

Now do this one.

Show thinking

DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This article by Dr. Temple Grandin, a prominent autistic professor, provides a powerful first-person account of autistic thinking styles and advocates for a strengths-based approach to education. She explains that autistic cognition is not a deficient version of neurotypical thinking but a different mode of processing, such as thinking in pictures, patterns, or verbal facts. This document is essential for Enliten as it offers direct, lived-experience evidence for the neurodiversity paradigm, reframes "symptoms" like fixations as motivational strengths, and provides concrete examples of how standard educational practices and assessments can fail to accommodate and recognize autistic intelligence.

FILENAME

GRANDIN_2007_Autism_from_the_Inside_first-person_account_of_autistic_thinking_and_strengths.md

METADATA

- **Primary Category:** NEURODIVERSITY
- **Document Type:** article
- **Relevance:** Core
- **Key Topics:** autism, lived_experience, first-person_account, strengths-based_education, visual_thinking, pattern_thinking, neurodiversity, sensory_sensitivity
- **Tags:** #autism, #first-person, #lived_experience, #strengths-based, #visual_thinking, #neurodiversity, #education, #mentorship, #sensory, #assessment

CRITICAL QUOTES FOR ENLITENS

- "Teachers need to understand how autistic people think. How I think is different from how 'normal' people think."
- "I have had teachers ask me, 'How can I get the pictures out of the student's head?' The answer is that you cannot. Pictures are the autistic student's way of thinking."
- "The bottom line is that skills are uneven, and encouraging students to excel in their strongest areas is better than trying to push for well-roundedness."
- "The secret to motivating a student with autism is to broaden the student's fixations into useful activities."
- "Fixations are great motivators, and it is often a mistake to stamp one out. Try to help the student develop his or her fixation into a useful skill that other people will value."

- "An autistic student often does better by 'selling' his or her work, rather than by relying on a charismatic personality."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: MODELS OF AUTISTIC THINKING (FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNT)

Dr. Grandin describes three distinct cognitive styles she has observed in the autistic population, providing a model for neurodiversity in thought processes.

1. Photorealistic Visual Thinkers (like herself)

- "As I described in *Thinking in Pictures* (1995), all my thoughts happen in photorealistic pictures."
- "My mind works like the search engine Google when it does an image search. If somebody says the word saddle, the first image I see in my imagination is an English saddle, my most prized possession when I was in high school. The next image is the tack room full of saddles at my aunt's guest ranch in Arizona. The third image is tennis courts. How did I get from a saddle to tennis courts? Next to my aunt's tack room were tennis courts for the ranch guests. My thinking is associative and is often not sequential or linear."
- "Research using brain scans now shows that my brain works differently in its greater reliance on its visual areas."

2. Pattern Thinkers

- "Some [people with autism] think in visual or sound patterns instead of in pictures."
- "These pattern thinkers 'see' in their mind's eye relationships between numbers instead of photorealistic images, they usually excel in music and math."

3. Verbal/Factual Thinkers

- "Still other people with autism appear to have almost no ability in visual imagery."
- "They think with long lists of words and facts and often love history and sports statistics."

CRITIQUE OF CURRENT EDUCATIONAL & ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Grandin's advice to teachers serves as an implicit critique of standardized methods that fail to account for autistic cognitive and sensory differences.

Critique of Processing Speed & Verbal Instruction

- **Give the student time to respond.** "I process information slowly, and I need time to provide an answer. I remember a very frustrating episode from kindergarten. The assignment was to mark all the pictures of things that began with B. I failed to mark a picture of a bike and a birdbath. The teacher did not give me time to explain that I did not know the difference between the little trike that I rode and a bike. I also marked the bird-bath picture G for garden."
- **Avoid long strings of verbal directions.** "When I ask for directions when I am driving, I have to write them down if anyone tells me more than three steps. I have absolutely no sequential memory for verbal directions. If the student can read, provide him or her with written instructions."

Critique of Ignoring Sensory Needs

- **Respect sensory sensitivities.** "The way an autistic child perceives the world is different, many have heightened sensitivities. Sensory sensitivities can vary, but in class the teacher may need to help a student cope. When my elementary school bell rang, it hurt my ears as much as a dentist drill does when it hits a nerve. I have great difficulty hearing another person talk if there is too much background noise."

Critique of the Goal of "Well-Roundedness"

- "The bottom line is that skills are uneven, and encouraging students to excel in their strongest areas is better than trying to push for well-roundedness. If a 7th grader can do 12th grade math, he or she should be taking 12th grade math. Otherwise the student will become bored and have behavior problems."

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS (A STRENGTHS-BASED MODEL)

Develop the Student's Strengths

- "The most successful adults with autism, Asperger's syndrome, dyslexia, or other learning problems had teachers who developed their strengths."
- "I use my ability to think visually in my business designing livestock facilities."

Use Special Interests ("Fixations") as a Gateway to Learning

- "The secret to motivating a student with autism is to broaden the student's fixations into useful activities."
- "If a child likes airplanes, then use airplanes as the subject for reading and math. Fixations are great motivators, and it is often a mistake to stamp one out. Try to help the student develop his or her fixation into a useful skill that other people will value."
- **Personal Example:** "In my case, nobody was interested in my obsessive interest in cattle squeeze chutes... When I eventually transformed the obsession into the skill of designing cattle chutes and other facilities, other people became interested in what I could do."

The Importance of Mentorship and Apprenticeship

- "My high school science teacher, Bill Carlock, saved me. By giving me interesting projects, he gave me a reason to study: to become a scientist."
- "Some of the most successful individuals on the autism spectrum were 'apprenticed' into such fields as auto mechanics or computer programming."
- "An autistic student often does better by 'selling' his or her work, rather than by relying on a charismatic personality. Showing student work in a portfolio is a good strategy. Talent will attract a mentor."

Developing Social Skills Through Shared Interests

- "Socially, high school was the worst time in my life. I was teased constantly. My only refuges from teasing were horseback riding and my science teacher's electronics lab because the kids who sought these activities were not the kids who teased."
- "I recommend getting children with autism or Asperger's syndrome into activities where they can socialize through shared interests with other children. Specialized activities or clubs, such as robotics, chess, spelling bees, art, music, or computer programming, are wonderful for students on the autism spectrum."