Braille Literacy Canada 2024 Symposium Transcript: Teaching Braille to Adults (by Jennifer Ottowitz)

**Natalie Martiniello**

I am so happy to be here. And without further ado, I am thrilled to welcome Jennifer Ottowitz as our first speaker today. Her talk is titled **TEACHING BRAILLE TO ADULTS BEYOND JUST KNOWING THE CODE**. Jennifer is a certified vision rehabilitation therapist. An older blindness specialist with the [Older Individuals who are Blind Technical Assistance Center (OIBTAC)](https://www.oib-tac.org/#:~:text=The%20Older%20Individuals%20who%20are,blind%20or%20have%20low%20vision.)which is part of the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision housed at Mississippi University, which I strongly recommend you check out they have lots of great resources. She is a coeditor of the FOUNDATIONS OF VISION REHABILITATION THERAPY textbook, which is a center seminal textbook, in our field. And she brings over 30 years of experience, including as a braille reader herself, and I can attest that she is very active in the field of VRT and we are so fortunate to have her and I feel very fortunate to know her as well. So Jennifer, I thank you for joining us today, I will turn this over to you. And your title slide is currently in view, so you can just let us know when to switch advanced to each one. Thank you.

**Jennifer Ottowitz**

Thank you so much, Natalie, and thank you everyone. I'm very happy to be with you today. Let's go ahead and move to slide number two, the objectives slide.

And the objectives for the presentation today are that by the end of the presentation, I'm hoping you'll be able to describe the teaching braille to adults course that's offered by the National Research and Training Center on blindness and low vision, you'll be able to identify how to positively address misconceptions about learning braille, and be able to explain how adult learning theory can be incorporated into both assessment and instruction.

So if we go to the next slide, please. Now I'm assuming that our audience is quite varied. Some of you may be teaching braille, some may be transcribing braille. Others may be supporting those who are learning braille. Either you're a family member may be a peer, mentor, or tutor. And some of you may be learning braille yourselves. So I like to start with this question. And I know on the slide, I have the word client, but feel free to replace that with the word individual. But the question says, how do you introduce the topic of braille to your clients, or to adults? Right? So once you think about that for just a second, how do you introduce the topic of braille? A lot of times instructors will have somewhat of a checklist that we go down, right? Would you like to learn XYZ, we get to what are you interested in learning braille? And we're expecting a yes - no answer. And you can imagine that a lot of the time more times than not, the answer for adults is likely going to be no, for various reasons. Braille might be something they're not ready for, they haven't thought about how it could be meaningful or useful in their lives. Or it may be associated with a stigma related to vision loss that they're just not quite ready to accept yet.

And so what I'd like to do, if we can go to the next slide, please is encourage you all to reframe your thinking, and present a topic or Braille in a different way; to present it as a means to solve a problem or meet a goal. So we'll just say that again, present it as a means to solve a problem, or meet a goal. A lot of times, you know, instead of thinking of it as an isolated skill, you're going to learn how to use a cane, you're going to learn cooking, you're going to learn braille. Think about approaching it by asking the individual what challenges are you having, problems are you having, what would you like to be able to do? And then as you present the spectrum of options that could help them solve that problem or meet that goal, braille is one of those options. When we think about having a toolbox at home. We usually have more than just one tool, right? This one tool doesn't do every task. And so braille can be a valuable tool among many, that people have in their toolbox to help them with communication tasks. It may be the tool they use most often, it may be used only once in a while, but it can be useful in very particular situations. And so by presenting Braille in this framework, it becomes more meaningful, more relevant, and more likely that people will be interested in learning it.

We're going to talk a lot more about this as we go on. But if we could go on to the next slide, I want to take this time to mention a really helpful resource. And this is the course that is offered by the NATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING CENTER ON BLINDNESS AND LOW VISION. It's a free online course, called TEACHING BRAILLE TO ADULTS. And I had [the link](https://nrtc.catalog.instructure.com/courses/teaching-braille-to-adults)in the PowerPoint. And we're very excited to share that Dr. Natalina Martiniello was part of our team that worked on developing this course with us. And we were so thrilled to have her input and insights in helping put the course together. But the course is available to those who already knows the braille code, and are teaching braille. But I think anybody who's supporting a braille reader might find it helpful as well. And we do say the title of the presentation is TEACHING BRAILLE IS BEYOND JUST KNOWING THE CODE. So this course already assumes that you do know the Braille code. It does have its open ended, and does not how it should say an end date. So it's self-paced, you can take as much time as you want to complete it. There are no assignments, but there are six quizzes. There are six modules, each module has a quiz. And it is available for continuing education credit through the ACADEMY FOR CERTIFICATION OF VISUAL REHABILITATION AND EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS. And to get that ACVREP credit, you just have to complete all the modules and score at least 80% or higher on each of the quizzes. But even if you're not taking it for credit, it's available again at any time, and you can work through it at your own comfortable pace. The course presents assessment and instructional strategies for both reading and writing Braille. It discusses strategies to keep learners motivated during the learning process. And it also gives ideas for customizing instruction for individuals with unique learning needs, and additional or other comorbidities. And okay, and we'll talk a little bit more about this later on.

Next slide, please. As I mentioned, that course has six modules.

· Module One is learning styles and motivation.

· Module two is foundational braille skills,

· Module three, reading braille, is teaching reading braille basic concepts.

· Module Four, teaching braille writing. And that includes both related to using a slate and stylus, braille writer, and also refreshable braille displays.

· Module Five, is going to talk about learners with additional needs when working with them.

· And module six is going to talk about increasing braille reading speed.

And we now admit that may not go be a goal for all braille readers. But that's a very interesting module that just discusses, again, people's getting more comfortable with their reading skills and increasing I would say even Braille fluency as well as speed. So we really hope that you will check out the course, we're very excited about it.

And the rest of the presentation is going to cover some concepts and information that's presented, especially in the first two modules. But just to give you a taste of what all the course has to offer.

So next slide, please. All right, well, whenever we're starting out with someone first learning braille or, again, thinking of introducing the topic of learning braille, a lot of people may have misconceptions about it. And so there are some ways that you can help address these misconceptions. So a few of them are listed here.

On the first one says that braille is a tool for literacy that can be used by people with remaining vision, and not just for people who are blind. So often times, a person may say, I don't I'm not interested in learning braille, I don't need to learn braille, I can still see. And then I’ve known professionals who may say; well, I recommend braille to someone with glaucoma, because they're more likely to lose a significant amount of vision for reading. But for someone with macular degeneration, they I don't recommend Braille because they will be fine with magnification and they don't need Braille. And I would argue that, again, thinking of braille as one tool in the toolbox, it can be used by people regardless of your level of vision. So you know, thinking about someone who has remaining vision, it may be helpful for identifying colors, if they have trouble with color vision, it may be helpful if the lighting is not optimal, or the position of the reading material is in an awkward location, or it's just not possible to get as close as the person might need to view it. And so it can really help. I think, in situations like reading elevator controls, again, you know, seeing colors or identifying colors of clothing, there's uses for it, regardless of your level of vision. So I really like to promote that it's not tied to just people who are totally blind.

Another way to address a misconception is to talk about how braille can be useful for people with functional goals. And not just those who are interested in doing extensive reading. So people who may be interested in reading books and magazines, that's wonderful. It's a great use of Braille. But braille is also useful for functional goals. So people may say, I don't need to read braille. I don't like reading, I don't read books and magazines. But you can find ways when talking about them, finding what motivates them, finding out what their goals are, what problems they're having, you can find ways to incorporate braille to help meet their functional goals.

And then, lastly, on this slide, it says that learning braille isn't something to be ashamed of. And sometimes this can be a misconception that people have, I had a client once told me that her mother told her, why are you learning braille? You're giving up on your vision. Now, luckily, my client who was a young adult at the time, did not feel that way. But I think it's a very strong message, right? That someone might have, whether it be the individual themselves and their family members to think that Braille is something to be ashamed of, or means they're giving up on something. Luckily, my client shared with her mother, how she felt that Braille was going to be a tool to help her. Which is what again, it's all about.

All right, next slide, please. All right, so Malcolm Knowles, is one of the leaders in the field of adult education and adult learning theory. And he talks about the idea of the need for relevancy. And anytime you're working with an adult learning should help solve a need, or a problem. Sound familiar? Again, you'll probably think I'm a broken record with some of these ideas. But this is where we get the idea of reframing how we're thinking of presenting braille, right, and it can solve a problem, or meet a need, because that's how adults learn best. Learning should also be practical, and immediately usable. We're going to talk more about that as we go along too. But adults want to be able to put what they're learning into practice learning for just learning sake, and then nice to know learning is okay. But the more meaningful experiences are going to be those that are practical and can be immediately used.

Next slide, please. So some ways that braille can be used. I know you're all familiar with this, but just kind of thinking of them broadly. Braille can help with socializing with others. By playing games playing cards. It can help with participating in a community or a faith based group. By enabling someone to perform reading and writing tasks. I once had a client who is so excited when she was able to create, braille index cards to help her use those as notes so that she could do a reading in her church service. Braille can be used to increase independence with daily living activities. So again, being able to identify your personal care items or colors of things without having to ask someone you is really beneficial, where it can increase access to information and privacy. You know, when you're the one that can read the information, it, I think it's just, it's so helpful. It can expand recreational and educational opportunities and improve efficiency with job tasks. So if you think of someone who may be working as a customer service representative, they may be able to use braille, like, for example, a refreshable braille display, to help them read information that they're looking up online as they're having a conversation with someone, you know, over the phone. So it can just help in that way as well.

Next slide, please. So when we think about adults, and this is going back to Malcolm Knowles and adult learning theory, adults a problem centered, as opposed to being minimized, maybe more subjects centered, right? Again, what, how can it help me? What problem is it going to solve? Adults are result oriented. And again, this is truly that, what can I get out of it? How is it going to help me? What is this going to do for me - type of thinking. Adult learners are self-directed learners. And this means that they want to be an active participant in deciding kind of how things are done. And they can be an excellent collaborator throughout the learning and the instructional process; we'll talk more about that in just a little bit too. Adult learners are a little more skeptical. They don't just accept something because the teacher said, they need to see that it works, they need to practice it, and check it out for themselves, then they'll determine if they're accepting it or not. And also, adults are usually more internally motivated. So they're internally driven, and develop that level of self-satisfaction.

Next slide, please. So when you're teaching adults, you want the focus to be on the mechanics of successful braille reading, this is going to include finger position, hand movements, you know, adults bring a lifetime of literacy skills. And so you're not necessarily teaching decoding and phonics and how to read, but you're teaching the mechanics of reading braille. As braille is a means to access that that information, and so we're going to want them to, also encourage them to bring those literacy skills with them to the table. With adults, also, you want to, again, attach learning to meaningful life goals. So how can this relate to what they're doing every day?

Next slide, please. The some additional considerations for adults, again, you're going to need to give relevant and motivational opportunities to develop those tactile recognition skills, along with proper finger and hand movements, getting looking at those mechanics of braille, but you want to do it in a way that's relevant and meaningful. So a lot of times I might use, if someone has grandchildren, I'll use the names of their grandchildren; I really get to know the person and find out what's motivating to them. And then I like to use those words, being part of our process, whether it's, you know, we're working on just identifying letters, identifying contractions, practicing any of those activities.

You want to acknowledge and draw on the person's life experiences. People will, when they're able to relate things to their past experiences, it reinforces the learning. It also helps show that you are listening to them, and that you really acknowledge and value their life experiences. And it really helps build that collaboration with them so that you're working together to help them develop their skills.

You want to be aware of how past learning experiences, influences interest and enthusiasm. Someone who's an avid reader before vision loss is likely going to be very interested and enthusiastic about learning braille, compared to someone who was not. But you may also be watchful, because sometimes avid readers can get a little discouraged initially when they're learning braille, because they're not reading as quickly as they did when they had vision or as much as they did. And so keeping them motivated is really important.

You want to recognize that past learning experiences could have been either positive or negative. And think about how that impacts motivation, and even confidence. So if someone did not have a really positive experience during their education, you know, they may not be super interested about, you know, learning to help them read again, and you may have to do a lot to build up their confidence and really, again, make things meaningful and relevant. So they have a successful positive experience.

And you want to tap into what motivates them. So again, this sounds very repetitive, but I cannot say it enough, again, using materials that are going to be motivational to them. I worked with a client once, and she was actually also teaching braille. But she was refreshing her own skills as a braille reader, and shared with her resources to get braille books. And she was so excited because she found a book about the history of baseball. And she read all about the first World Series, and we're sharing with me what she read. And then she shared about how she was then taking that with her, using that with her students as an opportunity, because she didn't realize until that point, how important it was to find those motivational reading opportunities to tap into what motivates people and use those as a means to help advance their braille learning. It just hadn't. It was like an aha moment for her. And it all came together.

Okay, next slide, please. Alright, so some questions that we can ask during the assessment to help with that collaboration, is, there are lots of the questions that we asked during assessment, but these are some that we may not always think about. And I'm not recommending that you use these as a checklist that you go through with everyone or ask these with these exact same words. But these just give you some questions to use as guides. And you can modify the wording based on the individuals that you're working with or supporting.

· But what kinds of things did you read before losing vision?

· How do you see yourself using braille?

· What are some of your reading and writing goals? And that can be you know, even not related to braille, just reading your writing goals?

· In school, was reading easy or hard for you?

· What strategies have helped whenever you learn something new, maybe it was hands on activities, quizzes, study notes, anything like that?

· What do you enjoy reading? And do you have any favorite authors?

Now one thing to caution about is again, you know, get to know the people that you're working with, you don't want to ever make someone feel bad about themselves if they're not an avid reader. So the caution there.

Next slide, please. So we often ask questions during assessment. But that's not the only time we should ask them. There are questions we can ask throughout the instruction process as well. And these can include,

how do you think things are going? How do you think you're doing to get the individual self-reflection on their own performance, because maybe they're reading really well. But then they share with you that they're actually frustrated, because they're not reading as quickly as they want. And then you can talk about that you can have a conversation and address it. So these types of questions to get the feedback from the individual can be helpful in so many ways.

You might ask them, Are there activities or materials that we're using that you're finding helpful? And then of course, are there things that aren't working so well? You’ll want to know that too. And then are there areas in which you'd like more practice or support? And how have you been able to use braille in your daily life? So asking these questions along the way can be really important.

All right, next slide, please. So we'll talk just briefly about customizing instruction. I know our course teaching braille to adults goes into a lot more detail with this, but many adults have, in addition to vision loss, other health conditions or disabilities. And so it's important to take a look at how you might adapt reading. And for this, maybe someone has hand tremors has issues with their hands, you might teach a different technique for hand positioning as they read across the line, maybe they use the side of their finger as opposed to the pads, maybe you're focusing on one hand and tracking rather than two handed tracking. Maybe you're putting a nonstick mat under the reading material to keep it from slipping. There are several different things that can be done as adaptations for reading.

You also want to consider adaptations for writing. If they're using a slate and stylus, maybe a saddle stylus won't be more comfortable for someone who has arthritis than a standard stylus. You may use a braille writer, a uni- manual braille writer or to that they make a kit that you can attach to a standard braille writer with that will basically convert it to a one-handed brailler or you might find, you know, the braille writer with set requires a lighter touch, or even use refreshable braille technology notetakers and such with one handed mode to help. So again, I'll refer you to our course and module six has a lot, excuse me, module five has a lot of information about working with learners with unique needs.

Next slide, please. So when it comes to choosing an approach for how what you're going to teach, what things you're going to teach, you definitely want to match the approach to the learners’ goals. You want to think about whether you're going to be teaching uncontracted or contracted braille. Someone who just has goals for labeling, you may teach contracted braille, you may not, book some magazines; contracted braille, reading elevator controls, maybe playing games, maybe just uncontracted braille was suffice. You want to think about the order of symbols, and when to introduce contractions. And this is going to depend on a lot of factors. I had a client once who was a college student, and she wanted to learn braille over the summer. So she had an immediate need to learn braille quickly. And so we introduced contractions right away, as we were introducing letters. Other folks may benefit from a really logical order, they want to learn the letters in the order of the alphabet, because that can help them when they're practicing on their own without you there to guide them, while others may like to mix up the letters so that they can read words that are more interesting and more motivating. So all of those things don't go into consideration. You want to identify the learners reading level, and make sure your reading materials that you're presenting is are at that level. And you want to think about if you're going to use a formal curricula, homemade materials, a combination of these, or the I-M-Able approach.

And next slide, please. So I was really excited that at last year's symposium, Dr. Diane Wormsley.

So Dr. Diane Wormsley did a presentation on this. And the link is in the PowerPoint. So it's a way to identify meaningful words you work with a learner to identify what I call tactile sight words, they call key vocabulary words. And you look at things like the shape of the word tactile characteristics, then move to the skilled approach with phonics. And so I had a learner who we said, he had trouble reading words, but I said to put a full cell for the cooking time, that's 350 degrees, and then he could braille the amount of time is a number that he would need to cook his frozen dinners. I knew we I knew I told Natalie, I have had way too much information. So there's a lot more information in the PowerPoint. So I encourage you to read that. I'm hoping it during the q&a. We can talk about some issues I have at the end, near the end of the slide. Some things about ways to assess progress and address certain issues. But for right now, I think I'll try to end with just some helpful tips.

You want to vary instructional strategies. So if you have an hour with someone reading passages for an hour might not be so exciting. So vary the types of activities you're doing. Do some writing activities, have them do some proofreading finding errors, play some games, just mix it up a little bit, draw on their visual memories, to make associations with letters. My favorite story, as my client who was an artist said that letter U reminded her of the universe because it was two people laying on the ground looking up at the sun. You want to don't push or do not push. And you know, to advance further until the learner has really exhibited success and it's ready. And then you want to begin with high interest, low vocabulary materials. And then once they're successful with those, you know, vary the complexity in terms of vocabulary, and then also vary the format as well. And then finally, you want to use materials for practice, use, give them homework, and just give a big shout out to Braille Literacy Canada and the Braille Zoomers group. Because I think that's an excellent resource that can be shared with individuals to participate in, as a way to get support in their braille learning and to help practice their braille learning outside of or after former instruction has occurred. And also resources like [CELA library](https://celalibrary.ca/). And in the US National Library Service as resources for getting braille materials, I should throw in the Braille superstore as well, as they have a lot of great games and braille books. So I think with that, I will kind of wrap it up for now. And we can maybe move to questions.

**Daphne Hitchcock**

Oh, that's wonderful. Jennifer, thank you. Thank you, thank you, you've given us so many practical and immediate ideas to put into place and just love that. It's that Braille is to be something that is really practical, and something you can put to work for you with you right away. And that's great. You've given us lots to think about. We'll open up the Zoom Room to take a few questions now. And we don't have much time. But we'll try to get to everyone a reminder to those asking questions, please raise your hand and unmute when you're introduced. For anyone who doesn't know it will be ALT Y or option Y. Or if on your phone star nine to raise your hand and to unmute Alt A or Command A on your Mac. And we'll take the hands in order of them being raised.

**Kim Kilpatrick**

Excuse me Daphne, there's one question chat, which is how do we get access to the PowerPoint? I believe everyone registered will get those is that correct?

**Daphne Hitchcock**

Yes, we will make sure that the PowerPoint is distributed. Thank you for that question. And also in the chat, you'll see the direct link to this program that Jennifer has been presenting on there, as well. And the other questions there.

**Question:**

Go ahead. You're the only one queued up. So yes, please. Go ahead with your question.

Yeah, sorry about that. I didn't know if I had to raise my hand or what? I just received the phone call. So I didn't hear it is one is there any way of getting the link I've seen you shared it, but I couldn't find it to the resource that you found to do the braille and I'm looking for something like a book that my wife can see on my phone, like with the letters but I can read with a refreshable braille display like to learn braille better. Where would I find a resource like that?

**Jennifer Ottowitz**

That's a great question. I'm thinking off the top of my head. And Natalie, I'm going to defer to you for your help as well with this. I’m thinking that you know, and again, if you're and you're looking at to just to learn letters, contractions, words and have it available for her as well. Correct.

**COMMENT**

I have gotten books through the CNIB and I've learned all the letters, I've learned the contractions which I have, like I don't always have time, but I knew all, but what I want is something to basically refresh me again and keep like learning it or keep reading it so I don’t lose it. I've had books, I've had books from the CNIB that have the braille, like a digital book on my, in an email with a copy of it, but it's the Braille. And then it's the copy underneath where it's written what it is. So if I go over it with my Braille display, it reads it twice. Okay, they can read the Braille and then the, the letters. So I only want access to the print part.

**Natalie Martiniello**

So I can add to this bit. So this will depend a little bit on your, your situation but if you if you're not aware yet, one resource would be the [CELA library](https://celalibrary.ca/). And we can put that I will ask someone to just put that link in the chat, but we will also be sure to include it somewhere in the resources. Yeah. Okay. Okay, if you have a Braille display, the other option is that if you access books through Apple books, or even Gutenberg or Bookshare, or some of these other Kindle, then the that would be available to somebody in print. But then you would be able to read it on your Braille display. And then the other resources not for your Braille display. But it could be actually, National Braille Press. And several other vendors sell books that are of interest to, you know, different ages. And some of these are physical braille books. Some of them are print braille, which means they have both the print and the braille. And then some are also available in electronic format, meaning you can purchase it to read on your Braille display. So national book press is nbp.org. For [National Braille Press](https://www.nbp.org/), so well, we'll be sure to include those resources. But I hope that helps get you started.

**Natalie Martiniello**

So we will, we will put those resources as well as transcripts eventually on to our website. So we do encourage everyone to, to look at the BLC website closer to the fall for all of this information as well.

**Jennifer Ottowitz**

And just a note, there is a book available called [JUST ENOUGH TO KNOW BETTER](https://shop.nbp.org/products/just-enough-to-know-better-ueb?_pos=1&_sid=a53f933bf&_ss=r), which is a book for light dependent folks who sighted folks who may be interested in reading braille.

**Jennifer Ottowitz**

Excellent. And the [Braille Superstore](http://www.braillebookstore.com/) is another great resource to obtain some braille materials as well. I always like getting magazines or would encourage people to obtain brown magazines from places like CELA. Because I know, in the US with the National Library Service, the magazines, you don't always have to return. And so you can take as long as you'd like to read them, which is wonderful thing. So magazines may be something too, because again, maybe your wife could get a print copy of the magazine, too. And just, you know, be there to support you as you read. Or you could ask questions as you're reading something like that.

**Daphne Hitchcock**

I'm just checking for other hands. Are there any other? Yes, we have a hand.

**COMMENT**

Yes, I just wanted to also suggest that one really fun thing to do. If you have a partner or friend and you want to practice reading is for each of you to get out the same book. And whether you're reading that book on paper or on a Braille display, and your friend or partner is reading print, then, you know you can read to each other. And I think that works very nicely.

**Jennifer Ottowitz**

Thank you. Absolutely. I would agree.

**Daphne Hitchcock**

Now, any other hands. Anybody else out there? Well, I'm not seeing any other hands raised here and I think we will be move along a little bit. Jennifer, thank you very, very much for this wonderful presentation. I know there will be lots more discussion coming out of this through our zoomed group and for others that have joined us today. It's really a wonderful program that you've introduced us to, and I really appreciate that. So thank you on behalf of Braille Literacy Canada for presenting this symposium.

**Jennifer Ottowitz**

Thank you all so much.