

Autism and Academic Writing at University: A Pilot Study

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Goals, Purpose and Benefits

- To explore the experiences which autistic undergraduate students report in acquiring academic writing
- To better understand the needs of this growing population on university campuses in order to support them more effectively
- **Perspectives:**
 - Previous research has been largely quantitative, decontextual and focused on the “deficit” model in younger students
 - Social context of writing and the voices of the students themselves
 - Autism as a rhetorical “way of being” (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011; Bazerman, 1997, p. 3)

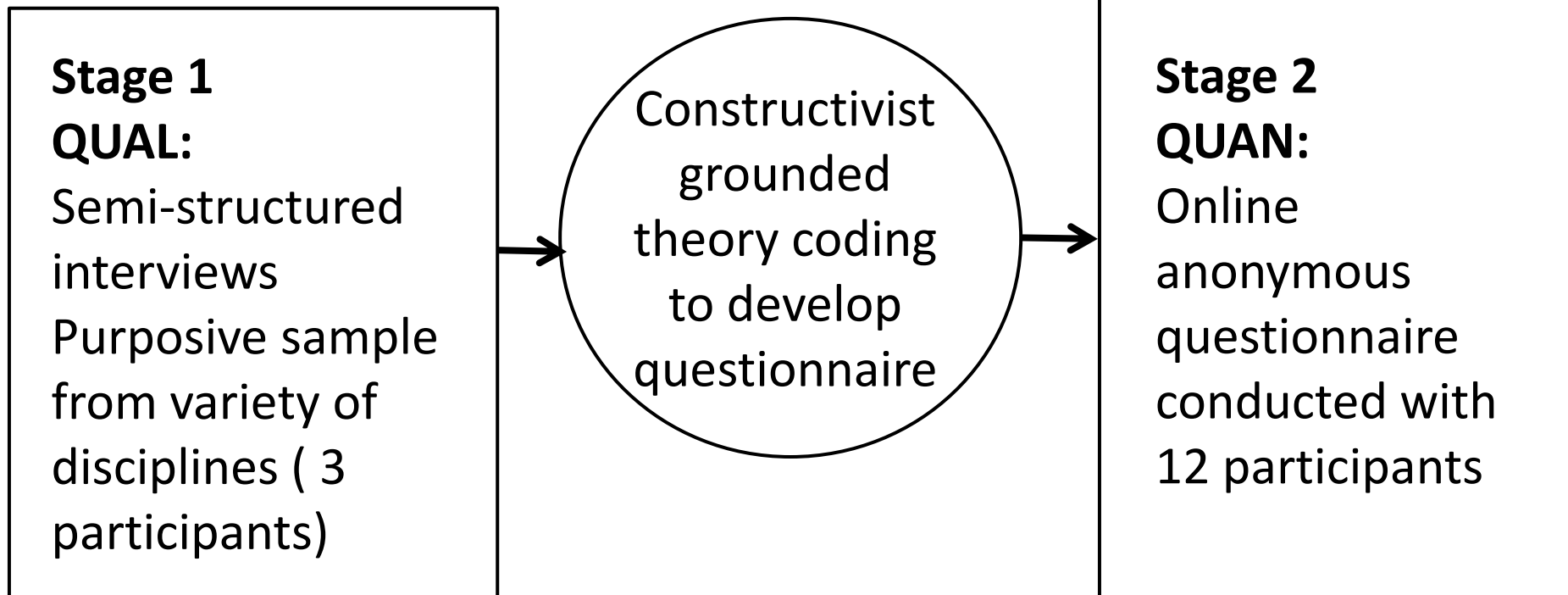
Previous Theoretical Frameworks

- **Weak Central Coherence Theory** (Frith & Happe, 1994); **Enhanced Perceptual Functioning** (Mottron, et al., (2006, 2013) ✓
 - Hyperfocus on details
 - Difficulties with main ideas
- **Theory of Mind** (Baron-Cohen, 1999) ✓
 - Awareness of reader/interlocutor
 - Awareness of self/difficulties with personal reflections
- **Executive Dysfunction Syndrome** (Hill, 2004) ✓
 - Maintaining focus
 - Inhibiting irrelevant information
 - Organization, planning

Research Questions

- What experiences do autistic undergraduate students report in learning academic writing?
- Does a history of speech and language challenges as children affect undergraduates students' experiences in learning academic writing?

Exploratory Sequential Design



Findings

- Precocious, voracious reading skills
- Preference for content and details in writing
- Avoidance of verbal interactions; strongly participative in class
- Dislike for personal reflective writing
- Limited awareness of needs of the reader/interlocutor; writer-based prose
- Differences in thinking
- Preference for explicit, individualized instruction

A Fresh Theoretical Lens

- Genre Theory
 - Primary and secondary genres (Bakhtin, 1986)
 - Uptakes (Freadman, 1994)
 - Addressivity (Bakhtin, 1986)
- Situated Learning (contextualized)
 - Guided participation (Rogoff, 1990)
 - Role of chat rooms?

Discussion: Primary and Secondary Genres (Bakhtin, 1986)

- Primary genres mostly acquired through reading dominated by restricted interests
- Secondary genres rich in content and over-detailed, but lack personal response/reflection

Questions:

- Does lack of experience with social interaction as part of primary genre development lead to different ways of writing (weak sense of otherness)?
- Does writing by undergraduates with autism serve a different purpose (“information dump”), or more positively a new rhetoric?

Uptake and Addressivity

- “Monologuing” is dominant style
- Students continue to struggle with uptakes (Freadman, 1994) in face-to-face communication
- Timing of uptakes may be part of the challenges, particularly in primary genres.
- Strong sense of writing without reference to audience or addressivity (Bakhtin, 1986)

Insights from Stage 2 Questionnaire

Explored three demographic characteristics:

- Gender
- Choice of major subject
- History of speech/language delays

Limitations

- Highly heterogeneous population (Price, 2012). Some skew in participants in Stage 1 (2/3 gifted; highly motivated writers; all males)
- Pilot study with insufficient N to date. Plan to do more interviews and invite more students to participate in the online questionnaire.
- Greater triangulation of data is required e.g. perspectives of academic supervisors and professors as well as analysis of writing samples.

Implications and Conclusion

- Early reading proficiency associated with decreased opportunities to practice primary genres in verbal, interactive social spaces may lead to reduced sense of audience and ability to perform in timely manner in uptakes; chat rooms; value of different rhetorical “ways of being”
- Preference for details, facts and content information in written, secondary genres with challenges in sense of audience or addressivity; different rhetorical “ways of being”
- Preference for individual, dyadic supports from professors to guide acquisition of academic writing genres (especially in males)

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Thank you.

Questions?

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