

Chapter 3

Autistic and Non–Autistic Collaboration in a Presentation on Neurodiversity– Inclusive Workplaces: Neurodiversity Presentations in Post–Secondary Classes

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors describe their experiences as Autistic and non-Autistic collaborators providing classroom training to business students at a Canadian university on neurodivergent workplace inclusion. Trainings of this nature are timely as many Autistic individuals struggle to find and keep work—meanwhile autism is often left out of workplace diversity and inclusion strategies. Post-secondary business students need neurodiversity education opportunities to reduce stigma, exclusion, and discrimination towards Autistic colleagues in future professional environments. Applications of similar training to post-secondary students in other fields of study may be gleaned from this experiences. Such trainings should be delivered by Autistic individuals who understand the complexities of autism in the workplace. Neurodivergent allies can support such training.

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we describe our experiences as Autistic and non-Autistic collaborators providing classroom training to business students at a Canadian university on neurodivergent workplace inclusion. Autism is seldomly considered a diversity dimension in employer Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) strategies (Gould et al., 2020). Since most Autistic adults are unemployed or underemployed (Nicholas et al., 2018; Zwicker et al., 2017), and because those who are employed often experience discrimination, unfairness, and bullying (Berman, 2022; Davies et al., 2022; Harvery, 2021; North, 2021; Ortiz, 2018; Wood & Happé, 2021; Whelpley, 2021), there is a pressing need for future business professionals to better understand neurodivergent inclusive workplaces. Post-secondary business students need neurodiversity education opportunities to reduce stigma and discrimination towards Autistic colleagues in future professional environments.

To address the need for neurodiversity acceptance training in post-secondary business courses, we developed a live, virtual, sixty-minute neurodiversity acceptance training for a group of students in a fourth-year business administration course. *Neurodiversity acceptance training* has a goal of increased acceptance of neurodivergent individuals. Such trainings extend thinking beyond neurodiversity awareness, by challenging audiences to recognize stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. In the presentation, we contextualized our own experiences and insights with findings from scholarly literature with a focus on inclusive workplaces. As a self-advocate, Todd drew on and shared examples of his experiences in the workplace as an Autistic employee. Sarah shared information from commonly observed themes in her clinical practice and from her knowledge of scholarship on autism inclusive workplaces as a Social Work Ph.D. Candidate specializing in workplace neurodiversity. By providing examples of real-life experiences, neurodiversity acceptance and inclusion in the workplace was demystified. The presentation included an overview of autism and other neurodivergences, case scenarios, and a question-and-answer period. We did not measure engagement of students and/or assess their neurodiversity knowledge or attitudes in any capacity because we did not have ethics approval or research funding to do so. However, we believe that our presentation to approximately thirty students enhanced their neurodiversity acceptance. In addition to receiving positive feedback from the instructor, the students asked meaningful questions and appeared attentive (keeping cameras turned on and using body language that signified interest).

During our collaboration, we experienced many moments of validation and synergy, and at times, we ran into conflict. This is not surprising given the double empathy problem. The ‘double empathy problem’ refers to a communication problem that needs to be contended with when there is a breakdown in mutual understanding between two (or more) people, which occurs most frequently when people of vastly different dispositions interact (Milton, 2012). Building off this idea, it has been found that Autistic people tend to communicate better with other Autistic people, and non-Autistic people communicate better with other non-Autistics.¹ Therefore, when the two neurotypes communicate with each other, misunderstandings frequently occur (McCowan, 2022; Pellicano et al., 2022). In the context of work, such miscommunications too often lead Autistic individuals to be viewed as a “problem” (Bury et al., 2021). By examining miscommunications from the ‘double empathy’ lens, both Autistic and non-Autistic parties can take ownership for their contributions to the miscommunication, as opposed to assigning blame to the Autistic individual for not conforming to a neurotypical norm. It is likely that the double empathy problem impacted our working relationship at times. During challenges that we experienced in working together, we wished for guidelines to use to help us improve our working relations. In the absence of such a resource, we compiled our own reflections and analysis that emphasises the of Au-

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