Autism as Artistic Identity at the Collegiate Level: Max Angelo Groff
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Introduction

      Recent media coverage has drawn attention to the employment of autistic adults at large tech companies such as Microsoft and SAP. On television, an autistic surgeon has been featured on the fictional series *The Good Doctor*. However, it is unreasonable to assume that *all* autistic adults (or even a significant fraction thereof) will excel in such stressful and competitive fields as software development or surgery. Who will account for the autistic groups that are unable to develop software or perform surgery? Furthermore, what if an autistic individual is simply not interested in writing code for Microsoft, and instead seeks other interests? The issue of autism in higher education should not be a product of corporate PR or mass media hysteria. We must face the reality that employment at Microsoft is, ultimately, unlikely for the millions of autistic people living in the United States. We must continue to emphasize the importance of the arts within a humanistic and communicative, rather than technocratic, context.

      There is more to the story of autism when considering neurodiversity in higher education. As educators, we must account for autistic individuals who possess interests and skills that are not rooted in a science/technology/engineering/math (STEM) format. To fully grasp the role of creativity in autism, we must reconsider the paradigm of STEM, and reconstruct the paradigm of SHTEAMM (the *H* denoting *humanities*, the *A* denoting the *arts*, and the extra *M* denoting *music*). Due to the unique diversity of autistic minds, there is great potential to embrace autism as an asset, rather than a hindrance,

in undergraduate arts practices. Autism is emerging as an artistic identity, thereby actualizing and communicating the strengths of the individual. In this sense, autism as artistic identity may be considered analogous to other forms of identity in the arts, e.g. gender identity, racial identity, political identity, religious identity, etc.

Current Issues and Challenges

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) currently affects up to 1 in 59 individuals in the United States (Autism Speaks, 2018). Each autistic individual faces unique challenges. ASD is diagnosed according to levels ranging from 1 to 3, according to the following DSM-5 criteria:

- Level 1 (including high-functioning):
  - Decreased interest in social interactions or activities
  - Difficulty initiating social interactions, such as talking to a person
  - Struggles to maintain the give-and-take of a typical conversation
  - Obvious signs of communication difficulty
  - Trouble adapting to changes in routine, or difficulty planning and organizing
- Level 2:
  - Difficulty coping with change to routine or surroundings
  - Significant lack of verbal and nonverbal communication skills
  - Behavior issues severe enough to be obvious to the casual observer
  - Unusual or reduced response to social cues, communication, or interactions
  - Trouble adapting to change

- ◦ Communication using overly simple sentences

- ◦ Narrow, specific interests

Due to the severity of ASD Level 3, Level 3 is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is likely that most autistic adults employed at Microsoft and SAP have ASD Level 1, and are high-functioning. Contrary to popular belief, savants (such as the surgeon depicted in *The Good Doctor*) are rare. There is no intrinsic aspect to autism that magically enables super-STEM savant status, simply because the spectrum is so diverse and prevalent. To a degree, it is harmful to spread the misconception that that autistic individuals should, by nature, become brilliant computer programmers or surgeons. There is great promise for a segment of autistic adults to succeed in the creative domains of their own choosing, which may or may not involve the use of new technology.

Much of the existing literature on autism focuses on autism in children, as well the use of art/music therapy. In contrast, this paper responds to a gap in the literature: the development of professional arts practices for autistic adults with ASD Levels 1 and 2, at the collegiate level. Alarmingly, only 20% of autistic adults who enter college are able to complete an undergraduate degree program (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). It follows that academia is currently failing to accommodate the needs of 80% of undergraduate students with ASD. For those in academia concerned with disabilities accommodations, neurodiversity, and teaching efficacy, there is significant room for improvement. The author of this paper has been diagnosed with ASD Level 1, and has over 5+ years of experience teaching computer-based visual arts and sound design to students with ASD Levels 1 and 2.

Autistic adults face a variety of challenges when working in collaborative environments. Adults with ASD often have difficulty forming friendships, due to issues with empathy and intuitive responses. Collaboration, socialization, and informal conversation are key components of college for typically developing students, and yet there is no panacea for enabling socialization amongst the autistic, even through years of therapy. Often autistic adults fail at job interviews, regardless of their skills (Kharif, 2015), due to the aforementioned social challenges. To one extreme, a vocational educator might take a regimented STEM approach, according to the following ethos:

Autistic students should be trained to collaborate and succeed
in the corporate world, for the good of the U.S. economy.

And yet, such an approach may be an uphill battle, or even worse, traumatic to individuals with ASD Level 2, who simply cannot function in an intense corporate environment.

An Alternative Approach

In contrast to the STEM approach, one could take the humanistic SHTEAMM approach, according to the following ethos:

Some autistic students may be soloists in the arts,
and the best outcome is to develop creative practices on an individual basis,
in an academic, rather than vocational, context.

By taking the latter approach, it follows that the arts comprise disciplines to enable individual expression while minimizing social difficulties, especially for those

with language disorders. For example, an autistic painter or autistic solo pianist may achieve excellent results with minimal collaboration and minimal verbalization. Such a student may interact with only a small circle of trusted professors and peers.

Autistic individuals should not be hermetic or silenced, or segregated from their peers. Friends can be made amongst fellow classmates, and collaboration is possible. And yet, if an adult with ASD Level 2 is willing to take stage front and center, so to speak, through his/her own creative works, as *auteur*, then the arts, by nature, comprise promising fields of study. As neurodiverse education evolves, professors of the arts should help autistic students exceed expectations, while avoiding vocational dogma and pipe-dreams of a Microsoft-funded future. Professors who have personal experience coping with ASD may be the professors best suited to teach undergraduate students with ASD, thus reinforcing autism as identity, as well as support community.

It is also notable that the need for software developers is highly specialized, and somewhat limited. Many of the largest software companies (e.g. Adobe, Autodesk, Apple) focus on creating tools *for* the arts. The future of creative technology necessitates the widespread *use* of software, proportional to the specialized needs of software *development*.

Standards of Academic Achievement and Professionalism

Autism as artistic identity must be framed in terms of the student's strengths, rather than deficits. In a college setting, professors cannot be expected to reward mediocre or incomplete work. Autistic creativity must involve a calling towards professionalism, and a drive to overcome challenges, while developing structure,

organization, and personal voice. College professors of the arts should encourage creative excellence amongst autistic students, moving beyond the realm of therapy, and into the realm of professionalism. Therapy may have beneficial results, especially for children and adolescents, but a college curriculum of the arts necessitates lessons, assignments, and deadlines. As an adult, an autistic individual may enter college, but seek outpatient therapy elsewhere (available in Philadelphia at the Center for Autism, at zero cost). Colleges provide accommodations, but separation between educational and therapeutical organizations may prove beneficial to maintain academic rigor. Undergraduate education requires standards of achievement that should not be compromised, even for students with disabilities accommodations.

Pre-College Initiatives

To address the challenges facing autistic undergraduates, the College Living Experience (CLE), overseen by Educational Services of America, was established circa 2007. In several cities across the US, CLE provides tutoring sessions as well as training for independent living and social interaction. The purpose of CLE is to prepare autistic students for the challenges of the undergraduate experience. As autistic students gain admission to college, programs such as CLE help oversee the transition. In addition to helping autistic students prepare for college life, such programs help mitigate the concerns and anxieties of parents (PR Newswire, 2007). There are also schools dedicated to autistic children and adolescents, such as the Monarch School in Ohio.

In 2017, Ambrose and Lacour established NOLArts in New Orleans. The program recognizes that "young adults on the spectrum have physically complex systems

that are wired differently than ours, and therefore, we have a special nutritionist"
(Ardekanni, 2017). In addition to helping pre-college individuals succeed in the arts, the
program prepares students for college experience in terms of maintaining hygiene.
NOLArts is so popular that it currently has a two-year waiting list, and it is currently only
available in New Orleans. Further progress is needed, since such programs are only
available in limited geographical regions. Such programs should be made available to all
autistic people.

The Need for Intra-College Initiatives

In 2015, the University of the Arts (London) undertook a project to examine the
practices of neurodiverse undergraduates. The students involved were mainly afflicted
with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia, rather than ASD. Nonetheless, the project
generated data that clearly demonstrated unique creative abilities amongst the
neurodiverse students, especially in a trans-media context. The students excelled in
combining sound, visual still and moving images, as well as applying interactivity and
augmented reality (Damiani, 2017). It may be worthwhile to conduct similar studies
focusing specifically on students with ASD.

Current Initiatives: Unique Abilities, Unique Challenges

Like all people, autistic individuals have latent creative and intellectual strengths,
as well as vulnerabilities. However, certain strengths and vulnerabilities are specific to
autism. Damiani (2017), an arts professor diagnosed with ASD, notes that educators
should take initiatives to discover the creative strengths of each autistic student,

while avoiding potential pitfalls. For example, in music education, students with ASD often perceive sound differently than typically developing students. Autistic students may be extremely sensitive to sound and pitch (Menzinger and Jackson, 2009), such that a typical music curriculum (e.g. traditional band practice) might overwhelm students with ASD. By understanding each student's individual sensitivities, the potential negatives (e.g. sound-induced stress) may be transformed to positives, e.g. enhanced sound perception.

It is beneficial for students with ASD to use computer-based tools to manipulate sound on their own terms, while still maintaining an organized, goal-oriented curriculum. Autistic music students may benefit from the use of computer-based tools of their own choosing (rather than software mandated by the schools), as well as sealed headphones, in order to limit exposure to extraneous noise. Due to light sensitivity, it may be beneficial to conduct audio classes in dimly-lit studio environments. There is still room for collaboration in such a curriculum, but it is evident that autistic students may be most comfortable working individually. In autism, it is the educator's role to implement collaborative processes, carefully and gradually.

Is there a "language" of the arts in autism? A 1998 study by Kellman compares the visionary language of European Ice Age art to the practice of autistic visual artists. Kellman notes formal similarities in terms of foreshortening, linear three-dimensionality, sense of motion, and structural focus. Autistic artists may develop processes of seeing and making unique to their own cognition, thus reinforcing autism as artistic identity on an innate, psychological level. Kellman notes a case study of an autistic artist named Jamie, who did not feature humans in his work for his first eight years of drawing.

Jamie's unique portfolio reflects the autistic tendencies towards structural focus, geometry, stacking, rows and columns, patterns and series, etc.

For Kellman, the balance between structure and chaos is key to the autistic creative process. In some cases, autistic artists are able to use visual memory to their advantage, and create "memory as narrative," without the use of words. Kellman also notes a general lack of sociocultural concerns in the work of autistic artists, which could be considered a problem, serving for worthwhile discussion. To what extent should educators push autistic students' work towards informed sociocultural significance?

In 1999, Yale University conducted a psychology study in collaboration with the School of Visual Arts (SVA). Autistic child patients (not college students) were shown animated films created by the SVA animation students. During the viewings, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) was conducted at Yale, and it was found that animation positively stimulated the minds of autistic children. This research suggests that animation, in particular, is a discipline well-suited for autistic people, moving beyond childhood consumption and into adult professionalism. Similar ideas are reinforced by the 2016 documentary *Life, Animated*, which demonstrates the link between autism and interest in animation. However, it is not enough to say that animation should serve only to engage autistic children. At the collegiate level, animation-loving autistic students should learn to become professional animators, technically and creatively.

Classroom Environments and The Need for Memory Retention

In the field of music, memory for melody is generally enhanced among persons with autism (Stanutz et al., 2014). Musical savants (although rare) may, in many cases,

be autistic. However, students with ASD may face problems coping with certain visuospatial contexts, as well as qualities of particular sounds, based on acoustics as well as environment (Menzinger and Jackson, 2009). Autistic individuals tend to be "visual thinkers," and even auditory memory may have a necessary visual component (Boucher and Bowler, 2010).

In ASD, episodic memory functions differently when compared to episodic memory in typical development. Autistic individuals sometimes remember details of an event, while having little to no memory of "the gist," i.e. the overall meaning of the event (Happé, 1999). People with ASD may be highly dependent on cues to access episodic memories, such as the visual cues afforded by computer-based music applications. Further research is needed to characterize how sensory details – both auditory and visuospatial – affect episodic memory in autism. By researching the specificity of sensory details, researchers may develop methodologies to improve learning efficacy in the autistic arts. How do particular visuospatial and acoustical factors impair or enhance musical memory in adults with ASD?

It is imperative to characterize visuospatial and acoustical factors with regards to both short-term and long-term memory in autism. Education is only effective if the students have the ability to recall what they learn, week-to-week, and years into the future. The results of autistic educational research should help to formalize and clarify the strengths and deficits of students, with respect to the classroom environment. It may be necessary to rethink the classroom. For example, how many students should occupy a classroom of a specific size, with respect for personal space? To what extent should students face their own workstations, relative to the instructor? How should the instructor

present verbal lectures, relative to presenting multimedia content? How may simple techniques such as color-coding help improve memory retention of learned materials? There are opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue and research between arts educators, psychologists, and communication specialists.

The Case of Artistic Savants and Educational Efficacy for the Inherently Talented

As previously discussed, the vast majority of individuals with ASD do not have savant status in technical arenas. And yet, it is plausible that some highly talented autistic students may be found to have savant status, within certain (often limited) boundaries. One must, then, consider the possible conflicts of interest between savants and traditional educational curricula. It is often the case that savants are autistic. If savant status implies inherent talent, is it possible to teach non-high-functioning artistic savants in the traditional studio context?

Pring et al. (1997) characterize savants in terms of modular processing capacity – a capacity separate from general intelligence. For example, an artistic savant may possess a cognitive "module" for line-drawing, far exceeding average skill levels. However, such a module may be separate from other skills, e.g. use of color. Stephen Wiltshire, an artistic savant, is a case study with such a penchant for line drawing. In line with the modular nature of savant talent, Stephen initially lacked modules for other artistic skills – in particular, the use of tone. Prior to his undergraduate education, Stephen's artistic "vocabulary" lacked tone, e.g. shading and shadow. The educators at the undergraduate level were responsible for encouraging Stephen to use tone, through the structure of lessons and assignments. In this situation, the structure of formal education played

a necessary role in developing new (or latent) skills for an autistic artist, complimenting the student's inherent talents.

It is significant that Stephen's IQ does not reflect his artistic talent: he has a verbal IQ of 47 and a performance IQ of 65. In the case of autistic art students such as Stephen, intelligence may not be quantifiable through standardized testing or other quantitative means. As such, the qualitative analysis of a student's work, must, in some cases, supersede quantitative testing, towards advocation of a humanistic educational approach. Pictorial and formal language can be taught, and thus teaching may be effective even in cases of medium-functioning (i.e. ASD Level 2) students. The key to teaching Stephen to "see" tone was simple: tone was described as "steps" from black to white. The simple delineation of "steps" as discreet boundaries of black to grays to white (and vice-versa) elucidated Stephen's understanding of tone. Art instructors at the collegiate level must not overlook simple explanations of seemingly obvious concepts, because autistic students often need extra clarification of concepts that may be perceived by typically developing students as obvious.

A major challenge in cases such as Stephen's is the issue of intentionality. Artistic intentionality correlates to the development of a student's artistic identity, and is thus essential. Unfortunately, in many cases, Stephen lacked conceptual intentions, and instead hyper-focused on form, perspective, and subject matter (e.g. cars). In some cases, Stephen's choice of subject matter (particularly having to do with depictions of people) seemed banal. As such, educators may need to take a special role in the direction and curation of autistic students' work. If the autistic student is conscious of the educator's direction, and does not resist a gentle "push" towards new subject matters and concepts,

then such interactions should be considered ethical and productive. ASD's tendency towards repetition and patterns may, in itself, be a pathway towards a universal autistic/artistic identity, both stylistically and conceptually. Pring et al. (1997) conclude that expert art training, via undergraduate education, was essential for Stephen to fully actualize his artistic intentions.

Accommodating ASD at the Collegiate Level

As suggested throughout this paper, students with ASD are currently pursuing undergraduate degrees. Contrary to statistics, many individuals with ASD are capable of completing undergraduate degrees (Dymond et al., 2017). However, the extent to which autistic students are gaining support/accommodations is unclear. The academic strengths of autistic students include passionate interests, a desire to be correct, intellectual capabilities, and adherence to rules. Despite such strengths, Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) note several challenges to autistic students, including social misunderstandings, lack of critical thinking, and anxiety.

Dymond et al. (2017) provide empirical evidence of additional challenges:

- Executive functioning deficits, e.g. organization, time management, and generalization of learned skills

- Problems initiating and cultivating social interactions and friendships

- Independent living skills, e.g. grooming, morning wake-up, medication regimens

- Academic skills, e.g. focus during class and turning in assignments on time

- Frustration management and self-determination, e.g. seeking accommodations and asking for help.

In response to the aforementioned strengths and weaknesses, Brown and Coomes (2016) identify best practices for supporting autistic students at the undergraduate level:

- Promote equity for the autistic.

- Customize support/accommodations.

- Promote autism awareness/education at all levels of the institution.

- Ease transition from high school to college (as previously discussed).

- Create and enforce of policies for all autistic students.

- Build and cultivate relationships between students-to-students, students-to-faculty, students-to-administration, and students-to-community.

- Intentionally use support groups (e.g. collective meetings of autistic students).

- Provide sensory accommodations.

- Enforce non-ambiguity in the language employed by educators (particularly relevant in the case of arts educators who lack GRE performance or PhD credentials).

Heflin and Alaimo (2007) propose environmental modifications (best practices) for the classroom, in order to accommodate autistic students in a studio or classroom environment:

- Visual modifications for the classroom:
  - Reduce the number of room decorations.
  - Cover the shelves with paper the same color as the walls.

- Use carrells around desks.

- Use sunshades and dim lighting.

- Allow students time to close eyes.

- Allow students to wear caps to reduce exposure to light.

- Place a display board around a desk with a shield on top.

- Auditory modifications for the classroom:

  - Generate white noise or quiet music with a steady beat.

  - Move away from noisy areas.

  - Use fluorescent lights.

- Olfactory modifications for the classroom:

  - Avoid cologne/perfume.

  - Eat lunch in the classroom, if possible.

  - Use soothing scents in the room, or make scents available to individual

    students.

  - Position desks away from trash cans.

  - Use unscented cleaning products.

The Management of Stimming

In characterizing verbal and non-verbal behavior in autism, it is essential to define *stimming*. Rudy (2018) defines stimming as "self-stimulatory behavior," or "stereotypic" behavior. Stimming in ASD may physically occur as hand-flapping, rocking, spinning, or repetition of words and phrases. Clearly, the college classroom

is not an "autistic art festival" (although such things do exist) – the student/faculty delineation must be preserved. And yet, the acceptance of stimming and stimming-like behavior is a serious matter of disabilities accommodations, and not simply a matter of classroom etiquette. Stimming is a significant characteristic in ASD, and therefore must be accommodated, rather than suppressed. It is unreasonable to expect students to camouflage tendencies towards stimming, for the reasons cited previously. There may even be a correlation between stimming and creativity in autism.

Whether the stimming can reasonably occur *within* the classroom must be considered on a case-by-case basis. As a first step, a dedicated safe space ("stimroom") should be provided, in close proximity to the classroom. If it is not logistically possible to establish a "stimroom," then students should be allowed to leave the classroom and access some kind of safe space, or simply move about the hallway. Although atypical amongst the general population, stimming must be considered, and students should not be punished for behavior that is characteristic of their disorder. If neurotypical students find stimming behavior strange, then this characteristic of autism should be clearly explained, rather than stigmatized.

The Problem of Camouflaging

Some autistic individuals may mask, or "camouflage," their difficulties with communication amongst peers. In essence, these individuals are "in the closet," so to speak, about their status with ASD. While both males and females both may camouflage, autistic females are, on average, more likely to conceal their social difficulties (Lai et al., 2016). Camouflaging is directly associated with depression. In the interest of mental

health, there is a need for college students and faculty to be more open and accepting about ASD. Camouflaging is less common for individuals diagnosed in early childhood, and more common in late-diagnosed cases. Camouflaging has been described as "hiding behavior that might be viewed as socially unacceptable, or artificially 'performing' social behavior deemed to be more neurotypical" – in other words, pretending to be normal (Wiley, 1999).

Examples of camouflaging (Lai and Baron-Cohen, 2015) include:

- Making (possibly unwanted or stress-inducing) eye contact during conversation
- Using learned phrases or pre-prepared jokes in conversation
- Mimicking other's social behavior
- Imitating facial expressions or gestures
- Learning and following pre-defined social scripts

Camouflaging is a serious problem because it prevents family and educators from recognizing individuals on the spectrum, leading to late diagnosis and depression. In the interest of preventing depression, we must shed light on the problem of camouflaging. In some cases, even primary care providers fail to diagnose patients with ASD. At the academic level, there is a need for clinical awareness and interventional measurement. Neuroimaging measures are gaining traction towards the development of a neurocognitive phenotype of ASD (Lai et al., 2016). There are also developments of blood tests for diagnosing autism (Martialay, 2018). Diagnosis is essential for the welfare of students.

Camouflaging and Late-Diagnosis in Autistic Females

Due to the prevalence of camouflaging in females, the National Autistic Society of the European Union produced a female-centered documentary entitled *Autism In Pink* (2014). Psychologists currently face the challenge of developing and quantifying a female autism phenotype, which may have a specific neurocognitive basis, distinct from male autism. Bargiela et al. (2016) note a variety of problems leading to late diagnosis of ASD, especially in the case of late-diagnosed females:

- Friends, family, and educators may dismiss autism, leading to late diagnosis.

- Health professionals may make incorrect assumptions about autism (e.g. that it is a male-specific condition). The current male-to-female ratio in ASD is approximately 4 to 1 (Fombonne, 2009), not accounting for possible misdiagnosis/late diagnosis.

- Autistic students may go unnoticed or under-noticed in the classroom due to quietness or lack of eye contact.

- Instructors and professors may blame autistic students for non-neurotypical behavior or lack of comprehension.

- Autistic students may feel like they are "wearing a mask" when appearing in the classroom, possibly leading to clinical depression.

- Autistic students may be dependent on learning social behavior from TV, books, and magazines, thereby impeding the development of true self-identity and individuality.

- Autistic students may undergo societal pressures and have problems being assertive in the classroom.

- Autistic students may have difficulty forming friendships with neurotypical classmates.

- Autistic students may have "emotional meltdowns" at home, due to the stress of masking/camouflaging.

- Autistic students may be bullied, inside and outside the classroom.

- Autistic students may feel desperate for acceptance by neurotypical peers, while not attaining acceptance.

- Autistic students may feel uncomfortable with gender stereotypes, further complicating friendships.

- Autistic students may be overly dependent on online communication, because face-to-face communication is difficult.

- Autistic students, especially females, may become involved in abusive relationships and risky situations, even to the point of sexual abuse, due to perceived passivity.

The incidence of sexual abuse against autistic females is especially troubling. Within the research of Bargiela et al. (2016), 9 of the 14 autistic female participants experienced sexual abuse. Therefore, diagnosis, accommodation, and acceptance of autism is essential at the collegiate level, in order to ensure safety for all students. Due to the problems of late diagnosis, mandatory autism screening of all incoming college students may prove beneficial.

On a positive note, Webster and Garvis (2016) describe the experiences of autistic females who, despite being late-diagnosed, achieved success in adulthood by overcoming challenges. Such success stories include:

- Adult females with ASD developed the ability to bring about positive change.

- Adult females with ASD developed strategies to succeed in their coursework.

- Adult females with ASD participated in charity walks.

- Adult females with ASD escaped abusive relationships.

- Adult females with ASD succeeded based on the shared belief in their abilities.

- Adult females with ASD successfully charted their own career paths.

- Adult females with ASD became mentors to other autistic females.

Such success stories give hope for the lifelong potential of *all* autistic people, given the proper diagnosis, treatment, and accommodations.

Conclusion

It is clear that mass media, the tech industry, and academia have all taken a keen interest in ASD, due to its prevalence. Colleges have yet to implement best practices for autistic students. Further research is necessary. Further developments in accommodations are also needed to improve the retention crisis of autistic undergraduates. With informed understanding of ASD – both pedagogical and practical – we may form a cohesive community of highly talented autistic students of the arts. Due to the current research, as well as the current problems, now is the ideal time to define autism as artistic identity. The humanistic factions of academia must help transform autism from negative social limitation to positive artistic identity.

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