

FAST FACTS FOR FACULTY

An educational tool for faculty on the go.

Designed to offer practical information to facilitate teaching & interacting with diverse learners, including students with disabilities.

Fall 2007 — Spring 2008

Did you know?

Visually cued instruction, or the addition of visual elements to instruction, “can facilitate attention to relevant stimuli, organization of information, and an understanding of concepts and expectations” for students with Asperger’s.

(Heflin and Alaimo, 2007, p. 127)

AUTISM & ASPERGER’S AS IT RELATES TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

The featured topic for the Fall 2007 issue of “Fast Facts for Faculty” is Autism and Asperger’s disorders due to the growing population of students with Autism and Asperger’s participating in higher education¹. Autistic disorder occurrence estimates range from five cases per 10,000 individuals to two to 20 cases per 10,000 individuals.² This issue will unveil practical suggestions and insight to better equip professors when teaching learners who may have Autism, Asperger’s, or a nonverbal learning disorder (to be explained shortly). There is much debate over whether Asperger’s is its own syndrome or an Autism spectrum disorder, according to Olga Bogdashina (2005). However, whatever the label, this issue of *Fast Facts* recognizes that professors may very likely have students in their classes with Autism, Asperger’s and/or a nonverbal learning disorder without realizing it. As a result, *Fast Facts* aims to provide information to enhance professor understanding of some characteristics, practical teaching and communication tips, students’ voices, and resources for further exploration.

What is Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome?

Today, there are three characteristics which define autism, a pervasive developmental disorder. These “triad of impairments” include social difficulties, communication problems, and repetitive and restrictive activities. Specific characteristics or tendencies associated with autism are displayed on page four. Every person with Autism or Asperger’s is an individual, and like all individuals, has a unique personality, interests, and combination of characteristics.³ There are some differences between Asperger’s and Autism. For example, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), Asperger Syndrome, unlike Autistic disorder, is not characterized by significant language delays, but rather subtle social usage is affected.

Students with autism or Asperger’s can exhibit any combination or variability of behaviors and characteristics in any degree of severity.⁴ For example, two students with autism, “can act completely different from one another and have varying capabilities.”⁵ Further, Bogdashina (2005) asserts “individuals with Asperger’s differ as much from one another as they do” from those who do not have Autism (p. 28).

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I like to think of [Asperger’s] as not a disorder, but a way in which I think differently, as a deviation from the norm. Not necessarily better or worse, just different. As more and more people are diagnosed in this day and age, the public should know about it and what it means to have Asperger’s.” - SJSU student with Asperger’s



Brought to you by the Disability Resource Center

Autism & Asperger's as it Relates to College Students

(Continued from page 1)

Students with autism or Asperger's also process and respond to information in unique ways. Students with autism or Asperger's may exhibit some of the traits revealed on page four which may impact how s/he negotiates in, and interacts with, the academic arena⁶. Furthermore, there is an overlap in traits seen in nonverbal learning disorder (NVLD) and Asperger's. The presence of overlapping characteristics takes on heightened significance as NVLD is predicted in 10% of those with specific learning disabilities, or 1% of the general population (Stewart, 2002). Overlapping areas seen in those with NVLD and Asperger's include:

- * Visual-spatial deficits
- * Multi-tasking challenges
- * Written language deficits
- * Pragmatic language use difficulties (refer to page 3 for an example)
- * Anxiety
- * Difficulty predicting what will happen next

Source: Stewart, K. (2002). Helping the Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder or Asperger's Syndrome: A Parent's Guide. Berkley: New Harbinger Press.

What are the advantages of Asperger Syndrome?

A life coach who specializes in working with individuals on the Autism spectrum identified the following advantages of Asperger syndrome:

- * **FOCUS.** The ability to focus on one objective over long periods of time without becoming distracted allows you to accomplish large and challenging tasks.
- * **DISTINCTIVE UNIVERSAL PERSPECTIVE.** The ability to make associations that are not apparent to others is an important skill.
- * **UNCONVENTIONAL THINKING.** Thinking "outside the box" provides the opportunity for new solutions and options.
- * **PURPOSIVE.** Being true to one's own thinking without interference from the perspectives and pressures of others allows full development of alternatives. Single-mindedness of purpose allows accomplishment.
- * **DETAIL ORIENTED.** This fosters accurate memory and allows a unique perspective in problem solving.
- * **MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CONCEPTION.** Having a visual perspective in multiple dimensions provides a unique and analytical view when problem solving.
- * **TARGETED AND DIRECT PERSPECTIVE.** The ability to cut through to the vital or obvious facts and state them can save time and redirect energy on tasks.
- * **LOGICAL THINKING.** The ability to weed out extraneous information to arrive at well calculated and rational conclusions without being distracted by the emotional reactions of others can facilitate a positive outcome.

Source: The Asperger Advantage. On the web at www.coachingasperger.com/index.htm (as cited in Bedrossian, L.E. and Pennamon, R.E., 2007).

References for pages 1 & 5:

1. (Bedrossian, L.E. and Pennamon, R.E., 2007).
2. (Bedrossian, L.E. and Pennamon, R.E., 2007)
3. www.autism-society.org/site
4. www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/aswhatitis.html
5. www.autism-society.org
6. www.autism-society.org; www.udel.edu and (Breakey, 2006)

References for Table on pages 4: Stewart, K. (2002). Helping the child with NLD or Asperger's Syndrome; Breakey, C. (2006). The Autism Spectrum and Further Education: A Guide to Good Practice. Heflin, L.J. and Alaimo, D.F. (2007). Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Effective Instructional Practices. Bedrossian, L.E. & Pennamon, R.E. (2007). College Students with Asperger Syndrome: Practical Strategies for Academic and Social Success. LRP.

Other: Boedashina, O. (2005). Theory of Mind and the Triad of Perspectives on Autism and Asperger Syndrome: A View from the Bridge. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Fast Facts for Faculty

Communication

Individuals with Autism may have difficulty with communication problems such as receptive language both visually and auditorily. Though both individuals with Autism and Asperger's have difficulty with expressive language, individuals with Asperger's "have an intense social instinct and desire to communicate" (Bogdashina, 2005, p. 95). Individuals with Asperger's may opt for a direct approach (i.e. meeting face to face) to communication, while individuals with Autism may prefer an indirect approach (i.e. communicating via e-mail) (Bogdashina).

Individuals with Autism may also experience difficulty with the pragmatics of language usage, or "things done with words," such as turn-taking in conversations and an understanding of assertions or proclamations. An example is provided below, adapted from Bedrossian and Pennamon (2007):

John, in addition to having little ability to read body language and other non-verbal cues, did not have a sense of his own voice. He could be heard at the far end of the hallways in the classroom buildings if he spoke. Many times John did not ask questions when he should have, but when he did, he was persistent in getting an answer. When John asked a question in class and was told something he did not like hearing, his voice became louder. He persisted in repeating the question several different ways and received the same answer. It was not the words that alarmed the professor but rather his monotone and the volume of delivery. John was perplexed by the professor's reaction and reported feeling isolated and alone (p. 25).

Reflect On Your Practice

- * Am I explaining abstract concepts such as time?
- * Is my language clear, abstract or ambiguous?
- * Have I provided visual information?
- * Am I reducing student anxiety by providing structure and choice?

(Breakey, 2006, p. 152).

RESOURCES

Books:

- *Thinking in Pictures* by Temple Grandin, Ph.D. (ISBN 0679772898).
- *Aquamarine Blue 5* (ISBN 0804010544). This book features personal stories of college students with Asperger's and high functioning Autism.
- *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* by Tony Atwood (ISBN 1843104954)

Web sites:

- www.autism-society.org (Check out the free online Autism 101 course)
- www.tonyattwood.com
- www.udel.edu
- www.aspennj.org
- www.wrongplanet.net

"As autistic students, our internal needs and motivations are often at odds with the physical environment and many of the social demands of a college. Behaviors that are 'normal' to us (talking long and enthusiastically about our special areas of interest, disregarding personal appearance and sometimes hygiene, speaking plainly rather than censoring our thoughts) and our coping mechanisms (small rituals, a need for continuous clarification, an attachment to comfort objects) make us stand out as odd and sometimes unwelcome."

-Dawn Prince-Hughes, who has Asperger's Syndrome, is an adjunct professor of anthropology at Western Washington University (this quote is an excerpt from Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism).

	DIAGNOSTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AUSTIM, ASPERGER’S (AS), AND/OR NONVERBAL LEARNING DISORDER (NVLD)	RESEARCH-BASED CLASSROOM PRACTICES & STRATEGIES	AN INSIDER VIEW: SJSU STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER’S SPEAK OUT
COMMUNICATION	* Difficulty expressing needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Clear, concise information (avoid superfluous information) * Clearly define course requirements, the dates of exams, and date that assignments are due. * Being available to meet with students during office hours and before and after class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * OPENNESS TO QUESTIONS: “Just by being more open to questions and being available to answer students’ need. In my major specifically, the faculty is wrapped up in their research, it almost seems that they do not want to communicate with their students as they have little time.” * IMPORTANCE OF DIRECT, ONE ON ONE STUDENT-PROFESSOR COMMUNICATION: “I found it easiest to communicate to the professor after class or in office hours, when I can get his/her undivided attention.”
	* Difficulty using language in a social context; difficulty with semantics, pragmatics, and prosody (volume, intonation, inflection, and rhythm)	* Provide direct feedback to the student when you observe areas of academic difficulty. Avoid or explain euphemisms and figures of speech (unless you explain the meaning).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * ASKING FOR HELP & CLARIFICATION: “[O]ften when one is not sure of something and has a question, it is hard to go and ask a peer or the professor for clarification.” * DIFFICULTY WITH SOCIAL JARGON: “I found it hard to understand new ways of jargon, humor, and sarcasm.”
	* Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Consolidate information being sure not to get bogged down in details. * Make course expectations direct & explicit. Do not expect the student to “read between the lines” to understand your intentions or to automatically generalize instructions. 	
SOCIAL INTERACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Difficulty mixing with others and give and take conversations; verbose on focused issues * Little or no eye contact; flat affect; difficulty determining proper body space * Difficulty reading nonverbal/social cues (i.e body language and facial expressions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Develop a private signal that tells the student when they are speaking too loudly or quickly or unaware of other social mores/norms. * Classroom and assignment rules that are clear and consistent and consequences that are predictable. 	* GROUP ACTIVITIES & ASSIGNMENTS: One student with Asperger’s reports finding it challenging “dealing with required social situations, like group activities and assignments and communication with others.”
LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Uneven gross/fine motor skills * Overly literal translations (concrete thinking) * Difficulty generalizing concepts from one area to another * Central coherence difficulties (difficulty seeing “the big picture”) * Poor organizational skills * Abstract or inferential concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Use students’ focused special interest to help motivate them * Explain abstract concepts * Assign homework assignments that are not redundant and projects that teach the <i>process</i> of learning * Provide models of finished products * Display worksheets that are not visually overwhelming * Deliver explicit beginning and end points to tasks * Allow for extra time to process information Provide visual instructions (i.e. to supplement spoken instruction with visual media). * Syllabi that are posted and adhered to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * DIFFICULTY WITH UNSCHEDULED QUIZZES & “STUCK IN THE DETAILS”: “I do poorly on multiple choice quizzes and pop quizzes because it’s hard to choose the right answer when you focus one or two answers over multiple ones. Pop quizzes should be removed. I have to know what I need to study before I study it .” * TEACHING MATERIAL IN MULTIPLE WAYS: “People have different ways of processing information, keeping an open mind about these different ways is the first step to understanding people with Asperger’s”. * CLEAR, CONCISE SYLLABUS: “I find a wordy, heavily overstuffed syllabus hard to understand.
CLASSROOM & COURSEWORK MANAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Resistance to, and difficulty with, (positive & negative) change * Difficulty with transitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Provide advance notice of any syllabus changes * Classroom environment that is neat and uncluttered * Classroom and assignment rules that are clear and consistent and consequences that are predictable * Course activities that are structured and presented with a visual plan. * Classwork that uses visual cues as often as auditory cues * Permission to get up and move around (get water) as a means of focusing and managing alertness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * STRUCTURE: Likes that college is “regimented and ordered.” * VISUAL REINFORCEMENT OF ORAL INSTRUCTION: “I find the most helpful in learning with Asperger’s is the visual part. Writing things down when lecturing can help [me] with processing information. Conversely, the auditory aspect is the least helpful. Lecturing and speaking happens quickly and thus, it is hard to process information one just heard.”

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