

Classroom Tips for Working with Students on the Autism Spectrum

Introduction

Working with students on the autism spectrum can be a daunting experience for some educators, especially at first. Since students on the spectrum generally process the world differently than their neuro-typical peers, instructors can feel overwhelmed by certain behaviors or at a loss for strategies to help students be successful. Don't worry if you feel this way because it is perfectly normal.

Just as teachers have anxiety about helping students, students also have anxiety about doing well in their classes. While it would be so nice if we could simply put together some quick rules to make a classroom run smoother, we run into the reality that each person on the autism spectrum is quite unique. Still, there are a few things that teachers of students on the autism spectrum can do to make the semester progress more smoothly.

While the strategies listed below are by no means comprehensive, they have been shown to be effective in many classrooms across different grade levels. The ones listed here are those best suited for adult education and community college, in particular.

Strategies

Teacher-Student Communication

- Remember that our students are often young adults who come from an educational system that provides a lot more support for the students *and families* than is often available at a community college. Please, take the time to **give additional help** when necessary and keep in mind that in many cases, family members have been an integral part of a student's success up to this point.
- It often takes a lot of courage for students with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) to ask for help or clarification. When you notice that student struggling or in need of help, **offer direct assistance** as soon as possible. In some cases, the student might not exactly know what help he needs, so try to work on it together.

- **Always keep your language simple and concrete.** Get your point across in as few words as possible. Typically, it's far more effective to say "Pens down, close your journal and please open your textbooks to page 253," than "I'm so excited about the next chapter in the book that I can't wait to get into the lesson. As soon as you've finished your writing, close your journals and open up your textbook. The chapter we're going to study today is quite fascinating, and if you have already looked ahead, then I am sure you know why".
- If you ask a question or give an instruction and are greeted with a blank stare, **reword your sentence** to see if that helps. You might even ask the student a follow-up question to ensure that you've been understood. Keep in mind that some autistic students need a bit more time to process a question that has been asked or information that has been given. It is also helpful to have students tell you their interpretation of what has been said to avoid any miscommunication.
- **Avoid using sarcasm.** If a student does something inappropriate or unexpected and you say "Great!" you might be taken literally and this action will be repeated on a regular basis. The same thing goes for those moments during a wonderful classroom discussion where the instructor feels a sense of synchronicity with students, which can lead to the use of more familiar speech because of a perceived comfort level. Unfortunately, while the overwhelming majority of students will correctly interpret sarcasm, body language, tone and cadence of the voice, autistic students will likely experience the entire exchange in very concrete terms. If an instructor states that something is good or bad, or right or wrong, an autistic student will hear those words as statements of fact, not sarcasm.
- **Avoid using idioms.** "Put your thinking caps on", "Open your ears" and "Zipper your lips" will leave a student completely mystified and wondering how to do that. Even phrases such as "Keep an open mind about..." might leave our students completely stumped as to what they are supposed to do since actually cutting one's skull open doesn't seem like a good idea. This is also important to keep in mind when using jargon, acronyms, simile, metaphor, and analogy. After many years in our profession, we use these with ease and those around us generally understand our intent, but autistic students might have real difficulties with these. Sometimes, a simple explanation of meaning will help, but this is not always the case.

- **Use technology to communicate outside of class.** It is a good idea to remind students about upcoming due dates, future assignments, reflections on something that happened in class, readings that need to be done, materials to bring to class, and any major or minor changes to the class calendar. Blackboard makes it easy to email announcements to the entire class, so try to get into the habit of emailing announcements once or twice a week. This will actually help keep the entire class on track.

Inside the Classroom

- **The instructor is the leader in any classroom.** The instructor sets the precedent for what will and will not be allowed. The instructor sets the tone of the class in terms of acceptance, tolerance, and compassion. The instructor is a semester-long guide that students look toward for direction. The instructor models expectations and students will follow those expectations as they are modelled day after day, so be a good model.
- **Teach specific social rules/skills,** such as how to appropriately engage in classroom discussion. Some students on the autism spectrum will passively go through an entire semester without ever speaking a word, if possible, so you might need to show them that it is okay to share their thoughts. Other students will completely dominate a classroom by blurting out answers and redirecting classroom discussions to topics of their liking. Those students will need parameters put in place for how often they can speak in class.
- When autistic students go off topic or make comments that seem to be unrelated to the topic at hand, **simply redirect the class** back to what should be discussed. Since autistic students interpret the world differently than their neuro-typical peers, you should be aware that they might make connections between ideas that the rest of us do not see. In that case, you might want to ask them to clarify their thought process. In some cases, they simply want to talk about their own personal interests. In that situation, you will need to redirect the discussion. In either case, please do not make the student feel bad because of their comments. This also goes for how the rest of the class responds to those comments. Remember that the instructor is the leader in the classroom.

- **Address the pupil by name when appropriate.** The pupil may not realize that an instruction given to the whole class also includes him or her. When starting group work you might ask, “Joseph, do you which group you are in?” During class discussions, you might choose three people to call on, but let each of them know that you will be addressing them shortly and expecting a response. Do this for all students, not just autistic ones by saying, “Ashley, Joseph, and Diego, listen up. In a minute I am going to want to hear your response to...” This way you focus the autistic student’s attention without singling out that student.
- Many students on the autism spectrum are uncomfortable working in **collaborative groups**, but group work is often an important component to community college classrooms. Fortunately, there is often a group of students inside many classrooms who naturally gravitate toward those who need extra help, so use them to your advantage by strategically placing ASD students with them whenever possible. It is amazing how many compassionate students attend our classes, so be flexible so that group work can even be done in pairs, or even allow for an extra person, when appropriate. Teachers may also want to consider describing and assigning group roles so that all students are aware of teacher and group expectations.
- Be aware that **an active classroom can be overwhelming** to some students. Many students on the spectrum will self-stimulate (stimming) by flapping hands, tapping, or rocking in order to calm down when their senses are being overloaded. Sometimes this is due to an internal anxiety, and at other times it is due to external sources, such as noise, smell, or even sights. When an environment becomes too chaotic (for them), then they might shut down or react negatively in class. Be aware of this and offer students a short break to regroup.

Assignments and Homework

- **Use Task Analysis** by being very specific and presenting tasks in a sequential order. Whenever possible, break down lessons so that they naturally scaffold one another. Sometimes graphic organizers and color coding help students visualize what needs to be done. Having examples of what the different step look like is also helpful.

- **Use rubrics and very clear directions for projects and large assignments.** Many students with ASD are notorious rule followers, so if the rule states that something must be done a certain way, then that is how it will be done. If a rule does not appear on a rubric, then that implicit expectation might not appear in the work. Be as explicit about expectations as possible.
- **Help students narrow down their choices** whenever an assignment is open-ended. Instead of asking a student to write about a general topic, such as industrialization, narrow it down to two topics about industrialization that might fall under the student's interests. Many of our students like systems, math, engineering, and rules; therefore, you might guide the student toward an essay about how mechanization changed how we produce goods, instead of simply asking how industrialization changed the world in which we live. This can be adapted to many different academic disciplines. It is also helpful to model in class how to narrow down choices for assignments.
- **Teaching what "finished" or "completed" means** and help the student to identify when something has been finished or completed, and something different has started. Take a photo or have samples available of what you want the finished product to look like and show the student. The students can use this for a reference.
- **Use tools, such as Blackboard, to your advantage.** Allow students to engage in discussions, ask questions, and even turn assignment in through Blackboard, or any other platform that you might use. This will help the instructor have a clear record of what has been completed, what questions were asked and how they were answered, and will help quiet students participate more easily. If you see something is missing, then it is easy to email a reminder before that student's grade is negatively affected.
- Online support is a wonderful tool, but it can be overwhelming and distracting, so **give direct links whenever possible.** Blackboard allows instructors to post everything from websites to model essays, which is a wonderful tool. However, if you simply ask students to look something up online, they just might do everything except the assignment because, well, the Internet is the proverbial rabbit hole of our society.

Imagine how distracted neuro-typical students can be, and then consider an autistic student who is obsessed with video games.

- Try to notice when a student is having difficulty with an assignment, and then **work collaboratively toward a viable solution**. Students might have difficulty with assignments because they have no interest in the topic, they lack certain skill, they do not understand one or more pieces of the process, they cannot visualize the finished product, or the work feels overwhelming. Discovering ways to help the student be successful will take time, but working individually with those ASD students to create a plan is essential to their success.
- **Follow-up is very important.** Please check in with your autistic students as much as possible to ensure that they understand assignments and have the ability to complete them. We all get busy, but even an email or a quick question before or after class can really make the difference between success and failure.

Conclusion

The community college system is a unique place in that our students elect to continue their education with us, the system is open to anyone qualified to enroll, and we see a wide range of abilities in our classrooms. Within this diverse student population, we also have an increasing number of students on the autism spectrum, and this population poses some unique challenges to our faculty and staff. The tips listed above are just a few suggestions that should help the instructors and students create meaningful classrooms for everyone where rigor and expectations are high, while also taking a very humanistic approach to teaching and learning. While our autistic students might not always openly express their appreciation for all of your hard work and investment in their success, all of us associated with the ASD community are extremely grateful for taking the time to give these students worthwhile educational experience here at Southwestern College.

References:

[22 Tips for Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders by Pat Hensley](#)

[*Preparing Teachers for Students with Autism.* Johns Hopkins University School of Education: Autism](#)