



National Organization of Blind Educators

A Division of the NFB

The Blind Educator

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“Teaching is an instinctual art, mindful of potential, craving of realizations, a pausing, seamless process.” -- A. Bartlett Giamatti (1938 - 1989) US university administrator

As the beginning of a new teaching year approaches, we are reminded that teaching might not always appear to be a seamless process. Setting up classrooms, organizing school policies and schedules, and meeting new students is stressful. But despite the stress there truly does exist an exciting potential. The year begins a new start for everyone, and we have an opportunity to improve and inspire. The National Organization of Blind Educators, a division of the National Federation of the Blind, offers an opportunity

for blind teachers to learn from each other and discuss issues common to our profession.

On Thursday, July 1 in Atlanta, Georgia, the National Organization of Blind Educators held our annual seminar. This year we experimented with the format of our meeting, involving everyone in icebreakers, small group discussions, and group presentations. We discussed the importance of alternative techniques needed to be effective teachers who are blind. Group topics included: classroom management, supervisory duties/ field trips, and relationships with colleagues.

Many teachers and students connect on nobe-l, a listserv sponsored by the National

Federation of the Blind. This listserv allows people to exchange ideas and questions about teaching. To subscribe to this list, send an email to listserv@nfbnet.org. Leave the subject box empty, and type “subscribe nobe-l” in the body of the message.

If you are new to the field of education, either as a student or a teacher, our mentoring program gives you the opportunity to talk with a blind person who has experience teaching in your area of interest. You can sign up for our mentoring program by contacting Sheila Koenig at shekoenig@msn.com. Please indicate the subject area and grade level in which you are interested in mentoring or being mentored.

What I Know Now by J. W. Smith, Ph.D.

I was so honored to receive the prestigious National Federation of the Blind Educator of the Year Award at our 2004 convention in Atlanta. Such an occasion is an extremely humbling experience, but in my case, it also proved to be a reflective one as well. Leading up to the convention and after receiving the award itself, I began to think about some of the experi-

ences/strategies that I thought have made me an effective graduate and teaching assistant, guest lecturer, assistant professor, and now a tenured professor. The purpose of this article is to share with you at least three strategies that I have learned after over twenty years of teaching, and I hope that they will facilitate your progress as an active, vital faculty member no matter what your educational landscape looks like.

Stay Connected

Many of us who are blind know that some of our well-meaning friends and colleagues, and even family, would like to keep us isolated so that we won't "hurt ourselves." Often, what they really are trying to do is keep us from hurting them in some way. However, many of us, if we are honest, tend to favor isolation ourselves because it's just not worth the hassle sometimes to do otherwise, we say. I strongly believe that as blind educators, we cannot afford to be isolationists: independent thinkers, yes, but isolationists, never. I believe this because much of the perception about what we do in our classrooms is based on what we do or do not do outside those classrooms. One way to deal with those perceptions is to stay connected to our communities, departments, neighborhoods, etc. This means, specifically, participating in social events, field trips, commencement exercises, community activities, cultural and ethnic events, and many others. Many people want to believe that we are just like everyone else, and that we should act accordingly. I also believe that we should get involved with aspects of our community not necessarily related to blindness or disabilities. Working with the Red Cross, the Rotary Club, the Boy and Girl Scouts, church groups, and other groups where blindness is not the central focus of our involvement are just a few examples. Just because we are blind, we should not have to be "super people." That is to say, we should not have to do more than any other faculty member to prove ourselves necessarily, but it is important that we let our students and colleagues know that we live balanced and connected lives. I take my boss out for a drink sometimes, and when it's my turn to pay, I do.

Consistent Correction

In many cases, we are the only blind educator someone knows or will ever know. This in itself can lead to misconceptions and perceptions, and sometimes blatant ignorance on their part. We all should seize the opportunity to correct when necessary, always with the idea of teaching others about what it means to be blind. Recently, one of my colleagues of twelve years told an offensive joke in a faculty meeting. Not only did she offend me, but she offended sev-

eral others. Even though we had worked on committees together and her office is across the hallway from mine. I thought it was necessary to correct her directly, and I confronted her as friendly and as diplomatically as possible. We are the human delete buttons and erasers for those unfamiliar with blindness, and if they are to respect us in the classroom, they must respect us outside as well.

Don't Hesitate to Direct

By direct, I mean to lead and take your responsibility as a faculty member seriously. Often, down deep inside, many of our colleagues don't feel as if we can take the lead. For example, chairing the search committee, leading in faculty discussions and meetings, directing dissertations, even leading in a field trip of some kind. I speak as one who has done all of these, and they go a long way toward closing what I call the "respect/expect gap." What I mean is, some people can respect you but keep their expectations lower than their respect for you. My challenge to you is, when it's your time to lead, although there may be some trepidation, find a way to do it as effectively as you can, don't shirk your responsibility, and never use your blindness as an excuse not to be able to get the job done.

I thought it would be interesting to conclude my musings with a scenario I believe encompasses all three approaches. One way to stay connected with your colleagues is to break bread with them, however, we all know that invitations to peoples' homes or unfamiliar surroundings can be interesting at best. Even though you want to play a vital part in both the planning and implementation of the social event, people feel obligated to keep you safe and to serve you. So why not invite them to your place? Why not throw the party? Why not be the host? You then have them on your own territory, where you can arrange things to correct any slight misconceptions that may have been building over a period of time. You can demonstrate your leadership outside the classroom. What an effective way to help close the respect/expect gap.

Possibilities **by Jackie Mushington**

I have been teaching at The Chatsworth School in Reisterstown Maryland for six years, but my presence there began before that. I started as a paid parent helper, which allowed me to work alongside four seasoned teachers. I was able to fine-tune some of my skills in a non-threatening environment. For example, I was given a small math group to instruct, and later I was asked to teach a reading group. After three months, a position became available in the second/third grade program. Because of my reputation, I was asked to interview for the position. I gladly accepted.

As a teacher who is blind, I use adaptive techniques in my classroom. Some strategies that I use in my classroom are tried and tested techniques. Others are things that might work for that moment and may not work for the next. I start each year off by labeling cubbies, hooks, books and lockers in print and in Braille. I also use a laptop computer to maintain all my records. Because we constantly share information with our teammates, starting this year, I will have the capability to log into our school's network system. This will allow me to instantly share grade report on any student that I teacher with any teacher in the building. Another benefit will be that I will be able to complete my report cards electronically without the aid of a reader.

One learning situation that I find unique to the early childhood field are dealing with handwriting and helping students develop basic writing skills. In dealing with handwriting I have worked hard to be able to model correct handwriting for my students. I also have my readers look at students' writing samples to check for any mis script in their writing. I also have them check for grammar and punctuation errors in every writing exercise. If there are errors, students revise, and the work is then turned in again. This has made my students more conscientious in their writing. This practice goes above and beyond my coworkers' practice of only checking grammar on writing assignments.

I find that the most important adaptive technique that I utilize does not necessarily relate to blindness: flexibility. I have to be ready to move when the principal comes in and changes the schedule. I have to be ready with a back up lesson when there is extra time. I have to be ready when the teacher next door has an emergency, and I am covering both classes for the first two hours of the day.

To be a successful teacher, one must be flexible. To be a successful teacher who is blind, we must be flexible and well equipped with alternative techniques. Only then can we show others what is possible.

Why Networking Is So Important **by Cheralyn Braithwaite Creer**

In early June, I was contacted by our president of the National Organization of Blind Educators (NOBE), Sheila Koenig. She explained that an attorney working for the NFB had contacted her, wanting to speak with a blind teacher in Special Education. Since I teach Special Education, and Sheila and I know each other through NOBE, she thought to call on me. She said the attorney was representing a teacher who had been teaching Special Education when she lost her sight, and that after Rehabilitation at the Louisiana Center for the Blind, renewal of her teaching contract was being denied. Of course I told Sheila to give my number to the attorney; I would love to help in any way I could.

I spoke with the attorney, Joe Espo, the next day. He filled me in on the unfortunate details. He read to me the rejection letter that the teacher had received. It included such things as, "Visual supervision of students is essential in managing both the behavioral environment of the classroom and the learning environment," and "The position of a teacher in a public school requires visual monitoring in order to ensure the safety and well being of all students." The letter concluded by saying, "...expect a formal non renewal letter from [Dr. So and So], Superintendent of the Little Rock School District." I can assume that all blind

educators offer a collective gasp at reading this. We know that blind individuals can successfully supervise behavior as well as learning; we can monitor the safety and well being of students. This is what we do every day!

Mr. Espo and I had several conversations leading up to the June 26th meeting of the Arkansas State Board of Education. He would be representing the teacher in "appealing" the decision of the school district. He prepared me for making my statement and for responding to questions that members of the Arkansas State Board might have for me. I shared my experiences in the classroom. I described to him how I monitor and supervise students. I told him that when I was in college, I didn't believe that I could be a teacher; I should only ever plan to be an assistant to a teacher. But after my first meeting of the National Organization of Blind Educators, I grew to believe that I could be a teacher myself. He asked me what it was about NOBE that helped me come to believe that. All I could say was, "I met dozens of blind teachers from all over the country who are successfully teaching. They impressed me by sharing alternate techniques of doing the everyday things that any teacher does; taking roll, making a seating chart, involving themselves in extra curricular activities, etc."

I made special arrangements to be home in time for the conference call on June 26th. At 9:45 PM Arkansas time, Mr. Espo called and said, "I'm really sorry, but they don't want to hear from you." I think we both assumed the worst. He told me that he might need my help in the future, but that he'd call me back in the morning with more information. When he called me the next morning, I was surprised and re-

lieved when I heard him say, "You're not going to believe this! After all that, the reason they didn't want to hear from you is that they had already made their decision to extend a renewal of the teaching contract." He told me that after the information he'd gathered and the conversations that the Board had, they knew that she deserved to have her job back. The blind educator triumphs thanks to the help from the National Federation of the Blind!

I have to admit that I looked forward to the opportunity to present to the Arkansas State Board of Education. I was also excited by the possibility of being a part of the story in Dr. Maurer's Presidential Report. But, in the end, I couldn't be more pleased with the results. I am so happy for the teacher in Little Rock. I admire her determination to hang in there until she was given a fair chance. Beyond that, I learned a great lesson. I saw first hand the importance of being active in divisions of the NFB. What if there was no National Organization of Blind Educators? What if there was no network of teachers to call upon to testify on behalf of one being discriminated against? If you haven't already felt the strength and the influence of NOBE, someday you just might. Who knows when each of us may have to fall back on NOBE for support? Who knows when each of us may be called upon to provide that support?

I for one am very grateful for the National Organization of Blind Educators. As I told Joe Espo, "it literally changed my life and my belief about what my potential as an educator might be." Thanks to all of you who provide that network of support to me and to a teacher in Arkansas who had to fight, but triumphed, in keeping her teaching position.

Quotables

"I feel a mixture of both anxiety and excitement as the school year approaches. I almost feel like I did as a child right before a new school year, except this time I am coming in with tools and the confidence to succeed." -- Joy Thomas, first year teacher (7th grade English)

"A mind is like a parachute, it works best when it's open!" -- J.W. Smith, tenured professor

"Embrace the chaos!" -- Sheila Koenig, 9th grade English teacher

"Enseigner c'est apprendre deux fois." (To teach is to learn twice.) --Voltaire, submitted by Carolyn Brock, Retired French teacher

"Animi cultos humanitatis cibus" (Learning sustains the human spirit) -- David Ticchi, High School English teacher

"We're practicing for real life." -- Caroline Rounds, Teacher of the Visually Impaired