

# My Semester with an Asperger Syndrome Student

**By Stephen A. Yoder**

*I am not a psychologist or otherwise qualified to say for certain that “Fred,” the name I am using as a pseudonym for one of my students, has Asperger Syndrome. He never identified himself as such, or sought any accommodation. I have not even been a teacher that long, having recently become an assistant professor after a 30-year career in the business world. Before meeting Fred, I had, however, read media coverage of the seemingly swift rise in the reported incidence of autism-related disorders, including the controversy over whether the phenomenon was related to childhood vaccinations. After meeting Fred, I took it upon myself to do some reading. From that reading, and from my four months of interaction with Fred, I feel comfortable that my lay diagnosis has at least some accuracy.*

## **Week One**

I completely miss the first clue that something is different about “Fred” during the first class of the semester in an undergraduate business school class: the white mesh gloves he wears throughout class. I do not even notice when he comes up after class and fires off several questions. He is a bulky young man, in his 20s, with shaggy light brown hair and wearing all gray including a gray ski jacket.

I do take notice the very next day, however, when I log on to the Blackboard site for the class and see that a student has sent me five or six e-mail messages in rapid succession following class the evening before. I usually receive only one or two e-mail messages a day from students for this class, and rarely so early in the semester and not related to an examination.

I answer the first two or so questions, with responses like “no, but see page \_\_\_ of the textbook.” By the third question, however, I respond back, “Fred, you can get the answers to these questions yourself by reading the book and you should not be sending me questions unless you cannot find the answer there.” His response: a quiet, “OK.”

That same day, I start some research. First, I consult my department chair, who refers me to a seasoned professor in the same department. He tells me that Fred had enrolled 10 years or so before, and is coded “SP” rather than “FR”, “SO”, “JR” or “SR.” Several weeks later, I would use online faculty resources to check Fred’s record myself and see that “SP” apparently stands for “Special Non-degree Low GPA.” My colleague volunteers that the university likely would not admit someone like Fred today, referring him instead to a community college. My department colleague also tells me that Fred has taken my course before. That night, thinking that Fred seems to fit the profile of someone with autism and Asperger Syndrome, I start surfing the Web for information on those topics.

The next day is an office hours day. As an adjunct professor, I hold my office hours in the student lounge, bustling with other students, and located at the entrance of the school. Fred is waiting for me and holds the front door open for me. His gloved hand holds a print-out of the first class’s slides, about 15 pages’ worth. While normally such a stack of paper might be about 1/16-inch thick, Fred’s stack is a fluffy one-inch tall, full of pencil marks and several highlight colors and obviously well-thumbed.

Fred wants to review most of the slides but mainly wants me to repeat back to him the points made in the slides. I recall the word I had learned from my Internet surfing on Aspergers the night before: “echolaic.” Several times, he says things like, “I already knew that.” If he ever makes eye contact with me, I do not see it.

During this first “office” visit, Fred is clearly pleased with the results of the online extra credit assessment for the first chapter. In an effort to encourage students to review course material immediately after class, I make

available on Blackboard, for 48 hours after each class, an online test consisting of five true-false or multiple choice questions on the chapter just completed. If every single extra credit assessment is taken and every single question answered correctly, a student can raise his or her final grade by ten percentage points. The catch is that a student must attend at least 75 percent of the classes to get the credit.

Fred has gotten four out of five correct on the first assessment and wants to make sure that I know that. I say, "Good work!." His response is no response – he just moves on to his next clarifying question. After 30 minutes or so, I tell him I think we are done and that others ought to have a chance to ask questions. He looks quickly around the room to see if anyone else from the class is waiting, and quickly jumps up and says "OK." I notice in class that evening that he has not signed the seating chart I pass around, but had sat in the same seat as he had in the first class: front left corner several seats removed from the next student.

## **Week Two**

In the weekend following the first class I do more reading, including checking out of the library Ann Palmer's *Realizing the College Dream with Autism or Asperger Syndrome* (2006). This is an excellent resource for confirming Fred's symptoms but is clearly aimed more at parents than teachers. One helpful anecdote is the author describing how her son, who is autistic, had received a D+ in a college course for which he needed to earn at least a C-. The professor had turned down a request for extra credit because the student seemed disinterested during the course term.

Fred asks one question after the next class. His reaction to my answer is that he "already knew that." Coincidentally, after that same class another student hands me an official disability accommodation form, advising me that she might need to get up and leave during classes, might need more time to take exams and might need a peer note-taker. I wonder if Fred would benefit from such accommodations.

Fred sends off three e-mail questions after class, either not requiring a response or at most requiring a response of "That's right."

During office hours that week, he finds me quickly and we review the class slides. Taking a verbal cue from me that we were about done after reviewing each and every slide, he quickly stands up and leaves the table. Later, I pass him in the computer lab, ski jacketed and gloved, staring at the next class's slides just a few inches from the PC monitor.

## **Week Three**

In the previous two weeks, I had posted my class slides on Blackboard several days in advance. I fail to get the slides up by 24 hours before a class this week, however, and Fred calls that to my attention by e-mail. He also wants me to recognize that he had scored a 100 percent on an extra credit assessment.

## **Week Four**

I am not able to have in-person office hours this week, so I experiment with the real-time "Chatboard" feature of Blackboard. There is only one student online, Fred.

## **Week Five**

This is the week of the first exam. Fred has more than his usual four or five e-mail messages that week in advance of the exam, asking questions like "What do I need to know about...?"

After the exam, for which I use a Scantron form, I can pick Fred's form out of the other forms even if he had not put his name it, because he has darkened the answer bubbles with ferocity. With trepidation, I immediately

run the forms through the scoring machine after class. My heart sinks when his form zips through with a score of 66.

### **Week Six**

During office hours in the student lounge, Fred is not the first to see me. However, after spending 30 minutes or so with two other students I notice out of the corner of my eye that he is sitting behind me about two feet away, and facing away, listening intently to my conversations with the other students. When it is Fred's turn, he wants to review his exam. He is clearly disappointed in his results, but brightens when I note that he has gotten all of the questions right on a particular topic. I ask him what he had done differently on that chapter, and he seems puzzled. Still, it gives me something positive to talk about with him.

It is shortly after this session that I notice that his student record has a notation of "Low GPA."

### **Weeks Seven and Eight**

I am still receiving about 15 e-mails per week from Fred. Most do not require a response, or are in the nature of "What do I need to know about..." He does not participate in the second Chatboard substitute for office hours.

### **Week Nine**

Fred greets me at the front door of the school for office hours this week, immediately before the second exam, but tells me that he does not have any questions for me "right away." He sits a few feet away from me while I talk to other students. I notice that he is reading a review book for the professional examination offered in the subject of the course, in preparation for the second exam.

I am relieved to see that he scores a 74 on the second exam. Perhaps not surprisingly, he does not miss the same questions most often missed by the other students. Even as a new teacher, I know how predictable it is that the same questions will be missed most often, even in different classes taking the same exam. When I do not have the results posted as quickly as I did for the first exam, Fred asks me via e-mail when I will have them posted.

After the results are posted, Fred immediately advises me that his average is now a 70, and asks me what he can be doing over Spring break to prepare for the classes after the break. This saddens me to think that he does not see the vacation as a respite but rather as an annoying deviation in routine.

### **Week Ten**

I read *Thinking in Pictures* by Temple Grandin, a Ph.D in animal science, who is autistic but also a recognized expert on livestock behavior and facility design. I wonder if my use of pictures and other visuals are helpful to Fred. Grandin's book is inspirational but a bit depressing in its coverage of most of the author's experiences as a student.

### **Week Eleven**

Fred sends me a reminder e-mail that the slides for a particular class are not ready when they normally are. During office hours, he sits close by while I talk to a spirited student about a wide variety of topics some of which are not related to the class. He pronounces the student preceding him a "piece of work." He also is perplexed by a prior class's discussion involving a gay man serving as a dressing room attendant at a women's undergarment apparel chain. I detect both some hostility as well as puzzlement.

### **Week Twelve**

In e-mails, Fred seems to challenge the answers to several of the extra credit assessments that he gets wrong. He defiantly asks how he was “supposed to know” the meaning of a word (“adjudicate”) that I had not defined. I wonder what the reason for his irritability is.

I catch a teaser on a morning news program on autism in college. The program describes [a program at Marshall University](#) for students with Asperger Syndrome and an organization called [Higher Education and Autism Spectrum Disorders](#), dealing with all aspects surrounding the experience for students with autism spectrum disorders in higher education.

### **Weeks Thirteen and Fourteen**

I get a reminder from Fred when I am late in posting class slides, although one other student also does so. He scores a 100 percent on an extra credit assessment and I say “Great work!” in an e-mail to him. During office hours, he asks me if on the final exam I will test on a concept that is taught at the post-bachelor degree level only, and I say simply, “No,” and he moves on. Mentally, I am trying to remember the concept myself.

### **Last Week of Class and Final Exam**

Fred has his usual questions during office hours, based on well-worn copies of class slides. He tells me that he has gone to a government agency Web site to do his own reading, even though I had never suggested doing so. He also tells me that his “advisor” had given him a particular piece of advice about test-taking. Intrigued, I ask him the name of his advisor. I consider calling the advisor, but decide to wait to see what Fred’s final grade turns out to be. I look him up and see that he is a “general studies” advisor.

I am out of town for the final exam, given in the late afternoon during finals week, and have it proctored by a student assistant. At 8:44 am the following morning I have an e-mail from Fred asking me when the results of the exam will be available.

After returning from out of town, I gather up the exams and head toward the Scantron machine, with Fred’s grade top of mind. Again, I notice that his form is heavily marked. I am somewhat relieved to see that his score is 75. I head to my office to see how the math works out after taking into account his 7.9 extra credit assessment points. With those points, Fred’s final grade works out to be ... 80, a B.

### **Lessons Learned and Observations – About Fred**

- ▀ Asperger individuals often are sensitive to touch and wear loose-fitting clothing. Fred never did take off his gloves or jacket in my presence.
- ▀ Fred did not tolerate changes in routine, including last-minute posting of class slides, another classic Asperger symptom.
- ▀ He did not want confrontation, even if his tone or behavior might indicate otherwise.
- ▀ Fred wanted to be treated like every other student. Hence, my decisions not to ask him if he has Asperger and never to let on to him that I knew this was his second shot at the course were probably wise decisions.
- ▀ Fred never indicated that he “thought in pictures” or otherwise relied on my pictures and other visuals to remember the material. During office hours, however, he did recall my examples used during class.
- ▀ The extra credit assessments were a benefit to Fred, I believe. He could take them anonymously immediately after class (indeed, I suspect he raced to the computer lab immediately after class, because he never asked another question following class, after the second class). He scored better on these exams than he did on the regular exams, thereby

boosting his grade from a C to a B. The exams' immediate testing of materials covered just hours or even minutes before might have appealed to his desire to echo back what he has learned.

- ▀ Individuals like Fred crave clarification. His questions constantly sought the key to his knowing the right answers. Even his last e-mail to me upon reading his final grade and my congratulatory note revealed his desire for certainty: "It looks like I got 75% on exam 3 and a B for the class?" My response: "That's correct – good work! "
- ▀ And one more thing: Fred had perfect attendance.

### **Lessons Learned and Observations – About the Teacher**

My experience demonstrated several limitations we as teachers face with learning disabled students: lack of knowledge about the disability itself; restraints arising from privacy rules; and lack of time to fully meet the student's needs.

Fred's failure to self-identify his condition put me in an uncomfortable box: Asking him about his situation would mean offending him and violating his privacy, but not asking him would also mean not being able to direct him resources that might help him.

We all must make adjustments for our students' particular needs in each class. Just as an eager non-English speaking student in the front row makes us realize that we cannot use too many colloquialisms and local examples, so too did I realize that much of what Fred needed was simple repetition of key concepts.

If the incidence of autism is indeed rising, all college teachers might need to learn to make adjustments for these students, who undoubtedly will seek higher education.

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Stephen A. Yoder is an assistant professor at a research university.

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at  
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