
Whose Learning is it? Fostering Student Ownership in Orientation & Mobility

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There is a growing body of literature (Ashcroft, 1987; Kohn, 1993; O'Neal & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Rainer & Matthews, 2002; Wood, 2003; World Health Organization, 2010) that encourages age-appropriate choice and control as a way to develop student ownership in a variety of educational areas. However, exactly what student ownership is and how it manifests in the context of orientation and mobility (O&M) services appear to be more elusive concepts. This article is an attempt to advance our understanding of student ownership in O&M while providing concrete strategies to foster engagement and decision making, two key aspects of student ownership.

Introduction

While decision-making and active engagement in learning is important in all areas of education, they are critical in the context of O&M. In order to be an independent and successful traveller, one needs to constantly assess situations and make decisions in unpredictable, sometimes unsafe environments.

The relationship between decision-making and independent travel is not the only reason why we should try to engage students in their mobility experience; there is also the question of meaning (i.e., “What does O&M mean to you?”) This fundamental question can only be answered by the student (and their family when appropriate) receiving the services. If O&M is to be relevant to the individual, then that individual's voice should have a prominent

place in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the learning experience.

Assessment and student ownership

On-going assessments, observations, and reviews that inform teacher instruction and provide students feedback on a regular basis have been found beneficial to student achievement. Such formative assessments appear to be most effective when not only the teacher but also the student understands where he stands in his trajectory towards his learning goals (Sadler, 1989). For this to happen, strategies need to be implemented that allow the student to clearly understand 1) what the goal means 2) his current place in relation to it, and 3) actions that he could take to move closer to the learning goal (Brookhart, Moss, & Long, 2009).

The following case study illustrates an effective strategy that can (a) promote active student participation in assessing O&M progress and (b) making decisions about current and future instruction:

Cindy was a high school student with no light perception and a hearing impairment that required the use of hearing aids. One of her stated O&M goals was to walk home from school independently, a route that involved crossing three intersections and walking along one block with no sidewalks. Although she wanted to master the task, she had also expressed high anxiety about the time when the instructor might decide that she was ready to do it on her own. Instead

of assuming that responsibility for herself, the instructor shared it with the student by creating a chart that would help them both assess her daily progress and make shared decisions. The chart consisted of a column for the date of the lesson, one for challenges/problems encountered that day, one for comfort level, one for comments and finally the duration of the trip. Student and teacher decided ahead of time that when the column for problems was left consistently blank and Cindy's comfort level reached 8-10 points, they would discuss the possibility of independent travel. With this approach, Cindy felt a sense of control and her anxiety decreased almost immediately. At the end of

Table 1. Assessment of progress chart.

Date	Challenges/problems	Comfort Level (0 lowest -10 highest)	Comments	Duration
First independent trip	a) Got disoriented at driveway on Walnut St. b) Unsure when to cross school driveway (lots of car and pedestrian traffic)	4	Raining hard (made waiting for "all quiet" difficult, since rain carried the sound of cars longer)	30 min.
10 th independent trip	Masking sound at Thomas Av. created by leaf blower. Waited until sound stopped and crossed when all quiet.	8	Discussed alternatives for dealing with masking sounds: a. wait until sound is off or faint enough b. use a shield car to cross c. wait for assistance from passerby d. try an alternative route if possible e. try to get attention/assistance from person causing the masking sound	23 min.
15th, 16th and 17th, independent trips	None	"9ish"		20 min.

each lesson, they would go over the chart and fill in the blanks. Table 1 shows an excerpt from the chart, including her first trip, one in the middle and the last three.

Choice and student ownership

The concept of choice is complex and multifaceted. One classification, expressed by Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, and Turner (2004) is particularly helpful when reflecting on choice in the context of O&M. The authors identify three types of choice:

1. Organisational choice e.g., selecting what to work on first, choosing destinations
2. Procedural choice e.g., selecting what device to use for a particular task, selecting a media to follow directions such as written or verbal
3. Cognitive choice e.g., discussing various strategies, engaging in problem solving, formulating personal goals, debating ideas, asking questions.

While all three types of choice are important and have a role in O&M instruction, they are not equal in their ability to promote student ownership. Organisational and procedural choices have been called “the bells and whistles” of instruction because of their role in motivation and temporary engagement. Cognitive choice, on the other hand, can be considered “the hold” because of its role in promoting long lasting autonomy (Mitchell, 1993).

While choice has to be age-appropriate, this does not mean we as instructors should give only organisational and procedural choices to young children and reserve cognitive choice for the older students or adults. What it means is that cognitive choice

must be adapted according to the age of the child, considering previous experiences, and his/her level of ability. In other words, instructors must meet the students where they are in the continuum and help them move forward.

Engaging students cognitively can be as simple as asking questions and posing challenges. As students get older, more experienced, or demonstrate higher levels of ability, their engagement can become more sophisticated. Below is an example of cognitive engagement and choice leading to the selection of a specific cane tip.

Wei was 10 years old and had severe low vision (5/800 OU) when she started O&M instruction. Rather than providing her with a particular cane and tip, the instructor asked for her assistance finding the one that was right for her. For a number of weeks, Wei experienced walking with different canes/cane tips and recorded her observations. For example, she created a chart where she brailled the name of the different tips she had tried, drew pictures of them, and recorded their advantages, limitations, and price (her chosen categories). She also suggested adding a column to give each cane tip an overall grade (Figure 1).

The process of trying various devices and recording her observations was appealing to Wei, who had an analytic mind. She developed a strong sense of ownership regarding her travel device, as she was able to identify her preferred device and to articulate why, in her opinion it was superior to the other ones she had tried.




NAME	PICTURE	+	-	A B C	\$
JUNO				A	11.25
MARSHMALLOW				A	9.25
				D	9.25

Figure 1. Cane tip chart.

Goal setting and student ownership

Many students are not aware of what their Individual Education Plan (IEP)¹ mobility goals are for the year and in what ways they are relevant for their lives. Depending on the student's age and level of ability, having an open discussion when developing goals and engaging in negotiating/prioritising can go far in promoting student 'buy-in' and commitment in the O&M process. When

1 In the U.S, IEP meetings are held annually for children who have been identified as having a disability. These meetings produce a legally binding document that spells out what special education services the child will receive and why, and details individualised goals in each area of instruction.

student participation in IEP meetings is not possible or appropriate, other alternatives may be considered to ensure the child's voice is being represented:

- The mobility instructor meets ahead of time with the student to discuss possible goals and then again after the meeting to report back to the student what was discussed/decided at the meeting and why
- The student writes/records a mobility statement to be presented at the meeting
- Student and instructor put together a brief video showing the student's current skill level and progress made in mobility to help inform future decisions.

Cultural considerations

Being actively involved in one's education, asking questions, showing initiative, taking risks, or bringing up issues or concerns are not necessarily behaviours valued by all cultures. In fact, some of these behaviours can be in direct opposition to what students experience and are taught at home.

The ways in which student involvement manifests during mobility depends on culture, prior experiences, personality, and learning style, among several other factors. A quiet, compliant student who has a clear understanding of what his/her goals are and is fully committed to the training may be as (or more) engaged than a very vocal student. In contrast, the vocal students' main participation in the O&M process might consist of choosing destinations and selecting rewards at the end of a lesson, without being aware of his/her long term goals or how the skills he/she is practicing apply to his/her everyday life. It is, therefore, essential for O&M teachers to respectfully explore each student/family's style, beliefs, and values and the ways they conceive their participation in the O&M process. Honest and respectful communication about these issues may uncover preconceptions and misunderstandings and lead to better and more satisfying partnerships.

Conclusion

Sharing control of O&M instruction with students can take place at all phases of the learning process, including developing goals, designing the style of instruction and assessing progress. However, giving the student total choice of what to learn, when and how is not appropriate and it is not what

empowerment is all about. In fact, having that much power can leave the unprepared student confused and uncomfortable. Student ownership represents a continuum; it is dynamic and fluid and does not manifest in the same way for all students. It is a process through which children learn to make decisions by making decisions, rather than by following directions (Kohn, 1993). Therefore, the approach is to meet students where they are and support them as they gradually increase their level of engagement. At the same time, instructors may also need to decide where they are in the continuum of promoting student partnerships and think about the steps they can take to gradually increase their comfort level with shared ownership.

In sum, student-teacher partnerships can be viewed as journeys taken together in search of an answer to the question: What does O&M mean to you?

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