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| GTC Action Research project |
| Art and Independence for the Visually Impaired |
| EDG 685 – Grand Valley State University |
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| **Linda Walker** |
| **3/10/2013** |

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**Problem Summary**

The inherent paradoxical character of blindness and visual art is often a huge mental block for visually impaired art students. My research is based on, Nick B, a ninth grade student at Kalamazoo Central High School in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I first met Nick in the Introduction to Ceramics class while working as a student teacher in Mr. Voege’s art room. Nick is completely blind now but was able to see as a young child. A brain tumor and subsequent surgery caused his complete visual impairment.

The issue studied and action taken is based on Nick’s inability to work independently. The questions posed associated with the problem are:

1. How can visually impaired students have a successful and meaningful art experience and how can they be instructed to manipulate the medium more independently?
2. What techniques and tools can be used to achieve the first objective and the ceramics course objectives?
3. Where does confidence building and creative drive fit into the process of becoming more self-sufficient?

**Situation/Setting/Persons Involved**

Nick came to K Central in the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year. He has a full-time aid, Mr. Handley who is employed by the Kalamazoo Public School district. He’s with Nick constantly to help with his class note taking, maneuvering the halls and any other academic or personal needs. He has expressed that Nick needs to act more independently and come out of his shell. Nick’s mother equally reflects this concern.

The art room environment is often noisy and the thirty-five students can be vociferous. Nick came from a small school in Wisconsin and expressed to me his dislike of K Central high school immediately. His demeanor was apprehensive even though Mr. Handley had told me previously that Nick was very excited about taking Introduction to Ceramics. He also mentioned that Nick was below grade level, both cognitively and socially due to the brain surgery.

The ceramics class is entirely project-based with little note taking for vocabulary terms and for the final exam information. There are six students per table with areas within the room for gathering clay, glazing and kiln firing. Students generally work at the canvas covered clay table or at their seats. There are frequent individualized teacher demonstrations. Mr. Handley informed me that Nick has previously learned craft skills by the “hand on hand” technique along with specific verbal instruction.

**Professional Research**

The main source of my theoretical research is the GVSU library database where I found an extraordinary book, *Art Beyond Sight - A Resource Guide to Art, Creativity and Visual Impairment*, by Axel Levent, (2003). This publication provides an in depth explanation of the tactile approach to art education along with theories, research and a resource list of national and international art related organizations for the visually impaired. The two articles that are also referenced describe the interaction between the visually impaired and works of art along with the instruction of art concepts and techniques in handling artist’s materials with blind students. Additional information pertaining to this subject can be viewed at; www.artbeyondsight.org, [www.blindart.net](http://www.blindart.net) and [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org). In addition, personal conversations and information gained from Mr. Handley and Nick’s Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency (KRESA) caseworker, Mr. Bormann. He is a Teacher Consultant for Visually Impaired, Orientation and Mobility Specialist who is instrumental and enlightening concerning Nick’s disability during the research process. (personal communication, January 25, 2013)

Levent posed the question, “To what extent could *visual compartments* be formed in the mind’s eye?” He also addresses the notion, “Do blind people appreciate art in the same way that the sighted do?” (2003, pg.15) Levent looks to researcher, Simon Hayhoe as a source to aid in forming some conclusions. The text also discusses the nature of visual and tactile perception within student-centered studies focusing on creativity.

Moreover, Hayhoe comments on another leading researcher’s findings, Revesz (1950). He states that people with visual impairments cannot “properly” perceive beauty or create aesthetic images. The early hypothesis’ within this area of study references art comprehension and argues that since touch is sequential and gradual, a blind person does not have the ability of a complete and spontaneous understanding of art.

Later, researchers James (1970) and Sacks (1995) made comparisons between sighted and blind children to gain understanding of tactile perception and concluded that shape is perceived from the outline and edges of a form. Therefore, tactile art is a depiction and reference of the visual. Psychological and educational research crosses over in this area and it has been determined that research should be less concerned with tactile perception and more with emphasis on drawing. Researchers now are moving more towards and reckoning with the understanding of creativity, motivations of students and the debate on how to achieve inclusion to better serve the visually impaired.

**Data Collected, Analyzed and Used**

The ten observations recorded on average lasted 20-30 minutes each, spanning over the course of seven weeks. The specific data collection techniques applied are; one to one interaction, direct instruction, observation and questioning. These were all beneficial in determining a proper and effective course of action. The data collections prompted some simultaneous actions taken during the research project to improve Nick’s level of independence and skills. Photo documentation was also important to track and record Nick’s work and progress. Permission was secured from Nick’s mother, Mr.Voege, Mr. Bormann and Mr. Handley before beginning the project. The following notes are the log entries taken during the observation sessions.

Nick B.

Intro to Ceramics

January 18, 2013

Observation 1 - notes

Throwing demonstration/lesson with Mark Voege, Mr. Handley (aid) and myself

Open the session with wheel throwing explanation:

All tools placed in same spot for every session

Position body close to wheel, adjust foot petal to be comfortable

Mr. Voege has hands on clay with Nick’s hands on top

Add/drip on water w sponge

Walk through steps: Open up clay ball, raise the walls, thumb right there, pinch thumb and forefinger

Learn by mistakes, lots of practice

Be gentle and go easy with clay

Mr. V. tries with eyes closed to show Nick it can be done

Nick is a bit discouraged and says he doesn’t like it.

Handley explains that he should do it and takes time to acquire skills.

End session

Nick B.

Observation notes - 2 (20 min.)

January 25, 2013

Slab and coil 10” vase anticipatory set

Nick and I began by talking about shape and form. We went to the bisque fired shelf so he could touch and feel a 10’ tall ceramic vessel that another student had made. I explained that it was a slab and coil construction. He mentioned to me that he could feel holes on the corners of the vessel. He enjoying the time feeling many more different pieces that other students created.

I then began to talk about colors. I said that this piece was black and very shinny. He said that he would like his vase to be gold, blue and purple. Mr. Handley, his helper, confided to me on the side that since we don’t have purple glaze, we should use maroon and tell Nick that it’s purple. (Not sure if I agree with this.)

I explained that there different way to apply glaze like, spraying, dipping and painting. We decided that his piece needed to be sprayed with water and soaked over the weekend in order to have it ready for work for Monday’s class.

Nick B.

Observation – 25 min.

February 6, 2013

We started by retrieving Nick’s coil vessel that had just been bisque fired and it was ready for glazing. We discussed the color options after we made our way into the glazing area. I suggested using latex gloves that I brought to school since Nick doesn’t like to touch the glaze with his skin. He’s has super sensitive feeling and the gloves made it possible for him to dunk the entire clay vessel into the five gallon glaze pale.

Later, I introduced Nick to the *Sensory Guide to Museum Art Catalog for the Blind of Paintings from the Birmingham Museum of Art with Tactile Reproductions and Audio Tapes* Brail book. It is a large book with brail text, written text and plastic molded tactile relief pages in forms of famous paintings. This is an art history tool for the visually impaired person. The KRESA blind vision specialist, Mr. Bormann supplied me with this publication to help Nick.

The first work he explored was the “Madonna and Child” painted in 1300. I explained the term “tempera” paint to Nick and that it was painted on a “panel”. My Handley also thought this was a very good tool to aid explaining the history of visual art. Nick really enjoyed the brail and relief forms, I think this is his first exposure to this type of art publication.

Nick B. Observation – 20 min

February 8, 2013

Questioning strategy

We began by opening the *Sensory Guide to Museum Art Catalog for the Blind of Paintings from the Birmingham Museum of Art with Tactile Reproductions and Audio Tapes* book and resumed with painting # 2

Ms. Walker: Can you read the name on this painting?

Nick: C-A-N-A-L-E-T-T-O

W: How about the first name?

N: A-N-T-O-N-I-O

W: What else can you read?

N: Title is “View of the Grand Canal”

Mr. Handley: Is the dot a letter or a word, Nick?

N: Each set of dots is a letter except for small words like; of, so, and.

Nick felt the relief form of the painting as I described the colors and some details about the original work to him as shown on the opposite color plate page.

W: Let’s move onto picture #3.

N: Albert Bierstadt is the artist and the title is “Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California”

Date completed, 1865

W: What else?

N: The artist is German and American.

W: The painting is oil on canvas

W: Good, that’s the medium, like the 1st painting we looked at was tempera paint on wooden panel. Nick, feel the form page, please. What do you think?

N: What is this?

W: It’s the sheer rock formations in the valley with some trees on the ground.

N: Oh.

W: That’s enough for today.

N: Good. Let’s work on my clay pot now.

Observation Notes

Nick B.

February 11, 2013

(20 minutes)

Strategies: Provide fewer directives to student in order to promote more independent working.

Art work title from the *Sensory Guide to Museum Art Catalog for the Blind of Paintings from the Birmingham Museum of Art with Tactile Reproductions and Audio Tape* book: Le Matin, Temps Brumeux Pourville (Foggy Morning at Pourville)

Nick read the remaining pages of the brail book with no prompting today. He’s getting accustomed to the routine now. He felt the relief page of the Monet painting and guessed the waves of the water correctly. It was more difficult for him to decipher the cliffs in the composition.

I mentioned to Nick that Claude Monet began to go blind in his later years. The vision impairment may have contributed to the overall effect of his work. We also talked about the possibility of Nick signing up for art class next semester and some accommodations that could be made for drawing and painting. I explained that the idea in his head could be applied to the surface of a paper or canvas. It is not necessary to actually see it and that’s how some blind artists work.

End session.

Nick B. Observation

20 min.

February 25, 2013

Today we are working on smoothing his large coil vase. We use the backside of a plastic spoon and rub it in a circular motion onto the vase. I give Nick the spoon and we lay the vase down onto the table to make it easier for him to manipulate. The surface begins to get shiny and Nick likes how it feels. It will be fired after this stage. He works on it for a while and I finish with scribing his soccer ball line design. After a short time the conversation shifts to the idea of imagery.

I ask Nick if he thought it would be neat if there was some sort of physiological device with electrodes that could be placed onto your head to transmit images in to your brain. He responds back immediately and says, “I knew you were going to say that, Mrs. Walker! That is so cool, I was just thinking about that too.”

I think there can be something like that considering the virtual technology that is currently available, I reply. Nick enjoys this idea and begins to tell me about a movie that he went to see with his mom over the weekend and how much he liked it. I said, “You’re not allowed to talk in the theatre, Nick. Did your mom explain what was happing while you were there?” He mentions that it wasn’t a typical theatre and she did explain it during the show.

Nick B. Observation

Feb. 27, 2013

Large coil vase and soccer ball rattle

I brought Nick’s large coil vase and soccer ball pieces to him to feel that they were completely dry before bisque firing. He liked the ball even though the top sunk in a bit while on the shelf. I explained that’s good thing and can be the bottom so it won’t roll off your dresser at home with the flat side. He promptly agreed. Nick asked when it would be ready, he’s always anxious to take his work home. This is most likely since he’s heard conversations about work getting stolen from the room.

We begin our work time with discussion of ideas for vase design. I asked, “What kind of design do you want to carve into your vase, Nick?” He replies that he’s not sure but soon thought of a spiral. I agreed that I liked his idea and explained it was an ancient symbol which means different things to different cultures like; water, sun and stars.

I began by drawing stars with pencil on the vase so he can carve the spirals out revealing the terra cotta clay color under the blue slip coating. Next, I guided Nick’s hand to begin the carving; I could see he was having difficulty with making the circular spirals. I redirected Nick to think about stars in the sky also. He immediately mentioned red, white and super nova. I said that he should consider creating these other smaller stars on the vase also. They can be randomly placed and can be made by incising deep marks. I guided his hand while he held the incising tool to apply pressure onto the vase surface while pulling hard to create the random star line.

It took a few tries but he got the hang of it and became very enthusiastic about the process. He was happy with the results and acting on his own accord! I felt he had truly gained confidence in his creative self at this point. It was a break through point and he wanted to do more but it was time to go.

In closing, I said we can continue with it tomorrow to complete it and get it ready to fire. Nice job!

Nick Observation

March 6, 2013

Future plans and ideas for creating art

I mention to Nick that in my research I found blind artists who do painting and drawing and ask if he’d like to try it. We talk about techniques with soft surfaces to create textures similar to the incising done on the vase. Also, I explain an idea with layering a screen under paper and drawing with oil pastel to create a thick mark that can be easily felt. He likes this and we begin with some simple drawings first.

Later I provide soft Styrofoam and ballpoint pen for a “carve drawing” activity. He likes this very much.

We move onto laying textured paper and drawing paper duplicating the screen idea.

I encourage Nick to continue at K Central with the art curriculum and possibly take drawing or painting class next year. He agrees that it would be fun.

**Action Plan, Findings and Analyzation**

Establishing trust was essential to developing a successful relationship with Nick this semester. By starting with an anticipatory set explaining art elements like; shape, form and texture along with clay construction on January 25, Nick would be able to place trust in me as a teacher and hopefully, as someone who is genuinely interested in his artwork and life. The work and observations I conducted with Nick were linear and spontaneous. By coming up with solutions quickly and in the moment, I could effectively provide more directed and differentiated instruction to further his progress.

I quickly realized the need for Nick to understand more about art history, which in turn could help him to create art more confidently. According to Yvonne Erickson, (Levent, 2003) the object of interacting with museum exhibits is the transferring of images into our own perceptions. When conveying a style or period in art history, it also identifies the underlying mechanics of our perception. Therefore, tactile art can be a depiction of the visual as well as an essential learning tool for the visually impaired. The February 6th and 8thentries present evidence for this statement with Nick’s new understandings gained through the art museum paintings brail book.

The article, “Somewhere in Between Touch and Vision: In Search of Meaningful Art Education for Blind Individuals*”*, (DeCoster & Loots, 2004) details that visually impaired individuals are still curious about art as an essential aspect of life, sources of information and typical experiences. This was obvious to me when Nick was given the opportunity to touch and experience other student’s ceramic artwork as seen in the January 25th observation notes. It is important and inspiring to give the blind rich aesthetic experiences in which they can form their own opinions.

Encouragement and experimentation to create more frequently and with different medias is a very big influence for improving desire and also can promote working more independently. In the February 27th session, Nick was able to successfully manipulate his vase and incise a design onto the surface with little help. The experience was new and it had meaning because it represented his own idea of the night sky. Thus, the break-through gained in this activity is far more important than the end product. The self-confidence and satisfaction generated during this session will hopefully resonate with Nick and he’ll be motivated to participate in future art experiences. This theory can be equally explained in Colleen Freund’s article, “Teaching Art to Blind the Child Integrated with Sighted Children” (1969). In the text, she describes that it’s most favorable to use a variety tools and pedagogy when teaching visual art to blind students.

The final session on March 6th illustrates one of Freund’s strategies by developing a lesson so that Nick can be exposed to other mediums to make art in the future. The explanation given to him about other blind artists in respect to drawing, painting and 2-D works was an introduction to the possibility of taking more art classes at K Central next year. The post- ceramic activity I designed using textured paper as the base layer for a drawing surface along with making impressions into foam plates were ideas I interpreted from Freund’s lessons. I also generated a painting lesson on brushed suede matte board with acrylic paint. He felt the suede board surface and then brushed on the paint in a simple flower design. After it dried, the tactile difference was noticeable between the suede surface and the painted areas Nick created.

The mini wrap-up lessons proved to be the perfect ending for the remaining time left in the trimester. These new materials were specifically chosen to spur Nick to become interested in furthering his art making abilities. Certainly, it is necessary be aware that you must not over plan the student’s life and activities which can result in squelching their independence and source of personal strength.

**Review of Results and Further Suggestions**

Nick B. made significant progress in the areas of skills and his capacity to act more independently in the art room. In order to help him mature into a higher-functioning blind adult it is necessary to continue with materials manipulation and confidence building activities like visual arts. Not only is it interesting and satisfying, but it can provide inspiration for Nick to develop his abilities further in the arts and hone his social skills. During our time together, I suggested to Nick that his mother could research area programs held with other visually impaired teenagers. Later, he related to me that his mother has signed him up to participate in summer softball for the visually impaired and is very excited to play. I think the sports activity is step in the right direction towards greater independence for Nick along with continuing to make art.

No doubt through this project we realized that Nick is capable of acting more independently and could manipulate the clay successfully. My Handley, Mr. Voege and Nick’s mom are all in agreement with me that Nick made significant advances in his artwork and motivation. I suggested that he should continue with art by seeking out local instruction for the disabled. This is a copy of the note I sent home for Nick’s mom.

Hi Sarah,

I have finished my time at K Central as a student teacher and I have some suggestions for Nick to continue his art experiences beyond school:

<http://www.mrcindustries.org/contactus.php>

MRC Industries

Art lessons at the Park Trade Center (Park and Kalamazoo )

Artworks Manager- Dawn Bowen

343-0747

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Kalamazoo Institute of Art Classes (KIA)

www.KIARTS.org

349-7775

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WMU student teaching Saturday art classes program….not sure about this. I know it’s for kids but I don’t know what ages.

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Private studio art lessons. Please call me call if you will like to discuss this option further with me.

269 668-2476 Home

269 352-6662 Cell

[Linda\_paints@yahoo.com](mailto:Linda_paints@yahoo.com)

[www.valentinowalker.com](http://www.valentinowalker.com)

I appreciate the time Nick and I spent together in the art room. He’s a wonderful young man and I wish you and him all the best in the future!

Warm regards,

Linda Walker

This action research project was rewarding beyond all expectations. I was introduced to the integration of a blind student into the art room while focusing on Nick’s dependency issues. We both learned so much by this experience and I will continue to think about the courage and inner strength Nick shared with me as we tried to navigate the K Central art room by working together.

References

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*Sensory Guide to museum art catalog for the blind of paintings from the Birmingham museum of art with tactile reproductions and audio tapes.*