In this article, I report on the results of a case study of two students with self-identified Asperger Syndrome (AS) in first-year university writing courses. After exploring existing conversations that tend to ignore the voices of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), I propose a methodology based on the concept of ASD as insight, rooted in critical disability studies, in which the perspectives of neurodiverse students are prioritized. My findings reveal the neurotypical assumptions of some traditional writing pedagogies, such as those based on a process model and the understanding of writing as a social activity. These approaches often do not value the critical literacies and social activities involved in writing done by neurodiverse students outside the classroom. Drawing from my participants’ insights, I explore the potentials of critical pedagogy for valuing the neurodiverse social literacies of ASD students. I demonstrate how a critical pedagogy better attuned to neurodiversity can support the alternative social literacies of neurodiverse students and resist stereotypes of ASD writers as asocial.

Despite a near-dizzying amount of media coverage of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in the past decade, there remains much to explore about the experiences of ASD students in colleges and universities, especially from the perspectives of students themselves. Although there is increased attention to programs at universities that cater to ASD students, there is also “a lack of sufficient quantitative studies and surveys about autistic students and college life” (Robertson & Ne’eman, 2008). Even less is known about the crucial transition time between high school and college, as “little research exists about transitioning and teaching ASD students” just entering higher education (Kelley & Joseph, 2012). Regarding the needs of ASD students transitioning to college, Pinder-Amaker (2014) calls an approach combining elements from secondary and postsecondary systems with mental health strategies for young adults “disjointed, but promising,” indicating much further work is needed (p. 125). As universities are faced with pressing demands for access for ASD students, the transition into higher education constitutes a particular challenge (Geller & Greenberg, 2010).

These challenges are especially critical for ASD students in the first-year writing and composition classroom. Many universities require students to pass first-year
writing, making the writing classroom a crucial site for students from diverse backgrounds. Writing teachers generally agree that pedagogy should be informed by students’ backgrounds, particularly if they are from underrepresented groups. Yet the perspectives of ASD students are often missing from pedagogical discussions about them. As self-identified autistic scholar Yergeau (2009) notes, “very few, if any, theories of autism and composing have been offered by autistic individuals themselves” in writing studies. Writing teachers are beginning to feature ASD students in valuable collections such as *Autism Spectrum Disorders in the College Composition Classroom* (Gerstle & Walsh, 2011); these accounts, however, contain little quoted material or direct reflections from ASD students.  

A more potentially damaging trend is developing in other pedagogical accounts. Some teachers of ASD students are so focused on their own journey of learning about autism that issues of student disclosure and self-identification are overlooked. Yoder (2008) prefaces his week-by-week account of the behaviors exhibited by a student he assumes has Asperger Syndrome (AS) by noting that his student, “Fred,” never self-identified as having AS. Despite this, Yoder reaches his lay diagnosis through his own detective work, taking examples of Fred’s atypical social behavior as “clues” and finding correlations to “classic symptoms” in his research. Jurecic (2007) also takes a detective’s approach to her writing student, “Gregory,” whom she suspects of having AS. Gregory does not disclose this diagnosis, but Jurecic assumes it, seeking advice from a neurologist, parents of children with ASD, and Gregory’s high school English teacher to confirm her suspicions. 

This investigative strategy is part of a trend in pedagogical literature that Yergeau (2009) calls “cue the anecdote,” a move in which teachers describe well-meaning but limited efforts to understand an ASD student in their classroom: “A Temple Grandin book and a WebMD article later, you feel like you’ve got a grasp on this ASD thing.” Price (2011) identifies a similar impulse as the “diagnostic treasure hunt,” in which teachers describe their journey to identify and diagnose difference (p. 55). What these efforts share is their reliance on suspicion and anecdote to make a case for someone else’s cognitive status and, more troubling, their tendency to speak about ASD students, often without their knowledge, rather than with them. As Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage (2008), Heilker (2008), Vidali (2009), Yergeau (2010), and Kerschbaum (2014) relate in their critiques of Jurecic’s approach, the voices of ASD students risk becoming lost in this discussion. Discussions about ASD become stories about how teachers heroically accommodate students perceived as on the spectrum, rather than about how self-identified ASD students navigate largely neurotypical writing classrooms in the face of unacknowledged challenges. 

Ignoring the voices of ASD students also risks simply reflecting dominant messages based on stereotypes, especially regarding social interaction. ASD is often perceived as a problem to be fixed or managed, particularly in K–12 classrooms. This perception makes academic and social transitions to higher education difficult. Texts such as *Managing the Cycle of Meltdowns for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Colvin & Sheehan, 2012) and *Social Skills Success for Students*
with Autism/Asperger’s (Frankel & Wood, 2011)—which touts advice on “How to Teach Conversation Skills, Prevent Meltdowns, and Help Kids Fit In”—take a deficit approach, focusing on the antisocial behavior of “meltdowns.” ASD is reduced to issues of “management,” implying control and containment. This approach reflects dominant assumptions about ASD related to asocial behavior and reduces the classroom experience to “fitting in” socially. It is likely that dominant views such as these contribute to the diagnostic impulse that can occur in first-year writing, as teachers, often operating as gatekeepers, are primed to identify “problems” with their students early in the university experience.

Diagnostic anecdotes and treasure hunts persist because few existing studies feature the voices of ASD students in universities in general and in writing classes specifically. To intervene in this trend, I propose a different approach, based on the perspectives, insights, and experiences of ASD students. I offer the account of a study I undertook with self-identified AS students, focused on their experiences in their first-year writing courses and their reflections about writing in their lives. I focus on first-year writing because the transition between high school and college is a crucial time about which little is known regarding the experience of ASD students. I show that when AS students characterize themselves as writers, they suggest revisions to traditional writing instruction, while also revealing neurotypical assumptions about the social activities of writing and stereotypes regarding social communication and ASD. I identify the ways that certain elements of accepted writing practices and pedagogies are neurotypical, but also suggest how students’ perspectives invite teachers to value writing practices and pedagogies that encourage socially neurodiverse ways of writing. This revaluing means moving toward a critical ASD pedagogy of insight—research and teaching that feature active participation and insights from self-identified ASD students and that extend principles of critical disability studies, critical pedagogy, and social approaches to literacy.

Rather than understanding disabilities or differences as problems to “fix” in the classroom, a disability studies approach values the possibilities of disability. As Brueggemann (2002) explains, disability can be transformative for pedagogy, contributing to the formation of “an enabling pedagogy, a theory and practice of teaching that posits disability as insight” (p. 321). In this study, I extend this perspective to neurodifference, offering an approach to pedagogy based on ASD as insight. Understanding ASD as insight resists the dominant approach toward ASD as a problem in the classroom, in social communication, and in students’ writing lives. As my participants reveal, when self-identified AS students describe themselves as writers, they position themselves as social writers, closely connected to diverse writing communities and in resistance to pervasive ASD stereotypes regarding social deficit. Recognizing the insights of ASD students means valuing their neurodiverse critical literacies and social activities of writing. Appreciating these insights urges teachers and researchers interested in critical pedagogy and social literacies to question neurotypical assumptions undergirding literacy theory and practice. After exploring the methods of my study, I detail these findings.
Methods and Critical Disability Perspectives

I advertised my study of self-identified ASD first-year writing students through flyers, listservs, and online ads. Two undergraduates who self-identified as having AS, described in the following section, volunteered. My participants both chose to self-identify with AS rather than autism, a critical naming choice that I honor by using AS in reference to them and explore in depth below. Taking a case study approach, I met with each participant five times over a semester for 60- to 90-minute-long sessions, collecting data from semi-structured individual interviews with each participant and from participants’ course work and writing. My inquiry was driven by three specific research questions:

1. How do students with AS characterize themselves as writers inside and outside of the classroom?
2. How do students with AS describe their experiences in their first-year writing courses?
3. What do AS students’ perceptions, experiences, and reflections show about how or why they are succeeding and/or struggling in first-year writing?

I designed my research questions to elicit and prioritize the insights of self-identified AS students. I used semi-structured interviews because they align with a critical disability perspective in that they “invite interviewees to express themselves openly and freely and to define the world from their own perspectives, not solely from the perspective of the researcher” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 45). Data from these interviews consisted of participants’ spoken and written responses to questions I posed following from the research questions, including answers to questions that surfaced conversationally and in collaboration with participants. I also collected data from participants’ writing assignments from their first-year writing classes, course syllabi, and assignment sheets. Since I was most interested in students’ insights, I focused more on their responses to interview questions than on writing produced for class. Because I was currently teaching in the same writing program my participants studied in, I was familiar enough with their curriculum to contextualize their responses. I also collected and discussed participant-chosen data from students’ writing done outside of class. All digitally recorded interviews and writing samples were obtained with participants’ informed consent.

I transcribed interviews, coding data into categories using Berg’s (2001) models of content analysis that focus on “themes” and “concepts” as organizing principles for written and spoken messages (pp. 246–247). Specifically, I coded responses into “categorical labels or themes” (p. 240) related to my research questions. I further sorted data into more specific groupings, “identifying similar phrases, patterns, relationships and commonalities or disparities” (p. 240), and analyzed responses concerned with: (1) drafting, revising, and peer review; (2) writing as a social activity; (3) writing in a community; (4) critical literacies; (5) creativity; and (6) participants’ self-reported writing strengths and weaknesses.
I employed a case study approach because it allowed me to forward disability studies aims (for example, by using semi-structured interviews), but there were elements that I chose to imbue with a sense of critical disability. Berg (2001) describes a case study as a “method involving systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how [the subject] operates or functions” (p. 225). I was critical of the somewhat totalizing aim of this approach—the information I gathered resulted in detailed data, but there are missing parts to the story I tell with these data, which may not permit me to completely understand my participants’ experience. For example, in one instance a participant assertively declined to talk about a specific song chosen to analyze for a paper, practicing a powerful rhetorical silence (Glenn, 2004). To honor this incompleteness, I drew from Yin’s (1994) description of a case study as an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life-context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). This blurring between phenomenon and context helped me resist making simplistic assumptions and causal connections. Specifically, I resisted making assumptions about how my participants’ AS might be a specific “cause” of their struggle or success in their courses, but instead was interested in the rich ways that their insights as AS students and experiences in writing courses could raise issues about existing approaches to writing pedagogy. For example, I did not want to attribute my participant’s silence on her song choice to her diagnosis of AS, but instead wanted to explore the complex context of her experience with writing, her course, and her reflections.

I prioritized the principles of critical disability studies in my research and methods. I made my identification as a non-autistic researcher clear to my participants and relay it here in an effort to resist, as Price (2012) describes, “the valorization of a ‘neutral,’ or at least unmarked, position on the researcher’s part” (p. 171). I also resisted thinking of my participants as “subjects” and encouraged them to set the terms of our interaction and communication. When one of my participants, for example, indicated that one of my questions was too abstract, we worked together to devise a different formulation. In ways such as this, I attempted to make access a key concept in my study, and sought to make the research environment less ableist (Price, 2012).

Self-reflexivity is an important element of critical disability research (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). By listening to digital recordings of interviews, I became more self-reflexive regarding my own positionality and neurotypical standpoint. For example, I gained perspective on my participant’s silence on the song she had chosen for a paper. An observer might have interpreted the silence as a stereotypical situation in which a person with AS is “in her own world,” asocial or unable to open up and express herself. But listening to the recording, I noticed that while I sat in silence, looking down at my notes for the next question and reeling from my misstep, my participant was the first to speak, offering a joke to put me at ease.

Most importantly, understanding ASD as insight in this study meant taking a critical disability studies perspective by explicitly prioritizing the experiences and
testimony of self-identified AS students. This priority aligns with the aims of the Autism Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), which emphasizes the voices and expressions of autistic people in conversations about them. Privileging the insights of AS students also aligns with cornerstones of disability studies, enacting the disability rights mantra, “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998). Furthermore, as McRuer (2003) explains, to claim critical disability is “to recognize disability as a vital force that constantly reshapes culture despite ableist norms that would relegate it to a supporting role” (p. 96). Involving students who self-identify with AS or ASD ideally leads to research undertaken in resistance of deficit-based assumptions. When self-identified ASD students participate in pedagogical projects, they resist being relegated to a “supporting role” in research and begin self-advocating.

Jen and Jon: Critical Positionings

The two undergraduate students who participated in my study both self-identified as having AS, were from white, middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds, and had experience with homeschooling, yet they represented two different perspectives of the first-year writing experience at the university level. Jen was a 20-year-old junior double-majoring in history and psychology who took first-year writing the summer before her freshman year in a program designed for incoming students. She had enrolled the previous year at a different university, but dropped out after becoming overwhelmed by the experience, especially the urban setting. She had been homeschooled for her senior year of high school, a decision she attributed mainly to having trouble interacting with other students. As a high school student, she had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and took accelerated and AP English courses. She did not register with the university’s disability services office, although she disclosed her AS status to select professors, including her writing teacher. She aspired to earn a PhD in history and to become a history professor or to pursue a career as a writer. Outside of class, Jen described herself as an avid reader of fantasy, manga, classics, horror, and science fiction, maintained several blogs, and regularly wrote fiction and fan fiction online. When asked to share her own definition of language, Jen offered a dynamic and socially complex understanding of communication, saying, “Language is words, syntax, grammar. It’s a structured sort of thing that evolves over time and is shared by people.”

Jon was a 17-year-old student, homeschooled since third grade, who had begun taking one college course per semester in the past two years. He preferred homeschooling because of the pressures of what he called “forced socialization” in the typical school setting. He expected to major in geography when he fully matriculated in the coming year. Jon’s homeschool teacher, an instructor in the university’s writing program, followed a curriculum similar in goals, objectives, and assignments to the standard writing syllabus, while making several modifications. Jon described himself as an avid reader of fantasy, historical fiction, and mysteries and a writer of fiction. He enjoyed drawing maps of real and imaginary worlds and making lists and chronologies, activities related to his interest in geography. Like Jen, Jon offered a definition of communication attuned to complex interplays...
of language and society, saying, “I think when we talk about communication, it sounds like a definition that mostly means social communication.”

Jen and Jon both identified with AS rather than autism, a conscious naming choice that reflected a critical approach to their identity and position within larger ASD discourse. In resistance to new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) criteria that subsume AS into the broader category of ASD, my participants chose to continue to identify with AS because they felt it better represented them. Neither Jen nor Jon used “high functioning”—terminology often used in association with AS—in their identification, reflecting a growing preference within ASD communities to resist categorizing members into “high” and “low” designations and instead promote a neurodifference model. ASAN defines neurodiversity as the “social acceptance of neurological difference as part of the broad landscape of human diversity” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2014). My participants situated themselves in this landscape of diversity while preferring to identify with AS, a deliberate choice to critically balance their own identifications within larger ASD discourses. This choice was a form of self-advocacy in which Jen and Jon exerted critical literacy within ASD discourse.

This critical positioning extended the critical literacy also at work in Jen’s and Jon’s definitions of AS, composed early in our meetings so that they could define AS in their own terms. Jen wrote, “It would be someone who has difficulty interacting with others simply because they just don’t get people or quite understand why people would act in certain ways. They also have a hard time describing their feelings, but they do feel—it’s just hard for them to express it correctly. It also involves being unable to discern the emotions of others easily.” Jon also opted for description in his definition, saying, “I would describe it as just the type of personality that someone has. I don’t know what exactly it is that leads to this, but I think the medical community has tried to define ‘normal,’ which is really undefinable, and to classify everything else as a disease. So I think that it [AS] is probably something that’s legitimately a distinction but not necessarily a disability. It’s more like a personality type that has been officially designated and inappropriately considered a problem.”

Both Jen and Jon understood language as socially constructed and negotiated, a perspective that enabled them to exert critical literacy within the discourse of AS. Jen’s description of AS invoked the accepted cultural script of emotional and communication challenges, but Jen also emphasized that people with AS do have feelings, a critical move that resisted stereotypes of people on the spectrum as unemotional and lacking empathy. Jon pushed this critical resistance further, moving from his definition of AS as a “personality” to a critique of the deficit model approach. Jen exerted her critical literacy regarding AS in other agential ways. After reading widely about AS, she questioned the original diagnosis of “moderate” AS she received as a child, revisited her medical professional, and was rediagnosed as having “mild” AS, which she attributed to “growing up” and “adjusting more to normal life.” She noted a critical understanding of “normal,” however, explaining, “I think everyone creates their own world in their head, even the normal neurotypical
people. . . . It’s just *their* world is the ‘real’ world." Reflecting more, she said, “I guess I’m used to passing as a normal person, or what society thinks of as normal.” These critical literacies show both Jen and Jon as active interpreters of how they are situated in discourse, attentive to how meaning is socially and culturally constructed, and resistant of certain aspects of their representation.

Despite their active stance toward self-identification, a critical social consciousness toward language, and a self-described love of reading and writing, both Jen and Jon struggled in their writing courses and experienced frustration translating their interests, creativity, and critical literacies into their course work. In what follows, I focus on Jen’s and Jon’s struggles with the writing process required in their courses, including inventing, drafting, and revising. I then turn to their experiences with writing as a social activity inside and, more productively, outside the classroom and focus on participants’ situating themselves as socially connected, creative writers. I conclude by exploring these depictions in relation to valuing a broader, neurodiverse range of social literacies among ASD students. These revaluations have the potential to revise existing approaches to social literacy and critical pedagogy.

**Struggles with the Writing Process: Inventing, Drafting, and Revising**

Jen and Jon’s writing program adhered to a process or stage writing model based on prewriting, writing, and revision. First-time instructors required students to write a proposal, rough draft, and final draft for their four to five papers a semester. The writing program also emphasized peer review, recommending that each rough draft be peer-workshopped in class. Students were typically not allowed to hand in final drafts without peer-reviewed rough drafts. At the semester’s end, students submitted portfolios, including all rough drafts, final drafts, proposals, peer-reviewed drafts, and source material. In a cover letter, they described their progress over the semester.

Jen’s and Jon’s courses reflected the university writing program’s emphasis on process in different ways. Jen took her first-year writing course in the summer prior to her freshman year, in an accelerated six-week course that met every day. Jon took his first-year writing course in a homeschool environment over a time period roughly equivalent to a semester, with an instructor in the writing program who modified the syllabus to his needs. Jen’s papers were due at the rate of one per week, with proposals and rough drafts due every few days. Jon’s papers were due every three weeks, with time built in for rough drafts.

Jen and Jon approached invention, prewriting, planning, drafting, and revising differently, and the structure of their courses supported or constrained them to varying extents. The accelerated summer course deeply affected Jen’s experience, particularly her movement through the stages of writing expected in the course. She wrote, “I felt kind of rushed—clearly I should’ve just taken it during a regular semester which would’ve given me more time to work on my assignments. . . . I got kinda frustrated with several of the assignments—namely the cultural one.” She elaborated, writing that she did not like the “fast pace” of the course and especially
the “cultural analysis paper which I just could not find info for and ended up turning it in late.” The cultural analysis paper, the third of the sequence of Jen’s course, was the first to require research with a minimum of five sources and annotated bibliography. Jen had received a B on her first paper, an advertisement analysis, and an A– on her second paper, a proposal and rebuttal, but failed this third paper, an analysis of *Star Wars*’ Anakin Skywalker. Her resulting paper, only two and a half pages, fell under the required length of three to five pages. Jen visited her professor in office hours because she struggled with starting this paper, and her instructor worked with her to form an outline, which did not seem to spur any progress—her resulting draft only reflected one additional paragraph. She handed in the paper four days late and received an F, in part because of a policy docking late papers a letter grade per day.

With other papers, Jen also described being adversely affected by time constraints, especially in relation to the inspiration or creativity necessary for her individual writing process, relating that “sometimes it just doesn’t come on command for classes.” In rhetorical terms, Jen’s process of invention was constrained by time pressure. Jen described problems with time management with her next paper, a definition paper, for which she received a D. She did not understand the directions for the assignment and could not get started, explaining, “I have this really bad habit of writing my papers one or two days before they’re due. . . . I just can’t get started early. I’m a very bad procrastinator. Sometimes I’ll just be typing a sentence and retying it, just trying to figure out how to word it correctly.” Jen received a C on her final paper, which was an improvement from her previous two papers, but her grades on her last three papers represented her poorest performance and were most likely based on a cyclical combination of lack of time, stress, and procrastination.

Jon struggled differently with time constraints in his homeschool version of first-year writing, feeling that he had too much time for each of his four essay assignments, spread over approximately one semester. He explicitly stated that he disliked revising and writing the multiple drafts required; he also did not engage in prewriting. Simply put, he said, “I don’t really edit. I just sort of figure out the sentences in my head and write them down. . . . Usually I try to get revisions done as quickly as possible. . . . I don’t like going back and rewriting what I’ve already written.” He preferred the invention stage, explaining, “I guess I’m just more interested in writing something the first time when I’m creating something new and I don’t have to do a huge amount of revision.” Jon also disliked elaborating on his writing or what he called “just filling in details” for an audience. In general, Jon’s final drafts did not show a large amount of revision from the rough-draft stage. Like Jen, he felt his creativity was constrained, although in a different way. He identified his biggest obstacle in his writing course as “having to write about something that doesn’t seem interesting.” He felt that moving between different topics made it difficult for him to “sustain interest” and would have preferred concentrating on a single topic of his choice in one longer assignment.
Jen’s and Jon’s reflections regarding their challenges in their writing courses showed that pedagogies based on a process or stage model approach were not effective for them. Although teachers use writing process approaches differently, it is almost always expected that students will benefit from a large amount of drafting and revision. This expectation forms the bedrock of many instructors’ approaches: “Knowledge of the composing process (or process writing) is now considered fundamental information for writing teachers, and integral to their teaching” (Connors & Glenn, 1999, p. 123). Indeed, stages of writing such as those described by Murray (1972)—prewriting, writing, and rewriting—are frequently still employed in the pedagogical approaches of writing programs like Jen and Jon’s. Unfortunately, the stages of process pedagogy rest on the assumption that most students think and write the same way—neurotypically. As Murray (1972) writes, “most writers most of the time pass through these three stages” (p. 4). This generalization rests on normative assumptions that researchers and teachers of writing process have always been implicitly aware of. Jen and Jon certainly disrupt assumptions of how “most writers” write; they do not fit a neurotypical mold. For Jen and Jon, the expectations involved with what are considered the fundamentals of the writing process and its basic stages feel constraining and limit creativity.

It’s possible that students with AS or ASD, who often process cognitive information differently, may not experience the same stages of writing that structure neurotypical process approaches to writing. And yet, the AS students I interviewed expressed difficulties that many neurotypical students also experience—struggles with time management, starting an essay, choosing topics, understanding directions, and completing revisions are all common problems. My participants faced challenges in writing courses that differed not necessarily in kind but in degree from those of other students. The degree of their challenge, however, was more related to the neurotypical approaches to writing that structure writing pedagogy than to their AS status. Students struggle not necessarily because they have AS, but more often experience difficulty because their courses do not support their neurodiverse approaches to writing.

To better understand these challenges, I turn my attention more fully to the insights of my participants, contrasting their experiences of the neurotypical social activities of writing in their course work with their more productive, neurodiverse experiences of social writing outside of the classroom. In these out-of-school experiences, their struggles with the writing process diminished. The conversations I had with Jen and Jon regarding their social and creative writing suggest directions for a neurodiverse pedagogy that both builds on and extends existing approaches to writing, including those stemming from critical pedagogy and social approaches to literacy. Understanding the insights of students on the autism spectrum and valuing their writing practices as social literacies revises pervasive stereotypes of ASD students as asocial and invites writing teachers to adjust their pedagogy accordingly.
Social Activities of Writing and Social Literacies: Assumptions and Resistance

Jen and Jon’s writing program valued writing as a social activity, grounded in cultural context, attentive to audience, and supported by collaborative activities such as peer review, class discussion, and small-group work. Jen’s text for her writing course, a cultural studies reader, included readings from popular culture, describing various social issues. Assignments, including a cultural analysis and ad analysis, further supported this approach to writing as a social activity. Jon’s course also encouraged him to view writing as a social practice, drawing from specialized readings individualized to him, from articles in online magazines, local newspapers, and The New York Times to comic books. In a rebuttal essay, Jon responded to an article about AS in The Chronicle of Higher Education, and in a proposal essay he responded to a local issue with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In their approach to writing as a social activity, Jen’s and Jon’s writing courses implicitly drew from critical pedagogy approaches such as those espoused by Freire and Macedo (1987). Encouraging social outlets for writing, the writing program supported a pedagogical perspective that resisted the banking model of education by which “the teacher fills the supposedly empty heads of learners with his or her words” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 34, emphasis in original). Instructors were encouraged to run student-centered courses, students were given freedom regarding topic choice, and assignments drew on cultural contexts through which students were encouraged to situate themselves. Students critically read texts, entered into conversation about important topics, and wrote with political and social purposes. Yet, as I explore more thoroughly below, a variation of critical pedagogy more attuned to the neurodiverse insights and social literacies of students on the autism spectrum might have been more helpful for Jen and Jon, in part because of the kinds of social writing activities and social literacies that are valued in neurotypical classrooms and in part because of pervasive stereotypes about ASD and social communication in larger cultural conversations.

Literacy theorists such as Street (1984, 1995) and Gee (1996) draw attention to the social and cultural aspects of literacy and learning, especially the multiplicity of social literacies. As Street (1984) remarks, there are as many literacies as there are “social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” (p. 1). Yet, how these literacies are recognized differs. Gee (1996), defining literacy in relation to Discourses, writes that a Discourse is “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts,’ of thinking, feeling, believing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’ or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’” (p. 131). Literacy and its discourses are closely related to social meaning, social recognition, and social acceptance. Accordingly, “there is no reading or writing in any meaningful sense of each term outside of social practices” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 2). Yet, students on the autism spectrum are still seeking social recognition and acceptance in many areas and are frequently stereotyped as asocial or antisocial. Diagnostically, deficits in social interaction are
key criteria for ASD. In larger cultural conversations about ASD, the emphasis on
deficits in social communication translates into assumptions that make it difficult
for students on the spectrum to be recognized, in Gee’s (1996) terms, as a “socially
meaningful group” with a “socially meaningful role” because the literacies of ASD
students are often not “socially accepted” by neurotypicals.

In conversations on writing and ASD, students on the spectrum are often
portrayed as asocial, unresponsive to audiences, and unskilled at the social activ-
ity of writing. Jurecic (2007), for example, assumes that “writing, which is a social
practice, will be a particular challenge for some students on the spectrum because
it does not tap into their typical strengths” (p. 423). She cites autism researchers
such as Frith and Happé (1994) to understand how AS “would present obstacles”
Syndrome is an extreme form of egocentrism” and “a failure of empathy, involving a
poor ability to be in tune with the feelings of other people” (p. 676). Jurecic (2007)
concludes that “either of these traits—egocentrism or limited empathy—would
certainly hinder the ability to write for an audience” (p. 425). In short, this view
of students on the autism spectrum expects them to fail at the practice of writing
as a social activity.

My participants resisted this deficit view, demonstrating themselves to be
extremely social writers, often with concepts from the neurodiversity movement
shaping their social activities of writing. In resistance to the emphasis on deficits
in social communication, the neurodiversity effort focuses on “social acceptance
of neurological difference” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2014). This focus on
social acceptance models ways of valuing the neurodiverse social literacies of ASD
students. Contrary to stereotypes, both Jen and Jon described themselves as highly
social writers, closely connected to diverse communities and pursuing neurodi-
verse social writing activities outside of their writing courses. These neurodiverse
writing activities resisted assumptions about the potentials of AS/ASD writers
and focused on social acceptance, non-neurotypical creativity, and community
building through writing.

Jen demonstrated herself to be a thoroughly social writer, attentive to au-
dience and community, particularly online. Jen maintained two blogs that she
differentiated in terms of audience. She described her private blog as an online
journal she maintained for herself and select friends, enjoying it as a space of
social acceptance—where the “pressure [is] off of face-to-face communication.”
She intended her public blog for a wider audience, saying, “On my public one I
write about my books, or about the books I’m reading.” Jen was also very aware of
the different social rules that govern online spaces, explaining that “people seem
to be more brazen online because of different social constraints.” In resistance to
stereotypes, Jen clearly understood how to write for different audiences. She also
constructed communities online and fostered social acceptance of diverse ways
of communicating.

Jen and Jon also built on the critical literacies they demonstrated in their ne-
egotiation of ASD discourses with the neurodiverse social literacies they exhibited
outside of the classroom. Jon exhibited strong social and cultural connections to
audiences in his writing and, like Jen, made these connections in creative and non-neurotypical ways, often outside of traditional course requirements. Jon excelled in a curriculum that enabled him to form social connections on his own terms. What he called the “forced socialization” of the typical school experience depleted his energy. In his homeschool curriculum, however, Jon explored projects that connected him to his community in ways that significantly shaped his university experience, including his decision to major in geography. In a project not done for his writing class, he chose to write a local history of his county, which developed into a historical fiction project of over 100 pages. He explained, “It’s based on the style of historical novels like Rutherfurd or Michener. I read those and enjoyed them and was kind of aware of the idea and then I just started writing shorter stories on my own for fun.”

In addition to looking up local records, surveying historical sites and visiting his local library, Jon described social activities such as interacting with members of the county historical society through his research. His description of his writing process merged creativity with detail-oriented fact finding. He said, “This is creative—although I also did footnotes for the research. . . . There’s more detail known about the history so for the early chapters I can sort of imagine what’s happening based on general context without worrying about whether there are more possibilities,” but “for a lot of the other stuff there weren’t so many specific events that would make for a good plot so what I did was research trends that were going on generally at that time.” Jon resisted the stereotype of the fact-obsessed person with AS who is over-interested in a single topic. In his neurodiverse approach, Jon wanted to get details correct, but also used his imagination to extrapolate, blending interpretation with accuracy. His project also built community, putting him in contact with a wide range of people. He planned to seek publication with the local historical society.

In select essays he completed for his writing course, Jon also showed himself to be a neurodiverse social writer, arguing for making alternative approaches to what counts as “social” more socially acceptable. In a rebuttal essay, Jon responded to an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled “Asperger’s Confounds Colleges” (Farrell, 2004). In one of his most developed essays, he directly confronted the author’s argument and argued for acceptance of a different approach to social interaction:

Farrell seems to assume that Asperger’s is a problem, writing things like “people who have Asperger’s tend to struggle with social interactions because of their extreme literal-mindedness.” This sentence may be overgeneralizing by assuming that everyone with Asperger’s is extremely literal-minded, but it also assumes that struggling with social interactions is a problem. It would seem to be a problem when looking at it from an entirely neurotypical perspective, as a neurotypical would likely be very unhappy with the amount of social interaction an Aspie would typically get, but those with AS do not have a need for constant social interaction and so do not feel that they need to be friends with people who consider conformity and superficial values to be of great importance.
Instead of accepting that social interactions are a “problem” for people with AS, Jon reset the terms of what social means. He directly forwarded the self-advocacy movement’s approach of “social acceptance of neurological difference” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2014). Jon explained that social interaction can be different for AS students. This alternative to a neurotypical understanding of social interaction directly resists a positioning of AS students as problems for universities and teachers. More broadly, Jon’s rebuttal is an argument for recognizing a fuller spectrum of social interaction that may differ from neurotypical understandings of what counts as social. Jen and Jon form neurodiverse social literacies outside of the classroom by seeking and developing social acceptance and community sites for their ways of writing. Community, creativity, and alternative approaches to what counts as social form the foundation for their critical, neurodiverse literacies.

**Critical Pedagogy and the Spectrum of Social Writing: Struggles and Successes**

Autistic writer Prince-Hughes (2002, 2004) describes writing as important to many people on the spectrum and identifies a growing culture among autistics, especially in online social communities and networks. My interviews with Jen and Jon support this recognition of ASD writers as diversely social and point toward additional ways of valuing their neurodiverse literacy activities as socially meaningful and culture-building. Jen and Jon immersed themselves in writing communities and practices that might not qualify as “traditionally” or “neurotypically” social, yet each was an intensely interactive writer, engaging consistently in practices of writing as a social activity. Jen created a social writing self online, while Jon’s social writing was rooted in local conversations of regional fiction and environmental history. In these activities, both of my participants resisted a strictly neurotypical understanding of social and forged their own definition of what it means to be a neurodiverse social writer.

In their writing courses, however, these interests and activities often did not translate because they were not recognized or accepted as being, in Gee’s (1996) terms, “socially meaningful.” Despite the enjoyment Jon clearly derived from writing local histories and historical fiction, his enthusiasm for writing did not carry over to his writing course. He said, “English isn’t really a class I look forward to that much. It’s difficult to do a series of essays like that. . . . I enjoy writing stories, but not so much nonfiction.” In this comment, he marked a clear distinction between academic and creative writing. Using the flexibility of the homeschool environment, Jon and his instructor tailored a curriculum for him, but they remained obligated to the university writing program. If he could do an assignment like his historical fiction project for his writing class, Jon likely would have enjoyed it more. But his university writing program did not recognize historical fiction writing—even though it was clearly a social and audience-oriented activity for Jon—as the kind of writing practice valued in its courses.

Jen struggled to translate her passion for writing into the classroom because her ways of writing—particularly in her fan fiction communities—were not valued
as social or socially meaningful in her course. Jen wrote an astounding amount outside of class, on her blogs and her friends’ blogs, in fan fiction communities, in her journal, and in several hundred pages toward her own novel. Despite her love of writing, Jen earned a C in her course. Particularly notable was the struggle she experienced in integrating her outside social and cultural interests into the classroom. Jen’s interests often did not reflect mainstream popular culture or neurotypically social activities of writing. In a rhetorical analysis assignment, she struggled to find a topic because she did not connect with the popular culture examples the readings and discussions focused on. Popular culture, to her, revolved around writing fiction about anime, science fiction, magic, and fantasy—often in socially connected online communities—but she did not see these topics as socially accepted into the mainstream culture of her peers. Accordingly, she did not feel that the social activity of writing she participated in via online fan fiction communities could be valued in her writing classroom.

Although critical pedagogy objectives and a social approach to literacy implicitly informed the student-centered writing courses that Jen and Jon took, my interviews with them suggest that more explicit attention to the potentials of critical pedagogy that tap into students’ neurodiverse senses of creativity and social literacy may be more beneficial to ASD students. Critical pedagogy “engages students in analyses of unequal power relations that produce and are produced by cultural practices and institutions (including schools), and it aims to help students develop the tools that will enable them to challenge this inequality” (George, 2001, p. 92). Jen and Jon challenge inequality in their definitions of AS, their deft negotiation of AS discourses, and their redefinitions of what counts as social writing. A critical pedagogy approach also has the potential to engage ASD students in analyses of the unequal power relations that structure how their social activities of writing are often less recognized, valued, and accepted as meaningful in neurotypical writing classrooms. One neurodiverse, social literacy that Jen and Jon shared—the use of lists—is an example of how critical pedagogy can support and value alternative approaches to literacy.

Critical pedagogy emphasizes the relationship between the “word” and the “world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987), a connection well suited to the neurodiverse social literacies of ASD students. This relationship prioritizes the ways students creatively connect their world to their writing, build communities through their writing, and forge social acceptance of their diverse perspectives. As Freire (1976) writes, “Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words or syllables—lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe—but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context” (p. 622). Both Jen and Jon cultivated their literacy as a neurodiverse attitude of “creation” and “re-creation” in their respective social ways of writing, connected to online and local communities despite stereotypes describing people on the autism spectrum as unconnected and asocial.

Specifically, Jen and Jon both used list-making as a social, neurodiverse writing practice to forge their own critical literacy. These efforts resulted in a writing experience that starkly contrasted with their struggles with process model approaches to
writing in their courses, and these efforts suggest ways of valuing critical pedagogy as neurodiverse. Freire (1976) recommends the use of “‘generative themes,’ whose syllabic elements offer, through re-combination, the creation of new words” (p. 623). Jen described a list of words generated by her various fan fiction communities that were used to inspire writers collaborating in social writing circles. These lists, similar to the “generative themes” that Freire recommends, resulted in dozens of pages of creative writing for Jen that connected word and world—a sharp contrast to her essays that fell below the required number of pages in her writing class. The lists of dates and maps Jon created for his historical fiction project, although they would not be valued in a typical writing course, are also akin to Freire’s generative themes. These lists often inspired and structured the longer-form writing in his historical fiction project. He did not have trouble elaborating or “filling in details” for his real-world audience in this project as he did with his essay revisions, because he saw a dynamic relationship between his writing and world.

The worlds Jen created outside of her writing class particularly demonstrate the possibilities for neurodiverse students when their literacies are socially accepted and valued as “socially meaningful.” Jen disliked peer review and struggled with revision in class, yet thrived on feedback in her fan fiction communities. She explained, “Peers just can’t review very well. . . . I just do it because I have to. Everyone probably feels like that.” Regarding reading comments from peer review, she noted some trepidation: “Sometimes I read them and do what I think I want to do and sometimes I just ignore them. . . . I don’t like criticism because I take it too personally and it will upset me too much.” However, in her fan fiction communities, where her writing was socially accepted and valued, Jen enjoyed receiving feedback from others. In this space, trust and openness formed a productive context for writing, whereas in the classroom, fear and avoidance shut down possibilities. The sense of social acceptance that Jen felt in her online fiction communities fostered a better attitude toward writing, especially revision: “I kinda take a concept and work it in my head. . . . Even after writing parts of the story down, things will change as the characters tell me things or correct me or I end up doing research that would require change.” In online spaces where her writing was valued, revision happened much more fluidly for her.

**Insight and Listening: Supporting the Literacies of ASD Students**

Jen struggled to communicate in class discussion, especially with topics she perceived as emotional. Regarding emotion, she resisted the stereotype of the coldly logical AS person, stating, “it’s just hard for me to translate it into words . . . because I can’t come up with the right words.” To avoid getting too emotional in class, Jen usually chose to pass as neurotypical: “In class I just know I can just be there and stuff and pass, although sometimes I shout out and answer when I’m not supposed to.” Jen’s insight on passing can be understood on two levels. Jen felt pressure to pass as neurotypical in a classroom based primarily on neurotypical approaches to writing and teaching. Although Jen admitted to procrastinating, it is possible to see her time mismanagement as a critical response to a neurotypical classroom
that did not suit her abilities. Her struggles with topic selection, writer’s block, peer review, and handing papers in on time, in this light, seem less the actions of an apathetic or unsuccessful student and more the response of a talented writing student who does not feel supported in a neurotypical writing classroom. Jen also passed, of course, with the grade of C, yet this assessment does not reflect what she identified as her greatest strengths: her love of writing, her creativity as a fiction writer, and her talents as a social writer.

Jon’s homeschool curriculum enabled him to succeed more in his writing course. His instructor was able to tailor the writing program’s assignments to his interests so that Jon could exercise some of his strengths as a socially involved writer. He planned on taking an honors writing course in his next semester. Yet Jon, like Jen, did not enjoy his class as much as his love of writing outside of class—particularly evident in his historical fiction project—would suggest.

Several adjustments might have supported Jon and Jen more in their courses. More freedom with topic selection, opportunities for semester-long projects, flexible due dates, mixed-genre or multimodal formats for assignments, online and/or asynchronous peer review, and additional opportunities for one-on-one online or face-to-face meetings with teachers might have been beneficial for Jen and Jon. Both Jen and Jon enjoyed writing fiction on topics of their own choosing far more than anything they wrote for their courses. In Freirian spirit, they created worlds with their words, but these worlds existed outside of their course experience.

To recognize the potentials of ASD students, it is necessary to value their literacies as social and socially meaningful. Writing teachers can support students like Jen and Jon by valuing the social activities of writing that they participate in outside of the classroom. Teachers can also invite ASD students to bring their social literacies into the classroom by modifying assignments. Fan fiction writing communities, for example, are sites of experimentation and cross-genre innovation for many writers (Black, 2009). Teachers could provide students with the option of completing a peer-review exercise in a fan fiction writing community rather than in the traditional classroom setting.

There are also more expansive ways to better accommodate ASD students. These approaches require asking deeper questions of writing pedagogy. Heilker and Yergeau (2011) argue that “autism itself is a rhetoric,” albeit one that “we may not have encountered or recognized frequently in the past nor value in academic contexts,” but since it is a rhetoric, “we are beholden to respond to it with cultural sensitivity, ethical care and pedagogical complexity” (p. 487). A complex pedagogical response means not only making structural adjustments, but also listening to students to find ways of honoring the variety of neurodiverse social literacies and creative approaches that ASD students bring to the classroom.

In many ways, this effort is already underway. Universal Design approaches to learning (Ribble, 2011), visual pedagogies (Cunningham, 2011), and multimodal approaches (Yergeau et al., 2013) are likely to benefit ASD students. In addition, post-process theories and genre-blended approaches may also invite more participation from neurodiverse students. Many possibilities are available for better supporting the literacies of students on the autism spectrum through these ap-
proaches, as long as the insights of ASD students are prioritized and valued in pedagogical conversations about them.

Writing teachers know that when the social literacies of students are valued in the classroom, there is a better chance that students will excel. For ASD students, the stakes are particularly high in this regard because they have so often been stereotyped as asocial. The stereotypes of ASD students have real-world consequences, particularly in higher education; less than 35% of ASD youth polled in a recent study had even attended college (Shattuck et al., 2012, p. 1045). Jen’s experience of dropping out of an urban university the year before reenrolling at a different school attests to the challenges that neurodiverse students face. These challenges can begin to be addressed by listening to the insights of neurodiverse students. Although the perspectives of students with ASD have often been ignored in conversations about them, my participants were eager to collaborate. Self-identified ASD students have much to express about their university experiences (Prince-Hughes, 2002). ASD students can succeed in college classrooms, and writing teachers can resist damaging stereotypes by being receptive to the range of social literacies that neurodiverse students bring to the classroom.

When I asked Jen what she would want writing teachers to do to better accommodate AS students, she simply said, “Talk to us. Listen to us.” As Jen suggested, a stance of openness or “rhetorical listening” (Ratcliffe, 2005) may be the most beneficial perspective for both students and teachers to consider when a student self-identifies with ASD or discloses it to a teacher. This stance contrasts sharply with the investigative spirit of the “diagnostic treasure hunts” (Price, 2011, p. 55) that teachers sometimes undertake. The ethical pedagogical response is to listen to students and value their insights, a response that works in direct resistance to the deficit-based assumptions and stereotypes that persist about the abilities of ASD writers.

NOTES
1. Contributions from Wills (2011) and Freeman (2011) feature autistic students, although they are primarily teacher accounts.
2. This approach reflects the difference that Newkirk (1992) draws between “causative” and “transacted” elements (p. 131).
4. Since my participants explicitly identified as having AS, I choose the more specific term AS when referring to them, but typically use broader terms such as ASD students to refer to the larger conversation or other students with ASD. I am following the preference of many autistics to use identity-first rather than person-first language, although, like many in the autism community, I challenge the assumption that autism is a “disorder.”
5. This normative assumption has been recognized, although not necessarily in ways that are helpful to ASD students. Cognitive process theories of writing, for example, that address the linearity of the process model also can be seen to rest on neurotypical assumptions.
6. Additional examples of social writing and ASD culture include Straus (2013), Loud Hands (Bascom, 2012), ASAN, and http://www.wrongplanet.net.
REFERENCES


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