

SPECTRUM SKILLSHARE

Spectrum Skillshare is a collaborative learning experience that will connect autistic people* with mentors who are also on the spectrum to help them with education, employment and other life skills. Spectrum Skillshare will be geared towards adults in their 20s and 30s, working with mentors of any age. The idea draws inspiration from collaborative learning projects directed by artists and crafters to share skills, ideas and inspiration with the rest of the community (often called 'skillshares'), mentoring initiatives directed towards younger people on the spectrum, and life-skills trainings offered by non-profits. What sets Spectrum Skillshare is that it is led by, and is designed for, people on the autistic spectrum, and combines traditional mentoring with the skillshare concept.

The heart and soul of Spectrum Skillshare are one-on-one meetings between mentors and mentees, and workshops to teach other autistic people in the community about the skills they've discussed during their one-on-one sessions.

Our goal is to have two pairs of partners, with a total of four participants, all chosen by the end of October. After two months' worth of meetings, participants will begin planning a set of workshops to present to other autistic people to share what they have learned and refined during their discussion. These workshops will be held once monthly from January to April.

*Autistic self-advocates tend to prefer *identity-first language* ('autistic people') over person-first language ('people with autism'). <http://autisticadvocacy.org/home/about-asan/identity-first-language/>

Step 1: Research and information-gathering - July/August

The beginning of the Spectrum Skillshare project will involve information-gathering, which includes research and conversation with experts about mentoring, life-skills training, skillshares and community education. Preliminary steps will also involve the creation of the Spectrum Skillshare visual identity - logo, typography, website and other design - to create a cohesive image for the project. Important questions include implementation, recruitment, vetting candidates, sustainability and monitoring participants' progress.

Step 2: Recruitment - August/September

We will start recruiting participants in August and September, using a variety of methods: reaching out to self-advocates, making use of personal networks and social media. This will entail the following steps:

- Creating a questionnaire asking potential mentors and mentees about their time commitments, personal interests, areas of expertise, areas of improvement and other relevant questions - as well as the typical personal data like name, address, age etc.
- Spreading the word about the project to various autism and disability non-profits, as well as other places in the community (for example, ASAN, AANE, BCIL, local universities)
- Creating social media presence - Facebook page, Tumblr blog

Step 3: Vetting and selection - September/October

Reference and background checks

After potential participants have submitted their applications, Spectrum Skillshare will work to the best of their ability to protect participants by conducting reference and background checks. Finalists will need to have at least one professional reference and one personal reference — either via letters of reference or contacting references listed on a mentor's application — and possibly undergo a CORI criminal background check.

Selection

After we have all the finalists' references and possible background checks, we will select our final four participants. Selection will be based on matches between people's interests and experiences and their qualifications as a mentor. Successful participants will be contacted and introduced to their partners. Applicants who were not selected to be mentors or mentees for this cycle will be invited to apply for the 2016-2017 cycle and to participate in the open workshops starting in February.

Orientation and handbooks

Mentors will be required to attend an orientation that outlines the goals of Spectrum Skillshare. They will also receive a handbook that contains the same information presented at the orientation, along with more detailed information regarding rules, mediation processes and procedures for rule violations. Mentees will receive a similar handbook, with some additional information about contacting Spectrum Skillshare if they feel their safety is threatened. The orientation won't just be rules and regulations, however; it will also serve as the kick-off party for Spectrum Skillshare, where participants can get to know each other.

Launch! October - November

Once the mentors have been selected, they will be matched based on their interests & expertise. For example, we would match somebody with concerns about the workforce with somebody who has had success in the workplace, or somebody who requires government benefits like SSI and Medicaid with a mentor with extensive experience dealing with that sort of bureaucracy.

Mentors should schedule their first meetings with their mentees and have them contact us so we can know they are meeting. We will check in with our mentors and mentees after they've held their first meetings. Mentors and mentees should meet in person at least once a month (if this isn't always possible, a Skype or Google Hangouts video chat can occasionally substitute) and communicate weekly via email, instant message, video chat, phone or text message. Participants will write weekly journal entries about their experiences. There will also be a monthly questionnaire that measures their engagement and satisfaction with the project, possibly administered via SurveyMonkey.

Community Engagement - December - April

During the months of December and April, mentors and mentees will continue to meet monthly and communicate weekly. In January, they will start planning the open workshops - the public "skillshare" portion of the project. There will be three workshops - in February, March and April - that will be about topics selected by the mentors and mentees as a group, where they will create an hour-long presentation. Format will be decided by all of us as a group, though I would prefer if these were treated as interactive workshops where participants will be engaged in activities in order to reinforce their learning. We will also have periodic meetings between all mentors and mentees to build relationships between everyone involved in Spectrum Skillshare (perhaps monthly or bi-monthly).

Wrapping It Up - April - July

People who will not be continuing in the mentor/mentee relationship In May will go through a "debriefing" process, where they discuss what worked and what didn't, and will be provided some degree of closure so that mentees in particular don't feel as though they have been left hanging at the end of their participation in Spectrum Skillshare.

There will be a final wrap-up/closing celebration in May, and there will also be a presentation about the project and the impact that it has had on the participants, both through individual mentoring meetings and the workshops.

I am strongly considering potentially turning this project into a paper if I can collect enough data from participants and create a working research methodology, considering the dearth of information regarding autistic adults and the effectiveness of mentoring.

Resources

(currently not put in particular categories, but these were all sources I looked at to find out how previous mentoring partnerships worked.)

Mentoring

Partners for Youth with Disabilities' Best Practices Guide:

<http://www.pyd.org/editor/images/Best-Practices-Guide-With-Graphics.pdf>

Indiana University - working with children <http://www.indiana.edu/~iubhonor/honorvol/Autism.php>

Cygnets Project at London South Bank University, study currently underway regarding the efficacy of mentoring for autistic students <http://researchautism.net/cygnets-project> <https://www.lsbu.ac.uk/about-us/news/mentoring-project-for-young-people-on-the-autism-spectrum> (and one of the researchers is on the spectrum himself)

The National Autistic Society's guide for student mentors (mostly written for non-autistic mentors, but some of the advice is still helpful: <http://www.autism.org.uk/studentmentors>)

<http://mentor.unm.edu/members/articles/664/Self-Advocacy-and-College-Satisfaction-in-Autism-Focused-College-Support-Programs>

<http://www.gcu.ac.uk/student/disability/additionalservicesandfacilities/studentmentorsautismaspergers/>

<http://www.wku.edu/kellyautismprogram/collegeandcircleofsupport.php>

Rochester Institute of Technology: <http://www.rit.edu/studentaffairs/ssp/info.php#accordion-program-enrollment>

UK's National Mental Health Foundation about peer support http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/need_2_know_peer_support1.pdf (peer mentoring, cross disability)

University of Wisconsin: <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/hrtw/PPM.pdf> (peer mentoring, cross disability)

Minnesota <http://www.mcil-mn.org/index.php/programs/peer-mentoring> Peer mentoring (cross disability)

https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/people_helping_people.pdf

<http://life.curtin.edu.au/health-and-wellbeing/autism-related-conditions-peer-mentoring.htm>

Curtin University, Western Australia, Australia

<http://www.wiltshirecil.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=196> Wiltshire CIL

<http://monash.edu/social-justice/disability/peer.html> Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

LIFTT in Montana: <http://www.liftt.org/programs-services/peer-mentoring/>

West Virginia - Mountain State CIL: <http://www.mtstcil.org/services/peer.html>

Darlington (UK) CIL <http://www.darlingtondisability.org/centreliving/centreliving.html>

Suncoast CIL (in Florida) <http://scil4u.org/core-services/peer-mentoring/>

Access North (Minnesota): <http://www.accessnorth.net/services/ilservices.html>

Spain

UMass Lowell <http://faculty.uml.edu/ahillier/StudenttoStudentMentoringProgram.htm>

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/work-based-learning> National Collaborative for Work and Disability