

# Introduction

Working With Students on the Autistic Spectrum at  
Portland State University

presented by:

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(with many thanks to Darcy Kramer for her collaboration on  
the initial outline and editing)

Special thanks to the Disability Advocacy Cultural Association

# Definitions

- Person first language
  - Person with a disability (not disabled person)
  - Autistic person (not person with autism)
- Pervasive Developmental Disorders (DSM)
  - Autistic Disorder
  - Asperger's Disorder
  - PDD - NOS
- Terms used in this talk
  - Autism / Autistic Spectrum
  - Intellectual Disability (not Mental Retardation)

# Perspectives on Disability

- **Socio-ecological Model**
  - Something is broken between the environment and the individual
  - Provide appropriate supports to remove the disability
- **Socio-ecological Model is the perspective taken for this talk**

# “Invisible Disabilities”

- Disabilities that are not physically apparent
- Invisibility can mean
  - Increased vulnerability
  - Skepticism about legitimacy
  - Increased chance of misunderstanding
- Autistic students are doubly vulnerable due to
  - Social and communication issues
  - Invisible nature of the disability
- You can help!

# Purpose

- Autistic people
  - Attend college
  - May or may not appear different
- This talk
  - How to understand, communicate, and work with people on the spectrum
- What is helpful to autistic students may apply to other students

# Outline

- What is Autism?
- Successful Interaction with Autistic Students
- Support for Students on the Spectrum
- Finding Common Ground
- Panel Discussion

# What Is Autism?

- Stereotypes
  - Catatonic child?
  - Super-powered genius?
  - Something in between?

# Autistic Intelligence

- IQ not always an accurate measure
  - Verbal and social issues may interfere
  - College educated, published authors: Donna Williams IQ 70, Lucy Blackman IQ 50
- Autistic people often have uneven skills
  - Dora has scores on both sides of the bell curve
- Learning styles may be unusual

# Whole People

- Autistic people are not empty or trapped
  - *“I'm always connected at the core and I never lose track of my own self. This is all I have that I can always count on, all I have that is truly my own.”* - Jim Sinclair
- Autistic people have emotions and relationships
  - Dora
    - Has intimate partner for 15 years
    - Has plenty of feelings and a sense of humour
    - Is definitely not unique in this!

# Autistics, Savants, and Autistic Savants

- Autism is not Savant Syndrome
  - “...*not all autistic persons are savants, and not all savants are autistic.*” - Darold A. Treffert, MD
    - Daniel Tammet is a savant
    - Dora Raymaker is not a savant

# Abilities and Disabilities

- Not all autistic people are good at (or even interested in) computers
  - Anything non-autistic people are good at may be what an autistic person is good at
- Disability is real
  - Disability may be invisible
  - Disabilities don't go away if you “just try harder”
  - Social awkwardness is not social impairment
  - There are no bonuses to disability

# Assumptions about Language

- Shared language
  - Verbal
    - Mode
    - Semantics and pragmatics
  - Non-verbal
    - Body language
    - Prosody
- Autism affects language use, both verbal and non-verbal

# Assumptions about Experience

- Shared experience
  - Similar perceptions
  - Similar motivations
  - Similar behaviors
- Autism affects experience, perceptions, motivations, and behavior

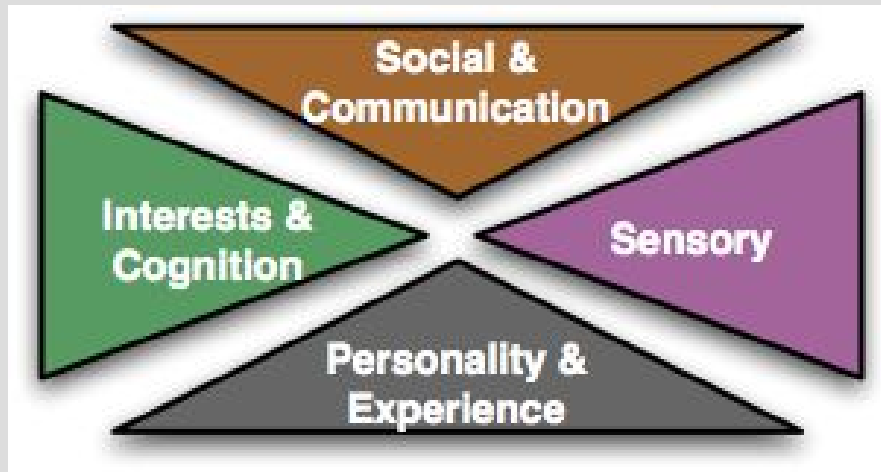
# Assumptions about Others

- Too little trust
  - Bullying
  - Misunderstanding
  - Miscommunication
- Too much trust
  - “Authority is always right”
  - Rules must be followed
- Assumptions can only work when applied in appropriate context!

# Ugg, Autism Is Confusing!

- Uneven Skills
- Variety of Traits
- Attempts to short cut understanding don't work well

# Back to Basics



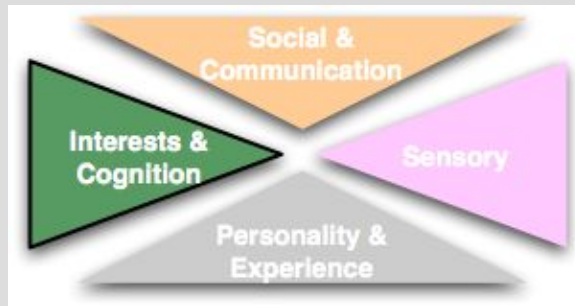
- Social and Communication Differences
- Interest and Cognitive Differences
- Sensory Differences
- Basic Human Differences, Unrelated to Autism

# Social and Communication Differences



- Social communication & social understanding
- Communication
  - Communication modes
  - Semantics and pragmatics
  - Non-verbal communication
- “Reading between the lines”
- Communication is effort
- Social desires

# Interest-related and Cognitive Differences



- Special interests
- Unusual topic or focus
- Routines
- Stereotyped behavior
- Executive function issues
- Self-care issues

# Sensory Differences



- Sensitivity
  - Hyper
  - Hypo
- Attentional processing related
- Mono-processing

# Personality and Experience



- Autistic people are people
  - Different personalities
  - Different likes and dislikes
  - Different skills and talents
  - Not related to autism!
  
- Autistic people have unique histories
  - Life experiences
  - Demographic
  - Education
  - Not related to autism!

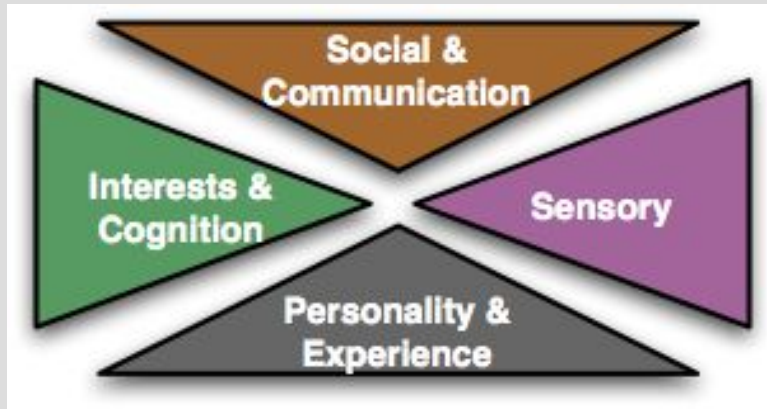
# Successful Interaction with Students on the Spectrum

- Knowing a student is on the spectrum
- Suspecting a student is on the spectrum
- When can you ask?
  - Legality of disclosure
  - Asking without asking

# Tools for Facilitating Successful Interaction

- Show respect
- Be flexible with communication modes
- Sensory-friendly environment
- Agendas in advance
- Warn of any changes
- Take student's word at face value
- Give student time to respond
- State emotions and needs explicitly
- Learn from mistakes
- Everyone is unique – *Ask!*

# Support for Students on the Spectrum



- Accommodations and support for
  - Social and communication needs
  - Interest and cognitive needs
  - Sensory needs
  - Other disabilities and general student needs

# Accommodations

- Accommodations
  - Are not special treatment
  - Do not give an advantage
  - Attempt to “level the field”
- Are required by law to prevent discrimination (504, ADA)
  - Are determined by negotiation
- Are part of our ethical responsibility to students

# Scope

- Scope of this talk
  - Accommodations PSU can provide
    - Academic
    - Student housing
    - Student services
  - Understanding accommodations
  - Accommodations given in practice

# Social Needs



- “Group work”
  - Facilitate
  - Drop
- Communicate expectations
- Class participation
  - Facilitate
  - Drop
- Making contributions

# Social and Communication Needs



- Accessing services
  - Understanding resources
    - How to access
    - What's available
    - Social barriers
    - Communication barriers
  - Don't make accommodations inaccessible!

# Communication Needs



- Be precise
  - Use nouns not pronouns
  - Take care with context
  - Specify format
  - Say what you mean
- Non-standard communication modes
  - Asynchronous
  - Speech devices
  - Only verbal
  - Non-verbal
- Time to process
- Don't overload the autie!

# Interests and Routines



- Consistent
  - Rooms and locations
  - Placement of objects
  - Course expectations
- Modification of assignments to hold interest
- Start of term may be hard
- Comfort items

# Cognitive Needs



- Organization
  - Schedules and planners
  - Syllabus
- Orientation
  - Maps
  - Directions
- Putting things in writing
- Computer for
  - Test taking
  - Note taking
  - All work

# Cognitive Needs



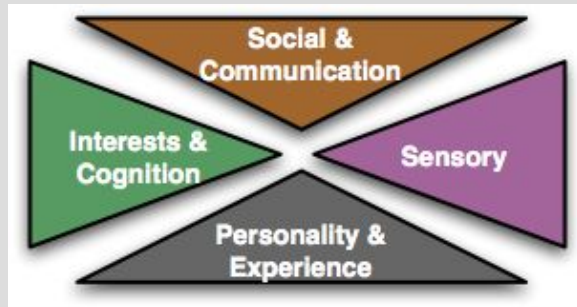
- Substituting requirements
  - Severe learning disabilities
  - Exceptional abilities
  - Inability to get accommodations

# Sensory Needs



- Testing accommodations
- In-class sensory items
- Recording devices
- Auditory processing
  - Interpreters
  - Closed captioning
  - Note takers
- Visual processing
  - Lighting
  - Verbal Instructions
- Exit classroom if overloading
- Seating arrangements

# Daily Living Needs



- Allow aid access
- Accessible locations
- Student housing
  - Private dorm room
  - Other needs
- Check-ins

# Supporting Other Disabilities

- Outside the scope of this talk, but some are common:
  - Specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dyscalcula)
  - Other neurological (ADD, OCD, epilepsy, agnosia)
  - Movement disabilities (apraxia, dyspraxia)
  - Mental health issues (anxiety, depression, PTSD)
- Other disabilities accommodated as appropriate
- Some autistic people don't need accommodations for their autism, but do need them for their other disabilities

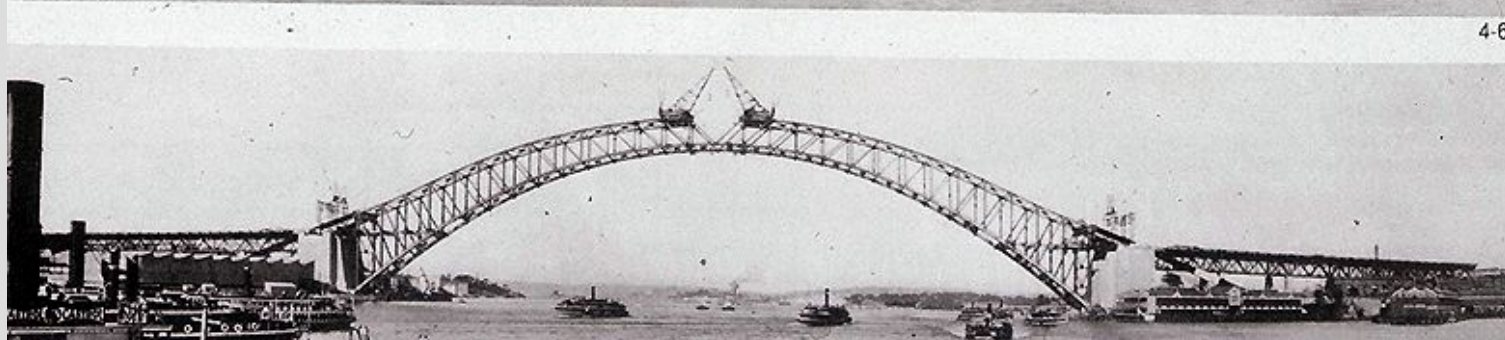
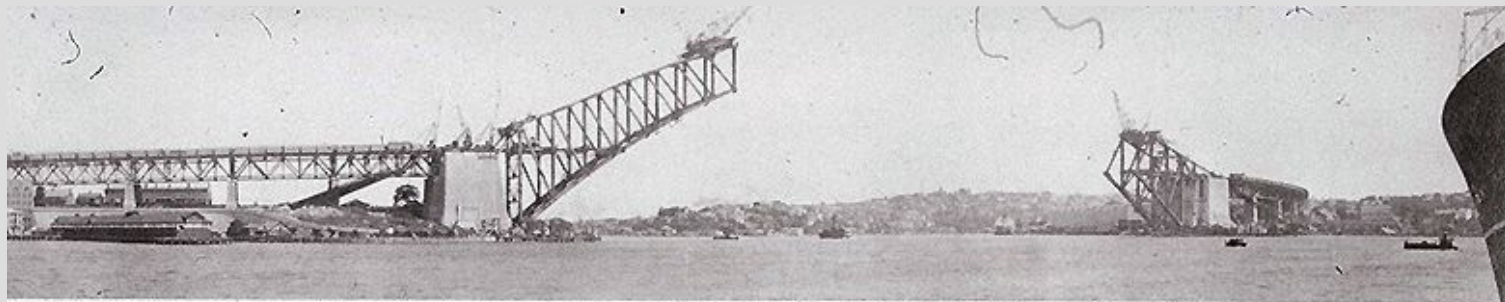
# Advocacy

- *Creating an **environment** that promotes student success ... a shared responsibility*
- Creating systems change and reducing student burden
- Even students with exceptional self-advocacy skills may need your help to succeed
  - Difficulty with social interactions
  - Difficulty with communication
  - Invisible disability

# Effectively Assisting and Advocating for Students

- Help others to understand autistic students
- Engage in creative problem solving
- Help create explicit rules and processes for self-advocacy
- Attend meetings with student to facilitate communication
- Connect students with peer mentors
- Provide more resources to support students with disabilities

# Finding Common Ground



# Reciprocity

- Communication requires more than one person
- "*Reciprocity needs to be mutual and symmetrical--...reciprocity is a two-way street.*" -Morton Ann Gernsbacher
- Learning to take an autistic perspective is possible and necessary

# Perspective Taking and Empathy

- Rudeness may be directness
- Lack of eye contact may be dislike of eye contact
- Fidgeting may be an attention or focus aid, stress relief, or mean nothing at all
- Email may be the only way communication is possible
- A meltdown is a reaction to excessive stress
- Sometimes, a pipe really is a pipe :-)

# Work With Us

- Meet us half way.
- Be patient. Keep an open mind. Assume nothing.
- If you find autistic students hard to work with, refer us to someone who doesn't.
- If you don't know, or you don't understand, just ask.

# Thank You

- 5 Minute break
- Panel Discussion
- Contact information:
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# Panel Discussion

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Accommodations Coordinator, Disability Resource Center
- **Mary Shivell, MS, CRC**  
Adjunct Faculty, Rehabilitation Counselor Education Program, PSU and  
OVRB Branch Manager/Counselor
- **Dora Raymaker, BFA**  
MS Candidate Systems Science / Computer Science and Autistic Self-  
Advocate
- **Katie McDonald, PhD.**  
Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology
- **Jody Ramey, MA**  
Author, *Autistics' Guide to Dating*, and Autism Advocate