



Good with a cane, but how much better with an UltraCane?

Mike Corbett is a mobility and orientation expert with more than four decades of experience. Based in North Carolina, he runs training sessions for mobility officers and the visually impaired in the USA and the UK.

Here he highlights the particular benefits of the UltraCane, an electronic travel aid which detects obstacles in the user's path and overhead through the use of ultrasound technology.

“The UltraCane is a sophisticated travel aid, yet simple and reliable in operation, with a mechanism easily understood by children as well as adults. In fact the UltraCane user has a regular long cane, with the added advantages offered by an electronic cane – all in one package”.

“If long cane foundation skills are in place, the UltraCane will add much more to the skill set. In my experience, if you are good with a cane – you will be even better with an UltraCane”.

“One of the many advantages for the user is the way it helps them to walk around people. This is very useful and one of the aspects of use I demonstrate in training sessions so that everyone understands the UltraCane's detection capabilities. With a standard long cane the visually impaired person will only know someone is in their path if they make contact or they may be relying on others to move out of range. By contrast, the UltraCane user is able to negotiate social situations in a more graceful and purposeful manner”.

“I had some feedback from a training session for a visually impaired group that I ran in Glasgow and I think it is useful to share here for those mobility officers that are new to the UltraCane”.

“One of the group commented that it takes a little time to get used to the vibrating signals received through the handset and to interpret what they are telling you. She went on to explain that as you adjust and become used to the signals they become part of your repertoire of skills”.

“To avoid sensory overload in training, I suggest covering the upper channel with tape so new users just concentrate on the forward beam at first, then work with just the upper beam and gradually combine both”.

“The key thing about the Ultracane, and one of its great advantages, is when you turn it off, it is still a cane. I encourage new users to experiment, as there are situations when it is useful to use the Ultracane’s capabilities selectively. For example, at a bus stop, the UltraCane will help you locate the bus shelter but when you get on the bus the proximity of people will cause the buttons on the handset to buzz constantly. You don’t actually need the signals on the bus so you can turn it off and then turn it back on when you get off the bus. If you use it selectively in this way you can better interpret what it is telling you”.

“Understanding when it is useful to turn it off is all part of the training. Another situation, applicable to school children is to use the UltraCane as a regular cane to get to the next classroom in a crowded corridor, then turn it on to negotiate your way round the classroom or outside”.

“After a little practice with the UltraCane the user feels more secure because they can better understand the environmental information they are receiving and therefore their confidence grows”.

“Assistive technology is developing rapidly and mobility trainers need to give their visually impaired clients information about everything that is available to help them. I try to engage in everything available so the mobility trainers I teach have the background they need to help their clients make informed choices.”

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