

Notes from the Odyssey 2001 Conference, at the University of British Columbia, Canada

Presenter: Pat Gould – Vision Teacher

Introduction:

I get to talk about two great students who are using the MB. First I'll tell you about some of the similarities and differences, then go into their experiences with the MB.

Both Amrinder and Jay:

- have the same eye condition (retinal blastoma)
- are six yrs. old and started Kindergarten last year,
- are good natured and charming
- have loving families
- are ESL (English as a Second Language)
- are highly, highly distractible
- are very curious and
- live within 8 blocks of each other

They go to different schools. Amrinder started Kindergarten ready to learn, had a wealth of experiences, had strong English language skills and was an active learner. He is now in Grade One. Jay's life experiences were limited. When he came to school, he was desperate for experiences; he just sucked them up. His English was marginal and he had such little physical endurance that sometimes he was so tired in Kindergarten, he'd just sit down and cry. Jay is now in his second year of Kindergarten and goes to a Resource Room in the afternoon. In the Res. Room he learns self-care and improves his English and meets his thirst for new experiences through swimming, therapeutic riding, bowling, music therapy, fieldtrips, etc.)

Both students started off with Perkins brailers last year. Amrinder tolerated it. Jay liked it because he loves all machines. After a month, neither had the finger strength nor the control to do more than the 'a' and 'i' correctly, on a consistent basis.

Amrinder's been using his MB for about six months, Jay for about nine months. The MB was introduced to both students as a talking brailier, not as a computer. It was love at first sight!

This chart shows Amrinder's and Jay's progress in learning braille writing on the MB.

Time Line	Amrinder	Jay
September		Explored and played with the MB; played 'my line, your line' where the student explored for a line and the next line I taught letters, correct fingering, 'space' key, etc.
October		Learned 5 letters of the alphabet; we spent a lot of time over the next 4 months building concepts and experiences, and on spelling small words.
November		10 letters; wanted to play on the MB all of the time
December	Explored and played with the MB for one week;	Same 10 letters; happy, eager, not ready for more academics on the MB
January	15 letters of the alphabet; brailing short words; played 'my line, your line'	Still just 10 letters
February	20 letters; he played on the first and last lines and I was able to teach for all the lines in between	11 letters; continued to love his MB

March	Introduced the MB as a computer; using the letters to do commands on the MB motivated A. to learn the rest of the alphabet and increased his speed and confidence; began using the MB for his spelling lessons.	Just before Spring Break everything started to come together: understanding & using English more easily, started to generalize & anticipate (often successfully) & to manipulate people and events to meet his needs.
April	Learned to control the speech, listen to the directory; turn speech on and off; turn embosser on and off; begin a file; end a file; speak a file; print a file; period; comma; all of the alphabet contractions (or as A. says, "contraptions")	Finally, 18 letters!! Jay was trying to sound out words like 'cable' and see if he could make the MB say them correctly, even if they weren't spelled correctly.
May	Began learning to move the cursor around a file and to edit a file using overwrite and insert commands	Learned all the rest of the letters and 2/3 of the alphabet contractions; 3 wks ago I introduced the MB as a computer; just this week Jay said, for the first time, "I don't want to finish my line. Let's do your line." In other words, he wanted to learn more. Also, he learned to do the set-up needed to turn the speech on.

Amrinder feels happy and confident. Each Wednesday he teaches a different buddy how the MB works and helps him or her do two of their spelling sentences in braille. The brailled sentences are put into the student's exercise book. Buddies can't wait to have a turn.

Jay feels successful with his MB. He apologizes to it whenever it beeps at him.

Student Comments

I asked each student what he thought about the MB.

Amrinder:

- It tells me the letters.
- I know if I made a mistake.
- It understands if I braille the long way or the short way(l-i-k-e or 'l')
- It tells you when it's out of paper.
- I like when I can save files on it.
- I can make the paper go in and out by itself.
- I don't like it when it beeps at me!!

Jay:

- I like to do letters.
- I like to turn the speech on -- "star" command, sp space, ss space, qt, margin release.
- I like to turn the embosser on and off.
- I like to make sentences.
- I like the MB to read the files to me.
- I don't like it without the speech on and that's it!

My Comments

1. The MB initially increased my stress because it is new technology. Even though people told me I didn't need to learn it all at once, I didn't believe them until I discovered they were right. So, if possible, I think it's important to have a peer at a similar level or a knowledgeable mentor.
2. The students loved to make up nonsense words and see how the MB tried to say them. Also, they liked exploring the MB key combinations and discovering new braille contractions. When they did that, the children took ownership of the contractions – "You don't have to help me with the 'and' contraction. I *invented* it."
3. I'd love to see the students with Mountbattens at the beginning of Kindergarten, so they would be ready for the technology to be part of their academic learning as soon as they enter Grade One.
4. The MB can be a social magnet. Peers are curious and are fascinated by it.
5. It was important for both students to have speech on right away for immediate feedback.
6. The MB is interesting for most students. For students like Amrinder, it can be used to challenge them in a very positive way.

7. Noise is a problem, but it can be handled. A) Use headphones; turn the embosser off during times the teacher finds it too noisy, then turn it on and print out material during recess, lunch, after school, etc. B) Talk to the teacher before the MB goes into the classroom and make decisions together.
8. In Jay's case, his abilities with the MB gave his teachers and TAs the courage to disbelieve the 'moderately mentally challenged' label that a psychiatrist had put on him. By April, people started to expect more from Jay because they knew that a child who could learn so much (he decided, on his own, to change one letter in his name whenever he was using the MB because he didn't like how the MB said it) didn't fit that label. Note: Jay is not his real name.

I knew the MB was important to Jay, but not how important. The following happened about a month ago. We were outside doing some Orientation and Mobility.

Jay: Miss Gould, we do Mountbatten today?

Me: Not today. I have to go to another student soon.

Jay pauses and thinks for a moment.

Jay: Miss Gould, we do Mountbatten tomorrow?

Me: Yes, Jay. Tomorrow.

Jay pauses and thinks again.

Jay: Miss Gould, is that a promise?

Me: Yes, Jay. That's a promise.

Jay still wasn't satisfied and thought for a moment more.

Jay: Well **Pat**. (said in a very serious/sad tone of voice) Don't break your promise.

I didn't.

Pat Gould

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