

Neurodivergence Welcome Here

Elizabeth Norell

University of Mississippi

A week before I met my night-class students one spring, I'd gotten a diagnosis that would change the way I think about myself. I had been struggling for years to decode the directions of my dean, who wanted me to update her about my collaborations with others on campus in ways I couldn't decipher. "Use your professional judgment," she would say to me—but what did that mean? I never figured it out. After years of unsuccessful attempts to do so, I was finally able to name my struggles as autism. During the diagnostic process, I'd been reading about spectrum behaviors and tendencies, reconciling the stereotypes about autism I'd always held with the diversity of ways the condition shows up in adults, especially women. Getting my diagnosis helped me navigate my professional life more effectively—and it powerfully changed my relationships with my students.

For years, I'd seen teachers problematize classroom behaviors they saw as "disruptive." A student getting out of their chair in the middle of class was disruptive. Speaking loudly, disruptive. Not being able to sit still, disruptive. Classroom-management workshops often offer advice on how to handle the eager student who wants to be the first to answer every question. These behaviors were meant to be controlled, tamped down, removed from the learning environment. In my own teaching, I'd replicated this draconian system of classroom management. I discouraged—through nonverbal communication, mostly, but when that failed, with private reprimands—behavior that might disrupt other students. I justified this command-and-control mindset by telling myself I was merely protecting the other students in the room who deserved

to have an undisturbed learning environment. In trying to balance inclusion, I now see, the neurotypicals won.

I was an entirely different teacher walking into that night class a week after getting a formal diagnosis. Parker Palmer tells us that “we teach who we are” (Palmer 2007); the corollary is that when we know ourselves better, we teach differently. The ways my teaching changed were subtle, but they were instrumental in welcoming a student whom higher education was at higher risk of failing.

I’ll call this student “Simon.” Simon behaved in ways that might be characterized as disruptive or disrespectful by some instructors. For example, Simon liked to get up and pace around the room a bit during class. A class that meets for two-and-a-half hours once weekly is hard for anyone, even with a break midway through; I had always been forgiving of those who needed to leave to use the restroom or take a break. Simon’s behavior wasn’t that. He just needed to move.

This is common among neurodivergent students, particularly those with ADHD and autism. Repetitive or frequent movements help focus a neurodivergent brain. What’s more, research suggests that repetitive movements can improve learning and memory for everyone (Hrach 2021; Paul 2021). Some students learn how to exercise their impulses in what feel like less-obvious ways, engaging in what is often called “masking” (Miller & Pearson 2021). But this comes at a cost to the student’s underlying cognitive bandwidth, reducing their ability to pay attention and learn.

Simon’s tendency to pace never especially bothered me, so I chose not to acknowledge it. When he immediately jumped into the fray after I’d asked a question or couldn’t contain his

enthusiasm to offer an example of something, I gave him space to share a few thoughts and then gently asked if we could chat privately after class about that more.

At the end of the semester, Simon lingered after we'd concluded our final class meeting. A small circle of students had gathered at the front of our classroom, not quite ready to say our final goodbyes to the community we'd built together. I mentioned I was available for hugs if anyone wanted one. Simon demurred, but he said, "This semester has been the worst of my life, but this class was the only place where I felt like I could be myself." He wasn't an especially emotional student in class, and making this admission seemed to break through that stoicism. I expressed my appreciation for his enthusiasm and engagement. I told him I thought he had contributed a lot and had smart things to say. "You think I'm smart?" he asked incredulously. "One hundred percent," I replied. At that point, he shrugged and said, "I guess I'll take that hug."

A week later, I was reading the students' final assignments when I came across "Emily's" reflection. About midway through reflecting on what she'd learned in the class, Emily paused to share that she'd been annoyed by Simon's behaviors at the start of the semester—that she kept waiting for me to tell him to settle down and stop the disruptions. She couldn't figure out why I never did. Then, as the semester progressed, she started questioning why she was so bothered by Simon's behavior. Emily observed that he wasn't doing anything wrong. That's when Emily said she realized she learned something I'd never explicitly intended to teach—that, when possible, it's okay to just let students be themselves. As an aspiring teacher herself, Emily said she hoped she would be as understanding of her students as she'd seen me be with Simon.

The entire semester reinforced for me the importance of observing student behavior without jumping to judgment. About 15-20 percent of our students have some sort of mental health diagnosis or disability, and many more have mental health or disabling conditions without having an official diagnosis. As faculty with positional power, we can change entire cultures

around neurodivergent inclusion simply by relaxing our insistence on subdued classrooms. Simon taught me that we must allow students to behave authentically, interrogate our assumptions around their motivations, and acknowledge that what looks like disrespect may have nothing to do with us or our teaching at all.

References

- Hrach, S. (2021). *Minding bodies: How physical space, sensation, and movement affect learning*. West Virginia University Press.
- Miller, D., Rees, J., & Pearson, A. (2021). "Masking Is Life": Experiences of masking in autistic and nonautistic adults. *Autism in Adulthood: Challenges and Management*, 3(4), 330–338. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0083>
- Murphy Paul, A. (2001). *The extended mind: The power of thinking outside the brain*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Palmer, P. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life* (10th ed.). Jossey-Bass.