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SPED 510 Podcasts Episode 07: Doug Trimble

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Amy: Hey Doug, are you there?

Doug: Yes.

Amy: Okay, great. Is the sound quality okay?

Doug: Sounding loud and clear.

Amy: All right. Well, welcome everybody to another podcast for our Orientation and Mobility cohort at Portland State University. I want to welcome and thank Doug Trimble from the Washington State School for the Blind, who is an orientation and mobility specialist. He's spending some time with us just talking about his own experiences. Welcome, Doug, and please introduce yourself to the class.

Doug: Well, thanks for having me. Like Amy said I'm an instructor at the School for the Blind, been a teacher there since 2004. Before that, I was a residential life counselor at the school, so working with students in the cottages, and before that, a teacher's assistant. Way back in the 90s, I was in an adult training center in Colorado, the Colorado Center for the Blind, where I also was a mobility instructor but I was agency trained.

So I had no formal schooling but was agency trained in their blindfold for three months and then student teaching for three months. When I came back to Vancouver and started working at the school, I knew I wanted to work with kids, so I went back to school at Portland State to be a TVI and then Stephen F. Austin for O&M.

Amy: That is fantastic. You've got a great arc of services, being a teacher's assistant, being a residential life counselor, being agency-trained. Tell us a little bit more about agency training because there are several O&Ms in our field who began with agency training. Do you mind just giving us a little bit of that history, Doug?

Doug: Sure. Being agency trained, I was with a certified O&M instructor at the time and basically in Denver, I was treated like just a student. I had to take O&M every day and I took their other classes, technology in braille. It was all nonvisual, so under a blindfold all day long with breaks at times, of course. It was very intense. Like I said, three months. Then I was made a student teacher, so still under instruction in student teaching students.

It was pretty intense but it was very rewarding at the time. At that time, I was working mostly with adults who had various degrees of vision loss and also working with youth in the summer programs they had there. It was just more intense training during the day. There wasn't a lot of schoolwork. Looking back, I've seen this both sides and definitely the schooling is very important.

Amy: Well, you're kind to say that. I actually think, Doug, that the schools, the university programs including probably Stephen F. Austin and certainly Portland State, we've tried to integrate some of what that agency training was as a part of a formal class. Some of our students are a little bit nervous about this summer that's coming up. Our first class,
our advanced O&M class, we’re going to be working with small groups who are led by COMS and going through a sequence of instruction under blindfold and low vision as well. It’s great. We’ve learned from each other, I think, in this field. I think that’s important.

Doug: Yeah. I would just for the students when you’re going into that this summer, just look on it as a fun adventure every day.

Amy: That’s good advice.

Doug: It’s going to be an adventure. Sometimes you might miss a curb, you might walk out in the street. No big deal, your instructor’s going to be with you. It’s just an adventure. Looking back, I think doing more blindfold training is really critical. Even though I’ve been teaching a long time, I personally need to go back and do some more training under a blindfold from time to time. I show that to students sometimes. "Hey, if I can do it, you can do it, too."

Amy: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That’s so important. You know that my mission also, Doug, is to recruit you to become one of our summer instructors as we go forward because of your great experience. You’re very respected at your school and with your students. Can you tell us a little bit about nonvisual instructional techniques? Can you fill us in on maybe some of your approach and your philosophy with the students and the clients that you serve?

Doug: Sure. For myself, I’m visually impaired. I have ROP. Completely blind in my left eye and about 2400 or so in my right eye, so it’s been pretty stable. Typically when I’m working with very new students, I stay pretty close with them where I can hear what they’re doing and visually see what they’re doing. As they get more ... their skills become better and I know that they can cross that street, I definitely step back and let them take the lead. I have worked with other instructors who were totally blind.

A person I know in Colorado unfortunately is not teaching anymore, but he would have his cane out but he wouldn’t be ... he would just hold it up in a vertical position and arcing a little bit. He would listen to what the student did all the time. He knew that student was veering into the street, so using auditory clues and communication of course with the student, staying close to the student when you need to. There are definitely blind instructors out there who can do it, but that doesn’t mean every blind person can be a mobility instructor or every sighted person can be a mobility instructor.

Amy: Correct.

Doug: I would encourage also people to go besides with your student teaching, go, when you can go do some of the other training programs around the country and see what they’re doing. Always call them up and say, "Hey, can I observe a class?" Most of the programs will let you do that.

Amy: That’s really good. That’s certainly good advice.
Doug: Every state has an adult training center usually through their services for the blind or commission. There’s the three NIB centers also and there's other all over the country. Even after you start teaching, keep learning. We always need to keep learning.

Amy: Oh, that's for sure. That's for sure. So the [crosstalk 00:07:06]-

Doug: Another thing I-

Amy: Go ahead.

Doug: Sorry.

Amy: Go ahead, Doug. Yeah.

Doug: Oh, I was just going to also say that besides working at the school working with youth primarily right now middle school, high school, I also work within the state of Washington with our older blind program. In Washington, older blind is considered 55 and older in anybody with a severe vision loss. Diabetes, macular degeneration, all those conditions that cause blindness or low vision. Don't be thinking O&M you can just work with kids, it's age from babies on up to whenever. Very rewarding.

Amy: Absolutely.

Doug: Yeah. Each age, each group, everybody's different [inaudible 00:07:53]. Independence is different for everybody. I still remember the lady I worked who was about 99 and her goal was to get to the mailbox. Right out the door, take a right, about five feet, there it was. She had just lost all of her sight, but she wanted to go get that mail every day. She didn't want to have somebody to do it. For her, that was her independence.

Amy: And so we've heard from a lot of people have shared with us about the instruction and the assessment of course all gets designed around that person and that person's goals and that person's travel context. Can you talk a little bit more about the different systems for adults? This podcast will be shared with the class that's taking the adult class right now and a lot of the students in our program are teachers of the visually impaired who maybe have not worked with adults before. Could you share a little bit more about those adult service systems and then the differences in working with adults versus children?

Doug: Sure. The adult systems are typically through the state agency for the blind. Oregon Mission for the Blind, Washington Services for the Blind. Some states have services for the blind that are part of a bigger organization, which necessarily isn't so good for blind people because sometimes people have trouble finding those services. Typically you're working with a rehabilitation counselor and you go out and assess the person.

Usually you do a low vision assessment, home training, how do they do getting around in their own home. Are they newly blind? Have they been blind for a long time? Checking out their skill level. Usually with adults who have that vocational plan, you
always need to be thinking along with the counselor they have a vocational goal. How is their O&M going to affect their ability to get from home to work?

A lot of instruction is working with the person on routes to get to their work and how do they deal with their own blindness and O&M skills within the work setting. Sometimes that’s working with the person learning how to ... If they’re newly blind and have no skills, of course they’re going to have a lot of training on starting to use the cane and basic O&M skills. If they’ve had some training, learning a new bus route maybe.

Sometimes people move or they're going to college and they have to learn the routes around the campus. It's really just individual assessments, but with adults of working age, it's mostly gearing it towards they have to get going to work. O&M skills for work. Of course the older blind are people who don't have a vocational goal maybe because it's medical reasons or whatever.

It's more O&M around their home, leisure, getting around the town, getting to their appointments. A lot of it sometimes is learning bus routes, learning to use paratransit, but also goes sometimes foundation O&M skills. Cane skills, crossing streets, how to listen to traffic, how to advocate for yourself.

Amy: I think what you said about advocacy, Doug, is so important. There is a communication role or a coaching role almost that an O&M plays where it's communication with other people. For the person to be able to communicate what they need to ask for information, to maybe communicate with public transit providers. Can you talk a little bit about that type of role?

Doug: Sure. Basically we want to teach our students to be able to advocate, be able to learn the steps of planning routes. If it's using public transit, learning how to old-school call the transit company and getting good information of planning a route. If we have students that can do that, I really want students to know how to do that because even with the other technology and their smartphones, sometimes they don't work.

After they learn how to call and get the steps of a route and write it down, execute the route, then look at using technology integrating it into O&M, also. Also advocating with the ... I like my students to know about the city and county transportation department. Who's in charge of those traffic signals?

I'm working with a student that needs to cross a four-lane street, a three-way intersection where you really can't assess parallel traffic that maybe an APS would be a good thing to put in there. We've built up some good relations with the county and the city folks traffic department about advocating for an APS when it's appropriate.

I've taught students to, "Hey, yeah the city/county folks will listen to me a little bit, but they'll listen to you, the person that lives there, much more." I have students write a personal letter to the person and we've had some good luck on that. It brings it back to the student like, "Hey, look what I did. I advocated for myself and plus this is going to help other blind people."
Amy: Yeah, and empowering to think about the student accomplishing or the adult, the client, accomplishing those things. Yeah.

Doug: Definitely. Yeah.

Amy: Well, if we could circle back to ... I think it's really important for our class and for people who are blind and visually impaired themselves to know that orientation and mobility as a profession is also open to them. What other advice would you give someone who was blind or visually impaired who perhaps wanted to become an orientation and mobility specialist? What advice would you give them?

Doug: Fine tune those auditory skills. There are times when you need to ... we want students to sometimes go out and preview routes. We want as instructors to go out and do that and most of the time, there's not. Sometimes we have to make that personal time just to go do it, to check it out. Talk to other people, get information. "What's that intersection look like?"

Don't be afraid to ask questions. I'm always happy to have people if they want to come observe me and how I teach and I can give recommendations for other people who are totally blind that teach mobility, also. Everybody does, we all have our own style. Not every one person teaches the same way, but definitely you can do it.

Amy: Well, that's for sighted or visually impaired. Everyone has their own styles for sure. That's awesome advice.

Doug: Yeah. You got to be patient. When you're teaching them, you got to be patient. Make sure you have good walking shoes. That's for everybody.

Amy: That's it. That's for sure.

Doug: You don't want to get plantar fasciitis when you're teaching mobility. Believe me, I've had that, so ... 

Amy: Right. It's a definite occupational hazard. Take care of your feet. Take care of your lower body for sure.

Doug: Yep. Here in the Northwest, have a good raincoat.

Amy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Doug: So yeah.

Amy: In addition to auditory skills like that, I know that when you and I were chatting at Pacific Northwest AER, I asked you about tactile methods, or tactual methods. If a person has hearing loss in addition to vision loss, maybe an older adult, maybe they're not even super aware that they have hearing loss, what's appropriate there? What have you discovered about that method and when is it appropriate?
Doug: I think it's just important to communicate with the person if you feel that's going to be good to try to just to let them know, "Hey, I want you to touch my ... May I touch your shoulder just to see where you're at and how you're traveling across the street?" And more important, just to communicate beforehand.

Sometimes I've been guilty of when I touch a student's shoulders and see how they're lined up, then I forget, hey, just to talk to them beforehand. Some people are a little tactile defensive, so communication's the key. A lot of times I'll demonstrate to students, "Hey, this is what it feels like to cross the street straight." I'll have them go human guide or have them follow and touch my shoulder as I cross the street.

Amy: That's great. Yeah, I was wondering about their being able to touch your arm or shoulder or put a hand on your hand while you're using a particular cane technique.

Doug: Yeah. I definitely have students do that from time to time. I need to also see how they're doing, how they're arcing their cane and how they're holding it. I always try to tell them "I'm just going to look at your hand and see how you're holding the cane, how you're arcing the cane." Communicate that first. But sometimes I, over the years, have forgotten. Sometimes the person will get a little defensive. It's just important to try to remember to communicate first.

Amy: Absolutely. Are there any examples of a particular client or student without naming any names that you've worked with using some of these techniques that you're describing to the class that's really benefited them, that's really helped them maybe have confidence in themselves? You're an O&M, you're a professional, you also happen to have a visual impairment yourself. Can you talk about what that brings to the student or client that you're serving?

Doug: Yeah. I've had students over the years. Being blind or visually impaired, you're kind of a role model. Students have said, "Hey, that's really cool. I notice you use a cane." I know they see me catch the bus to go home or other places. They like to see that. That's why I was saying earlier it's really good sometimes that we wear a blindfold and demonstrate to the student that this is how we can ... that we could do it, too.

Yeah, students like to see other blind people doing what they do. I think it's important as we as instructors to also go out and search the blind community and find somebody who can demonstrate to the student, "Hey, this is how I go to work every day. This is what I do." That's another way to find other blind people will do as good role models.

Amy: It's incredibly empowering and affirming, I think. That is what so many people have mentioned to me about your work, Doug, and other leaders who happen to be blind who are orientation and mobility specialists. What do you think [crosstalk 00:19:47]. Go ahead.

Doug: I was just going to say I mess up too from time to time like everybody. When I'm telling a student, "Hey, let's go" and they like, "Hey, Mr. Trimble, we know you're looking for
your cane. You forgot where you put it, so ..." They think that's pretty funny too, so anyway.

Amy: That's very cool and insightful. For family members who have children who are blind, visually impaired, deaf-blind, for spouses who may be with someone who is losing their vision, does your particular expertise and lived experience have any influence on those relationships that you've observed?

Doug: Well, I try to work as much as possible with students along with their families and with their spouses and get them involved in the O&M program as much as possible. Working at a school, it's not as easy sometimes but unless we make that special effort to go work with the family in their home area. Where I work at the school, I try to do that mostly with our local students and communicate with the students and families the email and over the phone.

Sometimes I get to go out into the home community on a little trip and work with the students where they live, which is outstanding, which is great. Definitely want to talk to them as much as possible and urge them, "Don't take Johnny, guide Johnny all over the grocery store. Let Johnny go in the store and go to customer service and get what you need or what he needs." We want to definitely encourage the family or the spouses to let the student do more. They're going to gain confidence and be more independent. That's one of our biggest challenges is the home front.

Amy: Right. Absolutely. This has been really great talking to you. I want to ask you a little bit about environmental types of assessments like you were mentioning in the beginning when an O&M goes and previews a route or looks at the environmental needs. Would you talk about the ways that you gather information about an environment? That's one of the skills and knowledge bases that our students are learning about, how to go in and look at an environment and organize that information.

Doug: Yeah, so sometimes if I'm going to a new place I've never been to before, like this week I was over in Kennewick, Tri-cities area Eastern Washington, which I don't live so I don't know that area really well. I was going to go work with two people who are adults. I go with my driver and get information from my driver about what do these intersections look like? Are there sidewalks around? These were new people who haven't had any O&M training before, so I'm looking for basic sidewalks.

Is it safe or they live in a rural area? At least one person did. I'm using my driver, getting information from them about the area, and then I made time to get out and walk some routes I thought would be helpful for the student. Just trying to get as much information as possible. I like [inaudible 00:23:25] start outside with our sidewalks. Traffic intersections, traffic patterns. If there's no sidewalks, is it a safe street with a good shoulder to walk along?

Amy: I remember in Texas when we were getting our training. I did a little bit of work as an O&M in Texas. There's caliche. There's a type of rock and gravel along the side of the
road. It's really interesting how that cane interacts with the caliche and what are some of the unique environmental clues that come with a particular environment.

Doug: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Amy: Definitely.

Doug: There are times where there's not a lot of time to go out and preview routes. You just go to the adult person's home and see what they can do in their home and their home area and get out on the street. If there's a sidewalk or not, just get out there and try to figure it out with them.

Amy: Mm-hmm (affirmative). You spend a lot of time maybe, like you said, communicating with the person, interviewing them, observing them in the natural environment.

Doug: Yeah. For folks I've not spent time with even before I go work with them, I'll interview them on the phone. Hopefully I have some medical information, but sometimes I don't. I just talk with them, "What's your eye condition? Have you had any O&M training or a cane?" Some people say, especially the older adult blind community might say, "Yeah, I have a cane." I really specify, "Do you have a white cane?"

Most of them will say that they have a support cane. They don't understand the difference between a white cane and a support cane. You have to make that distinction with them so they understand that. I've worked with older adults too who have a balance issue, so I'll teach them to use a white support cane along with the long white cane. I've had some good success with people doing that.

Amy: That's fascinating. Can you describe a little bit more about that? About how an older adult could use a support cane and the long white cane?

Doug: Sure, so with folks I've done that who sometimes live in ... we're doing indoor O&M and they may live in an assisted living facility and their goal is to get from the elevator downstairs to the dining room. They're doing a lot of shorelining with their cane or diagonal technique following the wall. Teaching them to listen for openings too unless they have a severe hearing deficit and doing those basic techniques: squaring off, trailing the wall looking for openings.

There are people who they don't want to have both hands tied up with a support cane and a long cane. Like I said, I've had success with some people doing that and really need that support. I've worked with a few people using a walker too and using a white cane, which is very tricky, but there's some people who can do it.

Amy: I'm just fascinated because that isn't something in my own practice that I've done. One of the folks that we're bringing in to work with us this summer, Scott Crawford, has expertise in wheelchair mobility and also with the use of walkers. Could you talk a little bit more about how you've integrated the use of the long cane with the walker?
Doug: Basically just using the walker and having the cane out in front and just moving it back and forth. Taking a step, arcing the cane. I’m glad you’re having Scott come because he’s great. I went to his presentation last year in Bellingham. Definitely get his book. You're not going to see a lot of people doing it, but you will definitely see some, especially if you’re going to work with the adult population.

When I say the adult population, you may think that people using walkers. That’s the older blind, but now we are having 40-year-olds, 35-year-olds, people who have strokes and sometimes severe medical issues that end up using ... have to use a walker or another adapted mobility device.

Amy: Right. That's really great insight. I really appreciate this conversation, Doug. It's so helpful. One of the things that you and I talked about a little bit and I say this laughingly. You said you’re not really a techie. I was asking you about the use of technology. Our program, we’re thinking about the use of technology of course as O&M, but in its place. That it’s not a panacea, that it’s not a one-size-fits-all. Would you reflect a little bit on the use of maybe wayfinding apps or the use of technology? What's your feeling about that?

Doug: Well, I stress to all my students adult or youth that you really need to have awesome O&M foundations. You got to have good cane skills, good listening skills, ability to assess traffic. All those foundational skills. Get that down and then we’re going to have to run some technology. Just like using, calling public transportation getting information. Can they do that efficiently?

Let's look at an app. Can we get the same information with Google Maps or a transit app? There's all kinds of apps out there. Can you do it, can you get that information quicker than calling or is it more on-the-go? We do play around with some of the apps. Some apps are real-time. Google Maps is great, but you really got to learn how to understand what it's telling you, like EB.

It says EB. That's eastbound. Well, some students, some people see that or hear it and you may not understand what EB means or WB. We definitely look at the technology with some of the apps. I've learned about BlindSquare. Learning about the Seeing Eye app, which I’m trying out now. There is a free app for the Seeing Eye for O&M instructors, which I discovered. You go to good conferences, you'll find all kinds of new tricks.

The one I like about that app is it will actually tell you just like the [inaudible 00:30:23] used to that, "Hey, there's a three-way intersection coming up" where most of the apps don't tell you that. As a blind person traveling, "Yeah, no, hey this is a three-way intersection" and it's on the other side of the street. You may not know the street stops and goes through.

Definitely look at as many apps as possible. Make tactile maps, sometimes that's helpful. I still liked the old [inaudible 00:30:49]. I know most people aren't using it anymore. I think [inaudible 00:30:54] made a new one come out that is pretty expensive and most
people don't want to carry two or three devices with them. I think technology is exciting. I know people use the area glasses. I don't know if you guys are going to get a chance to do that.

Amy: Yeah.

Doug: Or some of the other devices that are out there. I'm all about using the tools, having as many tools in our toolbox, finding out what works best for the person. But you got to have those foundational skills.

Amy: Absolutely. Well, we are looking at the integration of technology into our summer. I do just want to invite you to come and be with our class when they're all together and I'll send you those dates, Doug. Is there any closing advice or just words of wisdom that you would offer our folks? Just know that people are listening to this from Alaska. In the future, we'll have students from Hawaii. We've got people in Washington, of course, and Oregon, one in California, one in Maryland. People are listening and thinking about O&M in all different kinds of environments.

Doug: Just enjoy it. It's an adventure every day. It's extremely rewarding. You get to work with a wide variety of people. Yeah, there's some paperwork, but that's involved with every other kind of job. Folks, think about what population you really want to work on, work with. Do you want to work with kids? Wherever you're going to work, if you want to work with kids, make sure you know what school districts or the educational establishment in that state requires.

Some states require a teaching license to be an O&M instructor, some states don't. Make sure if youth is what you want to work with that you know that you find out those requirements. I know of other people who went through a program, thought they could go into a school and teach but didn't know they had to have a teaching certificate. Really do your research.

I would say just it's great, it's enjoyable. Even if you do think you want to work with kids or adults, there's lots of opportunities to work with both. There's lots of summer programs. They're looking for O&M instructors to work at a summer camp or a vocational training program over the summer. Partake in those so you can get used to working with different populations and can decide you want to do both or one or the other.

Amy: That's great advice. Yep, that's great advice. Well, Doug, thank you again for spending some time with us on this interview. I'll give you a call back, but we'll stop the recording for now. Thanks so much for sharing your wisdom with Portland State University. I really appreciate it.

Doug: You bet. Go Vikings.

Amy: Okay. Thanks. Your alma mater, right?
Doug: Yep.
Amy: One of your alma maters. Okay.
Doug: Yes.
Amy: All right. Thanks again, Doug. Take care.
Amy: Bye bye.