**Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind**

**and Visually Impaired (AER) Position Paper:**

**Teaching O&M Through Individual and Group Lessons**

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      The standard of practice in orientation and mobility is to provide one to one instruction for individuals who are engaged in active travel both indoors and outdoors. In this approach, the learner and the O&M Specialist (OMS) are working collaboratively together, with the OMS providing direct instruction to the individual. There are also specific reasons and advantages for using group-based instruction to extend the learning opportunities for individuals based upon their instructional goals (Jacobson, 2012). In this model, the O&M Specialist works with groups of learners, and may be collaborating with other O&M Specialists, or relevant team members to support safety and monitoring during active group travel.

 **The reasons for individual lessons focus upon five issues:**

1) Instruction must be individually designed to meet unique needs.

No two students are alike and have the same needs.  Variations in vision; visual prognosis; concomitant disabilities; communication needs; background and experience; understanding of concepts; facility for orientation; cognitive ability; emotional needs; and goals necessitate an O&M program designed to meet the unique needs of each individual. In order to design an individualized sequence of lessons at an appropriate pace for the person, as well as a supportive rapport with the learner, it is often essential that lessons be offered in a one on one format.

2) Students learning to travel need individualized attention and coaching.

Students should each be monitored in order to assess their progress and plan subsequent lessons appropriate for their level of mastery or to address gaps in concepts or skills.

3) Discovery learning should be facilitated.

One goal of O&M training is for learners to increase skills in problem solving.  Some of the concepts and techniques necessary for this task can be learned through group activities, including team challenges and observing role models, but learners must ultimately have the chance to demonstrate their own competence individually. If learners lack sufficient opportunities to engage in individual problem solving, it may ultimately limit their confidence and competence in O&M.

4) Student safety must be provided appropriately.

A primary responsibility of the O&M specialist is to provide for the safety of each student.  The level of monitoring and intervention which is appropriate and necessary will vary, but the safety of most students requires the undivided attention of an O&M Specialist particularly during certain stages of instruction.

5) Students need to gain a sense of self-efficacy.

Many students begin O&M instruction unconvinced that they will be able to travel independently, in spite of knowledge that other blind and deafblind people can do so.  Skills and concepts may be learned in groups but learners must apply them independently in order to become convinced of their own capabilities.

**While individual lessons remain the standard of practice, there are many situations in which group lessons are appropriate and advantageous for learners, such as:**

* Increasing the motivation of the traveler by developing a sense of shared accomplishment (Bandura, 2002).
* Allowing individuals to demonstrate leadership skills as they reinforce others in the group.
* Receiving and giving peer encouragement reduces frustration in the face of obstacles.
* Developing social connections may decrease an individual’s sense of isolation (Lieberman, et.al, 2021).
* Positive competition may help to push the participants to grow their skills.
* Gaining an appreciation for their own strengths and strengths of fellow travelers.
* Developing teaming and communication skills may assist in other areas of life.
* With the rapid evolutionary life cycle of technologies, group lessons on the application of assistive technologies can support practical adoption and use of technologies.
* Observing others performing diverse O&M skills may create greater acceptance of O&M (Lieberman, et.al, 2021).
* When appropriate, parents, significant others, or other team members who observe group lessons may become more supportive of an individual learner developing O&M skills.
* Instruction in groups may be a more economical way of providing service; however, cost effectiveness should ***never*** be the sole rationale for this delivery option. Succinctly, the rationale for a person to participate in group lessons must include one or more of the outlined advantages to be considered an appropriate delivery option. The lesson objectives for each person must never be compromised.

**Various types of group lessons can be developed for travelers, such as:**

* Concept development: this may include exploring the environment to learn about traffic patterns and analysis, accessible pedestrian signals, street crossing safety, spatial orientation, geographical directions, etc. (Sauerburger, Guitar, & Martin, 2013).
* Exposure opportunities for individuals from rural and remote communities to explore urban centers or those from cities exploring non-urban settings.
* Route planning: brainstorming and information-gathering may be best accomplished in groups.  This may include problem-solving relating to physical and social barriers, using public transportation, analyzing the environment, and gathering information.
* Role playing interactions: examples are role playing situations of soliciting aid, refusing aid, interacting with the public, and interacting with bus drivers
* Sensory training: individuals can learn in groups to interpret environmental clues such as identification of sounds, use of echo detection, and identification of changes in textures and terrain.
* Visual training: identification of critical features of the environment.
* Use of optical aids and wayfinding devices.
* Competitions: travel skills and concepts may be facilitated by competitions to find stores in shopping malls; finding items during a scavenger hunt; or other navigation games.
* Forming a mobility club where the group tracks their explorations and adventures using maps, narratives, and digital badges of skills earned.
* White Cane Day events where the community plans group activities and use of public transportation
* Yoga, adaptive sports camps, transition programs, or self-defense classes can incorporate O&M principles where an O&M Specialist may collaborate with other instructors to deliver integrated group instruction (Lieberman, et. al., 2014).
* Motor labs for students with multiple disabilities can provide for interdisciplinary collaboration between O&Ms, PTs, OTs, and groups of students.
* Virtual explorations of environments in groups can also support the group’s travel to real environments (Parker & Tellefson, 2018; Sauerburger, 2020).

**However, it is important to note that group lessons may be an option only as long as:**

* adequate and appropriate monitoring for safety as well as communication is provided for each individual in the group;
* travelers receive instruction that has been individually designed to meet their unique needs
* discovery learning is facilitated by providing each learner with sufficient opportunities and time to analyze the features of the environment and problem-solve solutions with no more assistance than is appropriate and necessary;
* the individual develops greater self-reliance, and confidence in their ability to travel independently without peer assistance;
* the decision to provide group lessons is made by the instructor with concurrence of the consumer and, where appropriate, their family.

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