

# Towards a Socio-cultural, Non-deficit Perspective on Academic Writing by Autistic University Students – September, 2019

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“Nothing about us, without us” (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2018)

“If you meet one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” (Silberman, 2015)

## Definitions of Terms:

**Autism:** Characterized by

- Persistent deficits in social communication across a variety of contexts (*reciprocity, nonverbal communication, development/maintenance of social relationships*)
- Restricted, repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

**Ableism:** “the practices and dominant attitudes in society that devalue and limit the potential of persons with disabilities” (Stop Ableism, About page, n.d.)

**Neurodiversity:** the concept that neurological differences (such as autism) are just part of human variation and do not need a cure (Silberman, 2015)

**Reflexivity:** “an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher on every step of the research process” (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation., n.d., Reflexivity page).

**Community-Based Participatory Research:** A research methodology which “engages researchers and community members in a reciprocal process of learning and capacity building, in order to generate knowledge and foster social change through cycles of action and critical reflection on both the process and outcomes of the project” (Raymaker and Nicolaidis, 2013, p.177).

**Genre:** Recurrent, “stabilized-for-now” responses to needs within recurrent social situations; social action, ways of being (Bakhtin, 1986; Bazerman 1997; Miller, 1984; Schryer, 2002).

**Rhetorical Genre Studies:** Developed from Miller’s (1984) ideas of recurrent and typified responses to recurrent social situations with an emphasis on the social context of textual responses where genre is seen both as a form and action (Paré & Smart, 1994; Schryer, 2002).

**Rhetorical situation:** “a natural contexts of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strong invites utterance” (Bitzer, 1968, p.5)

**Primary genre:** Simple, usually verbal types of utterances linked to their immediate contexts which are subsumed into higher level secondary genres

**Secondary genre:** Complex, usually written genres such as commentaries, literary genres and academic writing which re-contextualize primary genres

**Exigence:** A social need which, when recognized or determined, results in a response in a communication partner.

**Uptake:** responses to exigence or interlocutor’s social needs within genres and ceremonials (Freadman, 1994)

**Addressivity:** An essential characteristic of an utterance in that the utterance is always within an interaction and directed towards another person (Bakhtin, 1986).

## Emergent Themes from Semi-structured Interviews

### **Reading Experiences:**

- **Early and voracious reading practices instead of socially/verbally interacting (cf: unique developmental trajectory through verbal and written communication)**
  - “I was practically born reading.”
  - “It was mostly not me who initiated most social interactions at that age [preschool] but I read.”

- **Preference for content information/facts/details; dislike for personal reflective writing/reading fiction**
  - "I love information; I've been called the walking encyclopedia."
  - "I talk about facts of my life, but I talk about what I think, not what I feel because it's not there, it's not present for me, it's not important to me."

#### **Writing Experiences:**

- **Differences in formulating verbal/written responses**
  - "It's like I had a thought but then I don't have the words to describe what I'm thinking, like fast enough."
  - "I think faster than I talk/write."
  - "No, it's just like--I only had--at the time I only had one thought but it was just like, trying to figure out "
- **Limited awareness of needs of the reader/interlocutor**
  - "I've never thought of an audience much before. I always think about purpose and meaning, what does this story mean – that kind of helps me write..."
  - "It's basically a monologue and both in verbal and written [the one thing] that I can do is monologue! I've had to work a lot on monologuing less."
- **Feeling overwhelmed internally by too many facts and connections leading to difficulties starting to write**
  - Reading knowledge leading to "a glut of concepts and ideas flooding your mind."
  - "You get overwhelmed by the rush of ideas and concepts and tangential relationships between other things and again, I just think, I would speculate that it just a bit more pronounced in people on the spectrum and it's harder for people on the spectrum to sort through those ideas quickly."
  - "Once you're overwhelmed, it's not easy to regain your focus or move on from it even."

#### **Social Experiences:**

- **Avoiding verbal social interactions because they are overwhelming and anxiety-provoking, although strongly participative in class (answering questions)**
  - "...other people you can see that when they meet, you can just watch them, just click. "It's in their eyes, it's in their voice – like their brain waves are synching. I don't necessarily do that."
  - " Every one of my teachers would tell you that I am one of the loudest, most participative students, almost too much so."
  - "It's exhausting."

#### **Ways of thinking/feeling:**

- **Differences in thinking**
  - "I've heard that, 'You think you're right about everything.' Well, of course, I do, why would you believe something if you don't think it's right?"
  - "Your fixation is impossible to break, impossible." (like repetitive behaviours in some autistic people)
- **Emotional responses**
  - "There's a popular misconception of autistic people being a-emotional and that's so bizarre!"
  - "The emotional responses of people on the spectrum are extreme: my joy is more joyous, my anger is more hateful, my depression is more depressing, like it's crushing."

- **Organizational skills**
  - “They suck.”
  - “It’s a fundamental difficulty with anxiety as well as organizing multiple tasks or ideas.”
  - “If I don’t write things down, they evaporate immediately, and I mean immediately!” “Or tell it to someone else, I cannot remember it.”
  - It may have to do with differences in autobiographical memory in some people with autism – “I’ll see someone neurotypical remember something and to me, it is a particularly impressive skill.”

**Useful pedagogical practices:**

- **Need for structure, clear expectations from one-to-one guided instruction from professors, especially regarding structure and limiting overabundance of details**
  - “I could write, what they considered really good idea-wise essays but there'd be sometimes problems in terms of writing too long...”
  - “as interesting as that was, you're not going to go that much into the weeds.”
  - “It’s too easy to be tangential with my brain; you have one thought and it leads to another thought and you forget immediately where that original thread came from.”
  - “Distractions happen all the time in a classroom; one-on-one means that someone can help you move on”
- **Value of autistic mentors for autistic students**
  - “I think autistic mentors are a really good idea. I had mentors (in the enriched support program) who had pervasive learning issues and they were invaluable; they shaped my university experience.”
  - “They were able to empathize, there was commonality. People who have shared the same experiences as you are better equipped to help you.”

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