

Personal Statement

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I am an autistic educator, researcher, artist, and writer, born 1985, Norristown, Pennsylvania. I hypothesize that autism is emerging as an artistic identity worldwide, beginning at the collegiate level. To explore this position, I raise two key questions:

- How, when, and where can autistic students produce media of enduring value?
- What is the socio-cultural and psychological significance of a given work of media, in the global context of autism as well as the specific contexts of media study?

My current autism research is necessitated by two critical factors:

- The current undergraduate retention rate for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is around 20%, meaning that 80% of autistic undergraduates are unable to earn degrees such as the BFA or BA (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Autistic college students are, therefore, a marginalized group within the current academic system.
- I have found a gap in the literature specific to autism in adults pursuing arts at the collegiate level. Much of the existing literature focuses on art and music therapy for children with ASD. In contrast, my research focuses on the academic and professional development of autistic adults, beginning at the collegiate level.

My personal background directly reflects my interests and experience: I have been diagnosed with ASD Level 1, and have been practicing digital media since 1995. I have five years of experience teaching digital media and sound design to students with ASD Levels 1 and 2, at the University of the Arts (Philadelphia) and Moore College. I also have 8 years of experience as a design and animation freelancer. My current goal is to pursue a PhD.

Underlying this goal is a desire to unite, promote, and strengthen the practice of professional artists on the autism spectrum, through enhanced educational efficacy, community-organizing, and positive digital media portrayals. Extensive research is key to achieving my goal. Due to the current college retention crisis, there are many challenges to overcome in the education of the autistic community. In light of the challenges, I seek to be an agent of change.

I contextualize my personal artwork as visualizations of my own cognition, i.e. my uniquely autistic mind. And yet, in the practical sense of arts education, educators must learn about the autistic mind in order to accommodate autistic students, and to actualize the production of professional work. In this sense, I find a communicative – rather than purely pedagogical – need to “get the word out” about autism in emerging media. Such portrayals may be audio-visual, interactive, or text-based. As emerging media educators and academic administrators learn about ASD, educational efficacy – as well as empathy – will improve for a once-overlooked minority. Therefore, social equity underlies my desire to embrace autism for social change, in the ever-expanding community of autistic artists.

I am critical of popular initiatives that encourage autistic people to become computer programmers for large corporations. I consider those initiatives to be anti-humanistic, since only a small minority of autistic people are programming savants, and job availability is limited. I believe that there is great potential for autism-as-identity in the cultural heritage of the arts, especially with regards to emerging media. My research aims to enhance educational efficacy and emotional wellbeing for an ever-expanding group of autistic artists, worldwide.

Work Cited

VanBergeijk, E., Klin, A., & Volkmar, F. (2008). Supporting More Able Students on the Autism Spectrum: College and Beyond. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 38(7), 1359-1370.