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Mentoring autistic students

I have worked with autistic people in one capacity or another for the last 20 years. I am a qualified teacher and self-confessed autism geek, so making the decision to become a specialist autism mentor with the [National Autistic Society](#) at the University of Hull was an easy one to make.

Starting university

The process of student support starts before the academic year begins when students first request funding through [Disabled Students' Allowance](#), but I make my first contact a few weeks before the students arrive at university. Many autistic people hate using the telephone so I make contact via email and text message, but also give the option of direct contact by telephone if that is something which they feel comfortable with. The important thing is that students know that there is a safety net and someone they can turn to at the university, even before they arrive.

Often the academic work, especially in first few weeks, is the least of a fresher's concerns. They will be living (often) in a communal environment, one which they have never experienced before and which brings its own set of challenges.

Misunderstandings are sadly commonplace and there are often issues surrounding shared housekeeping and the perception that the autistic housemate is unsociable. The dilemma for the student being to disclose or not to disclose. If all goes well the student's differences are accepted and accommodated. In the worst case the student is isolated and accused of 'using' their autism diagnosis as an 'excuse'.

Perhaps the most difficult and potentially debilitating issue/difficulty in shared student accommodation is that of noise. Many autistic students have difficulties with unwanted sound (noise) particularly late at night.

Case study

All names have been changed in the case studies.

Sophie is a second year game design student. Some of the other girls she had shared with last year have moved out and found a house together, leaving Sophie a little concerned over who she might now be sharing a house with. Sophie's new housemates are 1st year students who are determined to make the most of their new found freedom, often coming in loudly at 2 am and waking Sophie up in the process. Sophie is now upset and tells me that she attempted to discuss the noise and how losing sleep is affecting her studies. Unfortunately Sophie's concerns fall on deaf ears and she does not know how to manage the situation - Sophie hates conflict.

I suggest that we talk to student accommodation and if the situation does not improve a mediation meeting should be arranged. A mediation meeting is arranged and Sophie asks me to also attend. Following the meeting the situation rapidly improves, much to Sophie's relief.

Attending lectures

I try, and usually succeed, in booking the same day, venue and time each week for each mentoring session. Consistency is so important if sessions are not to be forgotten and missed. Students often feel bombarded for the first few weeks: multiple demands, a busy campus and often, especially in the first few weeks, the dreaded timetable changes. Building good working relationships and trust early is important, as is planning in the event of a change, what to do with the time if the lecture is cancelled completely and where to find information and support are all important subjects for early mentoring sessions.

Case study

Claire is a first year student in her first semester and is studying psychology. Claire has never lived away from home before and is struggling to settle in. Claire's timetable has been changed several times and this has caused her great distress. During an early mentoring session Claire discloses that she feels that she does not really understand what is expected of her, or what she needs to focus on. Claire is beginning to suspect that she asks too many questions during a lecture and that her lecturer is growing tired of this. Claire discloses that she had not identified her academic support tutor (AST) or where her facilities student hub is situated.

Claire was supported by her mentor to locate her student hub and to make contact with her academic support tutor. Claire's mentor (myself) attended her first academic support session with her tutor (who was also the course senior lecturer) at her request.

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Claire's lecturer was unaware that she was autistic and offered weekly catch up sessions. I went over the student portal again with Claire and she now understands where to find lecture notes and how to access course announcements. The lecturer agreed to email Claire personally when a change to a lecture theatre was expected. Claire successfully completed the semester and says that she is looking forward to her second.

Managing workload

Universities may discriminate against autistic people without meaning to do so. I am currently a second year MA student studying Autism Spectrum at Sheffield Hallam University. I have one 6000 word essay to complete at a time, unlike my undergraduate students who have multiple essays and projects to complete all with competing deadlines. Some autistic people are monotropic learners - quite simply we like to complete one task at a time before moving on to the next. For undergraduate students of course, this is not possible.

Visual timetables are a really practical way for students to really understand and plan their workload with the time available. For those students who may benefit from a more monotropic approach, modules and semesters can be planned and structured to support this, setting out small tasks to be completed that altogether contribute to the whole.

Some autistic students get 'locked' into a particular area of study and will focus intensely on this project to the exclusion of other topics. In my experience game design students in particular have a tendency to focus on a particular digital platform, leaving the written element of the module under prepared for.

Case study

Martin is a second year game designer. Martin has a particular interest in 3D game design and has combined this with his love of dinosaurs. Martin has extensively researched the dinosaur he wants to recreate as part of his academic work - its history and anatomical structure - and wishes to create the most realistic 3D model possible.

Martin has a portfolio of written work (2400 words), a group project and presentation which all need to be submitted just prior to the Christmas break. During the next mentoring session Martin discloses that he has not shifted his focus from the 3D project, and although the group work is almost complete he has yet to begin his portfolio work. During our session I looked over his digital work with him, alongside his brief. The detail of the work which he had already completed was more than the brief required, and now just needed to be 'rigged'.

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A plan was in put in place to first complete the group project and to 'rig' the 3D design, before moving on to the portfolio. The plan was completed in order, notes were taken alongside the completion of the 'rigging of the 3D dinosaur design. The portfolio was then completed, proof read and submitted 24 hours before the deadline.

Peer mentoring

The importance of the pastoral element of mentoring cannot be underestimated. I have students who tell me that they would not have a meaningful conversation for the rest of the week were it not for their mentoring session. I have students who have been through mainstream schooling and have never met another autistic person before. The relief of being able to safely 'offload' their past life experiences to another autistic person, someone on the same wavelength who has experienced the same set of difficulties, is palpable.

Case study

Paul has arrived to sit his exam. Paul has disclosed he is autistic and it was agreed that he would sit his exam in a room with no more than eight people, but on arrival he discovers that there are almost 100 people already in the exam hall. Paul, who is already anxious, is too nervous to tell anyone about the mistake that has been made. The exam does not go well, though I know through discussion that Paul has a good understanding of his subject. I support Paul to submit mitigating circumstances. The mitigation is accepted. The exam is rescheduled for an August resit with no more than 8 people in the room as previously agreed. Arrangements are made to meet with Paul prior to his exam for some support.

I left school in 1979 without any qualifications. School for me was a frightening, bewildering and violent place. To escape the constant bullying I truanted daily for the last two years of my school life. As a result I left school without qualifications and believed I was stupid.

I am now a qualified teacher with a postgraduate qualification in autism and Asperger's syndrome. I am now a second year Master's student. If autistic people are given the opportunity to learn in the right environment, with the right support and in a way which meets our learning needs, then we can achieve anything