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## **Should Neurodiversity Culture Influence How Instructors Teach?**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the rise of the neurodiversity movement, and the advantages of understanding students as members of an emerging culture. Taking a multicultural approach to work with neurodivergent students can increase understanding and awareness of their experience. It can also allow instructors to go beyond approaches that are based solely on the provision of accommodations in their work with students who may qualify for diagnoses such as autism, ADHD, or other specific learning disabilities.

### **Introduction**

“What accommodations are autistic students entitled to?” “How can I help my student who doesn’t work well in groups?” “Should I fail my student whose work is strong but often incomplete?” “What can be done for the slower readers in my class?” College faculty have been asking practical, problem-solving questions like these when they encounter students who may not fit the mold of a traditional learner. Questions like these have also guided research on effective postsecondary practices for students who have the diagnosis of autism, ADHD, or a learning disability (LD). But what if these questions, well-meaning as they may be, cannot lead to equity for the people they are supposed to help? What if inquiry about needs and services cannot by itself lead to teaching practices that give all students a reasonable chance to achieve? This article suggests that the development of teaching practices to solve immediate practical concerns is important but not enough; to complement a needs-and-services approach, the teaching implications of the neurodiversity movement are an untapped path to greater equity.

### **Special Education Perspective**

All students in the United States have the right to a free and appropriate public education. This right is explicitly legislated to apply to individuals who have a disability, including neurologically based conditions like autism, ADHD, and LD. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and subsequent reauthorizations (IDEA, 1997, 2004) establish the right to equitable education for elementary and secondary school students who have disabilities. Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act

(ADA, 1990) legislates access for college students by tying federal aid to colleges and universities' provision of services to students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

In colleges and universities, this legislation has resulted in the provision of accommodations to students who provide documentation of a qualifying diagnosis. Accommodations that teaching faculty may provide include extra time on exams, a distraction-reduced or private room for taking exams, provision of lecture notes, preferential seating, audio recording of lectures, text-to-speech and speech-to-text software. The college or university may provide tutoring, executive function coaching, interpreters, need-based housing, individualized diets, mobility assistance and more. While this list is not exhaustive, it represents some of the ways in which institutions have complied with legal responsibilities to learners.

While the special education approach of providing accommodations and services is critical to the success of many students, it has not closed the post-secondary achievement gap between students who have a disability and those who do not (Newman, et al, 2011). In addition to being less likely to graduate from college, students with disabilities experience disproportionate bullying (Maiano, Normand, Salvas, Moullec, & Aime, 2016), exclusion (Bottema-Beutel, Kim, & Miele, 2018), and mental health difficulties (Hendren, Haft, Black, White, & Hoeft, 2018; Hollocks, Lerh, Magiati, Meiser- Stedman, & Brugha, 2018; and Katzman, Bilkey, Chokkaa, Falu, & Klassman, 2017).

These disparities exist despite decades of research that describes learning challenges and the best educational practices for working with them. While this line of inquiry reflects the commitment to educational access for all students, it may also serve to perpetuate the worldview that something is wrong with a class of people thereby continuing cycles of bullying and exclusion. Helping learners who have trouble in school has meant defining their problematic behavior and traits. It is not surprising that there would be social and psychological costs to this framing, and evidence shows that neurodivergent people bear this cost in the form of social repercussions and mental health issues. These inequities cannot be resolved from a deficit framework, so a different framework is needed.

### **Neurodiversity Perspective**

What if autism, ADHD, and LD were understood as natural variations within the human species rather than disorders? With this core message, the neurodiversity movement, often shortened to neurodiversity, has been gaining momentum. The neurodiversity movement reframes neurologically based conditions as forms of diversity that can afford benefits to society rather than as medical conditions to cure or eradicate. It recognizes that neurological variations can provide richness to society, just as biodiversity provides variety to the natural world. This social movement is driven by autistic people and people who identify as neurologically different in some way, such as by having ADHD, dyslexia, LD or another characteristic. Because autistic people have been productive advocates, their work is referred to in this article with the understanding that the insight might be applied to a wide range of differences.

One implication of the neurodiversity movement is that neurodivergence can be understood from a cultural perspective, not just a diagnostic perspective. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, culture is “all knowledge and values shared by a group (AAC&U, 2009).” By this definition, neurodiversity is a culture if neurodivergent people can be considered a group. On that question, the American Psychological Association defines culture broadly, not just race and ethnicity, but also gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, disability/ability, and other salient aspects of social being (APA, 2017). Based on the APA definition, neurodiversity is a culture with membership of autistic people and others with hidden disabilities. In fact, authors have made the case for neurodiversity culture and autism culture (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016; Jaarsma & Welin, 2011; Ortega, 2009).

From a cultural perspective, neurodivergence can be an important part of how individuals view themselves (Baker, 2011; Murray, 2010). Like other cultures, neurodiversity culture includes preferred modes of expression and communication, as well as its own art and literature. With the pervasiveness of personal technology, those who may be less comfortable in face-to-face settings have a more relaxed and less anxiety provoking ways to communicate with others. As remote communication became widely available, online autistic communities began to flourish.

In the autism corner of the neurodiversity movement, autistic writers including Temple Grandin, Donna Williams, Julia Bascom, Dawn Prince-Hughes, and others have narrated autism from the inside, challenging medical model viewpoints (Yergeaux, 2018). Dyslexic writers such as novelists John Irving and Octavia Butler and playwright Wendy Wasserstein are among the literary figures profiled by the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity (2017). There are Nobel laureates with learning disabilities such as Carol Greider and Jacques Dubochet, and well-known entrepreneurs including Charles Schwab, Paul Orfalea, and Richard Branson (Gilman, 2018; Schwartz, 2012). Art and advocacy organizations include the Flow Observatorium, the Art of Autism, and the Autism Self-Advocacy Network. Blogs share personal stories, essays, and advocacy from neurodivergent writers, and books, television shows and films feature autistic characters.

The neurodiversity perspective represents an alternative to the special education or medical model way of understanding brain based human differences. From this perspective, autism, ADHD, LD, and other ways of being are natural, often valuable, and also linked with real challenges that deserve attention. The neurodiversity movement is made up of people who identify as neurodivergent telling their stories and advocating for social justice.

### **Neurodiversity Culture and Postsecondary Teaching**

From the neurodiversity as culture point of view, teaching can and should take its cues from egalitarian-minded multicultural education instead of, or in addition to, special education. A promise of this approach is that it may support the development of neurodiversity culture as something to be proud of and establish awareness of the unintended consequences of a needs and services model of addressing neurodiversity in education.

What does this mean for teaching? In addition to providing legally mandated and often critically important accommodations college and university professors can think of neurodivergent students as members of an emerging neurodivergent culture. Like other minorities not every student will identify with this community, but some do. Students can be understood in ways one might understand students from other minority cultural groups who have struggled for their places in the classrooms of colleges and universities.

In the classroom, culturally relevant teaching would include learning about neurodiversity culture, identifying the contributions of neurodivergent people, using culturally sensitive language, such as “autistic person” rather than “person with ASD,” which is preferred by the neurodiversity community. Also, instructors can choose to include the writing and artwork of neurodivergent people on syllabi where appropriate and examine their own biases that might lead to unequal treatment. Neurodiversity discussions and content can fit into many courses in the humanities, social sciences, and applied fields that teach about culture and/or human similarities and differences. It can be included in hard sciences and technical fields via inclusion of the work of neurodivergent researchers and writers when available.

As part of diversity and inclusion efforts, colleges and universities can intentionally recruit faculty and staff who have disclosed disabilities who can become role models for students. When postsecondary

institutions make overtures of acceptance, faculty may also choose to disclose their own neurodivergence. They may share being on the autism spectrum or having ADHD or LD as a way of creating solidarity and paving the way for a more accepting environment. This might be done in the same way one might choose to disclose sexual orientation, religion, citizenship status, or another less visible element of identity.

The idea that instructors should consider the cultural experiences and strengths of their students when planning syllabi and lessons is not new, and the instructional approaches that have evolved over the last two decades have had a positive effect on learning environments (Ladson -Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010). Researchers and teacher educators have developed approaches that have been effectively applied to a wide range of students in our increasingly diverse classrooms (Erikson & Mohatt, 1982; Au & Jordan, 1981). In other words, a path already exists for increasing the cultural relevance of postsecondary curriculum, and it is logical to apply a similar approach to neurodiversity.

College students who align themselves with the neurodiversity movement see it as “associated with the struggle for the civil rights of those with neurological disorders” (Fenton & Krahn, 2007). With the backdrop of culture, students can incorporate differences, including autism and potentially ADHD and learning disabilities, into their personal identities in a positive way and see themselves as members of a neurodivergent community. In this way, a neurodiversity perspective has the potential to address inequities that a special education approach alone has not been able to resolve.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past fifty years colleges and universities in the United States have benefitted from an increasingly diverse student population. Social trends, legislation, improved secondary education, and recruiting efforts have contributed to increasing diversity on college campuses. While legal accommodations for students with disabilities are essential for equal access, disparate outcomes still exist. Changing to a neurodiversity mind set has the potential to rectify persistent inequities in the current system. Postsecondary institutions have faced challenges and reaped benefits from demographic shifts that have brought broader representations of race, age gender, religion, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status to its classrooms. This increased variety of experience by students brings and broadens the possibilities in student life and classroom discourse (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2014). A more diverse student population results in a wider variety of points of view and is positively related to a variety of educational outcomes (Umbach & Kuh, 2006).

While advances in this area have been made, faculty awareness must continue to grow as students increasingly describe their identities as multidimensional. Some of the elements of identity, like those related to race or ethnicity are relatively easy to recognize while others like religious belief, sexual orientation, and hidden disabilities can be more difficult to distinguish. While it is important—and legally mandated—to accommodate student learning needs based on the specific challenges they exhibit, it is also important to understand hidden disabilities from a neurodiversity perspective. From this view, multicultural teaching is salient, and proactively incorporating culturally affirmative practices can enrich the environment for neurodivergent students and their peers.

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