

Personal statements: helping transition to further education and employment

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Editorial comment

Nicki Martin is Principal Lecturer in Inclusive Practice at Sheffield Hallam University. In this paper, she describes how students with ASD create personal statements to give details of their likes and dislikes to pass on to people who they meet in the course of their work within college or university. She argues that first impressions for us all are very important and that these statements aim to prevent misunderstandings and difficulties that might arise when other people misinterpret behaviour and help others to include students with ASD in their everyday activities.

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Acknowledgements

To the students I have had the pleasure to work with in further and higher education.

Introduction: first impressions

The luxury of having a second chance to make a first impression is something that is not afforded to any of us. For people who have Asperger syndrome (AS), what other people think about them can be a cause of great concern and the skills required to come across immediately as friendly, cool and in control may not come easily, particularly in unfamiliar situations. Assistance to make a good impression when meeting new people in anxiety-provoking and novel contexts – such as the first day at work, college or university – may alleviate some longer term difficulties around social inclusion in these tricky environments. Ideas presented here are put forward not as a universal panacea but may be useful to some individuals.

Familiarisation activities

People with AS and their families and practitioners are usually acutely aware of the requirement to take steps to smooth the transition from familiar to unfamiliar environments (Breakey, 2006; Lawson, 2006). Moves from school to college or university, or into employment, represent major upheavals in the life of an adult with AS (Attwood, 1998; Howlin, 1997; Martin, 2005; Mawhood and Howlin, 1999; Meyers, 2001). Peer relationships at such times are clearly important as they can share experiences and support one another. However, prior experiences of isolation and bullying are often part of the life history of an individual with AS (Grandin and Johnson, 2005; PJ, 2007). Lack of social experience and anxiety about the physical, sensory and practical aspects of

any new situation can add to feelings of trepidation (Beardon, 2002; Bogdashina, 2006; Mitchell et al, 2007). Imagining new situations by reflecting on past experiences is difficult for an individual with AS. Having little idea what the new environment might be like will be unsettling. (Mitchell et al, 2007). In addition, concern about being viewed as an autism stereotype, as in the film *Rain Man* or in the book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*, (Haddon, 2005), may make things a lot worse (Martin, 2006).

Facilitating opportunities to visit and become familiar with the environment is relatively easy in college or university, but may be more difficult in the workplace. Careful transition planning in educational contexts may involve getting to know the environment physically via campus tours, spending time in the library and eating in the establishment's food outlets (Breakey, 2006). Campuses are generally open over the summer so this takes little organising. Meeting staff before starting in September can be really helpful, particularly if a prior discussion has been arranged to formulate a few questions and the individual with AS is supported by someone with the sensitivity not to take over. Freshers' week at university will require careful navigation and assistance to deal with what may be an overwhelming sensory experience. It can really help an individual with AS to join clubs and societies that may prove to be the key to their social inclusion in the long term (Martin, 2006).

Ensuring that individualised and appropriate support arrangements are in place from day one, following a

careful transition stage designed to increase familiarisation and confidence, is clearly possible within college and university and should be the standard to which institutions aspire (Goode, 2007; Martin, 2006).

Transition out is as important as transition in (Martin, 2006). Developing employability skills while still in education to facilitate progress into the world of work, with assistance if necessary, is clearly important for a student with AS. Educational establishments need to take on board the particular requirements of individuals with AS when thinking about careers advice. Effective work placements, which allow the individual and others to reflect on where their talents lie and support with the application and interview process, are clearly essential components of the development of employability. When work has been secured, activities to develop confidence in the contexts, prior to starting, could mirror those described in relation to familiarisation with college or university. The question is which would be the appropriate agency to deliver such a service? There are one or two employment support schemes such as Prospects run by the NAS in London; Aspire run by autism.west midlands and Employment for Autism in Belfast but the demand for support in these areas and the rest of the UK is far higher than can be met both for young people leaving school or college and older adults.

Sharing information

The idea of helping an individual with AS to create a short statement to share with a particular audience has been trialled in further and higher education contexts with very small numbers of students (two in each setting, three male, one female, all in their early twenties). No real feedback is available because the majority of students chose not to disseminate the document. One male university student felt more comfortable simply by writing the statement and chose not to share it with peers. A female FE student asked that her tutor keep the information for later distribution should she choose (which she did not). A male FE student reported that he felt happier having had his tutor give out the statement to his group and a male HE student who formulated a statement this summer has yet to decide. The aim of the statement is to present straightforward information that explains aspects of the behaviour of the individual with AS. It may be that the work of thinking about what to write acts as a confidence booster in itself. Clearly, the impetus to generate such a document must come from the person with AS, without coercion, and there is an obvious risk inherent in the strategy. Once information is out there, it is out

there and it is not always possible to predict how people will react.

An example of the sort of statement that may be helpful follows. The context is higher education but this can be adapted to other environments. Formulating such a document would need to be part of a careful process of transition planning. Working on a statement in advance of the transition and/or holding on to it to allow the student (or new employee) time to change their mind is recommended and the temptation to think that the work is wasted if it is not shared should be avoided.

Hypothetical sample statement

- **About me**

My name is Paul and I am in your tutor group for computer programming. I expect I come across as very shy to you and in a way I am. I have Asperger syndrome and this makes it difficult for me to be confident socially. I am a bit concerned that you will think I am being unfriendly. I'm not, I just feel really awkward with people until I get to know them. I hope you don't think it's too unusual for me to put all this in writing. It's just my attempt to get to know people. I have had the experience of being left out in the past and I am trying to avoid this happening again because I really want to have a good time at university.

- **My likes**

- o computers
- o films
- o pizza
- o Arctic Monkeys
- o going for coffee with one or two people
- o probably other things I have not yet discovered

- **My dislikes**

- o noisy crowded places
- o unreliable people
- o sudden changes I am not expecting
- o new, unpredictable situations
- o lack of clarity
- o being compared to the boy in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*. – I'm 20 and not all that good at maths

- **Please**

- o Ask me along when you go for coffee.
- o Understand that I find it difficult if

arrangements are unclear or change suddenly so please be reliable.

- o Say things clearly, like 'Do you want to come to the Globe pub at six o'clock tonight with Mike and me? We will make sure you get on the right bus home.'*
- o Avoid ambiguous things like 'Maybe we'll go drinking later'. I don't know whether this is an invitation or not.*
- o Keep in contact with me by e-mail*
- **What's in it for you?**
 - o When you get to know me you will find that I am a good laugh.*
 - o I am a very reliable friend.*
 - o I am very good at computer programming so might be able to help you.*
- **Trust**
 - o Please don't share this information with anyone outside the group because I want to keep control of who I tell.*
- **Questions**
 - o If you have got any questions please e-mail me.*

Thank you for taking the time to read this. Please invite me for coffee. I am keen to get to know you.

Best wishes

Paul

Dealing with feedback

The recommendation in Paul's statement about answering questions via email is based on the growing trend towards online communication, which may well be more comfortable for some people with AS. If the statement is distributed, responses may need to be monitored and any hint of negative feedback addressed as bullying. This would clearly be easier to do in college or university than in the workplace.

Maintaining control

Ensuring that any statement represents the authentic voice of the individual with AS rather than their parent or a well-meaning professional is essential. The question of who would be the most suitable person to facilitate this process is complex. Someone with an understanding of the context, an awareness of AS and who has probably not known the student/employee since childhood would probably be best. It is difficult

to avoid the temptation to reflect on childhood behaviours if that information is available and this can make it hard for the person with AS to leave behind painful baggage. Allowing a gap between the production of the document and its distribution provides crucial time for reflection. If the person with AS does not want to go any further than writing it, that is their choice and they will have been given the space to think about what it is they want from peers, tutors and colleagues.

Health warning

Individuality cannot be over emphasised and not everyone is comfortable with discussing AS. Bringing this idea up with someone who is trying hard to fit in on their own terms could do more harm than good. Templates are to be avoided at all costs because of the danger of perpetuating stereotypes. It is not necessary to bring up old patterns of behaviours in the development of this information. It is not relevant to mention a catalogue of past behaviours that may challenge others. There is such a thing as too much information. There is such a thing as a clean slate.

Concluding comments

People with AS contribute their own uniqueness to college, university and work. Underpinning the ideas described here is the notion of valuing people as they are and encouraging people to value themselves as they are, rather than those with AS trying to change in order to fit in with everyone else. Neurotypical individuals could be given the opportunity to flex their empathy muscles, to value diversity and to be more inclusive.

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