

Name	Angie
Age	>50
Degree	Archaeology, Single Subject
Year	3
Full-Time/Part-Time	Full-Time
Role	'Buddy'

It happened totally coincidentally. Like most mature students we sat in the front right hand corner in lectures. Veronica needing to see everything clearly, also happened to sit in the front row. So it started by sheer chance. There were a group of three of us mature students who over the three years tended to go around together. During the first year we did not have any system for helping Veronica, we were just genuinely friendly. Then the spectre of doing four weeks at the Field School arose. She went to the Director and said that she did not really think she could cope with having blindness in bright sunlight at one extreme, and night blindness at the other. Her first question was, 'Are there electric lights in the Portaloos?' The Director said, 'It is part of the Course, so we do have to find some way for you to participate. Is there somebody that you could perhaps go with?' She said me. She picked me out because of the three of us, I was going to camp. I talked to her about it then and allayed some of her fears straight away. Because of my prior work in education with children with special needs, I was able to underline some of the things that we would have to look out for. In advance, we organised with the camp 'Commandant' that our tents would be nearest to the Portaloos so we would not trip over guy ropes in the dark, and we could also have our tents close to each other. Very practical things we could plan for before we went, but she was still incredibly tense.

We only knew that she was partially sighted, we had no idea that she had Ataxia as well. I had come across several cases of this before with children, so I did have some idea of what it entailed. But I had no idea until the first day trying to get down sloping planks into the excavation and suddenly realised what it was not to have control of your balance. I went straight into teaching mode and we structured how we were going to attack this: partly through talking and deciding what we were going to do because she was incredibly frightened. So, reassurance that nothing was going to happen to her; and also reassurance that I did not mind what people thought, so she was not going to mind what people thought. Also, I was not going to push her faster than she wanted to go. We did cling to each other and stagger down the planks to start with, but after a while, with repeated performance, we were able to improve

on that somewhat. At first she would only go down hand-in-hand with me.

Then there were all the other tasks that face the excavator such as trowelling. It was the realisation that she did not have enough vision to see the patch in front of her as part of a whole context. So we worked alongside and she did literally trowel patches and I would just join them up afterwards. There were some problems with the trowelling such as seeing the subtle difference between some contexts, but many students have that problem. But that was the thing, she suddenly realised that she was enjoying it! She must have done, she came back for the whole time the following year and the whole time this year. It was just structured progress in trowelling techniques.

On the site as a whole what we can see in one sweep, she would have to visit. She would have to go and find where the tool shed was, what was in each of the cabins, where the Planning Hut was and so forth. The whole layout of the site and the camp had to be visited and learnt. Her sight does not show slight differences and she would walk very hesitantly across the site to make sure her foot was not going to stumble on a small hole or rise. But when she got used to a 'path', her confidence grew.

She started surveying from Year 1 and did have trouble seeing staffs and so forth. She did take ages looking through the Dumpy Level to be absolutely sure. Whether she was checking the reading several times, or if it was a question of seeing, I do not know. With planning and drawing, once she got the parameters right and kicked off, she was much better at it than I was number-wise. Her idea of space is pretty good, as are her drawing skills. We drew a pit in plan and section.

She had trouble with the light. As soon as the sun was bright she always wore a hat right down over her glasses. As soon as it started to get dark, for her it was truly dark. We had some quite exciting walks to the pub.

One of the things I had most problems with was Veronica being accepted by the rest of the team. There were several instances when she was not. She had had experiences of not being accepted when she was at school. During the first season when we were doing everything together was especially difficult. There is a great age gap between us and she should have been socialising with students her own age. I encouraged the other students to take her to the pub. They said yes, but it lasted once. After that I was her social life and her work life. I was very aware that our age gap was not doing her socially any good. My next ploy was to bring in other isolated students and we started playing

Scrabble at night to avoid the drinking and generally what you would expect students to be like. It took her three years to actually get herself friends, but then she is not the most outgoing of students. By the last season she was fine and really confident. The sign of success was that she did not need to work with me anymore and we hardly worked together at all last season. She was taking wheelbarrows up the planks to the top of the spoil heap and back down again on her own.

There were problems with other students. In University now there is a lot of competition and at times you could see that other students felt that she was holding them back. It did stress her at times, but it seems to be the attitude of the Institutions. This was a problem for her, she has to do everything in a ponderous manner and other students showed impatience.

I think you have to put her specific problems against the background of what other students count as problems. There were many people at the Field School who suffered more than Veronica because of their individual attributes. It could be aching joints, or because they were vastly overweight or just bored out of their minds. Some people find the whole task of trowelling mindless because they do not have anything going on in the brain behind it. The actual experience for an archaeology student is essential. Even if you are not going to work in the field, the fact that you actually had that experience helps you understand what you have to go through to get the data, even if you end up in a library or a museum. For Veronica, her eventual work may not be in the field, but she has had terrific experience which she will always be able to draw on.