

Autism as a facet of experience, not a limit

March 28 2014, by Chuck Leddy



“In special education, there’s too much emphasis placed on the deficit and not enough on the strength,” said the Boston-born Temple Grandin at Askwith Hall. Credit: Melanie Rieders

Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science at Colorado State, brought her experience with autism, with which she was diagnosed at age 2, and insights from years of activism to a talk at the Graduate School of Education (GSE) Wednesday.

One of those insights: Diagnostic labels have their limits. "In [special](#)

[education](#), there's too much emphasis placed on the deficit and not enough on the strength," said the Boston-born Grandin at Askwith Hall. "I'm seeing a lot of 10-year-olds getting completely hung up on their autism, caught up in a handicapped mentality."

Much of Grandin's activism has focused on connecting autistics with education and careers. "I like to think about how the different kinds of minds can work together and complement each other." Speaking at length about her own "different thinking," she said, "my thinking is bottom-up," grounded in specific details.

"When I think about a cathedral, I see a series of specific cathedrals," not an archetype. "People who think in words tend to 'over-abstractify' the world too much and miss the details."

Grandin brought along two brain scans to illustrate her much larger circuitry for visual thinking compared with the average brain: "Being a visual thinker has really helped me in designing livestock handling facilities. Animals are sensory-based learners," she said.

(The 2010 HBO movie "Temple Grandin," with Claire Danes in the title role, showed how Grandin crawled through an existing livestock facility to understand how cattle experienced moving through the chutes, and then integrated her sensory-based insights into her own designs.)

Shifting her focus to the classroom, Grandin offered several suggestions for educating students with autism or unconventional learning styles. "Kids on the spectrum tend to get fixated on the things they like," she said. "You need to use those fixations to teach kids different subjects." If a child is fixated on airplanes, Grandin said, the teacher might use planes to illustrate lessons in physics, engineering, history, and more.

Mentors are also important. A particular teacher sparked her interest in

science, Grandin said. Educators need to nudge students "slightly out of their comfort zone" to challenge them while providing support.

Autistic children also need responsibilities and tasks—paper-route-type jobs—"to build work skills," she said. Adults can't "allow kids to become recluses playing video games by themselves all day."

Near the end of her talk, Grandin offered a bit of advice to autistic people in the job market: "You need to sell your work, not yourself. Create a portfolio to show your work and carry it around with you." It was a practical note keeping with her wider message, that those with "different thinking" have much to offer.

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