

**Padding Towards Inclusion:
Lessons Learned
Working with Teens with Vision Loss and Veterans with
PTSD**

Move United Conference

April 23, 2026

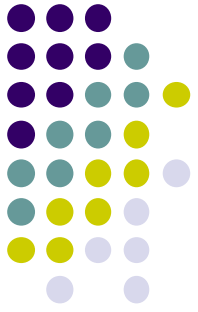
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Agenda



- Learning objectives
- Understand what VI is (Visual Impairment)
- Meeting someone with VI
- Empowering tactics
- Instructional strategies
- Familiarization with equipment
- Getting on the water
- On the water
- Getting off the water
- Topics related to veterans with PTSD

Learning Objectives

- Coaching strategies for sensory & emotional access
- Inclusive program design
- Social & emotional impact

Why This Work Matters

- Kayaks level hierarchy
- Nature regulates the nervous system
- Challenge + support = growth
- Shared vulnerability builds connection

Inclusive Design

- Safety, trust, choice, collaboration
- Low-sensory environments
- High support ratios

Building Community

- Mixed-ability pairing
- Veteran–teen connections
- Shared challenges
- Celebrate milestones

Outcomes

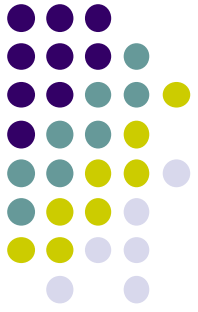
- Increased confidence
- Emotional regulation
- Reduced isolation
- Identity shift to 'paddler'

Observable Impact

- Posture changes
- Tone shifts
- Independent decisions
- Peer coaching

Key Takeaways

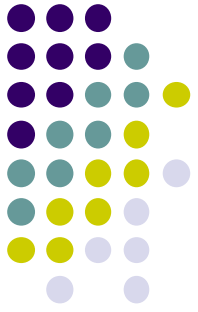
- Preview everything
- Use rhythm
- Normalize opting out
- Debrief every session
- Design for sensory clarity



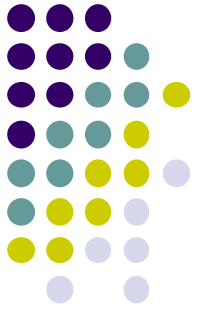
Blind versus Visually Impaired

- Not everyone who travels with a cane or dog guide is totally blind
- Various eye conditions result in various types of vision. An individual may see:
 - light/darkness
 - outlines/shapes/shadows
 - blurred images
 - incomplete images
 - central (tunnel vision) only
 - outer (peripheral vision) only

Remember



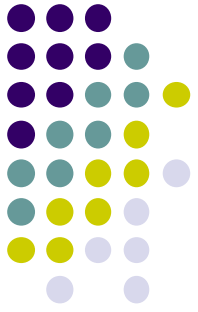
- Not all students are blind (no light perception).
- Some have vision, just not 20/20. It's called having "low vision".
- They may just have to move closer to see something, or they may not have peripheral vision, central vision, or night vision.
- Some need a lot of light to see better and some can't see at all if it's too bright.
- Be aware of biases you may have about someone with VI
- They are experts at how they navigate a sighted world



Keep these things in mind . . .

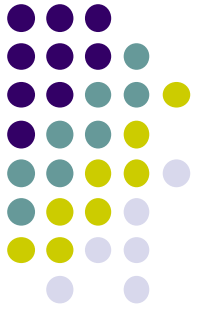
- Direct questions, comments, or conversation to the students, not the teacher.
- Saying to his teacher or friend, “Has he ever been kayaking before?” can make the students feel as if they need to be taken care of or incapable of answering for themselves.
- Your goal is to empower them to be independent, confident and open to try new things.
 - Learn faster, less assistance needed
 - More paddling time
 - Less distraction for you, watching the entire group
- Being a kayaker, a “good” kayaker, is secondary.
- Encourage them to self assess what does/does not work.
- Before touching student/kayak, ALWAYS ask for permission

Keep these things in mind . . .

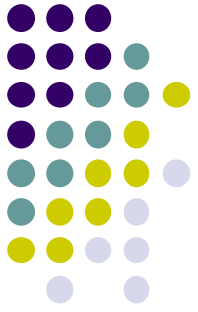


- Make eye contact with student you are speaking. Even if they can't see your eyes, they can hear the direction of your voice or see the direction of your face.
- Introduce yourself, extend your hand for a handshake.
- If someone is not reaching back for your outstretched hand, simply say, "It's nice to meet you, let me shake your hand." to give them a heads up.
- ASK the student what his or her vision is like.
- ASK about their other hobbies, sports, activities, etc.
- ASK if they have kayaked before? Do they enjoy swimming?
- Greet and chat with the student as you would with any teenager, make small talk, etc.

Keep these things in mind . . .

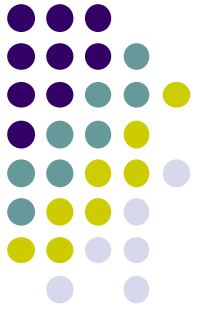


- Ask how they like to be guided over uneven ground
- If you need to guide a student, put your elbow next to his/her arm as a tactile cue and the student should reach for and hold onto *your* arm just above your elbow.
- Describe what they are walking on, especially before they walk on it. e.g. sidewalk, grass, slope down to launch
- If a student drops something, give him a chance to pick it up. (unless it goes in the water – then grab it!).
- Teach your students to be doers and go-getters instead of them waiting for the world to come to them. Little things like this instill in them that others believe and expect them to be independent and capable



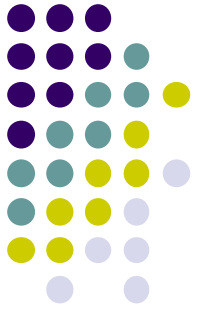
Keep these things in mind . . .

- Ask students to carry things and help *you* or others, giving them the expectation that they can and should contribute just like anyone else.
- Don't be afraid to say things like, “see you later”, “let me show you”, or “look at this”, even if you know a student is totally blind. It's perfectly natural and normal to use “sight” words.
- Use person first language, such as, “a student with low vision” or “kayaker who is blind” as opposed to “blind kayaker”



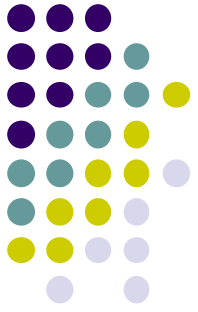
Keep these things in mind . . .

- Instead of pointing, describe objects or locations using specifics and details, such as “The kayak is on your right.” or “the kayak is at your 12 o’clock.”
- Here, there, or pointing are not always helpful.
- Saying that something is directly behind, to the left, on the end of the picnic table closest to the water, etc. are more specific.
- Respect the student’s equipment as it is part of their “identity” or “space”. Cane, glasses, hearing aid, etc.



Exercise

- Think back to a positive experience you had as a student with a coach/teacher
- What did you feel?
 - Before
 - During
 - After
- What did they do to make it a good experience?
- If you had VI, would your answer be different?
- if you had PTSD, would your answer be different?



Instructional Strategies

- First time or 1 time paddler
 - Tandem kayak with teacher/volunteer
 - Minimize stroke instruction, maximize time on water
- Encourage repeat paddler to try single kayak
- Assign instructor and volunteers single kayaks
- Determine student goals and adapt real time
- Give clear, verbal descriptions

Instructional Strategies- Intro



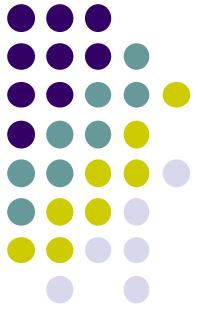
- People First language
- Safe Sport Practices- protection children/adults
- Ask student about their vision
- Understand if there are secondary impairments
- Ensure they know left/right or clock position
- Use multiple modes of learning
 - Auditory, visual, tactile, kinesthetic, proprioception
- Individuals with VI learn by touching and doing
 - Touch kayak, paddle and PFD
- For those with low vision, modeling works

Instructional Strategies- Coaching



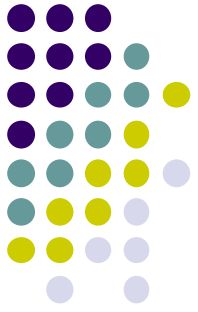
- Same as with a sighted student
- Manage your own emotions
 - Recognize frustration
 - Patience and humility
- Be prepared, in the moment and self aware
- Focus on student's goals
- Make it fun
- Adapt your instruction to the student
- Gradual release of responsibility

Instructional Strategies- Coaching



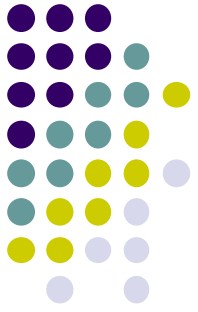
- Dominant style- student centered/guided learning
 - experiential
 - experimental
 - encourage self assessment
 - What did you notice?
 - What a challenged you?
 - What did you accomplish?
- Scaffold/bracket instruction
 - Build on one element at a time
 - Experiment and contrast, e.g. hands close together, hands far apart
- Experiment, add to your toolbox
- Learn what works with that particular student

Instructional Strategies- Communication



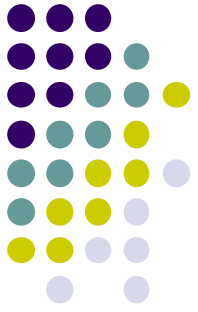
- Goals SMART
 - Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Responsibility and Time
- 4 elements of communication
 - Message, verify understanding, evaluate and feedback
 - Take ownership for communication. “I may not be explaining it well”
- Evaluate progress with frequent checks

Instructional Strategies- Communication



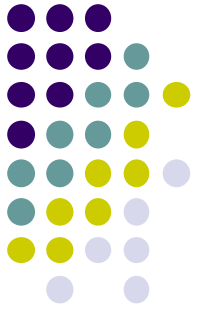
- Use positive reinforcement
- Celebrate success with generous use of high five's, "Ta Da" moments, etc.
- Ask open ended questions
 - "What do you feel?"
 - "What worked?"
 - "Anything surprise you?"
 - "What would happen if....?"

Familiarization with Equipment



- Personal Flotation Device (PFD)
 - Purpose is buoyancy
 - Have student put on and adjust their own PFD
 - Importance of, how to adjust and check fit
 - Have student check fit by lifting shoulder straps
 - Have students check each other
 - Whistle- purpose and how to find
 - **IMPORTANT.** Personally, check fit of every student's PFD
 - Consider having student wade and float

Familiarization with Equipment



- Kayak
 - Use correct terminology, e.g. kayak, bow, stern, cockpit, seat, foot pegs, paddle, shaft, blade, power face, etc
 - Explore the vessel, naming each part
 - Use generic and correct terminology, e.g. “front and bow”
 - Transition quickly to using only correct terms
- Have student sit in kayak and observe/instruct on how to adjust seat and foot pegs
 - Verify posture
 - ASK before touching student or reaching into kayak

Familiarization with Equipment

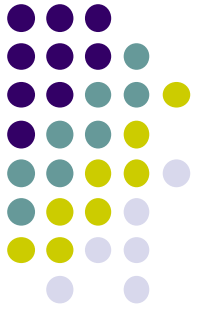


- Paddle
 - Describe shaft, blade, power face, back face
 - Describe and assist how to hold paddle, light grip, shoulder width, hand placement, paddle angle and blade angle
 - Consider marking shaft with a tactile index (tape, bump dots)
 - Have students demonstrate high and low angle paddle
 - Describe when to use
- Demonstrate forward stroke
 - Verbally, visually or with physical assistance- ASK FIRST

Getting on the Water



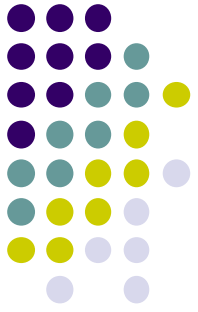
- Trip planning
- Venue selection
 - Level 1 conditions
 - Large enclosed area is best
- Risk assessment, mitigation and management
- Proper clothing
 - quick dry, hat, water shoes, sunglasses, sunscreen, eye glass retainer strap
- Water, snacks, dry clothes
- Volunteer safety meeting including duties/communication/head on a swivel/positioning



Getting on the Water

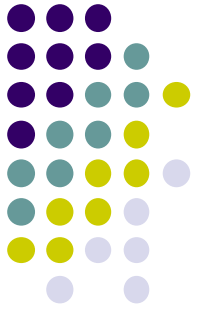
- Group trip and safety briefing
 - Give a physical description of venue
 - What to do if someone falls in
 - Leave cane, hearing aids, etc. secured on beach
- Float and stabilize kayak
 - Instruct how to get in kayak
 - Emphasize ‘nose over belly button/navel’
- Lean kayak to demo tip point, loose hips
- Rock kayak to teach upper body separation
- Verify on water instructor is ready for launch

On the Water

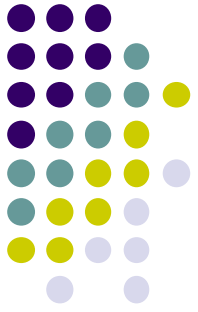


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On the Water



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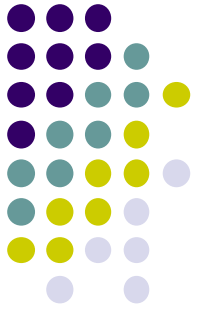
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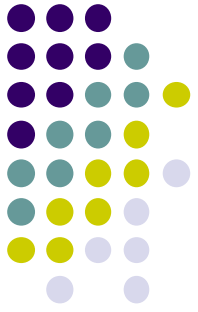


- Constant communication, e.g. “On me”, auditory sound box, phrases, etc.
- Describe what the body, boat and blade should feel like
- Teach directional control, e.g. feeling the sun, wind
- Using voice commands
- Give responsibility to students, e.g. lead group, lead games
- Games e.g. Marco Polo, Simon Says, Farm Animal, etc.
- Rafting up, water break and switch kayaks
- Group management skills
- Manage volunteers

On the Water- games



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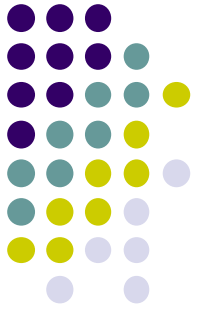


On the Water- rafting up



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Getting off the Water



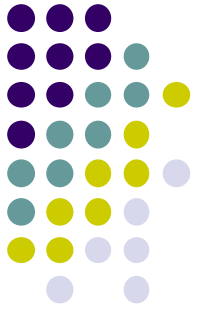
- Have coach, on shore, to direct kayaks and assist students.
- A coach should be last off the water.
- Each student should
 - loosen straps and buckles on PFD
 - return paddle and PFD to storage place
 - help move kayaks, depending on venue
- Gather group and have students talk about their experience, what went well, even better if, personal goals for next trip.

Veterans with PTSD



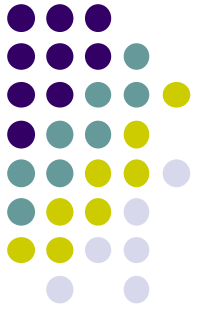
- Veterans commit suicide at 40% greater than general population, female vets 78% greater
- Barriers: hyper-vigilance, trust, need for control, possible emotional regulation deficiency
 - Shutting down, anger management issues, etc
- Strengths
 - mission focus
 - teamwork
 - High persistence
 - Team cohesion when safe

Shared Needs



- Predictability
- Clear communication
- Choice & autonomy
- Psychological safety
- Small wins

Program Administration



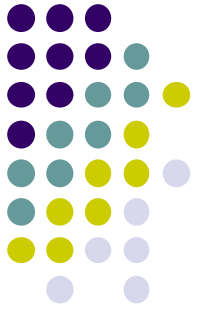
- Partner with VA, local parks and recreation organizations, et al
- Outreach to local veterans organizations
- Networking
- Media relations, e.g. news releases
- Develop volunteers
 - Paddling groups
 - Standardize training
 - Ask volunteers to share their stories, draft other volunteers
- Make personal contact between trips

Vets with PTSD- Prelaunch



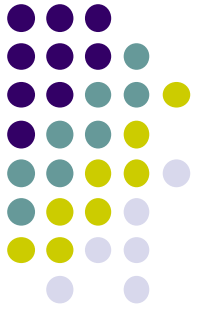
- Veterans help to unload kayaks, etc
- Introductions
- Resources available
- Sharing of relevant stories
- Trip plan
- Safety briefing

On Water Coaching



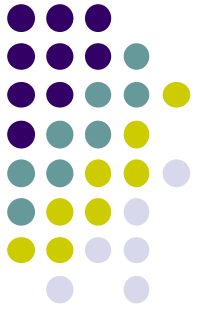
- Verbal mapping & stroke cadence
- Predictable routes
- Breathing and rhythm for regulation
- Mindfulness exercises
 - Grounding based
 - Focus on individual senses
 - Focus on distant local sounds, sights, etc
 - The “Power of Water” tactile led exercise, et al

Getting off the Water



- Gather group and have vets talk about their experience, what went well, even better if, personal goals for next trip.
- Vets help load trailer, put away PFD's, etc

Contact Info and Questions



- Wayne Douchkoff wdouchkoff@aol.com