

Course Design and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Designing College Courses for the
Student on the Spectrum

Heather Ryan
Wenatchee Valley College
hryan@wvc.edu

Designing College Courses for the Student on the Spectrum

- ▶ Setting the context
- ▶ Designing courses
- ▶ Identifying and addressing issues during the courses

Setting the context:

What's life like for someone with autism?

- ▶ 75% of students with Asperger's or autism were victims of bullying (van Roekel, et al 2009).
- ▶ 94% of mothers of kids on the spectrum indicated their children had been bullied in the past year (Little 2002).
- ▶ Many students have struggled to get accommodations in the K-12 system.

Setting the context:

What's like life for someone with autism?

- ▶ Disability services offices only address specific academic accommodations, and typically don't address students' other needs (e.g. social).
- ▶ IDEA is relatively young (1975), so our culture is still moving toward understanding disability rights.
- ▶ In many cases, students on the spectrum have been viewed as problems.

Course Design

- ▶ Step 1: Annotate each of your assignments by making a list of every element and skill you're assessing, even if it's not something you intend to assess.
 - ▶ Think broadly
 - ▶ Consider your student population
 - ▶ Make a note of all technologies required (both access to and knowledge of) as well

In Class Free Writing Assignment

Before Re-Design

- ▶ This assignment assessed:
 - ▶ Process speed
 - ▶ Fine motor skills
 - ▶ Ability to tune out ambient noise

In addition to the skills I wanted to assess

Pen and Paper



In Class Free Writing Assignment

After Re-Design

- ▶ Ability to respond to a text
- ▶ Ability to begin working through a critical problem
- ▶ Ability to state an opinion

Online or Computer Option



Course Design

- ▶ Step 2: For each element of your class, note every element that you're assessing.
 - ▶ Handouts
 - ▶ Online access
 - ▶ Participation

Course Design

- ▶ Step 3: Make sure that your course doesn't inadvertently favor neuro-typical students.
 - ▶ Participation is one area where neuro-typical students are often favored.
 - ▶ Provide clear, detailed directions for all aspects, like small groups.
 - ▶ Provide tools for students to gain proficiency in all elements they are graded on.

Course Design

- ▶ Step 4: Create a classroom environment that encourages students to be open about their needs.
 - ▶ Don't rely on the boilerplate disability statement.
 - ▶ Repeat the message: "If this format doesn't work, let me know."
 - ▶ Give examples at the beginning of the term of ways you've changed the format in the past for other students.

Course Design

- ▶ Practice making your first reaction to students one of interest and compassion, and not of defensiveness.
- ▶ Avoid using the phrase “in the real world.”

Identifying and addressing issues during the course

- ▶ Re-define your concept of “struggling.”
- ▶ Train yourself to assume the best about a student who is struggling, and not the worst.
- ▶ When a student needs help or is struggling, practice re-framing the situation as a problem with the class as opposed to a problem with the student.
- ▶ Model acceptance and encouragement.

“I am on the autism spectrum,
which doesn’t mean you can say
you feel sorry for me.”

Ivan Jensen, 15