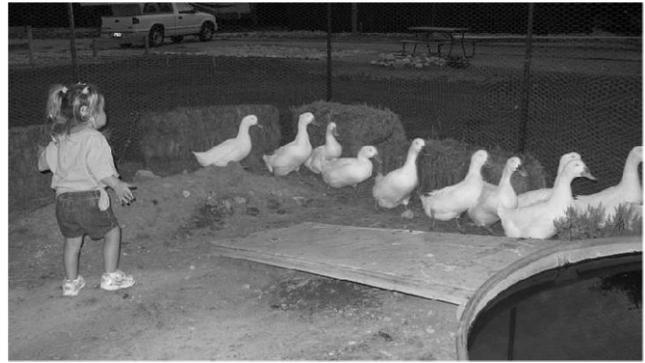


We decided to do this because we did not want to overload Laci with too many activities, and because we hadn't been camping in so long that we needed a "dry run" to shake off the cobwebs. Looking back, I am glad we kept the activities simple, because those were the things Laci liked to do, and now she will associate fun things with camping. I am sure that someday she will want to mountain bike and hike and boat, but for now, its bugs and leaves.

We got to the campground Friday afternoon and immediately took a walk so that Laci could begin to get comfortable with her surroundings. We soon discovered some ducks living at the campground, and Laci fell in love with them. We had made many trips to a local park to feed the ducks, so she knew all about feeding ducks! Soon after the ducks, it was time to build a fire and make dinner. Laci and Becky helped out while I cooked. After dinner, we made s'mores. Laci didn't take too well to them, but she loved the chocolate and graham crackers separately. She did think it was cool how Daddy's marshmallow kept catching on fire. We showered, and then it was time for bed. Becky and I sat out at the campfire, in awe of how tired we were, thinking about past trips when we never really got *that tired*.

After a great night's rest with rain outside, we woke up, and I made breakfast while Becky and Laci got dressed. We spent the whole day just hanging around the campsite doing our little projects. We played on the playground, played with some "moon" sand, went fishing, and made some leaf drawings. The campground manager had noticed Laci's interest in the ducks. He said that he watches the children and picks the most well-mannered to help feed the ducks and corral them into their cage for the night. He told us that he really liked Laci and that he wanted her to help with the ducks. So he bestowed upon her the badge of the "Duck-meister." It was an actual pin with a duck on it and beneath it the word "Duck-meister." So Laci helped feed the ducks and put them in their cage, and she had a great time doing it. Before we knew it, the day was done, and we went through our "time for night-night" routine. Laci did really well both nights. I think it was because she got really tired. She had many new experiences to register in that little brain of hers, and it showed.

On Sunday, we woke up, ate breakfast, loaded up the truck, and came home. Laci helped put stuff away as she always does. She didn't stop talking about the trip for a couple of days, and she shared the experience with her classmates. We



will go camping this upcoming summer, for sure. And honestly, there won't be any mountain biking, or running, or hiking, or even 4-wheeling. But there will be a lot of projects. I imagine they will be whatever Laci Faith is into at the time. I would like to make another trip back to Corpus Christi—not to see the U.S.S. Lexington, but just to see the beach, because Laci has never been to an ocean.



Making Online Technical Assistance Connections

The Kansas Distance Mentorship Project

Peggy Malloy, NCDB

Four-year-old Blaine is sitting in front of a large computer screen with a picture of a colorful car. With assistance from his teacher, he touches the screen and then laughs out loud as the picture changes to one of a tractor. Blaine's dad is a farmer, and his mom, Jaclyn, says that Blaine is a big farm boy. He loves tractors, cows, and cattle. He also likes cars, trucks, football, basketball, and swimming. He loves to be read to, and he cracks up when his sisters fight or get into trouble.

Blaine, a triplet, was born prematurely at 24-weeks gestation. Because he has cortical visual impairment and auditory neuropathy, he has trouble processing what he sees and hears. He also has cerebral palsy, uses a wheelchair, and needs assistance to use his arms or hands. The scene of Blaine at the computer is captured on a short videoclip that his teacher, Brandi Smith, posted on a secure website called "Blaine's Clubhouse." The site can only be accessed by Blaine's educational team members and by external consultants who assist the team. The videoclip posted by Brandi is one of a series of clips on the website that show Blaine using a computer to play games that teach the concept of cause and effect. The availability of the

videoclips on the website makes it possible for consultants in Lawrence and Kansas City, both more than 100 miles away from Blaine's school in Clay Center, to observe him at the computer and provide advice to Brandi and other team members about positioning and supporting him during computer activities.

Blaine is one of three students who are the focus of a new distance learning initiative in Kansas called the Distance Mentorship Project (DMP). Using Internet technology, the DMP makes it possible for educational team members to interact online with a team of consultants who have expertise in deaf-blindness. The goal of the project is to use distance technology to help educators learn the skills they need to work with children like Blaine, who have complex disabilities that include hearing and vision loss.

The DMP was developed by Megan Cote, the project coordinator at the Kansas Deaf-Blind Project; Bob Taylor and Anne Nielsen, educational consultants at the Kansas State School for the Blind; and Jon Harding, a technical assistance specialist at the National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB). Each of the agencies they represent provides what is known as technical assistance (TA). TA providers in the field of deaf-blindness use training and consultation to help schools, families, and educators obtain the skills and knowledge they need to provide quality educational



Screen shot of a video in Blaine's video library

services to children who are deaf-blind. The Kansas Deaf-Blind Project, like deaf-blind projects in other states, is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), and it is the primary provider of TA for children and youth in Kansas who are deaf-blind.

The Kansas State School for the Blind (KSSB), through its outreach department, provides TA for educators of children with visual impairments, some of whom are deaf-blind. In 2008 these two agencies, with assistance from NCDB (also funded by OSEP), began to work together to explore creative ways to deliver TA using new distance technologies, and in the fall of 2008 the Distance Mentorship Project was born. For this article I interviewed Megan, Bob, and Jon to find out details about the project and what they have learned so far. I also interviewed Blaine's teacher Brandi and his mother Jaclyn Pfizenmaier, who, in addition to being Blaine's mom, is the principal at Garfield Elementary School in Clay Center.

Connecting Teams Using Distance Technology

The DMP consists of three key components: (a) the exchange of videoclips of a student engaged in specific routines, (b) a secure website where an educational team and external consultants share videoclips and other resources and post comments, and (c) monthly web-based video conferences between the educational team members and consultants. Although the DMP does not replace the need for onsite visits by consultants, it does make the need for visits less frequent and provides ongoing opportunities between visits for in-depth discussion and decision-making.

The student's educational team is known as the **core team**. All members of a student's team (e.g., primary teacher, paraprofessionals, parents or guardians, related service providers) are invited to participate, but teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents tend to be the most engaged in the DMP on a regular basis because they work most closely with the focus child on daily routines.

A key feature of the DMP is that it is not just consultation *to* a team, but also consultation *from* a team. The TA specialists who provide the mentorship and consultation are known as the **extended team**. The primary members are the professionals who developed the DMP—Megan Cote, Bob Taylor, Anne Nielsen, and Jon Harding. Megan has also included other staff members from the Kansas Deaf-Blind Project and, on occasion, master teachers from the Inclusive Network of Kansas who are mentors for teachers of students with profound disabilities.

Consultants with specific expertise, such as communication experts and pediatric ophthalmologists, serve as additional extended team members and join the group as needed. "Having a

group of consultants leads to better recommendations," says Jon Harding. "As consultants, we know we are not in it alone. Because we all have different backgrounds and areas of expertise, we can give better advice."

DMP Components

An arrangement between the DMP and an educational team begins with a meeting at the child's school between one of the DMP consultants and the core team. Onsite visits, especially initially, are important. As Bob says, "You can never do this entirely by distance. Someone on the consultant team has to have hands-on contact." Megan, Bob, and Anne are each case managers for children who have been involved in the project so far, while Jon Harding's primary role has been to coordinate the development of the project and facilitate meetings. All four participate in the online consultation and web-conferencing for each child.

Once an agreement has been reached between a school and the DMP, Bob Taylor helps the core team learn how to create effective videos and use the web-based technology. Bob, who has worked with distance technology for a number of years and has great enthusiasm for its possibilities, has been the driving force behind the DMP's use of technology. The following sections describe this technology, which as noted above, the DMP uses to achieve three purposes—exchange of videoclips, online team collaboration using a secure shared website, and monthly web-based video conferences.

Exchange of Videoclips

The consulting model used by the DMP is built around routines. Core team members are asked to videotape their student during key routines and post them to the team collaboration website. The videoclips make it possible for everyone on the core and extended teams to really see what is happening when a child is engaged in a routine. Bob recommends that videoclips be no more than 3 to 4 minutes long, and he encourages teachers to narrate what is happening and to ask questions while the tape is running (e.g., "This isn't working very well. What could we be doing differently here?"). "If you follow this formula," he says, "you get very good information. Even short videoclips create opportunities for discussions and demonstrate the right way to do things." He says that it usually takes about three videos to get a routine structured. Final videos demonstrating the best techniques are posted in the "video library" on the team collaboration website. Blaine's video library

currently contains clips for a variety of routines including book reading, concept-building, and eating. There is also a series of videos in which Blaine's physical therapist demonstrates how to move and position him during activities.

Team Collaboration Site on the Web

The second component is a team collaboration site on the web where videoclips and other resources are posted and viewed. These sites also provide a place for the educational team members and external consultants to post questions and comments so that they can conduct online discussions, often focused around the videoclips.

Free software programs that make it easy to create team collaboration sites (often called "wikis," which means "quick" in Hawaiian) are available on the Internet. Bob says they have had success using a program called Google Sites, but a number of other programs are also available. The project used an internal site developed by the school district for one of the students but found it to be inconsistent and difficult to use. Megan Cote says that, going forward, the project will only work with school districts that allow them to use an external site.

Good organization that makes the sites easy to navigate is important. For example, the following are some of the sections the DMP has found to be useful:

- ◆ Discussion Avenue—for questions and comments.
- ◆ Town Hall Meeting—a place to post videos, action plans, and the schedule for the web-based conferences.
- ◆ Library—a place to organize the final videoclips that demonstrate effective strategies and to store information resources (e.g., fact sheets) and forms (e.g., IEP forms, assessment forms).

The structure of the team collaboration sites is designed to support both immediate information-sharing and data capture over time. "The site," says Megan, "opens communication and gives everyone a better understanding of the child and what they are learning. Families absolutely love it because they feel like they are gathering a running portfolio of their child and can see the evolution of their learning." Brandi, who is a new teacher for Blaine this year, found the information on the website to be enormously helpful in getting to know Blaine and understanding his needs. "Because I had access to the wiki," she says, "I was

able to see what they had started last year and could see how to get through classroom tasks and teach Blaine independent skills. And it is awesome to have the extra support for what we are doing and what we need to be doing; to get new ideas and other people's perspectives."

Monthly Web-Based Video Conferences

The final DMP component is web-based conferences. Bob says that any type of web conferencing software program works (e.g., Skype, Polycom), depending on its availability in a particular school. The purpose of the meetings is to give team members a chance to speak live and get questions answered in a face-to-face format. They review previous plans and recommendations, as well as new topics that have been generated on the website; and the consultants make new recommendations and offer advice.

Future Directions

To date, the DMP has worked with educational teams for three students in three different Kansas towns. In the process of developing and beginning to use this model, the TA providers have learned a great deal about what does and does not work when providing distance mentorship and consultation. Overall, Jon, Megan, and Bob all say that the project has made it possible for them to provide much more intensive and meaningful technical assistance. "It augments traditional forms of TA and creates opportunities for increased engagement that you don't typically have with intermittent onsite visits," says Jon, "and it builds relationships between consultants and educational teams." Jaclyn Pfizenmaier agrees. "I can't imagine where Blaine would be without it," she says. "It has given easy access for people who are a couple of hundred miles apart to communicate. As a principal, I can see how it holds the classroom accountable. As a parent, I get to talk to professionals much more often or get on the wiki. I constantly know what is going on at the school and the progress Blaine has made."

In addition to building relationships between external providers and core team members, the DMP has fostered interagency collaboration between the Kansas Deaf-Blind Project and the KSSB. At the time they began to develop the DMP, KSSB was just beginning to explore distance mentorship options, and the Kansas Deaf-Blind Project was a new project with new personnel after the project moved from the state's Department of Education to the University of Kansas in 2008. In his work as an NCDB technical assistance spe-

cialist, Jon Harding, who already had relationships with both agencies, was able to facilitate the collaboration.

Developing the roles and responsibilities of the consultants involved in the project has been challenging at times. Project collaborators have found that a combination of informality and structure is necessary for effective work as a group, but the four primary extended team members—Megan, Bob, Anne, and Jon—have found it easy to work together using this model. "There is a danger," says Megan, "in having too many cooks in the kitchen, because you can have too many opinions and consensus would never be reached. Having four people has worked well though. There has never really been any argument for what should be done. From that standpoint it has just been amazing."

While noting that distance mentoring will not replace traditional TA, Megan says that the ultimate goal for the Kansas Deaf-Blind Project is to use it as a key part of their TA delivery structure, and Bob and Anne at the Kansas State School for the Blind have adopted the model for their entire outreach program for children with visual impairments and multiple disabilities. "This is the type of virtual community," says Bob, "that teams need to help them solve problems. I don't think schools can ever be effective for kids with unique learning needs by having one consultant going to a school. You can't take a child as far as they can possibly go without help. It is much more effective when you use these team collaboration sites and draw in specialists as needed."

Jon, Megan, and Bob say they hope that this model will spread to other states. "I think every deaf-blind project should do this," says Megan, "It's a lot of fun and it is just going to have to be a new way to deliver TA because our projects have a limited number of staff members and limited time. Plus I truly believe it's a way of delivering richer technical assistance. Now, I just want all TA to be this rich."

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