

# Towards a Socio-Cultural, Non-Deficit Perspective on Academic Writing by Autistic University Students

---

Jacquie Ballantine, S-LP (C), Retired

Ph.D. Student, School of Linguistics and Language Studies

Carleton University

Supervisor: Professor Natasha Artemeva

# Background

---

- Increasing numbers of autistic students enrolling in post-secondary institutions (Alcorn MacKay, 2010; Heilker, 2008)
- Reports of challenges in meeting the needs of these students (Jurecic, 2006; 2007, Gerstle & Walsh, 2011)
- Push back from autistic academics and self-advocacy groups (Lewiecki-Wilson, Dolmage, Heilker & Jurecic, 2008; Yergeau, 2018)
- “New (but, perhaps, not all that different) population” (Heilker, 2008, p. 320)
- Opportunity for growth in understanding different ways of thinking, writing and learning (for all participating parties)

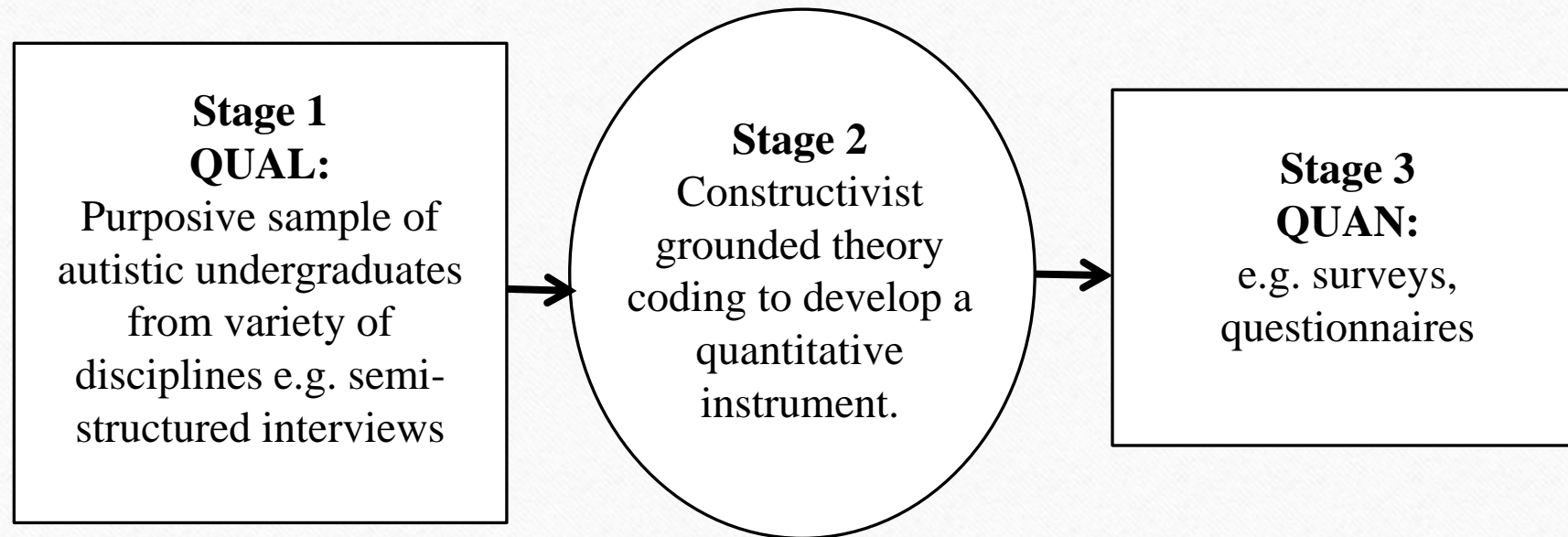
# Research Question

---

How do undergraduate autistic university students account for their experiences with academic writing and how do the analyses of their accounts and samples of their academic writing feed into the development of a socio-cultural, non-deficit perspective on their academic writing?

# Exploratory, sequential mixed methods model

---



# The “big three” cognitive theories of autism

---

- **Theory of Mind:** Suggests difficulties lie in perspective-taking and understanding the mental states of oneself and others. Many studies on this topic but only a few related to academic writing and those are for school age children. (Baron-Cohen, 1999). **Whose theory of mind?**
- **Executive Dysfunction Syndrome:** Proposes that the failure to develop appropriate focus, planning, organizational skills, working memory impact communication (Hill, 2004).
- **Weak Central Coherence Theory:** Suggests cognitive style bias in favour of local processing over global processing (Frith & Happé, 1994)

# The problem of cognitively-based theories

---

- Over-emphasize the biomedical model of disability (focusing on the individual, deficit-based, pathologized)
- Aligned with a “deficit perspective on inclusion” (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p. 14)
- Inadequately address the dynamic nature of discursive interactions within and between autistic and non-autistic rhetors and spaces

# Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) as a fresh lens for writing studies and autism...

---

- Genre as typified, recurrent responses to perceived social needs which accomplish some social action (Miller, 1984)
- Exigence (Bawarshi, 2000; Miller, 1984)
- Uptake (Freadman, 1994)
- Addressivity (Bakhtin, 1986)
- Kairotic timing (Artemeva, 2004; Miller, 1992; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002)

**Need to explore these concepts within and between autistic and non-autistic spaces**

# Autism as a rhetorical way of being

---

“autism is a rhetoric; a way of being in the world through language, a rhetoric we may not have encountered or recognized frequently in the past nor value highly in academic contexts, but a rhetoric nonetheless.” (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011, p. 487)



# Centering the voices of autistic undergraduates

---

- Exploratory, sequential mixed methods approach – voices of the participants drive the direction of the research; the problems may be understudied or not well understood (Cresswell, 2015)
- Community based participatory research (ASAN, AASPIRE) – “nothing about us, without us”
- Need for team member(s) or co-researchers who has/have personal, lived autistic experience throughout the research process
- Reflexivity of researcher

# Some final considerations

---

- Ultimately, I aim to use RGS to explore the interface between and among autistic and non-autistic students and faculty at universities to effectively create an optimal environment for learning to write in the academy
- Dialogic, transformative pedagogy rather than remedial approach to writing
- Explicit, socio-cultural learning model e.g. Guided Participation i.e. intentional, socially-situated learning within dyads of experienced and relatively less experienced participants, including autistic mentors (Rogoff, 2003)

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Artemeva, N. (2004). Key concepts in rhetorical genre studies: An overview. *Technostyle*, 20(1), 3-38.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1986). The problem of speech genres. In C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Eds.), V.W. McGree (Transl.), *Speech genres and other late essays* (pp. 60-102). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bawarshi, A. (2000). The genre function. *College English*, 62(3), 335-360.
- Bawarshi, A. (2015). Accounting for genre performances: Why uptake matters. In N. Artemeva & A. Freedman (Eds.), *Genre studies around the globe: Beyond the three traditions* (pp. 186-206). Edmonton, AB: Inkshed publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Freadman, A. (1994). Anyone for tennis? In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (pp. 43-66). Bristol, UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Grinker, R. (2008). *Unstrange minds: Remapping the world of autism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Lin, C-S. (2014). Early language learning profiles of young children with autism: Hyperlexia and its subtypes. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 8, 168-177.
- Lewiecki-Wilson, C., Dolmage, J, Heilker, P., & Jurecic, A. (2008). Two comments on “Neurodiversity”. *College English*, 70(3), 314-323.

- Maister, L., & Plaisted-Grant, K.C. (2011). Time perception and its relationship to memory in autism spectrum conditions. *Developmental Science*, 14(6), 1311-1322.
- McGuire, A. (2016). *War on autism: On the cultural logic of normative violence*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Miller, C. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151-167.
- Miller, C. (1992). Kairos in the rhetoric of science. In S. P. Witte, N. Nakadate, & R.D. Cherry (Eds.), *A rhetoric of doing* (pp. 310-327). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Prince, D.E. (2002). *Aquamarine blue 5: Personal stories of college students with autism*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Prizant, B. & Fields-Meyer, T. (2015). *Uniquely human: A different way of seeing autism*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Schryer, C.F. (1993). Records as genre. *Written Communication*, 10(2), 200-234.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tregaskis, C. (2004). *Constructions of disability: Researching the interface between disabled and non-disabled people*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Yates, J., & Orlikowski, W. (2002). Genre systems: Chronos and kairos in communicative interaction. In R. Coe, L. Lingard, & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The rhetoric and ideology of genres* (pp. 103-121). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Yergeau, M. (2018). *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.