



Teaching Students with Asperger's Syndrome

Context

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is part of the autistic spectrum. Autistic disorders can occur in widely varying degrees, but cover a triad of difficulties:

- **social interaction:** aloof; indifferent to others; acts in an odd manner
- **communication:** absence of desire to communicate; echoing the words of others
- **imagination:** concentration on 'fact'; repetitive stereotyped actions

This information is intended also to be helpful in instances of communication difficulties, where a student may not have a diagnosis of AS, but may display some of the same characteristics.

Issues

Most people with AS find eye contact extremely difficult. If they do maintain eye contact, they often lose the sense of the conversation, as they cannot look, think and listen at the same time.

People with AS often react favourably to bright or shifting light, and dislike the dark.

Some find large, quiet, empty spaces disconcerting. This may happen in a large exam room, or lecture theatre, where they can hear everyone turning pages and the scratching of pens.

People with AS typically do not pick up on nuances of expression and body language. They may take ironic or metaphorical statements absolutely literally, and completely misread situations.

People with AS tend to like routine and can be distressed if there is an unexpected room change.

Many AS students have trouble when it comes to group work, as they do not understand interactive situations, and can cause a group to under-perform.

“Students... may take ironic or metaphorical statements absolutely literally, and completely misread situations.”



Strategies

- Arrange for someone to take a student around the buildings and rooms for the first few weeks each year and/or as timetables change.
- Many AS students learn better from imitation, rather than instruction. If you do give instructions, give them clearly in writing, wherever possible.
- Most students with AS have a Note Taker as the student would tend to concentrate on neat handwriting. The Note Taker may also act as a “buddy”, an advocate or a study supporter.
- Having an academic tutor who can meet regularly with the student as a mentor has been beneficial.
- Some people with AS strive towards perfectionism. They may need to be told that they have done enough to pass an assessment, for example limiting the time to give a presentation.
- Some AS students need to be helped to see the relevance of deadlines. Give a reasonable explanation why it is necessary, e.g. less time for the next assignment, your marking schedule.
- If intermediary steps in solving a problem are required by the student, in order to demonstrate understanding for assessment purposes, this will need explaining.
- Is there a way other than group work that they can meet the learning outcomes?
- Most students with AS need room or time adjustments for examinations. Students may also need clear advice and support on how to use their time between exams.

“ Students... may need to be told that they have done enough to pass, ... for example limiting the time to give a presentation ”