Teaching University Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS
UOW Learning Development (Disability, Transition and Outreach)

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Introduction

STUDENT COHORT

Number of 20-24 year olds in post-compulsory education has significantly increased

— Of these, 5.2% of Australian students identified as having a disability in 2009 (O’Neill, Strnadova and Cumming)

— Anecdotally, it seems that a significant proportion of those have ASD

— “Burgeoning population” (Wenzel and Rowley)

— Almost a quarter of students with ASD who enrol in tertiary education abandon it before completion

Graph shows: 100 000 students in 1971 aged 20-24 were in higher education; almost 500 000 in 2011
Key truths

PERSON CENTRED APPROACHES WORK BEST

• Inclusive approaches work best
• Transition planning for students with complex needs occurs in advance of transition
• UDL makes curriculum accessible for all students, not just those with disabilities
Unwritten Expectations

• Who explains the differences between
  – Lectures and tutorials
  – Essays and reports
  – Email tone as opposed to chatting to your tutor in the corridor?
Usually these tasks fall to University teachers

- Potential issues with this:
  - May not know they need to do it
  - May assume it’s been done
  - May not “have time” in curriculum
  - Have typically understood information quickly
  - May not have empathy for those who atypical learners
  - Are fairly unlikely to have pedagogy to assist atypical learners, even if they do have the empathy.
All students learn differently

- Multi-modal information provision (write it, say it, post it online—what else?)
- Visual slides may assist cognition
- Write descriptions of visual images for those who need assistance

(for example, students using text-to-speech software)

[https://www.naturalreaders.com/](https://www.naturalreaders.com/)

- Image contains: Yoda, wise teacher
Run this slide through *Natural Readers* …

- Multi-modal information provision (write it, say it, post it online—what else?)
- Visual slides can assist cognition
- Write descriptions of visual images

(some students may be using text-to-speech software)

*This very concrete example demonstrates to teachers the impact of leaving out the image descriptors*
SIMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Use multimodal instructions
- Repeat information and instructions
- Give students with anxiety “warnings” about what’s coming up in class
- List vocabulary—tabular nasa/tabula rasa
Interpreting Assignment Tasks

“EXPLAIN MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU HAVE TO” (p117)

- Explain how to submit
- Explain consequences of inaction
- Make examples available
- Get someone to check your subject outlines
- Think about what you are testing
- Limit metaphors

Images contain: Book Cover; cake emoji
Working Around Rigidity of Thinking

• Can manifest in classes, or at subject/degree level

Simple Strategies:

– Lay out the options clearly and logically
– Hope for the best
Self-Monitoring

• May need to be developed with regard to some behaviours, as well as academics
• Be wary of the “procrastination—perfectionism loop”
• Students on the spectrum often have increased anxiety

Simple Strategies:

– Don’t assume the worst motivations—context is everything!
– Don’t debate in front of an audience
– Politely redirect
– Wait for the respect for “rules” instinct to kick in
– Ask open questions—but ones that elicit useful responses
SEXY

- Statement
- Evidence
- EXplanation
- whY
Multi-Tasking

- Self-Monitoring, Multi-Tasking and Project Planning are related areas
- Areas where any issues around perfectionism and/or executive Function will become apparent
- Students may need to be taught strategies for prioritisation and competing deadlines.
Project Planning

• Teach students to think about the relationship between times/weightings/marks

Simple Strategies:

– Use available AT eg Wunderlist, Pomodoro, MotivAider, phone timers/alarms
– Also BlockSite, SelfControl, Rescue Time
NB: EXPLAIN THAT THE RATHER ALARMING TITLE IS A PUN ON THE PHRASE, “DEADLINE”!

CUSTOMISABLE WORDS PER MINUTE GOALS

If you write enough words, you will be rewarded with cute, purring kittens. Kittens make everything just that little bit better, don’t you think? I think...

If you don’t write enough...

Write or Die

Image 1 contains: cute kitten
Image 2 contains: large spider on red screen
Conclusion

GOOD INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Looks a lot like good teaching practice, generally

IF YOU IMPROVE CLARITY OF EXPECTATIONS ACROSS THE FYE

You will help *all* students, including those with ASD diagnoses

WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO TAILOR additional, quality individual interventions while lobbying for systemic change.
“If you’ve met one person with Autism …”

… you’ve met one person with Autism”

Dr Stephen Shore

• There are no “silver bullets”
These are students who …

are typically very interested in the subject matter, very motivated to do well, very keen to follow rules, and willing to apply the strategies we share … they are also largely appreciative of our help.

Don’t we wish all students were like that?”
Bibliography


