Working with Students who may have Autism or Asperger’s

You may encounter students in your classes who appear to have characteristics or behaviors that look like Autism or Asperger’s Syndrome. This handout describes some common behaviors as well as strategies for instructors that may be useful in the classroom.

- Individuals with autism process information in distinct ways, and may experience difficulties with verbal and nonverbal communication and social interactions.
- Individuals may be highly gifted in certain areas, such as math, science and technology or music. (Some may see numbers as shapes.)
- Individuals are typically very concrete, literal, visual thinkers.
- Highly intelligent students may have difficulty with organization, initiation, and the ability to get their thoughts from their head to paper.

Challenges:

- Difficulties in reading emotions/body language in others. Students may make frequent errors in interpreting others’ body language, intentions or facial expressions and have problems understanding social rules (i.e. personal space).
- Difficulty understanding the motives and perceptions of others.
- Social discomfort; difficulty with group projects.
- Difficulties with transitions, changes in schedules. These can cause high anxiety.
- Hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli: may experience sensory bombardment from noises, activity, lights, textures and strong smells.
- May become so frustrated and/or overstimulated that they freeze and become unable to use coping skills. They may be challenged by normal classroom chatter and activity.
- Problems with organization (including initiating, carrying out, and finishing tasks).
- Difficulty with writing: the motor process of handwriting, as well as difficulty getting thoughts from head to paper. They may write ten words to most students’ ten sentences. It’s easier to use a computer.
- Very detail oriented—to the extent that they can perseverate on details, with an inability to see the big picture. Tendency to notice errors, be perfectionistic. As a result, there may be a fear of failure.
- Difficulties with abstract thinking and generalizing; some rigidity in thinking.
- Difficulties with interpreting words with double meanings; they may be confused by metaphors and sarcasm. Writing and literature courses can be challenging.
- Students may be able to state facts and details in a writing assignment, but have difficulty taking another’s point of view, synthesizing information, comparing and contrasting, using analogies, similes, or metaphors.
- Problems asking for help.

Strategies:

- Provide a clear syllabus and clear expectations (or rules) for the classroom.
- Provide clear and explicit instructions in both oral and written formats.
- Provide advance notice of any changes that need to be made to the class schedule or assignments.
- Don’t use absolute words like “always” or “never” unless it’s exactly what you mean.
- Avoid idioms, words with double meaning and sarcasm.
- Use clear and detailed directives when referring to revisions that need to be made.
- Many are visual learners, so pictures, flow charts and graphs may be helpful.
- Allow students to type their notes and essay questions.
- Assist with how to organize a project; students can feel overwhelmed.
- E-mail communication should be concrete and clear.
- Students are rule-oriented. If there’s a need to address behavior, speak in terms of the “rules” of the classroom.
- Note their skills and intelligence prior to providing constructive feedback.
- Vocalize your thinking process and the steps used.
- Let them know that asking for help demonstrates intelligence.
- Model how to cope with frustration, i.e. staying calm.
- Help students shift their attention by bringing closure to a previous process.
- Emphasize that we learn from our mistakes; errors are opportunities to learn.
- For group projects, help students find a role that will be comfortable (i.e. doing background research or a PowerPoint vs. doing a verbal presentation.)
- Students may need to sit in a specific part of the classroom to minimize distractions and sensory stimulation.
- Suggest possible resources to students: Tutoring Center, Disability Resources.
- If you would like further assistance, you may call Disability Resources and consult with an advisor.

Further Resources:

Born on a Blue Day by Daniel Tammet (autistic savant in math)

Pretending To Be Normal: Living With Asperger Syndrome by Liane Holliday Willey.


The Complete Guide To Asperger’s Syndrome by Tony Attwood

The Myriad Gifts of Asperger’s Syndrome by John M. Ortiz