



Advancing **ALTELLA** SNAPSHOT

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot: Get to know Sheri Wells-Jensen

Reading and Listening Considerations
for Multilingual Students who are
Blind or Visually Impaired

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot No. 5

December 2023

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advancingaltella.org

About Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots

The Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot is feature series. Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots are short, informative articles that highlight experts, educators, and topics of interest.





Sheri Wells-Jensen: **THE FACTS**

TITLE:

Associate Professor

AFFILIATION:

Bowling Green State
University

AREA OF INTEREST:

Linguistics, blind or low
vision learners

Get to know Advancing ALTELLA Expert Sheri Wells-Jensen

Dr. Sheri Wells-Jensen is an associate professor at Bowling Green State University. Wells-Jensen's primary research interests include disability and inclusion in space exploration, astrobiology, disability studies, linguistics, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and Braille.

Wells-Jensen says that even though she is a linguist by training, she has been able to branch out into other areas of study. When she was serving in the Peace Corps, she discovered that she desperately wanted to teach English as a second language after working with "mind-meltingly" brilliant language teachers. The teachers made the classes fun.

"I wanted to do that; I wanted to be them," Wells-Jensen says. "Then, when I got to grad school, I also found out that you could do science and language at the same time. That's how I fell in love with linguistics."

Wells-Jensen is blind, and she says that as her career progressed, she changed how she identified and communicated about her blindness.

"Pre-tenure I tried to have an ambiguous disability web presence. People would read my stuff online and think 'Is she blind? Is she not? I don't know, but she seems to read braille,'" she adds. "Politically, socially, and in academia, it felt safer to me to keep it ambiguous. And then I got tenure, and all the ambiguity went away. I started picking up disability studies, because it's something that we strongly need in the world."

As Wells-Jensen continued with her career, she studied myriad topics related to blind or visually impaired multilingual learners. One such topic is what reading looks like for blind or visually impaired multilingual learners and how that meshes with language acquisition definitions and practices.

"If you're going for the whole hamburger of blind and visually impaired, that's a whole spectrum of things from 'I could drive a car if I'm careful' all the way down to 'I don't know if the lights are on in this room.' One solution cannot fit all for those people," Wells-Jensen says.

She points out that at one end of the continuum are things like contrastive colors and print size. And on the other end is braille. So, deciding on the medium should come first. She thinks it makes the most sense to make sure a student isn't straining over the medium and can be comfortable.

Sheri Wells-Jensen's recommendations for working with multilingual learners who are blind or have low vision

- When using manipulatives as accommodations on a paper-based assessments, choose objects with care, because not all manipulatives are effective to represent a picture.
- When using different types of braille, keep in mind that different alphabet systems use the same six dots for braille. If a student knows how to read braille in one alphabet, then they may not know the other one.
- When it comes to advocating for students, the classroom should be a galaxy of them advocating for themselves. That's what teaching is! You can't separate that from anything else you do. The classroom is supposed to be a place [where] the student has the right to access information all the time, everywhere. It's that habit of knowing you belong, and it's that habit of knowing you have the right to be treated with dignity. You have the right to know what is around you.
- Instilling the habit of expecting equality is the most important thing. Accepting inequality as natural is poison. We cannot advocate for ourselves at the big level if we're going to accept inequality at the small level.



"The default assumption might be that the kid should read print," Wells-Jensen says. "That's probably making a good subset of those kids struggle ... it hurts their heads, and they're slow—and they could be reading braille and be much more relaxed. So the fit of the medium is delicate, important, and it requires us to let go of our idea that reading print is always better."

She adds that what's always better is the comfort, gracefulness, and naturalness of the feel to the student themselves.

"It doesn't matter what we think; it matters how the student feels," Wells-Jensen says.

As Wells-Jensen considers this topic she mentions that people tend to ask, "...is listening reading?"—

especially, in the context of language testing.

"Listening to conversation is a different beast than listening to a book. The rhetoric is organized differently," she says. "My participation in a conversation with whoever is standing there will have a lot more feedback and interaction."

Her hypothesis is that testing is going on all the time, and that people are reinforced for getting it right and guided when they get it wrong in conversation.

"If I'm just pulling out my book and being read to from the book, there's a lot of discourse that goes by without any opportunity for me to interact and confirm that I'm understanding," Wells-Jensen adds. "If you're asking me, 'Did you read that book about

evolution technology?’ I would say yes. And I listen to it on my phone; my fingers touch no words, but the information is read from that author’s head into my head.”

Wells-Jensen says that when it comes to proficiency testing, reading is reading, and reading is not listening for the purposes of language evaluation.

“One of the things that we do when we decide, ‘Oh, they’ll just listen,’ is we [deny] that student all the advantages of reading, and I don’t mean the advantages of sitting on the beach with a book,” she says. “I mean the advantages of writing a shopping list, writing a note to a family member, or reading a stop sign. It’s a life skill.”

She points out that as a blind person, it’s important to be able to read your own work.

“There’s so much stuff in print in the world that I can’t read. I love my little braille labels. They’re everywhere,” Wells-Jensen says. “Children have a right to read. It is

in their cognitive ability, and we have a responsibility to offer that to them.”

Wells-Jensen emphasizes the impact of braille skill development within reading domains of English language proficiency assessment, “It is a different kind of training to learn to read tactilely than it is to learn to absorb the written word visually. The tactile system needs more time, attention, and care than the visual system does.”

Ultimately, as we consider how to be more inclusive, Wells-Jensen challenges people to be less fearful of blindness.

“Blindness is simply a lack of information,” she says. “If you think of it as a lack of information, it becomes, first-off, less terrifying, and it becomes a problem to solve... Information is something we all understand. We have to couple that with the understanding that our modern society is arranged for the convenience of people who see and get their information visually.”

Learn more: Sheri Wells-Jensen’s suggested resources

- [The Case for Disabled Astronauts](#) is a blog post that Sheri authored for *Scientific American* that sums up her work on disability and space.
- [All You Need to Know about Blindness You Could Learn from a Four-Year-Old Girl](#) is a piece that Sheri authored for *Braille Monitor*. The piece summarizes her philosophy of blindness.

Suggested citation: Taylor, D. M., & Wells-Jensen, S. B. (2023). *Advancing ALTELLA snapshot: get to know Sheri Wells-Jensen* (Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot No. 5). Retrieved from University of Wisconsin—Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, Advancing Alternate English Language Learning Assessment project: <https://advancingaltella.org/resources/>



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The contents of this brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.

