URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/problem-solving-despite-stigma/

Adrian Rodriguez, co-founder and CEO of Dreamlinks, discusses how technology has made it possible for people with disabilities to solve previously immutable problems, despite the stigmas they face. He shares how his experience teaching a class for blind and low-vision students in Thailand showed him how having a disability can inspire entrepreneurial thinking.

Transcript

- Blindness is a puzzle like most things in life.. 00:00:08,340 And I differentiate a puzzle from a problem with the notion that a puzzle has all the pieces you need to solve it, right? It's a matter of performing the right operations in the right order.. And in fact, that is the landscape of disability in 2018.. Given the technology that we have, given the connectedness that we all share, we are uniquely equipped right now, this generation, to solve entire classes of problems that previous generations considered to be completely immutable.. Things that would not change, things that would always be bad things.. And so this picture represents me teaching one of my students, thanks to the help of a teacher assistant of mine named Dani Lucas.. She and I co-designed this rubric.. And so this is the punchline.. So like I was talking about in the video, there's a lot of stigma around disability.. Blindness especially comes off as incompetence..

And there's a long legacy of people interpreting blindness as karma, as you paying off something terrible you did in a past life.. And some of these attitudes still persist and they persist in parts of Southeast Asia as they do everywhere.. And so the first time we went to Thailand to do this EHR record, we stopped by a school for the blind in Pattaya.. And years later, a friend of mine who had helped create a inclusive design class at Stanford was gonna go back to do volunteer work.. And she said, "Hey, like, you know, we should maybe collaborate on something." And so I thought, whoa, like I'm not really, you know, Google Glass is, you know, AR is not happening tomorrow." So it looks like where I can maybe create value is in transferring these skills, right? Maybe we can computationally design things.. But then I realized that there was this social barrier of like, why invest in this population? And there have been a lot of governmental programs in the US that have excluded the blind, specifically 'cause it seemed as if it wasn't worth the investment.. It's tough, right? But, you know, when you're so out of sync with the environment, there are hard truths around how the government needs to make decisions.. But again, technology has just radically changed the outlook for this community.. And to start, we needed to make a social statement, right? We needed a symbolic outcome.. And so what we did is we taught the solutions to Rubik's Cube as just an exercise in control structures..

Here's an if statement, here's a for loop.. We weren't trying to speed, we were literally just trying to demonstrate that a blind person could use control structures.. And, of course, they can.. And all we did is we took a hot glue gun to this Rubik's cube, we later found out Rubik's actually sells a Tata Rubik's cube, but how it goes.. And so we got the student to solve it.. And then I joined a new team.. And so I wanna shout out my freshman year roommate Ken Chan.. And I also wanna shout out

a special guy named Trevor Freed, who banded together with me and his family backed us as well.. And they were just really, really remarkable allies.. And so we ultimately got an opportunity to go back to Thailand and scale up this work..

So initially I had gone with Dani and Steadman, whom I will mention in a second, to do this first course, but I then went solo and pitched a senator, a royal legislator named Dr.. Montien and, you know, and basically he helped me raise funds to scale out this class at a national level.. And so I, you know, got the band together and we set sail.. And so you saw me teach a blind person Rubik's Cube and now you're going to see two low vision people to help each other with the Rubik's Cube.. These are two of my students who are both blind, one's blind, one's low vision.. - Okay.. 00:04:08,430 Thank you very much.. - And so before I knew it, the best day of the class 00:04:15,390 was when the students came in with their own Rubik's Cubes that were better designed than mine and they were selling them in class.. Yeah, these kids are awesome.. And we didn't just teach them this exercise in, you know, control structures..

We actually taught them Git and the command line, and we made websites and at the end they got into teams and they deployed a website on GitHub pages using Jekyll, which Steadman actually taught me.. And it was just so remarkable to see the entrepreneurial spirit.. And, you know, I don't want to mythologize disability, but I do think there's a reality that when you're just not with the mold, when you are, you know, the peg that doesn't fit, you kind of have to be in an entrepreneurial mode, in a problem solving mode.. And it kinda seemed like no surprise that all these kids had these entrepreneurial ideas and it was just so cool to get them to express it.. And to me, this is the height of my personal success in my life thus far, is getting to be a part of this course...