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# A Cognitively Enabling Approach: Cognitive Diversity In Composition Studies

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**A COGNITIVELY ENABLING APPROACH: COGNITIVE DIVERSITY IN  
COMPOSITION STUDIES**

by

**CRYSTAL J. STARKEY**

Submitted to the Graduate School

Of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2013

MAJOR: ENGLISH (Composition Studies)

Approved By:

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Advisor

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Date

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## **DEDICATION**

*For Professor Griff.*

*For Stark.*

*And, for Viv...of course.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank first and foremost my advisor, Dr. Jeff Pruchnic, at Wayne State University, without whose weekly advice, suggestions, interventions, and guidance this dissertation would never have been completed. A memorable moment for me was when Dr. P said “Hey...that sounds like quitter talk to me!” He was right, I was ready to quit, but he wouldn’t let me. I know, without a single doubt I would not have finished this PhD without Dr. Pruchnic’s encouragement, humor, flexibility, support, and uncanny knack for always finding creative ways to email and talk when I needed to, regardless of the day or time. Thank you, Dr. Pruchnic. Thank you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Cognitive Diversities and Composition Studies**

Since the discipline's formal emergence in the mid-twentieth century, scholars in Composition Studies have demonstrated consistent interest in marginalized identities, subjectivities, and discourse communities. One might argue there are two major rationales for this tendency. On the one hand, we might read the discipline's investment in social categories that have been historically disadvantaged in higher education as forming a series of dynamic responses to the changing demographics of college and university students. Such groups and such an interest are well represented, for instance, through various Composition scholars' shifting foci on GI Bill and working class students (Berlin, Giroux, Rose), at-risk students (Brice-Heath, Purcell-Gates), African American students (Delpit, Gilyard, Prendergast), female students (Flynn, Glenn, Wilson-Logan), queer students (Malinowitz, McRuer), etc., from the 1960s into the present. This first rationale shows steady change in response to a number of changing demographic factors, the shifting terrains of research into identity and its effect on pedagogy and learning that were taken on in the humanities and social sciences during the same time. On the other hand, however, Composition Studies scholars' interest in marginalized student groups has also quite often appeared to be a mission undertaken in the service of addressing a more consistent and specific problem: how will Composition Studies make itself "a discipline," a recognizable academic domain of research and praxis distinct from other areas of the humanities and having its own special perspectives and interests? In other words, focusing on questions of identity and subjectivity from the 1960's onward has allowed Composition Studies to carve out its own identity within English Studies and amongst

other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (sociology, education, etc.) that were becoming increasingly attuned to progressive politics and the questions of post-war critical and cultural theory. Indeed, one might argue that focusing on “identity” (identity politics, the nature of subjectivity) as an area of intellectual inquiry has often been called upon to solve Composition Studies’ own “identity crisis.”

Regardless of which rationale we take to be primary, however, given the discipline’s history of, and consistent investment in, marginal identities, it is somewhat odd that scholars have paid little attention to what is likely to be one of the most prevalent and fastest-growing of such populations in college classrooms: individuals with cognitive disabilities (or “diversities”) such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The California Department of Developmental Services reported a 273-percent increase in ASD diagnoses in the past decade, and a study conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that one out of every 165 children has some form of the disorders (2). According to the National Autism Association, one in every 88 children will be diagnosed with an ASD. According to the U.S Department of Education, students with disabilities are defined as:

Children with disabilities (IDEA) are children with intellectual disability, hearing impairment including deafness, speech or language impairment, visual impairment including blindness, serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, developmental delay, other health impairment, specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) according to an

individualized education program (IEP), individual family service plan (IFSP), or a services plan provided under IDEA. Note that for state level data, this count includes children ages 3-21. (4)

Because high-functioning autism and/or Asperger's Syndrome (HFA/AS)<sup>1</sup> is a mild form of autism and occurs on the opposite end of the autism spectrum than other, more severe forms of autism that might preclude an individual from pursuing higher education, it stands to reason that colleges and universities are seeing an influx of students with this pervasive development disorder (as discussed later in this dissertation, my own experience as a Composition instructor has also suggested an upswing in students with ASD student enrollment into higher education). Indeed, in response to such changes, many governmental and academic entities have begun devoting resources to serving students diagnosed with spectrum disorders. For instance, the Center for Excellence for Autism Spectrum Disorders is a collaborative venture of the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginian Commonwealth University, devoted to, in their own words, "serve as a focal point for research, professional development, and technical assistance in implementing research-based effective practices and comprehensive services for students with autism."

Symptoms of ASD can be difficult to notice; indeed, they are often only more intense versions of typical behaviors associated with common experiences of anxiety or social awkwardness (these include, for instance, such traits as one-sided interaction,

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<sup>1</sup> High Functioning Autism (HFA) is a term used to describe autistic people who are deemed to be "higher functioning" than other autistic people. There is no consensus to the definition of what "high functioning" means. HFA has not yet been recognized as a diagnosis in the DSM-IV. The amount of overlap between HFA and Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is disputed. Asperger's Syndrome is also an autism disorder. It is named for the Austrian pediatrician, Hans Asperger and his research on children, published in 1944. The Asperger diagnosis was added to the DSM-IV in 1994.

repetitive speech, poor non-verbal communication, intense absorption in certain subjects, clumsy and ill-coordinated movements/postures, social isolation, and/or an inability to make eye contact) (Atwood, *Asperger's* 113). Because of the specific nature of such disabilities, particularly the fact that they are not as readily apparent as the majority of physical disabilities, the issue of cognitive disabilities is both urgent and often ignored.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980's Mike Rose wrote influential studies of the ways in which literacy is connected to behavioral theories. This led scholars away from the habit-formation approach to education and to the "skill-based approach" and even further into what scholars have referred to as the "New Literacy Studies," where, according to John Duffy, education is conceived as fundamentally social—an expression of culture, values, and beliefs (8). According to Duffy, while New Literacy Studies "have been profoundly important, shifting focus away from the individual and psychological perspectives that have dominated education research over the last century to reveal the socially situated nature of written communication...New Literacy studies may be at an 'impasse,' having produced many necessary studies of literacy in cultural context yet still not having fully engaged the structural forces that shape the meanings of literacy and the implications of those forces for learners, especially minority learners" (9). This is especially true for students with an ASD who most people inaccurately consider unable/incapable of pursuing higher education. Moreover, Duffy argues "rhetorics are the languages of

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<sup>2</sup> Cognitive diversity refers to the acceptance of thinking differently—creating new opportunities for individuals. Leveraging this thinking power utilizes a diverse cognitive ability. Cognitive disability is often used to describe below-average cognitive ability; historically, the term focused purely on cognition, but over time the reference has come to include one's ability to function in their environment.

ideologies and offer the symbolic means through which ideologies become known and are imposed, shared, understood, or overthrown...Such treatments typically view literacy as instrumental, a means for assimilation into the dominant culture, political institutions, and economy for the United States” (17-18). In this way American culture is suffused with social constructions that devalue differences in beliefs and practices as well obscure the history through which various cultures promote or suppress literacy. In their article “Autism and Rhetoric,” one of very few to address autism within the Composition Studies scholarship, Paul Heilker and Melanie Yergeau contend that:

...autism itself is a rhetoric, a way of being in the world through language, a rhetoric we may not have encountered or recognized frequently in the past nor value highly in academic contexts, but a rhetoric nonetheless. If autism is a rhetoric, then we are beholden to respond to it with cultural sensitivity, ethical care, and pedagogical complexity. And if autism is a rhetoric and autistics are minority rhetors, English faculty already possess all the tools and experience they will need to do exactly that. (3)

Catherine Prendergast argues that people with various cognitive disabilities often find their mind having been reconstructed by the discipline of cultural psychiatry (*Embodied* 45). For Prendergast, “...disability studies, with its emphasis on the body and not the mind, creates fissures through which attention to the mentally disabled easily falls. One might ask if there are any discourses in which people with severe mental illness might comfortably reside. The rise of identity politics helped make possible the application of the rhetoric of rights to situations facing the mentally ill” (46-49). However, as the DSM’s have continually evolved and changed over time, thus so too have diagnoses

evolved and changed over time, which has ultimately led individuals' treatment changing as well.

Undoubtedly, it has been difficult for Composition scholars to take up this line of inquiry due to various reasons. For example, some scholars are worried that approaching this issue brings instructors dangerously close to conducting research into pedagogies for the learning disabled—a different field of research than Composition Studies and one for which most Composition scholars feel themselves not adequately trained. Composition teachers are concerned they would have to alter their pedagogy to accommodate students on the autism spectrum to such a degree that they would be “dumbing down” their content. Still further, Composition scholars are also often discouraged by problems in other areas, including the difficulties and ambiguities of diagnosis and disclosure, the broad range of traits and abilities on the autism spectrum, and the belief that this group of students will not or should not be in university classrooms. Beyond the consideration of autism as a topic, with the notable exception of works by Michael Berube and Stuart Murray, there has been very little in research pedagogy addressing students with ASD in the teaching of writing.<sup>3</sup>

My objective in this dissertation is to address the issue of cognitive disabilities in a way that will allow us to serve this discrete community as well as provide a fuller perspective on what we think of as disabilities/diversities in the writing classroom. My

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<sup>3</sup> In the May 2011 edition of *College English*, in their article “Autism and Rhetoric”, Paul Heilker and Melanie Yergeau contend that “...autism itself is a rhetoric, a way of being in the world through language, a rhetoric we may not have encountered or recognized frequently in the past nor value highly in academic contexts, but a rhetoric nonetheless. If autism is a rhetoric, then we are beholden to respond to it with cultural sensitivity, ethical care, and pedagogical complexity. And if autism is a rhetoric and autistics are minority rhetors, English faculty already possess all the tools and experience they will need to do exactly that.”

project, then, takes up the historical emergence of the autism spectrum and the challenges it poses to contemporary Disability Studies as well as Composition Studies research. Disability Studies has done a fine job of identifying and theorizing various cognitive disabilities, while Composition Studies has done a fine job of including various marginal and potentially at-risk groups into Composition pedagogies in the classroom. However, neither field has worked consistently to find an inclusive pedagogy that engages ASD, and ways in which Disability Studies and Composition Studies might intersect in addressing students with ASD in the college writing classroom. Rather, Disability Studies as a research interest within Composition Studies has primarily focused on physical disabilities. As I suggest later in this dissertation, the conflation of bodily and mental comportment within the rhetorical and writing pedagogical tradition has in many ways created limitations on our understanding of, and approaches to teaching, students with cognitive diversities, limitations that continue up into the present.

Similarly, to anticipate another legacy addressed later in these pages, our traditional considerations of the skills taught in the composition classroom as either mirroring and/or complicating the skills valued in the contemporary labor force are another way in which we might take up the study of students with ASD as intersecting more general and urgent concerns within the discipline as a whole. Labor has always been an important reference point in Disability Studies as well, in that, as many Disability Studies scholars have suggested, the disabled body forces us to rethink the body in terms of physical labor, while the cognitively diverse mind forces us to rethink the body in terms of intellectual labor. The case of students with an ASD is a particularly interesting one in this context in that this particular body often contains the very skill sets most

valued in today's progressive labor force (i.e. working from home with people who are working across the nation). Unlike our normal conception of the physically disabled body within Disability Studies as the body that cannot produce value through labor production, the cognitively diverse body can encompass the abilities to concentrate intensely for extended periods of time, to intuitively grasp complex technical systems, to perform long term memorization, to invent artistic approaches to technical problems, and to demonstrate an unusually high talent for mathematics and engineering, often in degrees statistically higher than individuals without ASD (Atwood, *Complete* 87). Some disability scholars maintain that disability is the social construction of industrial capitalism, that "...the process of industrialisation under capitalism is a major factor that has contributed to the prevalence of disability" (Davis, *Bending* 172). For my purposes, I am interested in the changing categories of labor, as well as the ways in which these shifts have altered the students in our classrooms as topics that are inseparable from our considerations of contemporary cognitive diversities as well as of composition pedagogy more generally. While all of these concerns are central to this dissertation and I return to them frequently, in the following pages of this introduction I provide a short context for each.

### **Cognitive Diversity and Disability Studies**

The diagnostic criteria for Asperger's Syndrome were first published in 1994 by the American Psychiatric Association, giving the condition a diagnostic history of only nineteen years. Due to this relatively short history, diagnosis itself is problematic; most of the medical theories of ASD are based on clinical impressions rather than scientific study,



and there is no uniform cognitive profile on an intelligence test that can be used as proof of an ASD diagnosis (Atwood, *Complete* 29). We do know, however, that on the whole the diagnosed high-functioning autism has seen a remarkable increase during these 19 years.

However, current research on diversity has, until recently, focused on gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation differences and excluded a focus on difference associated with cognitive disabilities. Only in the past few years has diversity created a space for disability discourse. Much disability research centers on the false dichotomy between able-bodied persons and “dis”abled persons, or those defined by their physical, functional limitations. The ideology of ableism—defined as “discrimination in favor of the able-bodied” and “discrimination against disabled body”—has often been, Lennard Davis argues, more “disabling” than the physical limitations of disabilities themselves (*Enabling* 11). Because we measure our bodies within the framework of an ableist society, we are simultaneously disabling *all* bodies which differ from that standard—creating a disabled culture which *emerges* from the values and practices within disabilities. It is within this alienation from the norm that people with HFA/AS are oppressed, marginalized, stigmatized, and stereotyped.

During the 70’s and 80’s, Disability Studies began to distinguish between disability and impairment. This social model of disability defined impairment as a biological difference, and disability as a social construction. Currently, Disability Studies is investigating the cultural model of disability—a model that dissects the ways in which people with disabilities experience their bodies and their environment (Linton, Mitchell, Snyder, Thomson). According to Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, “rather than

lacking a term exclusively referring to ‘social disadvantage,’ the cultural model has an understanding that impairment is both human variation encountering environmental obstacles and socially mediated difference” (10).

My objective in this dissertation is to address the issue of cognitive disabilities in reference to such pioneering work in the field of Disability Studies, a method that will allow Composition scholars and instructors to serve this discrete community as well as provide a fuller perspective on what we think of as disabilities/diversities in the writing classroom. As such, my dissertation takes up three lines of inquiry: 1) the effective teaching of students with ASD; 2) the historical identification of the intersection of bodily and mental comportment within the rhetorical and writing pedagogical tradition; and 3) the relationships between cognitive diversities, their diagnoses and treatment, and the connections between these phenomena and recent changes in labor and social power.

### **The (Disabled) Body in Rhetoric and Composition Studies**

Although Composition Studies has only recently attended to the “materiality” of the body, and even now largely through the proxy of affect (the embodied feeling, rather than embodied reasoning or the body itself), there is a long standing history of discussing the body and the pedagogical tradition of rhetoric. Indeed, the expert rhetorician is often identified as the polar opposite of the student with ASD. Debra Hawhee cites Greek terms such as *cronos*, *kairos*, and *metis*—which (and I am purposely oversimplifying here) mean duration, timing, and mode, respectively—to describe the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of rhetorical skill as defined and practiced by the Greek Sophists (66). Typically, students with HFA/AS lack understanding of some or all of these three categories in that within social situations, they often miss social

cues/subtleties, decipher literal interpretations of words, speak bluntly without regard for impact, and often focus on a single topic that may not be of interest to others. Students with ASD often do not have the *metis* to speak well, lack the concept of timing (*kairos*), and cannot conceive of appropriate length (*cronos*). Students with ASD frequently struggle with these abstracts, unseens, and unspokens. Generally, this is a result of having difficulty understanding social nuances, exercising poor judgment of personal space, using abnormal inflection and eye contact, and experiencing great difficulty using and understanding non-verbal gestures (Williams).

Further, contemporary training in Composition still very much relies on the sophistic emphasis on the ability to adjust arguments, speeches, and other means of persuasion according to the character of the audience, while for students with ASD audiences don't matter as much as what they are trying to communicate, so presentation often remains the same for all audiences. With no ability to conceptualize or exercise these idealized sophistic strategies, these students remain at a massive disadvantage in society because our communicative commonplaces (as well as those of composition pedagogy) are imbedded within sophistic “norms” and ideals to such an extent that differences are often equated to inadequacies (these disadvantages are exemplified in the classroom in forms of disruption, which I discuss later).

It is my hope that my research will provide a different perspective on the ways in which cognitive diversities fit into the field of Rhetoric and Composition as well as the ways in which Rhetoric and Composition intersects with Disability Studies. Disability Studies research pervades every aspect of civic and pedagogic spaces, and people with disabilities have often resisted the definitions and “cures” imposed on them by others. By

positioning Disability Studies at the center of composition pedagogy I hope to show that an informed pedagogical approach can undo this compulsive, able-bodied identity and create spaces where collective (dis)identifications can sustain conflict within the walls of the composition classroom and beyond.

### **Toward a Cognitively Enabling Classroom**

The most immediate and pragmatic contribution my project will make to Composition Studies is to offer a feasible enabling classroom approach for high functioning students with cognitive disabilities. In this objective, I am guided by Brenda Jo Brueggemann's book, *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* and the enabling pedagogy she discusses, which argues for inclusion in all classrooms for deaf students. Brueggemann argues that a variety of pedagogical practices are particularly discriminating to students with certain physical and mental abilities and often conflate physical disabilities with diminished or limited intellectual ability. For instance, Brueggemann positions St. Augustine's concept, which contends that "faith comes by hearing," as an example of the ways in which traditional notions of learning have typically disadvantaged the disabled. For Brueggemann, if we follow Augustine in presuming that faith can come only from hearing, then those who are deaf cannot hear the voice of faith and/or reason. Subsequently, Brueggemann argues that contemporary variations on Augustine's commonplace reasoning continue to preclude people with disabilities from being perceived as able to succeed in higher education. The effects of this are obviously debilitating in that the assumptions behind the pedagogical practices are too reliant in attaching intelligence to physical abilities. While I hope to incorporate many of Brueggemann's strategies, my approach, obviously, will be focused on cognitive

disabilities and more specifically students with ASD in the composition classroom.

I am also additionally inspired by the work of Susan Peters in this regard. Peters maintains that in order for people with disabilities to be successful in the classroom, they must often fulfill the very roles of social oppression that have created their “disabled” label in the first place. To combat this, Peters suggests pedagogical strategies that combine theory and practice to “form a new educational praxis of transformation and liberation from oppression that enables students labeled as disabled to find their own voice, to rediscover a positive identity, and to gain literacy skills through empowerment and self-discovery” (154). Undoubtedly, people with disabilities will continue to be oppressed and excluded from normative avenues to literacy without such a cognitively diverse pedagogy. Because this purposeful or accidental exclusion continues, people with disabilities are, in their “ignorance”—which people with abled bodies have created and ultimately forced people with disabilities into—seen as a threat to wholeness, morality, and social values (Brueggemann, *Embodied* 118). Brueggemann’s enabling pedagogy is also partially based on her analysis of Quintilian’s *vir bonus*—the “good man speaking well”—as a means of revisiting disability within the confluence of literacy. She argues that “the good man” and “speaking well” are two separate, distinct and very different aspects of literacy. And, for people with disabilities, both create a challenge. Disabilities, whether mental, emotional or physical, often create a sense disruption within the non-disabled body, which all but dispels the hope of being “the good man”; the same occurs within “speaking well.” Herein, the humanistic tradition only furthers the isolation and rejection of bodies with disabilities from education, which increases their chances of poverty, ignorance and unemployment—exacerbating the problem. A cognitively

enabling classroom would address such exacerbation.

A second contribution my project will make is to our theoretical and practical conception of disabilities in Composition studies more generally. In a broad sense, ASD is an odd category because we typically think about disability as a distinction made on a bodily, physiological basis, and thus it is often connected to notions of vision or sight (that ability to “see” the disabilities of other individuals), but HFA/AS is often undetected or detected through different means. Further, autism is a disability that resides on a spectrum (i.e. there are vastly different degrees of symptoms within the classification as a whole). Indeed, scholars have argued that nearly everyone can be placed somewhere on the autism spectrum (Atwood, Shore). Cognitive disabilities shatter our typical notion of disability because it diffuses popular perspectives of what it means to be disabled. The perception of cognitive disability is not necessarily recognized through direct sight. Importantly, given my interests here, it is often through rhetorical performances that this type of cognitive disability is revealed. In this sense, my project gives us a chance to think of disability as something that can be responded to through the domain of rhetoric (the address and manifestation of a disability through persuasive communicative performance).

### **Description of Study and Research Methodology**

In the following chapters, I present research on the ways in which autism affects students’ classroom experience as well as their writing process in the introductory college writing course, English 111, at Delta College, a mid-sized mid-western rural community college, which opened its doors in September of 1961 to 1,800 students. Today, Delta College enrolls nearly 16,500 students annually. More than 87 percent of Delta graduates

have stayed in Michigan, and more than 63 percent reside in its Tri-County area (Bay, Midland, and Saginaw). Being an open enrollment institution aligns with Delta’s mission statement to “...educate, inspire, challenge, and support a diverse community of learners to achieve academic, professional, and personal excellence” (Delta). Additional information about Delta’s student demographics is included in the chart below.

Degree/ Certificates	2,742 students earned a degree or certificate in the 2010-2011 school year.
Enrollment	Fall 2011: 11,498 students enrolled Winter 2011: 11,765 students enrolled
Financial Aid	60% of Delta students receive some type of financial aid: 715 Delta students were awarded \$1,039,236 in scholarships (These include Delta endowed and institutional scholarships and community funds).
Status	40% of Delta students are full-time (12 or more credits) 60% of Delta students are part-time
Class Distribution	26.3% of course offerings are daytime classes 6.6% of course offerings are evening only classes 61.3% of course offerings are combination day and evening classes 0.1% of course offerings are weekend only classes 5.6% of course offerings are online and other education classes
Gender	54.5 % of Delta students are female 45.5% of Delta students are male
Age	29.7% of Delta students are 19 and younger 33.6% of Delta students are between ages 20 – 24 13% of Delta students are between ages 25 – 29 18% of Delta students are between ages 30 – 44 5.7% of Delta students are ages 45 and over
Ranking	65.2% of Delta students are freshmen (this equates to approximately 7,494 students) 34.8% of Delta students are sophomores (this equates to approximately 4,004 students)
Ethnicity	79.5% of Delta students are Caucasian 10.1% of Delta students are African American 5.5% of Delta students are Hispanic 0.6% of Delta students are multi-racial 0.5% of Delta students are Native American

	1% of Delta students are Asian
	1.1% of Delta students are International
	1.7% of Delta students are non-coded
Ethnography	Located in the middle of three counties, Delta College calculates its enrollment by these counties:
	42.4% of Delta students are from Saginaw County (this equates to approximately 4,876 students)
	27.1% of Delta students are from Bay County (this equates to approximately 3,114 students)
	14.6% of Delta students are from Midland county (this equates to approximately 1,682 students)
	15.9% of Delta students are from other surrounding counties

The number of students with an ASD who self-disclosed with the Delta College Office of Disability Resources Office per year has increased significantly in the last decade from two records in 2002 to twenty-three in 2012 (Cooper). Because students with an ASD had to volunteer to participate in the study and thus had to have self-disclosed to the Delta College Disability Resources Office—as it is illegal to inquire whether a student has a disability—I composed a recruiting email (See Chapter three), which I sent to the Director of the Disability Services Office. The Director then forwarded this email to all students who identified as having autism or Asperger’s syndrome. From there, students who were willing to participate in the study contacted me, and we completed the interview studies (See Chapter three), which took a minimum of two separate sessions.<sup>4</sup>

My research questions for the first session focused on my participants’ demographics and college classroom experience. I asked questions which would provide

<sup>4</sup> All emails, questions, and permission forms were approved by Wayne State University’s and Delta College’s Institutional Review Board. All students in this study read (and discussed with me) an explanation of my research, its benefits and risks to them, their voluntary decision to participate, and my assurance of their confidentiality and anonymity.



me with background information about their individual experiences with ASD both inside the classroom and beyond. I also asked questions which gave my participants an opportunity to explain their daily experiences with ASD as well as their perspective on what it takes to truly understand someone with ASD. The questions that focused on their college classroom experience sought to discover their level of comfort with professors, teaching strategies, classroom topics, and instructors' choices for in-class information delivery. In my mind this meta-cognition follows what scholars like Brueggeman, Mitchel, or Snyder, and others argue in claiming that students with disabilities are their own agents, and no one can speak to their experience better than they can. The research questions for the second session focused more on participants' specific writing processes and, specifically, their college writing classroom experiences. My focus in this second session was to have participants reflect on their personal writing process and the individual choices and paths each took or did not take along the way. It is my hope these questions will provide a better understanding of writing processes for students with ASD. With the exception of my name and faculty/staff members at both Delta College and Wayne State University, all names have been replaced with a pseudonym. Using a tape recorder, I recorded both sessions with each participant. During each session, I also actively took notes clarifying any answer which I might later misconstrue or confuse. Most of the participants asked to see my notes, which I shared with them. Finally, I transcribed each session for each participant. Over the course of one academic year, I completed six of these transcribed interviews.

The students who participated in my research: Eli, Jake, Penny, Mona, and John, are members of a growing minority group—students with autism spectrum disorders.

Such students are a seemingly unexpected or often unnoticed minority within composition classrooms and the public discourses of Composition Studies. This perception reflects the general lack of knowledge about these students; it also reflects the fact that these students are overwhelmingly not recognized. While students with ASD are quite aware of the impact their autism has on their success in Composition courses, it is my hope that this dissertation will provide something approaching this awareness on behalf of instructors, as well as theoretical and practical strategies that can be used in the classroom within which they teach and learn.

### **Conclusion**

As Mitchell and Snyder note, there has been an “ominous silence within the humanities” concerning disabilities: “[p]erhaps because disabilities are exclusively narrated as debilitating phenomena in need of medical intervention and correction, the humanities have not privileged disability as a foundational category of social experience or symbolic investment” (1). As they go on to argue, studies of disability have the potential to help clear an inclusionary path for the invisibility of disabled academics. But, I would argue we must reach even further back to our students with disabilities before we can expect to see a growing population of disabled academics or more general attention to the particulars of cognitive disabilities as a whole; in other words, we need to develop a cognitive enabling classroom.

A cognitive enabling classroom would be particularly useful in this regard, because, as James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson argue “difference challenges traditional assumptions and epistemologies,” and it is these very differences, of students with HFA/AS, within the walls of the composition classroom I hope to analyze and

respond to (Wilson, *Disability* 296). Admittedly, open discussion about disability in the classroom can pose a risk of defining the person by their disability, and/or cause the person with the disability to be stared at as representation of the Other, but silence only reinforces the inappropriate and incorrect widespread stereotypes Disability Studies is attempting to re-define. And, while teachers are limited in certain areas of change in their institution of learning, Lewiecki-Wilson and Wilson argue all teachers are capable of the following much-needed changes: “making creative adaptations in teaching; enhancing access; and representing disability in the classroom” (300). Still further, Lewiecki-Wilson and Wilson maintain that introducing disability as a critical modality and as a community is not enough. Rather, the classroom should be a transformed “third space” where teachers and students are rethinking pedagogy as an “engagement with disability itself” (302), so that students understand how “everyday assumptions constitute an ableist point of view as well as a recognition of how non-ableist points of view complicate and might transform social practices” (303). According to Lewiecki-Wilson and Wilson, assignments in such a classroom might enable students to “analyze cultural images of the disabled, explore new ways of representing the disabled in their writing, or reflect on the critical issues of difference in our culture” (304). Ideally, students would cease hearing (dis)abled voices as the voice of victimhood, bias, injury, and/or the mainstream-versus-minority, but rather, hear and “see the disabled as a culture and the disability as a social construction” (305). In asking students to conceptualize their experiences with disability, we must raise questions, which “turn a critical lens back on us and our projects, challenging students to think about the boundaries among academic disciplines, community, and discursive spaces” (306).

Disability has never been a monolithic population, and because the enormous diversity of disability itself differs from any other minority groups, experiences of cultural devaluation and socially imposed restrictions are often more varied and thus distinct from the historical experience of these other groups, despite our tendency to link them together. To this day, cognitive diversity has often been lumped with discourses of physical disability, emphasizing the fact that we have been rather imprecise with how we coordinate marginal identities. As Stuart Murray argues, the autistic presence contains its own logic and methods, which must be fully understood from inside-out (much like the composing process) because autism is a way of being in this world that does not require a treatment or condition (6). Within disability research, however, there is a noticeable lack of study on disabilities that are more subtly defined, that do not fit neatly into an artificial dichotomy. People with a high functioning cognitive disability such as HFA/AS, reflect a range of characteristics which fall somewhere on such a broadly defined spectrum that it remains quite difficult for professionals to generalize and educators to identify (and thus) serve. Although a single study such as this cannot possibly solve this problem in Composition Studies, my intention here is to begin the hard work of identifying practices inclusive to students with HFA/AS. Though we may not overcome this challenge anytime soon, it is my hope to provide a basic foundation from which current and future Composition scholars can work to discover the best ways in which not only to understand this rapidly growing group but also to most effectively teach all students in our classrooms.

## CHAPTER 2

### **The Emergence of Autism and the Cultures of Cognitive Diversity**

While autism is a biological developmental disorder, it is diagnosed on the basis of behavior. Although one might presume that high functioning autism has existed as an undiagnosed condition for a much longer time, unlike more severe varieties of autism, symptoms of high functioning autism and/or Asperger's syndrome (HFA/AS) (such as one-sided interaction, repetitive speech, poor non-verbal communication, intense absorption in certain subjects, clumsy and ill-coordinated movements/postures, social isolation, and/or an inability to make eye contact) can be difficult to notice. While these tendencies are often only more intense versions of typical behaviors associated with common experiences of anxiety or social awkwardness, when considered as components of an ASD diagnosis, such actions are often deemed a "developmental disorder due to a dysfunction of specific structures and systems in the brain," and AS is sometimes thought to be a physiological problem in that the cerebellum can appear smaller in people with AS than those without (Atwood, *Guide* 144). According to Tony Atwood, there are three potential causes of Autism: "...genetic factors, unfavorable obstetric events and infections during the pregnancy or early infancy that affect the brain" (*Guide* 143). Atwood and other researchers are further investigating the possibility of a fourth cause: "...the result of specific viral or bacterial infections during or soon after birth" (*Guide* 143). Defining diagnosis criteria for ASD is not easy; identifying the multitude of ways these various symptoms can play out within human beings can be even more difficult. Atwood notes "...at present there is no universal agreement on diagnostic criteria. Currently, clinicians have a choice of four sets of criteria, two developed by

organizations, two by clinicians” (*Asperger’s* 22). In this chapter I analyze the development of the diagnosis of ASD as well as how that diagnosis has been interpreted and circulated culturally, using two different interpretive frameworks: J. Blake Scott’s cultural-technical analysis as introduced in his study *Risky Rhetoric* (2003) and Georges Canguilhem’s historiographic method for studying the cultural construction of medical normativity as described in *The Normal and the Pathological* (1943). Canguilhem’s study of normalization and what Scott calls a “rhetorical-cultural” approach to HIV testing reflect complementary analytical frameworks for reading the cultural forces active in the clinical designation and popular understanding of diagnostic categories, frameworks I will apply to the cultural discourses surrounding autism. I chose Canguilhem’s text as a framework for my analysis in part because it is a seminal text in the humanistic studies of the cultures of diagnosis and pathology, but also because it is particularly evocative for my work with students with an ASD (a condition that, like many of those studied by Canguilhem, has been defined and diagnosed in references to cultural understandings of the “normal” as much as by empirical medical testing). In particular, his study of the construction of normalcy and difference in medical contexts is useful to my research because it complements (and in some ways expands) available approaches developed within Composition Studies and Disability Studies. Scott’s framework, developed specifically within Rhetoric & Composition Studies, but with a strong Cultural Studies component, is also a particularly insightful resource for my interest in studying the ways that representations of autism in popular media influence Composition students’ understanding of cognitive diversities, and their expectations about the abilities of students with ASD.

Thus, while both of these approaches are more traditionally used to analyze the cultural implications of physical diseases or used in cultural analyses of research into pathology, I am suggesting these approaches can be useful in thinking through cognitive diversities on the ASD as well as how such a diagnosis circulates within our culture. Doing so will lay some important groundwork and make more explicit the issues that explain and provide context for the next few chapters of this dissertation, which are focused on questions of pedagogy and classroom accommodation. While I cannot provide anything like a comprehensive history of the emergence of autism as a clinical category in the twentieth century, my analysis below is meant to highlight the complicated cultural and social factors surrounding its appearance in both medical discourse and popular culture. Its circulation as a concept in these discourses has in many ways formed the “public face” of autism. Analyzing this framework will thus help us better understand how autism classifications have developed as well as what defines normal and abnormal within such diagnoses.

### **Canguilhem and Scott on the Cultures of Medical Normativity**

For Canguilhem, normality is a metaphorical delineation defined in clinical terms of medicine and biology as well as the cultural production and institutionalization of medical knowledge itself: “[n]ormal is that which bends neither to the right nor left, hence that which remains in a happy medium; from which two meanings are derived: (1) normal is just that which is such that it ought to be; (2) normal, in the most usual sense of the word, is that which is met with in the majority of cases of a determined kind, or that which constitutes either the average or standard of a measurable characteristic” (125). According to Canguilhem, to truly see a human being, we must conceive of them on the

basis of an individual's relation to their "milieu" or environment (both physical and cultural), rather than on the basis of physical mechanics or technics conceived in an abstract sense, a move that conflates the individual with machines and deprives them of their cultural contexts. In other words, while the normal and pathological may be two separate pillars of medicine, we certainly could not define one without the other. The normal is symptomless and therefore does not register on our psyche, yet the abnormal deviates from the symptomless state and therefore draws our attention. More specifically, Canguilhem studies the ways in which disease (and therefore health) was defined with the onset of biology as a formal science in the 19th century and continuing into the twentieth. For Canguilhem, the categories defining the normal and the pathological are far from objective; indeed, it would seem that health and disease are a mere set of "securities" as well as "insecurities." We list our securities in relation to our health, while our insecurities grow more evident when we are faced with or close to disease. To be in good health, then, implies one being able to become sick but ultimately recover—a biological luxury, and thus a security. Thus, through disease (insecurity), we learn to appreciate the normal (security). As Canguilhem argues, the definition of the normal and the pathological depends upon the specific circumstances in which they are observed: "[e]very disease has a corresponding normal function of which it is only disturbed, exaggerated, diminished, or obliterated expression" (68).

The power dynamics of how such circumstances have been forgotten in medical diagnosis occupy the center of J. Blake Scott's study of HIV testing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault, Scott explores the ways in which a rhetorical-cultural analysis of the cultural discourses surrounding HIV



testing reveal the ways in which social power is exerted over individual bodies as well as over entire populations. For Scott, the rhetorical-cultural approach not only allows us to analyze the socio-rhetorical practices of science and technology, but also examine the ways in which those practices affect broader cultural formations and ideologies (20). Through Scott's rhetorical-cultural analysis, the power of HIV testing is seen as not only unresponsive action based on testing results, but also as a dangerous phenomenon for both bodies deemed normal as well as those deemed "risky." Scott argues that "protection through detection" does more to detect, manage, label, and in some ways punish people diagnosed with HIV than it does to protect people who are defined as normal members of the general population. Through such overestimation of the benefits of testing as well as the simultaneous denial of testing's harmful effects, people's ideas of HIV testing have been significantly skewed toward false information. For Scott, such a rhetorical approach involves not only applying rhetorical theory to critique diagnostic frameworks but also tracking the "...functions and transformations of testing across various cultural arenas, to account for the ways rhetoric works with extramaterial actors, and to focus on testing's subject-related effects" (4).

Applying these two interpretive frameworks—Canguilhem's work on normal and abnormal as well as Scott's framework of a rhetorical-cultural lens—to my own research, gives me powerful tools with which to analyze the cultural representations of ASD. Like Scott, my goal is not only to analyze but to intervene. I am not interested in a theoretical argument that merely troubles the boundaries of autism in the abstract; I aim to rebuild those boundaries in more ethical ways through a Cognitively Enabling Classroom, which I explain in chapter four.

### **The Normal, the Pathological, and the Emergence of Autism**

Autism's history began in 1908 when Eugene Bleuler coined the term "autism" when describing schizophrenic patients who kept to themselves and appeared self-absorbed. The root word stems from the Greek word *autos*, which refers to self. The suffix, *ismos* refers to an action or being of state. Thus, the word autism characterizes morbid self-absorption. In 1943, the American psychiatrist, Leo Kanner, identified 11 children with remarkably similar characteristics in terms of impaired social interaction, strong memory, anxiety over change(s), sensitivity to certain stimuli (sound, sight, etc.), significant intellectual potential, belated echolalia, and talented familial history. Kanner referred to these students as autistic. In 1944, Hans Asperger described a similar group of children, who he referred to as "autistic psychopaths." Asperger's delineation of a specific sort of autism was the first to suggest that categories of autism existed. While both Kanner and Asperger noted that the children talked like little grown-ups, Asperger also mentioned their clumsy motor activity. Asperger's work was not translated into English until the end of the 1980's. Since then, research on the autism spectrum disorder has exploded, and some of the research points to basic causes such as neurological and/or metabolic disturbances, hereditary illnesses, and/or chromosomal aberrations. Autism registers as a spectrum with various characteristics, but there remain enough similarities that they are still able to be grouped under the same diagnosis. Because the autism spectrum varies from highly retarded to extremely gifted and eccentric, autism manifests itself in many different ways.

In the ninth revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) infantile autism was considered a psychosis (Cox 259). This is an example of the socialization of

disease criteria that Canguilhem describes as a difference between “norm” and “normative.” He writes in *The Normal and the Pathological* “...the sick man is not abnormal because of the absence of a norm but because of his incapacity to be normative” (186). Indeed, the psychosis of infantile autism is due not to the absence of a norm defining the ways in which childlike behavior should be assessed, but rather to the child’s inability to act in accordance to expectations. Alternately, when the autism diagnosis was defined in 1978 and, later, originally included in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder* (DSM III), the condition was labeled not a psychosis occurring in children, but rather as a deviation of several developmental processes— something Canguilhem touches on as well in his research. According to Canguilhem, new norms can be established based on deviances. For Canguilhem, establishing new norms is a matter of altering the normal, that is, the previous environment: “Disease is a positive, innovative, experience in the living being and not just a fact of decrease or increase. The content of the pathological state cannot be deduced, save for a difference in format, from the content of health; disease is not a variation on the dimension of health; it is a new dimension of life” (186). The progress in thought displayed in the third edition of the DSM (from disability to deviation) was not continued in the revised third edition, the DSM-III-R. The DSM-III-R’s categorization of autism supported its placement within the field of pervasive development disorders (PDD) (Wolff 738). But the positives of the revised third edition end there.

In his review of the DSM-III-R criteria for autistic disorders, Peter Szatmari evaluated five data sets of the psychometric properties of the new DSM-III-R criteria for autism, which indicated that the criteria have “very good sensitivity, but much lower

specificity. The implications of this are (a) greater numbers of children diagnosed as autistic; (b) greater numbers of children misdiagnosed as autistic; (c) greater heterogeneity among samples of autistic children. In essence, the DSM-III-R criteria act more like screening tests than diagnostic criteria” (507). Here one might ask what is the spectrum of “normal”? How close does one end of the “normal” spectrum come to one end of the autism spectrum? As Canguilhem argues, “[i]f the normal does not have the rigidity of a fact of collective constraint but rather the flexibility of a norm which is transformed in its relation to individual conditions, it is clear that the boundary between the normal and the pathological becomes imprecise” (182). This imprecise borderline between the normal and the pathological occurs when examined for several individuals simultaneously, but the borderline becomes definitively precise when the same individual is examined continuously. Canguilhem goes on to argue “In order to be normative in given conditions, what is normal can become pathological in another situation if it continues identical to itself” (182). While our clinical understanding of autism has moved toward a well-established diagnostic category, the autism diagnosis continues to significantly widen by the notion of the autism spectrum.

Such a spectrum points even more toward HFA/AS reflecting a cognitive diversity rather than a disability; or, as Canguilhem notes, one speaks of “health” only because “diseases” exist (118). It is no wonder, then, given these variables, higher education is seeing an influx of students with these pervasive development disorders. Indeed, a study conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that one out of every 165 children has some form of the disorders. According to Canguilhem, “...the pathological or abnormal state does not consist in the absence of

every norm. Disease is still a norm of life but it is an inferior norm in the sense that it tolerates no deviation from the conditions in which it is valid, incapable as it is of changing itself into another norm. The sick living being is normalized in well-defined conditions of existence and has lost his normative capacity, the capacity to establish other norms in other conditions” (183). For Canguilhem, the various depths and levels of normal and what is diseased seems also to lie on a certain type of spectrum. While Canguilhem studies this process in a critical way, autism scholars not only defined people with autism from people without autism through deviance of the non-autistic norm, but also defined what a “normal” person with autism is from a non-normal autistic within the confines of the ASD and/or the spectrum of norm and deviance.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the Neurodevelopmental Disorders Workgroup met in April 2009 to discuss potential changes to the DSM-V. These changes reflect the need for consistency in diagnosis. To do this, the workgroup proposed to separate the diagnosis PDD from the diagnosis Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); this is, I take it, a good example of what Canguilhem discusses regarding the ways in which disease labels “isolate” people from label to label. In addition to narrowing the diagnosis the Neurodevelopmental Disorders workgroup sought to better reflect the “symptomology and clinical presentation of ASD.” Currently, there are three symptom domains: social deficit, communication deficit, or fixated interest/repetitive behavior. The proposed changes reduce these to two symptom domains: social communication deficit, or fixated interests/repetitive behavior. Moreover, the APA seeks to dispose of the current term, Mental Retardation (MR), which is often used to describe people with PPD and ASD, and replace it with the term, Intellectual

Disabilities. Altering this term, however, has also led to further language and category proposed changes. The current MR categories are: Mild MR; Moderate MR; Severe MR; Profound MR. The proposed change to the Intellectual Disabilities category is a choice between 1) IQ and 2) Adaptive Functioning.

Although Linda Lockyer and Michael Rutter showed in 1967 that autism and mental retardation frequently co-occurred (Feinstein 170), Leo Kanner's research in 1943 "made a clear distinction between intellectual retardation and autism" (Feinstein 173). Utilizing IQ tests and what had become common language (such as infantile autism, child psychosis, childhood schizophrenia) to discuss children who displayed the behaviors Kanner's research documented, Rutter found that "most children who fit the criteria of autism were also intellectually retarded" (qtd in Feinstein 173). However, later in 1978, Lorna Wing and Judit Gould introduced their theory of the "autistic spectrum," which broadened the definition of autism significantly (Feinstein 174). Indeed by 1979 the term "infantile autism" had been replaced with "autistic disorder" (180). In 1980 Eric Schopler and Robert Reichler developed the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS), which was "the most widely used standardized instrument specifically designed to aid in the diagnosis of autism for use with children as young as two years of age" (Feinstein 177). According to Feinstein, CARS was used to help practitioners distinguish children with ASD from other cognitive and developmental disorders as well as mental retardation. "Eric developed the CARS to demystify autism, to remove it from the shrouds of psychoanalysis" (Mesibov qtd in Feinstein 177). By 1981 Lorna Wing had coined the term "Asperger's syndrome." Hans Asperger believed what Wing was referring to with her Asperger's syndrome label was a different condition entirely from autism. Wing did

not believe Asperger's syndrome to be a separate condition from autism, but rather that Asperger's syndrome lay on the autism spectrum. According to Feinstein, "they discussed the matter together when Asperger visited London in the late 1970's, and agreed to differ" (179). In the late 1980's two diagnostic tools, the Autism Diagnostic Interview (ADI) and the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) were created and are extensively used throughout the world to this day. Critics of the ADI and ADOS argue that the expense and sheer investment of time it takes to complete both tools make the ADI and ADOS prohibitive and inefficient (185). As we approach autism's history into the millennium, it is easy to agree with Feinstein when he states that "Diagnosis of autism remains difficult because the best early indicators involve the absence of consistent social and communication behaviors, rather than the presence of an abnormality" (183).

While the 2009 edition was the first major revision to the ASD portion of the DSM since its inception in 1994, these changes could reduce the ever-increasing rate of the ASD diagnosis. The changes the APA have proposed to the ASD will most likely exclude people with a higher functioning diagnosis: "the proposed change would consolidate all three diagnoses under one category, autism spectrum disorder, eliminating Asperger syndrome from the manual. Under the current criteria, a person can qualify for the diagnosis by exhibiting six or more of the 12 behaviors; under the proposed definition, the person would have to exhibit three deficits in social interaction and communication and at least two repetitive behaviors, a much narrower menu" (Carey). The potential impact on students with HFA/AS could be dramatic if these proposed changes do not allow for higher functioning autism as part of the DSM-V diagnosis, then

the students who will most likely be successful in college will be unable to obtain the services and accommodations they need. Some treatments and services are determined by a person's diagnosis, but others often depend on other criteria such as I.Q. level or medical history. Using data from the previously mentioned 1993 study, Dr. Fred R. Volkmar, Director of the Child Study Center at the Yale School of Medicine, and his associates studied 372 children and adults who were considered the highest functioning participants in their study. Under the proposed changes to the diagnosis criteria, of those 372 children and adults who were considered the highest functioning of the study participants, only 45% of them would qualify for the proposed ASD diagnosis currently being considered. In all, "about a quarter of those identified with classic autism in 1993 would not be so identified under the proposed criteria; about three quarters of those with Asperger Syndrome would not qualify" (Carey). Volkmar acknowledges the proposed diagnosis criteria will focus more tightly on "classically autistic" people, so the inevitable major impact is assuredly on the more cognitively able—the ones we are seeing and will continue to see an influx of in higher education.

In a 1994 article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Volkmar argues that while the initial diagnosis criteria in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) ICD-10 and the criteria published in the DSM-IV are rather similar, the criteria published in the DSM-III and DSM-III-R are much more broad and lead to many false diagnoses. In an attempt to regulate this, the DSM-IV reverted back to the more clinical description of required criteria for an autism diagnosis. Currently, the proposed changes for DSM-V seeks to narrow the ASD diagnosis criteria further than ICD-10 and DSM-IV to the extent that higher functioning people would be completely eliminated. Setting criteria for



and the actual act of diagnosis must be deliberately and responsively developed. It would seem, based on the historical precedence regarding the diagnosis criteria of ASD, that in the past policymakers and officials may have moved too quickly to implement an expanded or narrowed definition of and diagnosis criteria for ASD without careful deliberation. Autism scholars and DSM associates initially moved toward a more broad, encompassing diagnosis; because of their broad approach (and thus loosely defined criteria) as well as the multitude of ways various behaviors can play out in relation to individuals, the diagnosis ‘autism’ could have meant almost anything. This relates to the current questions the APA is wrestling with regarding the difference between the abnormal and the unusual. Where is the line? Admittedly, the public health at large and overall cultural responses to autism “have primarily been concerned with regulating subjectivity and embodied subjects according to notions of risk,” a tendency that Canguilhem has suggested is ubiquitous in the history of medical diagnoses of this type (231).

Indeed, students on the higher functioning end of the autism spectrum, who are able to engage in to meta-cognitive processes, would not think of themselves as having an affliction or a disease. Rather, students with autism often cite their ASD as helpful insight to see the world differently than people who are not autistic. Prominent autistic and doctor of Animal Science Temple Grandin, a professor at Colorado State University, has been an outspoken advocate of such a perspective. As a best-selling author and consultant to the livestock industry on animal behavior, Grandin is also noted for her high functioning autism advocacy and her invention of the squeeze machine, designed to calm hypersensitive people. More recently however, she has also drawn attention to the ways

in which even ostensibly objective and empirical measurements of cognitive ability may conflict with our presumption that individuals with ASD suffer from diminished capacities. As she writes, in reference to brain scanning diagnostic procedures:

Frontal lobe functions are the first to go, whether the problem is a traumatic head injury, a developmental disability, old age, or just plain lack of sleep...every other part of the brain is connected to [the frontal lobes]. When you damage any part of the brain, you change input to the frontal lobes, and when you change input, you change output. If the frontal lobes are getting the right input, they don't produce the right output even though structurally they're fine. So all brain damage ends up looking like frontal lobe damage, whether the frontal lobes are damaged or not...if you compared the brain scan of an autistic child to the scan of a sixty-year old CEO, the autistic child's brain would look better. In other words, the normal brain shrinkage people experience with ages makes your brain look more "abnormal" than autism does. (56)

Though people with autism are extremely sensitive to many sounds in their environment, the brain must process all sensory data. And, while inattention blindness is a result of high level mental processing which processes everything before choosing what to allow into our consciousness, people with autism are different in that they often have difficulty filtering out extraneous input and are often overwhelmed by the multitude of sensory details entering their awareness. For Grandin, this merely means that non-autistic people are "generalists" (263). According to Temple Grandin, smaller cerebellums aren't necessarily a problem. Instead, the smaller cerebellums are precisely what allows people with ASD to think abstractly and visually. Thus for Grandin, it is because of Autism that

she, and others like her see the world as it exists, rather than as they think (or are taught to think) it exists. According to Catherine Prendergast, “The growing literature on disability would seem a natural place to turn to find such language, yet it seems that disability studies, with its emphasis on the body and not the mind, creates fissures through which attention to the mentally disabled easily falls. One might ask if there are any discourses in which people with severe mental illness might comfortably reside” (*Buying* 46). Through the analysis of a friend with Schizophrenia who stated she is aware that her mind has been “reconstructed by the discipline of psychiatry,” Prendergast discusses the ways in which the psychiatric system validates “the impact of disciplinary formations on the construction” of patients’ thoughts (*Buying* 45). Indeed, as DSM’s change, diagnoses change, and thus treatment changes.

In further connection to Canguilhem’s argument that disease is nature’s way of working to find a new equilibrium in man, Michael Berube discusses the various types of students who have enrolled in his classes over the years and the ways in which they differ. For Berube, while all students differ in different ways, his approach remains the same: reasonable accommodation. This varied accommodation is important for all students, including students with ASD<sup>5</sup>. Scholars like Berube argue that regardless of the type of accommodation, the goal is always the pursuit of independent intellectual inquiry.

According to Prendergast, “A poststructuralist perspective suggests that insanity is a discursive construct, expressed, reinforced, and sometimes subverted by public

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<sup>5</sup> This quote from Berube is used in Chapter 4, but the information is relevant here as well: To all such students—indeed, to all students, those with disabilities and those without—I try to apply the standard of disability law: I make reasonable accommodations for them. Needless to say, that doesn’t mean that I treat non-disabled students as disabled; it simply means that I try to take each student on his or her own terms. The beautiful thing about the standard of “reasonable accommodation” is that it is a universal imperative (everyone should be accommodated, within reason) that requires one to acknowledge individual idiosyncrasies (not every accommodation will take the same form). It offers a liberal vision of society that I find particularly appealing, both in the classroom and out. (19)

discourse, the discourse of experts, and by institutional structures which themselves can be viewed as discursive constructs” (*Buying* 47). Similarly, Scott suggests that the ultimate aim of a rhetorical-cultural study into the dominant modes of representation and analysis in diagnostic procedures is ethical intervention. For Scott, “...rhetoric can function as biopower, wrapped up in large power alignments that shape bodies and forms of embodiment” (228). The diagnosis-related rhetoric of autism includes, as Scott points out about HIV testing, “classifying, measuring, regulating, normalizing, and otherwise disciplining individuals and populations” (230). In this first process, the role of the rhetorician is to be involved and committed to improving the discourse of autism in both the public and the private sector. But we might also consider a communication-related rhetoric for students with ASD. Indeed students with ASD often focus on what is true, regardless of consequence for this truth (i.e. embarrassment, appearing rude, etc.). Reporting their thoughts primarily in the form of images, while appearing to have a predominantly visual style of thinking, these students are often preoccupied by an “intense fascination with a special interest” and interpret figures of speech literally. In addition, students with ASD have a difficult time placing appropriate emphasis on the correct word(s) in a sentence/phrase. This very precise rhetorical issue can lead to multiple layers of convoluted conversation and misleading or failed communication. The following example from Atwood’s text illustrates how the meaning changes when the emphasis is put on a different word:

*I* didn't say she stole my money. [but *someone* did]  
 I *didn't* say she stole my money. [I *definitely* didn't say it]  
 I didn't *say* she stole my money. [but I *implied* it]  
 I didn't say *she* stole my money. [but *someone* stole it]  
 I didn't say she *stole* my money. [but she did *something* with it]  
 I didn't say she stole *my* money. [she stole *someone else's*]

I didn't say she stole my *money*. [she took *something else*]. (80)

In this vein, as Scott points out, social pressure exaggerates the power of diagnoses as well as “locate risk in individual and social bodies” (8). Autism is different in that the spectrum on which diagnosis relies can reflect what is often referred to as severe low functioning autism on one end of the spectrum, yet extreme high functioning or Asperger’s Syndrome on the opposite end of the spectrum. Canguilhem points out that our experience of other’s disease or our concept of disease is based around the idea that not all hope has been lost. He argues, “[w]hen we see in every sick man someone whose being has been augmented or diminished, we are somewhat reassured, for what a man has lost can be restored to him, and what has entered him can also leave” (39). Indeed we see someone who is ill as the healthy version of herself and are anxious for her to return to such a state. According to Duffy, “rhetorics may also be understood as the response, the opposing set of symbols and languages used by individuals and groups to negotiate or resist institutional pressures” (18). A rhetorical analysis of the diagnostic history and the cultural representation of autism in popular media (as undertaken in this chapter) and, even more importantly, interviewing autistic students in higher education classrooms (the work of the next chapter of this dissertation), would be a particularly productive way to use rhetorical analysis to investigate such pressures and their response.

Perhaps the best example of the process Duffy identifies is its occurrence in cognitive disabilities/diversities, as opposed to more traditional biological illness, is the autism spectrum. Moreover, then, diagnoses should be judicial and just in that diagnoses should create, as Scott points out, “more egalitarian forms of power rather than stigmatize, discriminate against, and otherwise oppress people” (9). The power of an

ASD diagnosis shapes people/subjects through domination and forces people to normalize and manage themselves in accordance to dominant cultural norms and labels such as infected or uninfected; threatening or safe; deviant or normal. This can be seen through what Prendergast calls a “perceptual distortion” in that many have viewed the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM’s as an “ill-ness constructing document of incredible rhetorical power” where the person with ASD becomes the sum of her symptoms. According to Scott, “[r]hetoric is defined broadly here as the situated, persuasive use of language that can include both verbal and visual discourse, both public and interpersonal communication, and both explicit and implicit arguments” (3). Indeed, subjects are shaped through language, and therefore, all language is persuasive, but the material realities of autism force us to acknowledge the limitations of language.

While the DSM’s create categories with which people can be diagnosed, as Prendergast goes on to argue, the rise of identity politics—intended to end discrimination—actually works to “recast the mentally ill not as ‘ill,’ not as being in need of treatment, but as being in need of social empowerment and liberation much like other historically excluded groups” (*Buying* 50). Using Canguilhem’s theories of social-medical normativity to read the emergence of autism as a diagnosable phenomenon has allowed us to see the spectrum that exists in various approaches to determining “the normal” and “the pathological” as well as characterizing low functioning autistic or high functioning autistic. In the next section I expand this analysis from the domain of medical discourse to that of popular culture.

### **The Construction of Autism in Post-Fordist American Popular Culture**

As I stated earlier in this dissertation, higher education trends in pedagogy and

curriculum often reinforce (purposely or accidentally) the culturally dominant conceptions of class, race, gender, and (dis)ability. Yet such hegemony is being challenged. As Berlin amongst many other Composition scholars have suggested, higher education can also be a site wherein students are called upon to critically examine the ways in which language creates such constructions. According to Berlin, Composition Studies has a distinct allegiance with Cultural Studies due to the influence of sociological and economic politics in English Studies and vice versa: "...although culture involves economic, and political conditions, it is not a mere reflection of them. Humans create the conditions of their experience as much as they are created by them" (*Rhetorics* xix).

Here, I am interested in the ways in which labor and social power under post-Fordism influences the persuasive common places of individuals on the autism spectrum and the role of such conceptions in the teaching of writing. This issue is important insofar as the critical questions of both disability studies and composition pedagogy have consistently revolved around the nature of "work" and the skills valued in contemporary capitalism. However, since the early 1980s disability research has put pressure on the generalities and assumptions made about persons with disabilities, particularly our common conceptions of the physical and functional limitations of the disabled. It is within this isolation from the norm that people with conditions such as HFA/AS are often oppressed, marginalized, stigmatized, and stereotyped.

According to Berlin, Fordism created a new kind of worker—not one that crafted a product but rather a de-skilled worker performing the same movement repeatedly on a fragmented portion of the final product. This change, Berlin further argues, created a defined line between manual and intellectual laborers (*Rhetorics* 44). With increasing

technological advances in transportation and communication, Fordism slowly adapted into the time we now recognize as post-Fordism. The difference between Fordism and post-Fordism, briefly, can be defined in three areas: 1) the mode of production expanded from a national to an international process, where companies may have its assembly plant, part production plant, and sales/marketing offices/stores each in different countries; 2) production responds much more quickly to demand rather than (as was more common in Fordism) availability of resources, means of production, and workforce; and 3) urban areas undergo decentralization as citizens respond to such government initiatives as tax breaks as well as more culturally amorphous promises of a new, better life (*Rhetorics* 45-46). While all of this shifting has indeed placed an emphasis of value upon intellectual labor (providing better as well as more opportunities for people on the ASD), it has also, according to Berlin, created a “decentered world, a realm of fragmentation and incoherence, without a nucleus or foundation for experience” (*Rhetorics* 48-49).

In response to all of this, English departments moved toward better preparing students for the level of labor identified with post-Fordist economies. But, as Berlin warns, we must be careful not to sacrifice the context education is centered around—a comprehensive conception of democratic concerns as well as comprehensive conceptions of those re-occurring phenomenon that influence our students’ daily experiences (*Reality* 54). Examining post-Fordism in relation to the larger economic, political, social, and cultural situations within Composition Studies reflects education as being primarily concerned with two things: first, the interests of the community at large, and second, the integrity of the individual student (*Reality* 55). Dissecting disability through a Marxist lens emphasizes how the logic and the value of production, and in a capitalistic society



humanity in its entirety, too often becomes synonymous with such values—values which negatively construct the (dis)abled category. Disablement, thus, is a largely historical product, in many cases void of objective value. Indeed some disability scholars maintain that disability is the social construction of industrial capitalism; as Davis suggests “the process of industrialisation under capitalism is a major factor that has contributed to the prevalence of disability ... Central to this approach is what Marx called ‘the industrial reserve army’” (*Bending* 172). From a traditionally Marxist perspective, production modes constitute our “humanness” as all human societies must produce to exist. Humans must produce the commodity to 1) satisfy a human want and 2) to exchange for other commodities. This condition of existence does not include bodies unable to produce, as Marx defines, a “useful” labor. Since nothing can have value without utility, then the labor to produce it is also not of value—rendered worthless under capitalism. This idea of valued labor producing valued commodities is linked to the idea of the average worker. Here, as Davis argues, it is the markets and industrialization which are the problem source rather than those who are labeled as disabled: “... the ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person. ... the social process of disabling arrived with industrialization”” (Davis *Bending* 9). This normalizing construction of a human worker showcases both the negative construct of the person with disabilities as well as the concept of disability as the antithesis to the normal worker. Since it is ‘labor power’ which workers sell as their value under capitalism, it is *impaired* ‘labor power’ that surmises disablement within capitalism.

Indeed, Marxist theory, particularly as developed by Disabilities scholars such as

Davis, provides a historical and theoretical foundation for understanding the social oppression of people with disabilities. According to John Duffy, “Rhetorics are the language of ideologies and offer the symbolic means through which ideologies become known and are imposed, shared, and understood, or overthrown. Rhetoric and ideology are in this sense enmeshed, impossible to separate. Rhetorics are ideological, and ideologies rhetorical” (17). One might even argue that this ideology, or what is “normal.” is a bourgeois social construction: “... the very term that permeates our contemporary life—the normal—is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment. It is part of a notion of progress, of industrialisation, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie” (Davis *Bending* 28). It remains a difficult task to socially integrate people with disabilities into Marx’s theory—a theory that argues people with disabilities cannot in any society be truly social because the true social integration occurs through the satisfactions from and memberships to the world of work. Within Marxist perspectives, there resides an equation of identity with the work one performs.

As my interview studies will show in Chapter 3, while students on the ASD may be aware of the explicit modes of regulations in the sense that they know they differ from the norm, they are at least aware of it. As Berlin also showed us long ago, conceptions of labor and their understanding of the value systems promoted by contemporary political economy often reveal themselves, at least to those within the traditional demographics of higher education students, through popular culture; the ways in which the often connected identities of the “good person” and the “good worker” are shown in movies and television specifically help to culturally construct our understandings of both

“normal” and “abnormal” people as well as the skills and personal traits that are prized in contemporary society.

In the following I analyze five representations of autistic individuals as they occur in popular movies and television shows. While some of these pop culture representations explain the often popular, accepted albeit misguided concept of autism, other representations I examine reflect that autism should be considered, as Grandin argues, a difference rather than a lesser-than. More specifically while these representations themselves show a growing interest as well as awareness in the lives of individuals with autism, it also demonstrates the often gross inaccuracy of what that life with autism is like. For example, in Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*, the protagonist, Christopher is detained by police because of a misunderstanding of ASD and common behaviors people with autism often display. In some of these representations autism reflects the main stereotypes our culture has created, while others are more real life portrayals of what autism can look like, although because of the wide range of possibilities with ASD, one case of autism is merely that—just one case. As autism becomes more and more represented in pop culture, it simultaneously becomes increasingly ingrained in pop culture as well.

On the television series, *Criminal Minds*, Dr. Spencer Reid (played by Matthew Gray Gubler) is an eccentric genius with Asperger’s as well as hints of schizophrenia. The character has three Ph.D’s (one in Physics and one in Mathematics) at the age of 25 years old; according to Gubler “...one can’t usually achieve that without some sort of autism” (Thomas). On the show Dr. Reid is portrayed as an incredibly intelligent, charming though quirky participant in solving crimes. Dr. Reid’s autistic tendencies

make him a valuable asset to the investigating team. But the similarities between Dr. Reid and real life Aspie's (a term people with Asperger's often use to describe themselves) end there. On the show, Dr. Reid is treated with respect and dignity, and his open-minded co-workers don't just tolerate his Asperger's, they more accurately welcome, seek, and appreciate it— professionally as well as socially. While this may be the case for some people with Asperger's in society, others often experience discrimination, oppression, and outright hostile behavior in the working world. Dr. Reid's character represents one of the most positive characters with autism on television in history—an individual with a professional and social life we may wish to aspire to. However, Reid's acceptance by his friends and colleagues also largely serves as a gross misrepresentation. In an interview with Rachel Thomas from *About.com*, Gubler stated that his character is not very similar to his real life identity: “He's a genius, and I'm technically and functionally retarded.” It is interesting to note Gubler's use of the word “retarded” here. Much like developmental disabilities have become metaphors for a lack of intelligence in “normal” populations-- such as referring to a bad decision by an individual as “retarded”—autism has undergone a similar transformation where “autistic/Aspergerian” becomes an adjective to describe behaviors (which our society has come to adopt as being associated with autism) of people without ASD when they show poor social skills in a certain situation, or act insensitively to some other person's emotional needs or moods. In both the “retarded” as well as the “autistic/Aspergian” examples, people have taken an actual clinical category (or at least the vernacular reference to the same) that causes a number of problems for people and use it as an adjective in a casual way. This can have damaging effects in terms of how the general population learn and come to understand what the autism spectrum is.

Although the Reid character provides, in a sense, a “positive” view of HFA/AS to some degree—emphasizing the immense educational achievements of the character, for instance—it also acts to outline a negative difference, one that shows Reid as a highly respectable, perfectly capable person due to his autism. And while the immense capacity for intellectual pursuits may be true for people with HFA/AS in the working world, they are rarely treated with the respect, patience, and value that Reid is on television.

We find a somewhat different depiction in the NBC television show *Community*, created by Dan Harmon and starring Danny Pudi as a character with a “development disorder,” who is sometimes referred to by viewers as having Asperger’s but mostly seen as merely a “quirky” person. While Harmon based the plotline as well as Pudi’s character (Abed Nadir) on his own personal experiences, initially, he only went as far as to say that he had been “self-centered and independent to the extreme” when describing tendencies he now considers could have been signs of his own autism. But as more and more people suggested that Abed’s character had Asperger’s, Harmon began researching the diagnosis. He took several online Asperger Diagnostic tests; they came back positive. The more online tests he took, the more Harmon realized his own personality was closer and closer to Abed’s character, that so many people had (seemingly) accurately labeled as having Asperger’s. Through researching HFA/AS, seeking the input of a psychiatrist, and learning about himself through writing Abed’s character, Harmon has come to better understand himself as well as the reasons why he often hurts those around him without meaning to. Like Harmon, Abed’s character relates to the world around him through television. Such portrayals perpetuate stereotypes, but they also can help educate, normalize, and include people with ASD. For example in the first episode of the first

season Abed's study group makes jokes about Asperger's because they have never heard of it (and thus they laugh over a condition they think is called "ass-burgers"). Moreover, Abed is quirky but relatable, obsessive but funny, intelligent but charming.

The danger here, of course, is crossing into a grossly downplayed, nearly negligent portrayal of people with ASD. This danger stems from people like teachers, police officers, community members, etc., basing their understanding of people with ASD and what it is like to communicate with or understand someone with ASD based on the representation of the same processes in popular media. This dynamic is similar to the one studied by Scott wherein a false sense of privacy, convenience, autonomy, as well as insinuation that an individual's result will be negative from home testing for HIV. Scott shows that he could not find a single ad in the campaign for promoting testing for HIV that remotely hinted the test results could be positive. All of the ads implied subjects would be more attractive to potential partners, more secure in themselves and their lives as long as they were tested for HIV, which (here is where the misrepresentations misleading) would of course come back as negative (222-23).

In a very different portrayal of someone with HFA/AS, the movie *Temple Grandin*, a film based on Temple Grandin's life, starring Claire Danes, portrays Grandin as an intense, highly intelligent, socially awkward young woman obsessed with animal's perspectives and feelings. While the Abed character can be funny and witty and even a bit charming, Grandin's character depicts a much more stark, brutally honest reality of life with HFA/AS. An interesting young woman misunderstood by her affluent mother but accepted by her farming aunt, Grandin's character is portrayed as someone the audience should view as inspiring, endearing, determined, intelligent, naive, enraging,

misunderstood, eccentric, and someone for whom the audience should sympathize. Yet, Grandin's character is often (accurately so) frustrated, angry, upset, unreachable, flustered to the point of tears, and rarely in tune with the people or places that surround her. For example, while away at school, Grandin designed and built the aforementioned "squeeze" machine. Made of wood and some levers, Grandin's squeeze machine was the place she retreated to when the stress of daily life accumulated to the point of break down. Because she had been shunned for loud outbursts in the past and thus learned not to scream or break things when she felt this type of stress, Grandin built the squeeze machine, which she crawled into, pulled the lever, and the wooden boards squeezed her ribs. This sensation gave Grandin a sense of calming and reassurance. But because such things weren't allowed in students' dorms (or anywhere on campus for that matter) the squeeze machine was removed from Grandin's room and crushed. Then, with no other outlet or resource Grandin resorts to screaming, and throwing things, and running away. But here is the difference: Reid's character rarely has a moment of break down or weakness or social blunder, as that which I've just described. And while Dane's portrayal of Grandin's character may still be more "hollywoodized" than the real Grandin, the character also gives a vital, fair, realistic picture of life with ASD.

Alternately, the television show *Parenthood*, also on NBC, seems to offer a more accurate perspective on what life can be like with a child with Asperger's. The producer of *Parenthood*, Jason Katims has a 13-year-old son with Asperger's, so the on screen portrayal character Max gives is based on real life examples. People with autism often find Max to be an accurate portrayal of someone with ASD, and someone to identify with and understand. For example, in one episode, Max wants to "get out of" gym class

because he is typically picked last for basketball or not at all. This is frustrating and hurtful for Max because he has a good jump shot with high percentages and considers himself better than the other children playing. Max's peer is in a wheelchair and when Max asks the gym teacher why this other boy is allowed to sit out for gym, the teacher says because the child has a disability. To which, Max replies "Well I have a disability too. I have Asperger's." Clearly the gym teacher does not believe Max has a disability—for it is not a physical disability and thus she can't see it—and while she looks reproachfully at Max, she does not make him engage in the basketball game that day. Ultimately, his parents agree to allow Max to skip an additional gym session, and at this time Max befriends his peer in the wheelchair, so much so that the friend comes to Max's house for a play date one afternoon. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be a typical portrayal in pop culture media, which means common knowledge of people with ASD is based on false pretenses, exaggerated details, and hollywoodized/romanticized versions of the truth. Unless one has close contact with someone with ASD or has researched the topic extensively, one may not know the difference between an accurate portrayal in pop culture versus a grossly inaccurate one. As we have seen, the rhetorical cultural responsiveness of diagnosis (in reference to these situations) and ethnographic investigation into actual individual experiences of students with ASD does much to reflect the cultural confluences of what is normal versus what is abnormal.

Disability has never been a monolithic grouping, and because the enormous diversity of disability differs from any other minority groups, experiences of cultural devaluation and socially imposed restrictions are often more varied and thus distinct from than the historical experience of these other groups, despite our tendency to link them



together. As such, labor is an interesting concept for cognitive diversities in that our culture has created a hierarchy of skill sets which value physical labor over intellectual labor. But, as we can see in the shift of media portrayals of people with ASD, this is changing. Because HFA/AS is a mild form of autism and occurs on the opposite end of the autism spectrum than other, more severe forms of autism that might preclude an individual from pursuing higher education, it stands to reason that colleges and universities are seeing an influx of students with this pervasive development disorder. Diagnosis can be difficult, as one in six people diagnosed with ASD have ADHD also, and “Semantic Pragmatic Language Disorder (SPLD) duplicates many of the language features of AS” (Atwood, *Guide* 23). Moreover, according to Atwood, “...none of the diagnostic characteristics of Asperger’s syndrome are unique and it is unusual to find a [student] who has a severe expression of every characteristic” (*Guide* 22). Other abilities affected by ASD include: locomotion, ball skills, balance, manual dexterity, handwriting, rapid movements, lax joints, rhythm, imitation of movements (*Guide* 106 - 108). People with ASD may also be found repeating one’s own words (Palilalia) and/or repeating another’s words (echolalia) (*Guide* 109). Michelle Garcia Warner uses phrases like “unconscious social navigator” and “social thinking” to describe the skills people with ASD lack. These are people, according to Warner, who “often demonstrate solid to exceptionally strong cognitive and language skills but have difficulties intuiting and adjusting socially to the very sensitive and unstated rules and emotions in everyday environments.” This inability to read social cues and the hidden rules that define nearly every encounter and situation humans experience can not only hinder success but also create confusion and distress. Scholars such as Brenda Smith Myles cite the hidden

curriculum as “the set of rules or guidelines that are often not directly taught but are assumed to be known” (5). Students with ASD learn the hidden curriculum only by direct instruction; thus, hidden curriculum guidelines/rules that are not directly taught are missed. For example, these students have great difficulty understanding non-verbal communication, including body language. Yet, comprehending body language is vital to our personal relationships as well as daily communication: “body language is about how we communicate or “speak” with our body. It includes gestures, facial expressions, body posture, and tone of voice. Sometimes body language seems different than a person’s words, and for this reason, it is important to understand body language” (6).

This interaction and lack of connectedness can result in an assumed decreased production of social value. One could even argue that this implies people with disabilities are deviant (as I discussed earlier in this with reference to the work of Canguilhem, Scott, Prendergast, Duffy, and Berube), as disability limits certain practice (depending on the impairment) and thus alienates the person with disability. Disability scholars would argue that disability is in fact not a biological hindrance but a social one: “Disability is not a biological given; like gender, it is socially constructed from biological reality” (Davis *Bending* 260). Similarly, Julie Jung argues that such rhetorics of the body are so entrenched in our students’ learning patterns teachers do them a disservice by not “disrupting their conditioning in obvious and direct ways” (148). Positioning disability studies at the center of composition pedagogy allows composition to undo compulsory able-bodied identity, while creating spaces within the composing process where collective (dis)identifications can sustain conflict within the walls of the composition classroom and beyond (McRuer 237). Historically, people with disabilities have not been

considered ‘critical agents’ because they often rely on technology advancement and/or other person(s) to communicate, but in disrupting the communication ‘norm’ the traditional definitions of the ‘human agency’ are also disrupted. Perhaps, within this disrupted space lies opportunity for inclusion in revising classroom spaces, curriculums, pedagogical practices, assessments, educational notions of what it means to be a critical human being. For all of these reasons and more, it would seem there is a need for a potential pedagogy which reflects the needs, practices, and knowledge of various cognitive diversities— a cognitively enabling classroom in the field of Rhetoric-Composition.

**Conclusion:**

As the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition evolved through the last several decades of the twentieth century, so too did interest in the varied pragmatics of pedagogy, and composition scholars further investigated the multiple dimensions of the classroom experience and the teaching of writing, particularly its affective vectors. For example, Thomas Kerr argues that until Composition Studies contends with all aspects of emotions, we will continue to engage in normative and oppressive practices. For Kerr, emotion is a form of “symbolic communication— highly inflected semiotic system— a rhetoric of the body— that relies on signs and representations at both the molecular (interior, biochemical), and molar (exterior, behavioral) levels of the organism” (Kerr 26). Strickland and Crawford extend such scholarship to discuss the performance and correlating emotions of self-correction, which systematically moderates our desire for homogeneity and gives voice to often invisible voices within capitalism (68). Indeed, Julie Jung's work showcases the numerous and diverse ways compositionists might

explore (and embrace) disruption in their pedagogy and the ways in which students learn the most within such disrupted space. These pedagogical approaches work to move productive/disruptive pedagogies toward inclusion for students marked as different or deficient through the institutional commonplaces that cast them as social or political inferiors.

Representation of people on the ASD in post-Fordist popular culture is reminiscent of what Scott notes certain advertisements do for people being tested for HIV—promise of relief and peace of mind if you’ll just take the test. The advertisements say nothing about what happens if the test comes back positive, and the individual does indeed have the HIV antibody. In the HIV advertisements that Scott studies, the bodies are read to be invulnerable. In the ASD media representations discussed here, as long as the person with ASD has an affluent but highly devoted family, then they too are invulnerable and can achieve anything. Once again this grossly negligent and false portrayal of reality for people with ASD creates only a damaging perception for people of the general population who have little education about or contact with someone with ASD.

Regardless, in all of these popular media representations, the characters who reside with ASD function as what Scott calls deviant others—those who are defined against the normal “general public” (211). To achieve this depiction, the creators, producers, actors, and audience members alike must rely on sometimes harmful overgeneralizations for both the person with ASD and those making up the “general public.” Scott argues that this constructed category highlights the “difference between rhetorically inscribed bodies and actual embodied subjects” (211). He goes on to argue

that the “...rhetorical and political struggles over needs interpretation often involve the objectification of non-dominant groups and the paternalistic interpretation of their needs for them” (214). Referring to Nancy Fraser, Scott shows the ways in which people being tested for HIV are often set up as recipients for predefined services rather than active participants in creating and shaping their conditions (215). Drawing on Fraser’s work again, Scott notes that “...institutional needs discourses tend to become normalizing, ‘aimed at reforming’ or more often stigmatizing ‘deviancy’” (174). It would seem, then, that our culture at large holds people with HIV as well as people with ASD responsible for not only finding out if they test positive for HIV or are diagnosed with ASD but also for a clear, meta-cognitively understanding of their own condition enough so that they can communicate their needs and accommodations to the public at large—but only without disruption. Our culture simultaneously expects people with ASD to be appreciative of ineffective treatments based loosely on what little information we know about the ASD and all of the various ways such a wide spectrum play out on vastly different people—an incredibly unfair assessment on both accounts. For Scott, using a rhetorical cultural approach shapes the rhetorical problems we uncover (16). Rather than proposing a radical departure from the rhetoric of autism, I hope to refocus it.

Briefly sketching the complex genealogy of autism as a diagnostic category as well as contemporary representations of autism in popular media has allowed me to illustrate how the condition was developed (as a symptomology) and diagnosed as well as how it currently circulates in popular culture. This process speaks to the intersection of contemporary science and social power and/or our view of the normal and abnormal. Much as Foucault examined ideas, practices, and literature in relation to madness, noting

the social and physical exclusion of people labeled as insane, we need to research the same in relation to cognitive disabilities. Foucault argued that madness was the reverse of reason, thus making students with cognitive disabilities (such as ASD), the successful reversal of an ideal rhetorician—valued skills which continue to heavily influence our composition courses.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **In Their Own Words: Students with Autism in the Classroom**

In this chapter I analyze the results of five case studies I conducted at Delta College. Of those five students, four were diagnosed by psychiatric personnel, and one had been diagnosed through Delta's Disabilities Office diagnostic criteria. Each participant volunteered to participate in the study, and each of them had also passed a traditional academic college course, which was my requirement to deem them "successful."<sup>6</sup> These interviews suggest that successful college students with ASD tend to be aware of the ways in which their autism alters their perspectives on situations typical of writing courses and/or how it influences their approach to writing projects and the composing process. In analyzing these responses, I discovered that students I interviewed consistently expressed anxiety about the way they are viewed and, often, misunderstood by their peers and professors. They also showed an acute awareness of the ways in which their autism affects their thinking process as well as their outward physical presentation. It is clear, however, that these students do not see themselves as having a condition, or an affliction. Rather, they appeared appreciative of the intelligence, creative perspective, and difference they took to be part of the effects of their autism. According to the participants in my study, these resources are derived from their autism. The rest of this chapter outlines these case studies and the conclusions derived from this research. Based on these responses, I also argue, in the next chapter, in favor of particular teaching strategies such as using hands on/visual stimuli, modeling peer-to-peer dynamics, creating an escape

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<sup>6</sup> Note, I did not define which type or what kind of college courses the students had to have passed; rather, I made the decision that if a student has passed any single college course, then, for my purposes here, I will consider them at least somewhat successful in college.

place, and other similar practices that have the potential to be beneficial for composition students with ASD.

### **Design of the Interview Study**

I chose to conduct my study at Delta College, a large community college in the mid-west region of the United States not only because it is where I teach, but also because it is the type of institution students on the ASD would gravitate toward for a number of factors (including its proximity to residential neighborhoods in which many of these students' families reside, the institution's small class sizes, Delta's open enrollment admission status, as well as Delta's active attempt to accommodate the diverse schedules of its students). All of the basic information—historical through contemporary—on Delta College appears in my first chapter of this dissertation. But here it seems important to explain Delta College's writing program specifically and its designated writing courses. The Delta College English Division Mission Statement states:

The English Division offers students opportunities with diverse literature, essay writing, research writing, creative writing, technical writing, and journalism courses. We also believe in offering the support students need to begin to grow from almost any starting point. Our mission is to educate our students to be effective writers, comprehensive readers, and coherent communicators in academia and in their professional and personal lives.

The first-year composition course that mainstream college students take is College Composition I (ENG 111). It is a four credit, fifteen-week course, with a total of 45 lecture hours and 15 lab hours. The outcomes and objectives for this course are as follows:



**Write effectively for appropriate rhetorical situations.**

Objectives:

- A. Use the writing process: pre-write, write, and revise.
- B. Write with clarity.
- C. Select, organize, and present details to support a main idea.
- D. Use generalizations and details effectively.

**Read effectively.**

Objectives:

- A. Demonstrate the ability to derive meaning of text from multiple perspectives.
- B. Demonstrate the ability to distinguish between the meaning one makes of a text and the author's intended purpose.
- C. Show comprehension by accurately paraphrasing and summarizing a wide variety of texts.

**Develop critical thinking skills.**

Objectives:

- A. Explore the relationships among language, knowledge, and power.
- B. Develop critical thinking skills and apply them to reading texts.
- C. Demonstrate intermediate skills for information literacy, including accessing, analyzing, and using resources.

I identified successful college students with ASD with the help of Michael Cooper, Director of the Disability Resources Office at Delta College. As mentioned above, I decided to define successful, for my purposes here, as having completed and passed at least one traditional academic course. Another requirement my participants had to meet was that they had to be recognized by the institution's Disability Office as identifying with ASD. This would mean participants had self-disclosed with the Disability Office, probably with the expectation of utilizing the available resources and accommodations available to them. Further, the students, once informed of the study, had to volunteer to participate. To achieve and meet all of these requirements Mr. Cooper and I first ran a query per students in his database who were identified as students with ASD. We then further refined the query by requiring the students with ASD to also have completed at least one Delta College course. This final list identified 13 students meeting

these criteria. Next, I composed an email to the potential group of 13 students. Mr. Cooper added an introduction to the letter explaining my study and how to contact me if they were interested in participating before distributing them to the students. Each of these students received the following:

*Students,*

*Below is a message from an English Instructor at Delta College conducting research on the experience of college students with Asperger's Syndrome or other forms of higher functioning autism. If you are interested in participating in such research, please contact her (see below):*

*Let me know if you have questions.*

*Mike Cooper, Director  
Disability Office  
Delta College D-102*

*Hello,*

*My name is Crystal Starkey. I am researching students with autism spectrum disorders in college. As an English teacher, I would very much like to better understand how students with ASD come up with ideas for writing essays, and how they revise their essays, and when/if they are comfortable in the classroom setting, etc.*

*If you would be willing, I would very much like to interview you to help me, as well as my colleagues, better understand how to serve all of our students. I expect involvement in this study will take approximately two one-hour sessions. Also, please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary.*

*If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact me:*

*Work: 989-686-9534*

*Cell: 989-948-4515*

*Email: [crystalstarkey@delta.edu](mailto:crystalstarkey@delta.edu)*

*Thank you in advance for helping me with my research.*

*Sincerely,*

*Crystal Starkey*

Five students responded positively to our letter. Of those five, I completed four of the case studies on Delta College's main campus in my office in the English Division. The other case study I completed at one of the student's homes with his parents present for

reasons of comfort for the student and parent.<sup>7</sup> For each case study, there were two sessions. Each session lasted approximately an hour long. Before I began the first session, I asked each participant to sign a consent form stating that they knew the details of the study and how their personal information would be used. I include an excerpt of the waiver below.<sup>8</sup>

*In this research study, my objective is to address the issue of cognitive disabilities in a way that will allow us to serve this community as well as provide a fuller perspective on what we think of as disabilities/diversities in the writing classroom. As such, my dissertation takes up three lines of inquiry: 1) researching the learning styles and pedagogical experiences of students with ASD; 2) identifying the intersection of bodily and mental comportment within the rhetorical and writing pedagogical tradition using ASD as an example; 3) and thinking through the relationships between cognitive diversities, their diagnoses and treatment, and the connections between these phenomena and recent changes in labor and social power.*

I recorded each session, with permission of each participant, while also taking notes to help me clarify certain things later during my transcription process. The first session focused on the students' demographics and classroom experience.

**Session I Interview Questions:**

**Demographics**

- 1) *When were you diagnosed with ASD? What was that like?*
- 2) *What have been your daily encounters with having ASD?*
- 3) *If you were to write a letter to your local newspaper that would help people truly understand what its like to have ASD, what would it say?*
- 4) *If you were hired to write a guide describing how best to treat people with ASD and how to help them be successful, what would it say?*
- 5) *What, do you think, are the benefits and drawbacks of autistic thinking?*
- 6) *If you could choose any job/career in the world for yourself, what would it be? Why? What are the possible barriers/challenges you might face in becoming this?*

**College Classroom Experience**

- 7) *If you don't self disclose your autism/AS, do you consider this a conscious/subconscious attempt at "passing" as someone without ASD? Why do you think some students with ASD refuse to utilize services to them?*
- 8) *How does your relationship with your teacher(s) affect your performance? Do you have advice on how to ensure positive teacher-student relationship? Do you have any suggestions on how to prevent poor teacher-student relationships?*
- 9) *How comfortable do you feel in an oral discussion? How comfortable do you feel in a class which primarily focuses on lecturing? Group work? Computers?*

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<sup>7</sup> This student's home was in Saginaw, Michigan, one of the main tri-cities Delta College serves.

<sup>8</sup>The entire document is attached as an appendix.

10) Do you learn well through generalization or would you say you learn better through details and patterns? Temple Grandin calls "generalization learners" Lumpers, and "detail/pattern learners" Splitters. Where would you place yourself?

11) Anything else you can think of? Absolute do's or absolute don'ts for college professors? College students?

The second set of questions, which I asked during a separate, second meeting time, which also took approximately an hour to complete, focused on a brief re-cap of the first session, then moved on to discussing the writing process of the students and then, more specifically, their writing classroom experience. I began the second session with a re-cap of the first, and asked students if there was anything they would like to add, change, or delete from our first meeting. This practice served two purposes: first, it helped students re-orient themselves to my project and the topic of discussion for the next hour. Second, it allowed the students to "revise" their answers from the first session. The interview questions from the second session were as follows:

**Session II Interview Questions:**

**Prelude**

*Are there any additional thoughts you would like to express from our following interview before we begin today?*

**Writing Process**

- 1) *What is your attitude toward writing? How do you approach writing? Why do you think this is so?*
- 2) *How do you generate ideas to write about? What do you do for pre-writing?*
- 3) *What drafting process (if any) do you follow? How do you handle peer critique? How do you approach self-revision?*
- 4) *When faced with a writing assignment, do you prefer a professor to give you a topic on which to write, or do you prefer the freedom to choose your topic? Why?*
- 5) *Can you describe your experiences with Peer-Revision/Workshopping?*

**College Writing Classroom Experience**

- 6) *What is your perception of a writing class? What is its purpose? What is the most challenging aspect of a writing course? What is the easiest?*
- 7) *How do you handle writing assignments? Do you have a specific writing process you follow?*
- 8) *If you could speak to writing teachers, are there any specific do's and don'ts you would tell them regarding students on the ASD?*
- 9) *Do you think your writing is improving in college? Why or why not?*
- 10) *Do you see writing helping you in your career? Why? Why not?*

While the first session's questions focused on demographics and the general college classroom experience, the second session's questions focused on the writing process and the college composition course in particular. I analyzed student responses relevant to

rhetoric, the composing process, and their experience of their instructor's pedagogical approaches. Further, I focus on the student responses that either showed similar patterns of thought processes, or a noticeable lack of consistency. I have structured the answers according to four common themes: The Experience of a Diagnosis; Communication; The Composition Classroom Experience; The Writing Process. While obviously I could not fit all of the information I gathered during the interview sessions, I have supplied the responses that illustrate common experiences of the students as well as those that I took to be most apposite to their common experiences.

### **The Experience of Diagnosis**

In this section I examine questions from session I and session II that relate to the experience of diagnosis.<sup>9</sup> From these questions I found that the students I interviewed were both aware as well as proud of the ways in which their autism affects them. I considered the question of diagnosis vital to my research due, in part, to the vexed history surrounding the diagnostic criteria of ASD. Each of the participants was diagnosed with age ranges from childhood (Jake at 4 years old) through late adulthood (John at 52 years old). While I found no pattern in age, there seemed to be a pattern in that the students' diagnosis itself helped to answer questions both the students and their families had such as "Why do I rock back and forth when I am stressed?" and "Why am I obsessed with one particular subject area and find it difficult to focus on anything except that?" and

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<sup>9</sup> In this section I have included questions one, two, five, and seven from section I. 1) When were you diagnosed with ASD? What was that like? 2) What have been your daily encounters with ASD 5) What, do you think, are the benefits and drawbacks of autistic thinking? 7) If you don't self disclose your autism/AS, do you consider this a conscious/subconscious attempt at "passing" as someone without ASD? Why do you think some students with ASD refuse to utilize services to them?

“Why do I seem to think so differently and see things so differently than my peers?” The diagnosis seemed to help everyone better understand what such behaviors meant. For example, Jake noted that while his mom was shocked with his diagnosis, it helped explain his tendency to “be in his own world” and spend recess on his own. It also explained his obsession for things on TV. For John, his diagnosis explained his difficulty reading people: “*Yes, I have a high level functional autism. I don’t read people well. I know that there is something there, but I don’t necessarily understand what.*” Mona said she was professionally diagnosed as “*emotionally impaired*” at first until she and her family discovered autism as a diagnostic category, which seemed a better fit and made Mona more comfortable. Similarly, other participants reflected that the discovery and ultimate diagnosis of autism answered a multitude of questions the participants and their families had in terms of their peculiar actions.

Eli’s answer reveals that while Eli’s parents found his odd behavior cause for further medical investigation, for Eli the rambling speech served as a way for him to clear his mind of whatever topic he had become preoccupied with. Eli, Mona, Jake, and John’s experience with diagnosis appears to be relatively common in that it led to a change in their sense of self and a new understanding, and at times a new acceptance, of their own thought processes and behaviors. While there was some shock (Jake’s parents) in response to the diagnosis, most of the students I interviewed and their families were relieved to know they were not alone, and that there was a medically researched explanation for their quirky behavior yet high intelligence. This kind of experience is not

at all an uncommon one in diagnostic narratives.<sup>10</sup> Indeed Tony Atwood notes the difference between a childhood diagnosis versus an adult diagnosis in that the adult may appear empathetic or provide responses which indicate social reasoning during the diagnostic assessment, but most often these appearances/indications are a product of intellectual analysis rather than intuition (48). Others, according to Atwood, may even lie during diagnostic criteria so as to avoid a diagnosis for reasons of self-esteem. While still others may consider their behavior quite normal if one dominant parent or both parents live with ASD tendencies (49). However, by and large, many young people understand the benefits to such a diagnosis in terms of social networking with other people with ASD as well as certain accommodations via school and work. It is quite common that diagnosis can be an empowering act because it can explain so much.

When I inquired about the participants' daily experiences with ASD, I was hoping

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<sup>10</sup> John Elder Robison, brother to Austen Burroughs, was not diagnosed with Asperger's until he was 40. Robison had been good friends with a psychologist for many years, when his friend gave Robison the book *Asperger's Syndrome* by Tony Atwood and told him that "Therapists learn not to analyze their friends if they want to have friends. But there is a condition in this book that fits you to a T" (234). After reading the book and realizing his friend's assessment of his condition was quite accurate, Robison asked if there was a cure to which his friend responded "It's not a disease. It doesn't need curing. It's just how you are" (236). Until his diagnosis, Robison was unaware that his behavior was unusual; he didn't understand why people treated him the way they did; and he didn't understand why everyone seemed so mean and unfair. Having spent most of his life listening to people tell him he was arrogant, aloof, or unfriendly, when he found out there was not only a name for his condition but also millions of people just like him, he was overjoyed. "Just reading those pages was a tremendous relief. All my life, I had felt like I didn't fit in. I had always felt like a fraud or, even worse, a sociopath waiting to be found out...if I had been diagnosed at six, no one would have believed it. Perhaps our culture needed to evolve a bit more for subtler conditions like mine to stand out from the background noise of society" (238). Indeed, while Robison welcomes his diagnosis, he does note the sadness behind the late celebration "My life had been filled with lost chances because I didn't fit in" (238). But, Robison also says he learned early on not to submit himself to repeated humiliation from people or institutions.

to show the broad range in which ASD can play out in various individuals.<sup>11</sup> Indeed this diagnosis is so individualistic that each case is often vastly different from its predecessor. However, participants were, across the board, self-aware of the ways their behavior differ from other people's— especially in terms of articulating this information— as well as the ways in which other people see them. While many students identified areas that their autism gave them problems, they also—throughout the entire interview study process— showed that each of them thought of their autism as a gift as opposed to a burden. Some students pointed to their creativity as well as their intense—albeit often atypical—thought processes as an advantage over people without ASD, while other students noted the embarrassment of their tendency to be, perhaps, too candid. John, a participant in the student case studies I conducted, noted the following about autistic thinking: *“One of the benefits is, no boundaries. You think outside the box. Come up with really unique ideas at times. I warn people that if they tell me to be creative, that I’m not sure you just realized what you asked for because I will be highly creative.”* Later in the session, John noted a specific example of what he meant here:

*I think the biggest thing that has always mystified me was people not taking the time to understand a problem and try to see what the best resolution might be...And it gets frustrating when you run into someone who has, shall we say, a single mindset, that no, this is the way it’s going to be done...And in some instances [I can] recognize a problem far in advance of where a lot of other people picked it up. One of those was a highway bridge that was going in the Phoenix/Scottsdale area, and I looked at it, and I said there is something wrong*

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<sup>11</sup> Question two from session I: 2) What have been your daily encounters with ASD?



*with it. I told my team not to go that way, and two days later I walked into the office and they were all sitting there just kind of stunned, and I said, 'What's going on?' And they said, 'The bridge collapsed.' And I said 'Oh [laughter]. Yeah.' But I just recognized there was something the contractor was doing that just didn't look right. And that's part of the visual—the high visual.”*

Similarly, Morgan, another student participant in my case studies noted the following about thinking processes with autism:

*....This is probably both an advantage and disadvantage, is that we tend to go from point A to point M in our thinking. We can think a couple steps ahead, but we might not exactly be able to explain. We can come to a conclusion, but we might not be able to explain how we got there. So, it's probably a benefit and you can make jumps and leaps of logic, but we can basically go from one thing to another pretty quick.”*

As these responses suggest, people with autism often see detail, and perceive themselves to be capable of seeing more detail, than most people without ASD.

While John attributes his autism as the reason he is careful and purposeful in his interactions with people, he also notes that because of his autism he needs someone who acts as his “checks and balances” to explain to John when his thoughts or actions may be inappropriate. When discussing his daily experiences as an individual on the ASD, John notes: *With my HFA, I think I'm a little bit more careful with my interactions with people. I do know that I need to bounce ideas off people, and I think that is one of the key things for at least me, is to have somebody that I can go to and talk to.”* Both Jake and John demonstrate acute awareness not only of their tendencies and what is going awry in

comparison to people without ASD, but also of their needs as someone with ASD. For example, Jake describes the ways in which his autism negatively affects his daily encounter with speech:

*Sometimes not having all the right words come out of my mouth at the same time. Like, the sentence comes out a little bit confusing, like it has words that probably...I mean, like, sometimes I say, like, when I have a sentence, like I really, like I have too many adverbs in one sentence. Sometimes I've got to add words that really don't need to be there. Just like, what I do in my writing papers."*

Next, I inquired whether the students thought being on the ASD was a benefit or drawback in terms of their perception and the way that they think.<sup>12</sup> Jake noted that a benefit to having HFA/AS is his intelligence, particularly his mastery of many different subjects. Jake further noted that as he aged from elementary school through college, he learned more critical thinking skills and a better ability to make inferences. Making inferences and deductive conclusions is something that Jake, based on his own account, had to learn how to do. It has been said that "instinct" or "gut reaction" does not exist as strongly (if at all) in people with ASD unless they have been pointedly taught how to think in that way, a situation present in Jake's narration of his experience.

Indeed while most of the participants are aware of their different thought processes, none of them pointedly identify it as a negative, or disadvantage. In addition to John's comment about "thinking outside the box" quoted above, Penny concretely

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<sup>12</sup> For this section I focused on question five of session I. 5) What, do you think, are the benefits and drawbacks of thinking with autism?

describes the potential advantages to autistic thought processes:

*Well the fact is definitely that you're good with facts, you're really good with computers. Maybe it's a stereotype, but there is a reason for that stereotype, because autistic people, they click with computers, and maybe because computers are very logical. They do things the same way every time. And you can figure them out. You can figure out computers because if you click here it does this, and if you click there it does this. If you click here and push here, and it will do this.*

However, Penny also comments on how her strengths in understanding logical relationships do not translate easily to understanding her or others' emotions: *But people are not computers, they're not robots, so yes they're harder to understand. Somebody clicks different than you are... Understanding, for me it's sometimes hard to understand my own emotions. And then it is doubly hard to understand about anybody else's feelings.*

Both Penny and John touch on important issues surrounding much of the research on autism. Autistic thinking, from their perspective, helps when these students deal with facts, computers, math classes, and science classes, where the formulated rules are logical and consistent.

When we discussed the possible reasons for self-disclosing and not self-disclosing, I was mostly interested in the conscious or subconscious orientation to "passing," a term which is used to describe people with autism who may choose not to self-disclose their diagnosis in the hopes of "passing" as someone without autism.<sup>13</sup>

Inquiring into whether a student has any sort of disability is illegal, so teachers rely solely

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<sup>13</sup> 7) If you don't self disclose your ASD, do you consider this a conscious/subconscious attempt at "passing" as someone without ASD? Why do you think some students with ASD refuse to utilize services to them?

on the students working in conjunction with the Disability Resources Office to communicate their needs. But for multiple reasons such as 1) the narrowing of diagnostic criteria that tends to cut out the higher functioning students (as discussed in Chapter 2) as well as 2) the need for a sense of independence with ASD, not all students who need services from their Disability Resources Office are granted them or accept them. Mona notes that the act of self-disclosure is not the result of a consistently conscious decision-making process, but is rather just something that is not part of her daily conversations with people unless they ask her directly:

*It's just, it's not something that comes up in conversation. Well, they're treating you normal...Well basically it's not so much what it means for passing, it doesn't come up. It's like you don't mention you have hemorrhoids in a general conversation. It just doesn't come up. If they don't ask...most people aren't going to ask a normal person, 'Do you have a disability?' It might be subconscious....It's not a consciousness—it doesn't come up.”*

Mona's comparison to discussing her autism in common conversation to discussing hemorrhoids is jovial, to be sure, but it helps us understand that this is something people may consider private and only worthy of sharing if it is needed to do so; or one could argue that Mona's point here is to communicate that her autism is just as much a part of her as any other physical part of her people can see, and it's not something she considers as something she should point out.

John takes a very different stance, however. While John once again touches on the creative benefits of his autism and the ways in which his knowledge about ASD has helped him better understand himself, he is also aware that his candidness can be a source

of embarrassment. He states:

*I think a little bit of it is embarrassment. Some of it may be they just don't realize they are not self-aware, and that was very, very true of me... I still probably am a little bit too candid about things, and maybe a little bit too blunt about things. Some areas you have to be. When it comes to safety, there is no compromise. So, for myself, it was a matter of self-awareness. It's the way that I am, and it's the way that I am going to be the rest of my life. Let's utilize the best parts of it that we can. With other people, I would encourage them to learn more and to be more open about it. Because there is a great contribution their talents can give other people. I do believe most of us think outside of the box.*

Penny, on the other hand, likens the trend to not self-identify with ASD when it comes to higher education institutions as a move toward independence and self reliance. She states:

*“Maybe they want to do the best they can on their own, and maybe they just don't want to talk about it, or they are embarrassed. It's kind of like the consciousness of being different, and I don't think, and not all is 100% that you have to go with that either.”*

While Penny also touches on the embarrassment factor, her response further reflects a determined strength to be independent even if she is conscious she is different.

Overall these responses show diagnosis is typically a positive piece of a person's experience with ASD, at least for those high-functioning students who have ended up pursuing higher education at institutions like Delta. According to Tony Atwood, drawing the artificial line of diagnosis can be difficult, as determining whether a person has a diagnosis of HFA/AS is a “subjective decision made by the clinician on the basis of the results of the assessment of specific abilities, social interaction, and descriptions and

reports from parents, teachers, etc.” (52). Atwood goes on to note that receiving psychiatric services from government agencies is one of the primary justifications for an official diagnosis. This is a conclusion that also coincides with the findings of my case study research. These students’ experience with diagnosis seems typical to many people with ASD in that some were diagnosed through an official clinical process, one through a college’s Disability Resources office, and one from a psychologist friend. Indeed, for some, diagnosis can be shocking and perhaps a little perturbing, but for others diagnosis can be an empowering experience. This is important in the composition classroom because while there are specific teaching strategies we can implement that may help people with ASD (see Chapter 4 for an extensive description of these specific teaching strategies and an overall pedagogy for cognitive diverse student populations), they won’t be able to receive any additional assistance without a diagnosis and self-disclosure. While people without ASD may not fully grasp the ramifications for people with HFA/AS not getting the level of help they require, students with ASD are most likely acutely aware.

These responses, as a whole, however, reflect an undercurrent of self-awareness and, for the most part, a reaffirmation of these students’ position on the autism spectrum as an essential part of their identity. Beyond considering what is normal to people with ASD, the students I studied showed a pattern of hoping to be understood, wanting to be treated fairly, and encouraging to others with ASD for their own individual choices regarding diagnosis and/or self-disclosure.

### **Communication and Metacognition:**

When it comes to communication and interaction, students with ASD can often be at a severe disadvantage. One of the most noted characteristics of people with autism is

their seeming lack of ability to communicate well. Ultimately, Jake notes that critiques from both his peers as well as his professor is helpful guidance when it comes to negotiating social space. Mona notes that clarification of all rules and requirements help her clearly understand expectations; for Mona, ambiguity equates to difficulty. John too notes specific and pointed directions and communications as being vital to his daily life. While Penny also hopes for communication that is exact, she also hopes for acceptance of diversity in ourselves as well as in our writing. In this section I examine questions from both session I and session II that relate to these students' experience with various forms of communication within the culture at large.<sup>14</sup>

As Penny notes she struggles to understand her own emotions let alone someone else's. Indeed this is a common difficulty for people with ASD, but it is also something that can often be learned or acquired over time. Indeed, at one point in the interview, Penny states "*If I'm talking too fast just tell me to slow down.*" While this may seem trivial, I thought it profound that Penny, who described herself as having difficulty reading the body language of others, was aware of my stress from trying to keep up with her speech.<sup>15</sup> Her ability to pick up on that non-verbal communication is something Penny says she has learned over time—with help from her friends and family —the content of particular emotional responses and what they mean and the ways in which they circulate in most people. Penny furthers this metacognition by acknowledging her

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<sup>14</sup> Questions from Session I: 3) If you were to write a letter to your local newspaper that would help people truly understand what life is like with ASD, what would it say? 4) If you were hired to write a guide describing how best to treat people with ASD and how to help them be successful, what would it say? 6) If you could choose any job/career in the world for yourself, what would it be? Why? What are the possible barriers/challenges you might face in becoming this?

<sup>15</sup> Granted, I was tape recording everything, but I wanted notes as well in case something went awry with the tape recorder.

recognition of her thought processes. She stated:

*Boy. Well, for one thing, I don't notice that I, I notice that I don't think the same as everybody else. And that makes communications difficult sometimes. Because, when I want to talk about something and nobody else wants to talk about it, I go on the same thing over and over and over, and they say about the report we've been hearing about 1984 for three weeks.<sup>16</sup> Talk about something else... My brain processes work differently. I can't always tell if people are being literal or they're being figurative.*

The difficulty determining a literal interpretation versus the figurative one is a common sign of Asperger's, listed as an identifying characteristic in almost every text related to the condition. It is unique to high functioning people on the ASD to be aware of the ways in which their autism affects their daily life, but the difficulties these students identified are common and typical in all people on the ASD.

When asked about what they would include in a letter to their local newspaper helping people understand what being on the higher functioning end of the ASD means, Mona responds:

*...people with Asperger's, depending on how the higher the functioning is, the more likely you're going to be aware of it, but basically I align between soci...between ...there's alignment. What's behaviorally is socially acceptable and what's not. How far am I going to go before I step over the line of somebody else's boundaries? People with Asperger's, with most people, they know where*

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<sup>16</sup> Penny has a close relationship with George Orwell's book *1984*; nearly all of her responses came back to this topic in some way: writing a sequel, daily dialogue about the text, etc.



*the line is just instinctively. These are social things you don't do. Well, people with Asperger's, we don't always know where the line is. And I'm pretty high functioning, so I know when I've crossed it... I can tell pretty much all the time when I've crossed. But I still ask people to let me know if I'm getting close. Usually, most people with Asperger's, we're not going to be offended if you let us know as long as you're polite about it....you're getting a little close, can you please not lean over my shoulder...*

Here Mona attributes her awareness of her autism to her high functioning level on the ASD.<sup>17</sup> What's more she also attributes her—albeit limited—ability to read social cues and non-verbal behaviors to her high functioning level. Yet she still seeks input and relies on advice from others to help her gauge where that social line exists and what actions, in which contexts, cross it. Mona goes on to discuss the ways in which she displays stress physically as a specific point she would emphasize in her letter to the Editor. She makes no excuses for the quirky actions in which she engages, but she also would like others to understand why she and others like her do it:

*...we're probably going to have...we're probably going to have a little more physical behaviors, we might fidget, pacing is another thing we do. We're not doing it to freak people out, it's.....well have you ever been to a movie where it's like 4 hours and when you get up....4 hours you don't get up to go to the bathroom or get anything, and when you get out you just have to move because you've been sitting in one place for 4 hours and really not moving at all. That's*

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<sup>17</sup> Some scholars place Asperger's on this highest functioning end of the ASD; other scholars refer to it as a separate entity, a distinct diagnosis. Based on the research I've done, I consider Asperger's as part of the ASD.

*what it's like on almost a regular basis for me with Asperger's. That's why I just have to move. We might talk a little loud. We're not trying to yell, it just happens...volume control is another thing that my parents were always telling me to turn it down. Our volume control doesn't always work correctly. We tend to go up in volume when we get excited, or even in just normal conversations.*

While Mona offers some concrete examples of specific actions and tendencies she recognizes as being part of her autism, she describes these experiences so that any person—with autism or without—could relate and understand. Yet, in her statement about what she would include in her letter to her local newspaper, Penny shows just how different and out of place she can feel as well as be told how she appears from others' perspectives. She states:

*I don't know how you can get someone who doesn't have autism to completely understand how people with autism feel... It's being different. It's within the things that should come easily, do come easily, cause people seem to have an easy time socializing, but it just kind of falls into place for them. They go to parties and talk to everyone easily. And they are not just on an island talking about, I don't know, the value of pi, or the latest episode of some cartoon... Yeah. That's a metaphor that we've used. Take her off on an island. Yup. That's what I say. I'm off on my island. Things that should be easy. Things that, it's like people who don't know how to use a computer have to sit down and just work at it, and work at it, and I'm really good with computers, so I just sit down and click for it, and okay. But that's how other things feel for me, like, things like being able to communicate with people, being able to help them with the same, help them, and*

*their asking with people. It's like just keeping things from, keeping from worrying and keeping...just having fun and not letting this stuff overwhelm me, I guess. It seems like it's something everybody else never really even gives a thought, but I have to think about it a lot to make it work.*

Penny notes how much effort she has to put into being social and while both Mona and Penny have the ability to recognize their own shortcomings as well as those of the society which sometimes embraces and at times rejects them, Eli reflects on his autism as a gift rather than a burden. He argues: *“Well, in my case of autism, it's sometimes people with autism might be irritating sometimes. They are still good people; it's just with autism it's a special gift that you have to get used to, and sometimes they might have to struggle with schoolwork or education, and it's always good to find someone who will help them get in touch with their autistic gift and help them do better in their schoolwork.”* Eli too notes the importance of having a contact in his life that he can talk to, who understands him, and who can help him better understand others and the world around him. Indeed all of the students I interviewed noted the importance of such a person in their life. One could argue students may perform better in the K-12 setting because there are often counselors or other staff members designated to fill such roles for people with autism. The lack of such a person in a college setting might be a major setback in terms of these students' success.

When asked to write a guide about how to treat people on the higher functioning end of the ASD, Mona states:

*Well, for starters, don't treat us like we have a problem. Because, yeah, with Asperger's...well I'm not sure about high functioning autism, but I know with*

*Asperger's....I guess I could have either, but...when you're high functioning, basically we're seeking a little bit of a different light. It's not really a problem. Don't treat us like we're 6-year-old's....no, we might be smarter than you because, I mean, one of the things I have found with Asperger's is that our intelligence is perfectly normal, if not that our IQ's are higher than others' ....People with Asperger's, they've actually found that in a lot of cases of a higher IQ or slightly higher IQ than the average person. So, we're not stupid. Just treat us normal. We tend to ramble, but just get us back on. Just let us know so we can get back on track. We may jump around...treat us like we're people and talk to us about it. Because, if you don't ask, you don't know. And, assuming it's really not a good thing with anybody with any kind of disability –whether it's physical or mental.*

While Mona requests straightforward honesty and pointed discussion as an aid from those around her, John acknowledges the need for continued support when it comes to his autism. Here again we see evidence of just how varied and altered autism presents itself in different people. John says: *“I think they need a safe person to go to, and that's very, very important.”* Once again we see another example of that popular saying in writings about autism, *“If you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism.”* Penny's response, in comparison to John and Mona's, helps reaffirm that no two cases of autism are alike. Penny states:

*Actually I think it is different for everyone, the autism, so I can only describe mine. Talking about this is like saying do you see the same shade? Is that green paper book the same as the green used, the same green I see? How do you even*

*address something like that? So yeah, it's green, but ...I think that's one of the biggest challenges to try to understand for a person with autism. How do you think is basically the same question as what color do you see, and are they the same colors I see. I would say to give them all the encouragement you can. Or keep them from worrying about doing things wrong or making mistakes. Because I know they have—autistic people have a tendency to do that, and I definitely have that tendency. I always worry about making a mistake. When they make mistakes – When I make a mistake, at least, I am much harder on myself than I probably should be. Till I get something wrong in class, or I missed something and I'm much harder on myself than I should be.*

Penny's insight about seeing the same color is intriguing. In general her use of highly intuitive, insightful, and creative metaphors throughout her interview reveal not only intelligence and meta-cognition of her autism but also an inherent ability to communicate well and understand layers of depth to a rather complex issue. Indeed, Penny is a good example of how misunderstood people with HFA/AS can be.

Such a feeling of a misunderstanding is an important consideration for universities with students with ASD enrolling in growing numbers. Specific to ASD, non-verbal miscommunication or even vague verbal communication can be disastrous. Indeed, in response to this situation, many state employees (notably police officers) across the nation are undergoing autism specific training. This type of training focuses on non-verbal communication, revising perspectives on what is "normal" behavior and what should be considered suspicious behavior. This training serves to educate people who are not on the or have no contact with individuals with ASD. Quite likely in their future

planning educational institutions will also have to proactively attend to this growing student population through faculty and staff training. While I turn to specific questions of the composition classroom in particular in the next chapter, the rest of this chapter details other research conclusions that may be useful in designing workshops or similar training programs to facilitate communication and effective teaching in classrooms with students on the autism spectrum.

### **The Composition Classroom**

In the following I focus on questions from both session I and session II that related to students' specific experiences in the composition classroom.<sup>18</sup> In analyzing these responses I discovered some students I interviewed expressed anxiety about interacting with their peers during periods of group work, while others expressed joy at the opportunity to work with their peers and share their writing. Because current research often cites people with autism as being awkward and anti-social, it might be surprising to hear the opposite is often true too. These particular answers showed me there is a significant difference between being socially awkward and being anti-social. While nearly all people with autism I have come in contact with are to some degree socially

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<sup>18</sup> Session I questions: 8) How does your relationship with your teacher(s) affect your performance? Do you have advice on how to ensure positive teacher-student relationship? Do you have any suggestions on how to prevent poor teacher-student relationships? 9) How comfortable do you feel in an oral discussion? How comfortable do you feel in a class which primarily focuses on lecturing? Group work? Computers? 10) Do you learn well through generalization or would you say you learn better through details and patterns? Temple Grandin calls "generalization learners" Lumpers, and "detail/pattern learners" Splitters. Where would you place yourself? 11) Anything else you can think of? Absolute do's or absolute don'ts for college professors? College students? Session II Questions: 6) What is your perception of a writing class? What is its purpose? What is the most challenging aspect of a writing course? What is the easiest? 7) How do you handle writing assignments? Do you have a specific writing process you follow? 9) Do you think your writing is improving in college? Why or why not?

awkward, not nearly as many avoid social interaction as the stereotype might predict.

When asked about student-teacher relationships and the ways that it may affect their success in college, John recommends that his fellow students with ASD

*Ask questions, ask for feedback. If you do not understand why something is happening, ask. Don't be a pest about it. And the comment has been made, and the observation I have made, is people seem to tend to view me as a know-it-all, or somebody who should be academically superior and that isn't necessarily true. I will always do well, but I won't necessarily be at the top of the class. One [job] interviewer said, 'You're arrogant.' But there is background to that too. And I haven't quite got to the bottom of it yet."*

Many times people on the higher functioning end of the ASD are considered arrogant because when they know the answer to or information about something, they tend to be blunt and candid, as John pointed out earlier. But, as John also emphasizes, although he is intelligent, he often struggles with determining when he is being a “pest” and when he isn't. While appearing arrogant is yet another common stereotype of people on the higher functioning end of the ASD, Eli's answer shows the humility it has taken for him to be comfortable with searching for resources, help, and a contact person on campus. Here again it would seem, while the stereotypes may be correct some of the time they are certainly not consistently accurate for all people on the ASD. Eli notes:

*Well, once I check to make sure my professors were notified of my autism by the disabilities office, sometimes after class I double check with them over some of the material details so that I am able to remember it as, if I speak with my professors after class to double check what the homework is, and what we need to study and*

*everything... I think a good relationship with your professor is not only vital, but it is important, because unless you are able to fully understand, unless you like double check with your professor on materials, so that you will remember it, you might not be able to remember what it is you have to study, and come when it's time for a quiz or a test, you might forget and thus do poorly. So, having a good relationship with a professor is very important and vital, as they will help you better under..., remember the material, and be able to remember it for the next quiz or exam... make sure you speak to a guidance counselor, or disabilities services employee, and make sure they let the regular teachers or professors know of your autism. So once they are told of you being autistic, they will be able to better teach the class so that you'll understand a lot more material in a better way than if they had taught the class without knowing you are autistic, where you might struggle because some of the information sounded like mush.*

I was particularly struck by Eli's use of the word "mush" here because it brings to mind James Paul Gee's famous description of "mushfake," a term from prison culture which means to "make do with something less when the real thing is not available" (177). In his research, Gee describes prisoners making hats out of underwear to protect their head from lice as well as using wooden matchsticks to create elaborate craft items as examples of a mushfake. When Gee uses the term "mushfake Discourse" he means partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge to "make do" within particular situations (178). According to Gee, "For many of us not acculturated early in life to 'mainstream' dominant Discourses, but who have lived large parts of our lives in them, we come to realize, I believe, that a significant part of our 'success' is evading the gatekeeping efforts of elites



in our society (a ‘success’ which is rarely, in my experience, total)” (178). Further, John Duffy, who cites Gee, argues that “...literacy operates as a discursive practice that works to construct identity and one’s position within a group or culture” (17). In this sense “mushfake” seems to be an accurate description of many of Eli’s own description of his own actions. Eli believes informing his teachers of his autism helps him have better communication with his teacher, so the lecture information does not turn to mush for him, which would require him to make do with only the information he did understand—leaving Eli at a massive disadvantage in the class. As Gee goes on to argue, “[n]on-mainstream students and their teachers are in a bind. One is not in a Discourse unless one has mastered it and mastery comes about through acquisition” (176). Indeed Composition scholars have applied Gee’s mushfake to better understand how students respond to their own confusion, a process that might also be useful for describing the adaptation strategies of students with ASD.

When asked for their comfort level in oral discussion, lecture, and group work, both Penny and Jake noted their distaste for certain classroom practices such as group work and/or oral discussion. Penny stated:

*Group work. No. Group work is kind of, no, I don’t really like group work a lot...Because it comes up with interactions with other people. You’ve got to do the give and take. You can’t really say, okay this is what I want to do, and this is what we’re doing. They won’t like that. I just can’t do that. You’ve got to give them some things, and take some things, and sometimes they won’t want to do everything you want to do, and sometimes they’ll let you do, sometimes if you’re into doing all the work, they’ll just let you. That’s what happens sometimes. And*

*sometimes they are like, 'Ooh I've got it all worked out, and I could use you for that.' Taking steps away.*

Here Penny shows her disdain for group work that stems from her tendency to do all of the work herself rather than learn how to interact with people and compromise about a project. She also reflects on instances when others interpret her ASD as rendering her incapable and thus “taking steps away.” Undoubtedly, this is because poor social skills is the most common trait found in many people who reside somewhere on the autism spectrum. However, as I mentioned previously about the often diverse nature of ASD cases, Jake notes precisely the opposite regarding group work: *“I definitely feel comfortable because that way I can know a little bit more about these people, make friends with them. It might kind of actually build up your skills on how to think for yourself, or do things on your own.”* Jake’s willingness to interact with others is more of an exception than the trend in people with ASD. Still, however, when asked about oral discussion, Jake stated: *“There is some anxiety, however, because whenever it would be my turn to speak, I’m somewhat afraid that I wouldn’t know what to say or what I had thought, at first, had already been said by somebody else, and I can’t think of anything else to say.”* While not thinking fast enough isn’t uncommon among all people in a formal setting, the anxiety that Jake describes which accompanies it is what is so detrimental for him in oral discussions. Alternately, when asked about a class that primarily focuses on lecture, Jake states:

*There is only like some degree of comfortability because sometimes the teacher may not take too many questions. Too many questions on the material, like when a student wants him to clarify something a little more. And sometimes the student*

*may not even raise his hand at all because he wouldn't want to anger the students or hold up the class. Sometimes I would find myself staying a few minutes after class trying to understand some aspects of the lecture.*

The somewhat solitary environment that the lecture format creates diminishes the social anxiety for students like Jake. But it creates a higher anxiety regarding the professor and his/her ability to be clear to all students.

When asked whether they believe they are detail/pattern thinkers (what Temple Grandin calls Splitters) or generalized thinkers (what Grandin calls Lumpers), all but Penny considered themselves someone who sees in detail and patterns (Splitters) rather than someone who sees the big picture and end result (Lumpers). Clearly, the metacognition evident in all of the participants reflects their ability to think critically and most likely speaks to part of their higher functioning label (and perhaps also to a generally higher IQ than those on the lower functioning end of the autism spectrum). Indeed the students I interviewed offered several insights in terms of advice for professors and students alike when it came to students with ASD working to be successful in higher education institutions. Jake asked for more reminders and regular appointments from his professors and also asked his fellow HFA/AS students to have confidence and to think highly of themselves. Mona, in addition to asking professors and students alike not to make any assumptions, also notes “...*there are really no absolutes when it comes to human beings.*” John notes: “*There is never enough time. I think it's important for a college professor to overemphasize the fact they are available and willing to help.*” Indeed there is a pattern for these students that equates time with their professor to success. For example, Eli asks his professors for more and continuous help but also

recommends to his peers to seek out help from various resources available on campus. Alternately, Penny focuses on herself and the ways in which people could work to come to know her and others on the ASD better. Penny says: *“Ask them how they feel, what they want. Try to see things in their perspective.”* While Penny also noted help from others and time with her professors would be helpful, she also spoke from the perspective of someone with ASD who hopes her peers and professors will also spend a little time and effort understanding her as well.

The students’ responses to the most challenging aspects of a composition course were somewhat varied; both Jake and Eli noted staying on topic as the most difficult, while both Mona and Penny were concerned with the readers—Mona claiming that figuring out “what the teacher wants” causes the most difficulty and Penny finding it difficult to write for an audience outside of herself. John noted structure as being for him the most challenging aspect to writing assignments but when discussing his thoughts on the purpose of a writing class in college, he notes: *“My perception of a writing class is to learn, to express ideas and thoughts clearly, distinctly, and concisely. To develop an understanding of the rules of why they apply, where they might apply.”* I thought it was interesting that John was so focused on the structure and mechanics of an academic essay, while Penny focused more on the humanistic aspect of writing, the community of writers the composition course creates. Penny states: *“To help people become better writers. To get writers together so that they can collaborate and cooperate. You used to be able to read by others, and so that you see how other people write.”* While both John and Penny reflected on specific areas they thought best described what the purpose of a writing class in college is, Mona’s response looked ahead a little more into the ways in

which a writing class should (at least in theory) prepare you for future writing in the working world. Mona noted:

*I don't think there is any writing class that can actually fully prep you. A writing class should give you the tools to go out, so basically you know this is how you write a paper. But, depending on where you are going that you can't, in a writing class you actually can't, it's not a true prep because when, you're in a writing class your audience is going to be your teacher. But, depending on what you're writing for, yeah, that may be accurate, you're writing for one person and you know what they are going to be looking for, or you might be trying to write a tech paper which they may or may not teach you how to do it depending on what type of writing class you are taking.*

Mona's response that no writing class can completely prepare students for every type of writing they may possibly encounter in the working world is incredibly insightful. As is her follow-up response, which while acknowledging that no writing course may completely prepare students, it can, for certain, teach students the tools they need to do various types of writing that they may encounter.

When asked if they believed their writing was improving in college, all students agreed that this in itself was helping them. For example, Penny states: *"Well, it's improving the more I write. It's not so much the college's, as I'm writing more and my writing is going to get better. The more I write, the better my writing is going to get. Keep writing, Keep writing. Which is what it really is. Just keep doing it. To get better at something, you gotta keep doing it."* But John credits college for helping him figure out what he was doing wrong and giving him the tools to correct his bad habits and begin

anew: *“Now that I have an idea of what is going on, and I realize the problems that have been caused in the past, I’m working diligently toward improving that skill. It’s always been very good, but now I need to make it absolutely stunning.”* Once again, it is interesting to note the vast difference in these two responses. John focuses on the specific skill of writing and improving it, while Penny focuses more on the art of writing and the overall picture, which coincides with the fact that she is the only one of the five who responded that she thinks in big picture, the overall, rather than in details or patterns.

While all of the students responded differently, I did note a pattern regarding learning the rules of composition, the why’s behind those rules, as well as how to apply those rules in various writing circumstances. I also saw a pattern of these students spending considerable time evaluating “what the teacher wants.” Teachers should be cautious of this in that students with ASD will come to their teachers for clarification and/or additional help—which is fine to give, of course—but students with ASD also often have to learn how to be independent of their teachers. While offering guidance and additional help is indeed a vital aspect of teaching, students with ASD may depend too much on their professors, if allowed, throughout the writing process in an attempt to understand what the teacher wants. Considering all of this, teachers may think about incorporating some basic writing skills and rules into their curriculum, as well as ensuring all students are comfortable enough to seek help but also uncomfortable enough to step beyond their comfort zone and write for themselves, rather than writing for other audiences instead.

### **The Writing Process**

In this section I discuss data compiled from session II only, as I do not consider

any questions from session I relative to this aspect of my research.<sup>19</sup> In this section I asked questions focused on the participants' attitudes toward writing, topic choice, peer critique, and the specifics of their writing process. When I asked about the ways in which the students generate ideas for writing assignments, Jake said he takes several different approaches, depending on the outcome he wants. If he wants to explore the context and/or history of some topic, he chooses pre-writing. When he wants to organize information in a fairly strict, academic structure, Jake chooses lists for his pre-writing activity. Finally, Jake chooses brainstorming on occasions because, as he states, you “never know what you [will] come up with.” Mona's response was focused on whatever topic about which she is writing. For Mona, she begins with the topic she's either been assigned or has chosen and then begins by writing all the questions she has about the topic. Then she does some basic research on the topic and proceeds to write down everything she believes to be related to the topic. She conducts some background research as well and decides what is important to include and what is not, depending on the slant of her writing or the assignment itself. Mona then tries to adhere all that she has done with her conception of her teacher's objectives. The final, yet most important factor for Mona as she generates ideas for a writing assignment is taking into account the big picture of the topic—the truly important aspect that does or may affect society at large. For John, generating ideas is fairly straightforward: he does research on the subject

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<sup>19</sup> 1) What is your attitude toward writing? How do you approach writing? Why do you think this is so? 2) How do you generate ideas to write about? What do you do for pre-writing? 3) What drafting process (if any) do you follow? How do you handle peer critique? How do you approach self-revision? 4) When faced with a writing assignment, do you prefer a professor to give you a topic on which to write, or do you prefer the freedom choose your topic? Why? 5) Can you describe your experiences with Peer-Revision/Workshopping? 7) How do you handle writing assignments? Do you have a specific writing process you follow?

matter, reads everything he can find on the subject, and then sits down to write the essay. He notes he doesn't do any real written pre-writing, but rather that step is done mentally. Penny uses mental pre-writing as well. She revises and revises in her head (memorizing the changes she has made in her mind) until the final version is ready to come out, then she sits down to write.

When asked about the ways in which they approach writing assignments, Jake said he writes his essays in exactly the same way every time: Introduction, Body, Conclusion. Mona reflected on doing research first, then creating sections/headers and then trying to write between a half of a page and two pages per section, depending on the required length. John was similar to Mona in that he cited completing all of his research as his initial step in writing. But he also noted the need for digesting that research before attempting to write anything. According to Eli, he begins, revises, and finalizes everything on the computer. Penny and Eli seem to have a similar approach, perspective, and attitude on writing. Eli states: "*Well, when it comes to pre-writing, I first try to get all my ideas formulated together [in my head] in somewhat of a storyline, and then once I'm able to get it formatted into a storyline, then I can then transfer it down onto paper or Microsoft Word.*" But Eli makes it clear throughout his responses that the only drafting he does is electronic. He does not draft even pre-writing ideas on paper. His entire writing process from beginning to end is all electronic. While this may be somewhat typical of contemporary US higher education students' familiarity with computers, for Eli and this group of students, I suspect that reliance on computers creates something of a comfort zone.

When I inquired about their attitude toward writing, the answers were varied.



Penny stated: *“I’ll take it step by step. I love writing. It’s a way to express my thoughts, a way to explore my thoughts, to explore.”* Similar to Eli, Penny creates a fairly solid draft in her head first, then she writes that all down. Once that draft is complete, Penny will go back and revise according to what her professor and peers suggest. Additionally, Penny, who hopes to make her life as a writer, says she loves being critiqued. John too enjoys writing and honors the creative process it takes to write. He notes:

*I’ve always enjoyed writing. I’ve always enjoyed the creative process. The way that I approach a subject for writing depends on what it is. If it’s creative writing, then it’s just kind of freely flowing out of my head. And to a degree, with any of my technical writing, that’s true too. Because what I do, is I’ll research a subject, and get my hands on as much material as I can, and then I just kind of start going through it, highlighting what I think is important, and then once I’ve gone through everything, then I go back through it and I sort everything, and then I re-read it, and then I start writing.*

On the other hand, John states: *“Well, it’s so much not my favorite thing in the world. I’ve said that before... Probably because I jump around a lot of times, I’ll get my ideas, my trains of thought so tangled up that it’s how do you get it on paper, where do I start, and I’ll have so much....I’ll just have so much information and so many ideas that I get, that it’s like traffic jamming.”*

Much like Eli’s use of the word “mush” to describe information he struggles to process, I appreciate John’s use of “traffic jamming” when referring to the immense amount of information he gathers for his writing assignments. He notes that he collects so much that it is almost a hindrance for him. This nearly obsessive behavior is often

common for people with ASD. Even if what John obsesses about isn't Orwell's *1984* (Penny's obsession, as mentioned above), he still demonstrates obsessive behavior when he is working hard to put forth his best effort. It would seem, then, that people on the high functioning end of the spectrum may have a difficult time finding a medium between "good enough" and "perfection."

When asked about their experiences with peer revision and peer workshopping, throughout their drafting process, the participants' answers not only varied but were vastly different from each other. Penny plainly stated that workshopping is fun. And while Jake's response doesn't necessarily equate to being opposed to peer-workshopping, he does express a bit of reservation: *"I've always wanted to have people, I've always wanted to have people I trust and know well to read my papers, but I mean, I may be a teeny bit skeptical with students I've never met before."* For Jake, having several opportunities with which to get to know a peer before entering into the sensitive area of workshopping an essay, is vital to his success with the activity. But Mona bluntly renounces the practice all together as she explains the potential social dynamics between she and her peers:

*They tend not to be as useful. What I've found is that they tend not to be as useful as, say, going home and having your parents look over it, or having someone you know. Because a lot of people, in class when you are asked to critique stuff, most people, you're going to get the wishy-washy comments. Most people are going to be too afraid of offending you to actually let you know. If you're lucky, you might get some spelling mistakes corrected or grammar, as in they say this is wrong, it should be spelled like this. It's misspelled but I don't know how to spell it. Or*

*grammar should be like this, disclosed better, but most people aren't going to tell you that. Whereas, in people you know, when they're directly people you know, if you directly ask someone and say, 'Will you go over my paper for me?' you're more likely that you're going to get a better response than if you just do it in class because....I didn't ask them to check my paper and they are probably...I'd better give them at least lukewarm reviews, otherwise they might be really mean about my paper.*

While Mona's response may not be unlike responses from other students, here Mona notes the difference between an informal, outside-of-class peer review versus the in class made-to-do peer review and the ways in which it affects the social interplay among students as well as the depth and level to which students comment.

When he is drafting, John tried to implement the outline tool he was taught in Composition I. He says he likes the technique for many reasons but mostly because it forces him to stay on track with a precise structure. When we discussed self-revision, John stated he does not fare well at this: *"Once I've written something, I don't edit, and I need to learn to edit. Because most of the time I have been too long or too precise about some things. If I write something and people have questions, then I need to leave it open for questions. Maybe leave it a little bit open for interpretation."* John's approach to revision may appear narcissistic but in reality it is quite common behavior for high functioning people with ASD. For example, some students are often misunderstood and labeled as arrogant, aloof, and or distracted because they often stare at the floor or a particular spot on the wall. While this may communicate nonverbally something along the lines of disrespect, it is often exactly the opposite. For instance, I once overheard a

student with ASD say to his mom, when she was critiquing him for not looking at someone in the eye when he spoke to them, “I don’t look at their face because I have to concentrate on what they are saying.” This student looked to the floor when he spoke with other people, so he could concentrate on the words being spoken. While John’s resistance to editing or making changes may seem arrogant, it is simply yet another example of the way autistic behavior is misunderstood. Even Mona keeps her distance from post draft revision when she states: “*I tend to revise as I write, because that’s how it works better...self revision is continuous.*” I liken this scenario to my earlier point about students with ASD appearing arrogant when they know the answer because their presentation is often so candid the tone sounds an awful lot like a cocky “Geez that was so easy.”

When asked about whether they would rather choose a topic or have it chosen for them, Jake, John, and Penny would rather choose their own topic, at every possible opportunity, which reflects their desire to focus on their subject area they are most interested in, like Penny and *1984*. Mona and Eli, on the other hand, enjoyed both the freedom to choose their own topic as well as the challenge to write about a topic their professor had chosen for them. When speaking about either version, John stated:

*I approach it as a learning experience. Seeing something in a new and in a different light, as the person who is making the observation is seeing it. And I do have the freedom and the ability to do that. It’s just like in debate, you aren’t sure which side of the issue you’re going to get, but you are expected to not necessarily defend, but express that view and make good arguments. So I’ve got the ability of essentially being the devil’s advocate if I have to.*

While the freedom to choose is a common thing to like about writing projects for all students, some students prefer the rigidity of being given a topic, regardless of ASD. While I would not argue the students' responses to this question are different from students without ASD, who like to choose their own topic—a common phenomenon in nearly all of my sections of composition—I do believe the *reasons* for them choosing their own topic and/or being given the topic is the real driving force for students with ASD as well as the real difference between students without and students with ASD.

### **The World of Work**

Much of disability research centers on the false dichotomy between able-bodied persons and “dis”abled persons, or those defined by their physical, functional limitations. This distinction often creates an artificial hierarchy between able-bodied (or “normal”) persons as superior because of their “wholeness,” while people with disabilities are viewed as “fragmented” and inferior. Just as the dichotomy between the employer and the (wo)man creates a hierarchy between labor power and personal worth, similarly, society has, in essence, disabled bodies. In an attempt to better understand how students on the ASD view the idea of work, I incorporated a couple of questions into my interview studies. One of the questions asked which job/career students would choose if they could have their pick. Then I asked several follow up questions regarding their reasoning behind choosing a particular occupation path as well as what they might foresee as potential barriers and/or challenges they could experience in pursuit of that particular job. Notably, participants were concerned about aspects of a job nearly all people consider, such as: Will my job be obsolete in five years? How much will this job pay me? How much person-to-person interaction is involved with this job? Jake stated he would like to be a pharmacist; Mona, a Chemical Processor; John an Engineer; Penny a tutor. But Eli's answer

which focused on the motivation behind this question was rather interesting. Eli says: *“Why? That’s kind of a tough question. That’s one of the things with my autism I struggle with. Whenever I see a ‘why’ question after a question I answer, I sometimes can’t pick up a good answer, and I stray off topic. I don’t give a fully clear reason why, because I seem to somewhat lose sight of the main idea or question.”* I found this answer the most interesting because Eli’s answer did not address the question I asked him. And although his insight about his autism being a struggle when faced with such questions reflects strong meta-cognition, I had to re-ask the question in order to get him to answer it. Eli would like to work at Disney World in many facets, the most important being a “ride designer.” I asked him why he chose this as a potential job, and he said *“Because then I can be just me and my pencil and my drawing.”* Here it is clear Eli’s primary concern is interaction with others.

When asked whether they see writing helping them in their future in their careers, John noted that writing was very important *“in what anyone does, giving clear directions to people”* Similarly, Penny also noted its importance in her future *“because whatever it is, it is going to have something to do with writing and even if it doesn’t, the thought processes are still there.”* While Mona doesn’t see a direct tie between writing and her career in Chemical Processing, she notes the following about the importance of writing and learning to write for all students:

[It’s important] *because sooner or later someone is going to ask you to put something in writing... I still say in every job knowing how to write, because sooner or later someone is going to ask you why do we need this, and if you can write up a reason why, clearly, succinctly, and do it properly, then you are more likely to get it if you really need it. Or, they’re going to ask why don’t we need*

*this, as if management wants it and you say, 'This isn't going to work.' But sooner or later somebody's going to ask you to either why don't we need this, or what's going on, and you might have to write it up.*

These students clearly demonstrate a belief that writing will help them in their careers and beyond. Moreover, perhaps due to their practice specifically on metacognition, these students seem more aware of the importance of writing than the average student. This is especially evident in Penny's pointed answer about the thought processes of writing being able to help her even if the actual act of writing is not a vital aspect to her career. Such insight is integral to any students' success but especially for those on the ASD.

Traditionally, humanistic research on diversity has focused on differences in gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—excluding differences associated with disabilities. This distinction often creates an artificial hierarchy between able-bodied (or “normal”) persons as superior because of their “wholeness,” while people with disabilities are viewed as “fragmented” and inferior (27). As we look at the human body and the conditions and practices associated with it, we construct the disability identity as well as construct our reality. This unfortunate reality allows for the very social construction (and thus oppression) of disability to result in bodies afflicted with disabilities swelling the numbers of unemployed, welfare-dependent persons in our society. As Fordist labor was a crucial device for measuring cultural currency in reference to the humanistic study of physical disability, post-Fordist labor (immaterial and cognitive labor) seems to be an equally appropriate device for studying cognitive diversities. People with ASD perform particular skills exemplarily well that are similar to the ones valued in capitalism such as technologic, symbolic analytic knowledge, long

term memorization, artistic approaches, mathematical knowledge, or engineering. However, the challenges they often face in the realm of social interaction, as well as the extent to which they are identified with the disabled as a generic category, may reinforce their exclusion from the “normal” as constructed by the conventions of contemporary labor.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, we as teachers have come to expect a certain “student norm” and our 1) classroom atmosphere, 2) pedagogical strategies, 3) assignments, and 4) curriculum are built around that norm. Significant challenges are created for the student with HFA/AS when contemporary classrooms and teaching pedagogies are designed around that student norm. A strong beginning to creating an ASD-comfortable environment is to remain open to revising perspectives, possibilities, success, and failure. As professionals, we are taught “good” students are attentive (intently, looking at us and the visual aids we may use) and engaged (participating, taking notes and asking questions), but most often students with ASD will not appear attentive and rarely will engage, but if asked, can often repeat verbatim what you lectured on and questions you answered during class. Certainly, students with ASD don't fit a mold. However, from these case studies, we can derive several best practices for all students but especially students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. I turn now, in the next chapter, to developing specific classroom strategies in the service of such a goal.



## CHAPTER 4

### **A Cognitively Enabling Classroom**

Perhaps what is most striking about the interviews I conducted with students on the autism spectrum is the consistent awareness demonstrated by my case study participants about the ways in which they have been, and continue to be, misunderstood. Additionally, participants commonly reflected upon their autism as a gift, something that has enhanced their life, not detracted from it. Pedagogically, then, it makes sense that we would work to better understand our part in this mutual misunderstanding and, again, work to minimize if not eradicate that communication gap in the composition classroom.

The most immediate and pragmatic contribution my project stands to make to Composition Studies is to create a framework for cognitively enabling classroom for those with high-functioning cognitive disabilities. In this objective, I am guided by Brenda Jo Brueggemann's enabling pedagogy, which argues for inclusion in all classrooms for deaf students. Brueggemann's enabling pedagogy works to erase the apparent invisibility of disability in places like the academy, for, as she argues, "...disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, and sensory" (321). Under the argument that a successful enabling pedagogy would posit disability as insight, Brueggemann approaches disability in her classrooms from multiple perspectives with multiple genres in the hopes that her students will find "...individual identity, personal strength, creative capabilities, representative power, and community" (326). In addressing long-standing prejudices against disabilities in pedagogical environments, Brueggemann presents Saint Augustine's idea that faith comes from hearing. According

to Brueggemann, if faith comes from hearing, then those who are deaf cannot hear the voice of faith and/or reason. Therefore, under Augustine's maxim, one's lack of hearing assumes one's lack of ability to reason, think, and even learn. Brueggemann argues that such logics, while ingrained, are absurd, and calls for a reassessment of composition classrooms and their tendency to exclude the deaf, as well as others outside normative conceptions of ability. While I hope to incorporate many of Brueggemann's strategies, my approach, of course, is focused on students with ASD and the objective of designing a cognitively enabling composition classroom. Therefore this project is more tuned to cognitive operations as opposed to physical senses. At the same time, however, I am attentive to the ways in which Brueggemann's example allows us to focus on the often commonplace ways in which we presume normative abilities in learning environments.

In a related vein, Susan Peters suggests pedagogical practices that combine theory and practice to "form a new educational praxis of transformation and liberation from oppression that enables students labeled as disabled to find their own voice, to rediscover a positive identity, and to gain literacy skills through empowerment and self discovery" (154). Undoubtedly people with cognitive diversities will continue to be oppressed and excluded from normative avenues to literacy without such cognitively-diverse classrooms. Because this purposeful or accidental exclusion continues, people with disabilities are, in their "ignorance"—which people with abled bodies have created and ultimately forced people with disabilities into—are seen as a threat to wholeness, morality, and values in their fragmented existence (Brueggemann 118). Indeed, Brueggemann's enabling pedagogy is partially based on her analysis of *Quintilian's vir bonus*—the good man speaking well—as a means of revisiting disability within the

confluence of literacy. She argues that the good man and speaking well are two separate, distinct, and very different aspects of literacy. And, for people with disabilities, both create a challenge. Disabilities, whether mental, emotional, or physical, often create a sense disruption within the non-disabled body, which all but dispels the hope of being “the good man;” the same occurs in regards to “speaking well.”

Believing a successful enabling pedagogy would posit disability as insight, Brueggemann approaches disability in her classrooms from multiple perspectives with multiple genres in the hopes that her students will find “...individual identity, personal strength, creative capabilities, representative power, and community” (Snyder 326). As such, her pedagogy works to erase the apparent invisibility of disability in places like the academy, for, as she argues, “...disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, and sensory” (321). For Brueggemann, then, disability affords an opportunity for all people to gain perspective into the ways in which ability is defined. All of these factors relate to how an individual creates and sustains attention, an important issue for students with ASD. According to Atwood, there are four divisions of attention: ability to sustain attention; to pay attention; to shift attention; to encode attention. Students with ASD are often distracted by irrelevant detail and are not sure on which or what to focus. Further, people with ASD struggle with what psychologists call executive function, which includes: “organizational and planning abilities; working in memory; inhibition and impulse control; self-reflection and self-monitoring; time management and prioritizing; understanding complex or abstract concepts; using new strategies” (Atwood, *Complete* 234). Working memory refers to the mental ability to retain information and pull from it, analyze it, and work through it. While a person with ASD may have an

exceptional long-term memory, drawing upon working memory is very difficult. Students with ASD also struggle with abstract reasoning, prioritizing, and time management; it is often suggested that people with ASD see the very minute details of things but fail to understand the context. In this way, people with ASD have a monotropism, or a fragmented view of the world (*Complete* 242). This is also often referred to as a weak central coherence, a “...problem determining what is relevant and what is redundant, and deciphering the overall pattern or meaning to create a mental framework” (242). In the composition classroom, students with ASD can struggle with summarizing information and providing just the important points. In the working world, people with ASD can often “identify details and notice connections that are not perceived by others who have a different mental framework” (242). In the following section I suggest pedagogical strategies that both identify particular competencies of students on the spectrum as well as model best practices in the Composition classroom.

### **Cognitively Diverse Teaching Strategies**

While analyzing the student responses from the case studies I conducted, I noticed a pattern of input from each student regarding specific (and often straightforward) teaching strategies instructors could implement into their teaching pedagogy in order to better accommodate cognitive diverse students. Indeed it is important to emphasize, again, that these strategies—while designed to be particularly helpful for students on the spectrum—are in general useful teaching practices in the composition classroom as a whole. This aligns nicely with a point Michael Berube makes in his book *What’s Liberal about the Liberal Arts: Classroom Politics and “Bias” in Higher Education*; while

Berube addresses the politics of race, class, and gender this text, he also makes a pointed effort to consider students with Asperger's from a pedagogical perspective:

...to all students, those with disabilities and those without—I try to apply the standard of disability law: I make reasonable accommodations for them. Needless to say that doesn't mean that I treat non-disabled students as disabled; it simply means that I try to take each student on his or her own terms. The beautiful thing about the standard of "reasonable accommodation" is that it is a universal imperative (everyone should be accommodated, within reason) that requires one to acknowledge individual idiosyncrasies (not every accommodation will take the same form). It offers a liberal vision of society that I find particularly appealing, both in the classroom and out. The challenge, however, lies in making reasonable accommodation for students whose standards of teaching are so difficult—and, I think, so rarely acknowledged by people who don't teach for a living. (19)

In alliance with the perspective forwarded by Berube here, the teaching strategies I discuss below truly are best practices for all students in addition to being specifically helpful and accommodating for students anywhere on the ASD. In the following I have divided these practices into nine concrete suggestions for creating a cognitively diverse classroom.

- **Put a brief, explicit schedule on the board before class begins. This allows the student with ASD to prepare herself for the 'what' and 'when'.**

Nearly every student with ASD I have had in my classes or have interviewed seemed much more comfortable as students when they were aware of future planned activities and assignments. To easily avoid this needless anxiety, I have adopted a few

strategies regarding posting the schedule for my classes. Especially if I know the schedule is most likely to change on a particular day, I will sometimes handwrite the daily schedule on the dry erase board (I typically do this off to the side so it is neither a distraction for students nor a space interference for me). Or, if I am fairly certain that we will stick to our schedule for that day, I will often post the daily schedule on our online course management system a few days ahead of time, so students know not only what is coming, but also what to bring, so they are prepared. Posting the schedule via our online classroom space helps my students as well as myself plan better for that particular day in class, but also helps all of us plan our time accordingly. Many of my students have full-time jobs and families, so knowing deadlines ahead of time (even if it is only a week) and having access to our upcoming class schedules helps my students on many different levels, from anticipation to time management.

While putting a schedule on the side of the dry erase board, or posting it on the electronic classroom site may sound like a relatively simple task, complications can arise when professors deem a last minute schedule change necessary. Explaining pointedly, albeit briefly, the reasons for, and the practicality of, the schedule change to the entire class has helped all of my students understand the direction in which the class is going as well as the reasons behind such a decision. If there is enough time prior to the schedule change, I will also post the explanation on our classroom site and asterisk the changes, so if a student has printed off the schedule change, they will be able to quickly identify the posted changes.

While it may not appear as that dramatic of an accommodation, this simple act has been reflected on my teacher evaluation forms on several occasions as being

something that cohesively brought the class together and made all students feel part of the decision-making process as well as a larger community with their peers and me. While these comments suggest that this practice has been found useful for all students, not just those with ASD, it can be specifically useful for students with ASD.

Students with ASD, can easily become sidetracked and/or distracted due to their often obsessive behavior and attention to a particular topic as well as a misunderstanding about the need for clearly communicated transitions and segues to ease the understanding of those with which they are collaborating. Here, my interview subject Mona mentioned (as previously quoted in Chapter 3) that “...*People with Asperger’s, they’ve actually found that in a lot of cases of a higher IQ or slightly higher IQ than the average person. So, we’re not stupid. Just treat us normal. We tend to ramble, but just get us back on. Just let us know so we can get back on track. We may jump around...treat us like we’re people and talk to us about it.*” Based on Mona’s case study, another way in which the schedule can be used in the classroom is as a tool to help students re-focus on the task at hand as well as help explain the order for doing certain activities. Using the schedule to help students with ASD stay focused has proven a helpful tool for me on several occasions.

Scholars who study ASD repeatedly cite abstractions and a lack of precision in people’s speech that can cause anxiety and high stress levels for students on the ASD. For example, autism scholars and contributors to the *Journal of the National Autistic Society* Joliffe, Landsdown, and Robinson suggest that for individuals on the spectrum “indecision over things that other people refer to as trivial results in an awful lot of inner distress. For instance, if somebody at home says, ‘We may go shopping tomorrow’, or if somebody says, ‘We will see what happens’, they do not realise that the uncertainty

causes a lot of inner distress, and that I constantly labour, in a cognitive sense, over what may or may not occur” (qtd in Atwood, *Asperger's* 81). Indeed substituting words such as “maybe,” “perhaps,” “sometimes,” or “later” with more specific language can help students better understand as well as help them avoid needless worry and anxiety. As I said, this small and seemingly easy teaching strategies can make a substantial difference to a student with ASD.

- **Use active hands-on and visual assignments, worksheets, and note-taking: students with ASD often think in terms of real, concrete processes rather than in abstract concepts/ideas.**

Whenever possible, utilize online as well as printed versions of assignments and course materials. When introducing an assignment or different worksheet, try projecting the material overhead as well as have a printed version for students. While it is important to capture the main points of your lecture and perhaps even put them on the board as the lecture proceeds, be sure to require students to take notes as well as require them to read their text. No two cases of autism play out exactly the same in any two people, and for this particular reason, researching autism and finding concrete patterns can prove difficult. However, one common trait most often found in students with ASD is the inability to understand subtle hints or clues. For example, I no longer say things like “taking notes might be a good idea now.” Rather, I incorporate note-taking into my syllabus as part of the class activity portion on the point scale I keep. In addition to this, I pointedly tell my students when to take notes as well as stress information they should be writing down. Further, I no longer suggest students keep up on the reading so they will do



well on their final project. Rather, I've incorporated reading quizzes and a set schedule for readings and their due dates.

Incorporating the required reading has helped all of my students do better with the final project, but it specifically helps my students with ASD because they tend to be the students who don't understand how crucial their textbook can be to their success in the course without my prompting. Moreover, because there is such a massive difference from case to case on the autism spectrum, I also try to take into account various ways my students might better learn. To do this, I typically post all of my assignment sheets on our online course management system classroom site, hand out a printed copy of the assignment to each student (either through a "coursepack" of pre-selected materials or individually printed handouts, depending on the course and assignment), and I also often project the assignment sheet as well as suggest students take out their printed version when introducing each assignment. I do this so that students may read the paper in front of them or the projected version on the screen, depending on what suits them best.

My interviews with students with ASD primarily focused on the social interactions of a college composition course, and while I did not pointedly ask students if they needed to be told directly to take notes and/or given multiple ways to read and interpret and utilize course materials, several of the participants' responses reflected an awareness that they needed different materials for different situations—sometimes just depending on the day. For example, Eli notes one of the ways he learns material (as previously quoted in Chapter 3): *"I think a good relationship with your professor is not only vital, but it is important, because unless you are able to fully understand, unless you like double check with your professor on materials, so that you will remember it, you might not be able to*

*remember what it is you have to study, and come when it's time for a quiz or a test, you might forget and thus do poorly. So, having a good relationship with a professor is very important and vital, as they will help you better under..., remember the material, and be able to remember it for the next quiz or exam...*” Moreover, Penny’s response reflects the incredible level of stress, worry, and anxiety that consumes her regarding school. *“I would say to give them all the encouragement you can. Or keep them from worrying about doing things wrong or making mistakes. Because I know they have—autistic people have a tendency to do that, and I definitely have that tendency. I always worry about making a mistake. When they make mistakes – When I make a mistake, at least, I am much harder on myself than I probably should be.”* When she read an early draft of this portion of my dissertation explaining the need for various ways to obtain and utilize course materials, she nodded in approval and added *“This would have helped me.”* For me, the little bit of extra effort to create a course pack or make copies as well as post our materials online in our virtual classroom site and even project the assignment sheets in class, is minor compared to the heightened attention and interest it allows my students to take in our assignments rather than their focus on stress or anxiety.

In an attempt to communicate the importance of these discussions for students with ASD, scholars (such as Lorraine E. Wolf, Jane Thierfield Brown, and G. Ruth Kukiela Bork in their book *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel*) have begun publishing guides for parents, education related professionals, and teachers themselves. Within such texts are many tools, but their suggestions to use various active and visual stimuli whenever applicable specifically stood out for me, as it supported my firsthand experience in the classroom. Ultimately though, as the authors

also suggest “every student with AS is different; therefore, it is impossible to offer a laundry list of reasonable and unreasonable accommodations” (Wolf et al 83). However, I am confident that successful accommodations stem from a thorough understanding of the student’s diagnosis as well as the ways in which that diagnosis affects him/her in a uniquely individual way.

- **If the student with ASD can create more easily on a computer than on paper, if possible, incorporate this into course scheduling.**

On many college campuses computer labs can be difficult to schedule for an entire semester. Additionally, students can wait long periods of time for access to an open lab. For these and other reasons, some students have taken to toting their own laptop from class to class. Whether we teach in a computer lab for the entire semester, schedule particular class periods in a computer lab, or allow students to utilize their personal computer in our classrooms, students with ASD often find using a computer for nearly every applicable assignment a useful tool.

When I first began teaching college composition as an adjunct, nearly all of the initial drafts submitted from students were handwritten. Typically, it wasn’t until the third or even fourth draft I would demand a typed draft. These days I receive a fair mix of handwritten and typed initial drafts, so there seems to be a need for some consistency in this area. However, because I understand the need for handwritten drafts for students without access to a computer as well as the ease of typed drafts for students who have regular access to a computer, I found it rather difficult to demand one or the other for the early drafts. What I did find, however, was that a certain amount of flexibility regarding these early drafts allowed more freedom for my students as well as my teaching. The

freedom it allowed my students made a significant impact for them in that if students needed to hand write their first draft (or two) they could do so and then find a way to have the later drafts typed.

The interviews I conducted revealed that much of the drafting process for high functioning students with ASD is done on an internal, mental basis, which proceeds to composing on the computer. In his interview, Eli especially noted his distaste for writing everything out by hand and then typing it. Penny also noted her connection with computers (as quoted previously in Chapter 3): *“Well the fact is definitely that you’re good with facts, you’re really good with computers. Maybe it’s a stereotype, but there is a reason for that stereotype, because autistic people, they click with computers, and maybe because computers are very logical. They do things the same way every time. And you can figure them out. You can figure out computers because if you click here it does this, and if you click there it does this. If you click here and push here, and it will do this...”* Penny shows here that she and many of her Aspie friends just “click” better with computers, and therefore she does nearly all of her writing on the computer at all stages of the writing process. Penny notes: *“it’s like people who don’t know how to use a computer have to sit down and just work at it, and work at it, and I’m really good with computers, so I just sit down and click for it, and okay.”* While Penny seems to grasp that not everyone does this or chooses to do this because, at least in part, many people don’t operate well with a computer, her responses throughout the case study indicate not only an extensive comfort level operating computers but also a preference to work with a computer on all aspects of her education.

While some students may view composing on a computer as merely the most efficient way to write an essay, students with ASD seem to view computer usage as a necessary comfort zone rather than a tool of convenience. While learning to write has indeed shifted in relation to computers in that computers affect the location as well as the type of writing with which we engage. New media in particular affords students on the ASD the opportunity to better understand the control of space without having to engage in such personal interactions for which they are often criticized (i.e. not making eye contact and not being able to read non-verbal cues such as body language). Composition courses (and processes) with students who have cognitive diversities must also negotiate this careful balance. Composition and Technical Communication scholar Johndan Johnson-Eilola describes alternate ways of understanding information as "...creativity articulated not as the creation of unique information in a vacuum, but as involving manipulation of preexisting pieces of information in space...[through addressing] the symbolic-analytic work issues as a way to orchestrate temporal fragments, constructing a line from heterogeneous, disjointed spaces" (109).

- **Nonverbal cues are not understood: To communicate effectively, be precise and brief, but also pointed and specific. Model this behavior with all of your students, so the student with ASD has a clearer perspective on appropriate behavior.**

Mona, a case study participant, captures the multi-faceted aspect of daily communication between herself and others around her when she states: "*What's behaviorally [and] socially acceptable and what's not... How far am I going to go before I step over the line of somebody else's boundaries? People with Asperger's... with most people they know where the line is just instinctively. These are social things you don't do.*"

*Well, people with Asperger's, we don't always know where the line is. "* Mona understands that there are social lines she should not cross. But she has made clear that knowing this fact does not necessarily equate to her effectively enacting it in social situations. Similarly, Penny also reflects her difficulty with maintaining some sort of social balance regarding her daily encounters with people:

*I don't know how you can get someone who doesn't have autism to completely understand how people with autism feel... It's being different. It's within the things that should come easily, do come easily, cause people seem to have an easy time socializing, but it just kind of falls into place for them. They go to parties and talk to everyone easily. And they are not just on an island talking about, I don't know, the value of pie, or the latest episode of some cartoon.... It seems like it's something everybody else never really even gives a thought, but I have to think about it a lot to make it work.*

One of the most important things I have learned in my research and teaching experience is that being blunt and specific is often thought to be rude or challenging, and is even mistaken for arrogance occasionally. This is unfortunate for many reasons but for my purposes here it is specifically unfortunate because as a society we have come to rely rather heavily on non-verbal behavioral tools for nearly every interaction. While this may be an inconvenience for people on the ASD in their day-to-day interactions, it serves as a major obstacle when it comes to being successful in higher education.

Obviously, this kind of problem with determining social cues and/or social norms extends beyond the classroom. For instance, one of the more poignant stories I heard during this research on my project was about a young man, new to college and a

freshman. He liked a particular girl in his math class and often attempted to make small talk with her. One particular day after class he walked with her to her dorm. The girl was uncomfortable because she knew nothing about autism or how to communicate effectively with her peer who had autism. Instead of pointedly telling him that she no longer wished to walk/talk with him, she walked faster. He walked faster. She stopped speaking. He continued to talk and talk on his own. Finally, feeling frustrated that she couldn't get the young man to leave her alone, the girl ducked into the girls' bathroom. Without realizing the consequences of doing so, he followed her into the restroom, talking the entire way. Ultimately, the student with ASD was banned from the dorms for this episode, even though he meant no harm. He was not able to understand her body language and other nonverbal communication efforts the girl attempted. He was also not aware that going into the bathroom with her was not something he should do for many reasons — all of which he was not aware. This is a single example of an unfortunate situation. Of course, a composition classroom is not a hallway social place, but clearly similar misunderstanding and miscommunications can occur in such a setting as the composition classroom.

A student from several years ago with ASD was overjoyed at the prospect of going to college. He was consistently early and always prepared for class. His exuberance extended to the classroom discussions, many of which he dominated—a common difficulty in college classrooms. Thus, I was well prepared to handle this. However, I was not prepared to handle this student's blunt, sometimes offensively-so, albeit often accurate corrections he would make of other students' answers or comments. His pointed suggestions were often condescending and sometimes frustrating for the other students.

At first, I said things like “I understand your point but might you find a more respectful way to say it?” To which, my student would reply “Why? I am right. S/He is wrong.” For my student with ASD having the correct answer and/or accurate information was more important than the way in which the information was presented. Frustrated, I asked this student to stay after class. After class, I told this student that while his answers were correct, the ways in which he was correcting his peers was being construed by the class as not only disrespectful, but also pompous. This was surprising and confusing for him. He could not understand why, if his answer was correct and their answer was not correct, anyone would be offended. I explained to him that while the right or wrong answer may be the most important academic aspect in these situations, from a social perspective the ways in which we choose to present information (i.e. tone, language choice, etc.) is equally important to most other people.

When I began researching autism, many of my first sources pointed me in the direction of the Jessica Kingsley Inc. website—a British publisher devoted to publishing ASD related works. During this initial research many autism scholars (Atwood, Gray, Bellini) cited comic book strips as the most effective way to communicate emotional logic to middle/high school students with ASD. Using similar templates from these comic book strips, I created situation-specific templates for my student and I to use. Eventually, through the use of templates<sup>20</sup> and several, continued conversations on this topic throughout the semester, this student slowly grew better at correcting someone in a kinder, less offensive way.

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<sup>20</sup> I created most of the templates we used. A few examples include: “I agree with X’s answer, but I think the questions could be better answered through Y’s theory/approach.” Or, “While X’s answer provides an insight into this problem I hadn’t thought of, I also thought Y might be of use to our discussion today.”



As Stuart Murray suggests, students with an ASD, like Melville’s *Bartleby*, or perhaps even the “average” recalcitrant student in our classroom, “for all that they might inspire confrontation and even anger, are determined to present their lives on their own terms as they understand them” (*Representing* 60). And as their teachers, is it not our mission to assist all students along this journey of self-actualization? Brueggemann’s enabling pedagogy argues for a teaching stance that accepts, instructs, includes, engages, and enables all students: “When literacy for and as language stands at the center of educational and social institutions, then literacy becomes about social identity, about power, about self-transformation, about speaking and listening to others, and, perhaps, most important for my argument here, about changing schooling and other social institutions from the inside out and the bottom up—about changing them by engaging students and citizens in ‘critical literacy’” (*Lend* 37). It seems to me adopting a blunter more pointed way of communicating with students on the ASD is well worth the effort on our part when we consider the lasting impact on perhaps all of our students.

- **Model the physical dynamics of a peer-workshopping group. Model appropriate language, noise level, as well as proximity in an academic setting.**

Not only are nonverbal cues typically inefficient means of communication with students with ASD, but these students are also often not conscious of the conventions of personal space. This can lead to uncomfortable situations in a classroom that usually incorporates regular partnering and/or group work. The first student I had with ASD had tremendous difficulty with the first few peer workshopping sessions—due in most part to my lack of specific instruction about what such an activity is, how it most often appears, as well as the ways in which it functions well. For our first workshop session, I paired my

male student with ASD (we will call him Joe for our uses here) with a young woman who, as far as I know, was not and is not a student with ASD. Initially, Joe sat close—probably a little too close—to his female partner. I noted this but figured it would work itself out through the process of the session. In addition to the proximity, Joe also discussed topics not at all related to the essays on which the class was working (i.e. video games, weekend plans, etc.). Again I noted this, but the topics were not unlike other students'. As I listened, I noted the conversation was primarily one-sided with the young woman staring at the floor and offering only single word replies as her contribution to the interaction. After a few minutes of this, the young lady excused herself to the restroom and did not return until nearly the end of the workshop session. Similar instances occurred for the following workshop session with other students in the class, until I had done enough research to better understand what I needed to do to ensure not only Joe's success with workshopping but all of my students as well. I learned to take on the same attitude toward social settings in my classrooms as I do with academic background: I don't assume anything is prior knowledge.

Moreover, when I introduce peer workshopping for the first time, I also model what a typical "workshop" with a peer might look, sound, and feel like. I make sure to discuss the sort of base line points most professors discuss—the art of giving and receiving constructive criticism; saying something positive for every negative; offering suggestions as well as encouraging comments, etc., but I have taken to folding that typical academic instruction with modeling various physical expectations, such as where two people might sit, the appropriate tone and audible level, and specific personal boundaries that should not be crossed. Intertwining my past academic lecture on the

details of a peer workshop session with the physical model has helped all of my students better understand what a peer workshop should look, sound, and feel like. But it has been especially helpful with stressing to all students the importance of delivery as well as content. Moreover, this strategy has reduced significant stress demystifying the correct way to conduct a peer-to-peer session while also preventing a potential miscommunication for my students with ASD.

Another way I've communicated the importance of physical space as well as compassion and clear directions is through mandating all of my students go to the college's Writing Center for their first essay after our second peer review session. Having modeled the physical and academic expectations of a peer workshop session followed by an actual peer workshop session where students can practice what I've shown them helps them learn first-hand what is expected from a workshop session—both inside and outside of class. Before they visit the WC, I ask them to do a pre-reflection journal about what they expect to happen during their WC visit. Then we discuss it. After they've visited the WC, I again ask the students to journal about their experience in the WC. This pre- and post-reflection has helped all students be more comfortable sharing their anxieties as well as learning to accept criticism on those words. But it has especially helped my students with ASD.

Throughout my case studies I noted the level of comfort students with ASD needed before conducting a productive workshop session. Indeed, all but Jake noted that they would rather have someone they know (i.e. parents, siblings, friends) review their essay because these particular reviewers are people the student is not only comfortable with but also someone who has earned the student's respect (as someone who could and

most likely will give valuable advice and offer important insight). Penny says (as previously quoted in Chapter 3) “*I’ve always wanted to have people, I’ve always wanted to have people I trust and know well to read my papers, but I mean, I may be a teeny bit skeptical with students I’ve never met before.*” Penny’s skepticism may stem from her not knowing the person well but also from her lack of comfort with the person, who she is supposed to be able to give as well as receive criticism about and from — phenomena which are most often directly related. In addition, because non-verbal cues are so often misread if processed at all (as discussed throughout this dissertation), aspects of group work such as physical proximity, audibility, and appropriate conversation topics are all important parts to successful group work, and therefore should be specifically taught and pointedly demonstrated.

Sensory overload is a crucial aspect for students with ASD. According to Atwood, for many individuals with ASD “...ordinary sensations are perceived as unbearably intense. The mere anticipation of the experience can lead to intense anxiety or panic...The most common sensitivities involve sound and touch, colours and aromas” (*Asperger’s* 129). In the past when I put my students into groups, the noise level in the room increases. As long as I could think and focus on what I was doing, I never gave much thought to this detail. But, having had several students with ASD in my classes who simply could not function at that noise level, I no longer make such assumptions. While for some students my detailed modeling of workshop sessions may initially seem tedious, explaining the reasons behind such modeling/discussion often helps all students to better understand the need for such an activity in a college composition course.

- **Create an ‘Escape’ for the student with ASD. Find a quiet, private place for the student to take a “time-out.” Be explicit about the amount and duration of such escapes.**

It is well known one of the most significant difficulties of students with ASD is the frequency and duration of times when they leave the classroom. This can not only be detrimental for the student with ASD due to missing so much in class coursework, but it can also be extremely distracting for other students as well as the professor. Indeed, a student with ASD in my class often disappeared for 15 to 20 minutes at a time during our three-hour course. After one such incident during which the student left class not long after it started and returned over 20 minutes later with a pizza from the opposite side of campus, I asked him to stay after class. When we spoke, he discussed his high stress level in the class and the ways in which his “escaping” was his way to deal with that stress. I explained to him that missing too much course content would only further his confusion and make his stress level even higher. So, instead I asked him what we could do to create a positive situation for the entire class as well as him. We discussed various options but the one that worked best was creating a quiet space near the classroom where he could escape if needed. We initially considered the hallway for his mini-breaks to relieve his stress, but the hallway was too noisy for the student and did little to diminish his stress and help him refocus for class. So, my next step was to call the room-scheduling department and reserve a room next/near to my classroom that the student could utilize for his breaks. This room worked well for my student. But, he was still taking off up to 20 minutes at a time during some class meetings. I finally had to bluntly and pointedly explain that while I understand his need to occasionally de-stress he will have to figure

out a way to do that more quickly because he simply could not continue to miss that much class. I also discussed my tardy arrival and early departure policy in our syllabus. Initially the student visibly struggled with the shortened duration of his ‘escapes’, but by the end of the semester, the student had dwindled his breaks (and thus stress levels) significantly from four to five 15 or 20 minute breaks to two to three five-minute breaks.

Such interim breaks were an allowance I felt comfortable making for my student with ASD (especially considering how much it helped him) but also a compromise that worked well and helped him be successful in my class. Indeed, my case studies reflected similar needs for students with ASD, as noted, for instance, by Mona (as previously quoted in Chapter 3):

*...we're probably going to have a little more physical behaviors, we might fidget, pacing is another thing we do. We're not doing it to freak people out, it's.....well have you ever been to a movie where it's like 4 hours and when you get up....4 hours you don't get up to go to the bathroom or get anything, and when you get out you just have to move because you've been sitting in one place for 4 hours and really not moving at all. That's what it's like on almost a regular basis for me with Asperger's. That's why I just have to move.*

It is certain that all people have quirks particular to themselves and that all people display and handle stress in very different ways (not to mention that the amount of stress which requires action varies from person to person as well). However, these interview studies have shown me that movement is most often the way in which students on the ASD deal with stress levels, and providing opportunities for students to de-stress in such a manner

without causing disruption for the class as a whole has proven to be the most effective way to accommodate students with this issue.

- **Encourage the student with ASD to make a list of things she wishes to share with you that are not on topic for the day's schedule (which you have put on the board). Suggest that she visit you during office hours to share her list.**

It is common knowledge that students with ASD can sometimes appear to be in their “own little world” or, in Penny’s words, “on her own island.” This is most often the case in part due to the obsessive thought patterns about very specific areas of interest for these students. Thus, one of the most difficult obstacles for students with ASD is learning how to disengage from their own “island” and tune in to the people and topics around them. Undoubtedly, this skill set is an acquired tool learned through specific teaching.

Indeed, it was such phenomena that motivated my research into autistic students in the composition classroom. During a lecture I was giving about the rhetorical situation, a student in my class with ASD<sup>21</sup> removed his shoe at his desk and then walked to the front center of the room where I was speaking. Unsure and a little confused, I paused the lecture and asked the student what he needed. He proceeded to tell me a detailed story about his shoe, that this was his favorite pair of shoes, his parents and he had been searching and searching for another pair of those shoes because (as he showed me by turning the sole backward) this pair were his favorite and he was in dire need of a new pair. Stunned, I mumbled something about hoping he and his parents find the shoes, then I asked the student to return to his seat so we could proceed. A week or so later, I was in the middle of another lecture when the same student again approached the front center of

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<sup>21</sup> On the first day of class this student approached me holding a business card in his hand which explained that this student had autism. Having an extremely limited knowledge base on autism at the time, I didn’t think much of it at that initial moment.

the room while I spoke and proceeded to tell me a detailed account of going to Pizza Hut with his parents the night before and all the ways in which the pizza had become stuck in his braces. I again asked the student to return to his seat and that I was sorry the pizza had become lodged in his braces. After class that day, I began researching ASD. I wouldn't read in my research about this type of experience until a few months later. During this research period, I learned that students with ASD are often not aware of the social conventions regarding timing, or judging when something might be inappropriate or appropriate. In lieu of the research as well as the first-hand experience, create time outside of class to discuss appropriate conversation timing and content for students with ASD.

For this particular student, we met every Friday at 9:00 AM until almost 10:00 AM in my office. The first 20 minutes or so I spent mostly listening to his stories from the week that he wished to share with me. After which time, we discussed whatever essay/activity we were working on in class, and we went over his draft/work for another 20 minutes or so. This usually took up the hour of each Friday. Sometimes the student would stay another hour, working independently on his draft at the student work station near my office, coming to me with specific questions. Considering the limited research I had done at the time, this adjustment I made worked well that particular semester, for this student.

However, after conducting my interviews, I learned that while I may have thought I was being rather clear with my body language and other non-verbal communication tools, I was not being clear in the least for my student with ASD. I learned this lesson the hard way, but it has been an invaluable one the more case studies I completed. For



example, John says (as previously quoted in Chapter 3) *“I have a high level functional autism. I don’t read people well. I know that there is something there, but I don’t necessarily understand what.”* Because I had not specifically explained to my former student this was not an appropriate time to discuss such things with me the very first time this occurred, I realized this type of thing would continue to occur unless I had a discussion prior to this activity with my students. While some students and even some colleagues may think teaching appropriate conversation topics as well as timing of these conversations is inappropriate, I would argue if a two-minute discussion saves a single student the embarrassment my first student with ASD felt, then I would rather error on the side of explaining this too specifically and too often than not enough.

While many students with ASD are aware of the ways in which they fall short in communication, they are most often not aware of the ways in which such poor communication can play out with their peers in a college classroom, where behavior is especially expected to adhere to certain social norms. For example, Penny states (as previously quoted in Chapter 3) *“Boy. Well, for one thing, I don’t notice that I, I notice that I don’t think the same as everybody else. And that makes communications difficult sometimes. Because, when I want to talk about something and nobody else wants to talk about it. I go on the same thing over and over and over...”* Similarly, John related: *“...Sometimes not having all the right words come out of my mouth at the same time. Like, the sentence comes out a little bit confusing...”* The behavior I discussed above demonstrates just how crucial this type of teaching tool can be for students with ASD.

- **Encourage students with ASD to seek external assistance whenever possible.**

I encourage all of my students to seek help from various centers on campus. At Delta College, I make sure my students enlist assistance from the Teaching Learning Center (TLC) where they receive one-on-one tutoring in nearly every subject. I also encourage my students to utilize our campus' Writing, Reading, and Information Technology (WRIT) Center where students can receive Writing Center pedagogy help as well as reading assistance and technology guidance. Encouraging students to seek external academic aid is useful in that learning is occurring on both sides of the desk: student employees and staff in the various tutoring centers across college campuses can undergo training establishing that non-verbal cues are not easily understood by students with ASD, and, the more contact students with ASD have in various social settings the more such experiences will become less stressful and filled with anxiety. Further, because students with ASD have so many mental and emotional distractions, they are often in dire need of additional assistance outside of the classroom. While assistance from professors is definitely vital to all students' success, it is crucial to students with ASD. Still, all students must learn how to interact with various types of people, so if the sole (or at least primary) source of help for students with ASD is their professor then they are not gaining this experience. Learning different types of communication skill sets as part of different audiences and different settings is a crucial step for students with ASD. Ultimately, for students with ASD, seeking external assistance beyond just the professor is often as much about social mentoring as it is about academic guidance.

In his interview, John noted the necessity for additional help outside of the classroom, but he attributed this need to a lack of time. John's point is that because he spends so much of his time focused on the particular areas that most interested him, and

because the other majority of his time is spent ensuring every aspect of his work is done to perfection, he almost always does not complete his work and/or runs out of time and is forced to ask for an extension. For time reasons then, John notes the need for help from his Professors: *“There is never enough time. I think it’s important for a college professor to overemphasize the fact they are available and willing to help...”* Eli also noted the importance of seeking help from his professor and other resources around campus as previously quoted in chapter 3):

*I think a good relationship with your professor is not only vital, but it is important, because unless you are able to fully understand, unless you like double check with your professor on materials, so that you will remember it, you might not be able to remember what it is you have to study, and come when it’s time for a quiz or a test, you might forget and thus do poorly. So, having a good relationship with a professor is very important and vital, as they will help you better under..., remember the material, and be able to remember it for the next quiz or exam... make sure you speak to a guidance counselor, or disabilities services employee, and make sure they let the regular teachers or professors know of your autism”*

Ultimately, utilizing available help is on the shoulders of all of our students; however, as their guide, we have a responsibility to at the very least encourage such practices continually throughout our courses.

- **Discuss your challenges, successes and failures with colleagues and potentially learn to revise your perspective on two issues: ‘Possibility’ and ‘Success’ in terms of your student’s behavioral issues as well as academic performance.**

Julie Jung argues that “rhetorics of the body” are so entrenched in our students’ learning patterns teachers do them a disservice by not “disrupting their conditioning in obvious and direct ways” (148).<sup>22</sup> Jung’s work thus showcases the numerous and diverse ways compositionists might explore (and embrace) disruption in their pedagogy and the ways in which students learn the most within such disrupted space. These pedagogues, through their focus on the affective dimensions of connection to contemporary politics, are in many ways carrying on the tradition of Composition Studies of the late 80’s and 90’s, wherein scholars such as James Berlin, Ira Shor, and Victor Vitanza foregrounded the ways that writing classrooms variously reflect and challenge the dominant sociological, political, and economic practices of contemporary society. As they did then, composition scholars continue to focus on the potential of disruptions, (de)compositions, (dis)connections and, I would add, a greater need to address the question of (dis)abilities, within the walls of the composition classroom, where I first discovered just how embedded my own expectations were with cultural constructions of what a “good” student was.

During a lecture in a section of mainstream Composition I was teaching, the majority of my students were actively taking notes, making eye contact with me, and engaging their peers and me with questions and answers. My student with ASD was not only not making eye contact and not taking notes, he was also playing a miniature video game mechanism hidden under the table. After several minutes, I reminded all students that they should be taking notes, consulting their assignment sheet I’d handed out, and

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<sup>22</sup> Rhetoric of the body is defined in various ways. For my purposes here, rhetorics of the body refers to the gray area between the body viewed as natural and biologically determined versus the body viewed as entirely constructed by cultural aesthetics.

asking questions. The student with ASD nodded in acknowledgement but remained disengaged and continued playing his video game. I continued lecturing. Finally, frustrated and in firm belief the student had heard nothing of the day's lecture, I let the class go on break then asked the student the content of the day's lecture. Without putting down his video game player and thus without looking up or making eye contact, the student provided an accurate summary of the 30 minute lecture I had given and repeated nearly verbatim the last 10 minutes of the lecture. In complete disbelief, I stood silent.

What could I say? I had been taught and grown accustomed to “good” students making eye contact, taking notes, and actively participating. Yet, this student with ASD had done none of those things and yet had retained the information I had provided. Granted, regardless of his ability to retain information I had to specifically request him not to play the video game in class. Throughout the semester, I learned many things about having a student with ASD in a composition course—little of which aligned with what most of my colleagues and I deemed “normal” or “typical.” In response to these experiences—which taught me to reassess what is “normal” and the different ways an “abled bodied” student can appear— as well as the research I have conducted here, I altered my own teaching strategies in hopes to include and benefit all students.

After conducting my interview studies, I realized Penny made things rather clear when she said the best way to understand students with ASD is to simply ask: “*Ask them how they feel, what they want. Try to see things in their perspective.*” After hearing her answer, I have taken a rather simple route to growing in my profession in terms of reaching all of my students: I explain my decisions and thus actions, then, in turn ask for their feedback and input. Not only has this opened lines of communication to a

comfortable level for all of my students, it also allows me to continually evolve my classroom to be increasingly cognitively enabling.

### **Conclusion**

As I suggested in Chapter one, students with ASD are only the latest of a long list of students at risk in Composition Studies. With these other groups, the key challenge is to find a way to accommodate the introduction of a new group into the Composition Classroom but at the same time avoid the tendency to normalize the difference they bring.

As identity formation is directly connected to individual experiences (and the oppositional practices to those experiences) in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality, the oppositional voice of disabled experiences has often been absent. Unfortunately, as numerous Disability Scholars have emphasized, the construction of normalcy since the 19th century has meant a simultaneous denigration of disability, as there is probably no area of life in today's society in which some idea of a norm hasn't been incorporated and assumed. Further, because disability embodies infinite and contrasting circumstances that are specific and variable to each individual (Thomson 14-15), disability does not easily lend itself to common theories applied across the board due to not only the very diverse conditions that define a disability, but also the multitude of ways in which each individual copes with that disability.

Culturally, our concept of disability lies within our senses in that our sense of touch, sight, hearing, and smell have been conditioned by our cultural experience to see, feel, hear, and smell what those experiences have taught us is normal, beautiful, and common. While technological modes of communication are equalizing the ways in which

various disabilities hinder persons with them—i.e. e-mail decreases the limitations of deafness; telephones decrease the limitations of blindness, etc.—we are all differently abled, and those typically referred to as “normal” are only temporarily abled, and thus, an “abled prejudice,” remains a friction between what we have constructed as the “normal” body and the “abnormal” body. Terms like “disabled students” inaccurately implies that a student is defined by her disabledness. Alternately, the term, “differently abled” implies the way in which people are differently abled represents a quality about personhood rather than implying the makeup of an entire person. If we conceive of disability as a mere description of the person rather than an absolute category, we may begin to examine the true identity of other bodies with “dis”abilities and cognitive diversities just as we are able to understand the identity of the “abled” without examining their entire existence. It is especially crucial to consider our students in this way in relation to the misconceptions we have placed on defining what a “good” student is as well as the ways in which we misconstrue aspects of behavior displayed by students with ASD.

Composition Studies, largely through its “ownership” of the required first year Composition course, has become a battleground site for certain culture wars. Indeed, this interest has been a driving force both in the theoretical wing of Composition Studies (as the primary route for CS scholars to appropriate and/or create theories of subjectivity, social power, and politics) as well as the pragmatics of composition pedagogies and process (i.e., work on the teaching of such individuals has equally driven much pedagogical scholarship in the field). For much of its history Composition Studies has worked to serve all students, not just those who represent the hegemonic dominant social group. Academics can be activists for progressive social change as long as they work to

tear down the barriers, as Composition Studies has a history of doing, instead of remaining aloof to people who may be regarded as unenlightened regarding the functions of oppressive ideologies (Berlin). At its core, this dissertation is about hope—the hope that individuals’ needs are no longer included in discussions primarily dominated by norm reinforcement and profit. At a time when the economical climate of the U.S. is unstable at best, “hope, while intangible, is not inconsequential. Hope is a necessary precondition (along with information and resources) that allows people to make investments that in turn affect economies” (Prendergast 18).



**APPENDIX A**

*This form replaces all prior versions of the informed consent template.*

**[Behavioral] Research Informed Consent**

Title of Study: A Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Cognitive Diversity

Principal Investigator (PI): Crystal Starkey  
English  
989-948-4515

**Purpose**

You are being asked to be in a research study of high functioning autism and/or Asperger's Syndrome in the composition classroom because you have either completed a college composition course or are in the process of completing one and you have been diagnosed with autism. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University and Delta College. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled at Delta College and/or Saginaw Valley State University is about five. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

In this research study, my objective is to address the issue of cognitive disabilities in a way that will allow us to serve this community as well as provide a fuller perspective on what we think of as disabilities/diversities in the writing classroom. As such, my dissertation takes up three lines of inquiry: 1) researching the learning styles and pedagogical experiences of students with HFA/AS; 2) identifying the intersection of bodily and mental comportment within the rhetorical and writing pedagogical tradition using HFA/AS as an example; 3) and thinking through the relationships between cognitive diversities, their diagnoses and treatment, and the connections between these phenomena and recent changes in labor and social power.

**Study Procedures**

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview and submit writing samples from your college composition course. We will meet for two different interview sessions. I estimate each interview will take approximately two hours. I further estimate the writing sample collection to take one hour. Questions in the interview will ask you about your approach to the writing process as well as the ways in which your autism does or does not affect your experience in the writing classroom. I will not use your name in my research, so your identity will remain protected.

**Benefits**

As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit you and other people in the future.

### **Risks**

There may be potential for emotional distress if participants become sad or depressed in discussing disability. Beyond this, however, there are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

### **Study Costs**

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

### **Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Human Investigation Committee (HIC) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

If photographs, videos, or audiotape recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. No one except me will have access to the recorded interviews, and I will destroy the recordings upon research completion.

### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

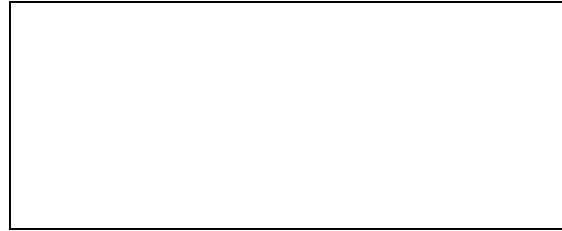
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University, Delta College or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

### **Questions**



\*Remove LAR reference if you don't intend to consent participants that have or may have a LAR.

\*\*Use when participant has had this consent form read to them (i.e., illiterate, legally blind, translated into foreign language).



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Signature of translator

Date

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Printed name of translator

Time

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**ABSTRACT****A COGNITIVELY ENABLING APPROACH: COGNITIVE DIVERSITY IN  
COMPOSITION STUDIES.**

by

**CRYSTAL STARKEY****August 2013****Advisor:** Dr. Jeff Pruchnic**Major:** English (Composition Studies)**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

My dissertation project investigates the rhetoric of cognitive disability in relation to the theory and teaching of rhetoric and composition in entry-level writing courses. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who frequently struggle with generalizing as well as feeling and expressing emotions, are often perceived to have a decreased intellectual ability and thus not often considered part of the traditional student body of higher education classrooms. Yet, as ASD diagnostic criteria has changed and diagnoses have continued to grow, it seems that likely that this cohort will be an increasingly larger presence in college and university classrooms. This dissertation analyzes cultural understandings of ASD in clinical discourses and popular media, presents a study of interviews conducted with students with ASD at Delta College (MI) and concludes with suggestions for creating what I term “cognitively enabling classrooms.”

In Chapter 1 I focus on the inclusion of cognitive diversities within the realm of Disability Studies and Composition Studies. As I describe the interview studies I conducted and the project’s research methodology, I simultaneously examine the

(dis)abled body in the fields of Rhetoric and Composition. Doing so allows for the opportunity to discuss the ways in which such bodies can be more enabled in the Composition classroom and thus, hopefully, more successful.

In Chapter 2 I look at the history of Autism as it emerges and develops within the culture of cognitive diversity. To do this, I utilize Georges Canguilhem's analytical framework in *The Normal and the Pathological* and J. Blake Scott's "rhetorical-cultural" approach in from his text *Risky Rhetoric: Aids and the Cultural Practices of HIV Testing* to show the extent to which the cultures of normativity dictate the way we socially construct various disabilities. To further examine this point, I also analyze the post-Fordist American culture and its particular constructs of difference in contemporary media portrayals of people with ASD.

In Chapter 3 I first discuss the design of the interview study before sharing my interview study participants' insight into their experience of diagnosis, their communication practices, and their conception of their own cognitive processing behaviors with a specific focus on how these issues impact their experience in the composition classrooms and their writing process most generally. Also in chapter three I share these students' perspectives on the world of work—a world these students seem eager to enter with specific career goals in mind.

In Chapter 4 I examine specific approaches to creating a cognitively enabling classroom through utilizing particular teaching strategies. These recommendations include utilizing technology comfortably, posting a daily schedule, using various hands-on and visual stimuli, modeling physical dynamics of critical, physical aspects to composition courses such as peer workshop sessions, creating a safe place for students

with ASD to escape, as well as using straightforward, rather than non-verbal, ways to communicate. The dissertation concludes with an argument for recognizing the ways in which cognitive diversities have always affected Disability Studies, and why these influences are critical to contemporary Composition Studies

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

I received my BA from Siena Heights University in English Language and Communications in 2000. Under the tutelage of Dr. Simone Yehuda, I completed a senior project examining Jane Austen's influence on contemporary women. Upon graduation from SHU, I needed financial assistance in order to attend graduate school, so I accepted a full time position as an at-risk youth director at Delta College. I continued in this job for over four years while working on my MA in English Composition and Communications at Central Michigan University. My master's thesis examined the relationship between at-risk, community college students and newly graduated Composition Instructors. I entered the Ph.D. program at Wayne State University in 2006, where I studied Rhetoric and Composition. I was hired full time in a tenure-track position at Delta College in 2007 and became interested in students with ASD my first year in the doctoral program, when a student of mine approached me, eyes cast down, handing me a purple business card that read: "I have Asperger's." Having only a vague recollection of that term at the time, I began what turned into seven years of researching and a dissertation focus. Currently, I am an Associate Professor at Delta College, where, in addition to teaching, I have served as the Assistant Director of Service Learning, the Co-Director of the Writing Center, and the Coordinator of the Honors Program. I continue to be drawn to students who face greater challenges than most—challenges that could prohibit their success in college, and beyond. While I have been recognized for using technology and creativity in my teaching, these efforts have always been with one goal in mind: to help all students recognize their full potential. This project has afforded me the opportunity to do that.