Neurodivergent and Teaching in the Time of Covid-19

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Vignette

In Fall 2019, I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and later autism spectrum disorder (ASD). I was 38 and these diagnoses shook the foundation of my entire life. I was immediately forced to confront how I had struggled and how much I had adapted over the course of my life and teaching career.

For example, in faculty meetings, I could take copious notes on everything discussed but then read them with only confusion as to their sense and possible application. If multiple tasks were being discussed for a project, I would zero in on a single task at the cost of failing to look at the bigger picture.

The same went for lifelong problems with interpersonal communication, which I was able to magically hide while in "teacher mode." This was a result of decades of masking, a technique neurodivergent people use to appear as "normal" and be able to fit in to an environment while pushing down impulses, stimming, or other coping mechanisms (Green et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2021; Pearson & Rose, 2021). Even under normal circumstances, masking consumes a lot of mental and emotional energy, which can result in communication breakdowns or emotional meltdowns in other aspects of life. Then, just as I was beginning to understand how to readjust to my life and my own world post-diagnosis, the rest of the world changed.

In Spring 2020, universities scrambled to adjust to COVID-19 restrictions. For my university, this meant moving everything and everyone online. Despite having no experience teaching online, I was tasked with creating a demo lesson for carrying out English Discussion classes online as well as with helping fellow instructors best meet the needs of students in an online learning environment. At the same time, I also had to meet my own needs. During the spring semester of 2020, I continued going to campus and teaching my classes online from my office in order to maintain a semblance of a routine. This helped me control at least one aspect of an otherwise uncontrollable situation.

However, in the fall of 2020, I chose to teach online from home and experienced the challenges of shifting focus from work to leisure and back again. I began understanding the importance of boundaries and setting limits on work. Keeping work exclusively on my laptop and leisure exclusively on a tablet device separated the two worlds. I also learned time management techniques to help me shift into "teaching mode" effectively. This included setting 10-minute-warning alarms before lessons so that I could transition into work mode and begin lessons on time.

Spring 2021, and, most recently, Fall 2021, began face-to-face and then shifted to online and back again respectively. This further challenged my ability to adjust from one environment to another, keep faculty informed of changes, and reacclimate myself to the physical classroom. Additionally, I had to discover how best to build rapport with students with so many restrictions in place.

What helped me most in all the shifting teaching environments were three personal and professional reminders: clearly identifying my organizational and planning styles, setting clear boundaries between work time and personal time, and self-advocating.

Objectives

- To highlight areas of understanding, adjustment, and self-advocacy for neurodivergent faculty.
- To inform university instructors staff reading this article of ways to understand and support neurodivergent instructors in professional situations.

Practical Implications

Clearly identify organizational and planning styles.

From the experience described above, I found that the best way for me to plan a course was to make a table that contains all the lessons, topics, materials I will need, materials students will need, and homework to be assigned. For individual

lessons, since going online and now back to face to face, I used the lesson's PowerPoint as my lesson plan. While teaching, I kept a notebook and took manual notes of attendance and reflection-in-action moments. For administrative tasks, I kept ongoing lists using Google Tasks. These styles worked for me, and I understood them thoroughly. Yours may be very different. The key is being aware of them and how they best serve you.

Set clear boundaries between working time and personal time.

Task switching and time management have always been a challenge for me and others with ADHD and ASD (Adamou et al., 2013), and since my diagnoses I have tried different strategies. One quick way to do this was to adjust smartphone notification settings so that I had more control over when and how I received them. On committees, I clearly tried to communicate the times I was available and unavailable outside of my teaching schedule, and I valued my personal time away from work. This was easier said than done, but it sometimes helped minimize meltdowns later.

Self-advocate.

Just as it was important for me to be clear about my work approach and work time, it was also important for me to be clear about how my work could better accommodate me (Ohl et al., 2017). Emphasizing personal difficulty with completing tasks without an exact deadline, or a clear breakdown of duties, brought attention to colleagues and demonstrated I did not want to negatively affect the task or project. It also informed colleagues to improve their explanations of tasks or assignments. However, although I have become comfortable sharing my disorders with others as necessary, at no point is anyone necessarily required to disclose their disorder(s). That is a personal choice.

Reflective Conclusion

For fellow neurodivergent colleagues, I hope my experiences and approaches to organization, work style, and communication show that it is more important than ever to identify ways you can maintain your comfort in teaching and professional environments. I hope this can also help foster faculty support.

It is very difficult to go back to the way I taught and interacted pre-diagnoses, and in more ways than one this "new normal" continues to bring about unexpected challenges. For the benefit of all teachers, especially diagnosed or undiagnosed neurodivergent educators, we first need to validate the difficulty and discomfort of these upheavals. The upheavals have also created a chance to continue understanding our approach to work, boundaries, and communication with others.

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Link to Presentation on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=309_ql7zZVY