



Jacob's Team Rides On

"I believe that Jacob made more significant and faster gains this year than any other due to the focus and collaboration of the team. Not only did I feel more involved as a parent, but everyone could see and celebrate the growth Jacob made. Sometimes growth is so slow, but the videos really helped document his changes over time".

-Sue Ann, mother of a middle school student with deaf-blindness.



Figure 1 - Jacob

Introduction

When I first met Sue Ann, we were at the middle school where her son would start in the fall. It was spring of 2012, and we were there to sign forms and demonstrate technology in preparation for our new *Distance Mentoring Project*. She was worried about her son's transition to middle school where he would be greeted by a brand-new team, with the exception of his paraeducator.

*Adapted from: National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness (2013). *DMP Initiative Summary*. Monmouth, OR: Western Oregon University.

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At home, Jacob's family signs to him at close range. They take the time to recognize his gestures and behaviors as requests for what he wants. So the gap between what Sue Ann knew about Jacob's needs for developing independence and communication and what the new staff would know was very wide. How was she going to get enough information across to a new team so that they weren't spending all day managing meltdowns? The timing of our offer to be part of the *Distance Mentorship Project* (DMP) couldn't have been better for Jacob—and his team.

The Washington DMP Team:

Kathee Scoggin, Co-Director of Washington's Deaf-Blind Project, was the deaf-blind specialist for Jacob's team. Kathee already knew the family and student and had facilitated a Person-Centered Plan with the team. Nancy Hatfield, also Co-Director, was geographically closest to the district and provided the initial liaison with their administrators. As Education and Distance Learning Consultant, I was the creator/maintainer of the wiki site as well as the online meeting scheduler and moderator. I also provided the technology "troubleshooting" and filled in for Kathee as needed. Jacob's local team included: Sue Ann (mother); Cindy (Special Ed. Coordinator); Sharon (Special Ed. Teacher); Janice and Ebonie (paraeducators); Tressa (SLP); and Amanda (PT).



Figure 2 - Technology and the Team

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Trusted relationships are the key to working most effectively at a distance. To introduce the DMP, Nancy met twice in person with three of the district's special education administrators. They then invited Jacob's team to consider the invitation before making a final commitment to participate. We bumbled our way through a first trial run meeting via *Blackboard Collaborate*, with both Kathee and I joining at a distance. Then Kathee, who lives across the Cascade Mountains on the other side of the state, and I (who live 115 miles north of the local team) both met the team and parent at the classroom where Jacob would be arriving in the fall.

At first glance, the checklist of requirements we showed the local team looked overwhelming. It turned out that once we had buy-in from the family and administrators, however, the single thing we needed most was not technical expertise, however, the single thing we needed most was not technical expertise, but *willingness*.

Sharon, the special education teacher who would be Jacob's new teacher in the fall, was honest about the concerns she had when we first met with their team. "When I first heard about the [DMP] project, I was completely overwhelmed. I didn't think I'd have the energy on top of my regular workload. Then, I realized that it was going to make my job a whole lot easier."

"Staff did have concerns initially. They had concerns about working with a new student with such significant disabilities, about equipment, about the time it would take to do videos and meet monthly, but they were willing participants."

- Cindy, Special Education Coordinator

Team Meets Tech:

The team was willing to try *Blackboard Collaborate* for online meetings, *Google Sites* as a private wiki site and *Dropbox* for sharing videos. They were willing to videotape Jacob. For this team of digital natives, Sharon later told us, the video capture and share was "super-easy." Sharon and Janice were also willing to record themselves during selected routines (i.e., greetings, reading experience books). They were willing to have Sue Ann and Kathee give feedback during the monthly online meetings about what they would each need to change in their interactions, to make a difference for Jacob. Not super-easy.

From my perspective, sharing video was easy, then scary, and then easy. The truth is, we had built the DMP cart, but it wasn't always rolling the way we had hoped. We initially loaded video straight onto the *Google Site*, only to discover that this would quickly overwhelm the free site. Jacob's family was already using *Dropbox* for photos,

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so by October, the team was posting school videos to "the cloud." It helped to have folders organized by month, to easily locate the most recent videos.

We also encountered problems using *Blackboard Collaborate* web conferencing with the school team. Our meeting summary form from November 2012 listed the technical problems the team encountered: Janice was not able to use audio from a new site (she had to type into the chat box with her answers) and Tressa (newly hired SLP) logged on too late to see our instructions on *Audio Set up*, so could not use her mic, but could hear and type in the chat box.

"[By looking at the videos of ourselves]. . .we were forced to talk about what didn't go well, what we needed to change about ourselves or the environment. Having Janice [para] at the meetings was really important. That level of collaboration with paras is unusual. We're just too busy. But Janice is such a huge part of Jacob's team. So it is paramount that we collaborate."

- Sharon, Special Ed. Teacher

The *Google Site* started well: Jacob's team was invited in May and the team had loaded over twenty documents by the time school started in September. Sue Ann, Jacob's mother, uploaded photos to help the school staff understand what he likes at home (e.g., a shiny plate above the fireplace; the color yellow; his aquarium). Between August, 2012, and March 15, 2013, over 100 comments by the team were posted on the wiki site.

Still, the *Google Site* (aka wiki) did not replace using email, as we imagined it might. Some people weren't getting notifications of postings, others of us assumed they *were* getting them. Sharon reported in her evaluation that she used the wiki site for specific things such as photos for Experience Books, getting to the link to upload videos of Jacob at school, or reading comments posted by the Teacher of the Visually

Impaired. But, she added, the synchronous online meetings with all team members present was the most important element for communication.

As moderator of the monthly web meetings, I had the honor and challenge of navigating the expectations and emotions that can come up for all members of a new team. We agreed to have brief round-robins for each person to give their feedback on the topic or routine. In every meeting—in addition to hearing the teacher's concerns and questions—Janice, Jacob's one-on-one paraeducator, had a voice, and Jacob's mother had a voice. This meant the rest of us learned from the two people who spent the most time with Jacob.



Figure 3 - Jacob in the classroom

Results of Teaming with Distance Technology:

Our survey of the six-member team produced these ratings on a scale of 1 to 5 (highest):

- The *Google Site* increased communication among our team members: 4.6
- The consultants assisted our local team in acquiring, setting up, and using the technology: 4.6
- The DMP model helped our local team communicate more effectively: 4.8

Could we have used an online meeting platform that was more user-friendly and had fewer problems than *Blackboard Collaborate*? Probably so. Nonetheless, the online meetings were conducted every month, and every member of the team was able to participate. When asked, "In what ways was the DMP most helpful to you?", we received the following responses:

- "Watching the videos and discussing what Jacob was doing and how we can facilitate greater communication. You inspired me!" - Sharon, Special Ed Teacher

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- "Helping me understand what I could do better. As a team we were all able to look at each other and express our concerns." - Janice, Paraeducator
- "Communication with people that are able to bring an additional perspective to our role working with students with Deaf-Blindness." - Amanda, PT

By the last month, the biggest surprise had emerged: it became clear that the team had become a cohesive whole. Kathee, Nancy and I remarked that not only was it possible to provide technical assistance at a distance, but it seemed the distance mentoring process had actually helped the new team become more engaged and collaborative. The web meetings had an equalizing effect: empowering paraeducators and parents to give feedback and share solutions.

Outcomes for Jacob:

The videos of Jacob from early in the school year show him sitting in his wheelchair and throwing things.

This could have become his general stance toward school. He would likely have been labeled a behavior problem, as happens to too many children who are deaf-blind whose communication needs are not met. Instead, the team set up a greeting routine, which was then videotaped, discussed and refined.

From the *Google Site*: November 13, 2012

Katie: Communication Routines: I'm starting a new thread here around J.'s communication. What's going well? We will talk about this at the Team Meeting today. Continue the conversation here. :) Did he use a gesture at school? Initiate communication by reaching or pointing?

Sharon: Jacob is consistently greeting me, Janice and Ebonie on a daily basis! He sometimes greets other staff and therapists. Janice and SLP and I are training students and staff to greet and interact with Jacob slowly. A particular student has taken an interest in Jacob. Maybe we could start socialization with this student?

Later videos show Jacob getting out of his wheelchair on his own (with the aid of a low platform the PT recommended). He would then scoot on the floor to areas of the room he wanted to explore. At his teacher's request, he would go find his "experience books" on the shelf. In the last video of Janice signing an experience book with Jacob, we see him turning the pages. He looks up at the camcorder and smiles an impish grin. Aha! His personality finally showed up at school.

In May, 2013, two weeks after our last official web conference, Sue Ann posted a story about Jacob. "COMMUNICATION," she wrote. "Boy, is Jacob communicating at home..." Within forty minutes, his teacher Sharon had answered " So exciting!"

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In a conversation with Jacob's mother, she summed up the value of this pilot project: "I know sustainability is sometimes an issue for new projects," she said, "but I think at this point, whether the Deaf-Blind Project staff are able to stay involved with us on a regular basis or not, Jacob's school team and our family will continue to use the wiki site, post videos, and generate our own discussion about next steps." And we agree.

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Figure 4 - A group photo of Jacob's Team