

## Beyond Routes and Techniques: The Energy of Structured Discovery in Blindness Training

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In the last few decades, scientists went from a conviction that there is no such thing as an energy field around the human body, to a certainty that such fields exist and are scientifically important. Since living tissues are conductors of electricity, the laws of physics require that the currents set up by the heart and other muscles, and the brain and peripheral nerves, will produce fields in the space around the body, producing an aura. The aura has layers of vibrational frequencies and mindfulness. Thus, our thoughts shape our reality. We are more than flesh and bones; we are energy that influences others.

Other words that describe energy are vitality, vigor, action, and power. So, when we talk about empowering consumers, we are also talking about transferring energy.

As we talk about structured discovery in rehabilitation programs, we must recognize the work of Dr. Jernigan, who brought and perfected this approach throughout his tenure in Iowa. The Iowa experience was characterized by Dr. Jernigan's magical energy he had when working with people.

To make a real difference in the training we provide, we must recognize that the main problem blind people face is public misconceptions and low expectations. Our structured discovery teaching extends beyond techniques. It infuses lessons about attitudes—attitudes that empower greater confidence, advocacy, self-esteem, and hope.

I am originally from Peru. I became blind and lost my right hand as a result of a grenade explosion. I went from being in good physical condition, about to graduate as a lieutenant with a future full of opportunities, to being blind, missing my dominant hand, doing nothing, with a future full of uncertainties — including whether or not I could get married and start a family. The only exposure I had to blind people, before I lost my sight, was, a blind beggar who played some music with a couple of sticks and an empty can at a flea market.

A year after becoming blind, I spent a few months receiving traditional training at a Center in Peru and trying to find independence. I was happy to get that training but did not know they were limiting my expectations. I wanted to go to college so eventually I could become an administrator, but they told me that blind people can only work with their hands or voice, such as massage therapists, musicians, phone operators, broom makers, and so

on. I have respect for all jobs, but I don't think blind people should be limited to a few options. In the back of my mind, I knew I could do more, but had no idea how. I felt frustrated.

As I was part of society, I also had misunderstandings about blindness. I lost my dignity, my expectations, and my self-esteem; it was painful, a constant pain in my soul. I decided to look for more opportunities in the USA.

I came to America in 1989 and searched for help. I eventually ended up at the National Federation of the Blind National Center. It was here where I was introduced to the philosophy that, with proper training and opportunity, blind people can be full-contributing members of society and that the main problem we face is society's misconceptions about the capability of the blind.

I went to New Mexico, a structured discovery Center, to start training. Not knowing much English, or much about American culture other than some tv shows, and with no friends or family, I wondered about this training Center. I remembered a short story where a grandpa is encouraging his granddaughter to get into the ocean. She asks, "Is the water cold?" The grandpa says, "If you want to know how it is, dive into it." So, I dove into it.

Upon arriving at the Center, I immediately noticed a stark contrast with the traditional approach in Peru. When I met the director, Dick Davis, he posed an unexpected question: 'If you weren't blind, besides being a detective, what would you like to do? Without hesitation, I replied, I want to go to college and then graduate school so I can eventually become an administrator, a director. Dick Davis's response caught me off guard: 'Good, we will help you then. ' What frightened me the most was the matter-of-fact tone he used. Despite my excitement and elation, I was also gripped by fear, worrying that I might not meet his expectations. However, his matter-of-fact tone, though initially intimidating, also conveyed confidence in my abilities and a steadfast commitment to supporting me in reaching my full potential.

The Center staff showed, in their actions and in their attitude, that they believed in me, that they wanted me to be successful. I sensed their vitality, their energy when working with the students. They were investing in us. I had hope, I had control over my life again.

Structured discovery also provides the foundation for critical problem-solving. We encourage our consumers to adapt, innovate and find unique solutions to the challenges they encounter. One of the most difficult things for me was to learn how to type with only one hand. I thought I couldn't, as that is what they told me in the traditional Center in Peru. However, at this structure discovery Center, the teacher encouraged me to try and not give up. I could sense her aura; I could feel her honest belief in my capabilities. This gave me motivation to try harder, I became determined. After several weeks of much trial and error, I was able to create my own typing system.

Our approach is also about elevating expectations. Dave Andrews, a blind man now working for the Minnesota State Services for the Blind, was a staff trainee in New Mexico when I was in training. I remember telling a group of students, "Listen, if you are frugal enough, you can live on minimum wage. You can rent a small apartment and find a roommate and split the cost, only buy the groceries you need—no sodas, no cookies, only what is necessary. You can even only buy second-hand clothing."

Dave said, "Carlos, you don't want to settle for minimum wage. You can do more. I am making almost four times more than minimum wage. You can go to college; you have the skills and the brains; you don't have to rent a small apartment; you can own a house and don't need to have a roommate; you can have a family, buy nice clothing, own a car, go on vacation, save for a better retirement." Then I realized I was looking for excuses not to go to college or giving my best effort. Often, it takes the unwavering belief of someone like Dave to push past our own self-imposed limitations and strive for excellence.

I did learn the non-visual skills and was ready to start an independent life in America.

We also prepare our students to advocate for themselves, to be ready to deal with low expectations from the community. Despite skepticism from many in Peru, and a few in America, who told me I couldn't handle the demands of law school, I drew inspiration from several successful blind attorneys and knew I could achieve that too. After finishing my training at the Center, I learned enough English within six months to be accepted into college. Then, within seven years, I completed my Bachelor's degree, Masters in Public Administration and a Juris Doctorate. Additionally, while attending school, I worked part-time for the Commission for the Blind and remained active in my community.

So, what set others and me apart and led to success? It was the vitality and high expectations set by other blind mentors and professionals who possessed an honest belief and understanding that, with proper training and opportunity, blind individuals can be fully contributing members of society. When blind individuals recognize their full potential and have opportunities, then we have a sense of purpose.

Neuroscientists have discovered that when we have a purpose, our body generates dopamine, which manufactures adrenaline, and thus gives us energy. When we crave success, when we want to win, our body is generating dopamine. Therefore, our bodies are made to have forward action.

In New Mexico, structured discovery was expanded to field services and other programs, such as transition. When I began running the Summer Training and Employment Program (STEP) for blind youth, I sent application packets to all the school districts and the school for the blind. Many of the teachers working with blind students, including those at the school for the blind, initially disagreed with the changes being implemented by the New Mexico Commission for the Blind, particularly in its training Center using the structured discovery approach.

I offered to visit the school for the blind to talk to the students about STEP, but the school administration informed me that it wasn't necessary and requested that I just send the applications. That year, twenty-one students applied for STEP, eleven of whom had additional disabilities. All the applications from the school for the blind were from students with additional disabilities. While I didn't want to entertain the idea that they would try to sabotage our program, it was clear that there was a misunderstanding. Knowing that most of the students didn't have any opportunities for the summer, we decided to accept all the applicants.

STEP offered more than just a job; it provided non-visual skills training, had high expectations, and fostered a positive attitude about blindness. Regardless of their additional disabilities, we set high expectations from the beginning. Since the students with multiple disabilities hadn't been expected to do much at home or at school, they were eager to try new things and prove to themselves that they could be independent and successful. At the end of the program, we encouraged participants to continue being independent at home and at school: take out your garbage, make your beds, clean your rooms, carry your trays in the cafeteria, and use your canes at all times. Never forget, you can achieve anything you put your mind to.

About three weeks after the program ended, I received a call from an irate student named Michelle, who asked, "Why didn't you send me an application for STEP? I was at home all summer doing nothing!" Confused, I asked her what school she attended. Michelle, from the School for the Blind in Alamogordo, insisted that she never received an application. After getting her parents' contact information, I assured her that an application would be sent to her next year. Michelle and other disgruntled blind students who hadn't been informed about STEP complained to the school's administration.

The following summer, at the start of the program, I asked Michelle, "How did you learn about STEP, and why were you so upset?" Michelle explained, "Well, Carlos, when we returned from summer break, we noticed a big change in some of the students." Intrigued, I asked for more details. Michelle continued, "We saw several students walking on their own, using their canes all the time—different from the ones we have—carrying their trays, and disposing of their garbage after meals. Not only that, but they were students with multiple disabilities. We observed a significant difference in their confidence and independence, so we asked them where and how they learned all of that. They told us about STEP and that they also worked and got paid. We were never informed before that we could get jobs or learn to be independent. That's why we were upset!"

The year Michelle joined us, we received 36 applications, the majority from the school for the blind, including those without additional disabilities. By the midpoint of the program, a couple of staff members from the school for the blind came to observe our activities. We demonstrated what we do. The crucial aspect was conveying, through both our actions and words, that these were normal teenagers and that we believed in their capabilities and

potential; moreover, that we not only care about them but trained them with love — at times, employing tough love.

It is now recognized that the energy we emit, is sensed by those we encounter, influencing how they perceive and react to us. No wonder that our students often surpass their initial expectations when leaving our Centers.

About four years ago, in Nebraska, we organized a one-week training on robotics for blind high school students. They coded and assembled the parts, constructing their own robots. We filmed portions as well as the culmination of the training, where each student showcased their robot, and uploaded the video to our website. A few months later, a blind college student expressed interest in studying robotics in college. However, upon arriving in class, the professor informed her that she couldn't participate, as sight would be required. Without contention, the student left and conducted research and found the training on robotics video on our website. She forwarded the link to the professor, who not only welcomed her to the class, but also gained insight into the capabilities of blind individuals. Success begets success.

Nebraska is well known for having a structured discovery Center since the seventies, even though we did not use that term back then. We also have expanded this comprehensive approach to other services. We have a robust transition program, even before federal law required us to do so. We have a robust business enterprise program, doubling the number of vending sites and increasing the vendors income in the last few years. We have a robust older blind program, being able to get over a million dollars from the state in the last few years and providing quality services to more blind seniors. We have been contracting with blind engineers and blind scientist to train consumers on STEM such as robotics, dissecting organs, and doing chemical experiments using adaptive lab equipment we purchased. Most recently, we are partnering with museums to bring accessible art and science to blind consumers using 3D technology and audio description. Furthermore, to expose our clients and staff to the pick of vitality, action, energy, and power, we bring them to state and national conventions.

We have challenged stereotypes by showcasing the achievements of blind people. From lawyers, judges, politicians, teachers, administrators, assembly and factory workers, to farmers, successful businessmen and women, rehabilitation professionals, and those working in STEM fields, the list is endless. We have moved beyond mere belief; we now know and have proven that blindness doesn't inhibit success or hinder contribution to society.

So, what is our challenge? As professionals in the blindness field, our challenge is not to be complacent, but to keep pushing ourselves and our students beyond our comfort zone.

Advocates worked tirelessly for us to have laws that protect the disabled. However, the power of law is restricted; it may set limits on behavior, but it cannot create understanding.

We are dedicated to continuing training blind students, training new professionals, and training ourselves. We should keep striving to lift blind people out of poverty.

About a year ago, I attended a conference pertaining to quality management for vocational rehabilitation. One of the statistics they gave is that around 35% of people with disabilities are unemployed, and that people with disabilities, compared to people without disabilities, make \$7,000 less per year and have less health insurance. We know the disparities for blind people are even higher. While some blind individuals may have humble aspirations, these should not be confined to a narrow range of options, nor hindered by the misconception that blind people are unable to compete.

When blind people come to us, it is often the last place they go, their one chance to live a full and productive life. We can make a difference, we hold the key to breaking the cycle of dependency, underemployment, and the myths about blindness. Our goal is to provide proper training to our students, so they reflexively use the non-visual skills and, reflexively know how to deal with negative attitudes about blindness.

We are progressing, we are evolving; there is continuity, but not sameness. Structured discovery is not static; it evolves. Evolving requires fresh perspectives to tackle new problems and develop new solutions. We learn from each student and from each other, refine our approaches and embrace innovation. We are part of this evolutionary process, shaping the future of O&M in rehabilitation, ensuring that blind people have the opportunity to navigate the world on their own terms.

We use the structured discovery model in our individual teachings, in our training Centers, in our agencies; yet each of us, each training center, and each agency has its own identity. Like Oscar Wilde said, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

As we empower our students toward true independence, we honor the legacy of those who paved the way. We have the energy and collective experience to empower our students. We ignite a spark that propels them beyond our teaching. Like renewable energy, our influence endures. The knowledge we impart becomes the fuel for lifelong learning journeys.