

# Students with Asperger Syndrome

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## INTRODUCTION

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Increasing numbers of students with Asperger Syndrome are coping successfully with Higher Education. Asperger syndrome does not affect intellectual capability, but students may find the social and practical sides of studying challenging and will benefit from additional support and a positive, encouraging attitude from lecturers. Do remember that each student is different and will have an individual approach to their learning, but some key common points are given here.

A student with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty with:

- UNDERSTANDING ABSTRACT CONCEPTS
- SOCIAL INTERACTION
- UNDERSTANDING TACIT SOCIAL "RULES" AND EXPECTATIONS
- INTERPRETING OTHERS' BEHAVIOUR AND CONVERSATION; THEY MAY MISS SOCIAL CUES AND BODY LANGUAGE, OR BE UNAWARE OF OTHERS' REACTIONS TO THEM
- THEY ARE LIKELY TO RELY ON FIXED ROUTINES THAT THEY CAN TRUST. THIS MAY MEAN SITTING IN THE SAME SEAT, OR MAY RESULT IN REPETITIVE BEHAVIOUR
- THE SOCIAL SIDE OF HE CAN BE VERY CHALLENGING, AND GROUP WORK CAN BE PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT

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Asperger Syndrome

- **THE STUDENT IS LIKELY TO TAKE LANGUAGE LITERALLY, NOT UNDERSTANDING JOKES AND METAPHORS**

The student may have a dedicated support worker who will help with day-to-day activities and practicalities, but this helper is unlikely to be familiar with the subject they are studying. Other students might not need any additional support at all.

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**CASE STUDIES**

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*(Both of these are real first-hand accounts, but names in the first one have been changed)*

# Case Study One

Working with Laura was one of my early teaching experiences. I was the only tutor of my first module, so I guess I was thrown in at the deep end.

It was explained to me early on that there would be a student on the course who had Asperger Syndrome, and I was given some information to take away. I was told that there would be support workers available throughout the module, and there was a network of people who had been teaching her that I could contact, so I didn't feel too daunted. The literature covered some of the things I would need to think about, but nothing matches real experience – each case is different.

It was clear from the first lecture that Laura was very much an individual within the group. She was lively, with unusually acute perception, but very literal and direct.

Initially I had to think about how to give her a very set routine. For example, we had a one-to-one meeting at 2pm every week, straight after lunch. That way she had the clear framework that she needed and was less disruptive in sessions.

I had to allocate my time and separate out my teaching so that there were bits for everyone. In a lecture she could get quite obsessed with very detailed tangential information. I would pick out aspects of her comments and build on them that other students got something out of it but she still felt included. If she was taking over a session I'd say "that's interesting, let's talk about it later. Now what do other people think?" There was tension in the class, knowing that she could "go on" about things, but other students enjoyed her fresh way of looking at things and her sense of humour. Humour helped a lot; Laura has a great sense of humour, very unselfconscious. I needed to be very patient and methodical, and repeatedly go through things. It had some good impacts on my teaching: having to produce very detailed handouts for her and going over things in clear language. I couldn't

use words out of their base context – for example instead of saying "burning a CD", I had to say that we were going to put information on a CD. I learned how to be very obvious and clear with my instructions. In a room full of people you just don't know whether you're really reaching them. You ask whether people have understood and they can just look blankly at you! I'm sure being so clear for Laura helped the others too.

Laura learned the skills gradually, but there were frustrations for her – I had to find new ways to teach her the same things in order to avoid frustration, but repeated information, forming patterns, worked best. She was always very clear about what she wanted to achieve, and I had to find the most straightforward method to enable her to do it. Routine helped her to remember what she had learned before. She couldn't pick up a set of instructions half-way through. The routine had to be started from the top each time, and it was important to help her keep calm so that she could remember what to do. She would often get distracted part way through a routine and have to be brought back. Note-taking was very important, and reminding her to look back at her notes. She was always trying to get extra time – I had to be really firm or she'd keep me back at the end of sessions.

Laura wanted social interaction, but didn't really know how to achieve it. She would avoid eye-contact, which made it difficult to have a conversation. She was very immediate with her thoughts and feelings which sometimes embarrassed the other students. For example, when one student brought in his family album for an exercise she was very upfront in her comments! I allowed some of it to continue for her engagement, then asked her to wait while I talked to the other students and made time for her afterwards.

People would talk to her and share their experiences. She remembered it all and had case-studies running in her head. She would ask personal questions to make comparisons, but not hold a conversation.

Laura could get frustrated and aggressive towards the equipment we used, and I had to calm her down. It would have been helpful to know in advance some strategies for crisis management – it can take a lot of energy to cope with someone shouting and getting physically aggressive with equipment. I needed to repeat clear and firm calming words. One's instinct is to negotiate, but if she's wrong you have to say so and go to the root of the problem, not just go along with it: "The computer isn't wrong; we just need to find the right code".

We did have to move around a lot as the room we were supposed to use was double-booked, but Laura coped quite well with this. Once she got worried that she'd left her locker open, and she had to go and check. She had lots of bags with her and abandoned them with me - she did like other people to take responsibility for things!

We went on a trip to London and she was fine, and knew her way around. The support worker didn't come. It was the first time I realised how much people would avoid addressing her directly and talk to me instead.

I enjoyed teaching Laura – she really enlivened the group. She didn't have the self-consciousness that limits most students. She was good at free association which is great with arts subjects. She was interested in montage, surrealism and fantasy; not in reality but in imaginary worlds that had relevance for her. She was always telling stories. She had a real engagement with stories. She wrote very good poems and stories with a fantastic rawness of content and excellent rhyming that wasn't obvious.

She was very conscientious about getting her work in on time. She took some pride in what she was doing – she wanted things to look the best they could be – but she wasn't very confident in her own creativity. She had very good sketchbooks, but I had to sort out what was hers and what was regurgitated. I would just ask her, she was very upfront about it. There were lots of intelligent comments, very witty and funny and bright.

I worked with Laura for a year, and always did things jointly with the support workers. Mid-way through I started to get worried about what would happen if we lost the support workers. They weren't knowledgeable about the subject I teach, although one wanted to get involved and learn. They had different approaches. One preferred to intervene and keep the situation under control, while the other let Laura make her own mistakes and learn from them for the future. I think the first one was probably better in the short-term, but in the long-term I can see that Laura would benefit more from the second approach.

It was tiring, but I got a lot out of teaching Laura. I'd been warned that I'd never get any personal engagement, but she thanked me for taking her as seriously as the other students and for helping her; she said that meant I was a good teacher.

## Case Study Two

In my first few weeks at university, I was summoned to see the college welfare officer as various fellow students had decided that I was behaving in such an odd and isolated fashion that I must be having a nervous breakdown. In fact, I was coping with leaving home and the shock of a new environment in my own way, retreating into my college room (occasionally retreating to under my desk) until gradually I felt safe and at home there and could venture out to explore. Because I couldn't see why anyone in their right minds would want to spend their evenings having conversations with drunk people in the overheated and crowded college bar, I was most happy avoiding my peers, investigating the wonderful libraries and bookshops, and going for long solitary walks around and around the college gardens.

Academically, I enjoyed myself. I found that my difficulty in absorbing long strings of auditory information made lectures almost useless, even when I found the aisle seat which my problem with physical proximity makes necessary. However, my reading speeds compensated for this. I found tutorials much easier to cope with than larger seminar groups, where I was unable to tell if I was talking too much, or work out how to explain to someone why their argument was completely flawed without their becoming offended.

Because I was only diagnosed halfway through my degree, it took me a while to have the courage of my convictions and adapt my learning methods to my own abilities, instead of trying to work and revise in the way I thought I was supposed to. My tutors were generally sympathetic and interested when I told them about my diagnosis. Before my final exams, I covered all the walls in my room with giant sheets of paper covered in complex diagrams of the philosophical arguments I was studying. It freaked out everyone who came into my room during that term, but I had finally learnt not to care.

CLARE SAINSBURY

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**REFLECTION/CONTEXTUALISING**

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Students with  
Asperger Syndrome

Having read these two personal accounts, how do they relate to your own experience – or your expectations if you are about to start teaching a student with Asperger Syndrome? What are the key things that need to be considered?

<b>Asperger Syndrome</b>	<b>Learning/Teaching</b>			<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Social Interaction/ group work</b>
	<b>Preparation</b>	<b>During session</b>	<b>Follow-up</b>		
<b>Issues</b>					
<b>Strategies</b>					
<b>Benefits</b>					
<b>What other support or information might you need?</b>					
<b>Where or who can you get this from?</b>					

## Points and Strategies

### **STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME MAY BENEFIT FROM SOME OF THESE APPROACHES:**

- A positive attitude, encouragement and co-operation
- Clear structures and routines – where routines are likely to vary (for instance for assessment or trips), discuss this in advance with the student and support worker
- Clear and explicit language which avoids metaphors etc
- If possible, time at the end of a session to check that key things have been understood
- Alternatives to group assignments or presentations if they find these difficult
- A familiar room layout, and being able to sit in the same place
- Clear assignment briefs with explicit instructions
- For exams and assessment, a chance to talk through and understand in advance the structure and expectations
- An agreed approach to balancing the needs of the individual student with those of the group; for example having a pre-arranged time during the lesson when you can give the student extra help and individual attention