UNIVERSITY OF
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Supporting autistic students to work with their peers

10 Good Practice Principles

Good practice
benefits all.

Bad practice adversely
affects disadvantaged
groups.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive practices should be embedded in curriculum development, teaching methodology and staff training, and should be seen as anticipating the needs of all students.

The principles suggested below are designed to guide how you work and interact with our autistic learners when considering the use of, or supervising, group work.

However, you might consider a wholesale adoption of these principles as what benefits autistic learners is likely to benefit all students.

10 GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

1. SHARING OF INFORMATION AND REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Know your students, find out if students you teach have disclosed autism to the University. Create opportunities and foster an open and inclusive atmosphere for students to disclose their autism. Be prepared to discuss support needs direct with the student and refer on to support services where necessary. Seek advice and support from the AccessAbility tutor in your department and/or study adviser for autistic students in the AccessAbility Centre.

Be mindful that although students may have the same label or diagnosis their needs will be different depending on how their autism manifests, how it affects them, and what strategies they

> Careful planning, an overhaul of out-of-date practices and policies, and greater flexibility in teaching methods can benefit all students in the department.
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use to cope with the difficulties they might have. If you have taught one autistic student you have taught one autistic student.

Whilst it remains important to respect the confidentiality of student information it must also be made clear to the student that if their information is not shared with those who need to know their access to appropriate support and reasonable adjustments might be limited.

2. ENVIRONMENT

Consider the physical environment autistic students are required to work in and the difficulties this presents for them due to sensory issues. Noise, light and smell all make concentrating much more of a challenge for autistic learners so consider if there is the facility for them to withdraw from the group for time out or to work quietly by themselves. Ensure arrangements such as the right to take a break are effectively communicated to students as autistic leaners are not likely to assume this is possible unless explicitly advised.

It is also important to foster a calm atmosphere to ensure sensory overload does not become a problem, and be prepared to switch learning environments if necessary. You might also investigate the provision of a quiet space within the department for priority use by autistic students.

3. GROUP SIZE AND STRUCTURE

Try to plan small groups of no more than 5, and consider carefully the makeup of the group. Wherever possible avoid random grouping or asking students to get into groups by themselves as autistic students may not know any of their peers well enough to approach them to work together. It is often beneficial for autistic students to work with people they know or have worked with before.

Think about seating arrangements, establish group rules such as taking turns to speak, and consider if the group will need breaks. Ensure that the regularity of meetings are clearly expressed to students, and consider remote working by using tools such as wiki's and Blackboard discussion forums. Where groups have to work on their own with minimal supervision it is advisable to ensure there is an experienced facilitator in the group, for instance a post graduate or support worker.

4. CLEAR DEFINED TASKS, DEADLINES AND OUTCOMES

In anticipation of additional needs make information available to students well before a session is scheduled so they can prepare. Provide accessible course materials in a variety of formats, such as hard copy and on line.

Assignment briefs, learning outcomes, deadlines and mark schemes also need

to be clear and explicit. It is important to provide a clear task outline using unambiguous language, and ensure the student knows what they need to do by when. Ask students which existing assignment outlines are good examples; could these then be used to establish a consistency of approach across modules throughout the department?

Be mindful that autistic students work best in a structured environment with clear rules and expectations. If the task is not able to be delivered in this way, for instance when students have to arrange their own group meetings and allocate tasks amongst themselves, consider what procedures you have in place to support autistic students with this. Autistic learners may also need additional guidance around time management, for instance with advice on how long to spend on a given task.

5. COMMUNICATION

Use various forms of communication such as Blackboard, email and notice boards, with students and between group members. Although we might encourage the use of official University channels consider facilitating the use of social media, for those who struggle to interact face to face this a more accessible way to contact others. However, ensure that if a team are going to use messaging apps or social media that all students in the group are signed up to it.

6. SUPPORT, SUPERVISION AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE GROUP

It is important to a have named member of staff, such as a group supervisor, whom autistic students know to contact if they need help or support.

When leading a group staff also have responsibilities to set the right atmosphere, recap ideas shared, and if the autistic student does not appear to know when to speak ask questions or invite contributions by name.

When a group works independently consider how they should feedback on their progress, how they should allocate tasks, how can they report issues such as bullying, and how you should undertake conflict resolution.

You may also need to intervene when communication appears to fail, division of workload seems unfair or where an autistic student has misunderstood or upset another group member. However, be mindful that it may not be the behaviour of the autistic student which needs to change but rather the behaviour or lack of understanding of their peers.

7. STAFF TRAINING AND SUPPORT

It is imperative for all staff to have autism awareness training because support is an institution wide obligation and not just the responsibility of disability services. This awareness training could be followed up with role specific training so that all staff have the confidence to interact with autistic students and the skills needed to support them by putting the appropriate reasonable adjustments in place.

Therefore, all staff need to have access to training; academics, administrative staff, technical staff, GTAs, part time staff and visiting lecturers. Furthermore, such training should be mandatory and time should be allocated during the working day for staff to undertake it.

As well as training also consider peer mentoring or supervision for staff, and access support from the AccessAbility Centre when you need it.

8. STUDENT TRAINING

Consider what support can be given to the rest of the group in order to work with their autistic peer. You might investigate how the department could facilitate student training in autism awareness, perhaps in partnership with other departments or the Student Union.

However, remember the need to respect the confidentiality of the student, do not disclose their condition to their peers unless they give you explicit permission to do so.

9. CONSULTATION WITH, AND FEEDBACK FROM, AUTISTIC STUDENTS

Consider your students as 'learning partners'. It would be good practice to consult regularly with autistic students on the organisation of group work across modules in order that the requirement and organisation of group work is regularly monitored, and if necessary amended.

10. ADVERTISE YOUR EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

There is much good practice already in departments so don't be afraid to remind students at every available opportunity!

For instance, flag up existing guidance on team working, remind students about the support on offer to them through, for example, an open door policy, and continue to utilise the personal tutor system to cultivate positive relationships with students.

This will ensure autistic students are clear about the support on offer to them when they are required to work with their peers, which in turn will help to reduce any anxiety they might feel about this.

> Hearing the student's voice is a key part of understanding the challenges they face and their concerns.
>
> HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY

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