

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 40 *Fostering Inclusive Learning
Communities Together*

Article 15

July 2023

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Recommended Citation

Havert, Lois "The True Difficulty of Autism: Why Acceptance Matters So Much," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 40 (2023), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/15>

THE TRUE DIFFICULTY OF AUTISM: WHY ACCEPTANCE MATTERS SO MUCH

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There is a lack of awareness of autism in non-autistic people, and many people have a negative perception of autism or are not aware of what autism can look like. This lack of awareness and acceptance can be a barrier to autistic people's success both at university and afterwards. It can mean that neurotypical (non-autistic) people discriminate against autistic people due to their negative perception of autism or because they do not understand how to be inclusive of autistic people. University students and staff members can assist in removing these barriers by ensuring that their practice is inclusive and by actively promoting autism acceptance and awareness.

According to the National Autistic Society (2021), about one in a hundred people in the UK are autistic. However, given that so many autistic people—especially autistic women like me—are not diagnosed until adulthood, this number may actually be higher. I wasn't diagnosed until I was 18, after years of being around counselors, teachers, and doctors who all failed to recognize autism in me. I can attribute this partly to the fact that I was good at acting 'normal,' because I learnt to overcompensate to fit in. I looked to other people for the appropriate things to do and say when I didn't know, and I hid the 'quirks' that I had been rejected for in childhood. However, had the people around me known about how autism can present, especially in girls, I think that I may have received that diagnosis a lot earlier. I had so many traits, and being expected to act like a neurotypical person—socializing and 'acting normal' or 'masking' autism every day—was overwhelming and exhausting. Like many of the difficult experiences in my life, this came not from the autism itself, but from a lack of awareness and understanding of autism from neurotypical people.

Unfortunately, this is a societal issue and therefore affects university life. Every time that I've told a fellow student that I'm autistic, they are surprised. What's more, I've never heard anyone other than myself talk about autism outside the context of care. Autism to me has always been a personality type of sorts that doesn't fit in with social norms, and which has strengths and weaknesses, rather than an illness or affliction. However, other people seem to associate it with a lack of capability or acceptability, or they think that disability is something 'wrong' with someone rather than it being another aspect of identity, like gender. I have rarely heard anyone talk about it in a positive way unless they are autistic themselves. Both this lack of understanding and lack of acceptance of autistic people means that there is a risk to telling people that you are autistic because it can affect the way that they treat you. For example, people usually respond to me telling them that I am autistic in one of two ways: they either assume that I am incapable of particular things based on a stereotypical idea that they have of autism, or they will expect me to think and function like they do because I behave like they would expect a neurotypical person to. For me, these perceptions cause emotional distress and isolation, but they also create a pressure both to be 'autistic enough' and to prove that I am as capable as a neurotypical person. A 2018 study found that many other autistic people also feel a pressure to mask, and that this, and a lack of acceptance, can lead to poor mental health (Eilidh, Monaco, & Newell, 2018).

Being autistic in a neurotypical world and not always being accepted by people unless you fit in to their idea of ‘normal,’ which many autistic people do not, has also made me question my own acceptability as an autistic person and whether I should act ‘normal’ or not. I consider self-acceptance, good mental health, and a sense of belonging to be vital to success and happiness. As lack of autism awareness and acceptance from others can be isolating and upsetting, it is a barrier to that success. If the negative perceptions that students and staff members at university have of autism and disability aren’t challenged, they may think of autistic people as inferior, and may make negative assumptions about them. For example, when neurotypical students become employers, their perception of autistic people may affect whether they give an autistic person a job or not. According to the Office for National Statistics (2021), only 22% of autistic adults are employed, and I can’t help but wonder whether this has something to do with the lack of awareness and acceptance of autism that I have experienced in my own life.

If people are not aware of how autism can present, the strengths that can come with it, and the difficulties that can come with being in an environment that is set up only for neurotypical people, those people may not be able to make environments more inclusive. For example, I would really like to get a first-class degree at university, but it often takes me a while to plan assignments and to make sure that I’m including everything that I need to in them because the instructions that we are given do not clearly state what we need to include. It is assumed that everyone can understand what is implied by vague questions, but clarity has always been something that I need. I have learnt to overcompensate by really thinking about what lecturers might mean when they are asking a question, rather than what they are actually asking, and to ask questions to understand what I need to include in assignments to make sure that I succeed. This lack of clarity in assignment briefs is one example of a barrier to my success at university that comes from a lack of awareness of autism.

In the future, I would simply like a job that does not involve constant stress that is caused by a lack of inclusivity. I put a great deal of effort into everything that I do, and I know that I can do many jobs as well as, if not better than, some neurotypicals because I do have many strengths and a desire to work hard. However, I have found that the assumption that I know how to complete every task without clear instructions, the judgement and lack of clarity that I have received from colleagues when I have asked questions, poor organization, and a lack of understanding of autism from employers and colleagues have prevented me from being as good at my job as I could be and has caused my mental health to suffer. For the long-term success of autistic people like myself, people need to learn how to be inclusive employers and employees, possibly with specific training at university, so that autistic people can achieve professional success without great distress.

Important steps are being taken to remove some of these barriers. However, many of the barriers that can arise in the lives of autistic people like me seem to be rooted in a lack of awareness and acceptance of autism. The implication of this is that, while addressing specific issues and barriers is important—like the low employability rates of autistic adults in university—addressing these wider issues and perceptions that may also be contributing to, or directly causing, difficulties for autistic people is also necessary. Universities could do this by actively raising awareness of autism and challenging the negative perceptions of disability that students and staff members have. Institutions could also make practice more inclusive by researching and addressing issues

that may be shared by many autistic people, like the clarity of assignment instructions, as well as by ensuring that individualized support is given.

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