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Transcription Brigitte Clavette, NBCCD

Introduction: A video in which Brigitte Clavette of NBCC talks about her experiences in accommodating students with mental health disorders.

How did you accommodate a student with a disability in your class?

I've had a number of occasions where I've had to accommodate somebody because of situations, their lives or whatever and not always easy for me to discern what was going on or what was happening so with the lack of training, because I'm a metalsmith—I run a metal studio, jewelry metal arts in a creative environment, it's not always easy to notice what is coming at me. So in a couple of cases, one case was a person who had self-harm issues in addition to her problems. It became so chronic that at one point it came to my attention—I kind of felt it, I started to see scars and things and I was very disturbed by that and I didn't know how to deal with that and at one point it was her reaching out to me saying, "I see blades there," and we need blades, we need very sharp instruments in our studio and I had to start to think about how am I going to be able to help her without removing her from the situation. So I started to remove the blades, so people all of a sudden had to start signing out the blades. It was very difficult to handle this one in particular because I didn't want to tell the class this is the reason but people started to figure it out, and there were health and safety issues as well attached to that. So, because I make them sign off on the first class, for example, about health and safety rules and about disclosure if they have any issues that they would like to share with us for their safety and the safety of others, it gives me permission sometime to approach them and say, "You know what, I'm feeling that there is something, would you like to talk about it." That's my way of approach, because I'm not trained that way. I do hammers, I solder. This stuff about how to recognize somebody's crisis is not always easy for me. And then I have a person also who has Asperger's Syndrome and then at first, I didn't realize what it was, except for tears and tears and tears and so her and I had to develop a system. At first it was always, my office, my office, cry, cry and I couldn't understand what had set her off. Eventually she disclosed to me and, without too much guidance, we tried to figure out language, so I asked her what could I do for her, and how could she try to help me to identify when something was starting to set her off. So we developed a bit of a language with her eyes sometimes, or sometimes she would just say, "no" and sometimes I would try to push her, too. It became a very interesting relationship, trying to make her maybe make an effort. Maybe that's not the right word to approach it but I said many times, "There are twelve in a class, it's not written on your forehead, I forget that you had those issues." So, I've learned to manage the class around this person. Now, fortunately for me, and for a lot of her classmates, she at one point after a crisis decided to self-disclose and there was a fabulous thing that happened. People said, "Oh, my God, this person is so nice, we didn't know why she was being so cranky" or whatever and eventually it created a fantastic learning environment for everybody where everybody was very protective and also very accommodating, for lack of a better word.

How was the experience from your perspective?

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It's always a surprise because I went to Art College, I don't have psychology background and a lot of things are obvious. Last week I had somebody who smelled like alcohol in the morning and so it was a hangover and I told him that he shouldn't be working in the studio and he understands the rules. There are things that you can see—that we're used to, people maybe with drugs or something. But even somebody sometimes with physical health issues that they are not bringing to the front, it's hard to discern, and I'm not in a lecturing capacity where I'm sitting, watching 30 passive people and I can start to see that something is going wrong. We're moving, we're busy, we're noisy, we're making sounds and noise and dirt and all of a sudden you catch that something may not be right, so for me, trying to find out sometimes, it's saying, "Listen, you know, I'm noticing that something's not quite right. Would you like to talk about it?" Plus, I happen to be the chief advisor to everybody in the studio—that's 24 people this year, it's a lot. Sometimes I'll say, "Look, you've signed off on the health and safety rules, I'm a little concerned." So there's this kind of thing where I can sometimes find out, but not against their will. They don't have to tell me anything. And then, if it becomes untenable, I just say, "I'm sorry, you have to go see our counsellor. I can recommend you to go to the mental health clinic." There are a number of things that we do on a daily basis—well, not daily, hopefully, that we can accommodate and help these people. And there are times when I have to basically shrug and say, "I'm sorry, this is the best I can do," give them a hug and say, "You've got to go get some help." There are times that I can just do it myself and by usually listening to people and being kind.

What would you say to a colleague who will have a student with a disability in his or her class?

Well, it happens sometimes where I'm advisor to students in the metal studio and they have to go take a course in drawing or elsewhere and there are moments where there are anxiety or there are issues that have to be dealt with so I give them what works for me or how I've approached a student, we discuss it a little bit. Sometimes it's not my place to discuss it with them, so I have to go through the counsellor that we have in the college but if it's somebody casually, like somebody who works with me in the studio and we share the student in the various courses, I will be very honest and I will say, "Don't forget that when you reach out to teach these certain types of things, you've got to try to keep in mind that somebody may respond to those sounds not in a good way and it's your job to try to maintain the classroom." Try to find the balance, how to make sure that the classroom of adults can get their needs met with the tools that they need for their job at the same time as to not necessarily ignore or forget the ones that need that special bit of attention. It's not easy, it's certainly not easy. It's been the number of I would say the past five, seven years—I have been teaching at the college (it's going to be 28 years soon), the past five, seven years I've seen a rise in more complex communication and things. I don't know what to call them—excuse my ignorance but I don't know—but there are a lot more anxiety in the younger people and it's complex. And it's out. Out is good, but then people like me have to learn how to work with that.