

Supporting neurodiverse students

When former Glasgow School of Art student **James Robertson** joined the GSA as a trainee librarian recently, he proposed practical changes to the library to better accommodate students with learning differences such as dyslexia and autism.

I AM an autistic librarian at Glasgow School of Art and have been working with my colleagues in learning resources and learning support to implement a neurodiversity strategy to support students with learning differences within the library. Personally, libraries have always been safe environments for me, a place where I could learn at my own pace, but perhaps more importantly, they were places of solace and I think that is a good thing for a library to be. Sometimes I would just go there for the calmness of the environment and for the simple pleasure of seeing books in rows. A library environment is somewhat predictable with relatively low noise levels, logical layout (usually), they are full of information to absorb, and finding alone time is relatively easy; so by default they are rather accommodating to autistic people like myself. Of course, not all library environments are the same and for some they can be quite uncomfortable places to be.

Support for neurodiverse students

Neurodiversity encompasses: autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADHD, Meares-Irlen Syndrome, OCD among many other cognitive differences including mental illness, and it is important to acknowledge that we cannot fully support them all. Financially and practically, it is too great a challenge. However, there are certain things



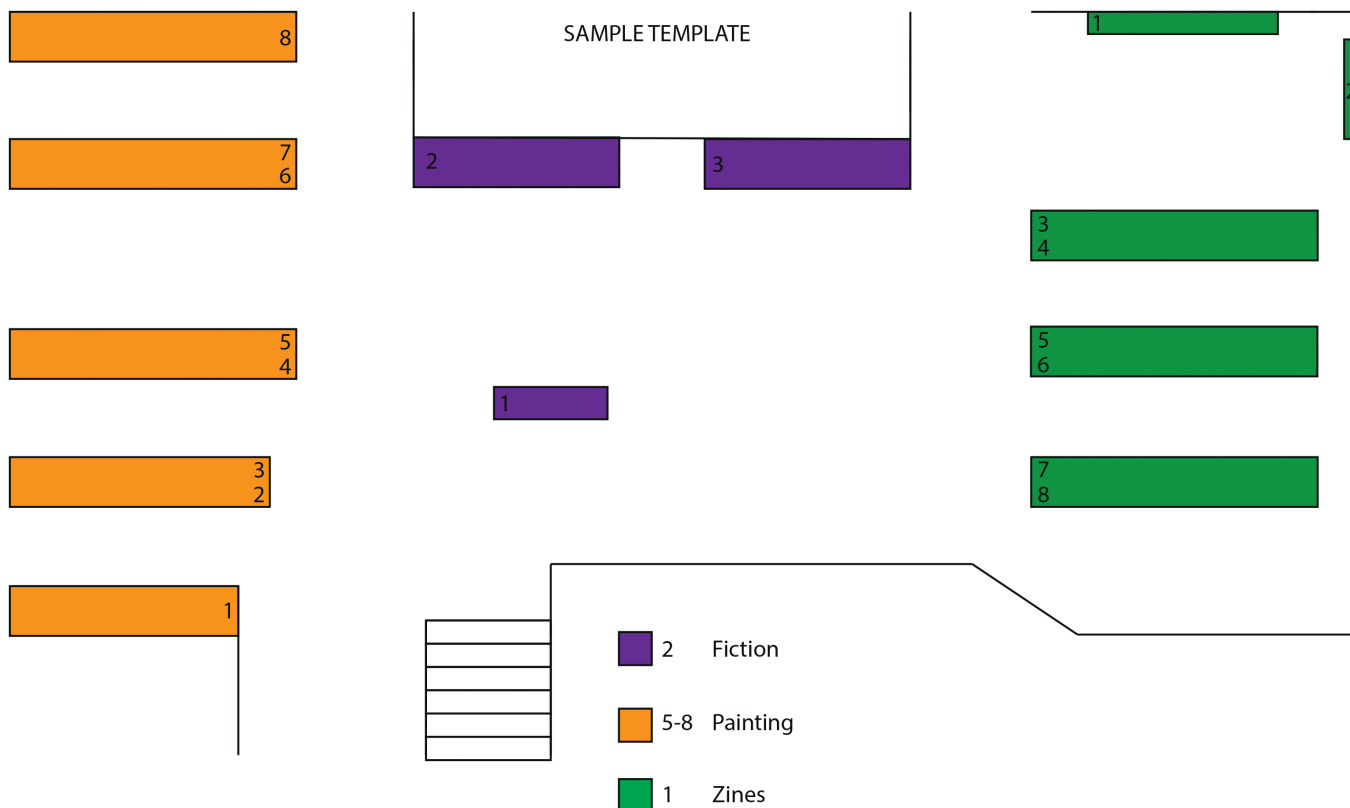
James Robertson (J.Robertson@gsa.ac.uk) is Neurodiversity Librarian at Glasgow School of Art.

that we can do to ensure that we provide a more accommodating support system for our neurodiverse students, many of whom suffer from the dreaded library anxiety.

Taking our already popular subject guides as a template, we designed a neurodiversity guide which will be available alongside subject guides at the library entrance and on a designated neurodiversity page of the library's site. Certain aspects of the guide will inevitably help all of our students, including those who chose not to disclose on their application, those who suspect they are neurodiverse or simply those who are just too shy to ask for help.

Dewey enigma

The first section of the guide aims to tackle classmarks. It is the main stressor



Colour is used on mapping to help students find their way around.

for many of our students and for many library patrons in general. Our library staff have been working to simplify the Dewey system and it has certainly become much simpler to navigate, but for many it remains an enigma. To use a seemingly random bunch of numbers to locate a single item among thousands can be cause enough for anxiety and stress and be the one thing that stops someone visiting the library again. To combat this, we created a simple subject area map that can be used without the need of classification marks. By colour coding the library, it breaks down the collection into manageable schemes on each floor. If you select a subject on the mezzanine such as Zines, it will be appointed a colour and a number. In this instance it is GREEN 1. You can then follow the map to the corresponding shelf. Once there, you can browse or consult the classmarks and find a specific item. As it is an art school, we opted to make use of the colour wheel; the ground floor representing the primary colours red, yellow and blue, and the mezzanine referencing the secondary colours: orange, purple and green. Another advantage of the subject map is that it can be used by students with dyscalculia who have significant difficulty in reading and understanding classmarks. The fonts used on the map and on the shelving are printed in a dyslexia-friendly font.

Designated librarian

The next section of the guide concentrates on direct engagement with library staff,

another common source of anxiety. When I first entered GSA library as a student in 1996, I immediately felt at home and for the most part I felt safe and secure, that is until I had a question that only a librarian could answer. That was a big problem. Social interaction can be challenging for people on the spectrum and to simply ask a question can cause significant stress. I needed a librarian that was quiet, that wouldn't engage in small talk, who didn't smile too much, that wouldn't stare into my eyes; I needed someone efficient that could find me exactly what I need and then leave me alone. I found two librarians that I came to rely on without them even knowing it and I stuck with them for four years.

Tactics such as this are often used by the neurodiverse community as it creates a familiarity and a fixed point of reliability. To remove such stressors, we implemented a designated librarian page for neurodiverse students which included a photograph of the librarian and contact details. The main services provided were designed to tackle the most problematic and anxiety inducing aspects of a library visit and include:

Designated Librarian: All our librarians are friendly and always happy to help, but some students may prefer the familiarity of a designated librarian who will be their point of contact throughout their studies.

Individual inductions: I will introduce you to the library and support you during your visit so that you feel safe, can assess

the environment and gain the confidence to visit independently.

Catalogue searches: I can assist you with catalogue and database searches.

Dissertation support: Proofreading of bibliographies and footnotes.

Borrowing: Should you need particular items from the library, I can retrieve them for you and have them ready for you to collect.

Meet ups: I can visit you in your studio and we can work out what items you need and I will collect them and deliver them to you.

Learning aids

In addition, we will be including new learning aids that can be borrowed from the library desk. Over recent years GSA have been increasing their e-book collection and opt for them in place of print when available, but unless every book in the library can be downloaded, then our dyslexic students are still unable to access the majority of our collection. To combat this, we will be implementing a trial run with pen readers. These devices scan the text and read it back to you or store it to be listened to at a later date. Read and Write Gold will also be installed on select computers in the library and will be highlighted by our neurodiversity owls logo. Coloured overlays and reading rulers will also be available for

students with dyslexia and Meares-Irlen syndrome and we will have noise canceling headphones which can be borrowed on library cards.

Silent sensory room

Many larger libraries have designated silent study rooms or even floors, but GSA is a small library and there is an increasing demand for further study space, so we had to devise a way to create a space that would benefit our neurodiverse students without reducing existing study spaces. Fortunately, we had a small group study room located in a quiet corner of the library which was an ideal location. Work has now begun on transforming it into a silent reading room and sensory space. Subdued reading lamps will be installed, there will be no desks only soft furnishings like beanbags and large cushions and most importantly, no technology. It is an escape room of sorts, a place for self-care in which you make your own time and can relax and just read. It will also double up as a bookable sensory room where students can lie back immersed in the glow of colour changing lights and regulate their emotions or even meditate. Overall, it will be a space to nurture good mental health.

Guide as toolkit

In the coming months, we will be overhauling our webpage in accordance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and developing a neurodiversity reading list for the new academic year. We will continue to work with Learning Support and implement a referral system whereby all neurodiverse students that register will be provided with the guide, and given



permission, will be connected to neurodiversity support at the library. We received very positive feedback and suggestions from the neurodiverse students who attended our focus group and we will implement as the academic year continues. The guide was designed to be simple and easy to adapt making it an ideal toolkit for other libraries to employ.

Eliminating anxiety

Amid all the chaos of the last year following the fire that decimated the Mackintosh building and the ensuing campus-wide disruption, GSA library has continued to

Neurodiversity owl logos will guide students to services and tools in the library.

deliver a great service to our students and in our Learning Resources Annual Student Survey for 2018/19, we received our highest level of student satisfaction. By continuing to develop our working relationship with Learning Support through our neurodiversity strategy, we will build upon this success and strive to eliminate the dreaded library anxiety. **IP**