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Educators with Asperger's Syndrome: An Interview with Professor Gundy Kaupins on Teaching Challenges, Solutions, and Advantages

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Very little is known on the subject of instructors with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), and the available information pales in comparison to the enormous literature studying students with AS. In this article, Professor Gundy Kaupins shares his thoughts and experiences related to the issues educators with AS face and offers an alternative lens to see the advantages that having AS can bring to the management education classroom. Professor Kaupins also offers ideas for behavioral solutions and considerations for future research. We finish with a commentary on the individual and institutional issues pertaining to disclosure of ‘differences’ and invisible disability in the university classroom.

Keywords: Asperger’s syndrome, autism, invisible disability, management education

As management educators, we strive to create learning environments that enrich students’ lives and nurture future professional relationships. Creating such learning environments requires an acquired set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that demand considerable effort from both the educator and the student. However, this effort can be even more challenging when the educator has Asperger’s Syndrome (AS). AS is a functional level of autism spectrum disorder in which affected individuals display impaired social interaction, unusual special interests, and ritualized behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2013). The syndrome affects how a person makes sense of his or her social world and relates to people. It can manifest as the inability to correctly identify other people’s feelings which is often perceived by others as reduced empathy. Some other indicators can include lack of eye contact, monotone voice, and motor skill problems.

A literature search on AS in education environments suggests there is a robust stream of research on the difficulties students face, such as handling the interpersonal aspects of doing group projects (Brown & Wolf, 2014) and the relational and person-environment interaction stresses they face (Glennon, 2001). However, there is little in the way of guidance or insights about educators with AS. The expression of AS behaviors in a learning environment can present issues for management educators, as the role requires a high level of social and interpersonal interaction with students and colleagues. Interestingly, AS is often perceived as a disability, hindering the effectiveness of those who have the syndrome; however in academe it can potentially be a gift (Basden, 2014).

Over the years, The *Journal of Management Education* (JME) has been an industrious advocate for the importance of engaged learning practices, and the associated requirement for educators to model effective interpersonal processes (e.g. Bigelow, Seltzer, van Buskirk, Hall, Schor, Garcia & Keleman, 1999; Miller, 2017; Nurick, 1998). As ‘difference’ in learning and education gains prominence in the way we experience diverse student needs (e.g. Tomlinson, 2014), we also need to be mindful of diverse faculty orientations toward teaching. The JME editors wanted to learn more about how AS affects the implementation of engaged learning practices, with the view to exploring some of the teaching challenges educators with AS face and ideas to overcome those challenges. I spoke with Professor Gundars (Gundy) Kaupins from Boise State University to help readers understand AS and to discuss some solutions that might help others improve their teaching practices. Professor Kaupins was recently diagnosed with AS and has spent considerable time and energy reflecting on how the syndrome affects and influences his teaching, and the relationships he has with students. He is a professor and former department chair of management at Boise State University. Professor Kaupins’ work includes 80 journal articles, three books, and 250 other publications in job evaluation, training and development, Baltic studies, and human resource ethics. He has supervised over 800 internships and has helped write over 600 employee handbooks with his students.

Professor Kaupins shared his thoughts and ideas with me in a recent interview about AS in the professoriate. After our discussion, we share research findings from other contexts that inform our understanding of AS in management education. We also share resources and further research that interested readers can explore for further information on this topic.

Interview

Sarah Wright (SW): *Tell me about how you were diagnosed with AS.*

Gundy Kaupins (GK): I've known I was different, since forever. My diagnosis was more by accident than anything else. I saw a documentary on television on AS and it resonated with me. I researched it a bit more and filled out several online self-assessments. I matched the criteria for having AS. After more formal testing and an interview with a psychologist, I was officially diagnosed with a "very high probability" of having AS. This confirmed what I knew to be true about myself.

SW: *How does it affect your day-to-day life as a management educator?*

GK: When I first started as a professor over 30 years ago, my lectures were very boring and student evaluations were negative. I have always had monotone in my voice so I'm not exciting for students. This is typical for those with AS because we can't use appropriate voice inflection, tone or volume to enhance meaning. I quickly learned I needed to reduce or modify my lecturing because of this.

Another issue is that it is difficult for me to make eye contact and that has an impact on my interpersonal interaction with students. I feel threatened by eye contact, so gaze aversion forms a functional purpose for me by reducing fear and allowing me to focus on what is said. But my lack of eye contact with students can reduce social interaction in the classroom and the interaction can feel awkward for others around me. For example, I wander by student groups while they do in-class projects. I tend to focus on their worksheets rather than make eye contact to confirm I am with them. Some students are surprised by my "sudden" appearance after I have been looking at their worksheets for a while.

With reduced eye contact, I find understanding facial expressions and body language somewhat difficult. I could appear to be looking directly at a face but really be blind because I am viewing a portion of a textbook in my mind to answer a student's question.

SW: *In the classroom, how do you overcome the feeling that eye contact is threatening?*

GK: This problem is a tough one to overcome. Some more forced eye contact on my behalf has helped but the effort is quickly forgotten as I wander into other thoughts. Another strategy is to try to match students' names with faces. I "sort of" have learned how to memorize a unique feature of some students and link it to their name. This name connection makes me more comfortable to not only see a student's eyes but continue a conversation.

SW: *In terms of the experience from the students' perspective, do you disclose to students you have AS?*

GK: No, because if I tell the students what the issues are, I might not try hard to modify my behaviour because they are expecting it [e.g. monotone voice]. My wife tells me to stop using AS as an excuse. Rather, I say to myself "given the symptoms, how do I adapt?" to be more focused on managing the symptoms in the classroom and beyond.

I thought about disclosing the challenges and benefits of AS, to give the students a realistic job preview of what they should expect in my class. I am not sure if my ratings would go up. I feel I need to adapt rather than ask students to accommodate my behaviour. I do disclose to my students my distaste for having too many lectures. This is done with a bit of humor to give them the idea that we will be working on cases and games throughout the semester. I have not seen much reaction to those comments.

I am a member of a local Facebook group on Autism/Asperger's syndrome. Members have disagreed on whether a person with such conditions should share such information in the workplace. The interest group's organizer says yes because he wants to set the level of expectations of his performance, show his strengths, and show his weaknesses. My counter to his opinion is that, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act, Autism/Asperger's are handicaps that should not be considered before hiring. If I were going for a new professor

job, I feel like I should work to have high evaluations to prove my worth without having to “resort” to stating that my evaluations could be higher but I have AS. I personally feel that is a cheap excuse to explain away any problems that might occur if I was hired.

SW: *You mentioned that you received quite negative student evaluations early on in your career; what did you do to respond to those criticisms of your teaching?*

GK: I had to think about other ways to teach than lecture alone. My shift away from lecturing and into active forms of teaching follows adult learning principles by offering students a variety of learning methods. So in this respect, having AS and managing the symptoms has become beneficial for my approach to teaching. Limiting lectures reduces the time I spend using the monotone voice and randomly staring while talking. When I am in deep thought while talking, I can be virtually blind and almost deaf to my surroundings.

I started developing and using games in the classroom, which resulted in a book I published that features many games to study for human resource certifications. Games help shift the focus to the student rather than the boring lecturer up front. I also developed live cases in which clients come to my class to have students write employee handbooks. This has two AS-related advantages: firstly, I get eager clients from small business development centers so I don't have to do personal marketing to attract practitioners to class, and secondly, having the clients interact with students in the classroom significantly reduces my lecture time.

SW: *Have your teaching evaluations changed over time? What do you pay attention to in your teaching evaluations?*

GK: My teaching evaluations have significantly improved and are sometimes above department averages. The students consistently praise the handbook project, games, and my quick responses to e-mails. Now I focus more on improving PowerPoint lectures by eliciting discussions and theoretically attempting humor.

SW: *Are students ever cruel when commenting in evaluations about your classes?*

GK: No. Though I have been bullied from grade school through college, my students have not done the same. To me, having my lectures labeled boring is not a form of bullying but a student perception.

SW: *As educators in an active classroom we need to monitor the climate of the classroom and emotional energy. How do you manage this?*

GK: I have to act to make a connection with students, it doesn't come naturally. It requires a lot of practice and dedication. People without AS can take such relational processes for granted. I learned to do this by emulating my wife, who does not have AS and is very interpersonally skilled. I studied her conversational techniques to learn how to connect with others. At the beginning of conversations, she finds something in common with people and responds (spontaneously and frequently humorously) to the information they desire. I have successfully practiced her methods at the beginning of conversations. Continuing beyond that is more difficult. For example, a student verbally gives me some information. I then start to think deeply of several responses to that information. In the meantime, I might miss other things the student just said. It is awkward when I ask a question that was already answered in the student's prior sentence.

One of the symptoms of AS is to talk too much about one topic that might not be remotely interesting to the listener. In the past, I think I have focused too much on a few of my research interests and racewalking (a major personal interest) to illustrate class concepts. I have tried to consciously replace those interests with games and other class activities.

I have also tried to understand student body language and facial expressions especially during significant pauses in my lectures or discussions. If students appear bored about the topic or worse yet, I am bored, I have stopped the class and asked them to write down what they learned so far.

SW: *Listening is an important skill in an active classroom. How do you manage this?*

GK: It often appears that as a professor with AS, I am not listening to students because of my blank facial expression, when in fact I am trying to listen. It is difficult for me to predict and react to emotional expression in a conversation, and to understand how I can or should repair a breakdown of communication. Getting specific and behavioral feedback through teaching evaluations has been a helpful way to somewhat change my behavior.

One of the most helpful things I have done to improve my listening behaviour is to emulate good behaviors of fellow teachers. Sitting in on classes of outstanding instructors is a good way to learn specific behaviors and the pattern of social dialogue with students. Seemingly innocuous things such as smiling, making direct eye contact, and speaking positively of students are patterns of behaviors that I have to notice, learn, and practice.

SW: *Does having AS affect how you assess students?*

GK: My assessments of students have always been quite objective with multiple choice questions and essays/cases that have very defined goals. Either the student completed the desired objective or not. I do this because of the black and white perceptions I have. Subjective assessments tend to be more difficult for me. I find understanding the inner thoughts of other people particularly challenging. I believe this means it is more difficult for me to read long reflection papers than others without AS. My solution is to split up longer papers into specific pieces that can be more objectively assessed. My assessments are short, direct and concrete. For example, my students must write employee handbooks for real clients. Handbooks involve short sections such as benefits and subsections such as life and health insurance. There is no case, story, or long-winded opinion to grade.

SW: *That makes me think of the advantages management professors with AS can bring to the classroom. Can you talk more about this?*

GW: I feel most of the issues we've talked about can be flipped into advantages for professors ... others have written about this from an identity perspective of having unusual talents. See the McIntosh (2016) paper for example. These unusual talents result in more attention to detail, objectivity, and expertise on one subject. As an example of detail, I love looking at the reliability and difficulty level of the multiple choice test questions that I write. It is almost a game to maximize the reliability score and flatten the normal curve to reward students who study harder. Detail does not mean perfection. When I screw up way too often, my e-mails to students are short and honest stating how I screwed up and what was done to fix them.

One advantage of AS is the ability to think of new ideas. I have created many new games in the middle of class just because a student sparked an idea, an idea suddenly appeared in my head, or I needed a better way to explain the materials. Though I mostly write my own case studies, the textbook cases I occasionally use are almost always adjusted to my teaching needs.

Online learning environments have made a big difference in my teaching. I don't have to see faces and interpret social cues. I write very fast and respond to students' e-mails, papers, and regular assignments in depth with my knowledge of human resources. I don't mind grading 40+ papers per class because, like most people with AS, repetition is tolerated.

Commentary

After talking with Professor Kaupins, a theme left resonating with me is that AS need not be seen as a disability or deficiency in the management classroom. Gundy has managed, for an extended period of time, to learn socially appropriate behaviors, which camouflages his social difficulties in the classroom. These behaviors include learning to maintain appropriate levels of eye contact (or finding ways to avoid eye contact such as students doing written work in class), memorizing jokes to use in the classroom, and imitating facial expressions. The cognitive and behavioral techniques used to manage the symptoms of AS, while effortful, can lead to enhanced teaching delivery and assessment methods. For example, the practice of breaking down subjective assessments into smaller concrete pieces of assessment that align with learning objectives is considered best practice by some educators (e.g. Nilson, 2015). Additionally, adult learning theories emphasize using multiple training methods rather than lectures alone (Knowles, 1990).

At the 2017 AOM Teaching and Learning Conference keynote address, Professor Ken Brown spoke about the importance of being more critical and self-aware about our performance as educators. Ironically, Professor Kaupins' personal response to the challenges associated with AS has helped him become more aware of his teaching abilities. His tireless approach to self-improvement has resulted in a better understanding of both his needs and those of his students. The literature also supports the efforts he has made to improve his teaching evaluations. Because educator enthusiasm can mediate the relationship between teacher and student enjoyment (Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun & Sutton, 2009) and influences professor reputation (McNatt, 2010), Professor Kaupins has used student evaluations to modify his teaching approach to help improve student enjoyment of (and engagement with) the material he teaches. Not everyone could welcome negative student evaluations with an objective eye and emotional control, and then use the feedback as data to continually improve teaching delivery.

To go through this process requires a significant degree of emotional detachment from the visceral reactions to student evaluations. Responding to negative student feedback also requires the ability to be critically reflexive about our teaching behaviors. In doing so, however, we all become more responsive management educators (Cunliffe, 2016). A lesson that can be learned from Professor Kaupins' experience is the benefit of seeing where there are patterns in student feedback, and where our behaviour can be modified based on those observable patterns.

Although the focus of this interview is on AS, it sparks an interesting conversation about professor 'difference' and complex issues involving self-disclosure to students in our teaching environments. It remains an ethical dilemma of whether we disclose our differences to students and therefore expect students to accommodate our individual differences, or we retain privacy and learn to manage our own behaviors in the classroom environment. A reflexive response might be that it is up to each individual faculty member to decide how much personal information they disclose to students about themselves. However, when the educator's 'invisible disability' can affect student learning should it be a requirement to disclose how this behaviour may affect learning and to what extent?

Such dilemmas are reminiscent of the JME papers published earlier this year on "*Your professor will know you as a person*" and the complexities of faculty-to-student relationships (Chory & Offstein, 2017). Should students know their professors 'as a person' including invisible disabilities? On the one hand, maintaining privacy in a classroom environment means that students are making their evaluations on the same criteria they evaluate any other professor. But in doing so we are required to practice reflexivity, take on board critical evaluations, and monitor our behaviors. On the other hand, disclosing personal information to students in the classroom (about behavior which may impact on student learning) may help avoid negative student evaluations. Self-disclosure about personal characteristics may also act as a way of modelling behavior, and help make a connection with students who feel marginalized in the classroom due to conditions such as AS. We need to ask ourselves, what is the intention of disclosing and under what conditions should we disclose? The environment may change what, and how much, we disclose to students. For example, would Professor Kaupins need to self-disclose he has AS in an online learning environment where the impact of his behavior (such as monotone voice and avoiding eye contact) may not be an issue for students? The lack of ability to be more nuanced in our behavioral approach to students might not be an issue in an online environment as it is in a face-to-face setting.

Suggestions for Future Research

Professor Kaupins believes more research is needed to identify delivery and assessment issues in management education, and on the efficacy of various AS interventions in teaching delivery. Collecting comprehensive data from professors who think they have AS and administrators who must manage and evaluate such professors is essential to find a pattern of what interventions work. There is significant empirical research on social skill development for children and adolescents with AS using interventions such as structured group activities (Bellini, 2006). Application of such research to college students and professors is another basis for empirical research.

We were unable to find any research on the disclosure by faculty of their AS/Autism (or any other silent disability affecting educators) to help navigate these personal and institutional dilemmas. Such research might help others to figure out how to adapt to a person with AS in and out of the classroom. Adaptation may lead department chairs to a new perspective on teaching evaluations and a plan to help improve those evaluations. However, how would administrators identify and approach such 'difference' that impacted classroom experiences? What is the institution's responsibility to students and colleagues if the educator chooses not to disclose but is receiving poor teaching evaluations because of their behavior? How should we respond to students if they come to us sharing difficulties in a colleague's class who has AS (or other type of diversity)? What are the pros and cons of self-disclosure that we have missed in this interview? We believe our musings here would make for an interesting and important professional development workshop or brown-bag event.

We have listed available resources below for interested readers. Thank you, Professor Kaupins, for sharing your experiences and learning with JME readers!

Resources and Suggested Readings

To informally self-assess AS, see:

Autism Spectrum Quotient; <https://psychology-tools.com/autism-spectrum-quotient/Aspie-Quiz>;
<http://www.rdos.net/eng/Aspie-quiz.php>

To help with communication problems, speech therapy can be useful. See:

- Attwood, T. (2015). *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Wylie, P. (2014). *Very late diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder): How seeking a diagnosis in adulthood can change your life*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

For further information on the ability to make eye contact, see:

- Anderson, S., & Morris, J. (2006). Cognitive behaviour therapy for people with Asperger syndrome. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 34(3), 293-303.
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For Professor Kaupins' teaching resources he has developed, see:

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For more discussion of general responses to student evaluations, see:

- Arthur, L. (2009). From performativity to professionalism: lecturers' responses to student feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(4), 441-454.
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- Chory, R. M., & Offstein, E. H. (2017). "Your professor will know you as a person" Evaluating and rethinking the relational boundaries between faculty and students. *Journal of Management Education*, 41(1), 9-38.
- Frenzel, A. C., Goetz, T., Lüdtke, O., Pekrun, R., & Sutton, R. E. (2009). Emotional transmission in the classroom: Exploring the relationship between teacher and student enjoyment. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), 705-716.
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- Nilson, L. (2015). *Specifications grading: Restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.
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