

## CHAPTER 5

## Facing Life's Crises as an Educator

### The Blind Leading the Sighted

Tiffany L. Sia, *Texas Lutheran University*

Think of what you know about blindness. Is your knowledge from media depictions or personal acquaintances who are blind? Who is the most famous blind person that comes to mind? If it is Helen Keller, what do you know about her adult activism career? How many books did she write? What political party did she belong to? Which causes did she advocate for: disability rights, women's suffrage, animal rights, or world peace? Were you aware she was a founding member of the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union)? All of this information is easily available but is usually overshadowed by the magical breakthrough in communication between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan when Helen was age seven. Google Helen Keller and some of her quotes—they

may surprise you. This is just an example of how easy it is for a disability to *erase* a person's accomplishments in the public eye. For a brief overview of Helen Keller, see *Hellen Keller: A Life* (Herman 1999). I use this Expanding on an Exemplar technique to help students pause and reconsider their assumptions (Sia et al. 1997; Sia et al. 1999; Lord et al. 2004). This technique can be used with any disability, but you must pick an exemplar for students where there is enough public information beyond their disability. I can attest to the utility of figures like Helen Keller, Louis Braille, and Stephen Hawking.

Accurate representations of the blind are limited in our culture. My main experience with a blind person was my grandmother. She went blind after a car wreck in her 70s, but it almost seemed like part of aging. She was also reticent about sharing what the experience was like. She just kept doing what she did (not surprising, since she lived through World War 1, World War 2, and the Great Depression). Although personal experience with a blind person I loved made me compassionate towards the blind, it did not break through the culturally promoted belief that blindness precludes meaningful accomplishments for most.

Now picture you are going blind permanently. How do you feel? How does your life change? How do you react? It may be painful to picture such a thing, but try. Jot down the ways your life changes. These ideas will help you start to understand the misconceptions and stereotypes that get in the way of understanding blindness and being an advocate for the blind. Once you have made your list, read a trustworthy article like Vision Center's "Blindness Statistics, Facts, and Myths" (Hill 2024). Cross off the misconceptions and update the assumptions. This technique ("Imagine & Correct") can be used with any disability if you look up actual information. People tend to remember things they got

wrong better than what came easily, so jotting down a list first is important. Otherwise, it is extremely easy to look at misconceptions and falsely believe that you already knew them (Ross, McFarland, and Fletcher 2012). I can tell you from experience that going blind is more of a *hassle* than a tragedy. However, being surrounded by people who assume a blind person is helpless (and if they are not helpless, are conning you) is exhausting.

I was a first-year student when doctors at the University of Washington nailed down what was wrong with my eyes: Stargardt's macular degeneration (for more information, visit the [National Eye Institute's page on Stargardt disease](#)). It had seemed minor. My glasses never quite corrected my vision to 20/20 (close to 20/50, but not quite). I was no more prepared than you are right now to hear from a university research team, "You will go blind; we just don't know exactly when." The timeline seemed particularly important to me. Would I have five years left of vision or thirty years? And truthfully, my initial reaction was thinking of what I had to fit in before "my life was over." I was naïve and going blind sounded like "The End." I would not be able to drive. I would not be able to read. I would not be able to go to movies or recognize people.

Most, if not all, of my catastrophic thinking was entirely *wrong*. When it comes to disability, picturing yourself in their shoes may not lead to clarity or an ability to encourage or mentor (Goleman 2006). It may lead to a type of oppressive sympathy or pity that encourages passivity (Seligman 2006).

I want to share how I went from a sighted first-year student to a blind professor. I believe it is critical that people understand more about blindness (and disabilities). Knowledge can help us feel empowered to approach the challenges that each of us may face. I do not expect you to go blind. I do, however, know

that each of us will encounter challenges in our life that we do not want, are unprepared to cope with, and do not understand. Learning how to face these crises can be the difference between stagnation and growth for both your students and yourself as a professional (Seligman 2006). This is my story of facing my crises.

The first time I remember worrying about my vision was in fourth grade, when my 20/20 vision suddenly plummeted. I knew having glasses would make me a social pariah, so I spent most of fourth grade walking to the front of the classroom to sharpen my pencil and memorizing the board. The first gift of vision loss was improving my memory. However, fifth grade hit, and the pencil sharpener was in the back of the room. All the reasons to go to the front were seen as disruptive, and I got caught. It was just as I feared; I needed glasses. The only weird thing about this was that the eye doctor could not correct my vision to 20/20. He thought it was due to my being unable to sit still or focus (which my teachers would also attest to). At that point, most thought I was "hyper," and the focus was on helping me pay attention (for more information on misdiagnosis of ADHD, see Graham 2020). Not surprisingly, these interventions did nothing to improve my vision. I have great focus now, though. Our brains really want to protect us from knowing about vision loss (and some other disabilities). I have met both visually impaired and deaf students who had no idea about their condition because of gradual onset. A technique I use to illustrate this is to ask students to share what it is like when they get a new eyeglasses prescription. Many share how crystal clear their vision is, and how they did not realize it had gotten as bad as it did. That sharp contrast between what was impaired and 20/20 illustrates how vigilant our brain is at protecting us from knowing our vision is deteriorating.

Somewhere in junior high (amidst my goth phase that never quite ended), the professional consensus gradually shifted from “hyper” to “doing it for attention.” My vision still wasn’t correctable. Physical education class was a nightmare. I was continually being hit by baseballs, tetherballs, basketballs, soccer balls, volleyballs, etc. Most teachers/coaches genuinely believed I was doing it on purpose for attention, and so ignored the frequent collisions (and black eyes, bloody noses, and other injuries). This is not surprising, since they were told by trained professionals that this was the case. I have been told as an adult that this could never happen today, but I have met college students who were not diagnosed correctly with visual impairments until college (so I doubt this assertion). Misdiagnosis can lead well-meaning professionals down entirely incorrect rabbit holes. In seventh grade, I tried wearing sunglasses all the time, but it was perceived as “bad attitude.” Light causes low level pain in my eyes, even indoors. The sunglasses helped, but I didn’t understand or articulate the situation or my rationale for wearing the sunglasses well. I also stopped being able to interpret social cues like facial expressions with the same facility as fully sighted people (Stargardt 2021). I was often misperceived as stuck up or hostile, much the way a dog without a tail can get in fights when the opposing dogs cannot see a tail wagging. Since people often reacted poorly to me, I reflected their poor reactions back to them. Picture (or google) adult Wednesday Addams, and you won’t be far off.

However, I also became obsessed with reading “all the books.” I read through most of the five libraries I had access to. When I ran out of books, I started in on encyclopedias and dictionaries, as well. I would get sent out to play and sneak up a tree or roof to read. I would get sent horseback riding and let the horse wander while lying on his back reading. If I had more than sixty

seconds to spare, I was reading. I may have been worried about not being able to read in the future, so I was fitting it all in. Gift two of developing blindness was the my focus on reading, plus gift one that gave me the practice of using my memory to retain and access much of the information. Most disabilities come with unexpected gifts (although it took me half a lifetime to see this).

College was wonderful. No P.E.. Social interactions were odd and stilted for most of the more intellectual students. No one expected anything different, since now I was perceived as a nerd. Professors and students alike seemed unfazed by the morbid persona I had adopted. Once others were reacting neutrally, I found myself abandoning the attitude (not skulls, I still love skulls, and my favorite color is still black). The obsessive reading also came in handy.

If you are picturing me as a wonderful student, guess again. I was in the front row face down, apparently sleeping. I pulled all-nighters at the beginning of the semester so I could have everything read before class started. Then I only had to memorize anything the professor said that wasn’t in the textbook. I still couldn’t see the board clearly, but I sat in the front row to catch glimpses. Light still bothered my eyes, so I usually was face down unless the professor said something novel. I had not been diagnosed yet, and did not have the language or understanding to advocate for sunglasses indoors. I remember one class, when a student asked why I got to sleep in class. The professor started asking me questions from the next chapter, which I answered without lifting my head or opening my eyes. He then started talking about a study on paranormal activity and I popped up and started frantically writing notes (it wasn’t in the book). Then he said, “When you can do that you can sleep in class, too.” Dr. Gilden was a social psychologist (what I would eventually

become). He was talented at seeing what was going on, even if he did not know why. He also pointed out to the class what I had not even recognized. I could be used as a human barometer of what was and wasn't in the book. I expect we all see students in class who appear to be doing things that are problematic. It is a sad truth that the students who have a reason/need for their behavior will look exactly like the students who are being disruptive with ill will. The obvious ploy of talking with the students individually will only help if the student understands and has the language to advocate for their behaviors. I at the time (and many of our students) have no way to articulate or even understand their own behaviors.

At this point, you may be wondering what and how I see. Everything looks like a Claude Monet painting. However, 80 percent of what is in the painting has no relationship to reality (my brain just makes it up). Your brain does this too, on a smaller scale. Try the following exercise with figure 5.1. Close your right eye and look at the X while slowly moving the page closer or farther from you. At a certain point, the circle will disappear. Or close your left eye and look at the circle, and the X will disappear.



FIGURE 5.1. Blind Spot Test

The part of my vision that my brain fills in from sound, smells, memory, and opinion is my central vision. Put your hand with fingers closed in front of your eyes with your palm touching your nose. Keep your eyes focused on the hand and fingers. Then look around. Try to walk somewhere. Try to recognize people's facial expressions. Or try to recognize your facial expression in the mirror. Or try to read, without shifting your gaze out of the corner of your eyes. It will be tempting to picture this instead of doing it. Your imagination is not that good; try it. Understanding, rather than picturing, will allow you to be able to use this information. A third gift of blindness is that imagining is never the same as experiencing. Hands-on experience not only is more accurate, but it also changes us more quickly.

I use the above "blind spot" demonstration to help my students understand that they do not know what their *own* brain is doing. I want to be clear that I am not advocating for just trusting that a student will know the best way to learn in your classes. I am asking for the grace to assume there may be an underlying reason for their behavior beyond the obvious, and a willingness to jointly explore what is happening. I occasionally run into students who suffer from migraines, and I usually share that wearing sunglasses under fluorescent lights helps me. A surprising number of sighted students found limiting light exposure helped, as well as having the language to explain so they did not run into the same stigma of "attitude" that I encountered.

Another moment that might help others relate to what it is like losing your vision was when I attended a drunk driving prevention program at Linfield College. I was active in promoting this basic responsibility. On one weekend retreat, I realized that I was worse than the average drunk driver. I had memorized the eye chart years ago and was using that knowledge to pass the

vision test that kept my driver's license. If you have ever gotten new glasses, you know how easy it is to think your vision is fine until it is corrected. My vision didn't correct, but it still felt useable. I felt *safe* to drive. We had gone over common excuses that drunk drivers give:

"I feel fine to drive."

"I am only driving a short way."

"I drive better than most people drive anyway."

"There is no other way to get home."

I realized I used versions of these excuses to justify my continued visually impaired driving. I stopped driving. I have also seen a lot of older adults with vision problems who are a danger on the road. I did not want to be them. I did not get tickets or in a lot of wrecks, and no one made me stop. I just *knew* if I kept driving, I accidentally would kill someone eventually. It may have been the most mature decision of my life. It was also, however, a hassle. I could walk to most places in if I allotted enough time. I got used to walking several miles a day, and still do. I also realized our feeling that we "have" to drive is based on not knowing how to do things differently. I spent a semester in Vienna, Austria and never missed driving, because it was so easy to get around using public transportation. The reason I remember this is that one of my only meltdowns about blindness happened while waiting outside the Linfield campus cafeteria. A student said, "I would die if I couldn't drive." I eviscerated him verbally, right there. We were never close again. It was not the insensitivity or the hyperbole that struck me, it was the "giving up." I was furious that merely picturing a mild inconvenience had someone ready to die. The fourth gift of blindness was persistence. It is not that hard to just keep trying, especially when you do not compare every moment to the "if only..." In my teaching, I hear a lot of

students tell me versions of why they cannot do something well as a reason to not do that something at all (Seligman 2006). I hate seeing that level of passivity or learned helplessness.

I try to get students to see that doing something badly is a mark of persistence, and much braver than not doing something at all (Duckworth and Gross 2014). I have four speaking rules in my classes. Rule 1: *Do not say "I don't know" (even if you don't know)*. Rule 2: *Do not repeat what another student just said*. Rule 3: *Answer in ten seconds*. Rule 4: *Multiple voices should be heard*. If everyone follows the rules, everyone gets a point for that day of class (5 percent of the course grade). When a rule is broken, no one in class gets the point for that day. Wrong answers or even nonsense answers are encouraged. One student would yell out "Bill Nye the science guy" when the class was about to lose a point. This technique may sound bizarre, so let me unpack it a bit. I do not usually call on invisible-to-me students. I cannot see facial expressions, confused looks, or raised hands. The regular non-verbal student communication is lost on me. I need to hear their voices, but even well-meaning students find it difficult to speak out loud when their mind goes blank. Being treated as a hero for saving the class's point with a wrong answer can break down the sometimes lifelong habit of not speaking (Allen, Hunter, and Donohue 1989). I let them come up with strategies on how to deal with the rules. Some classes tag team. Others all yell out answers at once to all questions. The wrong answers are also more useful in helping me guide my teaching than the right answers ever were. Even the incorrect "Bill Nye the science guy" response example previously provided was informative. It was so far afield from what I was asking them about, that it informed me they had no idea what I was asking about.

The individual rules built for the needs of a blind professor also have their pedagogical utility for my students, as is true for many Universal Design for Learning strategies (Edyburn 2021). Our brains will come up with answers based on little or no information (sort of like conspiracy theories). This is happening in every classroom. What we teach is not what students learn. What the professors say is interpreted through what the student understands. If there is no feedback loop, we as faculty can believe that our students are learning something quite different than they are. I gained this insight after asking a class what the word “truth” meant. A student said loudly that the truth was whatever was said the loudest. Another student disagreed saying it was whoever believed it the most. Of the several voices volunteering answers (to preserve the multiple voices rule), not a single student mentioned it having to do with reality, evidence, or facts. This made it clear that my previous approach to encouraging the use of peer-reviewed articles to find out the truth was laughable in light of their understanding of what truth is.

Now let’s unpack the individual speaking rules, starting with Rule 1: *Do not say “I don’t know” (even if you don’t know)*. Many students have learned that “I don’t know” is the magic answer that gets the focus off them. There is no need to think, just ward off the teacher with the magic words (like a cross at a vampire). For information on your cognitive miser, see Fiske and Taylor (1991) and Sia (2015). I try to convince them that any answer is better than “I don’t know.” Saying whatever comes to mind helps you learn about your snap judgements (or gut feeling). Some students will find out they knew something without knowing it. Others will find out not to trust their internal voices. One graduate (from my freshman experience class) who is now working as a physician’s assistant texted me in graduate school to tell me how

grateful she was for “breaking her of the ‘I don’t know’ habit” and that until then she had never “realized how lazy it was.”

Rule 2: *No repeating what another student just said* is intended to break the “anchoring” effect of social cognition (Aronson 2012). When we hear someone else say something/anything, it becomes extremely easy to anchor on it and believe that is what we would have said, too. This can lead to the kind of groupthink that in part led to the space shuttle explosion (Teitel 2018). Since students do not have to be “right,” they can share any other answer, or paraphrase. When talking with students about this rule, I often present it as a skill they are building. Even when you agree with someone, rephrasing or expanding on it makes more of an impression on an audience than simply saying “what they said.”

Rule 3: *Answer in ten seconds* is intended to keep the class moving, and to get reactions, rather than carefully thought-out answers. Silence or masked expression allows confusion and frustration to be unrecognized even by sighted instructors. For me, verbal reactions are more useful and closer to facial expressions than well thought-out answers. I usually tell students that life and careers seldom give us enough time to always sound thoughtful (Aronson 2012). There will be moments when reaction is critical. Professors often complain that when they ask if there are any questions, the class goes silent. Students complain that they do not have time to formulate or explain the confusion they are experiencing. Getting students ready for the moment when they need to say something fast, rather than let a silence hurt them and their fellow classmates by leaving them confused, is critical. For guidance on developing these skills, see Chugh (2018), pages 129–142. Another extension is how we process silence. A hateful comment left unaddressed in a shocked silence by the class (and sometimes the professor), is too often understood as

implied support. Again see Chugh (2018), pages 129–142 for tips on how we can use speech and silence strategically to allow for full consideration. Learning to say something, even “What?”, can open the dialogue.

Rule 4: *Multiple voices should be heard* is meant to invite everyone to talk (sometimes all at once). It is easy for a professor to feel like a class is interactive if three or four students are talking regularly. Students usually have a higher bar for what an interactive class feels like. Unless almost everyone in the class is talking occasionally, it can place barriers on students feeling like they can, should, or would be welcome to speak. Many of the questions I ask can be answered in unison by the whole class. For example, in asking “Are duckbilled platypuses venomous?”, students will yell out yes or no at whim, to soon find out that this is used as a transition into learning about the complexity of simple questions (male platypuses have venomous ankle spurs and females do not). Both yes and no are equally wrong or right, which is frequently the case with issues of nuance in social psychology. Do Irish people like green? To say yes, is a stereotype, but undoubtedly true for some Irish people. To say no is unlikely to be true for all Irish people, since green is a lovable color from what I remember. Stereotypes are like that across the board: they are not true for the whole group, but may be true for an individual member (Banaji and Greenwald 2013).

My speaking role game does require comfort with ambiguity for both student and professor. I find the payoff of learning where student misconceptions are occurring to be worthwhile. The details of using this strategy are that attendance is worth three points per day (one for attending, and half points for each of the rules). Keep in mind, this amounts to not much grading or tracking since either everyone gets the points or no one does.

Once again, this allows a blind professor to try to replace what is lost without being able to see facial expression. Fair warning, I have been told by sighted faculty who have team taught with me that my students' facial expressions vary all over the emotional gamut, as they hear a bit more from their classmates than usual.

After that lengthy digression, let's head back to my autobiographical narrative. Heading off to graduate school was a challenge. At this point, I still had 20/70 vision (searching for a Snellen eye chart may help visualize what this means). Reading was fairly easy, and the main issues were driving and interpreting facial expressions. I got funded to get my PhD at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. Relocating to Texas (where I knew *no one*) meant I had to do a lot of planning. I had to live within walking distance from school, the grocery store, the laundromat, the bank, and doctors. Eventually, I hoped to make friends, but I was finishing my PhD whether Texans were friendly or not. Texans were very friendly, but I still think it is better to be prepared, because even your best friends cannot be there all the time. The fifth gift of blindness was the ability to plan ahead. Having to plan ahead is a common habit for people with disabilities. It isn't best practice, it is a necessity. Quite frequently, if you don't plan ahead, you are not able to be involved. Keep in mind that as a blind professor, I can be derailed in class by an out-of-place chair tripping me, or an out-of-ink dry erase marker that I am diligently writing with, or not realizing the classroom has no lights on. Sometimes odd questions to my class like, “Knock if you have a pulse” are intended to help me locate how many people are in the room and where they are sitting.

My students and colleagues will tell you that I routinely plan every interaction. This level of planning can seem like overkill to a non-disabled individual, but may be a necessary coping

strategy for someone with a disability. Frank discussion of my needs can be a segue into a broader discussion of universal design and accessibility.

I eventually finished my PhD and was working as a research scientist at the Institute of Behavioral Research in Fort Worth, Texas. I was focused on increasing the motivation of incarcerated men who were put in substance abuse treatment programs (Czuchry, Sia, and Dansereau 1999; Czuchry, Sia, and Dansereau 2006; Dansereau et. al 2003; Sia et al. 1999; Sia, Dansereau, and Czuchry 2000). I suspect my lack of vision made my work easier, since other women researchers had to develop a thick skin to ignore the men staring and gesturing. I was unlikely to be intimidated by attitudes that I never saw. Working in prison was great preparation for working with college students in other ways, as well.

I have noticed a similar mindset between inmates and college students. Many do not want to be in class/prison and do not believe class/prison can benefit them. This can become a detrimental combination of distrust and apathy. Although not always said out loud, a lurking thought seems to be “What is the bare minimum I can do and not get in trouble?” Both populations throw up smoke screens to fit what they believe is needed in the situation, rather than what is going through their heads. Breaking through the almost institutionalized apathy is critical. Whether “working the program” in treatment or fully committing to the academic process in college, this level of engagement leads to future success and opportunities. It is also more personally rewarding and worthwhile (Czuchry et al. 1997; Czuchry, Sia, and Dansereau 1999; Sia, Dansereau, and Czuchry 2000).

In addition to working in the prison system, I was doing all the usual academic things. My vision was still holding out

for reading. Then a strange thing happened: The university put energy efficient doors in all the buildings. They were slightly smaller than the original doors in my building and so sat about six inches to the left. For almost a year, I kept “seeing” them in their old positions and running into the wall. It was the first big clue that most of what I see is made up or filled in from memory and other sources. I also started getting hit by invisible cars. Low-contrast gray cars blended into the pavement, and I would see a clear road unless I was listening carefully. I usually got hit in parking lots or streets where a car was about to go into motion. At this point, I was not legally blind and so did not qualify to carry a white cane to alert drivers. During this time, I got hit by eight cars, one bus, two bicyclists and an angry skateboarder. I looked right at him before stepping in front of his invisible low-contrast self. Some disabilities, like mine, are degenerative. The subtle daily worsening may not always be apparent to the person experiencing it (it certainly was not for me). It is easy to make assumptions that because a person could do something yesterday, they can do it today. The amount of useable vision for me can vary from minimal to none, but I may not be aware because my brain fills in from other senses. It feels very surreal. I may “see” a doorway open, run into a closed door, and realize what feels like vision is not at all rooted in reality. In this case, a vent above the door blowing cold air was probably the culprit that tricked my brain into thinking the door was open.

One of the struggles with being blind is that students and colleagues either cannot remember I am blind or believe I am “not really” blind. My mother once said that I act like I can see too well. I suspect that people imagine blindness being so incapacitating that they cannot relate it to an independent person (this relates to my earlier point about *imagining* being different than

*experiencing*). Perhaps the most pernicious of the misconceptions of the blind are that the blind are helpless, sad, useless people, living in a world of darkness and dependent on the kindness of others. If you examine the life of Helen Keller or Louis Braille or Ray Charles, or even the ancient Greek poet, Homer, you will see this is far from the truth. People can retain their true selves, even when struggling with disabilities or challenges. If you spend time together with the blind, you will realize they adapt well. I have seldom met a blind person who matched up to my own catastrophic imagining at the beginning of the chapter. At this point, if you didn't take the break and wander around with your hand in front of your face trying to use only your peripheral vision—*do it*, please. It is so much harder to forget what you have experienced. We all need to remember that challenges may not be as bad as we imagine that they will be (Seligman 2006). It is easy for students (and professors) to believe that the imagined horror of a disability, or failing, or even speaking in public will be the same as the reality. This can become self-fulfilling prophecy. For experiments on self-fulfilling prophecy, see Word and colleagues (2012) and Snyder and colleagues (2012). If you rehearse a feared outcome enough in your head, you can make it more likely to occur.

I knew the end of my career as a research scientist was near when I could no longer reliably detect the magic number of truth:  $p < .05$ , i.e., statistical significance. As my vision deteriorated and much of what I saw was imagined, I became less and less competent at skills I once excelled at. My data entry was full of errors. My ability to data check had more to do with what I wanted to see than what was there. Proofing and editing of stimulus sets for experiments or write-ups of results were also full of typos. My colleagues helped, but it meant I was a drag on the research

team. When the grant ran out, I was unemployed. It is as close to catastrophe as I have come. There are some rabbit holes that are dangerous to go down mentally when that catastrophe strikes (Seligman 2006). A common thought I had was “Why me?” I am an artist. I love reading. I love traveling. I need my eyes. It was easy to spend a lot of time in all the reasons I shouldn't go blind. This type of thinking increased my bitterness and kept me trapped in a dark place. Ironically, I spent more time in this dark place imagining myself blind than when I went blind. When I shifted my thinking to “who deserves to go blind?”, it became apparent that I viewed it as an extreme punishment for serial killers, criminals, and politicians. It helped me to realize no one deserves to go blind. Most things like this just happen (e.g., the “Just World Fallacy”). I began to call this blame-the-victim thinking, “the Jabberwock,” referring to Lewis Carroll's poem which tells an understandable story using sheer nonsense words. Blaming the victim is a familiar experience that seems to make sense, but at its core it is nonsense. So for me, calling this thinking the Jabberwock helps me recognize the fallacy for what it is.

Another dangerous thought was “What if?” It was easy to dream of “What ifs?” that could take my problems away. What if there was a cure? What if I were rich? These were lovely daydreams, but “what if” daydreams have no utility. I know people who are waiting for a cure in order to continue with their lives. I know people who proclaim that their problems will go away once they have enough money. And I am sure we have all gone down the “Ignore it, maybe it will go away?” rabbit hole. The problem for all of these ideas was that it left me in the same headspace without being able to take action to improve my life. I credit these experiences with becoming skilled at recognizing

and steering my students away from similar catastrophic thinking (or Jabberwock).

Once I emerged from the rabbit holes about being blind, I was able to seek out help. Another one of blindness's gifts is becoming OK with needing and seeking out help (everyone needs to be able to do this). Ironically, the first website I found told me how to cheat on my driver's test to keep driving blind. The second was the Division of Blind Services, a state resource. Once I contacted them (and documented that I was blind), they pulled out all the stops to find me employment and keep me functional. In my very first encounter, they asked why I did not have sunglasses on, since people with my condition usually experience migraines. I spent six intense months focused on learning to not get hit by cars (i.e., properly using cross walks), not hurt myself (doing basic household chores), and professional refocusing. Getting hit by cars became a thing of the past, as long as I had my white cane. Kindles and other devices allowed me to resume reading (albeit at a slower pace). Many of the techniques I was being taught were small things that made huge differences. As a teacher, I try to look for these small things that can lead to big progress (Gladwell 2002). One small but meaningful change was asking students to knock on their desks to show agreement (since I cannot see their nods or head shakes) or to knock rapidly instead of raising their hands.

I will not hide that the real challenge of being blind is interacting with other people. I often end up thinking, "Why can't people just act normal?" Many people hate being wrong and will say I am not blind. I am too independent, so I must be faking it. As far as I can tell, this comes from people's belief that blind people must be sad, helpless, and useless (and if they are not, they don't count as blind). It is a strong stereotype that must

be fought. I am *coping* with being blind, not faking it. I suspect many people with disabilities face this same issue. If they cope well, they are seen as faking or not deserving of accommodation. It is an annoying catch-22.

Once people know I am blind, they usually start gradually treating me like a "normal" sighted person. This is disastrous. Sometimes you should not treat people the same. It leads to impossible requests. I have been asked to point out where a car is, describe a student, and even drive on a field trip. I am sure people wave, and point, and do all kinds of things that I cannot see to respond to. For many casual encounters, this can be misinterpreted as being stuck up, distant, or purposely obtuse. It is also easy for people to forget that moving the furniture in a room can be disastrous for me when I come back in. People also get defensive when I call them on their misjudgments. I was at a McDonald's and I asked a friend to read me the menu. A lady immediately, said, "You should be ashamed that you can't read at your age." I exclaimed, "I'm blind." She continued with, "You wouldn't be if you went to a doctor and got glasses." She really did not want to admit she came to the wrong conclusion. Even small, non-hostile conversations can upset people. Often, I will ask questions, "What is ...?" people will point and I will say, "I can't read that. I am blind." The most frequent response is that "I didn't have to be rude about it" and "why didn't I tell them first." Usually, I am hungry, I am in a hurry, and I forget that people respond poorly to questions about things that are posted visually. Working with any person, it is important to find out what their limitations are and then work within them. We all have limitations, even if we do not recognize them. For some, we have limitations around our kids' schedules. Others have limitations based on a long commute. I can't drive or recognize faces.

Keeping it in mind helps interactions go more seamlessly. I had to stop expecting people to know and understand blindness and start educating them even though I know only a little about my own type of blindness.

Eventually, the training turned to the question of what I wanted to do in my career. The only part of my work as a research scientist that was unaffected by vision loss was leading two-hour motivational interventions in the prisons. This led me to believe that teaching was an option. I was usually facilitating groups of fifty people. (For more information on attending to cognitive enhancement for the treatment of probationers see Czuchry, Sia, and Dansereau (2006), Dansereau et al. (2003), and Sia, Dansereau, and Czuchry (2000).) Appointing ten team leaders among the inmates was a common strategy. I would pick out the ten with the best attitudes. They would then hand out materials and convey questions. It is a facilitation strategy I still use with college students. This might be choosing a row leader to be their spokesperson., or if I put students in groups, appointing a spokesperson or note-taker. Choosing, rather than letting the students choose, a spokesperson denotes trust, and allows the faculty to highlight underrepresented groups. Choosing spokespersons with good attitudes has continued to serve me well.

In a brave or reckless move, Texas Lutheran University hired me as a visiting professor. I may have glossed over the fact that my teaching experience had all been as a sighted individual. I went into teaching with an attitude that is best described as “nothing to lose.” I didn’t know if I could teach, and I certainly wasn’t going to be surprised if I couldn’t. So I marshaled my social psychology training on influencing small groups, my motivational training from substance abuse treatment in prison, and what I hoped was my infectious love of research. *It worked.* Each semester I see and

try to impact up to a hundred new students in my classes. For more on my teaching strategies, see Sia (2015).

I wouldn’t have this opportunity if I hadn’t focused on making small, significant changes in my life. Of course, some of the small things are remembering to check if the desks have been moved. The devil is and will always be in the details of any situation related to disability or challenges. Focusing on the small things, like explaining blindness to people, can allow greater things to happen.

The truth about being blind is that it is an inconvenience, not a tragedy. The degree to which my remaining vision is useable varies day to day. I can do many things as well as the sighted (and sometimes even I forget that I can’t see). Keep in mind, the vision I see is 80 percent made up, but feels quite real. Strangely, I am alarmingly good at axe throwing, which is as big a surprise to me as the friends I went throwing with.

Perhaps the greatest gift of blindness is compassion. Google Helen Keller quotes. She experienced a level of disability that I cannot imagine, but writes with a level of compassion that I can only hope to emulate (Keller 1996). These quotes were not meant just for the blind. Which ones can make your life better? How do we as educators bring voices of disability into the forefront of our lives and teaching? When my class is struggling, I will do a short easy exercise to find quotes to inspire. I choose a person, like Helen Keller, who showed a remarkable level of grit and persistence. Just like I did earlier with you, I ask students to google quotes from Hellen Keller that inspire and make them feel motivated to continue struggling. I then ask who wants to read the quote they found out loud and for other students to on their desks if they like it. It is probably better to learn from those who deal with obstacles, rather than ignoring them. Helen Keller’s

challenges were far greater than mine, and I expect her contributions to continue to remain greater as well. For a comprehensive biography see Herman (1999). Occasionally, a class will agree with a quote they like, and I will make it into the grounding exercise to start class. Each person says the quote and one word describing how they feel (Goleman 2006). Even on bad days, we remind ourselves of our desire to persist.

Before going blind, I was opinionated and impatient with people who didn't keep up academically, socially, and personally. It was very difficult to understand how they could stay mired in mediocrity. It is hard to maintain a know-it-all attitude when you can forget where you are in space and walk into walls, and when most conversations take place with people you can't recognize until rather far in the conversation. Blindness helped me understand that all people face challenges that they *cannot see a way to deal with*. It isn't their actual eyesight that traps them, but not being able to find a vision for themselves that frees them. A favorite Mumford and Sons lyric from their song "Awake My Soul" that I use for a mantra is, "Lend me your eyes, I can change what you see." Is it working?

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## CHAPTER 6

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Online Classrooms

Rodrick Shao, *Texas Lutheran University*

Amelia Koford, *Texas Lutheran University*

Teaching online requires instructors to examine our assumptions about what works in our classrooms. Online instructors often find that things we did by instinct in face-to-face classrooms need to be done intentionally when teaching online. We often need to explain and articulate things in online classrooms that may go unsaid when teaching face-to-face. In a similar way, looking at our classes through a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lens can force us to reexamine our practices. If we see that students from marginalized groups always struggle in our classes, we can think about ways to change the class design and delivery to avoid reinforcing inequities.

In this chapter, we explore the intersection of inclusive teaching and online teaching. We suggest using the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 1999) as a