

Communication Preferences of College Students with Visual Disabilities

ACPA 2011

Karen A. Myers, Saint Louis University
Jaci Jenkins Lindburg, Washburn University
Joni Bastian, McKendree University

Contact Information

Karen A. Myers, PhD

Associate Professor, Higher Education

Saint Louis University

kmyers11@slu.edu

Jaci Jenkins Lindburg, PhD

Assistant Director, Leadership Institute

Washburn University

jaci.jenkinslindburg@washburn.edu

Joni Bastian, PhD

Vice President Student Affairs

McKendree University

jmitchel@mckendree.edu

AGENDA

- **Purpose & Learning Outcomes**
- **The Study**
- **Small Group Discussion**
- **Action Plans**

Purpose

Share current research on determining the preferences in communication styles and techniques of persons with visual disabilities and their interactions with others particularly in a higher education setting

Learning Outcomes

- 1. Explain the preferences in communication styles and techniques of college students who have visual disabilities**
- 2. Understand how our personal stereotypes create barriers for communication**

Learning Outcomes

- 3. Apply this research to your own professional tools to enhance your work at your institution**
- 4. Create an action plan for implementing these communication strategies in your programs**

The Study

**Perceptions: “Daily, students engage in a decision making process about telling others. They often need to choose between the risk of being stereotyped and the risk of failing to procure accommodations”
(Olney & Brockelman, 2003).**

The Study (cont'd)

Degree of Acceptance: “People’s feelings about being disabled varied along a continuum from being bitter about being disabled, not liking or despising their condition, but simply accepting it as a condition of life that they had to deal with, to enjoying being disabled and embracing their disabilities” (Weinberg, 1988).

The Study (cont'd)

Gibson's (2006) Disability Identity Model demonstrates how individuals with disabilities integrate their disability into their identity formation through stages of awareness, realization, and acceptance.

The Study (cont'd)

Intercultural Communication: “Some persons with disabilities compare their culture to the culture of African Americans and women, and view their disabilities as unalterable conditions resulting in biologically based oppression” (Braithwaite, 1988).

The Study (cont'd)

- **Sample: 35 persons with visual disabilities**
- **Methodology: 40-minute interviews**
- **Grounded theory approach**

Demographics

Age

- 19 to 70 years

Years in College

- Ph.D./J.D. – 4
- Masters – 2
- Bachelors – 4
- No degree – 25

Demographics (cont'd)

Participants were from 23 cities in 11 states spanning from New York to Alaska

Onset of Visual Disability

Totally Blind from Birth – 3

Legally Blind from Birth – 13

Totally Blind Later – 9

Legally Blind Later - 10

Results

Emerging Themes

- **Respect from others - treat me as you wish to be treated.**
- **Comfort – want to make others feel comfortable during interactions**
- **Awareness – of others through disability education**

Student Quote

- **“People always assume that if you have a disability, you want to get rid of it. But, no. It is who you are, you are proud of it...I always thought that God spent a little extra time and said ‘I’m going to give her this.’”**

Do you typically initiate conversations?

- **Most do not**

When people approach you, how do you prefer they acknowledge your presence?

- **“Say my name and your name and how we know each other”**
- **Most did not want people to ask how to best communicate with them**

Do you prefer that people intervene when you are experiencing difficulty

- **Participants were split on this. Some shared that it was fine to intervene and others did not think that it was necessary.**

Intervene or not?

- **Some requested that individuals identify themselves before they intervene unless it involved a dangerous situation.**

What bothers, offends, or irritates you during interactions?

- **“When speaking to a sighted companion people become frustrated when I do not/can not give eye contact.”**
- **“Laugh behind my back”**
- **“When I bump myself and someone says, ‘open your eyes...watch out!’”**

Bothers or Offends?

- **“When people play with my dog!”**
- **“When others say, ‘I’m over here or right here.’ I can’t locate ‘here’ to save my life.”**

Bothers or Offends

- **“I don’t like it when others pretend that I’m not there. For example, my husband and I were at a restaurant the other day and the waitress said to my husband, ‘what would she like to eat?’ So, I picked up my Braille menu and pointed at an item and said, ‘I will have that.’”**

Is humor in reference to your disability an effective method of communication?

- **Close friends and family...**
 - Most participants shared that they use humor with their closest friends and family. When used by others it felt hurtful.
- **Age and Maturity ...**
 - Most believed that using humor comes with maturity or age. During their childhoods they would have not used humor.

Is touch important in communication?

- **All participants shared that touch was not important in the communication process. Often, touch was distracting and uncomfortable.**

What can teachers do to improve communication?

- **Verbalize or use more descriptions when writing on the board (All respondents)**
- **E-mail notes and slides prior to the class session**

Teachers (cont'd)

- **Place book orders with the college bookstore as early as possible**
- **“I had a professor who was demonstrating with her hands how eye muscles work—she then guided my hands so I knew exactly what she was conveying.”**

What can administrators and staff do to improve your college experience?

- **Occasionally review their campus accessibility plans**
- **Provide more computer stations with assistive software**
- **Use Universal Design when designing offices and buildings**

Administrators (cont'd)

- **Train staff and faculty who can then train the student assistants**
- **Locate Disability Office on a main floor which is accessible to everyone**

What can other students do to improve your college experience?

“Treat me like you would any other student.”

“Don’t place your book bag in the middle of the aisle because I will certainly trip over it.”

Who should tell teachers and staff how to best accommodate you?

- **All of the participants reported that they should be responsible for informing the staff or teachers.**

What advice would you like to give to people regarding how to most effectively communicate with you?

- **“Be patient with me”**
- **“Be descriptive when communicating”**
- **“Include me just like I am a sighted person”**
- **“Identify yourself when you first approach”**

Advice (cont'd)

- **“When sight guiding – guide puts her hand just above the elbow—don’t wrap my arm around your back.”**
- **Guide should look out for the height of the individual being guided not her own.**
- **“Don’t be afraid to ask me questions.”**

It's your turn!

- **Small groups**
- **Develop your own action plan**

References

- **Braithwaite, D. (1988). Viewing persons with disabilities as a culture. *Intercultural communication: A reader.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 147-153.**
- **Gibson, J. (2006). Disability and clinical competency: An introduction. *The California Psychologist, 39, 6-10.***

References (cont'd)

- **Myers, K. & Bastian, J. (May/June 2010). Understanding Communication Preferences of College Students with Visual Disabilities. *Journal of College Student Development*. 51(3), 265-278.**
- **Myers, K. (2009). Myers, K. (2009). *College Students with Visual Disabilities: Preferences for Effective Interaction*. Germany: VDM Verlag Publications. ISBN# 3639166000**

References (cont'd)

- **Olney, M. F., & Brockelman, K. F. (2003). Out of the disability closet: Strategic use of perception management by select university students with disabilities. *Disability & Society, 18, 35-50.***
- **Weinberg, N. (1988). Another perspective: Attitudes of people with disabilities. In Yuker, H.E. (Ed.) *Attitudes toward persons with disabilities*. New York: Springer Publishing Co.**

THANK YOU!

See ya later!

