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# This Was No Art Lesson

by Merry-Noel Chamberlain

**From the Editor: Merry-Noel Chamberlain teaches blind children. In fact, she is a past NFB Distinguished Educator of Blind Children. She lives in Iowa. In the following story she describes an encounter with a so-called expert art teacher of blind students. Heaven preserve us all from experts like this one. This is what she says:**

While working on my bachelor's in education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I was taught to give wait time to my future students. Wait time is a pause in the lesson to allow time for students to process new information, gather their thoughts, and perhaps develop appropriate answers, if requested. It also allows the student the opportunity to organize and file new knowledge for future use or draw upon previous knowledge to help digest the new information. Wait time can also give the student an opportunity to touch and explore an object tactilely. In structured-



discovery learning this wait time need not be lengthy, but it is important not to make it too short either.

For the benefit of my students, I build wait time into my lessons because I find it extremely valuable for them. However, I learned its importance personally when I attended a class in alternative techniques in teaching art to blind students. Among those in attendance and seated six to a table were regular education, special education, and physical education teachers as well as teachers of the visually impaired. Throughout the lesson two adults at each table wore sleepshades and were required to perform the activities for the various lessons. The others at the table were the "readers" and "helpers" to the blind guys as the instructor modeled how to work with blind students, including how to talk to them. Eventually it was my turn to wear the sleepshades and be the blind guy.

As a blind person with some residual vision, I didn't mind wearing sleepshades. Over the years I have had many hours of training under sleepshades through my employment at the Nebraska Commission for the Blind, Iowa Department for the Blind, and master's program at Louisiana Tech University for National Orientation and Mobility Certification. So, when my name was called, I quickly picked up my long white cane and went directly to the required location in the room for the activity. (Needless to say, others struggled with this simple task because they were not given a long white cane to use.) Once I arrived at the worktable, I felt someone try to take my cane away from me. I held on tight. The instructor, who was sighted, said something to the effect that they were "going to put my cane over here." I said that I could put it on the floor beside me. The instructor commented that it would be fine resting against the wall "over here." I didn't let go, starting to lay my cane on the floor beside me. Another class participant, whose voice I recognized, offered to hold it for me. So, to avoid causing a scene, I held my cane out to her. With that my so-called art lesson began.

The instructor placed the long skinny handle of a tool in my right hand. Instinctively I moved my left hand to investigate the tool. The instructor quickly grabbed my hand and warned that the tool was very sharp and I shouldn't touch it. I insisted that I wanted to see the tool. Of

course, my way of seeing was with my hands. So with the fingers of my left hand I began gingerly to touch the base of the tool in my right, only to have my left hand removed instantly and placed on a ruler on the table that extended away from my body with the metal ridge on the right. The instructor clasped my right hand around the handle of the tool so that I was holding it the way she wanted. It was not comfortable. With my right thumb I explored the handle and discovered a button, which I concluded opened and closed the tool, so I moved it forward.

"Did I say that you could do that?" the instructor asked me.

"No." I answered. The tool was removed from my hand. I was warned not to do that again as the tool was replaced in my hand. The instructor's hand held mine, and I was instructed to keep the edge of the tool on the table and move it away from my body along the edge of the ruler. All I could feel was the heat and pressure of the instructor's hand over mine. At this point I wondered what I was doing. So I put the tool down in front of me and started to investigate the table.

"What are you doing?" The instructor asked.

"I want to see what I'm going to do." I answered.

"You are going to cut some material."

I reached to feel the material with my right hand, but the tool was quickly replaced in that hand. So I lifted my left hand from the ruler and explored the cloth. I discovered that the material was the size of a handkerchief and that it seemed to be two-ply because it was thick. I searched ahead to see how far forward I needed to push the tool. The student who was holding my cane told me that I would know when I reached the end because I would feel a little drop off. I put my left hand back on the ruler, and the instructor's hand instantly covered it. She placed her other hand over my right hand, and she positioned it in front of my body.

"When I tell you to, move the tool forward," the instructor said. "Ok?"

"Ok," I said.

"You can move it forward now," I was instructed, as she released my hands. I moved the tool forward. I did feel the drop down at the end of the material, and on reflex I closed the tool with my thumb.

"What did you do?" the instructor asked.

"I closed the tool." I replied.

"Did I tell you that you could do that?" the instructor asked.

"No," I answered. I reopened the tool and set it on the table.

The instructor addressed the rest of the class: "This is what I call a problem student," and the class chuckled.

My cane was returned to me, and I returned to my seat without seeing the finished cut material or knowing what became of it.

Did I learn how to teach art to a blind student by a professional instructor of the blind? No. I learned something more important. At times teachers, university instructors, and parents alike are rushed to complete a lesson or task and may lack the time necessary to allow their students or children an opportunity to explore and process new information. I did not learn anything from this art lesson other than how to maneuver some tool forward. I still do not know what the tool was, nor do I truly have a picture of it in my mind. I am only guessing it was some sort of miniature pizza cutter, based on my personal experience. How many students would have had such knowledge to draw from?

When working with students with visual impairments, instructors need to give the student wait time to develop a picture in their mind's eye of the task so that they can walk away feeling they have truly accomplished the required assignment successfully. With such experience the student can then transfer this new knowledge to future use. Problem student? I only wish that I were lucky enough to have more such problem students under my instruction. Spontaneous investigation demonstrates that the student is organizing, processing, and filing away information to draw upon at a future date.

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