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Refreshing and empowering: reflecting on the experience of teaching autistic GCSE retake college students.

Clare Lawrence and Sibylle Erle

Sandy (a pseudonym) holds a doctorate in English literature and has been lecturing in English at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral level for many years. He is an experienced and highly accomplished researcher in the field of English literature, and in particular the literature of the Romantic period.

This discussion, however, reports on an experience he undertook moving away from academia and teaching for one day a week for a six-month period at a Further Education College. For this period Sandy worked with the re-take GCSE class, students who have not achieved the required grade in their first sitting of this exam and who are therefore required to continue the subject. Many of these students are autistic. Each class had sixteen students.

This experience provided an unusual and rich perspective on teaching students who have 'failed' in (or been failed by) the conventional education system and Sandy's reflections as reported here give a fresh insight into how as teachers of English we might better understand the needs of our autistic students as well as hone our teaching skills and approach to teaching generally.

The authors are extremely grateful to Sandy for sharing his experience with us.

The first thing I noticed when I joined the college was the difference between autistic university students and those in further education. Partly, no doubt, this may be because the university students feel, by dint of where they are, that they have succeeded in education whereas these retake GCSE students have 'failed' in arriving at this point. But actually, it was more than that. I have sometimes felt puzzled by the way that university students who are autistic behave, and going into college has helped me to understand some of that behaviour. I have been puzzled, for example, by some of these university students' passivity, their sense of stress and the pressure they exhibit regarding having to give 'correct' answers, their reluctance to engage with freedoms and to develop their own ideas or critically reflected opinions and to have confidence in themselves. They know that they have good ideas, but I have felt that they are cautious in sharing them. Perhaps by university these autistic students have become better at 'masking', at hiding their autism, but they also seem to me to be paying a price by doing so and not feeling free to become what they are made to be. They are polite; they don't tell you if you bore them to death! These students at college, by comparison, were more direct and I felt that I was getting more immediate feedback from them. The college protocols for this cohort meant that students' diagnostic labels are very clear, and I was able to discuss students' needs in a more direct way working as I was at the college with a far smaller cohort than at university. The

students, too, supported this. Whereas in the university context, you might only hear about a problem much later as a complaint through official channels and via your line manager, in the college context they tell you when something isn't working. They show you straight away, and so you can reengage. It is refreshing and empowering as a teacher and gives the opportunity to revisit many approaches. I feel strongly that being more conscious about my teaching and finding ways to better meet the needs of *some* student has improved my teaching for *all* students. I feel that this greater awareness has made me better at seeing people struggle and better at paying respect to all members of the classroom community, which I think is crucial for a successful learning situation.

My first impression of an autistic student was when a young person interrupted me and told me quite indignantly that, "That is not what I said!". I had paraphrased his response – because I had found this a successful teaching tool in the past, i.e. rewording or repeating points made in class that are valuable so that everybody can learn from them – but when this student pushed back, it just completely caught me off guard. He was very loud, very firm and I was completely thrown. On a literal level, of course, he was right: those words were not what he'd said. I admit that I would occasionally slip in new information or offer more interpretation, taking the student's point and probing deeply into their ideas. I would normally ask if I was putting words into the student's mouth; nobody ever said that I had. This approach, in other words, worked for both sides. On this occasion, I may have added something. I cannot remember. I was taken aback that I had upset him, and I didn't know how to react in the moment, but he helped me to reflect on how I should adapt my teaching to meet the needs of autistic students. Sometimes, I manage to do this proactively, but I still think that I have probably learnt more reactively – from admitting openly and reviewing my teaching practice after a lesson, when I make a mistake. I also realise that he was the only one who ever picked me up on what I normally say at the beginning of a course: if something doesn't work, you need to tell me. I cannot do anything about it if I don't know about it. He heard what I had said.

When I announce an activity, for example, I try to give the students plenty of time to plan it. I give choices, but I am also aware that choices can be difficult for some autistic students, so I try to give parameters to support them. At college I was aware that the GCSE speaking task was making some of the autistic students uneasy, so I asked them to step aside before the teaching started, just to say there would be more directed guidance which they would receive via e-mail, and there would also be information sheets available the following week. I wanted to announce it in person and to the whole class but also to give plenty of reassurance before the lesson started. I taught them just once a week, so that gave time for them to think of a theme or topic ready for the following week. This kind of adaptation, designed to support certain students, did I think help all the students.

One particular autistic student responded really well to this and chose to talk about gaming and about some designers who had developed one particular gaming series, how they developed it, the dates and so on. It was very informative, and I learned a lot and thanked

him for it. We videoed all the students for the speaking assessment, and we also gave them a trial run beforehand to build confidence, share advice and feedback and so on.

This student was very good during the trial run – very fluent and articulate. He worked without notes and engaged very well with the audience and with each of the questions that were asked. However, he stood in front of the screen, so we – my colleague and I – gave the feedback that he was blocking the slides for the audience and the camera, and we moved him to the side before we started filming the actual assessment. However, this created a problem because he started reading off the slides. His performance in the actual assessment was nowhere near as proficient as it had been in the trial run because he was distracted by the screen and turned himself away from the audience towards it. I felt that we had engineered this situation and had caused the fault, and because we had seen that he could just talk about his topic very fluently, we felt it was within our rights to accommodate that in our marking. We felt that it was imperative that he didn't have to pay for our mistake.

I think this willingness to take responsibility is essential to build trust. I joined the college mid-year and the students had to get used to working with me and we had to build open channels of communication. Sometimes, for example, I might forget in my single day's college teaching what precisely I said the previous week. When this happened, the students were quick to point out an inconsistency. If they did, I would simply pause and acknowledge what they say and then say, OK, let's revisit this. I was open with them throughout that my background wasn't in school teaching, and I warned them that sometimes I might do things differently. Some of these things would work, others would not, I told them, and you'll need to tell me. The bigger picture for me was that something had gone wrong in the teaching and support of these students. The premise was that something had to change in order to bring about opportunities for different (GCSE) results. The students listened and saw that I meant what I offered, because I was continually asking for feedback. Again, they took me seriously because I was following through. They told me what they needed and gave me constructive feedback – and that was really refreshing as well as productive.

I became better at 'reading' these students, who do not mask or camouflage their autism to the extent that many university students may do. I understood when they preferred not to face me or look at me when we interacted. I understood that there might be differences in, for example, how loudly or softly they spoke, whether they turned away from me, their body language, how they might express themselves. Some students preferred not to answer in class or to read aloud and if a student didn't want to join in with group work, I would let them work on their own but would also try to scaffold the activity to make joining in more accessible. I had to be flexible and discovered the richness of learning, both for me and the students. Once, one student refused to do a task because it was to take an opinion and argue for or against something to develop persuasive writing skills. He didn't want his words to embody somebody else's ideas and felt it was dishonest not to give his own thoughts, and when I realised this, I was able to work with him to adapt the task. I told him that the purpose of the exercise was to practise arguments. I was happy for him to argue his corner. However, while I was able to adjust in the classroom context, I also reiterated that

for the GCSE exam, students had to do what the question asked them to do. If they didn't, the hands of the person marking their work would be tied.

What I really enjoyed was when I set something and the response from these college students wasn't at all what I had expected. It could be something else completely, utterly outside what I would have thought. The different perspective and way of thinking allowed for a whole spectrum of possibilities that I hadn't thought about, and that was so enriching. Sometimes it would knock me sideways, and it reminded me what teaching should be all about.

I feel that I have learned so much from this experience. Previously I had undertaken 'Autism Experience' training through the university. This was an immersive experience designed to put you in the position of an autistic learner and included wearing headphones and special glasses to reproduce something of the sensory experience, as the creators saw it, of being autistic. It was very disorientating and perhaps gave me some empathy, but I don't feel that it helped me at all when I was in the classroom, faced with students who are autistic and struggling. What the teaching in the Further Education taught me is how important dialogue with both students and colleagues is. To help, you have to understand- meet students mid way. Each student is different. When there is trust, you may be able to see all of that difference. Dialogue, to repeat myself, is key... and dialogue needs trust and respect on and from both sides.

What I have learned from these students, above anything else I think, is how important it is to listen, to really focus on what they're saying and asking for. They are, in fact, communicating very clearly but if you don't listen – really listen and tune in – you miss something and then you've missed your chance. Also, I have learned to be aware that they are observing me as a neurotypical teacher at the same time and are having to learn my ways. I became a teacher because I'm interested in people, and I love to learn how people think and what makes them tick. As an English specialist I particularly like to use words as well as play with words and it is intriguing to work with students who may struggle with these but also offer a completely different perspectives on what is familiar. The situation of teaching autistic students is dynamic and fluid and also intellectually stimulating and rewarding. I feel infinitely grateful for the opportunity to experience the enrichment that it provides. I think it has made me a better person overall.