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

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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?
Stage 1
QUAL:
Purposive sample of autistic undergraduates from variety of disciplines e.g. semi-structured interviews

Stage 2
Constructivist grounded theory coding to develop a quantitative instrument.

Stage 3
QUAN:
e.g. surveys, questionnaires

Cresswell, 2015
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


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.


