

Nurturing Difference: The Autistic Student in Professional Writing Programs

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Pervasive Developmental Disorders

As director of the Professional Writing program at a small, Catholic, urban university, I've had to address the issue of inclusion of an autistic individual into the intimate setting of writing courses. While the nature of autism does not hinder an individual from gaining significant writing skills, the disorder may carry with it secondary difficulties, such as the impairment of "acquisition of concepts of self and others, and a delayed acquisition of insight into one's own behavior and that of others, with a resulting impairment in metacognitive ability" (Farrant, et. al 107). Such deficiency in metacognitive abilities often results in the exhibition of inappropriate social behavior, verbal outbursts, hand tics, and an assortment of distractions that make it difficult for autistic students to work within the confines of a writing classroom, where they are asked to participate in group projects, maintain deadlines, and to comply with educational etiquette and decorum.

A few years ago, a vigorous discussion took place on the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) listserv about the many facets of coping with students with a range of disabilities. Dale Katherine Ireland advocated for greater understanding of disabled students. In her post to the listserv she wrote, "In the same way we want to make education accessible to students who use wheelchairs, we also want to make education accessible to learning disabled students who may need accommodations." Her argument was compelling, and given the vehemence of the discussion, I realized that this was certainly a topic that needed greater investigation. At my urging, we assembled a roundtable discussion at the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication, entitled, "Students with Disabilities: Creating Accommodations and Inclusion within the Composition Classroom." And while this panel attempted to articulate a range of concerns about the disabled, we neglected to discuss the most compelling questions of all: what will those accommodations look like, who will pay for them, who will implement them, and how will we train professors to address the needs and concerns of disabled students?

From my experience with a student with Asperger's Disorder who was in several of my classes, I would like to suggest that mainstreaming these special-needs students and providing them with writing opportunities—through the classroom, through internships, through university publications—not only aids in their personal and professional development and growth, but also serves both the university community and the

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community-at-large. But I would in the course of this discussion suggest that inclusion is not risk free, and without the necessary institutional brackets to support such an endeavor, both students and faculty will fail, and fail miserably.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “the average autism rate is 6.6 per 1000,” which means that about 1 in 150 children will have some form of autism (“Autism” par. 3). Given this statistic, the question then is not *should* we incorporate these students into our writing courses, but how *will* we do so without causing disruption to the other students and creating an undue burden for faculty. Further, how do we make sure that we are meeting disabled students’ special educational needs without compromising the educational goals of our institutions?

In brief, Autism Disorder and Asperger’s Disorder, according to the American Psychological Association, are two of five disorders that fall under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD), a category of neurological disorders characterized by “severe and pervasive impairment in several areas of development” (“Autism,” Par. 1). But this clinical definition does not fully capture the nuanced complexity of this disorder. Perhaps a more holistic approach to defining these disorders might be as follows:

To begin to inquire into what is amiss in autism is to discover the indivisibility of those processes which make up our nonautistic being-in-the-world. Individual consciousness, volition, and empathy may be itemized as if they were discrete entities, but they turn out to be all of a piece, functionally interchangeable, each one definable in terms of the rest. (Glastonbury 4)

In sum, autism manifests in a variety of contexts and ranges. If you research autism in education, you will get significant scholarship related to early education, intervention, and mainstreaming, but there is a dearth of research that contributes to the discussion of what happens to these children as they become young adults and move into higher education. There has been notable discussion about the inclusion of disabilities studies in the academy, particularly in First-Year Writing courses (Price; Bruggemann; Mossman). Recently, the publication of two important disability anthologies, *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture* (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson) and *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (Synder, Bruggeman, and Garland-Thomson) have contributed to the discussion of disability in the humanities. Yet there is still a scholarship-gap in addressing, in realistic and practical terms, how we include these students into our classrooms.

In part, this gap in research is expected since, until very recently, it was commonly assumed that young adults with autistic spectrum disorders did not go on to the university. At best, they found a trade or worked menial jobs. At worst, they received Social Security Disability checks, and they stayed home with their parents. However, this is no longer the case. According to Elizabeth Farrell, “There are no definitive statistics tracking how many students at the college level have the syndrome and similar autistic spectrum disorders” (35). Furthermore, a growing number of students are being identified as having high-functioning autism (HFA), which means, inevitably, they will be challenged to advance in their educational choices (Shore 293).

What we do know about college enrollment is that the number of students with autism-spectrum disorders are increasing. In fact, support organizations like College Living Experience, a for-profit program that assists disabled students with making a transition to the university, affirms this trend. Beth Phillips, an Admissions Coordinator for the Fort Lauderdale site told me that they currently have 90 students in Fort Lauderdale colleges, and in the relatively new support centers in Austin, Texas and Denver, Colorado, they have 23 and 25 students respectively. She reported that enrollment is on the rise, and that parents and students are seeking greater educational opportunities.

In fact, autistic educational strategies seem to be a burgeoning industry, and that area of academic investigation includes books like Ann Palmer's *Realizing the College Dream with Autism or Asperger Syndrome*, which provides reassuring advice to nervous parents, guiding them through choices like college size, curriculum, and whether or not the child should stay in a dorm environment. Additionally, programs like those offered through Marshall University in West Virginia are specifically targeting students with Asperger's (Trachtenberg par. 6).

By law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is the legislation that mandates that colleges and universities provide equal access to programs and services for students with disabilities. Faculty and staff are not permitted to exclude a student with a disability from a course of study and we cannot suggest to a student that he or she pursue a more restrictive career because of a disability. However, as Farrall notes, "The absence of a common approach to students with Asperger's has led to widely differing interpretations of what constitutes 'reasonable accommodations' for them on campuses, as required by federal law." And this is where the difficulty lies, since faculty members are working without guidelines—or a safety net.

The Ethics of Disclosure

I would like to provide, as an illustration, my first encounter with Evelyn.¹ When she came to my office to inquire about registering for the Professional Writing Program, I thought that there was something "odd" about her; she talked rapidly, used manic hand movements, had a rather disheveled appearance, but she also appeared to be quite sharp. I have an uncle who was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, but because the spectrum of the disorder varies, I could not, with certainty, determine that indeed this was her specific disability, and until a student actively discloses the disability, you are not free to assume anything. Since I was her adviser, I would get calls from other faculty members wanting to know what was "wrong with her."

Evelyn enrolled in my Business Writing and Research course, where students are often required to work together in groups to create a variety of projects, from designing a brochure to developing a marketing plan for the operation of a business. Not surprisingly, none of the students wanted to be partnered with her. After a few weeks, Evelyn went to my university's Disability Services office and received an Accommodation Memo that outlined what modifications needed to be made to the course to adjust to Evelyn's unique needs. An Accommodation Memo typically includes instructions like letting the student

1. To preserve the student's requested anonymity, I've used a pseudonym.

use a tape recorder for lectures, extended deadlines for assignments, and often the right to take a test, a midterm or final exam, in the office of Disability Services.

Once Evelyn disclosed her disability, it freed me to interact with her in more appropriate ways; most importantly—and here is the lesson I want to impart—once she disclosed her disability to the class and spoke openly about it (which she did quite frequently), the class dynamic shifted dramatically. Students who were initially hesitant to interact with her because she was “weird” openly volunteered to do group projects, take notes for her, and guide her through computer research projects. By disclosing her disability, and by candidly addressing her needs, Evelyn created an atmosphere of empathy among the other students. Her presence in the classroom truly encouraged a recognition of “difference,” something we often give lip-service to in rhetoric and composition, but we do not fully apply.

The challenge, of course, is both ethical and legal: should we encourage disclosure? What if a student does not feel comfortable with revealing his or her condition? What then? What responsibility does the faculty member need to make to accommodate the student? How does a faculty member who is given no training in working with disabled students suddenly adopt a curriculum that presumes to meet their unique needs, as well as keeps the intellectual integrity of the program in tact?

I have no definitive answers to these questions since we are in the nascent stage of this higher educational phenomenon, but I will offer some preliminary suggestions for faculty to cope with this occurrence. However, these are the challenges that faculty and administrators must face in the next century, as those students with HAF will continue to enter the academy. Moreover, we need to begin research in our field (as opposed to merely replicating those studies that are in primarily in Education and Psychology) that documents and explores how writing, as a dynamic process, can be used as a transformative tool for shaping discourse for those who often struggle to create meaning.

Monica E. Delano advances that writing is a complex process that involves planning, drafting, self-monitoring, and revising text, and she suggests that academic interventions that provide explicit strategies for success, “are more likely to be effective with this population” (252). Delano argues for the use of Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD—a series of writing strategies developed and conceived by Steve Graham, Karen Harris, Charles MacArthur, and Shirley Schwarz)—whereby students engage in three types of writing strategies: understanding the use of action words, the use of description words, and the mechanism behind revisions. SRSD enables students with disabilities, particularly those with Asperger’s Syndrome, to perform better on written exams, write more fluid prose, and have a greater sense of confidence in their writing abilities. These types of studies with college-level writing students and programs need to continue to be implemented and developed.

A disabled student, like all students, has the right to confidentiality and privacy. I cannot say that it is always in their best interest to fully reveal their disability since numerous variables must be in place. I can only attest that in the small confines of a writing classroom, where the act of writing and responding to writing is an intimate process, the act of revelation helped to bridge an invisible barrier between the differently-abled student and the more traditional students. The result was that Evelyn was treated with the respect and dignity she deserved.

Obstacles Toward Full Integration

Even with the various accommodations given to her, Evelyn struggled through the rigors of the writing class, and she often engaged in activities that were, quite simply, disruptive: she spoke excessively in class, often veering off topic; she had a nervous hand tic, and she would continually flail her hands about; she'd arrive late and loudly take her seat; she would forget to turn in assignments, and she was in a perpetual state of disorganization. In situations beyond the classroom, she also would be intrusive, actively barging in on faculty meetings, and disrupting conversations with other students.

According to Leslie Rouder, Director at my university's Disability Services office, these are very typical behaviors for someone on the Asperger spectrum. "They don't get subtle nuances," so, she says, it is up to the instructor to punctuate and set limits. Autistic students require more direct instruction. For instance, while a traditional student might understand that you have shifted the topic of conversation, an autistic individual often has no idea that the shift occurred or that he or she has overstepped polite conversational boundaries. It is this inability to receive social cues that is, perhaps, the biggest obstacle toward full integration.

Conversely, the work that Evelyn submitted (*when* she submitted it) was always outstanding—another marked trait of high-functioning Asperger students—whose IQs are typically average or above and become expert in one or two areas. With my encouragement, Evelyn was a frequent staff writer for the Barry newspaper, wrote an essay for our literary journal, and with much effort, managed to secure an internship—a requirement for completion of the Professional Writing Program. While I tried to place her with several establishments (newspapers, publishing houses, magazines), the only receptive response I received was from the Advocacy Center for People with Disabilities, so Evelyn began her internship at that location. The students are required to keep internship journals that document their experience. Evelyn's journal reveals both her command of language, and the struggle of existing as an individual with Asperger's. She writes:

The internship will be at the Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities, a nonprofit agency with offices in the Tampa Bay Area and Tallahassee (State Capitol) as well as in South Florida. That site was chosen from a long list of sites I presented Dr. G. last fall. Evidently, that was the only organization that came through and returned Dr. Greenbaum's calls. The Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities primarily employs attorneys who represent disabled Floridians who are having trouble getting the services they need.

My first assignment is to write about hurricane preparedness. I think that this is a strange topic, as it is more practical living skills-oriented and less related to legal or administrative advocacy. I hope that this does not degenerate to all practical living skills topics, as I really wanted to help the disabled fight for their rights. When the supervisors learned how far I would have to travel from my Biscayne Gardens home to their Hollywood office, they offered to let me telecommute, pending approval from Dr. G. (who seems to be cool with the idea). (Spring 2007)

Evelyn's journal illustrates the navigational difficulties of integrating Asperger's students into writing programs. She is an articulate, thoughtful writer who possesses fine control over her language. However, her disability greatly impeded her ability to acquire

an internship at a newspaper or magazine, which would require her to go on interviews and interact with strangers who might be put off by the traits of her disability (excessive talking, inability to read social cues, and hand tics). Moreover, her journal reveals that even within organizations that cater to those with disabilities, like Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities, her supervisors preferred that she work outside the office and submit her work electronically. Evelyn's journal also demonstrates my university's underlying Catholic mission—to be of use. Evelyn recognizes that interning at this organization requires her to be an agent of change, understanding that with her literacy and expertise come the social responsibilities to advocate for others. This sort of socially responsible thinking is not only the goal of higher education but is also indicative of the kind of work we are doing in rhetoric and composition, empowering writers to use their critical thinking skills to advance social justice issues.

Like many students, Evelyn was hoping that her experience at the internship would eventually lead to a job offer, but it did not. While Gloria Weiner, the Senior Advocate and Evelyn's site supervisor at Advocacy Center for People with Disabilities, praised Evelyn's writing, she admitted that she didn't think Evelyn "could be in a conventional work setting" because "she's so typical Asperger's; she cannot stop talking."

Those of us who are struggling to integrate these students into the university environment have to recognize that even support organizations do not fully accept the unique challenges offered by these students. Nor are they willing to make the necessary financial and social investment in retaining such individuals within the work force. Moreover, Evelyn's presence in our writing program posed yet another dilemma: other writing faculty members had difficulty acclimating Evelyn into their classroom environment, and Evelyn's participation in a multimedia writing class proved disastrous when she failed to return valuable video equipment and told the professor that she had given it to her landlord as "collateral" until she could pay her rent. This professor found Evelyn's presence highly disruptive and contended that, "Seminar discussion is fatally compromised when it includes a student who has no grasp of social cues." Further, like many faculty members addressing those with special needs, my colleague felt ill-prepared for the strain of having an Asperger's student in the classroom. "Professors need to be trained to deal with this issue," he asserted, and at present, the university was not equipped to provide the necessary support structures for both faculty and students. Here is the rub: good intentions do not equip faculty with the skills to address the varied needs of these students. And even with the presence of a strong Disability Services division on campus, ultimately, faculty shoulder the burden of serving the diverse needs of these students.

Practical Advice for Working with Autistic Students

Faculty need, at minimum, practical advice for working with autistic students. Of course, there are no firm guidelines, and what has worked for me as an educator and writing administrator might not be applicable to others and their faculty. At the same time, below are some starting points to a discussion that must happen if we are to actively include all students in higher education:

1. Encourage disclosure, but learn to work around it if the student refuses to get an

Accommodation Memo; once a student discloses, not only to the teacher, but to the class, there is a general sense of empathy and understanding.

2. Work within the local community—ultimately, like the rest of the student population, autistic students are in college to learn a profession, and they need access to job sites.
3. Provide portfolio opportunities—let the autistic student demonstrate a range of writing skills.
4. If there's a school newspaper, encourage the student to participate.
5. Allow students to tape record lectures, or encourage other students to take notes for them.
6. Provide an array of writing outlets—webzines, university literary journals, church newsletters. Encourage writing in as many venues as possible.
7. Consult with your Office of Disability Services. Never try and handle a difficult task without guidance.
8. Allow the student longer periods to complete tasks.
9. Assist the student in getting into the habit of going to the Writing Center to get additional support services.
10. Find out if your university has an affiliation with support organizations such as College Learning Experience that offers classes in "College Politics." This kind of support allows Asperger Spectrum Disorder students to learn academic etiquette.

I'd like to conclude with an idea postulated by Simon Baron-Cohen, who refers to those of us without autism as "mindreaders," an interesting metaphor, and one worth exploring in our discussion of students with autism. He says, "I don't mean that we have any special telepathy . . . I just mean that we have the capacity to imagine or represent states of mind that we or others might hold" (2). Our autistic students look to us to help them learn how to anticipate those states of mind that we and others hold, so they are not left in the dark about how to try to get others to respond with empathy toward them. If we are to embrace full integration—we who espouse a rhetoric of inclusion—it is time to move beyond the parameters of race and class and embrace a true rhetoric of difference, learning how to bridge the gap between us mindreaders and those whose brilliance is masked by a cloud of social solitude.



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