Teaching University Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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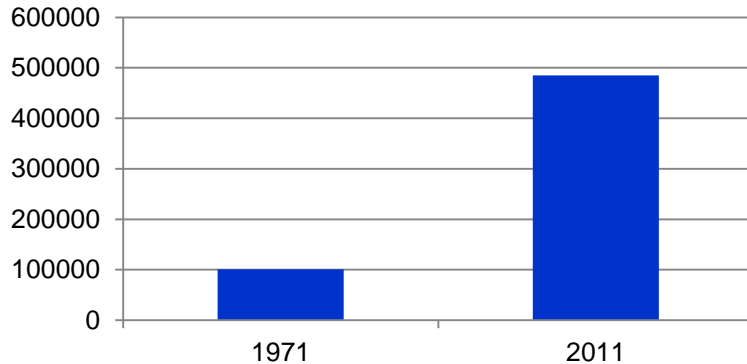# UOW Learning Development (Disability, Transition and Outreach)

KIMBERLEY McMAHON-COLEMAN

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.

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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/

- Image contains: *Yoda, wise teacher*

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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*

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Interpreting Assignment Tasks
"EXPLAIN MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU HAVE TO" (p117)
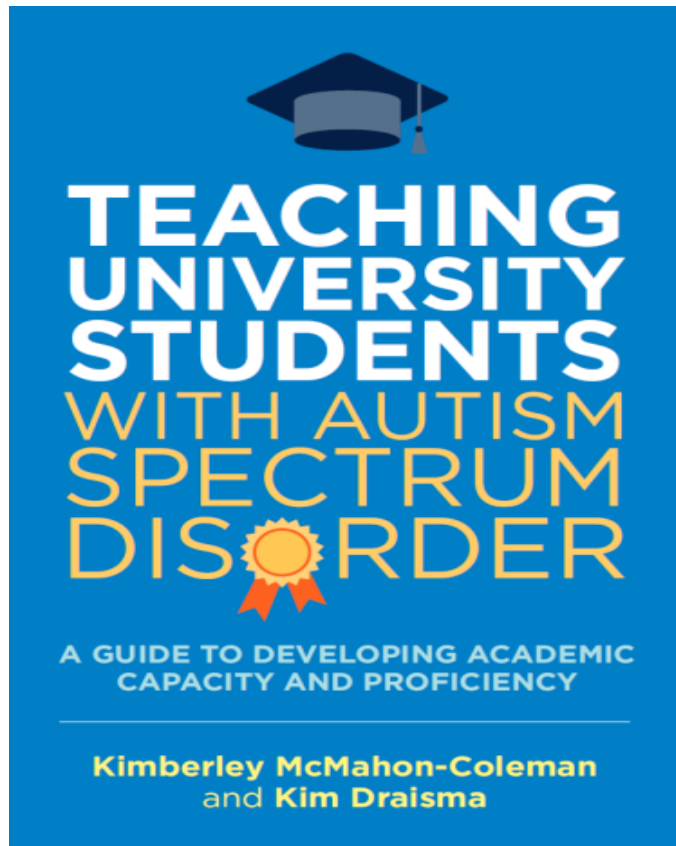
PROCESSES AS WELL AS CONTENT

— 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

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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

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SEXY

- **S**tatement
- **E**vidence
- E**X**planation
- wh**Y**

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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.

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Project Planning

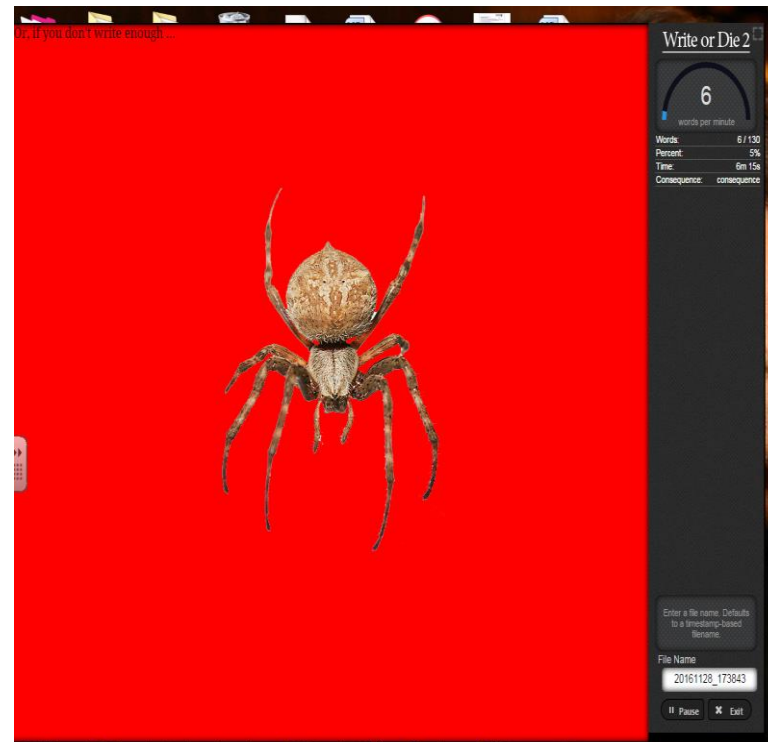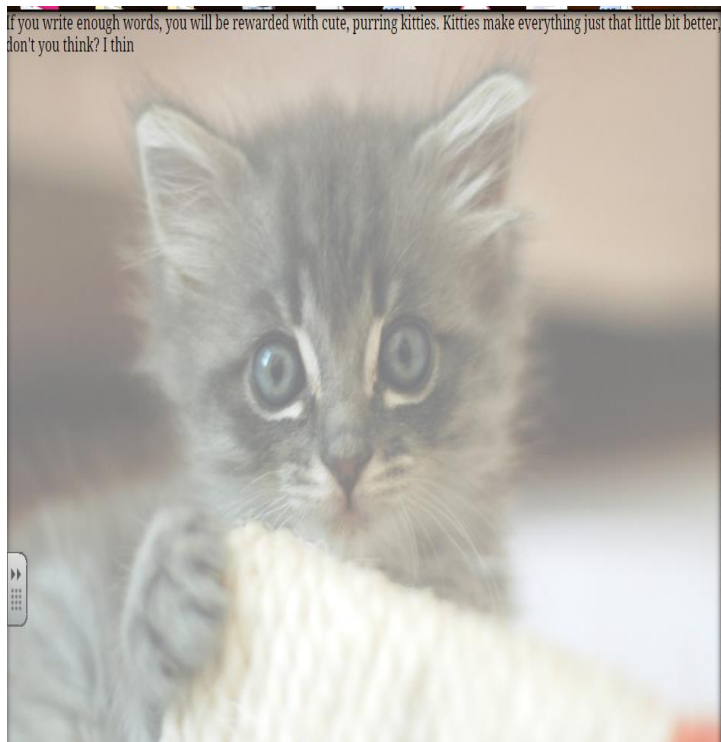- Teach students to think about the relationship between times/weightings/marks

Simple Strategies:

  – Use available AT eg *Wunderlist, Pomodoro, MotivAider,* phone timers/alarms
  – Also BlockSite, SelfControl, Rescue Time

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Write or Die

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

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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?"

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