

## INCLUSION FOR THE “ISOLATED”: AN EXPLORATION OF WRITING TUTORING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH ASD

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### Abstract

Across the country, colleges and universities are reporting an increased enrollment of students on the autism spectrum. This is in part thanks to increased efforts in early detection during childhood, where students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are then enrolled in services outside and within public schools to help integrate them into mainstream classrooms. Yet such integrative services, by and large, fall short in higher education, and many students find themselves without the support they once received in their primary school years. Writing demands are indeed challenging for many—without securing basic college-level composition skills, the likelihood of student success is placed in jeopardy. Writing centers can be regarded as gatekeepers for autistic students, since their assistance can greatly impact student success. Yet problems remain with access and inclusion based on rhetorical situations, as well as a lack of tutor education. This paper provides suggestions based on April Mann’s methods of inclusion for writing center tutees with ASD, including spatial awareness and tutor education. I also outline other possible methods, including outreach to students with ASD to prevent further isolation among the university population.

A student makes an appointment with you at the writing center. When she comes in, she appears apprehensive. She takes a quick glance around at the bright lights, and then takes a seat in a spot furthest away from all of the other tutors and tutees. She may appear “antsy” and uncomfortable in her seat. When your session begins, the tutee appears disengaged: she will not make eye contact, and she appears to have difficulty verbalizing her thoughts. As you attempt to discuss her paper with her, she looks down. She seems like she does not want to be there. You assume, based on the lack of engagement, that the student is just there for mere proofreading, and you take offense to this—you want to actually help tutees become better writers, not line-edit their work before submission. To your relief, the session is over earlier than the designated time. The tutee also appears relieved. She is unlikely to return to the writing center. Unfortunately, she may struggle with writing throughout the rest of her college experience. She may never regard the writing center as a place that promotes inclusiveness. She may not regard the center as a place where she may grow as a writer or converse about her writing.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is complex, and symptoms can vary between students. A “high-functioning” student might not “seem autistic,” and therefore may be overlooked as an outsider in the

broader mainstream student community. The above scenario is not meant to stereotype or profile autistic students, but is designed to serve as just one example of what a tutoring session with an autistic student *might* entail, as well as some of the misunderstandings and errors in communication that could occur.

Across the country, colleges and universities are reporting an increased enrollment in students on the autism spectrum. This is in part due to increased efforts in early detection, during childhood, where students with ASD are then enrolled in services outside and within public schools to help integrate them into mainstream classrooms. Yet such integrative services, by and large, fall short in higher education, and many students find themselves without the support they once received in their primary school years. Writing demands are indeed challenging for many—without securing basic college-level composition skills, the likelihood of student success is placed in jeopardy. Writing centers can be regarded as gatekeepers for autistic students, since their assistance can greatly impact student success. Yet problems remain with access as well as inclusion based on rhetorical situations. A lack of tutor education compounds these issues even further. Assumptions about ASD may stem from ableist notions, especially those about what a “normal” tutoring session ought to look like.

This paper explores the possible methods of inclusion for writing center tutees with ASD, including spatial awareness and tutor education. Concurrently, these inclusive methods also challenge the stereotype that autistic students naturally prefer isolation. I also outline possible methods for conducting outreach to these groups of students to prevent further isolation among the university population.

Within this context, I aim to find answers for the following crucial questions at hand for writing center professionals aiming to foster inclusivity for autistic students:

- What is the current state of college enrollment among students with ASD?
- How might writing center staff approach disability disclosure and accommodations or lack thereof?

- What tutoring strategies might be implemented to increase tutor confidence in working with students with ASD?
- What are some of the ways tutors can help students with ASD increase their writing skills?
- How can technological innovations help create a more inclusive, accommodating environment?
- How can a writing center be made more accessible based on universal design principles?
- How can we reach out to students with ASD who might seek our services?
- What issues might arise during online tutoring sessions?
- Can peer mentoring within a writing center be implemented to promote inclusivity?

### Background on ASD and College Enrollment

ASD is certainly not a new phenomenon. The public is bombarded with constant reminders of the seemingly grim statistics. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network still contends, as of April 2015, that 1 in 68 children are identified as having ASD (“Autism Spectrum Disorder: Data and Statistics”). Due to mass attention, parents are increasingly on the lookout for possible signs of the disorder in their children, and pediatricians have followed suit by offering earlier diagnostic testing. In early 2017, research published in *Nature* on the correlation between increased brain volume in infancy and later ASD diagnoses suggests that autism could be detected even sooner (Hazlett et al. 348).

Aside from possibly receiving physical, behavioral, occupational, and psychological therapies, many diagnosed children are placed in special programs in primary school—this is just one method of early intervention. Here, students are offered support services directly from their schools. For example, students might be taken in groups for on-site speech therapy. Not only do such measures increase the likelihood of placement in a general classroom, but these school programs also make college more of a possibility than ever before for autistic students.

Yet one must wonder what happens to such individuals after primary school. It is perhaps no surprise that many students with ASD go on to study at universities; in fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated in 2014 that nearly 70 percent of recent high

school graduates had enrolled in some form of higher education (1). While certainly not all students with ASD will go on to college, there is a higher likelihood of their enrollment as increased accessibility aims to include students with a range of abilities. April Mann highlights these changes with students under the autism spectrum (AS), writing that

“students with AS are being given an unprecedented level of academic and social support in the primary grades. Because of this improved academic and social support, colleges and universities can expect to enroll increasing numbers of students who have been diagnosed somewhere on the high-functioning end of the spectrum.” (45)

The increased enrollment of students with ASD not only provides opportunities for such students—it can also pose challenges for professionals across higher education who may not have the awareness or training to handle such an influx.

Despite an overwhelming lack of preparation, evidence shows that college instructors are at least recognizing an increased prevalence of ASD in their classrooms. Lynda Walsh, co-editor of the collection *Autism Spectrum Disorders in the College Composition Classroom: Making Writing Instruction More Accessible for All Students*, points out, “college instructors are starting to recognize more students with ASD in their classrooms” (7). As writing center professionals, then, we might assume that increased enrollment in college must certainly mean that these same students will end up using such tutoring services at some point. However, due to the nature of ASD, this might not necessarily be the case. Just some of the barriers include communication difficulties, social awkwardness, a perceived preference for isolation, and sensory differences; certainly, all of these challenges vary in severity and frequency between individuals on the spectrum.

### Disclosure and Accommodations

General awareness of ASD is on the rise, and colleges are no exception. The trouble is that, unlike at the primary school level, universities do not require disclosure. Indeed, “some of these students disclose their needs, while others navigate college with little or no support” (Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll 341). So instructors and tutors will not necessarily know that a student has ASD unless he or she discloses this information through an institution’s disabilities services program (which can vary between institutions). Still, even if a student has disclosed accommodations with the disabilities office, “the deeper commitment to understanding the disability and working creatively to

provide the best learning experience is staff-dependent” (Masterson and Meeks 50). Even if an instructor *suspects* a student might be on the spectrum, there is really no way of knowing for sure without formal documentation. What further compounds the problem is that an instructor is at risk of stereotyping potential autistic students. A lack of awareness certainly creates numerous challenges, with obstacles and miscommunication even extending into writing centers. The fact is that many students may not get one-on-one writing help regardless of ability; obstacles may range from problems with accessibility to a lack of awareness. For someone with ASD, a lack of writing help can perhaps be more difficult to ameliorate than that for the average “neurotypical” student because writing center staff may not know about his or her accommodation needs. Perhaps even more challenging is the fact that some students with ASD might not even enter the center in the first place due to fear of stigmatization or because of sensory challenges.

While the argument is often that “it is the student’s responsibility to request special accommodations if desired,” the question of accommodations and disclosure is at times unfairly placed solely on students with disabilities, since there are not always institutionally-regulated opportunities for such disclosure (Burgstahler 2). At the same time, the context may not be appropriate for students to disclose that they have ASD. Given the rampant stigma that still exists around disabilities, it is easy to understand why a student with ASD may not be forthright about his or her disability. In fact, a student should not be expected to disclose disability details with a writing center simply in order to gain tutoring services.

The challenge here is to instead implement a universal design within the writing center environment to accommodate *all* students of *all* abilities, while also training tutors to recognize that a tutee often cannot be categorized as a single type. In this context, “universal design means that rather than designing your facility and services for the average user, you design them for people with a broad range of abilities, disabilities, and other characteristics” (Burgstahler 1). Veteran writing center directors Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz describe universal design as not merely “taking a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to instruction,” but as instead an approach that helps develop “design principles for conducting all sessions that make them accessible to the widest audience possible, reducing the need to treat any writer as having ‘special needs’” (51). Such principles can help serve tutees with ASD in two ways. For one, it eliminates any pressure for a student to disclose any disability; and two, universal design can help prevent writing center staff from making errors

when accommodating students with a variety of disabilities and learning needs.

## Tutoring Techniques

It may also be helpful for writing center staff to increase awareness about ASD so tutors may be better prepared during tutoring sessions. In recent years, there has been more of an effort to explore not just what ASD is, but how it might also be recognized by someone who does not have ASD. This recognition is slowly turning into more scholarship about ASD and writing, as well as how students with ASD adapt to the composition classroom. Scholarship—particularly from education professionals—has also explored and debunked myths about the writing skill levels of students with ASD. For example, “on the sentence level, where writing center readers often notice signs of learning disabilities, students with autism are likely to demonstrate at least as much proficiency as any of the students in the center or studio” (Mann 49). Such a revelation can enlighten tutors and other writing professionals who once thought that having autism also meant dysfunction in being able to cohesively and coherently put thoughts on paper.

Once students book one-on-one sessions, it is common to experience miscommunications. Challenges in communication and interpersonal skills are perhaps among the most common obstacles between tutor and tutee. Some research exists concerning the challenges that traditional tutoring sessions could pose for tutees with ASD. Just some of these challenges include “the close proximity of the student and the tutor; the physical intensity of eye contact; the stress of conversational give-and-take; and the dangers of misinterpreting social cues—all are anxiety triggers for many people with AS, and anxiety is no small issue” (Mann 58). While a tutor might interpret these cues as mere differences in personality and not think twice about them, a student with ASD could very well dwell on these. “Often the very idea of sharing a problem with a tutor proves so anxiety-provoking that students would hesitate to come to the center asking for help” (Mann 57). The anxiety could then blossom, ultimately becoming an obstacle for future tutoring sessions.

Another issue can arise when a tutor fails to stay engaged with the paper at hand—especially if it is more of a technical paper. There is the assumption that “many students’ paper topics might be considered boring in general conversation, but part of the tutors’ job is to pay attention to other people’s paper topics, no matter how boring that topic might be to any individual tutor” (Mann 59). This mantra could certainly apply to any tutoring session: most writing

center professionals would encourage the utmost interest and enthusiasm in any project. One might assume that a student with ASD might not notice nonverbal cues that express boredom or general lack of interest in the tutee's work. This underestimation could very well be damaging. For example, a perceived lack of interest in a student's work could translate to the student feeling like his or her writing is not worthwhile, and that the tutoring session itself is a waste of time.

Focusing on some specific strategies and techniques tutors can utilize to help ASD tutees will promote more successful tutoring sessions. Mann offers the following advice:

- Do not press for eye contact if you suspect the tutee is uncomfortable sustaining or returning it.
- Suggest moving to another location if the current tutoring spot seems overwhelming.
- Repeat questions if a tutee appears distracted.
- Avoid areas within the center with excessive light or noise.
- Show, but don't tell: keep scrap paper or a notebook handy to demonstrate examples in sentence structure, etc.
- Avoid socially-derived humor and non-verbal cues people with autism might not get. (60)

### Technological Accommodations

Aside from writing skill sets, research has also been conducted into the physical challenges students with disabilities face in writing centers, such as technology-, vision-, and hearing-related difficulties. Due to the vast nature of the spectrum, many students with ASD can experience challenges to some degree within any of these categories. One study was conducted through empirical research about writing centers' technological offerings for disabled students, as reported in a 2012 edition of *Computers and Composition*. Here Allen Brizee, Morgan Sousa, and Dana Driscoll share their findings from empirical research conducted on the accessibility of the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). Specifically, their surveys uncover the extensive use of assistive technologies, such as screen readers and adapted keyboards. Their findings also reveal that the OWL—which is a resource used in many writing centers—posed some accessibility issues. The authors call for both computers with assistive technologies in the center, as well as accessible online platforms for a more inclusive tutoring experience.

While the Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll study was not ASD-specific, the concepts can certainly be applied for students on the spectrum who could benefit from

these services. For example, a writing center might offer the use of computers and assistive technologies for tutees as either a part of their tutoring session with a live tutor or as a separate form of accommodation. Writing center administration and staff can also "adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards" when considering websites and software for widespread use in the center (Burgstahler 3). Allowing for these types of accommodations creates more options and a more diverse learning environment. Furthermore, offering a variety of options can help take pressure off of students who perhaps need to acclimate to the interpersonal one-on-one environment that is typical of a traditional writing center tutoring session. Letting students use technologies within the center can help them to get comfortable in the writing center so that they may gradually work their way up to an in-person tutoring session.

### Applying Universal Design Principles to Create an ASD-Friendly Writing Center

Within writing center scholarship, authors have discussed a few tips for making writing centers more ASD-friendly. "The welcoming, collaborative space of the writing center might not appear as welcoming to students who find personal interaction more difficult than organic chemistry or differential equations" (Mann 57). It may be hard to fathom that our friendly and welcoming writing centers could really be a turnoff for students with ASD. Yet

"some people find a directive to make choices oppressive, not liberating. For writing centers, this variance may seem to challenge our philosophy of being non-directive with writers who come to us for one-on-one help, both because of our own pedagogies and because of our roles within our institutions." (Mann 53)

Thus, a sole adherence to universal design or to more normative writing center atmospheres may not accommodate tutees with ASD because it assumes that a ubiquitous plan for traditional tutees works for everyone while ignoring some of the possible needs of students with ASD (such as dimmer lights and noise reduction).

Another method of attracting and retaining tutees with ASD is to make writing centers more ASD-friendly and more physically accessible for students with all forms of disability. Writing centers—like any other student spaces—are often designed with the able-bodied in mind. Many of the "friendly" elements we might consider aesthetically pleasing or welcoming could actually increase anxiety in those with ASD. For

example, “writing centers which contain fluorescent lighting, open spaces, and/or multiple conversations happening simultaneously around the room, can be very difficult spaces for those with a tendency towards sensory overload” (Mann 63). On the flipside, *not* having these elements could cause anxiety in neurotypical students, so simply creating a quiet, closed, and dark space may not be a viable solution. In considering the writing center, it may be helpful to create multiple spaces as a method of fostering numerous access points in which all tutees can feel comfortable.

Taking a step back and really looking and feeling the space of the writing center is important in this assessment. For example, are there opportunities for students to experience less noise from outside influences during a tutoring session? Are there areas within the center that have dimmer lights for students who might be overwhelmed by bright fluorescents? Are there a variety of seating options that offer different heights, firmness, and fabrics? All of these considerations can help make a first step towards a universal design that offers options and accommodations for all students within the space of the writing center.

Striking the right balance to increase overall access is a complex matter, but one that is essential in making sure students with ASD are comfortable (and willing) to seek tutoring services. Universal design principles are a step in the right direction towards creating an accessible space that accommodates *all* students, including those with ASD. However, much more research is needed to assess which design strategies work when it comes to helping students with ASD. Longitudinal studies in writing centers may be needed to assess such factors.

## Outreach and Training Opportunities

Despite calls for increased access, there is little indication of widespread efforts to accommodate students with ASD in writing centers. Even if such outreach has taken place, no documentation of these efforts exists. Partnering with university disability services is just one step in increasing these efforts.

Tutor education to increase awareness of disabilities like ASD can also prove immensely helpful in retaining tutees with ASD. “Discussions of autism and autism spectrum disorders often read more like discussions about diversity than discussions of disability” (Mann 51). Furthermore, writing centers not only “struggle to provide assistance for the large number of students coming through their doors—they also struggle to provide adequate training for tutors

who work with students with disabilities, especially as funding decreases and campus populations increase” (Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll 342). Integrating universal design principles—particularly as they pertain to disabilities—during regular training sessions is key to increasing awareness about potential tutees with ASD. Guiding questions for training sessions can include:

Do all staff members know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations? Are all staff members aware of issues related to communicating with students who have disabilities? Are staff members aware of the benefits of universal design of instructions and accommodations for students with different types of disabilities? (Burgstahler 3).

It may also be helpful to allow the use of note takers and extended sessions, as well as recommending that tutors “offer directions or instructions both orally and in writing” (Burgstahler 3, 6). When such information is integrated as a part of mandatory staff training, tutors will likely gain the essential tools and skills needed to foster more inclusive tutoring sessions.

Yet hosting a one-time training session (or even an annual session) might not be enough for tutors to grasp the right tutoring methods. Kiedaisch and Dinitz even admit that despite the fact they are well versed in including “an emphasis on differences students may bring to a session,” they were shocked to find evidence from tutoring session reports that tutors were still unsure of how to help tutees with learning disabilities (39). In one such case, they write of one tutor report: “Why didn’t she connect this possibility with Seth’s staring, lack of social skills, spelling difficulties, and inability to grasp punctuation rules?” (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 41). While Kiedaisch and Dinitz refer specifically to learning disabilities here, some of the challenges students with learning disabilities face may be similar to or the same as those some students with ASD deal with regularly. It is not necessarily important to “connect” a tutee’s behavior to ASD since it is not our job to diagnose; however, simply being aware of the fact that all tutees bring different personalities to the table can prevent the idealized notion of the “typical” tutee.

Indeed, “rather than focusing on those who bring ‘differences’ to the tutoring session, we would explore how *all* of us, directors, tutors, and tutees alike, bring aspects of our identity to tutoring and how these various aspects might shape a session” (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 44). Universal design principles may help conquer such a focus on identifying differences in tutees because it “suggests tutees aren’t the only ones bringing ‘differences’ to a session” (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 49). Fostering a mindset and the expectation

that all tutees have varying challenges, needs, and modes of learning can go a long way in accommodating tutees with ASD.

Gaining administrative support can also translate to increased outreach by partnering with disability services centers, school administrations, and instructors. In general, as a strategy to reduce stress when transitioning to college, it may be helpful to provide students with opportunities to navigate "the campus at their own pace during a safe and less frenetic time," perhaps during the summer before classes start (Masterson and Meeks 48). We might even apply these same concepts to writing centers: some options could include an open house, partnerships with disability services to get the word out, and perhaps even one-on-one appointments for a tour of the center. Teachers can also play a role by taking their students on a "field trip" to the center so that *all* potential tutees may gain some awareness of the writing services available to them. The key here is to ensure that there are as many options available as possible, for "there is little research to suggest what type of support is required and valued by these students" (Masterson and Meeks 47). Since not all institutions extend disability-related accommodations to writing center tutoring sessions, directors and staff ought to make it clear in their mission statements that they provide inclusive atmospheres to help all tutees.

### The Problem with Relying on Online Tutoring Sessions

Outreach efforts can be challenging for students who might not be enthusiastic about seeking in-person tutoring assistance. A writing center professional's first response, then, could be the promotion of online tutoring sessions for students who are not comfortable with coming into the center in person. Here arises another ableist notion: the assumption that ASD tutees would rather seek an online session in order to avoid gaining writing feedback in person. This also takes the responsibility away from the writing center and inadvertently places it back onto the tutees. In fact, "on-line tutorials may not be able to address the issues most likely to be problematic for students with AS, such as breaking down an assignment into manageable bits, understanding the assignment, or intercepting a professor's comments for revision" (Mann 65). Such situations could very well increase tutee anxiety—that is, if the tutee decides to even partake in an online tutoring session in the first place.

In order to break through common misconceptions like the preference for online tutoring sessions, writing centers may decide to create surveys to better

understand what both current and prospective tutees need. Such methods could allow for a non-mandatory after-session survey to get an idea of how inclusive and accessible the writing center is perceived by tutees. Writing centers might also (carefully) allow for the disclosure of disabilities prior to sessions. In such a scenario, students with ASD could have the *option* of informing the writing center about their disability, just as some centers allow tutees to disclose physical disabilities. A questionnaire system could be helpful here, where tutors would have the opportunity for "engaging in conversations with a broad range of writing center users" that could also "help administrators and tutors 'listen' to a population that is normally underrepresented in staff meetings" (Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll 357). In this sense, having quantitative data might also make it easier to obtain more administrative support. Again, it is important to keep any survey methods optional, as well as any resulting data anonymous. Surveys also present the added benefit of measuring how well a writing center adheres to any universal design principles they claim to follow.

### Peer Mentoring Opportunities

Peer mentoring could play a pivotal role in the overall success of students with ASD in college in general, as such methods offer some educational continuity while also helping to foster social skills (Masterson and Meeks 49). We can also apply these ideas at writing centers, where tutors might offer mentoring to first-year students. For example, the University of Louisville uses "disability-related academic advising and planning that is supplemental to academic advising" (1). This presents an opportunity for writing center professionals to partner with disability academic advisors to offer help and services in a proactive manner. While we might make these connections, the University of Louisville still has a general disclaimer about their writing center on their "Services for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder" page, as follows:

University Writing Center supports writers and the teaching of writing. The center provides a comfortable place to write, to collaborate with other writers, and to use writing resources. In serving the university community, the center complements and supplements classroom instruction at all levels to promote attitudes and abilities essential to writing well, including confidence, skill, knowledge, creativity, and comfort.

In this sense, the writing center is promoted as a space for everyone. However, the statement does not elaborate on precisely *how* the writing center accommodates ASD, but is merely a generalized statement that could be applicable for all students. Indeed, Burgstahler calls for websites to have “a statement about your commitment to universal access and procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations” (3). More study is needed in the area of peer mentoring within writing centers, as well as the efficacy of partnerships between writing centers and university disability offices. Communication among all of these entities, though, is a first step towards an openness that can filter down to more inclusivity in the writing center itself.

### Implementing Inclusive Writing Centers for All Students

Inclusivity is a relevant issue for all writing center visitors. Yet sometimes we can do more harm than good when our efforts to include students with ASD results in staff unintentionally regarding a tutee with ASD as being “neurologically other” (Mann 46). The way we might become more inclusive without unintentionally isolating tutees with ASD even further is by recognizing that they have certain sets of needs, just like all other students. It is important to remember that “writing center tutors are uniquely positioned to help all students—on and off the spectrum—to see how they can share their unique interests through their written expression” (Mann 56). Rather than being fearful of not being able to accommodate students with ASD, tutors and writing center directors can take ownership of the concept of inclusivity and make strides towards accessibility. Such efforts can take time and are often measured from a trial-and-error standpoint, but they will not go unnoticed—especially by students with ASD, who are often inadvertently excluded from our writing centers.

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