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Structured Discovery Learning Goes to Turkey

by Robert Leslie Newman

From the Editor: When we stop to think about it, we all recognize that, much as we yearn to provide substantial assistance to blind people around the world, the National Federation of the Blind's primary responsibility must be to work to help blind people in this country reach their full potential as blind people and members of their communities. We can occasionally do something to help a blind individual in another nation, but mostly we must content ourselves to work through the World Blind Union to help blind people internationally.

That of course must not discourage individual blind people and groups from reaching out a helping hand to those in other countries who have seen our philosophy in action and long to put it into practice in their own communities. The following article describes such an effort made by six blind and sighted people, all of them Federationists, who set out to demonstrate what the structured-discovery approach to blindness training could accomplish when taught intensively in the developing world. The group spent from October 12 to November 7, 2007, in Turkey. Only time will tell how much institutional difference they made, but it is pretty clear that twenty-six Turkish citizens will never be the same, and the same might be said for six Americans. Here is the story of their visit as culled from Robert Leslie Newman's diary:

"Merhaba" (Turkish for "hello") greeted the six members of the Blind Corps team upon our arrival at the Istanbul national airport. We were the guests of Beyazey, an Istanbul-based consumer group of blind people and the Istanbul Municipality, our sponsors in a joint demonstration project called "Futures in Blindness," bringing structured discovery learning to the blind of Turkey. The impetus for our invitation came from the recognition that, within the Turkish population of seventy million, approximately seven-hundred-fifty thousand have a severe vision loss, and of these 85 percent of working-age people are unemployed. In Turkey rehabilitation services for the blind are in many respects neither well organized nor up to date.

Mostly the blind of Turkey wish to make a positive change in this situation. The Blind Corps team, with more than one hundred years of experience in blindness rehabilitation among us, were honored to be asked and delighted to demonstrate what we know to be the best method for bringing independence to the blind.



Blind Corps (BC) is an all-volunteer group of professionals in the field of work with the blind. We formed this nonprofit in November of 2005 with the purpose of addressing the rehabilitation needs of blind people in developing countries. The team for the Turkey project was made up of six members who individually had a range of ten to thirty-four years of



professional experience in the blindness field; all were active members of the NFB. The members were Michael Floyd, BC president, blind, currently a drug and alcohol counselor, and a former travel instructor; Fatos Floyd, BC vice president, blind, a Turk and former resident of Istanbul, and currently the director of the Nebraska Center for the Blind (NCBVI); Connie Daly, BC secretary/treasurer, sighted, and a district supervisor for NCBVI; Nancy Flearl, BC board member, sighted, and a district supervisor for NCBVI; Robert Leslie Newman, BC board member, blind, and a vocational rehabilitation counselor for NCBVI; and Buna Dahal, BC member, blind, and a trainer and motivational speaker in the blindness field.

(Originally we had planned to have an eight-member team, including another general teacher and a computer specialist.)

We left the United States on October 12, leaving our homes at approximately 11:30 a.m., and arriving in Istanbul at noon on the 13th. We stayed in the Istanbul area for twenty-five days, arriving home on November 7. Jetting eight thousand miles plus and crossing eight time zones to the east to spend time living and working with people of a different culture was, to say the least, exciting. For every member of the BC team this would be the first experience in presenting a training program outside our own borders when a majority of us did not speak the language. Fatos was born and raised in Istanbul. Fatos's husband Mike is a native of Oklahoma and speaks broken Turkish. He has been to Turkey several times. Nancy and Connie had spent nearly three weeks in Turkey in 2005 as Fatos's guest. I had visited Istanbul for one day in 1985 as part of a cruise originating in Athens, Greece. This was Buna's first trip to Turkey.

The training ran from October 16 to October 30. The site was a campus donated by the Istanbul Municipality called Florya Ozurluler Kampi, Ciroz for short. It is a fifteen-acre camp designed to serve the disabled and is located within the Istanbul city limits along the shore of the Sea of Marmara. All participants lived in the camp's fifty cabins, and classes were held in other camp buildings, including an Internet café with eight computers and a large cafeteria, where our meals were prepared and served. We used the campus's sidewalks and internal streets for cane travel training. In addition we used a nearby neighborhood and the extensive sidewalk system that extended south of the camp to and along the seashore.

On Tuesday, October 16, we started with twenty-four students. Throughout the next two weeks new students trickled in, until at the close of the training on Tuesday, October 30, we had worked with a total of thirty-six individuals. At the beginning of any training program it is customary to ascertain the expectations of your students, so in the beginning seminar we asked each person to tell what he or she hoped to gain from this experience. To our surprise many spoke of needing to learn specific skills: computer, Braille, cooking, sewing, independent travel, a new method of teaching, confidence, and more. Their desires were no different from those we hear from our students in the U.S. At our closing ceremony we gave out twenty-six certificates to students who had been with the training for nearly its full two-week period.



The students who came for "Futures in Blindness" were a mix of blind people and professionals in the field of blindness (some of these service providers were sighted, and some were blind). Their ages ranged from the teens through the fifties. Some were college students, most were unemployed, and approximately a third were service providers. Most were from the Istanbul area, but a few had traveled up to eighteen hours on a bus. Several were quite accomplished in their blindness skills, but most had had little or no blindness training. They all proved to have one thing in common: their openness and eagerness to learn.

It is important to note that in setting up and presenting our two-week training center, though we created a mini, short-term training program like those found in Nebraska and several other U.S. states and at the three NFB centers, our need to pack in a range of skill and topic areas meant that some classes were conducted and built on over several days and others were necessarily presented only once. Yet the parallels between the Istanbul center and those in the U.S. were easy to see: the philosophy of high expectations, the core of basic classes, teaching students to problem-solve as a blind person, and allowing them to learn that blindness need not be a barrier to living a normal life. Herein also lay the fundamental reason for the demonstration project, what our Turkish sponsors wished to see in "Futures in Blindness," structured discovery learning in action.

This is not to say that there weren't major differences between our training center in Turkey and our center in Nebraska, for two were worthy of mention. First was the language barrier. Only one of us on the BC team spoke fluent Turkish and one a form of survival Turkish. Four of us needed translators (which we did not always have when we needed them). Five of the students had some English; one was pretty good, but the others had only basic survival English or just Turkish. Three of our students were members of the European Volunteer Service from Germany, Holland, and France. Though they spoke good English, they were beginners in Turkish. As an instructor I found not having the full power of communication an interesting and sometimes taxing challenge. I was forced to think and plan how to simplify my delivery of a question or a new concept. Not only did I have to find basic terminology, but it had to be an English word that my student knew, yet a term that captured the thread of the concept being taught. So I too had to pick up a word or phrase of their language in order to further our communication. And always we made use of demonstration and much pantomime.

The second major difference arose from the fact that Turkey is a Muslim country. People of any faith range from the very devout to the liberal. Eight of our women students were covered and respectfully refused to work with male BC instructors. "Covered" means they were of a strict sect and were covered from head to foot, their hands and faces being the only body parts visible to the public. They wore scarves to cover their hair, long skirts to their feet, and sleeves that came to the wrists. Over this first layer they wore ankle-length coats. The rule was that they could not be touched by a man other than someone in their own family.

An average day's training schedule looked like this: (Turkey uses the twenty-four-hour clock.)

8:00 to 9:00—Breakfast: cheeses, olives, raw vegetables, maybe a boiled egg or fresh fruit or a slice of salami, and always fresh bread. ("Ekmek" is Turkish for "bread.") At all meals the drink options were chi and fresh juices. ("Chi" is Turkish for "tea.")

9:30 to 10:00—Group meeting to talk about the day's schedule.

10:00 to 12:00—Training; some days a two-hour class, some days two one-hour classes.

12:00 to 13:00—Lunch: rice; soup; a stew, sometimes vegetarian, sometimes with small bits of meat; raw or cooked vegetables; yogurt; bread; and sometimes dessert.

13:30 to 16:00—Training; some days a two-and-a-half-hour class, some days two one-hour-and-fifteen-minute classes.

16:00 to 16:30—Tea time: a break from work for chi or juice and a light snack of fruit or something sweet.

16:30 to 18:30—Seminar: a group meeting to discuss personal accomplishments and to explore a philosophical issue of blindness.

19:00 to 20:00—Dinner: rice, cooked vegetables, yogurt, a meat or vegetable stew or casserole, and dessert. (The food was good at the camp and excellent elsewhere.)

20:00 to 22:00—Most evenings we sat around in the cafeteria visiting, learning one another's languages or working further on cane travel or making music. The Turkish people love to sing, and many students played the darbuka, a Turkish drum held under the arm and played with the hands. Some students played a stringed instrument called the baglama.

22:00 to 22:30—Last snack of the day: chi or juice and fruit or sweets.

The classes or skill areas offered were as follows:

"Bastogne" is Turkish for cane. Cane travel class was a major skill area held every day and enjoyed by all. We had brought a large box of canes, and we had more than enough to give a long white cane and a sleepshade to each student. The skills we taught were basic two-point technique, pencil grip, traveling in a residential area, placing the cane in a vehicle, handling a flight of stairs, finding an address, carrying a food tray, keeping one's place in line, finding a dropped item, locating door handles, using a compass and cardinal directions, and more. We taught the initial cane skills on the grounds of the camp, but for more advanced travel we left the campus and explored the extensive network of seaside walkways to a sports exercise area, a tea shop, a restaurant, and a nearby neighborhood grocery store. We also boarded a city bus and worked out all the techniques and awarenesses for bus travel. Additionally we covered cane maintenance, including replacing a tip and keeping the cane clean and repaired. Finally we covered cane etiquette: making sure it isn't in others' space, stowing it safely, etc. ("Sa" is Turkish for "right," and "soul" is "left.")

Students were excited to get new and adequate canes; some had come with canes, and some had not. The ones they had were short and mostly folding. We were excited to watch the acceptance and dedication this group of students put into learning this skill. We saw them out between classes, sleepshades on, practicing alone or in small groups. Sometimes at 10:30 at night they would still be at it.

Braille was another key class for most students. It was held on several days. In this class too we presented each student with a Braille slate and stylus. To those who were not already Braille readers, we introduced the alphabet, both reading and writing it. Yes, Turkish Braille has some differences from the English alphabet; it differs by nine letters. The Turkish alphabet lacks the letters q, w, and x, but it has six additional characters not found in ours; the C with a tail, G with accent, I without a dot, O with two dots, U with two dots, and S with a tail.

One critical deficiency in Braille literacy we identified in Turkey is that there is no organized system of teaching the Braille code for advanced math. As a result blind people are not able to enter careers requiring the reading and writing of advanced math. In fact some college graduates aspiring to become certified to teach are not able to pass the math section of the national teacher certification examination and so cannot reach their goal.

Computer was another important class for most students and was repeated on several days. Some students came with good computer skills, and some had none. This class was a challenge indeed to the Blind Corps staff for a couple of reasons. First, we had intended to bring a computer expert with us; however that fell through. Second, the version of Windows that we found on all the machines was Turkish (we had been told this would not be the case), and the kicker was that the keyboard was set up for the Turkish alphabet. (Imagine producing an at sign by striking the letter Q plus the right Alt key.) Though all staff were good daily users of the computer, only one of us was a Turkish speaker, so we were handicapped in our teaching unless we had a translator sitting beside us. Our solution was to use the advanced Turkish student to aid in teaching computer to the less experienced.

The skills addressed depended on the individual's previous knowledge and experience. Some skill sets were basic keyboarding, basic Windows, word processing, email, Internet search, and more.

Cooking was another popular class held several times. Along with traditional cooking, we also offered a section on outdoor grilling (a task normally carried out by men in Turkey; however, we had women doing it too).

We found that most women had quite a lot of experience with cooking, though most were very appreciative of learning new alternatives. The skills taught were basic peeling, cutting, dicing, pouring, grating, frying, baking, cleanup, and more. The dishes we had them cook were Turkish potato salad, a cake, and zucchini pancakes. Afterwards we all sampled each of the dishes and even shared them with the cooks at the camp.

In grilling, the initial task was to assemble the grill itself, after which they learned to arrange and start the charcoal and achieve the right bed of hot coals. Next came the placement and monitoring of the items being grilled. One day we grilled Turkish meatballs. Another day it was chicken. Interestingly, cooking in Turkey is generally not done using written recipes. This includes measurements, meaning they use the dash, pinch, or handful method.



Sewing was another hit with everyone. It was held only twice. The first skill we covered was the threading of a needle; we showed them three methods. The self-threading needles were the favorite. The next task was to sew on a button. The final project was to assemble and sew together a cloth holder/dispenser for plastic grocery bags.

Home maintenance was also a favorite class of both men and women, but we had time to hold it only once. The skills we covered were plugging electric cords into outlets, changing light bulbs, hammering nails, and measuring and cutting lumber.

Techniques of daily living was another popular class, held only once. We divided this one up into two sections. First we discussed and demonstrated a variety of medical techniques and equipment, e.g., methods of filling a syringe, checking blood sugar levels, using a talking thermometer and a talking blood pressure cuff, methods of labeling medicines, techniques of administering medications to children, and more.

We also covered other home- and school-related techniques and equipment such as methods of creating raised-line drawings, methods of teaching handwriting, electronic notetakers (PAC Mate and BrailleNote), using an audible liquid level indicator, modifying dials with raised markings, labeling clothing and canned goods or other items in the kitchen, and more.

Good grooming and applying cosmetics was yet another popular class held only once. We divided it into grooming for men and makeup and personal hygiene for women. In both areas we discussed and tried out a range of alternative techniques and equipment. In grooming we covered hair care, brushing teeth, shaving, personal hygiene, nail care, polishing shoes, picking out clothing, labeling clothing, checking for wrinkles and spots, and more.

Dating naturally came up as a topic. In Turkey it is customary to see blind men marrying sighted women, yet it is not common to see blind women marrying sighted men. It is rare to see two blind people marrying. In the women's class we covered hair care, including styling; nail care, including polishing; application of makeup; labeling makeup and clothing; personal hygiene; and more.

It is exciting and satisfying to report that during the two weeks of training many students were visited by spouses, siblings, parents, and their own children. In fact, in some cases guests stayed the day, visiting classes and events and even spending the night. On many occasions these guests commented on the improvements they had witnessed and said that they would now be expecting more of their loved ones.



The media visited the training program. Within the first two days a local newspaper came, took pictures, and interviewed participants. A copy of this article can be found on the Blind Corps Website? <http://www.blindcorps.org>. And, what was even more exciting, a national governmental newspaper and

film team shot footage and interviewed students and staff. They made a documentary of their material that was shown on Turkish national television during the week of November 19. (We plan to stream it on the Blind Corps Website in the near future.)

I mentioned earlier that we had two major sponsors, but the rest of the story is that the majority of the training materials and equipment used during classes was purchased by BC using many generous donations by supporters here in the U.S. and in Turkey. A listing of these individuals can be found on the BC Website. At the end of the training it was all left in Turkey. That is to say it was all given to students or to Beyazey or Parilta, a nonprofit providing services to blind children.

It is important to tell more of the story surrounding the unemployment of the blind in Turkey. Above I said it is 85 percent. Even so, many of the blind people who work do so through a national law that requires a company to hire a percentage of disabled workers or be penalized up to three times the annual salary of a worker. Some companies get a willing blind person to accept the money and just stay home. After a blind person puts in fifteen years of employment, he or she can retire with full Social-Security-like benefits. This is quite common. I met several people who asked how we in the U.S. handle retirement and whether blind citizens receive any governmental support.



Here are some interesting facts and observations that I wrote into my personal journal. In Turkey, before you enter someone's home, you take off your shoes. The curbs are about eighteen inches high to prevent people from parking their cars on the sidewalks. Also the pedestrian does not have the right of way; in the U.S. cars must watch out for people on foot; in Turkey pedestrians must watch out for the cars. You know you are in Istanbul when most cell phone ringtones around you are Middle Eastern tunes. If you hear a group of people having fun and laughing, you cannot tell where in the world you are. The city limits of Istanbul span areas on both the European and Asian continents. The population of Istanbul is something like thirteen

million people, that is, people who are actually registered. The actual figure is more than likely fifteen million plus if the nonregistered inhabitants are included.

The windows of homes and businesses generally have no screens. There are few dogs in Turkey; they are viewed as unclean animals. You do see a lot of cats. If you call a cat, you do not say, "Here Kitty, Kitty," you say, "Pss, pss, pss."

After the conclusion of training, Wednesday, October 31, we spent the day cleaning up and organizing for the trip back on November 7, the following week. We relaxed and did some sightseeing and shopping on November 1 and 2. On the first we went shopping in the great covered bazaar. On the second we took a trip to where the Bosphorus meets the lower end of the Black Sea.

The next three days we made visits to several local Istanbul providers of services to the blind, where we held open discussions with staff and consumers.

On Saturday the 3rd, we spent the day with the staff and consumers of Parilta, the nonprofit that provides services to blind children. The morning was a discussion with a large group of parents of blind children, the blind children themselves, their sighted siblings, and agency staff. Afterwards they provided us lunch.

In the afternoon we received a tour of their facility and were asked to work with a classroom of children. On the spot we devised an instructional game in which each child was challenged to find a dropped piece of candy by listening to the object being dropped, kneeling down and laying the white cane flat on the floor, and

sweeping in an organized pattern until the candy was found. One commitment we made to this group was to provide an assortment of kid-sized canes.

Another highlight of this visit was being reunited with a couple of our former students. One, a blind college graduate, was a volunteer working three to four days a week. Getting to and from work takes her three hours one way.

On Sunday, November 4, we visited a district nonprofit in the morning where we split up and individually held topical discussions with members of the host staff. I covered the state of services in the U.S. and how we can bring about changes. Mike handled cane travel. Fatos covered the blind in math and science. Nancy dealt with social skills. And Connie covered employment issues. (Buna had returned to the States by this time to honor a prior business commitment.)

In the afternoon we visited one of our major sponsors, Beyazey. We began with lunch and a tour of their offices. We then led a large group of consumers and staff in a discussion of empowering the blind. Here too we met a couple more former students.

On Monday, the 5th, we started the day by visiting a school for learning disabled students, where again one of our former students works. The students in this school range in age from eighteen to thirty-five. They are taught some academics, but mostly arts and crafts like music, painting, weaving, and jewelry making.

Then we visited the headquarters of all government services for the disabled of Istanbul with eighteen offices throughout the Istanbul area. This office alone takes in one hundred applications a day on average. There too we were served tea and sweets.

Our midafternoon appointment was at a library that records talking books and offers computer instruction. Here too we were served lunch, after which we conducted a large group discussion with staff and consumers; the topic was differences we see between the blind of the U.S. and Turkey.

Our evening appointment was a farewell dinner with staff and board members of Beyazey. The company was great, the food was wonderful, but the setting was also remarkable. The restaurant is called the Malta Kosku. "Kosku" is Turkish for a palace built during the Ottoman Turkish era. Though a lavish mansion, it was built to serve as a prison for one of the Ottoman Turks. It stands on several acres of land and has its own forest. It is two stories tall with very high domed ceilings displaying beautiful murals. It has indoor marble fountains, and the entire structure is very ornate.

"Teshekkürler" is the Turkish word for "thank you." After dinner we were graciously thanked for our efforts. It is rewarding to know that they want us to return next year. They will be speaking with the governor's office in Nebraska to explore the possibility of developing a formal relationship with the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Beyazey presented Blind Corps with a very special plaque in a combination of black and clear crystal. The plaque is a blackboard supported by three clear crystal legs on each side, with a ledge, eraser, and piece of chalk (also in clear crystal) beneath the blackboard. The logos of both Beyazey and Blind Corps appear on the blackboard, as does text that looks as if it has been written on the board. It reads "Lesson: Rehabilitation Subject: Futures in Blindness." In addition each member of the BC team was presented with a Turkish tea set.

Tuesday, November 6, was our final packing day. Wednesday we left our cabins at 6:30 a.m., and I walked into my home in Omaha at 9:45 p.m.; add on the eight-hour difference in time, and you get the actual travel time.

Next steps: the Blind Corps staff will provide some additional support by Skype and email. We will also gather further donations in order to send additional canes and cane tips. An in-country manufacturer for canes

is being sought, but for now the U.S. is the best source for them.

This was a very rewarding experience, and I'd do it again. The Turkish people are very friendly, generous, and appreciative. Like us they are eager to improve the lives of the blind.

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