On the Spectrum in a Strongly Unified Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), especially among adults, is not well understood (Griffith, Totsika, Nash, & Hastings, 2011). Among the hallmarks of ASD are a strong attachment to clear structure and increased distress when changes threaten that structure. Adults with ASD struggle with many aspects of life, including employment. For ten years, Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) has demonstrated its strongly unified curriculum through organization and faculty development, and this environment has been particularly beneficial for instructors with ASD. However, as EDC is being folded into the newly formed Center for Foreign Language Education and Research in 2020, many of the EDC's organizational strengths will disappear, and any instructor with ASD who continues into the new program should be prepared. This paper explores how adults with ASD face employment challenges, how the Center for EDC has historically met many needs of instructors with ASD, and how such instructors may face additional challenges in the new center.

INTRODUCTION

From 2010 to 2020, the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University has served to instruct first-year university students on how to participate in balanced, interactive, and co-constructive academic discussions using skill phrases to help support, organize, challenge and evaluate their ideas (Hurling, 2012). With a set class size of eight (sometimes nine) students (Moroi, 2014), students have carried out these discussions in three- to four-student groups and have been evaluated by instructors trained to follow a strongly unified curriculum based on the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). Brereton (2019) defined a "strongly unified curriculum" as one "whereby all teachers follow prescribed lesson aims, lesson structure, course content, teaching methodology, and assessment methods" (p. 257). The Center for EDC exemplified this through any newly hired instructor in the program, regardless of prior teaching or research experience, participating in program orientation and training, recorded classroom observations and post-observations conferences with program managers, and additional faculty development training and workshops as needed.

Adherence to this structure has guided program managers, instructors, and administrators as they have created and annually updated textbooks for the program across four English proficiency levels of students based on their university entrance TOEIC scores (Hurling, 2012), and held the orientation and training sessions and faculty development sessions for instructors throughout their contracts within the program (Livingston & Moroi, 2015; Lesley, 2017; Brereton, 2019). By creating and working within a strongly unified curriculum for the necessity of ensuring more than 4,500 students annually were taught and evaluated reliably and evenly regardless of the instructor, this system also influenced subsequent program-wide research on faculty views of working within such a program (Garside, 2014; Brereton, 2019), course load and out-of-class obligations (Livingston & Moroi, 2015; Lesley, 2017), and class size (Moroi, 2014).

During those ten years, the Center for EDC, by virtue of having a mandatory course for first-year university students, has worked with Rikkyo University's Students with Disabilities Services Office (SDSO) to accommodate students who officially identified and informed the university of their special education needs. Part of this process involved program managers and administrative staff informing and guiding instructors who would have such students in their

classes and suggesting ways to best accommodate the students. Among those special educational needs is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Accommodations for these students vary and can include anything from modifying different parts of a lesson, such as the 3-2-1 Fluency task or discussion preparation (Hartley, 2019), to creating a one-on-one class with the student and instructor to maximize student comfort to best develop and communicate ideas. This special accommodation was only possible with support and flexibility from program managers, administrators, the SDSO, and being able to adapt the EDC's strongly unified curriculum.

The benefits of the Center for EDC's strongly unified curriculum could be seen in its teacher training, lessons, and reliability in terms of the ease of one EDC instructor covering for another due to absence and the students receiving the same lesson and mastering the same skills as though their original instructor were in the room. Even in instances of student-discipline issues, absenteeism, or, as stated above, students with disabilities, EDC instructors have adhered to the curriculum and followed through on the goals of each lesson. There has been a set routine and transparent expectations. Despite some instructor misgivings of repetition of student ideas, lesson monotony, and loss of autonomy (Brereton, 2019), one particular type of instructor could almost always be expected to thrive and commit to the perceived rigidity of a strongly unified curriculum without complaint: an instructor on the Autism spectrum.

DISCUSSION

Adults on the Autism Spectrum

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition. There is no cure, so adjustments to the environment are necessary in order to best accommodate a person with this disorder. Much research leans on genetic and environmental factors, and the impacts on social communication and interaction, sensory sensitivities, and restricted and repetitive interests (Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2017). In 2013 the DSM-5 widened the diagnostic net for Autism to include not just individuals with low-functioning Autism and severe mental difficulties, but also individuals who had theretofore been diagnosed as High-Functioning Autism and Asperger's Syndrome. The change from Autism Disorder to Autism Spectrum Disorder, so named to indicate the severity of the disorder is on a spectrum, has not been without controversy. It further confuses people already unfamiliar with the varieties of Autism and enforces the belief that *any* type or degree of Autism means "something is wrong with you" (Griffith, Totsika, Nash, & Hastings, 2011; Russell et. al., 2019).

Because of that misunderstanding of the Autism spectrum, there is still a widespread belief that no one with Autism could ever attend mainstream classes with neurotypical peers (Siegel, 2018), matriculate into a university, graduate, or work. Employment numbers for adults with ASD are discouragingly low (Chen, Leader, Sung, & Leahy, 2014). Nonetheless, let it be known that there are children with Autism attending mainstream classes (sometimes with special support). There are university students with ASD who officially report to the SDSO for classroom support. There are adults with ASD who do find work either part-time in retail or service, or even in research. Some become instructors. Some even become program managers. Being able to work full-time gives an adult with ASD the same feelings of inclusion and identity as it does a neurotypical adult (Chen, Leader, Sung, & Leahy, 2014), but it does not diminish the challenges an adult with ASD faces.

For many, especially undiagnosed or later-in-life diagnosed adults, *masking* or *camouflaging*, defined by Russo as "any effort to mask an autism feature, from suppressing known repetitive behaviors…to pretending to follow a conversation or imitating neurotypical behavior" (2018) helps the adult appear to fit in at work. When an instructor appears to agree with an idea on account of their colleagues agreeing, despite the instructor's expansive knowledge of the idea

and its shortcomings, it could appear on the surface as maintaining harmony. It could also be masking the instructor's ASD. Were the instructor to *un-mask*, they may appear unexpectedly out of character, abrasive, and show no regard for others' reactions. For anyone with ASD who is able, masking is the best way to maintain a career despite the exhaustive effort required (Russo, 2018).

Should the adult choose to disclose at work, it may or may not ameliorate prior issues with the work environment. There is a fear of discrimination (Meer, 2019) and belief that a person with ASD cannot be a successful teacher because of their inability to explain ideas or comfortably socially interact with students (Siegel, 2018). These beliefs only take into consideration the challenges of ASD and do not consider the gifts, such as greater focus on tasks, closer attention to detail, and sometimes an ability to align their "awareness of their own difficulties" to best respond to their students' own struggles (Prior, 2017). Sometimes the people being disclosed to (close colleagues, managers, directors, etc.) empathize with the employee more, now aware of the additional challenges the employee has faced (Foden, 2011). This is not always the case, though. While interviewing academics with ASD, Prior found that bullying, harassment, and direct discrimination did not always decrease; in fact, in some cases it increased (Prior, 2017). As with any incident of harassment, the university should work to increase awareness and understanding of ASD not just within its student population but also among its faculty. No one should ever be forced to disclose any disorder, nor should disclosure be the only means to procure support.

Still, as adults diagnosed with ASD find the courage to choose to disclose in the workplace, there remain more challenges for them in terms of understanding their roles, duties, and expectations. Fortunately, and unintentionally, finding work within a strongly unified curriculum such as the framework the EDC worked under for a decade was one significant way to minimize work stress for an instructor—and also a program manager—with ASD.

On the Spectrum in a Strongly Unified Curriculum

EDC's strongly unified curriculum has aligned well with the needs of an instructor on the Autism spectrum. In order to serve the needs of more than 4,500 first-year university students annually, the program and its curriculum have improved year upon year to address all aspects of lesson instruction, course development, and faculty training and further development within the program. It had a solid structure and its reliance on communicative language teaching has helped address any possible ambiguity a new instructor to the program, especially one with ASD, might have had.

In the past, when new faculty joined the program, they participated in a weeklong series of training workshops. These workshops addressed key parts of the standard EDC lesson: 3-2-1 Fluency (adapted from Maurice's 4-3-2 Fluency model [1983] for the sake of class time), Discussion Skill presentation, practice, assessed discussions, and feedback. Additional workshops addressed the differences in Discussion Test lessons, Discussion Test assessment, and lesson observations. All of these trained instructors to "teach in accordance with the principles of the course, with the goal of improving students' oral communicative competence in a discussion-based setting" (Garside, 2014, p. 277).

This orientation week was rigorous and overwhelming for any new instructor regardless of background. For instructors with ASD, walking away with all of this information could make the next step, prioritizing tasks, even more difficult (Meer, 2019). This was why it could be comforting to know that one of the final workshops in the orientation was viewing and discussing a recorded lesson of another instructor, stage by stage. Instructors could see everything in sequence and ask questions, thereby diminishing any lingering doubt. Upon completion of the orientation, the new instructor would ideally be as prepared to enter the classroom and conduct a proper English discussion class as every other instructor that came before and completed the same orientation.

This is not to say the orientation created automatons. Rather, it was intended to create community among all instructors in the EDC and emphasize the shared goal of using the lessons from the orientation and curriculum to help them help their learners (Brereton, 2019). Each instructor could still have their own style, background, and other pedagogies internalized, and these revealed themselves during recorded observations carried out by the EDC's program managers (Livingston & Moroi, 2015). The post-observation conference served as part of the program's quality assurance and was a chance to confirm adherence to the course principles. In most cases, minor improvements were recommended to the instructor in terms of timing of lesson stages or making feedback more actionable and student fronted. Follow-up observations checked to see if these adjustments were made. As instructors continued through their tenure in the program, they moved into the position of peer observers and offered feedback and with fellow instructors.

These known structures and their stages were helpful for instructors with ASD. From their first day of orientation onward, they comfortably knew what was happening and why. During orientation feedback sessions with program managers, instructors with ASD received unambiguous answers to questions about challenging parts of the recorded lesson, such as miscalculating the timing of tasks or too much teacher-fronted feedback. For a program manager with ASD who internalized the program's principles and handbook's guidelines, they could also provide transparent, unambiguous feedback in order to maintain quality control and focus on serving the needs of the students and university.

Beyond the classroom, other aspects of the EDC's strongly unified curriculum were just as strictly maintained as a result of research and feedback from instructors and students. Over the years, the program revised its own textbooks across four levels that corresponded to four different TOEIC-score bands. The textbooks have been updated annually based mainly on instructor feedback via surveys created on Google Forms. Instructors who provided feedback were acknowledged as contributors in the next edition, and this could give a sense of co-ownership and control to the faculty. This also aligned with a need for control and understanding for instructors with ASD. And for program managers with ASD who had a hand in editing the textbooks, their ability to *hyperfocus* on the editing task and integrate feedback was particularly beneficial (Russell et al., 2019). This gift also extended to the instructor with ASD who could concentrate closely on how to deliver the updated textbook's materials to students as well as create and manipulate their own supplemental materials in a way that they knew they could rationalize and use to help students understand and execute the target skill of each lesson.

The set class size of eight students was also helpful to instructors with ASD. As instructors became more familiar with each student's way of speaking and overall discussion participation, the initial cacophony of voices became easier to pick apart. This did not happen as easily for instructors with ASD due to sensory issues and the pressure to try and catch every utterance within two simultaneous four-student discussion groups. Especially for a class that heavily focused on speaking and listening and assessing speaking and listening, it could be difficult for any instructor at first to train their hearing towards each student's output and assess accordingly. The saving grace of the class size never being more than eight students (or nine in rare cases) assured the instructor that even if the situation was sometimes overwhelming, it could not become more so. Despite lacking any prior theory or literature indicating that eight was the magic number for a discussion class and relying on intuition instead, this set class size number prevailed and helped optimize instructors' ability to provide formative, and even individual feedback (Moroi 2014).

When an instructor with ASD first saw the weekly schedule of an EDC instructor, they saw the clearly defined clock-in and clock-out times, the class periods, and the scheduled periods for faculty development (FD) sessions. This built-in FD time could be extremely helpful for

instructors who struggled with time management beyond the confines of the classroom and could further offer these instructors a chance to build on helping the community of EDC instructors. The FD sessions were twofold: first, they were another way to affirm understanding and the objectives of the unified curriculum for instructors and program managers alike; second, they provided an opportunity for participants to go deeper into the methodologies of different parts of a lesson or task, and to discuss and get feedback on research relevant to the EDC (Livingston & Moroi, 2015; Lesley, 2017). For instructors with ASD who may have had questions but lacked knowledge of when or where to ask said questions, or for instances where these instructors may not have known which questions they should be considering in the larger fields of research, these sessions provided hints and could pull the instructor out of any potentially confusing gray areas.

However, in teaching and assessment, gray areas will always exist, and no matter how objective an assessment system is, subjectivity will always creep in. Perhaps the most difficult FD for instructors and program managers with ASD is the Discussion Test training session. These were held three times a semester to correspond to the Discussion Tests that occurred in Lessons 5, 9, and 13 of EDC. The purpose of these sessions was to affirm instructor understanding of the grading guidelines when assessing students' use of target Discussion Skills, to identify points of ambiguity with a pre-session practice task, and to complete a live scoring session together, with other instructors, of a recorded Discussion Test from an earlier semester. For the larger program, these sessions helped ascertain inter-rater reliability (Livingston & Moroi, 2015). After all, it would be unfair for two classes of students to be put through the same test but receive wildly different scores based on how their respective instructor assessed them. Instructors and program managers with ASD could find comfort in phrases that unambiguously received a score or not. They struggled with phrases that could be scored in multiple areas (i.e., the Connecting Ideas phrase "I agree. As you said,…" that scores as Connecting Ideas Speaker Side, Agreement, and Statement) or phrases that could be scored as any Communication Skill (e.g., Checking Understanding, Paraphrasing, or Clarification). With continued practice, scoring Discussion Tests could become easier for instructors with ASD, and defending scoring choices could become easier for program managers with ASD, but like with other parts of the program, so too do the Discussion Tests undergo updates with grading guidelines. Nonetheless, because of attention to the myriad ways students can use and manipulate phrases, in nearly all scoring cases, the instructor with ASD's need to know why something was scored a certain way could be explained quickly and clearly (Murray, 2019).

In any teaching environment, some struggles for an instructor with ASD will remain, such as socializing, networking, and working in a shared space. The Center for EDC has not been able to overcome these, but by minimizing other areas of difficulty such as ambiguity of expectations and maximizing an instructor with ASD's gifts of organization and planning, the EDC emerged as a far more welcoming place to work. Whether the instructor chose to disclose or not became less of an issue. Knowing the program already had a solid system in place to support students with ASD showed the instructor with ASD they could also expect some support from colleagues, program managers, and administrative staff.

On the Spectrum with Less Unification

For ten years, the Center for EDC built its strongly unified curriculum, complete with fluency, practice, discussion, assessment, and feedback, from any of the more than four dozen identically trained instructors teaching the lesson. For all instructors who completed the training, they received a foundation upon which to follow through on their lessons and opportunities to flavor the tasks with their own styles. They also had opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and further build upon their understanding of the program's methodologies through workshops,

observations, and conferences. This structure was hopefully especially beneficial to instructors on the Autism spectrum. In Spring 2020, this structure will be impossible as EDC becomes part of a new center at Rikkyo University, the Center for Foreign Language Education and Research (CFLER). The two-semester English Discussion course will collapse into one, training and orientation will be minimal, class sizes will increase, and FDs will no longer be compulsory. For any newly hired instructor, this may feel similar to any other university teaching position in any other Japanese university, or any university elsewhere for that matter. For an instructor with ASD who thrived in the strongly unified curriculum (despite having worked in less unified curricula prior), this change may be quite stressful.

2020 changes

New instructors beginning in Spring 2020 will not receive an intense, weeklong orientation solely aimed at the English discussion class and everything it contains. Instructors will receive textbooks, a handbook, a brief orientation that covers assessment, and an instructional video guiding new instructors through stages of a lesson and variations on carrying out specific tasks (i.e., multiple types of Discussion Skill presentation, feedback, etc.). There will no longer be a system of checks and balances via recorded observations and post-observation conferences, as there will no longer be program managers to oversee such tasks. Any observations that do take place will purely be peer-to-peer. These can still be beneficial, but the scope will be limited to only what the participating instructors wish to discuss, not necessarily the overall goals of the course.

Class sizes will increase to ten students. Compared to other university courses where class sizes are significantly larger but still able to run as planned, this increase in an English discussion class will have effects on student-student talking time, feedback and assessment, and overall classroom management. Teacher-talk time will also likely increase, as instructors may need to ensure all students understand instructions and complete activities as designed. In a survey carried out by Moroi (2014) about this possible issue, 92% of instructors reported that an increase in class size to ten students would make it difficult to maintain the same quality of teaching that is achievable in an 8-student class. For instructors with ASD who already take longer to get used to listening to simultaneous discussions and accurately assessing multiple speakers, this increase will no doubt detrimentally affect their ability to properly assess their students. All instructors will find themselves moving from more precise assessment to the use of an impressionistic rubric with this change. This takes another aspect of the course from more black-and-white to gray, and instructors with ASD will be without support to help them adjust quickly.

The loss of a set teaching schedule with built-in FD meeting times will also add to the stress of an instructor with ASD. Scheduling meetings in general will become harder and concerns an instructor with ASD has may not be addressed in a timely manner with sporadic meetings. That's not to say instructors cannot resolve their concerns via email. However, as with any type of communication, ambiguity is possible.

A saving grace of this transition to a less unified curriculum is that it was announced more than a year in advance, giving all affected instructors a chance to brainstorm ideas and questions, consider concerns, and strengthen community within the EDC (Brereton, 2019). Unfortunately, as the new academic year approaches, many aspects of the new program remain unclear, and for an instructor with ASD, making requests for more clarity to minimize stress has not been successful or on any schedule that alleviates the stress. For these instructors, whether the curriculum is strongly unified or not, it is imperative to have a clear schedule of tasks in place and to provide "advance warning of any changes in routine" with justification (National Disability Advisory, 2015). During its ten years, the Center for EDC was a model of predictability. Now it

is blending into something unpredictable, and that may be worrying from the standpoint of instructors and program managers on the autism spectrum.

Recommendations for instructors with ASD

For an instructor with ASD to adjust and thrive under radically changing conditions, it can be helpful to fall back on prior experiences in similarly less unified curricula. Reviewing old classroom materials from previous teaching positions and recalling how to carry out other types of assignments in other skill areas (i.e., reading, writing, and vocabulary) can lessen the uncertainty of how to carry out those types of classes in a new center. Talking with colleagues who are already teaching those courses and focusing on the practical lesson-to-lesson tasks adds needed structure. Avoiding toxic colleagues, regardless of one's disclosure of ASD or not, can also reduce stress. Explaining concerns with supportive colleagues, again, regardless of disclosure, can help an instructor with ASD understand other perspectives about the transition. It may very well be perceived as chaotic by other faculty as well, but it may also reveal new opportunities for research, innovation, and teaching experience. The known student support system the EDC had for students with ASD and other special needs will change dramatically but will not disappear entirely. This can still provide a model of expectations of support for instructors with ASD who may choose to disclose in the new program.

To say an instructor with ASD was spoiled by working in a strongly unified curriculum is immature. Rather, one should emphasize the benefits of working in a strongly unified curriculum for an instructor with ASD, given the difficulties adults with ASD generally face with employment in general. And, even if those responsible for the changes do discover they have faculty with ASD or other special needs, they should go one further and better understand those disorders. Instructors with ASD will always appreciate support.

CONCLUSION

Adults with ASD who are able to work will find themselves in work environments that may not be able to fully accommodate their needs. They may find support by disclosing, but that is not a guarantee. Many mask their Autism in order to fit in at work, and long-term masking can increase stress. For those who go into teaching, working within anything less than a strongly unified curriculum can be stressful even with years of experience in various programs. The Center for EDC exemplified a strongly unified curriculum that was beneficial to instructors with ASD. The EDC devoted its ten years to creating and modifying a strongly unified curriculum that could be followed by dozens of instructors as they taught more than 4,500 first-year students annually. Observations and post-observation conferences allowed for quality assurance for program managers and a chance to hone skills and work closer towards the program's goals for instructors. Faculty development workshops allowed additional opportunities for faculty to grow as a community, further understand teaching methodologies, and grow professionally.

Less unified curricula and programs are also capable of these things, but they have a steeper hill to climb in order to assure all of their faculty are aligned in terms of lesson delivery and assessment. For instructors with ASD moving into a strongly unified curriculum, it can be a lightbulb moment of what a structurally sound and supportive teaching environment can be; moving out of it can be distressing. As the EDC transitions into becoming part of CFLER in Spring 2020, many details will need to be ironed out, and all faculty will need assurance that the new center has their best professional interests at heart. For instructors with ASD, this support will also have to come from understanding colleagues and a return to the self-reliance that was necessary prior to joining the EDC. For those in managerial and administrative positions, it should be comforting to be aware that even if they have chosen not to disclose, there may be instructors at

your university who are on the Autism spectrum. They may mask, they prefer their routine, and they are trying their best. That can best be achieved when they are working in a supportive, strong, and unified curriculum.

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