Hello, I am Julie Prentice, Senior Lecturer in Education with specialism in special education needs, disabilities and inclusion and I work at the University of Worcester. I have been asked to discuss how I work with students with autism in higher education so I thought I would use a case study that of James which is a fictitious name to illustrate this.

Now, it’s really important that we get things right for students with autism in higher education. Within higher education, between 1% and 2.4% of students are likely to be on the autism spectrum and in a small university like Worcester, that’s about 10,000 students. However, research has also shown that only about 40% of students with autism manage to complete their studies successfully. Therefore, it is really important that we get things right.

James shared the social and information processing differences that are common to people on the autism spectrum, however everyone experiences autism individually. Therefore, I recognise that it’s really important to understand James as a person.

James is very articulate, very able, he had excellent subject knowledge and he always contributed well in the classroom. He was good in group work, he was really popular with other students. However, when his first assignment was submitted, it was clear that James was finding some things difficult. I then realised how important it was for me to really understand him well. James told me how much he liked to read. He felt the need to read everything on a topic before he felt sufficiently confident to write and despite his apparent social confidence, he struggled to sleep. He would have to rehearse every possible conversation he thought might happen the next day before he felt sufficiently relaxed to be able to go to sleep. Therefore, he was highly anxious and understanding the way that James was dealing with university was therefore really important.

I worked with James as a general tutor under 7 modules and also in a pastoral role and therefore I felt it was really important to build a trusting relationship getting to know his interests but also finding out what was of challenge to him.

Martin (2008) suggested what I feel is a really useful approach and it is linked with a very useful and simple acronym, that of being REAL. The R standing for Reliable, E for Empathic, A for Anticipatory and L for Logical. So you can be reliable by doing what you promised to do, being empathic by understanding the differences and anxieties and therefore channel that to be anticipatory in light of the empathy and the understanding of the difficulties that a student might be experiencing and by organising teaching and activities with James in a logical way, that really helped him to succeed.

Now I associate the logic with structure and so keeping a very tight structure for teaching sessions for tutorials was really important. Organising regular appointment times and also being proactive if James missed an appointment, following up myself to make sure he knew that it was ok to reschedule. Also, understanding the need to deal with his anxieties first so that he could then focus on the important aspects of the work that we were working on together and when he was working on assignments, we used a very structured planning approach so for each session, James would bring 3 key topics that he was working on with some subtopics for each. Then we would use a very visual approach using post its to write the topics, organise them until there was a logical structure that he could take away and work with.

So, you can see there are just some very simple approaches that really made a difference and helped James to succeed as a student in higher education. For anybody who is interested, I would suggest as a very useful project that was undertaken by Hastwell and colleagues in 2013. It was at the University of Cambridge and it was the Asperger’s Syndrome student project. If you search for that, you will easily find it. It’s got lots of useful ideas for you to follow up.

Thank you for listening.