

Book Review

Addressing the Challenges of Teaching Writing to Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Gerstle, V., & Walsh, L. (Eds.). (2011). *Autism spectrum disorders in the college composition classroom: Making writing instruction more accessible for all students*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press. [150 pp. US \$20 (paperback)]

Gerstle and Walsh's (2011) *Autism spectrum disorders in the college composition classroom: Making writing instruction more accessible for all students* provides comprehensive information pertaining to the unique abilities and needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and offers practical suggestions to educators and administrators for transforming the traditional classroom and making writing education more accessible to all. The book contains eight chapters, with the first four chapters addressing accommodation of students and the last four chapters discussing pedagogy. In line with its title, the book focuses on providing teachers and administrators with information about ASD, along with teaching strategies for better accommodating first year writing students with ASD. Contributors bring decades of classroom experience to bear on topics such as how to create assignments designed to encourage students with ASD to play to their strengths as they work to improve their writing, and ways to promote administrative support for students with ASD in writing classes. Taken together, the chapters make a case that ASD invites college composition instructors to craft a learning environment that better serves all students.

If this book has a fault, it is that it leaves readers wanting to know more about the diagnosis of autism, as well as other professional concerns, such as whether *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 5th edition* (DSM-V) will identify the same individuals diagnosed with different forms of autism by the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric

Association, 2000). The editors briefly touch on diagnosis in the introduction, but they do not address the proposed revision in the DSM-V, which is expected to be published in May 2013. In the editors' defense, however, since this book's focus is on helping all students acquire good communication skills, including those who are diagnosed with ASD, the lack of attention to the proposed revision in the DSM-V does not detract.

The four chapters in Section I address the use of accommodations for students with ASD within the wider context of the university, including work in writing and tutoring centers, and work that educators do to inform themselves about ASD outside the academy walls. The importance and advantages of collaboration among instructors, advisors, administrators, and others is stressed in these chapters, not only to increase student success, but also to heighten student participation. These early chapters work together by focusing on students' creative potential and by establishing criteria for assessing scientific articles that instructors often turn to for information on ASD when they need support.

Marcia Ribble's chapter on "Basic writing students with autism and the composition classroom" focuses on individual instances of students with ASD and other disorders, reporting, for example, on an autistic student at the University of Cincinnati who succeeded in passing a basic writing course through collaboration among the student's advisor, a tutor, and the instructor. By the end of the term, Ribble notes that not only had the student's writing improved, but his

classroom demeanor had as well, through increased eye contact and classroom participation. To learn more about how ASD affects writing students, Ribble recommends works by Temple Grandin, a Colorado State University Assistant Professor who has lived a highly successful adult life with autism. Additionally, Ribble notes that The Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy at the University of Minnesota has developed an extensive annotated bibliography that is extremely helpful for teachers who work with students with disabilities.

In “‘I just felt kinda invisible’: Accommodations for learning disabled students in the composition classroom,” Kathleen Wills presents an interview with student with an ASD diagnosis who received inconsistent care at Indiana University-Purdue. Her use of a qualitative research tool—interview—to gain insight on an ASD student’s experiences in college importantly addresses a persistent gap in the scholarship on classroom pedagogies. Two of Wills’ suggestions for encouraging more responsive teaching practices are of particular value: (a) questioning views that reinforce ineffective pedagogy and (b) providing strategies for more effective teaching of students with disabilities. Five detailed strategies about how to design classes and shape pedagogy for students with learning disabilities are also included in this chapter—“Pedagogy of the Body,” “Institutional,” “Ergonomic,” “Feedback,” and “Tools and Technology” (pp. 41-42). While Wills created these strategies in collaboration with her ASD students, she stresses that these practices may similarly benefit all first-year college students.

“The structure and accommodation: Autism and the writing center,” by April Mann, discusses how, at the University of Miami’s Center for Autism-Related Disorders, psychologists work with parents and professionals to help students with autism-related disorders achieve success and independence. As a teacher, writing center director, and parent, Mann believes we do students a disservice by seeing them as alien others. She stresses that “students with AS will become colleagues with AS and friends with AS and parents with AS, and we would do well to focus on these students’ ‘creative potential’ rather than deficiencies, just as we try to do with all of our students” (p. 68).

The final chapter in the first section of the book, “Recommended approaches to the neuroimaging literature on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) for teachers of writing,” written

by Lynda Walsh and Cheryl Olman, establishes criteria for assessing scientific articles that composition instructors often turn to for information on ASD when they lack instructional support. Walsh and Olman conclude that neuroimaging and other studies predict that students with ASD may experience challenges in empathizing, thereby missing out on interpretation of texts, in understanding non-literal language, and in bringing backdrop knowledge to the reading/writing task at hand. Based on their review of recent neuroimaging studies, the authors speculate on some educational interventions (for example, breaking complex writing tasks into small, concrete steps) and note that many of these interventions corroborate the principles of Universal Design for Learning, a pedagogical system designed to help instructors accommodate students with a diverse range of abilities.

The four chapters in Section II present interventions for successfully integrating students with ASD into the composition classroom by presenting hands-on, field-tested pedagogical interventions. Collectively, these chapters reveal that the energy and intelligence of students with Asperger’s Syndrome can be channeled in many ways that benefit all students through, for example, the humor of cartoons, the use of advertisements to engage students’ imaginations, and by teaching students to incorporate voice into their research papers.

In “Channeling the enthusiasm: Two narratives of teaching students with Asperger’s Syndrome in writing & literature classes, with questions and reflections,” Kim Freeman uses two cases studies to support her conclusion that in the most successful pedagogical situations, the energy and intelligence of Asperger’s students can be productively channeled to benefit all students in the composition classroom. By comparing narratives of her experiences with these two students, and by developing questions about integrating students with Asperger’s Syndrome into writing and literature classes, Freeman hopes to serve as a resource for other college-level writing teachers in what she views as an open and exciting field of inquiry.

Val Gerstle explains how she uses cartoons to teach topics such as word choice and sentence structure in her contribution, “Reaching the college composition student with autism through the cartoon-enhanced classroom.” The twelve drawings found in this chapter range from cartoons students might choose to illustrate their essays to

cartoons students could produce themselves to illustrate “synonym sentences” in an effort to teach them that, by using words with appropriate connotations, they can be more specific in their writing. She finds that the humor of cartoons not only brings warmth to the classroom, but also that the strong visual element taps into the expressive strengths of many ASD students, empowering them to feel on par with their peers.

“Helping autistic students improve written communication skills through visual images” by Muriel Cunningham explores the use of print advertisements to teach audience analysis, a communication skill that is difficult for many ASD students. Cunningham describes the exercises (some as brief as five minutes) that she uses to help students unleash their imaginations, encourage them to strive for vivid expressions, and focus on sensory detail. Of the three photo advertisements, the first is a bird with a bright red head to encourage discussion about focus; next, is a picture of a woman searching for a coffee cup to prompt discussion of how a writer can draw a reader’s attention to what the writer wants to emphasize; and finally, the last photo shows a woman looking directly into a camera to help students notice significant details.

In “‘Well, not exactly’: Asperger’s and the integration of outside sources,” Jennifer McClinton-Temple reviews strategies she used with an Asperger’s Syndrome student at King’s College to help the student integrate the words of others into her prose without losing her own voice and rhythm. The author discusses useful strategies for helping her student integrate outside sources, from traditional scholarly sources used for a research paper, to quoting an individual with whom the student had conducted an interview. For example, one strategy is to have students revise text summaries into smaller and smaller units so those summaries become paraphrases. The author also notes that comparing a direct quote to a hyperlink found in online texts helps students overcome the difficulty with this type of quote.

Strengths of the edited collection as a whole include its focus on the acquisition of communication skills as a key to the success of students with ASD. This includes the recognition that the socially-intensive college composition classroom can be a difficult environment for students with ASD, who can have problems working in groups, empathizing with potential audiences, and managing complex tasks. This book offers much needed support to help the growing population of mainstreaming students with ASD at the college level—not by disciplining them to behave “normally,” but by recognizing how the unique abilities can transform the traditional composition classroom by extending its reach and multiplying its perspectives in order to make writing education more available to all.

A noteworthy feature of the book is its use of case studies found in chapters by Ribble, Wills, Freeman, and McClinton-Temple. These case studies afford a greater understanding of students affected by autism and Asperger’s Syndrome, and also provide readers with insight into the background, symptoms, assessment, and suggested interventions for these students.

Primarily written for first-year composition and Basic English teachers, this book will also appeal to any college instructor teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. It is perhaps a particularly helpful resource for inexperienced teachers, such as Graduate Teaching Assistants. The basic concepts are presented in an accessible manner and often include illustrations. The collection’s thorough coverage of important and relevant topics provides targeted information for anyone interested in gaining a better understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorders—or more precisely, those interested in gaining a better understanding of how to teach and effectively communicate with students with autism. All those who feel strongly about helping students with ASD succeed will welcome a book like this each time they welcome a student with ASD into their writing classroom. **JCLL**

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 4th edition*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association.