

PRACTICE BRIEF:

Modeling Positive Behaviors for Postsecondary Students with Autism/Asperger's: The Use of "Television Coaching"

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Abstract

Students on the Autism spectrum, including those with Asperger's, are attending postsecondary schools at record rates and bringing with them unique needs and challenges. Although students with this diagnosis qualify for and often use traditional academic accommodations such as testing in a separate room, they also commonly experience academic difficulties more specifically related to the social interaction/communication deficits associated with their disability. This practice brief reports on a modestly scaled attempt ($n = 5$) to use Television Coaching to help students become more successful in social interactions in postsecondary academic settings (specifically, classroom discussions and job interviews senior year). Utilizing predispositions toward visual media and imitation, which are characteristic of many students on the spectrum, the results suggest promise for similar techniques that can be readily adapted.

Keywords: Autism, Asperger's, television coaching

Problem

Over a period of two years, five students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses voluntarily contacted the disability support services (DSS) office at a small liberal arts school seeking help with several communication challenges: classroom discussion activities that required uncomfortable levels or types of social engagement, direct interactions with professors, and interviews for graduate school or employment. In each case, the student had received feedback that strongly suggested his/her attempts were not judged by others as successful. All five students were already utilizing more common academic accommodations and agreed to attempt a new approach to solve the current challenge.

Method

During a structured interview based on individualized questions prepared by the DSS director in advance, each student generated with the DSS director a preliminary list of wanted and unwanted behaviors

associated with the communication activity they were having difficulty carrying out successfully. Examples included seeking out and accurately processing direct feedback from professors and/or interviewers. This list eventually became a rubric for informally assessing changes in behavior over time (see Tables 1 and 2). Such lists have proven useful to students on the spectrum, particularly if they have executive functioning challenges, since the list can provide hierarchy and an external priority (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Azano & Tuckwiller, 2011). The list also became the starting point for identifying a series of television sitcoms to watch, which were readily accessible online or through the college cable system, where the students could study similar communication behaviors in an exaggerated format.

There is research to suggest that students on the spectrum favor visual media, in particular screen-based media, and that they often can be quite imitative of behavior they witness repetitively (Mazurek, Shattuck, Wagner, & Cooper, 2012; Shane & Albert, 2008). One recent study also shows that individuals with ASD tend

Table 1

Rubric for Jimmy

Unwanted Behaviors	Positive/Desired Behaviors
1. Appearance of disengagement	Body language of engagement
2. Aversion of gaze	Direct eye contact/focused gaze
3. Too much/not enough emotional response	Appropriate emotional response to content
4. Appearance of disrespect toward professor	Appropriate level of professorial respect
5. Disengagement from other students	Practical cues toward fellow students
6. Blurting out/interrupting	Watching interaction cues from professor

Table 2

Rubric for Sally

Unwanted Behaviors	Positive/Desired Behaviors
1. Smiling at inappropriate times	Smile with intention/restraint
2. Talking too fast	Speaking deliberately/thoughtfully
3. Blinking excessively	Breathing deeply and slowing down
4. Giving too much detail/negativity	Intentionality with detail/sharing the positive
5. Excessive nervousness	Focus on posture and slowing down
6. Forced or inappropriate laughter	Use laughter with caution

to watch television more, earlier, and prefer more adult programs than their peers (Chonchaiya, Nuntnarumit, & Pruksananonda, 2011). There is also evidence that individuals with ASD respond to interventions with strong visual elements and transparent structure that lends itself to easier transferability (Slavin, 2010).

All of television, and arguably drama in general, is an abstraction: time is compressed, expressions and gestures are exaggerated, moods fluctuate wildly, body language is abnormally emphasized, and the plot is manipulated to skip events and exchanges that are not germane to most viewers. In particular, television sitcoms intentionally manipulate these variables much more intensely than movies or longer dramas. Sitcoms, therefore, have the potential to be overt examples of communication skills or challenges that can be observed by individuals who can find it difficult to understand more nuanced social behavior in real life.

“Coaching” in this practice brief is defined as guided practice with frequent feedback and modeling of desired behaviors and skills. Coaching has been shown to be an effective strategy in preparing professionals to work with students with ASD (Radley, 2012; Wilson, Dykstra, Watson, Boyd, & Crais, 2012). Just as importantly, it is a direct form of intervention for individuals with ASD, sometimes referenced with similar terms that include “play” or “mock” experiences, which normally also include guided assistance and practice (Kasari, Huynh, & Gulsrud, 2011; Swarns, 2012). The use of “television coaching” is also consistent with strategies for helping students with ASD that combine unusual activities that play to ASD strengths, such as educational music therapy for social skills development (Baraba, 2012).

Each of the five students was already well aware of the general nature of such shows, but lacked a sophisticated grasp of the abstractions they involved. When they were asked to explain the use of exaggeration in sitcoms, they generally could not explain it well. Therefore, after looking at the initial lists of desired and undesired behaviors created collaboratively, the DSS director helped each student select a series of shows to watch for at least four episodes (e.g., *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, etc.). The shows were intentionally chosen for high degree of exaggeration. Students were specifically instructed to note which expressions, reactions, or body language exaggerations were the most noteworthy in their opinion, and where similar behaviors intersected with their own on the lists. They were in

essence doing an informal analysis of communication skills portrayed through caricature and exaggeration on television (Hewitt, 2011).

After the initial viewings, a brief dialogue occurred between the students and DSS where each student received specific feedback and recommendations for “exaggerating” or staging (planning to use) the classroom/interview behaviors that were more desirable on their lists. For example, smiles were recommended during introductions and when interviews digressed into personal topics. Conversely, smiles were to be avoided when serious topics like sexual harassment policy were discussed. Students were guided to seek more practice in meaningful settings such as the academic center for mock interviews, classrooms where routine discussion was an expectation, or practice interviews at the career center. At the same time, students were assigned to watch four more episodes and continue to observe and generalize behaviors to their own situation. As the process evolved, students were asked to take notes. Given the utility that strategy proved to have, future replications should require that all participants do so from the start.

By the third meeting, all five students had made significant progress in recognizing behaviors in the abstract that sent concrete messages to an audience in real time. One student, who had been told she smiled too much during an interview, reported consciously making decisions in the next interview about when to smile. At no time was there any pressure placed on students to behave in any way that was uncomfortable to them. Their general comfort level with experimentation and “staging” increased with each session, however, as observed by the DSS director and often confirmed by their personal statements during debriefings.

Jimmy (all student names are pseudonyms) was a sophomore transfer student who came to the school expecting that the smaller environment would help him. In reality, he found the higher degree of social interaction quite stressful. He reported that, after going through this project, he was as afraid to pretend he was looking at the professor even though he was actually focused on the wall behind him. It did not matter that he was not actually looking at the professor; it mattered that the professor perceived him as being engaged. In this case, Jimmy felt that he had learned how to engage in a behavior that satisfied a need to communicate in the classroom by observing how television characters exaggerated their use of eye contact while talking to another character.

He reported more confidence in looking around in the classroom and observing what others were doing, rather than his initial habit of looking down.

Sally was a senior who was very stressed about interviews and applications for graduate school. Her interviews became increasingly polished and successful as reported by others and based on her own perception. She reported, as mentioned earlier, that her smiling skills improved; people reacted to her smile with a smile themselves. Prior to this training, Sally tended to smile at inappropriate moments in the interview, such as when the topic of office behavior was being discussed. This initially heightened the anxiety of the interviewer (who called DSS) and perplexed Sally. Sally, an extremely intelligent young woman, studied her shows to the point where she could identify every example of a character's smile in a particular episode and the events with which the smiles were associated. Ultimately, she was accepted into a graduate program after a successful interview.

Conclusion

Using Television Coaching on a small scale appears to provide another option in addressing the complex social skills deficits amongst individuals with ASD in the postsecondary setting. This approach appears to take advantage of students with ASD's general preference for visual media and positive responses to coaching and repetition. It is not a replacement for academic accommodations but may hold the promise of helping students learn the social behaviors needed to navigate typical social situations in college with less anxiety by providing more immediate feedback than they may receive in other settings.

The primary DSS resources required for this project were time and a willingness to dialog with students. If the students were willing to invest their own time in the television watching activities, as well as in meeting face-to-face, the results were uniformly perceived by DSS and students as positive. Implementing this practice has already led to refinements, such as recognizing the value of having students take notes while watching. This new service does not replace traditional therapies or technically qualify as an accommodation. Nonetheless, its value to DSS offices is significant in that social skills deficits can impact students with ASD's academic experience in myriad ways, ranging from one-on-one interaction with professors to completing

labs or other group projects where close teamwork and communication are necessary.

Larger replications or similar projects may lead to the possibilities of professional training being offered to DSS. Research about this practice could enrich the literature with more information about the efficacy of such interventions. While the limitations of this investigation are primarily related to its small scale and experimental nature, the informal results are positive and indicative of further possibilities.

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About the Author

Jack Trammell received his BA degree in political science from Grove City College and following an M. Ed. was awarded a Ph.D. in Education, Research and Evaluation, from Virginia Commonwealth University. His experience includes working as a special education teacher in the Virginia public schools. He is currently Director of Disability Support Services and Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department teaching disability studies at Randolph-Macon College. His research interests include disability stigma, transition, and the social mechanisms related to disability discrimination. He can be reached by email at: jtrammel@rmc.edu

