Course Design and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Designing College Courses for the Student on the Spectrum

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- Setting the context
- Designing courses
- Identifying and addressing issues during the courses
Setting the context:
What’s life like for someone with autism?

- 75% of students with Asperger’s or autism were victims of bullying (van Roekel, et al 2009).

- 94% of mothers of kids on the spectrum indicated their children had been bullied in the past year (Little 2002).

- Many students have struggled to get accommodations in the K-12 system.
Setting the context: What’s like life for someone with autism?

- Disability services offices only address specific academic accommodations, and typically don’t address students’ other needs (e.g. social).

- IDEA is relatively young (1975), so our culture is still moving toward understanding disability rights.

- In many cases, students on the spectrum have been viewed as problems.
Course Design

- Step 1: Annotate each of your assignments by making a list of every element and skill you’re assessing, even if it’s not something you intend to assess.
  - Think broadly
  - Consider your student population
  - Make a note of all technologies required (both access to and knowledge of) as well
In Class Free Writing Assignment

Before Re-Design

- This assignment assessed:
  - Process speed
  - Fine motor skills
  - Ability to tune out ambient noise

In addition to the skills I wanted to assess

Pen and Paper
In Class Free Writing Assignment

After Re-Design

- Ability to respond to a text
- Ability to begin working through a critical problem
- Ability to state an opinion

Online or Computer Option
Course Design

Step 2: For each element of your class, note every element that you’re assessing.

- Handouts
- Online access
- Participation
Course Design

- **Step 3:** Make sure that your course doesn’t inadvertently favor neuro-typical students.

  - Participation is one area where neuro-typical students are often favored.

  - Provide clear, detailed directions for all aspects, like small groups.

  - Provide tools for students to gain proficiency in all elements they are graded on.
Course Design

- **Step 4:** Create a classroom environment that encourages students to be open about their needs.
  - Don’t rely on the boilerplate disability statement.
  - Repeat the message: “If this format doesn’t work, let me know.”
  - Give examples at the beginning of the term of ways you’ve changed the format in the past for other students.
Practice making your first reaction to students one of interest and compassion, and not of defensiveness.

Avoid using the phrase “in the real world.”
Identifying and addressing issues during the course

- Re-define your concept of “struggling.”

- Train yourself to assume the best about a student who is struggling, and not the worst.

- When a student needs help or is struggling, practice re-framing the situation as a problem with the class as opposed to a problem with the student.

- Model acceptance and encouragement.
“I am on the autism spectrum, which doesn’t mean you can say you feel sorry for me.”

Ivan Jensen, 15