Lesson: Neurodiversity: Negotiating the World…Differently

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students explore how people who are "differently wired"—or not "neurotypical"—negotiate, view and interact with the world. As students learn about autism through the lens of individuals with autism, they analyze the wide range of perceptions, reactions and means of engagement among those on and off the autism spectrum. They determine how to embrace neurodiversity, and how everyone might recognize and accept the diverse ways *all* people function in a norm-prescriptive society.

The video clips provided with this lesson are from *Neurotypical*, a film about autism from the perspective of autistic people. It portrays the lives of three individuals on the autism spectrum, each of whom is facing a pivotal stage of growth. By exploring the behavioral and perceptual differences that individuals with autism express—differences that tend to separate them from a society that both sets the standard and attempts to have them meet it—the definition of "normal" comes into question. *Neurotypical* ultimately broadens the concept of what it means to be human.

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BACKGROUND

A Note for Facilitators

When facilitating a discussion of autism spectrum disorder and other neurological diagnoses, please be sensitive to the fact that views on the appropriate use of terms and labels may vary depending on the group, individual and/or context. For instance, in many cases the phrase "a person with autism" (or "a person with Asperger's" or another diagnosis) is considered politically correct, while in other settings the terms "autistics" or "Aspies" might be preferred. These terms, in addition to "neurotypical," are also sometimes used satirically or derogatorily. You may want to take a moment to ask those in attendance if they feel strongly about which terms to use in your discussion.

Sources:

Autism Network International. "A Note About Language and Abbreviations Used on This Site." http://web.archive.org/web/20080606024118/http://web.syr.edu/~jisincla/language.htm

Jaarsma, Pier and Stellan Welin. "Autism as a Natural Human Variation: Reflections on the Claims of the Neurodiversity Movement." *Health Care Analysis*, March 2012.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a concept akin to biodiversity or cultural diversity that recognizes neurological disorders as a natural human variation. Rather than looking for cures, neurodiversity advocates work to promote social support systems and spotlight the value of neurological differences, in the same vein as variations in learning styles or social tendencies like introversion and extroversion.

The neurodiversity movement was born out of the autistic civil rights movement in the 1990s and led by autistic writers and activists, including Jim Sinclair, Judy Singer and Kathleen Seidel. The Internet has been a crucial medium for the growth of the movement, since it frequently eliminates the need for face-to-face social interaction, something that often makes individuals with autism uncomfortable. The movement is now largely led by bloggers on the autism spectrum.

Though autism advocacy existed prior to the 1990s, the neurodiversity movement marks a significant emergence of self-advocacy. The goals of the movement include:

- recognition that people on the autism spectrum do not need to be cured;
- a shift away from the use of terms like “disease” and “disorder”;
- a revised concept of what constitutes “normal” or “acceptable” behavior;
- more control over if, when, how and why people with autism receive treatment or therapy.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Determine what makes someone “normal” and whether this is an appropriate term to describe people;
- Define neurodiversity and describe what the term encompasses;
- Recognize neurodiversity and the way people with and without autism (and other types of conditions) negotiate the world;
- Propose neurodiversity as a concept with regard to recognizing and accepting that all people view and engage with the world differently.

GRADE LEVELS
9-12

SUBJECT AREAS
Language Arts, Social Studies, Current Events, Health

MATERIALS

- Sticky notes
- Multi-colored markers

- Chart paper
- Computer with Internet access
- LCD projector

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One 50-minute class period

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: Don't be Normal (Length: 1:40)
This clip begins at 02:00 with an image of Violet Owens walking on a wooden bridge. It ends at 03:40 with Wolf, saying "…saddest movie I had ever seen."

Clip 2: Improving People (Length: 00:42)
The clip begins at 18:44 with a view of Nicholas Pope walking through a bookstore and MaddiKlein saying, "I don't like looking at people's eyes…" It ends at 19:26 with, "…need to improve them."

Clip 3: Pseudotypical (Length: 00:39)
This clip begins at 43:38, with a view of Paula Durbin-Westby playing the organ and Wolf Dunaway's voice in the background saying, "When I come home…" It ends at 44:17, with "…when they do the stupid things."

Clip 4: Everyone Has Differences (Length: 01:12)
This clip begins at 40:57 with a view of Paula typing, and Kevin Nelson saying, "Everyone has differences…" It ends at 42:09, with a view of Kevin and Suzanne Nelson sitting on a sofa. Kevin says, "I'm looking for a nicer name!"

Clip 5: Negotiating the World (Length: 01:18)
The clip begins at 07:33, with a view of a Violet's eyes and Vijay Owen's voice saying, "Just because you can't speak…" It ends at 08:51 with a view of a man washing his hands as Vijay says, "…there's their capacity."

Clip 6: Creating Systems (Length: 02:15)
This clip begins at 08:54, with Wolf saying, "I came from an educated middle class..." It ends at 11:09 with him saying, "I've been doing that ever since."

Clip 7: Small Talk? (Length: 01:31)
This clip begins at 20:48 with a view of Katie Miller saying, "My whole life, until I was 22 or so…." It ends at 22:19, with a view of a family at a kitchen table and a woman saying, "…no longer think people are idiots."

Clip 8: The Last Three Words (Length: 02:10)

This clip begins at 23:30, with a view of Nicholas skateboarding. John Beck's off-screen voice says, "Non-verbal cues. Well people take them for granted…" It ends at 25:40 with John saying, "Oh my God..."

Clip 9: Tag (Length: 03:30)

This clip begins at 30:38, with a view of a soccer goal on a grassy plot and John Ingle saying, "I don't really get instructions very well." It ends at 34:08, with a view of children chasing each other and John saying, "…than just smacking somebody."

ACTIVITY

1. Post two sheets of chart paper. On one write "autism spectrum," and on the other write "neurotypical." Place sticky notes and markers in three accessible locations around the classroom. Instruct students to write on sticky notes the immediate associations that they make with both terms, a different association per sticky note, and then post the sticky notes to the corresponding terms. (**NOTE TO TEACHER:** *Allow students freedom to post a range of terms; recognize that some of them may be controversial or not "politically correct." An exploration of perception and understanding will start at this level. Be sure to let students know they are safe to communicate their perceptions in writing and that the class, for this task, is to be open to different points of view*.) They are not to write their names or share their associations with their peers.

2. Ask the students to review the various associations once they have been posted. For autism spectrum, terms might lean toward less positive descriptions and might include disability, different/unusual behavior and low functioning, but also terms such as creative, smart; for neurotypical, terms might include normal, people without disabilities, special needs, something "wrong" and so on. The range will be broad, as associations will be drawn from understanding and perspective.

3. Invite volunteers to share what they noticed overall about the various responses. Students are likely to have many thoughts, all of them valid. (**NOTE TO TEACHER:** *Ask students to look at the range of associations they came up with to note that autism is a spectrum disorder with a wide range of characteristics that can occur in individuals who are on and off the spectrum.)*

4. Show students Clips 1 (Length 1:41), 2 (Length: 1:05), 3 (Length: 1:18), and 4 (Length: 1:11). Ask the following:

    - What is normal? What is neurotypical? (**NOTE TO TEACHER:** *In the film, "neurotypical" (both an adjective and a noun) is defined as "a term used to describe non-autistics by autistics." Neurotypical can also be used more generally to describe those not diagnosed with any of a range of neurological conditions, including, but not limited to, autism spectrum*

disorder, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and Tourette's syndrome. The term was coined by the autistic community and later adopted by the neurodiversity movement.)

- How do the speakers describe normal/neurotypical?
- Would you classify yourself as neurotypical? Explain.
- Can it be argued that all people, neurotypical and non-neurotypical, see and engage with the world differently? Explain. If yes, how can all people recognize and accept these differences?

5. Write "neurodiversity" on chart paper. Ask students to share what they think it means. (**NOTE TO TEACHER:** *There are many possible initial ideas, some that will simply be drawn from the terms neuro and diverse, such as diversity of neurology, neurologically different, nerve variation, diversity in brains. You may want to begin the discussion by sharing your initial associations with the term.)* Share a brief description of the term (see Background section), emphasizing the important element of the reconceptualization of what constitutes 'normal' or 'acceptable' behavior.

6. Distribute the handout *Neurotypical and Neurodiverse: What is Shared?* Explain that students will learn about the different ways the speakers featured in the film negotiate the world. Instruct them to do the following:

    - Revisit the specific clips cited in the chart, one at a time. Under the relevant skill/behavior header, indicate the skill/behavior highlighted in the segment, for example, conversation and eye contact, creating systems and so on.
    - Underneath, ask each student to indicate how the segment's featured speaker utilizes the behavior/skill indicated, how the student uses them and what aspects of the skill the student and the speaker may share.
    - Repeat with all the clips listed.
    - In the Your Experience section, students can add experiences they have had.
    - In the Reflection section, students should then answer the question about whether the term neurodiverse might apply to all people.

7. Show Clips 5 (Length: 1:16), 6 (Length: 2:56), 7 (Length: 2:06), 8 (Length: 2:07), and 9 (Length: 4:12) one at a time to allow students to reflect and fill in the chart for each clip.

8. Probe with students whether the term neurodiverse might be extended to describe how *all* people behave as a way to begin the reconceptualization of "normal" or "neurotypical." Ensure that students consider what neurodiverse people might think about this as an option.

9. Have students revisit their initial perceptions about autism and themselves. What has changed for them as a result of learning more about the autism spectrum? What do they now see with regard to how people with autism engage in the world versus how the neurotypical population does?

10. Invite students to share creative awareness (in school, community, society at large) strategies to promote understanding of autism and the notion that everyone is neurodiverse. Remind students that when thinking about autism, they should approach awareness from the perspective of the autism spectrum and also be mindful of language. (See A Note for Facilitators above.) Here are some sites that offer interesting projects to jumpstart thinking, if necessary:

    - **The Six Degree Project** (this one is ambitious, but creative, and can spark similar ideas on a more local level) http://thesixdegreeproject.com/
    - **Autism Awareness Month Kicks Off** http://www.cavalierdaily.com/article/2013/04/autism-awareness-month-kicks-off
    - **Autism Pride Week** http://autismprideweek.org/

Extensions

1) **FOR TEACHERS:** There is an emerging movement that has revisited the classification and engagement of children with special needs. The neurodiversity movement, as it is called, invites educators to rethink "special needs," viewing students from a strengths-based perspective (rather than from a deficit stance, often the basis for special education). The perspective states that people who are viewed as having "disabilities," could also be viewed as being differently wired or differently abled, and that don't want to be "cured or misunderstood." The neurodiversity concept emerged in the world of autism, but has grown to include other labels. To begin neurodiversity exploration, do the following:

- Read Thomas Armstrong's article "First, Discover Their Strengths" (http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct12/vol70/num02/First,-Discover-Their-Strengths.aspx) to learn more about the strengths-based approach to working with neurodiverse students.
- Participate in ASCD's online professional development offering "Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies for Students with Special Needs." (http://www.ascd.org/professional-development/webinars/thomas-armstrong-webinar.aspx)
- At a future staff meeting, professional development opportunity, regional special education conference, etc., find a way (discussion, workshop, etc.) to work with peers to probe the neurodiversity concept—what it means, how it connects with the work they do in school and with students, how the concept might influence

their practices and perspectives, its implication for other special needs education and inclusion programs and so on.

Additional resources include:

- **American Institute for Learning and Human Development**
  http://institute4learning.com/
- **Classroom Neurodiversity: The Marzano Model Says ALL Kids Can Learn**
  http://www.marzanocenter.com/blog/article/classroom-neurodiversity-the-marzano-model-says-all-kids-can-learn1/
- **Bringing Neurodiversity into the Classroom**
  http://autisticadvocacy.org/2009/11/bringing-neurodiversity-into-the-classroom/

2) "Autistic" is an oft-used term. But what does it mean to be autistic? To start, autism is a group of complex disorders of brain development. There are various types and levels of the disorder, and people with autism communicate, interact and generally engage with the world in different ways. Students can begin the task by polling members of the school community about their understanding of autism. Once they have tallied the results, they can conduct research on the disorder to heighten understanding and awareness through a school-based campaign (from posters to presentations to mini-trainings—whatever students feel would best educate peers and faculty) for National Autism Awareness Month (http://www.autism-society.org/about-us/national-autism-awareness-month/). Sites to jumpstart this exploration of autism include:

- **Autism Society: About Autism**
  http://www.autism-society.org/about-autism/
- **Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)**
  http://autisticadvocacy.org/
- **Autism National Committee**
  www.autcom.org
- **Autism Network International: Don't Mourn for Us**
  http://www.autreat.com/dont_mourn.html
- **Autism Science Foundation: What is Autism?**
  http://www.autismsciencefoundation.org/what-is-autism

3) How did the term autism come to be? What is the evolution of what is classified as the autism spectrum? Students explore the evolution of autism, its various types, its treatment over the years and where the contemporary view of autism stands. Student teams present on select aspects of autism's history and present-day status to the class. Resources to jumpstart the project include:

- **WebMD: History of Autism**
  http://www.webmd.com/brain/autism/history-of-autism
- ***The Washington Post:*** **Some Key Dates in Autism History**
  http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/27/AR2008062703062.html

- **Connecticut Education Advocates: The Evolution of Autism**
  http://ct-educationadvocates.com/information/autism/the-evolution-of-autism/
- **The Evolution of Autism: From a Psychological to Biological Disorder**
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VScg8KTfDY4

4) The autism blogging community is expanding, offering readers and participants opportunities to share myriad elements of autism, from negotiating romance to addressing it in schools to self-perception. As a class or in small groups, students can peruse some of the sites (a few are listed below, and a link to a compilation of recommended autism spectrum sites is also included), select a reading or two from one site and discuss and then write about how the author approaches Asperger's in terms of representation, self-perception and perception by others.

- **Wrong Planet**
  http://www.wrongplanet.net/
- **Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) Blog**
  http://autisticadvocacy.org/category/blog/
- **I Have Asperger's**
  http://ihaveaspergers.webs.com/
- **Life with Aspergers**
  http://life-with-aspergers.blogspot.com/
- **Babble: Top 25 Autism Spectrum Blogs**
  http://www.babble.com/baby/top-25-autism-spectrum-blogs/

5) Students examine their perceptions of the disabled or the differently-abled by doing the following:

- Students continue this exploration by first watching and discussing this viral video: "High School basketball player passes ball to mentally challenged player on the other team": http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTaB-hPg0P4. Have students share their initial thoughts about what occurred on the court. Record reactions and thoughts.
- Distribute the article: "That Basketball Video Gone Viral—What's Wrong With It?" http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brenda-rothman/discrimination_b_2773881.html Instruct students to read the article and the accompanying comments, share their thoughts on the author's perspective and compare these thoughts with those they noted earlier. How do their perspectives stand now?

RESOURCES

Autism Brainstorm
http://autismbrainstorm.org/

Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)
http://autisticadvocacy.org/

Child Mind Institute
www.childmind.org

The Connor Chronicles: The Best of the Best in Autism Advocacy
http://theconnorchronicles.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/the-best-of-the-best-in-autism-advocacy/

National Autism Association
http://nationalautismassociation.org/

National Autism Center
http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/

National Autism Center: Learning Each Other's Language
http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/pdf/AS_learning_language.pdf

***The New York Review of Books:* "What is Autism?"**
http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jun/06/what-is-autism/

***NOVA*: Video Short: Magic and Autism**
http://video.pbs.org/video/1675013829

PBS: Need to Know: Peter Bell on Advocacy for Adults with Autism
http://video.pbs.org/video/2074757236

***PBS NewsHour*: Autism Now: Meet Nick, Robert MacNeil's Grandson** (part of a six-part series)
http://video.pbs.org/video/1884325580

***PBS NewsHour*: From the Halls of Worrall Elementary School, News by Students with Asperger's**
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/health/july-dec12/aspergers_09-10.html

***POV*: A Neurotypical's View on Autism Documentaries**
http://www.pbs.org/pov/blog/docsoup/2012/04/a-neurotypicals-view-on-autism-documentaries/#.UZo5ZIIp0Wk

***POV:* Refrigerator Mothers**
www.pbs.org/pov/refrigeratormothers/#.UZo-D4Ip0Wk

TEACCH Autism Program
http://www.teacch.com/

Wrong Planet
http://www.wrongplanet.net/

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally), evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

W.9-10.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Content Knowledge: (http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Language Arts, Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

Health, Standard 4, Benchmark 1: Knows skills used to communicate effectively with family, friends and others, and the effects of open and honest communication.

Health, Standard 4, Benchmark 2: Knows strategies for coping with and overcoming feelings of rejection, social isolation, and other forms of stress.

Self-Regulation, Standard 4: Demonstrates perseverance.

Self-Regulation, Standard 2, Benchmark 5: Determines appropriate behaviors that are used and should be adopted to obtain wants and/or needs.

Self-Regulation, Standard 2, Benchmark 6: Knows personal strengths and weaknesses and techniques for overcoming weaknesses.

Self-Regulation, Standard 2, Benchmark 13: Identifies personal motivational patterns, personality, characteristics and style.

Self-Regulation, Standard 2, Benchmark 15: Identifies significant life experiences, including key accomplishments, successes and peak experiences.

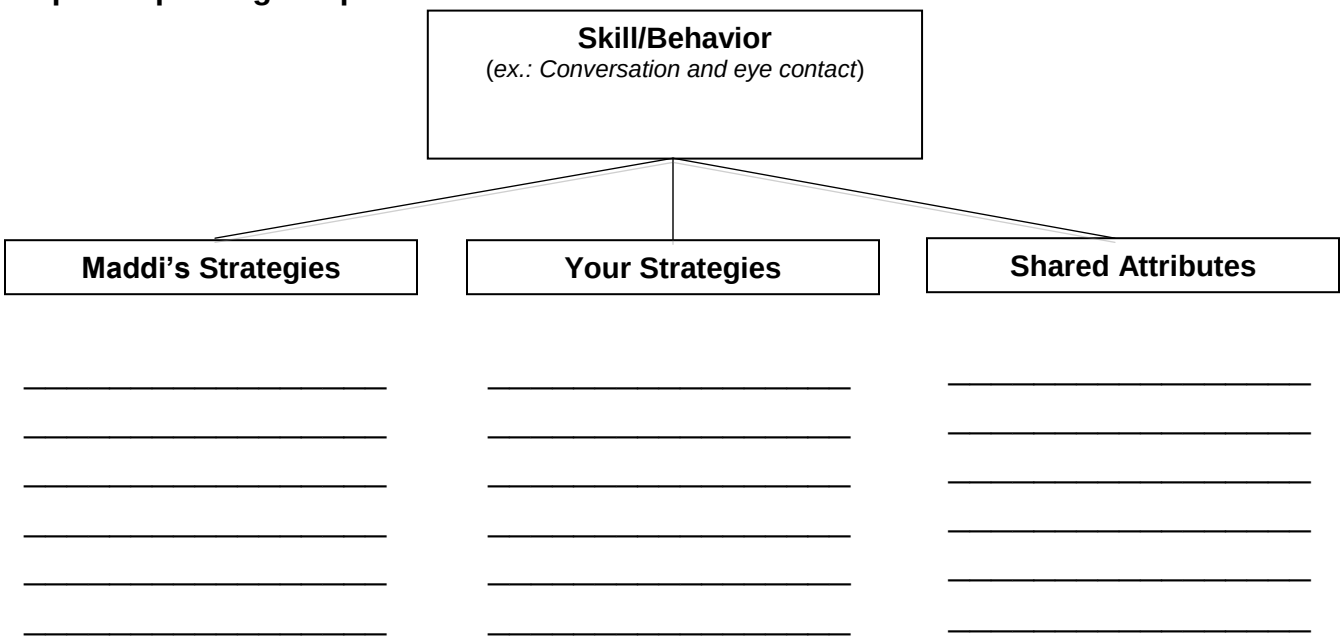
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Israel owns Educational Writing & Consulting (www.micheleisrael.com), where she works with large and small educational, non-profit, and media organizations to bolster products and programs. Her rich career spans over 25 years of successful experience developing educational materials and resources, designing and facilitating training, generating communication materials and grant proposals, and assisting in organizational and program development. Her long list of clients includes Public Broadcasting Service, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the NYC Department of Mental Health and Hygiene, WETA Public Television, *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, the NYC Harm Reduction Coalition, and the NYC Charter School Center.

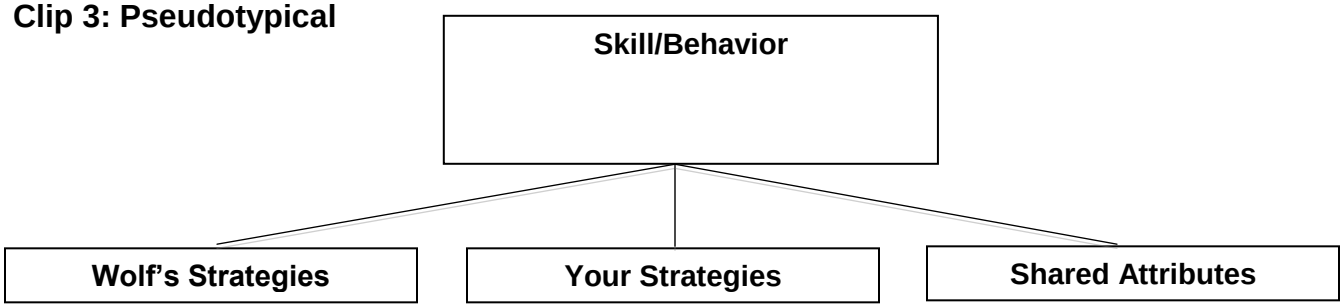
NEUROTYPICAL AND NEURODIVERSE: WHAT IS SHARED?

1. Revisit the specific clip cited in the chart. Under the skill/behavior header for that clip, indicate a skill/behavior highlighted in the segment, for example, conversation and eye contact or creating systems.
2. Underneath, indicate how the segment's featured speaker utilizes these behaviors/skills, how you use them and what aspects of the skills you and the speaker share.
3. In the Your Experience section, add experiences you have had in the neurotypical/neurodiverse realm.
4. In the Reflection section, answer the question of whether the term "neurodiverse" might apply to all people.

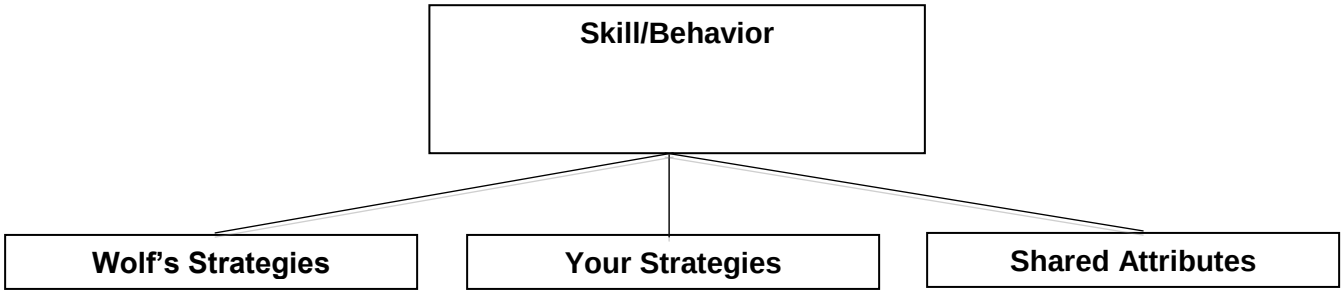
Clip 2: Improving People



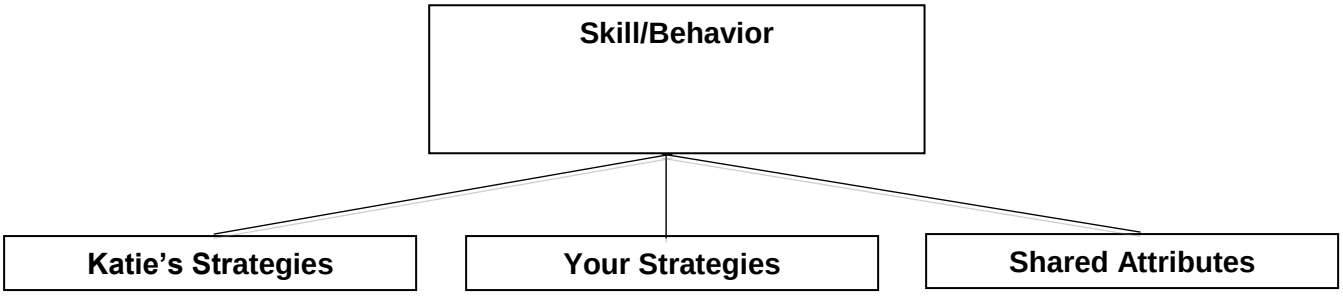
Clip 3: Pseudotypical



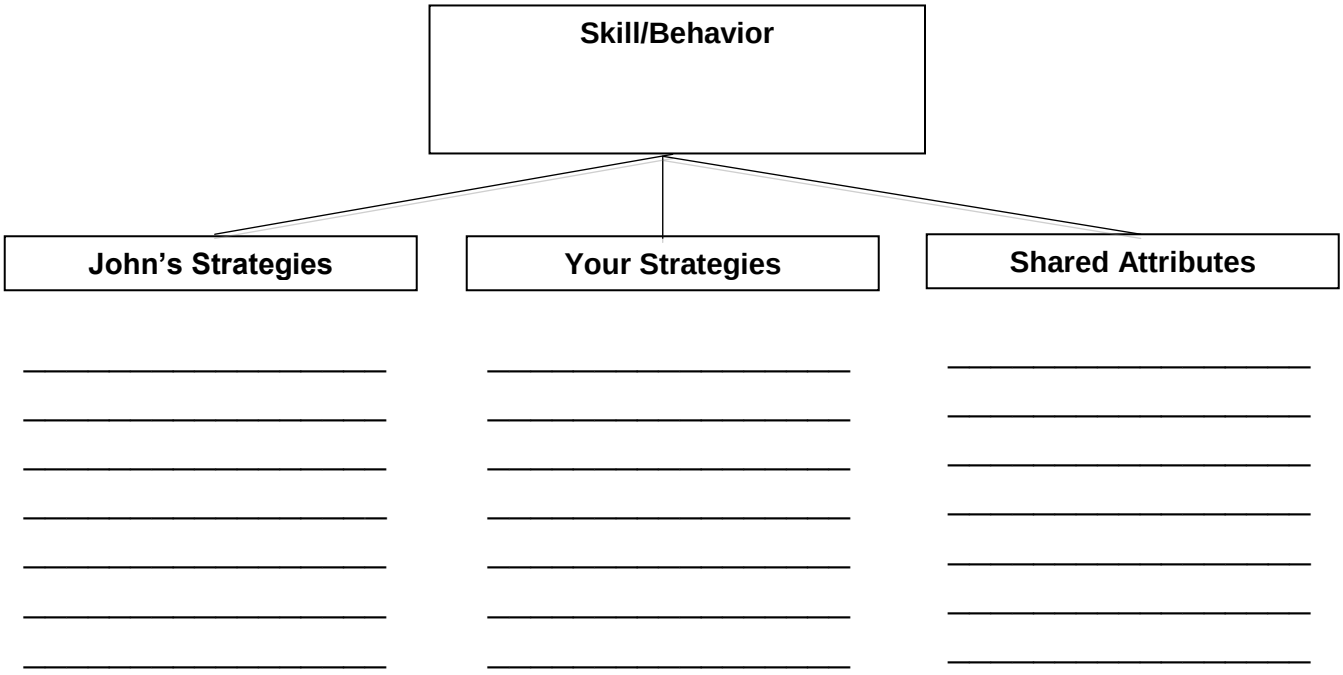
Clip 6: Creating Systems



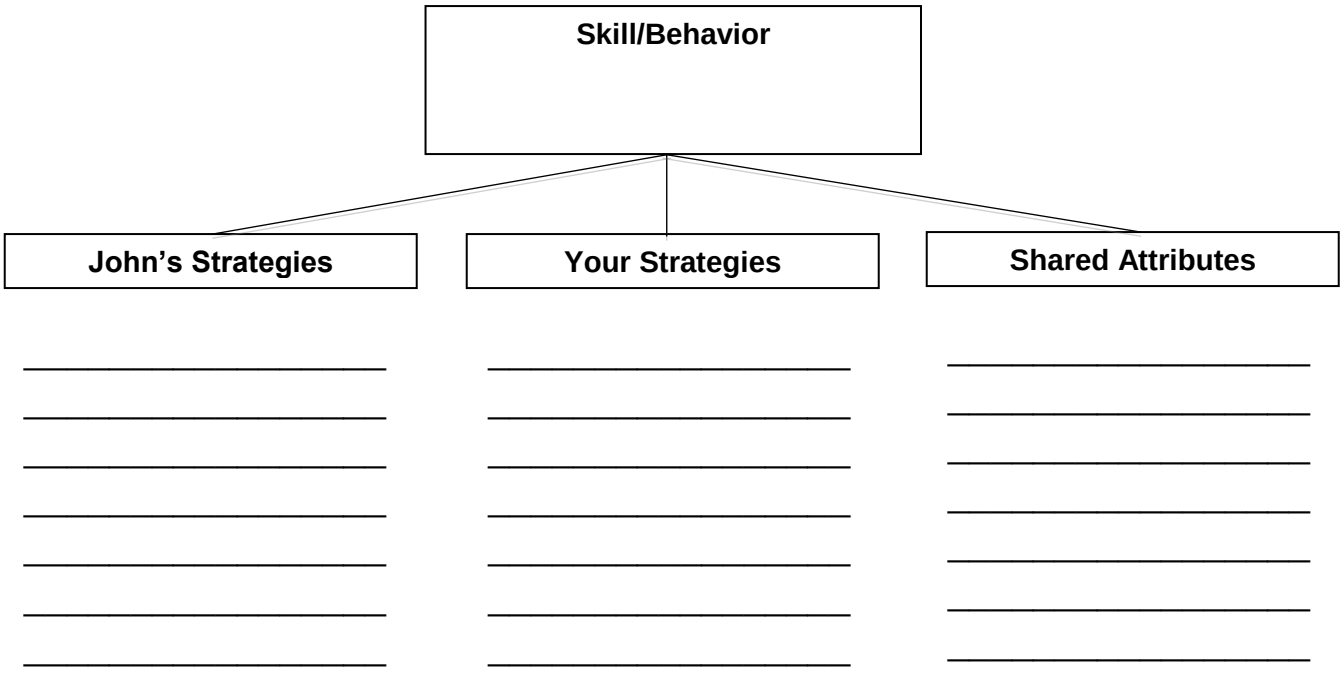
Clip 7: Small Talk?



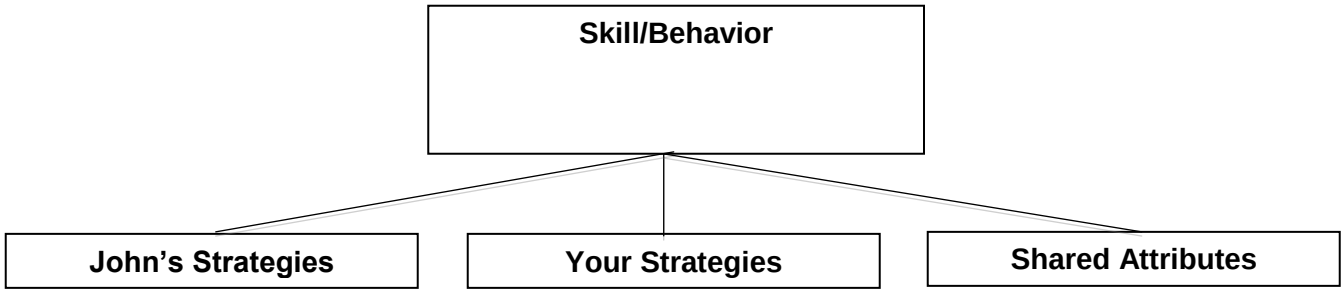
Clip 8: The Last Three Words



Clip 9: Tag



Your Experience



Reflection: Might the term neurodiverse apply to all people?

TEACHER'S GUIDE:
NEUROTYPICAL AND NEURODIVERSE: WHAT IS SHARED?

This guide provides concepts and ideas students are likely to note and can be used to propel student response, if prompting is needed.

Clip 2: Improving People

Skill/Behavior: Conversation and eye contact

Maddi's Strategies: Was coached to look into eyes, analyzing (and not accepting) how people view those with a syndrome and those who don't have a syndrome

Your Strategies:

Shared Attributes:

Clip 3: Pseudotypical

Skill/Behavior: Communication

Wolf's Strategies: Adopting neurotypical (pseudotypical) persona; scripting system

Your Strategies:

Shared Attributes:

Clip 6: Creating Systems

Skill/Behavior: Systems for day-to-day functioning in society

Wolf's Strategies: Reworking/building behavior until he functions in standard society

Your Strategies:

Shared Attributes:

Clip 7: Small Talk?

Skill/Behavior: Communication

Katie's Strategies: Recognizing and understanding other people's behavior and adopting "small talk" as a way to engage the neurotypical group, to show respect; acquiring communication strategies

Your Strategies:

Shared Attributes:

Clip 8: The Last Three Words

Skill/Behavior: Communication, non-verbal cues, conversation

John's Strategies: Analyze how people converse; learn and use other person's names; repeat last three words of what they are saying to show that he's listening; don't talk in order not to talk without stopping

Your Strategies:

Shared Attributes:

Clip 9: Tag

Skill/Behavior: Following instructions

John's Strategies: Observing, thinking through and figuring out the process and format, creating different approaches

Your Strategies:

Shared Attributes:

Your Experience

Skill/Behavior:

Strategies:

Your Strategies:

Shared Attributes:

Reflection: Might the term neurodiverse apply to all people?