

Autism and Academic Writing at University: A Pilot Study

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 at universities in order to provide more effective supports

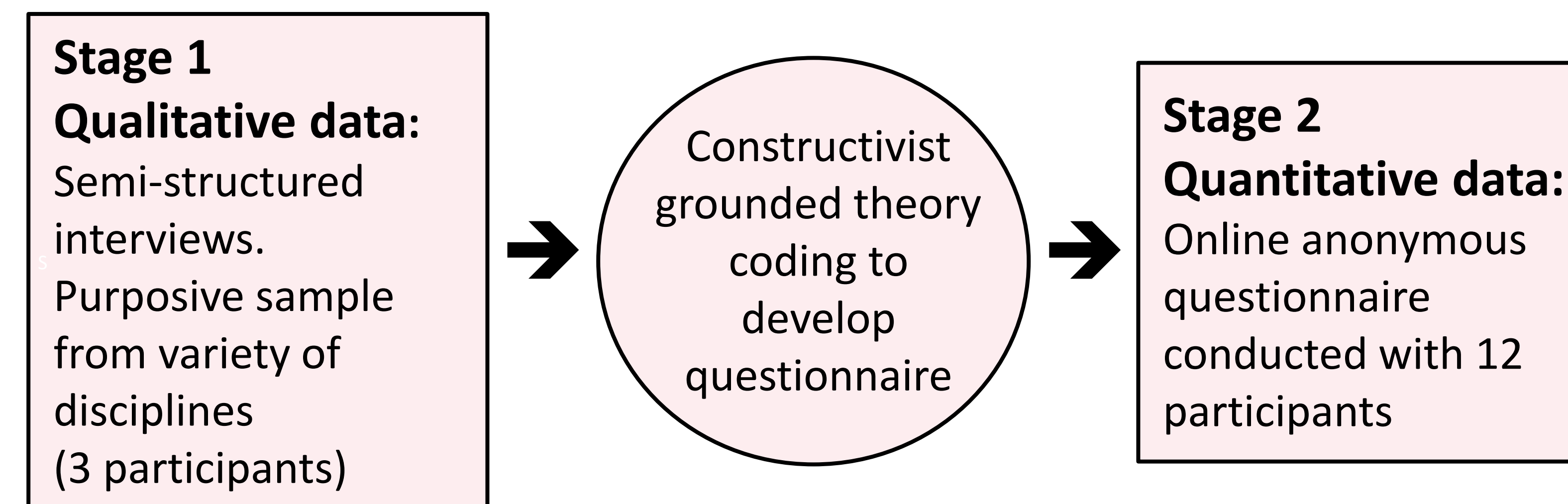
Perspectives

- Previous research has been largely quantitative and focused on the “deficit” model in younger students
- Need to include the 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)

Research Questions

- What experiences do autistic undergraduate students report in learning academic writing?
- What demographics affect academic writing experiences (e.g. gender, major subject, history of speech/language delays)?

Research Design



Findings from Stage 1 Interviews:

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

Findings from Stage 2 Survey:

- Early exploration of three demographic characteristics:
 - Gender
 - Choice of major subject
 - History of speech/language delays

Limitations

- Highly heterogeneous population. Some skew in participants in Stage 1 (2 out of 3 gifted; highly motivated writers; all males)
- Insufficient N to date in both interviews and online questionnaires. Expanded study underway.
- Greater triangulation of data is required e.g. perspectives of professors as well as analysis of writing samples

Conclusions

- Early reading proficiency with decreased opportunities to interact in social spaces may lead to reduced sense of audience
- Preference for details, facts and content information rather than personal reflections in different rhetorical “way of being” (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011; Bazerman, 1997, p. 3)
- Preference for individual, dyadic supports from professors (especially in males)
- Future research should explore online social spaces e.g. chat rooms

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