



## **Creative Students On The Spectrum: Integrating The University Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

One of the challenges of teaching (at any level) is to understand how students access and process information. Every student is different. What are their most active senses? Do they respond to auditory stimulus more than visual or tactile stimulus? A teacher's understanding of how students process the world and what they think about their experience—the opinions they form about it—helps to promote effective learning for both student and teacher.

But what of the autistic student? Much has been written about autism. The question this paper addresses concerns the development of a relationship between teacher (not clinically trained in teaching autistic students) and a talented artist and student with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Can effective teaching and learning transact? Through an experimental arts program, the author and department chair discusses the challenge of integrating autism into the mainstream university classroom. The template course: the Art of the Visual Journal teaches students to document their lives—daily—as they live it. The focus is on the development of “self.” Students understand who they are as defined by what they do. They are the lives they live. Part of that understanding is their relationship with each other and to appreciate their diversity. For the author, developing a relationship with an autistic student of enormous talent—gaining insight into an often confusing internal world, and integrating that experience into the mainstream classroom is both challenging and richly rewarding.

When approached by university administrators regarding the possibility of integrating an autistic student into the mainstream classroom—my classroom—I felt up to the challenge even though I had never taught an autistic student. My reasoning seemed simple at the time: in 23 years of teaching at the university level I had students with a variety of learning disabilities including ADHD, dyslexia, clinical depression, Tourette's syndrome and epilepsy. True, I wasn't entirely sure what autism was or how it manifested itself in outward behavior. Much has been written about autism but I'd read little of it. Although I had concerns, my rationale for agreeing to the arrangement was simply to learn from the experience.

My students—9 in all—had everything to do with the success or failure of the project. Failing to integrate a student on the autistic spectrum into the mainstream classroom might potentially be harmful to everyone—most importantly the autistic student, who might reject the collegiate experience altogether. I questioned what affect this experiment would have on the ebb and flow of my class routine. Success or failure notwithstanding, I decided to document the development of a unique relationship between this author—one not clinically trained in teaching the autistic student—and a talented artist and student with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Through documentation of a personal experience this paper will address two critical questions concerning teaching an ASD student: Can effective teaching and learning transact and what are the means of outcome assessment?

The template course for this project: The Art of the Visual Journal requires students to document their lives on a daily basis. Integral to this process is recognizing their relationship with each other and to appreciate diversity. Diversity is a word used liberally on college campuses. It's not always embraced as well as we would like. The university environment offers ethnic cliques, lifestyle cliques, social cliques, sports cliques, etc. Inclusion is affirmation. For the autistic student however, there can be real problems in integrating into the college environment. Diversity is not an easy concept to grasp for one with ASD and so it has been with my autistic student, 19 year-old Justin Canha.



When I was introduced to Justin he had just turned 19 and was 6 months from graduating from high school. His rather forthright greeting was not what I expected. Yes, there were moments when he diverted his gaze to avoid eye contact and would repeat a thought or observation as if totally consumed. Kate, his aid—a wonderfully patient woman with a sense of humor and an easy demeanor, was to help facilitate Justin's integration into the classroom environment. Kate would steer Justin away from his own self-absorption and redirect his focus. He was generally compliant and I was impressed by the gentle intimacy of their relationship. Justin would lean on her with his arm draped across her shoulder in an outwardly affectionate way. Later, I met with him and the rest of the students for their first class of the semester. Justin was fine if not a little bored, especially when the monotony of syllabus review became tedious to him. At the end of class Justin left with Kate. I spoke with his classmates (who were filing out of the room) concerning Justin's autism and what we were attempting to do in integrating him into the classroom environment. They were all very accepting of the situation and in fact, wholeheartedly embraced the opportunity to gain insight into alternative perspectives.

Alternative perspectives was the topic of the first project entitled "Celebrating Difference," requiring students to address their lives in short written and visual narratives. They were to observe ordinary moments in their daily routine. I felt this would be an engaging project for Justin, as one of the primary characteristics of autism is a focus on "self." Discussions with Justin's parents provided me insight into his early development. The following is a brief history of those early developmental years.

As a young child Justin's autism had severely affected his functioning. He spoke little before the age of 5, had minimal response to others and had no comprehension of the necessary "life skills" needed to protect him from physical harm. For example, if he walked by a swing set, Justin lacked the basic awareness of what a moving swing could do if it hit him. He didn't understand the danger of touching a hot burner on the stove. Justin's parents learned of his ASD diagnosis around the age of 3. His parents: Maria-Theresa and Briant sought information. Clinical research was available but it didn't always provide the answers to their questions. Research, for instance, had shown that autistic people's senses may be either hypersensitive (highly increased in sensitivity) or hyposensitive (highly decreased in sensitivity). The level and nature of sensory sensitivity varies greatly under different circumstances and in different situations, depending on an autistic person's stress level, emotional state, and surroundings.[1]

Briant observed that Justin appeared transfixed by television—even if it was only a blue screen. His son would sit in front of the television for hours. Subsequently, Briant developed crude sequential storyboards, scanned into a computer and run through the television set, narrated by himself. Educational in nature—like a simple children's book—these narrations promoted a learned awareness of the world in episodic fashion. With Justin as the main character, Briant would address scenarios such as never walking in front of a moving swing and not touching a hot stove burner. After viewing them, Justin's parents noticed a vast improvement in his awareness level. In time, Justin's verbal repertoire expanded to encompass a sophisticated vocabulary.

At eight Justin was introduced to a therapist who understood the value of art as a teaching vehicle and as therapy—basic self-expression through drawing when words were not an option. Research regarding the value of art as a teaching mechanism for people with ASD offers several promising therapies such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), which uses photographs, drawings, and objects to augment verbal communication and teach such skills as following directions, keeping a schedule, waiting a turn, and coping with unplanned changes in routine.[2] As a result Justin's work began to take on unusual amounts of detail and creativity. His work celebrated what was meaningful to him, exuding both innocence and moments of friendship—the love between mother and child, for instance.[3] As he grew older Justin's parents sought out exhibition opportunities for him.

To better understand what autism feels like from the inside, I read as many articles as I could—from articulate writers who happened to be autistic. One such writer is Ruth Elaine Haine who is also an artist. She wrote the following for the magazine *Autism Advocate*:

"As a storyteller, I sometimes wonder if we overlook the usefulness of narrative in developing our social ability when social intelligence is one of the greatest challenges for individuals with autism spectrum disorder." [4]

The famed British neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks, wrote in *The Autist Artist* regarding José, a young autistic artist who creates his art in the internally isolated state of ASD:

"For though 'horizontal' connections with others, with society and culture, are lost, there may be vital and intensified 'vertical' connections, direct connections with nature, with reality, uninfluenced,



unmediated, untouchable, by any others. This 'vertical' contact is very striking with José, hence the piercing directness, the absolute clarity of his perceptions and drawings, without a hint or shade of ambiguity or indirection, a rocklike power uninfluenced by others."

The upside of autism, as dozens of studies have demonstrated, is that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder have a number of strengths including enhanced ability with 3-D drawing and pattern recognition, more accurate graphic recall, and various superior memory skills.[5] Those superior memory skills are never more in evidence than in Justin's personal journals done in and outside of class. Painstakingly drawn with a mechanical pencil—tiny, almost imperceptible but with utmost precision and detail, these journals are daily documentations of Justin's perceptions. His media influences, his lists of favorites (names, movies, actors and actresses, animals, foods, etc.), his emotional reactions to the life around him, his lists of "opposites" (happy/sad, kind/unkind, rough/smooth, clean/dirty. etc.)—all are contained within his lined journal pages. Every available sheet is filled with the intensity of a Hieronymus Bosch triptych. Justin's journals make fascinating art—a window into the creative process of one on the spectrum who channels his intensity and focus in microscopic worlds gleaned from television, cinema and books, reflecting popular culture.

Relative to this media link to social awareness is Justin's creative output as a self-help mechanism. Justin uses his art to explain to himself what the world around him means as well as to articulate what autism feels like. The best example of this is his cartoon strip of several years ago (since retired): Jickey & Fankey—a red fox and a gray wolf that stand in opposition to one and other. Fankey is good and Jickey is bad. This cartoon strip serves as a link to Justin's endless lists of "opposites" and provides him I believe, a structure to play out life's "learning lessons." He learns about emotions and what they mean from others and then rehearses those emotions through his art. He subsequently learns to converge that learned behavior with his authentic emotional reactions. Justin became more socially confident through the acceptance of his work by fellow students and eventually came to class unaccompanied by Kate—a major stride. At present, supported by this developing confidence, Justin has completed 5 classes in the Art & Design program. He is represented by the Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York City, appeared in Oprah Magazine and has illustrated two children's books.

Noted author David Wolman wrote in *The truth about autism: scientists reconsider what they think they know* :

*"Autism isn't something a person has, or a "shell" that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive . . . .It is not possible to separate the autism from the person — and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with."*[6]

It's hard to know just how Justin takes his work. Seriously, no doubt—a survival mechanism to be sure—but I've learned our mainstream reactions don't always align with the reactions of people on the spectrum. We may never know what Justin really thinks about some things because Justin may not know. And that is fine. You can't change the unchangeable. That his work speaks to *him* is Justin Canha's greatest reward. That it speaks to us is ours.

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