

# Orientation and Mobility Training Using Small Groups

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**Abstract:** This article describes a group training program for sighted trainee orientation and mobility (O&M) instructors in South Africa, where the need for O&M instructors is great and the availability of services is limited. The outcome was positive and encouraging and provides the initiative for the findings to be more broadly applied and for further study of the application with clients.

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The authors would like to acknowledge the work of the late Simangele Msiza (nee Ndlovu) for her great contribution to the philosophy of group teaching in South Africa, for her exceptional teaching of groups, and for her motivation and efforts in advocating for the development of group teaching in South Africa.

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Historically, orientation and mobility (O&M) instruction has involved one student and one instructor (Jacobson, 1993). In the 1950s and 1960s, many instructors taught one or two students at the same time. It subsequently became apparent that the instructors were unable to do a satisfactory job, particularly in monitoring their students' safety in hazardous travel situations (Jacobson, 1993). It has subsequently become the accepted practice to teach one student at a time. However, there are times when it is acceptable to instruct more than one student at a time.

It is accepted that one-on-one mobility training achieves the best

results in terms of the quality of instruction that is provided and in meeting the needs of the client (Ndlovu, 2003). However, in South Africa, there are still many gaps in the provision of O&M services for people who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision). For the most part, these gaps are the result of the limited number of O&M instructors who are employed in the field. It is of great concern that organizations that show interest in employing O&M instructors are frequently unable to do so because of financial constraints. Most schools that serve visually impaired children have only one O&M instructor to meet the needs of approximately 120 students.

Largely in an effort to reach as many people as possible in the available time, O&M instructors in South Africa have been innovative in exploring new ways to deliver services, in terms of programs, schedules, and methods of instruction. One such innovation, which has been practiced in South Africa for a number of years, is that of paired and group teaching. The program described here is based on the work of Atkinson (1988) and Niemandt (1990).

## **Group and paired teaching**

### **Definition**

As the terms imply, *paired teaching* refers to the instruction of two people, whereas *group teaching* refers to the instruction of any number of clients from 3 to 10. In its instruction of student O&M instructors, the College of Orientation and Mobility in Johannesburg, South Africa, is clear in its definitions that paired and group teaching do not refer to situations in which a pair or group of clients are standing idle while only one person at a time receives instruction. Therefore, the college defines paired and group teaching as the active involvement and participation of both clients, in the case of paired teaching, or of all members of the

group, in the case of group teaching, for the full duration of the lesson.

## **Planning a group lesson**

One should always keep in mind where and who one will be training when using group teaching methods. Some of the institutions in which group teaching may be useful are residential centers, schools, and even private groups of people who have similar needs. The people who would benefit from group teaching would include those who are visually impaired, student instructors (O&M skills developers), professionals (physicians, nurses, occupational therapists, and optometrists) and members of the public who would obtain general information on interacting with visually impaired individuals.

When selecting students for group mobility lessons, it is not simply a matter of taking whoever happens to be available at the time and offering group instruction. The careful selection and pairing of the students is required to maintain high-quality instruction and to ensure the safety of each student.

When instructing visually impaired students, it is important to note who are the more capable students in a group, since they are the ones who are usually able to learn new skills quickly. For students who need more time to practice their skills, a solo mobility lesson may be essential to give them the opportunity to have structured learning experiences and practice times during the day. It is also imperative to keep in mind whether a student has any additional disabilities because, depending on the severity of the additional disabilities, the student may not be able to adapt to a group setting and therefore may benefit from individual lessons. Furthermore, it is advisable to determine whether the students are congenitally or adventitiously blind and to structure the group according to onset of visual impairment.

When the initial assessment is completed, the instructor should note the specific needs of the students, because doing so will make it easier to group clients with similar needs together. The initial assessment will also provide the opportunity to group clients according to language preferences and abilities. In addition, the assessment stage will enable the instructor to determine the client's emotional status, which will have an impact on the client's learning and ability to work in a group setting (Atkinson, 1988).

## **Structuring lessons**

Variables, such as the stage at which the students are in their training, whether the students will be traveling indoors or outdoors, and whether the students will be learning a new technique or orientation to a route, as well as any specific requirements, all need to be taken into consideration in determining whether to structure a group, paired, or individual lesson.

Atkinson (1988) suggested the following guidelines for structuring lessons:

- Group lessons (1 hour each): for teaching skills, such as the sighted guide technique, long cane skills, discussions on the negotiation of intersections with traffic lights, or sensory development
- Paired lessons (1 hour each): for route travel, supermarket orientation, and soliciting aid, for instance
- Individual lessons (from 15 minutes to 1 hour): for assessment, extra practice with the development of a technique, and route travel, for example.

Niemandt (1990) suggested alternative guidelines, depending on

the number of instructors who are present:

- One instructor: one large group in a controlled environment with well-defined boundaries
- Two instructors: trailing in the passages, whether in one large group or in sections
- Three instructors: one large group or smaller groups in more complex situations, such as outdoor training.

Since the safety of each student is of paramount concern, one approach to ensuring safety is to hold group instruction only in controlled environments, such as hallways, or in a lecture format (as in the case of alignment to traffic), in which all the students stand still. Since paired lessons are potentially the most dangerous, it is essential for students to maintain constant verbal contact with each other. Crossing streets, for example, should be a joint decision, or the students should agree that if one crosses before the other, he or she needs to wait on the opposite curb for his or her partner. The pair must be compatible and willing to work together. Furthermore, individual lessons are important because all students must have sufficient experience walking alone in all areas.

It has also been noted that in the early stages of indoor training, there may be more group than paired and individual lessons and that as the complexity of the environment increases (indoors to outdoors and street crossings), there should be more one-on-one training (Ndlovu, 2003). Depending on the type of lesson, the size of the group, the assistance available, and the individuals being trained, the training environment is given consideration. For group lessons--just as for individual instruction on specific techniques, sensory development, or practice exercises--spaces with minimal disturbances and few obstacles are the best settings for instruction.

## **Use of assistants**

The use of assistants is dependent on the circumstances; for example, whether one is training a large group or pairs and whether the students are blind or have low vision. Assistants may be used to demonstrate and control movement while the instructor explains and controls the procedure or to break up the group, so that each group has a different instructor. If a big group is trailing or moving around, assistants are needed in front of and behind the group and any place where difficulties or hazards may occur.

One instructor can control two or three small groups with good instruction, depending on the environment and safety, but if a group is split up, assistants are necessary. Pairs usually work well together, but control is vital, since orientation and safety problems may emerge if one or both of the pair are wrong or have dominant personalities.

## **Conducting a group lesson**

There are many ways of conducting a group lesson. However, it is important for one person to be in control; if assistants are used, they assist the instructor until the group is split up for practice.

### ***Verbal instruction***

Using the student's relevant knowledge, the instructor asks how the student would perform the task or technique. The reply may be verbal or a practical demonstration. The instructor may explain and then demonstrate the task to the group, or the assistants may explain it to the members of the group one by one. Also, the instructor first explains the task verbally, and the whole group then performs the task. The instructor demonstrates a task and then observes and corrects each student verbally or physically or

asks an assistant to help with this task.

### *Verbal practical instruction*

The instructor informs the students about the technique or orientates the students to its principles and then demonstrates the task. In this instance, control among the instructor, the students, and the assistants is essential.

### *Tactile instruction*

With tactile instruction, the instructor makes use of tactile maps to introduce or explain to the group new concepts or methods for negotiation; for example, offset curbs, roundabouts, and signalized intersections.

## **Benefits and disadvantages of group training**

There are both benefits and disadvantages to using group instruction (Atkinson, 1988; Ndlovu, 2003). Some advantages are as follows:

- More students are trained in the available time, which is cost-effective
- The students learn and receive emotional support from each other
- The lessons are reinforced by the students' discussion afterward
- There is an element of "fun," which relieves stress
- The students and the instructor do not become dependent on each other, which eases the break at the end of the course

- Personality conflicts are minimized because there is a group, rather than an individual, identity
- The students learn more than they would in individual lessons because group lessons offer students the opportunity to share experiences and problem-solving strategies with each other
- The instructor can be more objective about a student's performance because it can be compared with the other students' performance
- The instructor does not become bored with teaching the same material several times
- There is an element of competition, which leads to enhanced performance
- Some students who have felt isolated have the opportunity to make friends
- Group instruction helps prepare students for activities, such as long cane rallies, and to cope in a large group.

Some of the disadvantages are these:

- Groups need to be carefully chosen
- More equipment is needed
- The instructor is often required to lead long lines of people
- In the beginning, the students often find it difficult to walk in pairs
- Students who miss many lessons either hold up the group or have to drop out

- Students undergo a slightly longer period of training than they would have in individual lessons
- The instructor must be well prepared and alert
- Routes need to be selected carefully
- Groups can crowd an area
- Students may become dependent on each other.

## **Pilot study on small-group instruction**

To evaluate and develop an instructional program for group O&M lessons, we taught a group of six sighted trainee O&M instructors with the group method. As is common with instructor training programs, the trainees were blindfolded for all practical sessions. The program consisted of 18 lessons with a duration of 60-120 minutes each.

An initial assessment was completed when the individuals in the sample population were applying to train as O&M instructors. On the basis of the results of the assessment, this group was divided into two subgroups of three trainees each--one pair and an individual--for the purposes of instruction.

The assessment allowed us to determine the emotional status, language preference, and abilities of the individual students and thus aided in selecting the participants. Much care was taken in this selection because there is generally a relationship between the level of group cohesion and the degree of influence that the group has on its members (Hartford, 1971).

All the participants were instructed in the sighted guide techniques individually. Thereafter, they were divided into their respective groups for group training and the research process.

There were three instructors leading the group, the pair, and the individual student.

Before the beginning of each lesson, the three instructors were given a complete lesson plan stating the objectives, route to be followed, and procedure of the lesson. This lesson plan ensured that the lessons would be uniform and that the development of the lessons would flow smoothly.

After the completion of each lesson, all three instructors met and discussed the lesson. Reports on the flow and functioning of the lessons were made and conclusions were drawn. These reports were used to plan forthcoming lessons so as to ensure that all the needs of the students and requirements of instruction were met.

In addition to the basic orientation and unaided mobility skills, it was quickly discovered that the group setting was excellent for developing cane techniques and the senses that aid the performance of cane mobility (Klee & Klee, 1985). As the program developed, it was expanded to encompass a wide range of techniques and skills in self-sufficiency in addition to travel through a fairly complex indoor environment.

Students learn by traveling, but they also learn by listening to the mobility problems of other visually impaired students. In a group setting, students can find out how to adjust to these problems by sharing their experiences that may be causing frustration, anxiety, tension, misunderstanding, and apprehension in their lives as they struggle to function as visually impaired persons (Blakeslee, 1980).

The instructor and students submitted general comments on the lessons that were completed in the form of their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of the lessons. Four main areas that were highlighted to be essential for a successful group lesson

were communication, the development of skills and senses, role of the instructor, and the cohesion of the group members.

## **Communication**

Communication is considered to be the most important indicator of group cohesion and development. There is a greater "flow" en route when the members use good communication skills and the instructor provides information clearly, concisely, and loudly enough to be heard by all members. In addition, it was found that the following factors influence (either positively or negatively) the development of good communication skills:

- The nature of the route (long routes or those with frequent turns)
- The different abilities of the members with regard to their command of the English language
- The lack of a common African language among the members
- The members' different understandings of what is important
- The lack of definition of the members' role in the group because the members are all new to each other
- Personality characteristics (shy versus extroverted)
- The role of the instructor in prompting students to discuss strategies that had and had not worked.

It was found that an effective way to keep in touch at the beginning stages of instruction was to wait or stop at set points on the route. When the need for developing good communication is emphasized, there is a tendency within the group to initially communicate too much with one another. As the students' awareness of each other (of the person in front as well as the

person behind) increased with the subsequent lessons, the need for extensive communication among the members was greatly reduced.

Generally, the group members found that the following were effective ways of maintaining contact along routes:

- Each member verbally indicated when he or she set off or stopped unexpectedly.
- The lead member indicated the location of landmarks, turns, and unexpected hazards or obstacles.
- The last person indicated that the information had been received.
- The middle member maintained the lines of communication between the lead and the last member, when necessary.

When the instructor gives the members corrections, it is important first to say the name of the student who is being corrected, so that the other members are not confused. To include all members of the group, instructions related to group functioning were given at the beginning of each lesson. Initially, the instructor was active in nominating a leader for the group before each lesson, but as the lessons progressed, the members decided among themselves who would be the leader in each lesson.

### **Sensory and skill development**

One of the more important skills to develop when teaching in a group setting is the ability to assess individual accuracy in the use of the senses. In the earlier stages of training, it was easier to assess each group member's use of the senses when the member filled the lead role; for example, when the lead member located an open doorway by means of hearing. However, as training

progressed, it became possible to assess the members' use of their senses during group activities as each member fulfilled his or her designated responsibilities; for example, when students did not rely only on the sensory ability of the leader, but also used their own senses to locate designated landmarks or to make corrections when passing a corridor opening.

It was found that it sometimes took much longer to cover the objectives of a lesson, but at other times it took a shorter time. For example, it took much longer to teach the objective of diagonal cane routes in the group lesson than it would have in an individual lesson because all the group members needed time to explore the reference point and other landmarks. However, when the group worked together along a route to reach an objective, the decreased likelihood of the occurrence of disorientation made it possible to complete a lesson in a shorter period of time.

When in the lead, all the students demonstrated competence in identifying landmarks, applying good techniques, and walking confidently. However, the last student tended to be slow and appeared to lack confidence, despite earlier successes achieved when leading the group. One student experienced greater difficulty when carrying out tasks independently; however, this difficulty was thought to have more to do with her quiet and reserved nature and her lack of willingness to ask for assistance.

The identification of landmarks by individual members helped all in the group to experience aspects of the route that they may not have located on their own. The second and third members became active in locating aspects of the route that the leader missed, thus showing that they were aware of their position along the route at all times and actively using their senses--not merely following the leader and relying on the information that the leader presented. As the group traveled, the confirmation of landmarks or discussions of what to find all seemed to help reinforce their knowledge of the

area.

## **Role of the instructor**

As was stated earlier, the instructor plays a key role in formulating and developing the group, particularly the initial roles of the members and communication among all the members. The instructor must work hard to ensure that all the members are participating equally in discussions and practical activities.

Later in the training, the instructor must ensure that the members do not spread too far apart, by either stopping the leader until the other members have caught up or by providing verbal encouragement and information on the direction of travel to the last member. It is important for the instructor to move among the group members to ensure their safety, but doing so became easier as the members' confidence and competence improved during the lessons and the members became more familiar with the environment. The instructor's comment that she could not be close to all the members at all times contributed to the members' greater independence than might otherwise have been possible.

## **Group members**

The group members often expressed enjoyment of the lessons. The group seemed to provide a supportive yet competitive environment in which to learn. In addition, the members commented that the group situation never allowed them to become bored during the lessons, which, in turn, encouraged them to maintain the appropriate level of concentration.

The most significant aspect that was noted by the group members was the feeling that help would always be available when they found that they were lost.

At the conclusion of the study, the instructors commented upon

the greater confidence of the group members in relation to participants in the individual and paired streams. This greater confidence may be attributed to a number of factors, including these:

- The members' knowledge that each member was working more independently of the instructor, since it was not possible for one instructor to be in close proximity to all the members simultaneously
- The greater levels of responsibility that the members were required to take for themselves and in leading or guiding other members of the group
- The greater role played by the members in making decisions during the lessons and in planning routes.

The instructors commented on the difficulty and importance of establishing good lines of communication among the group members. However, once effective communication was established, the "group was able to develop and become a cohesive entity" (Hartford, 1971). The "group influence" was initially more formal in that the instructor controlled the activities of the lesson; however, once the dynamics of the group were well developed, this influence became more informal as members collectively or individually made decisions with regard to walking position, route directions, and the resolution of problems or difficulties.

Although early attempts to set guidelines for communication with the group appeared to be unsuccessful and it took time to develop good group dynamics, these were important steps in laying the foundation for the methods that the group used later and were seen to be part of the group process (Konopka, 1963). Initially, the instructor was largely responsible for identifying the outcomes and goals of individual lessons; however, her encouragement of

the members to participate in this process provided the incentive, direction, and support for the group to work together in reaching the anticipated outcomes and goals (Hartford, 1971). Thus, although Atkinson (1988) stated that "the more capable students in a group cope best," the study demonstrated that by fostering good group dynamics, the group provided a supportive and nurturing environment for less capable members to develop confidence and skills.

## **Discussion**

Although much of the earlier documented O&M training in groups (Atkinson, 1988; Niemandt, 1990) was conducted with a large number of people, the smaller group that was used in this study allowed for much greater flexibility and manageability, in that no special environment, such as a large space or hall, was required. Furthermore, no extra support staff were necessary because one instructor was able to facilitate the lesson and to ensure the safety of the members, independent of assistance.

Ndlovu (2003) noted "that in the early stages of training there will be more group than paired or individual lessons and that this is reversed later in the training." Although Ndlovu's study covered only the indoor module of an instructor training course, the results suggest that such group instruction could be replicated in other modules with success. In instructing people who are visually impaired, although factors, such as location and commonality of needs, need to be taken into consideration, the benefits suggest that paired or group lessons could contribute to increased levels of confidence among all the members.

Both Niemandt (1990) and Atkinson (1988) referred to the use of assistants or additional instructors when working with large groups. We concur that when instruction covers techniques or sensory development exercises, the use of assistants is effective in

reducing the time taken for the lesson and in ensuring the active participation of all the members. For example, in a lesson on the use of the various protective techniques, one instructor and several assistants can provide hands-on correction or demonstration to several participants simultaneously, thus allowing for a faster pace and better flow of the lesson than would be possible with only one instructor. We suggest that although the use of assistants is certainly advantageous, it is not essential for such assistants to be qualified personnel, provided that they have a basic understanding of what is required and a knowledge of the correct way to perform a technique. However, when group instruction requires technical expertise, as, for example, in crossing streets controlled by traffic lights, further research and experience will determine the validity and efficacy of assistance provided by unqualified assistants.

A variety of criteria have been used to select members of a group of actual clients. In this study, many of these variables were not present or applicable (for instance, being blind or having low vision or additional disabilities). However, the attention paid to personality characteristics suggests the importance of this factor in the selection of group members.

With regard to the benefits of group O&M instruction, the following were noted during the study:

- Twice the number of people were trained by one instructor
- The management of time was cost-effective
- The increase in the instructor-student ratio enabled the intake of more students for training
- The emotional support given by members of the group to one another led to the development of a "safe" learning environment

- The levels of confidence in relation to travel and problem-solving strategies greatly increased among the group members
- There was a greater opportunity to cover more content in lessons because difficulties that were encountered were shared experiences.
- The group members experienced increased motivation to participate and enjoyment in participating in the lessons
- The group members developed methods and experiences in working as part of a team.

## **Recommendations**

In South Africa, the majority of O&M instructors are community based, frequently operate independently of other instructors, and are often located long distances from their offices and other support staff. The probability of these instructors having a large group of students who are visually impaired located in close proximity to one another is low. Instructors are dependent upon public transportation in visiting clients. Thus, to coordinate the travel of a number of people to a central venue is likely to be a logistical nightmare, as well as costly for the clients or service providers. Therefore, we believe that there are greater opportunities for instructors to apply group training in small groups or pairs, which would allow the instructors to assist an increased number of visually impaired people.

The success of the study suggests that the implementation of small-group instruction in the training of O&M instructors appears to be a viable and cost-effective solution to the increasing demand for qualified personnel in the field, not only in South Africa but wherever there is a shortage of O&M instructors, with

increased benefits and no visible reduction in efficiency and safety.

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[Previous Article](#) | [Next Article](#) | [Table of Contents](#)

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