

## STEM, Autism, and Developing Professional Relationships: Interview with a Mentor, Part One

by Laura Gilmour, with Dr. Melike Schalomon

*Dr. Melike Schalomon is an interim Dean of Arts and Science and Associate Professor at [Grant MacEwan University](#) in Canada. Her background is in neuropsychology. I have had the pleasure of having her as an instructor for several of my undergraduate courses and as a research supervisor and co-author on [two of my publications](#). I first met her in 2004, when she held a class in brain and behavior in the same room where I took first year English. I arrived early to class and was fascinated by her notes on brain anatomy on the board (which is a special interest of mine), and I walked up to the front of the room and started asking questions as she was finishing her lecture. She continues to be a great influence and colleague thirteen years later and one of the greatest influences in my career path and life direction. In this three-part series, I speak with her about her experience mentoring me as an autistic student, what she learned from it, and changes to university policy that she advocated for that were somewhat influenced by my case.*

*Part one of this series discusses her experience on matching her cognitive style to mine when I was her student. We also discuss the importance of recognizing that autistic individuals may have [different personalities and communication styles](#) than the average university or college student. It is a matter of [difference rather than lack](#). As Dr. Schalomon says, “If you don’t quite know what the student needs, go to the student and ask” what you can do to support them rather than assuming ill intent or rudeness on the part of the student. Finally, knowledge of a diagnosis is not necessary to provide support. All students have unique needs, and some students may have autistic tendencies or need explicit instruction without having a formal autism diagnosis.*

**Laura Gilmour:** I sort of wondered: you had me as a student for several years, so I wondered, what was your first impression when I walked up to you in that English class and started asking questions about that thing on the board, or when I appeared in your brain and behavior class and was still sort of in my “ask-questions-every-ten-minutes” phase?

**Dr. Melike Schalomon:** I mean so, first of all, I thought you were eager, and I always like students who are really, really eager. I *did* think that your approach to asking questions was pretty blunt and “in my face.” I was wondering whether you might have some autistic traits. I didn’t think about whether there were any diagnoses or things like this. Like, okay this is a student who is going to ask questions, and she wants answers. Overall, I really liked it. I thought this was great because most of us really enjoy keen students. But, I’m fairly blunt myself, so I think your style simply worked for me. I didn’t have a problem with that. I also don’t have a problem with saying things like, “Okay my class is starting now; I can’t talk anymore.” I think I started doing that fairly quickly. It’s like okay, you know, and you always responded extremely well to that, so if I said, “I’m out of time now I have to start teaching,” you’d say, “Oh, sorry,” and stop asking questions and take it up again next time we met.

**MS:** And I do think that, just as with any student, it’s a question of having a similar interactional style. You will always interact well with some students as a faculty member, not as well with other ones. Other students find it offensive if I’m blunt and I just say, “Sorry, but I’m out of time now.” So, your and my style was fairly compatible, and I think that really helped. For me, from my end of things, it’s a personality style, and it just happens to work out that well. Again, having a background in neuroscience and in psychology and being aware that there is a fair bit of

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diversity in people's styles, cognitive styles, that probably also makes me more willing to look for, "How does this particular student interact well?" and to try and work with whatever style I'm recognizing.

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**LG:** Did you learn anything from me that would have you approach things differently than you would have initially with another student?

**MS:** I think what I really learned from you was more about how useful you found it if I would give you feedback on something. If I'd say something, you would really try and incorporate what I had said. Things like, "it's like the full hour and I have to start [teaching now]," and the next time you would do that on your own. I found that being really explicit...I found that worked extremely well with you. And I think I'd be more likely to do that with other students, where I'm explicitly stating what I'm thinking, rather than sort of trying to hint at things. Because it worked much better for you, and, I think, in the end, it worked better for me. And I think that probably, again, would apply to a lot of students.

**LG:** I find a lot of that, hinting—I know a lot of people think it's politer and all that—whereas I find it like someone speaking in cryptic messages or speaking in tongues, and I have no idea what they're saying. I'll stand there and look confused.

**MS:** I think that, to me, was the main thing. The other one was, not that I wasn't aware of it in the past, but it demonstrated it to a degree that I hadn't seen before, is how absolutely brilliant you are. And that a lot of us sort of make that initial mistake: that someone who has, for example, autism, would also have intelligence that is different, and I mean your intelligence *is* different. You think differently, but different doesn't mean lower. And, again, I *knew* that always—it's not that I wasn't consciously aware of it—but one does make those implicit assumptions, and I think I am more careful in not making implicit assumptions. I'm more consciously aware of it, if I tend to go that way, and say [to myself], "I have to keep an open mind here." I have to listen to what the student is saying, not how it is conveyed but *what* is being conveyed, and listen to the words. I mean, whatever you said was always, the questions were really, really good. And you would, from the beginning, demonstrate that you have superior intelligence. I have to be willing to listen to that and look past, you know, the way that you present the message [and how] is that different from what I'm getting from the average student.

**LG:** And sometimes, like even when I'm trying to express sympathy or express empathy, it's not that I don't have empathy but that it comes off in a different way.

**MS:** It is nice to have someone who sort of brings back to one, like, "I really have to watch my implicit assumptions and make an effort. I have to really listen to what the person is saying and forget about these superficial external things."

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**LG:** Thank you and one more thing, I think we're almost done. This is a closing question. What would you sort of recommend if you had someone coming in with a student on the spectrum?

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**LG:** What would you sort of recommend if you had a professor that came to you in the Dean's Office asking for advice, "how do I support the student?"

**MS:** I would say, "talk to the student openly." Don't talk around it. Say, "What is going on? What are the supports you think you need? What is it that I can do to make it better for you?" So, the student, I know in your case, would have said, "I need really straightforward feedback. Tell me what is okay and what is not okay. Let me know, don't try to hint at things." Sit down with the student; be really open. Say, "I'm not entirely certain what it is you need from me, what it is I can do to make this work for you, can you help me with some information?" And then have the debate about what kinds of things are possible and what isn't possible, say if it's a matter of asking too many questions in class. My usual approach with students who are asking too many questions in class is to give shorter and shorter answers in the hope that they will pick up on the fact that I'm trying to get back to my lecture material. In your case, it might be something where I would say, "Okay, I have to get back to the lecture material now, can we take this up at the end of the class?" So that is something where I'm now more explicit. So that would be my advice, be explicit and say [things directly]. If you don't quite know what the student needs, go to the student and ask.