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ADVICE

## How to Teach Your (Many) Neurodivergent Students

It's easier than you think to make your classroom welcoming and accessible to students with autism and other diagnoses.

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I recently met Emma, an autistic college student, who talked about navigating life at a mid-Atlantic university. Professors, she said, “can make or break your experience” in a course. Her favorite instructors “made me feel like I belonged in the class,” as opposed to those who only “followed through with my accommodations because they were legally obligated.”

Neurodivergent (ND) students like Emma can tell when you as a faculty member care about their success and when you don’t. They can tell when you genuinely welcome them into the classroom and when you see them as a burden. Of course you don’t always know whether you have ND students in your courses. Even when you do, you don’t always know what kind of support they’re getting from academic advising and disability services. And you don’t know whether they are even seeking help — or their reasons for not doing so.

In teaching neurodivergent students, the only thing you can control is what you do in your own classroom. Hence this essay on how to make your teaching more welcoming and accessible to

them. The good news: It's easier than you may think.

I write from experience: I am autistic. Like many women ([80 percent of girls go undiagnosed](#)), I didn't receive a diagnosis of autism until long after I finished my education. The high number of ND students who remain undiagnosed provides all the more reason to create an accessible classroom for students. Before I dive into teaching advice, let's first deal with some misconceptions.

**You have neurodivergent students in your classes. And in greater numbers than you might realize.** For example, up to [2 percent](#) of undergraduates are autistic, and [19 percent](#) have ADHD. Many more have anxiety disorder and depression. A large number of your students are neurodivergent [in ways](#) that can make it difficult for them to process, organize, and prioritize information. None of those difficulties say anything about their intellectual abilities — only about how much harder college can be for them than it is for neurotypical students.

It is also important to avoid stereotyping. Autism is a spectrum (it's in the name). In fact, when you hear the word “autism,” it's easy to think of movies or television shows, such as *Rain Man* or *The Big Bang Theory*. But they feature caricatures. As Maggie Coughlin, an autistic professor, [points out](#), “If you know one person on the spectrum, you know one person on the spectrum.”

Every ADHD student has unique strengths and challenges as well. They often face another insidious stereotype: the [disability faker](#) who is trying to game the system. There are [all-too-common myths](#) that ADHD is overdiagnosed and widely abused to help students cheat. These are awful stereotypes to have to face when you are a student with what can be a devastating disability.

No one expects you as a faculty member to be an autism or ADHD expert. Just keep in mind that (a) the academic struggles of ND students don't represent their intellectual potential, and (b) the stereotypes about their disabilities do not represent their lived experiences.

**Students struggle to get accommodations.** Despite their significant numbers in your classroom, you might not have many students disclose their ND status to you. Why not?

First, disabled students face many hurdles when it comes to seeking *any kind* of accommodations in college. Katherine A. Macfarlane, an associate professor of law at Southern University and a disability expert, [recounts the many hurdles](#): They have to provide invasive medical documentation to prove they are disabled. Some can't afford the expensive testing they need to document their disability. On campus, they've lost the support systems they had at home and must spend a lot of time advocating for themselves with both professors and disability-services offices. Those are difficult hoops to jump through when you are young and also trying to figure out how to do your laundry, eat healthy food, and make new friends.

Perhaps — much like Eric Garcia, a journalist who is autistic, wrote in his 2021 book, *We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation* — some ND students believe they don't deserve accommodations. Garcia described his initial experience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "I felt that if I used special accommodations at UNC, I was somehow cheating," he wrote. "... I feared I would be taking a shortcut if I got help that I felt I didn't really need." Garcia had internalized the ableism of perceiving accommodations as an unfair leg up rather than an equalizer. A thoughtful professor connected him with a guidance counselor, who set him on the path to success.

As a faculty member, you are moving in the right direction if you:

- Recognize how difficult it is for ND students to get help through our institutions.
- Know that accommodations are not actually handed out like candy and instead reflect a true need.
- Understand that some students do not have institutional recognition of their neurodiversity because of very real roadblocks — yet still need our help.

**Neurodivergent students face stigma.** Stigma means “shame,” and in higher education, any mental disability is — still — considered shameful. After all, college is about learning, which is

about brains, and if your brain isn't "typical," what does that say about your fit for higher education?

Because being disabled and asking for accommodations can be a source of embarrassment, even students who are registered with disability services might choose to hide their status from their instructors. Likewise, students who have been humiliated over an accommodation request, not surprisingly, may choose to avoid disclosing their status in the future, even if doing so puts their education at risk. They would rather "muscle through" than face humiliation again.

My student friend Emma told me about a professor who refused to follow the accommodations from her institution's disability-services center. Emma was supposed to be allowed to take her exams in the university's proctoring center, a location designed specifically for that purpose. Instead, Emma told me, "He made me take them in a secluded room in the building the class was in" — because it was convenient for him — and thus, disregarding an important aspect of her accommodations.

If a student does the honor of disclosing their disability to you, they will likely expect you to feel annoyed, or worse, doubtful. If you've had such feelings in the past, I beg you to set them aside and examine why you felt that way. Why does our society teach us to believe that people fake their disabilities? "Fear of the disability con," as Doron Dorfman, an associate professor of law at Seton Hall University and a disability law scholar, [puts it](#), is one of the most insidious forms of ableism.

**Openly welcome your ND students.** On your syllabus — ideally on the first page — add a statement like this: *"If you are disabled, I welcome a conversation to discuss your learning needs. I want to make sure you succeed in our course."*

It's simple but sends a big message: You welcome the presence of ND students; you welcome their disclosure; you are willing to collaborate to build an accessible classroom. Note that my suggested phrasing doesn't mention "accommodations" or "disability services" or "requirements." You are telling your students that this conversation will not be about the bare

minimum required by law, but about how to help them get the best education you can provide.

Which brings me to ...

**Focus on accessibility, not just accommodation.** This should go without saying but enough instructors still seem to buy into the “disability con” that it bears repeating: It’s vital that you honor a student’s request for learning accommodations. They went through a lot to get those accommodations; it’s not up to you to cast them aside. (Plus, it’s illegal.)

Next, understand the difference between accessibility and accommodation. As I noted in a [2022 interview](#), they’re not the same thing: “Accommodations are special exceptions made for one disabled person who has to jump through lots of hoops to get them,” while accessibility is “the creation of a space that is hospitable to and usable by disabled people, no hoops required.”

As you can imagine, then, the best teaching is always accessible. Fortunately for faculty members and their students, it’s not difficult to take steps in the right direction. Small changes can make a big difference to ensure that your teaching reaches all neurodivergent students, including those who are unable to get “official” accommodations or who don’t yet know that they are ND.

Finally, before I dive into specific strategies, remember that ND students are not monolithic. Their academic issues and needs vary, even among those with the same diagnoses. That’s why a teaching model that focuses only on accommodation requests — providing quiet rooms and extra time to take exams — doesn’t go far enough and risks failing other ND students. By emphasizing accessibility, too, you create a classroom environment where all neurodiverse students have access to the learning tools they need to succeed.

Here are four best practices that are easy to adapt for any course:

**1. Scaffold assignments.** Neurodivergent students frequently struggle with executive function — the mental skills that all people need to accomplish goals. Executive-function weaknesses [can cause people problems](#) with starting and finishing things, completing multi-step tasks, staying on

track, planning and organizing projects, and balancing multiple responsibilities. Such struggles are common in students with autism, ADHD, anxiety disorder, and even depression. (If you, like me, have ever been severely depressed, then you know how hard it is to keep track of anything.)

In the educational context, scaffolding means to provide interim structure to large, complex assignments. A [2017 study showed](#) that students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) benefit from scaffolded assignments. Indeed, it said, scaffolding “can lower the anxiety of students with ASD and play to their strengths of thriving in structured environments.”

So, for example, you could scaffold a large writing assignment, such as a seminar paper, by breaking it into smaller tasks. Ask students to turn in a brief proposal for their paper, then an annotated bibliography, then an outline, and so on until the final paper. At certain stages, you could ask students to peer review one another’s work, either in class in small groups or as homework. (Note: If you choose to assign peer review, just be sure to provide instruction on how to do it. Peer review is not something that comes naturally to any student, and can be hard for ND students, so providing a framework for how to proceed can be a big relief. There are [many](#) good [tutorials](#) out there.)

To minimize the load on you — none of us needs an increased workload right now — you don’t have to evaluate all of these smaller assignments. Simply peruse their progress at each stage in your course-management software to make sure no one is falling behind. Ultimately, scaffolding can reduce your grading work because (a) you’ll get fewer papers that are off track and (b) you’ll have a systematic way to provide feedback since all of the writers followed a similar process.

**2. Scaffold readings.** For some ND students, reading for a course can be a puzzle rather than a tool for learning. Say you are a biology professor who regularly assigns readings from a textbook. You very likely already know what you want students to get out of each day’s reading. Instead of leaving them to wander aimlessly through the text, why not provide a treasure map before they start? Such guidance is critical for students who find it difficult to discern which points are most important in an assigned reading.

After all, the purpose of having students read a biology textbook is to learn biology — not to have them learn how to decipher meaning from a text. (Certainly there are courses for which deciphering meaning from a text *is* the point, such as expecting students to interpret a poem or a novel in a literature class.)

How might you scaffold a reading assignment? It can be as simple as providing a list of key ideas that you want students to take away from a reading assignment, said Kelly A. Hogan and Viji Sathy in their teaching [advice guide](#) for *The Chronicle* and in [their book](#), *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom*. Such a list helps students read with a purpose rather than going down rabbit holes.

To avoid adding much to your workload, base the key-ideas list on topics that you already planned to mention in a lecture or class discussion. But, you might be thinking: “Isn’t it hand-holding to give students a list of key ideas for their reading? Wouldn’t I basically be doing their work for them?”

No, you’re not. The goal of a reading assignment is not to leave students feeling anxious about what they’re supposed to have learned. Neither is it to teach them how to read your mind.

**3. Rethink your definition of “paying attention.”** As a graduate student, when I was in seminars, I had a habit of processing the ideas that flowed during class by writing them down nonstop in a notebook. (This was before I was diagnosed as autistic.) As time went on, my incessant writing seemed to bother some professors, who presumed that I was off task, ignoring the discussion, and noodling around in my notebook. (I didn’t notice, though.) One particular professor tried more than once to “catch” me not paying attention by cold-calling my name: “And what do *you* think, Katie?” Because I was, indeed, paying attention, I cheerfully answered her questions.

At first, I was oblivious to the accusatory tone, because that’s what can happen when you’re autistic. Eventually, I did catch on to the mean-spiritedness and my feelings were deeply hurt. Why didn’t the professor just talk to me instead of trying to humiliate me?



“Often, neurotypical professors (and sometimes ND professors, too) have a belief system about what ‘paying attention’ looks like,” said Karen Costa, a faculty-development [consultant](#) and neurodiversity expert who has ADHD, in an interview. If a student doesn’t line up with the instructor’s belief system, then the student isn’t paying attention properly in class.

Sometimes it might appear that an ND student isn’t paying attention when actually they’re focused inward, trying to process all of the information coming their way. Some ND students find it stressful to maintain sustained eye contact. They also find it easier to process information by looking away from the slide deck, professor, or whiteboard — a reaction known as “gaze aversion.” Gaze aversion allows these students to concentrate on what they’ve just heard and turn it into knowledge. (I was doing that processing by writing in my grad-school notebook, transforming the professor’s words into my own.)

The stereotype of a student “spacing out” in class is just that — a stereotype. And it’s best set aside.

**4. Rethink how you run class discussions.** Many ND people, including me, struggle with something called “[working memory](#)” — the “process by which information is stored and processed mentally.” It’s hard to explain how frustrating this deficit can be. When information is flying at us, it can take us a moment to put it in an order that makes sense. We usually do fine when we are familiar with the information’s context. But when it’s unfamiliar terrain, we might need some time. In difficult circumstances, we might shut down completely.

What does all of this mean for class discussions?

It is tempting to call on the first person who raises their hand. I know I’ve done that. But that means the students who take a bit longer to process information rarely get called on. Sometimes ND students will take longer to raise their hands than neurotypical people, working through the new information you have presented. It’s OK to let hands hang in the air for a bit. Alternate whom you call on, between the early hand-raisers and the later ones. You might open the door to new and exciting contributions from students you haven’t heard from before.

As Eric Garcia [put it in his book](#), “The main reason autistic people fear asking for accommodations [is] it feels as if we’re seeking out special treatment and that we’re the problem.” In reality, “asking for help is about addressing structural problems.”

An accessible classroom is one antidote to structural problems in higher education. I hope you’ll join me in taking the first steps toward creating one.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

DISABILITY & ACCESSIBILITY

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