

# Voices of Orientation and Mobility Instructors Who Are Visually Impaired: Results of a Focus Group

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## Abstract

Four orientation and mobility instructors who are visually impaired participated in an online focus group. The themes that emerged included monitoring, instructor position, equipment/technology, accommodations, skills needed to become an O&M instructor, and what motivated the participants to become O&M instructors. The participants entered the O&M field to assist individuals with visual impairment for altruistic reasons. This study added to the past research focused on nonvisual teaching strategies and accommodations of O&M instructors who were visually impaired. Future research in this area should include a larger sample size, interviewing instructors with visual impairment, and observing them during their O&M lessons.

## Keywords

Focus group, blind, orientation and mobility, blind instructors

## Introduction

Orientation and mobility (O&M) is a profession that supports people who are visually impaired in the areas of safety, concept development, travel skills across environments, and quality of life (Fazzi & Barlow, 2018; Maurer, 2013; Wiener & Sifferman, 2010). Traditionally, O&M instructors are prepared through agency training, apprenticeship models, and personnel preparation (university) programs. In some countries O&M is not a stand-alone profession. Training can be part of a program for teachers of students with visual impairment (Neustadt-Noy & Bozeman, 2024; Neustadt-Noy & LaGrow, 2010). O&M services are generally

provided across the lifespan. Historically, O&M instructors were predominately sighted in the United States due to standards that prohibited individuals who were visually impaired from obtaining certification. However, requirements in the United States changed over time to allow individuals who are visually impaired to be certified (Wiener & Sifferman, 2010).

Research concerning how O&M instructors who are visually impaired provide O&M services to their students (children and adults with visual impairments) is scarce. In fact, Dodds (1983) called

for research to identify how mobility instructors who are blind perform their jobs. Four studies were conducted to gain a better understanding of the accommodations, nonvisual skills, and teaching strategies used by O&M instructors with visual impairments (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024). The current study aimed to determine the teaching strategies and accommodations used by this population. The research team employed a qualitative research design in which O&M instructors who are visually impaired participated in an online focus group to answer the overall research question “What are the accommodations, equipment, nonvisual skills, and teaching strategies O&M instructors who are visually impaired utilize when teaching O&M lessons to individuals who are blind and visually impaired?”

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This research used a constructivism approach, a representation or metaphor for how students learn (Cobern, 1995). The main goal is to generate information from the learners as much as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Precisely, constructivism is the belief that learners actively construct their own knowledge and understanding. Those who align with constructivism believe that everyone holds different views; therefore, the focus of the researchers was to uncover the diverse views of O&M instructors who are visually impaired.

In constructivism, emphasis is placed on ensuring the participants express their values and biases. Knowledge is derived from the participants’ lived experiences, and this is best developed through interaction between three to 10 participants and the researchers (Creswell & Baez, 2021). Therefore, this study focused on the lived experiences of four O&M instructors who were visually impaired while providing O&M services.

## **Methods**

The study used a qualitative approach where O&M instructors with visual impairment were interviewed during a 2-hour online focus group via Zoom that was recorded. The online focus group was selected as this method can “bring together geographically distant individuals and groups in web-based

settings; practical advantages of avoiding costly and difficult transcription; and the ability to facilitate greater participation and disclosure for users who are comfortable with social uses ... of the Internet” (Moore et al., 2015, p. 19).

## **I. Recruitment**

In August 2023, permission to conduct this study was approved through Texas Tech University’s Human Research Protection Program. In fall and winter 2023, recruitment emails were sent to CEOs of rehabilitation centers serving people with visual impairment and employing O&M instructors with visual impairment. The CEOs were asked to forward the information sheet describing the study. Inclusion criteria for this study required being an O&M instructor with a visual impairment who provided O&M services to individuals with blindness or visual impairment. Potential participants contacted the researchers via email listed on the information sheet. Consent forms were completed by the participants prior to their involvement in the focus group.

## **II. Instrument**

An interview protocol with the following questions was developed, refined by the researchers, and utilized during the focus group:

1. What are some nonvisual teaching strategies you commonly use when providing O&M services to people who are visually impaired?
2. Do you use accommodations (reasonable accommodation is a modification or adjustment to a job, the work environment, or the way things are usually done) when teaching O&M skills to individuals who are visually impaired? If yes, please describe what you use.
3. What equipment do you find most useful when providing O&M services to people who are visually impaired?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share with us regarding teaching O&M skills as an O&M specialist who is visually impaired?

During the discussion time was allotted for additional questions or comments. The following question emerged: What motivated you to get into

this field as O&M instructors who are visually impaired?

### III. Participants

Five participants were recruited, but only four could attend the online focus group as one individual became ill. Three males and one female with visual impairment who provided O&M services in different states participated in a focus group on April 8, 2024. Prior to the interviews, participants completed a demographic information sheet that included their age, years of employment within a range, and the population they served. Following is a description of the participants.

John is a White (defined as an individual who has ancestry from Europe, North Africa or Middle East) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009) from male between 31 and 40 years of age with Type 1 Diabetes who preferred not to answer demographic questions regarding his visual condition and acuity. John works full-time and has been in the field for 6–10 years. John is a certified orientation and mobility specialist (COMS) and resides in an urban area. John reports he works solely with adults.

Tim is a White male between 41 and 50 years of age with Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP) and has no additional disabilities. He reports his acuity as no light perception (NLP) in both eyes. Tim stated he is currently not employed but is seeking a new position, is certified as a COMS, has been in the field from 0–5 years, and lives in a suburban area. He reports that he most recently worked solely with children.

Kate is a White female over 51 years of age. Her eye condition is Optic Nerve Atrophy. She reports her visual acuity is 20/400 in her right eye, and she has light perception (LP) in her left eye. She has no additional disabilities other than age-related complaints. Kate works full-time, has National O&M Certification, has been in the field for more than 21 years, and lives in an urban area. She works solely with adults.

Nick is a White male between 41 and 50 years of age with ROP. He reports his visual acuity as LP in the right eye, NLP in the left eye, and says he has no additional disabilities. Nick works full-time, is certified as a COMS, has been in the field for 0–5 years, and lives in an urban area. He works across the lifespan.

### IV. Data Analysis

We used the Data Analysis Spiral approach described by Creswell and Poth (2018). With this method “the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (Creswell & Poth 2018, p.185). Following the recorded focus group Zoom meeting, a transcription was prepared using a software program, Temi.com. The information was then cataloged and saved in a OneDrive file shared by the team. Next, the researchers organized the data by reading through the transcripts and adding pseudonyms. The research team reviewed the transcripts together and identified codes and themes guided by interview questions. An Excel chart was constructed to provide a clear representation of the codes that emerged during the focus group discussion. These codes were then thoroughly described for classification into themes (Creswell & Báez, 2021). Additionally, member checks were performed for clarification by the participants in October 2024.

## Results

Researchers reviewed the transcript identifying themes and codes. The themes that emerged included monitoring, instructor position, equipment/technology, accommodations, skills needed to become an O&M instructor, and what motivated the participants to become O&M instructors. The nonvisual teaching strategies were monitoring and instructor positioning. Specific codes for certain themes were auditory and tactile monitoring, and use of a driver and sighted assistance for the accommodations theme.

### Monitoring

#### Auditory monitoring (N = 12)

For auditory monitoring John stated, "I pay attention to where they are in space based off of sound." Another participant, Kate, said, "so just sometimes just listening to somebody say something will tell you ... what their posture's doing." Nick stated, "I'm using verbal check-ins. I listen, I try to put myself directly behind them and doing exactly what they're doing so I can hear the traffic the way they're hearing it."

#### Tactile monitoring (N = 11)

Participants mentioned the use of one's foot and the cane, as well as the importance of alerting clients prior to touching them. Tim stated, "I'll use my foot just to double check and make sure that their ... feet aren't put off in odd directions." John mentioned, "Working with me is gonna involve me needing to physically touch them. I always ... check what they're doing with their posture how they're holding the cane." He also discussed warning clients before initiating physical contact and then touching with the back of his hand; specifically, "I make sure and spread my pinky and thumb as far apart as possible and put it right on the shoulder girdle there to feel which way they may be turning." Additionally, he mentioned the use of his cane to determine positioning by "checking out their feet with ... the tip of my cane." The cane was also used for safety when crossing a street. "I may hold up my cane to the side of them almost kind of like as a

guardrail to keep them from going too far to ... parallel traffic or stepping out into perpendicular when perpendicular [is] surging." Kate also mentioned using the student's shoulder to check their direction and ensuring her student's knowledge of when she would touch them.

#### Instructor positioning (N = 3)

The focus was on the instructor's position and the instructor staying between the student and traffic as the student was crossing a street. John stated he would "monitor where they're going, and if they're starting to veer or get disoriented." Kate mentioned "positioning ourselves ... back into the traffic side of the client's body."

#### Equipment and assistive technology (N = 13)

The equipment the participants mentioned they use for O&M training included Braille Notetaker, NQ 40, global positioning system (GPS) apps, Blind Square, Google Maps outdoors, CLEW (an indoor video recording app), bone conduction earphones, sunglasses that connect with a phone via Bluetooth, Apple Watch with compass, phone, JAWS, Braille displays, tactile tape, tactile map, voice recorders, Victor Trek, and AIRA. John advocated for the use of a phone, stating, "Like my phone is like my blind Swiss Army knife; I use my Apple Watch as well, but I set silent alarms, and it's more as a way to help me keep track of times for pacing on lessons."

The participants discussed the advantages and disadvantages of technology use for travel as well as the need to learn O&M foundational skills. Tim summed up the use of technology with his statement, "[You] gotta have the foundational skills. Technology is no replacement. If all the batteries die, you're still able to get from Point A to Point B." Nick agreed with Tim about the need for foundational skills: "the technology, and this is true in O&M ... and independent living skills is true. Wherever you want to insert this technology is no substitution and no replacement for doing the hard work of acquiring foundational skills." Nick also mentioned the unreliability of technology. "So when it gets time to teach tech, one thing that I teach with

GPS, I'll teach 'em how unreliable it is, for example or I'll teach 'em its limitations."

#### Accommodations (N = 5)

When teaching O&M, the participants used private drivers, Uber, and sighted assistance for accommodations. John stated he "get[s] assistance from one of my coworkers," while Tim mentioned, "I would have someone sighted give me feedback on the nonverbal communication that was being offered." Kate explained, "I've gotta train my driver what to look [for]."

#### Skills to become an O&M instructor (N = 6)

All participants agreed that just because a person is blind does not mean they should become an O&M instructor. For example, Tim stated, "because someone could know a given subject very well, if they can't convey that appropriately to their clients, it doesn't matter that they can get from here to East Jerusalem and back if they don't have a good way of conveying." Similarly, John said, "Blindness is not their resume. Someone who says that they should be an O&M instructor (sic) because they're blind, I think is right on par with someone who can see saying that I'm a good O&M instructor (sic).... And that's not the case that I am able to cross-train and share my lived experience and bring in all these other skills and work them in, you know, very seamlessly into lessons because I am blind ... I'm not a good O&M instructor (sic) because I'm blind." Kate mentioned, "I've known people that, you know, they could travel circles around me, and then when I listen to 'em teach, I think ... they're gonna put clients in that person's hands." Finally, Nick verbalized, "[T]here are sighted people who justly get washed out of programs because they don't, they can't hack it. There are blind people who should absolutely not be O&M instructor (sic). But the message that I will preach ... is that if you are qualified and you have the skills, then you deserve the chance to become an O&M instructor."

#### Motivation to be an O&M instructor (N = 5)

As the focus group discussion occurred, another topic emerged regarding the participants' motivation

to become O&M instructors. Tim stated, my goal in adaptive technology and mobility instruction is to give that to my students because it took me about 6 or 7 years to really get a handle on my blindness.... What I mean is, I come to a positive philosophy on my blindness and realize that the world doesn't owe me a living simply because I have a cane.... If I can save them a year or two of getting their stuff sorted out and give them a couple of extra years to their life, I've given them a gift that it took me a little bit longer to get.... It's kind of a pass it on, sort of pay it forward sort of idea for me.... My life is great, and I'm living the dream every single day, and I want to be able to encourage my clients to do that as well, regardless of their age and what their independent goals look like.

John agreed with Tim about the altruistic side of entering the O&M profession by mentioning, definitely the altruistic side of it.... When I went blind ... my world definitely closed in, and [I] had to learn how to interact with it more.... O&M really opened the world back up for me.... It really feeds me emotionally to be able to open the world back up for my students in a similar way; so I kind of like the blind parkour kind of element to riding the adrenaline rush out there playing in traffic.

Similarly, Kate said, "I can give you a fighting chance to come to your independence on your terms."

## Discussion

The current study's results are like the other studies conducted by Griffin-Shirley et al. (2019, 2021, 2023, 2024) with a few new findings. The themes are similar to the other studies as they include monitoring, instructor positioning, and equipment. Results from the current research also identified new themes: what motivates an individual to become an O&M instructor if they are visually impaired, and the skills needed to become an O&M instructor with a visual impairment.

## Voices of Orientation and Mobility Instructors Who Are Visually Impaired: Results of a Focus Group

The participants in the current study identified nonvisual teaching strategies (e.g., auditory and tactile monitoring, and equipment) when teaching O&M to students with visual impairment also found across four previous studies (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024). Instructor positioning, accommodations, and the skills needed to become an O&M instructor with visual impairment were also evident in four of the studies (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024).

Regarding auditory monitoring, participants reported using echolocation, listening to student's conversation, and verbal check-ins. In a study where O&M instructors who were blind were videotaped teaching O&M lessons to their students, the sounds of the students' canes and verbal communication with the instructors noted their location (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2024).

For ways of tactile monitoring, the instructor's foot, their cane, or touching their student were mentioned. Checking students' shoulders and using their canes to alert students to drop-offs were common techniques also utilized by O&M instructors with blindness in two studies by Griffin-Shirley et al. (2021, 2023). Maurer et al. (2006) discussed the need for an instructor who was blind to have contact with their student to physically point toward traffic. Stopping a student from stepping in front of vehicles by physical contact was recommended by Fazzi and Barlow (2017). Additionally, these authors recommended a small person could use their body weight to stop a larger student from stepping in front of a car.

The instructors mentioned the importance of positioning themselves between their students and traffic. Additionally, knowing whether the student is veering or disoriented was of concern. Being between the student and potentially dangerous objects such as traffic and drop-offs was also evident in a study where O&M instructors who were blind were surveyed about their nonvisual skills and teaching strategies (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2021). Similarly, Fazzi and Barlow (2017) stressed the importance of instructor positioning. They stated, "The O&M specialist should position himself to react

appropriately and consider the direction of vehicular threats" (p. 168).

Many types of equipment (e.g., mobile apps, braille, JAWS, screen readers, global positioning system, telephone, and compass) were used by the participants. In this study, participants used new technology not identified in the research team's previous studies (i.e., Apple watch, CLEW (an indoor video recording app, sunglasses that connect your phone via Bluetooth). Advantages and disadvantages of technology were identified by these participants, which was not evident in the other three studies conducted by Griffin-Shirley et al. (2019, 2023, 2024). Having foundational skills in O&M was very important to all the interviewees for travelers who are visually impaired. Technology is not a substitute for basic O&M skills. Equipment cited in previous studies (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2019, 2023) included mobile apps, braille, JAWS, screen readers, GPS, telephone, and compass, like some of the technology used by participants in the current study.

The participants mentioned assistive technologies that are also commonly used by O&M instructors during O&M lessons (Griffin-Shirley, 2018; Pandey et al., 2022; Smith & Penrod, 2010). Specifically, electronic orientation aids (e.g., GPS, compasses) and electronic travel aids (Miniguide) are cited in Griffin-Shirley and Smith and Penrod. Likewise, Pandey et al. (2022) surveyed 124 Indian college students with visual impairment about their use of mobile apps. The students found the GPS navigation app useful. Similarly, 250 people with visual impairment were surveyed concerning their usage of mobile apps to accomplish daily tasks (Moon et al., 2020). Apps for navigation assisted with participants' indoor and outdoor travel and identification of surrounding environments.

Siu and Presley (2020) stated, "The ultimate experts in access technology for nonvisual or low vision access will always be those individuals who are blind or visually impaired who are also proficient and savvy with a variety of mainstream and specialized technology" (p. 31). As the participants in the current study mentioned, Siu and Presley also discussed that, even though pros and cons of

assistive technology exist, individuals make the decision about what technology they choose to use. By making use of assistive technology, the participants modeled for their students what devices worked for travel.

Accommodations mentioned in the current study were private drivers, sighted assistance, and Uber. In one study, a student in an O&M program was assigned a sighted person to preview environments prior to teaching O&M students (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2019). The 2019 study also mentioned the use of a private driver. When four teachers of students with visual impairments who were blind were interviewed, they discussed their reliance on sighted individuals for information and transportation (Okungu et al., 2019), like the current study's interviewees.

Skills needed to become an O&M instructor with visual impairment included being able to convey information accurately to students and possessing the necessary O&M skills. Having a visual impairment did not automatically enable one to become an O&M instructor nor did having excellent travel skills. One participant also mentioned that having sight or blindness did not matter; however, an individual must be qualified and "have the skills" to become an O&M instructor. Likewise, in the Griffin-Shirley et al. (2021) study, "the participants stress the importance of acquiring good travel skills prior to entering a university program" for training of O&M instructors (p. 201). According to Morias et al. (1997), being confident in one's cane skills while providing O&M instruction is important for O&M instructors who are blind. Mettler (1998) also discussed the importance of trainees learning to become O&M instructors to "become proficient at learning, devising, and practicing nonvisual travel skills" (p. 156).

The participants were motivated to become O&M instructors by altruism and the desire to teach someone with a visual impairment to be independent. Specifically, one participant who had lost his vision as an adult discussed his journey of learning adaptive skills that led to a positive attitude toward his blindness. He continued to stress the importance of providing O&M services to assist

others with vision loss to accept their condition. Likewise, Mettler (1998) encouraged trainees who were blind and becoming O&M instructors to reflect on their limitations about blindness and overcoming them, stressing independence. Maurer et al. (2006) provided a scenario where, if an individual loses their vision, then if they can learn "to travel independently ... freedom is gained" (p. 305). Heyes et al. (1983) also mentioned the relationship between mobility and independence. Perryman and Calvert (2020) surveyed 1,200 teacher education graduates in the United Kingdom about why they entered the teaching profession. The graduates entered the field to make a difference; as one of the survey respondents mentioned, they had a strong work ethic and were passionate, which is similar to participants in this study.

Using a constructivism approach, the researchers uncovered the diverse views of four O&M instructors who were visually impaired when they provided O&M services. The online focus group provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their lived experiences and share these experiences with the researchers. Nonvisual teaching strategies, accommodations, and equipment these individuals used when delivering O&M services were identified.

## Implications for Practitioners

The practitioners for which the results of this study are relevant include employers at rehabilitation centers, O&M instructors, and faculty of personnel preparation programs in O&M. Due to the national shortage of O&M instructors (Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired O&M Division, 2022), employers may want to fund their employees who are visually impaired to enter and complete personnel preparation programs in O&M. Additionally, the employers may want to consider accommodations (e.g., a driver) for them to accomplish the roles and responsibilities of the job. Specifically, McDonnall et al. (2019) conducted a study of employers and professionals in the field of blindness about their attitudes regarding the competence of people who were blind. For employers, a strong association existed between blindness and incompetence,

whereas the professionals had a more positive attitude toward individuals who were blind. Thus, sighted O&M specialists need to welcome persons with visual impairment into the field of education/rehabilitation. Likewise, faculty of personnel preparation programs in O&M can recruit students with visual impairment into their programs if they meet their entrance requirements.

## Conclusion

This study added to the past research focused on nonvisual teaching strategies and accommodations of O&M instructors who were visually impaired. The participants entered the O&M field to assist individuals with visual impairment for altruistic reasons. From their discussion during the online focus group, their passion for the field was evident. Future research in this area should include a larger sample size, interviewing instructors with visual impairment, and observing them during their O&M lessons. Sighted or visually impaired, O&M instructors are concerned about the same thing, supporting the safety of their students and providing them with the O&M skills to be safe and efficient travelers.

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