The development of good practice principles for supporting students with autism to work with their peers

Introduction

This article outlines the undertaking of a research project which looked at how students with autism can be better supported to work with their peers. The aim of the research was to examine the experience of students on the autism spectrum in higher education in undertaking group work. A review of existing best practice guidance along with feedback from students themselves was used to develop a set of draft good practice principles which a smaller group of students then had a further opportunity to give feedback. A set of good practice principles was then finalised for dissemination to academic staff and autism practitioners. The message was that to support all learners, the advice contained within the good practice principles should be adopted wholesale as a principle of universal design for learning (UDL).

Developing guidance on peer group working with students on the autistic spectrum

I decided to look at producing guidance around peer group work as, although in recent years the adoption of this on degree programs has steadily increased, there were no dedicated resources with advice for supporting students with autism undertaking it. The inclusion of group work is essential on modern degree programmes as it has been shown to increase student attainment, motivation and self-esteem. Group work also '**helps students develop teamwork skills and social interactions as well as learning about various backgrounds, culture, beliefs, and attitudes**' (Burke, 2011, p.93), and is highly valued by employers. It is therefore essential that all students are supported to work successfully with their peers.

Many students with autism struggle to work with others, not least because '**teaching takes place in a social environment that potentially places all autistic students at a disadvantage** (Chown, 2017, p122-3). The core features of autism are identified in both the DSM V and ICD-10 as social communication difficulties and rigidity of thought and behaviour, which together can make it difficult to work with others. People with autism may take spoken language literally due to problems with linking language with context, and there may be difficulties with receptive language or understanding what is being said to them. Nonverbally, those with autism can have difficulty maintaining eye contact as it can be both distracting and uncomfortable, and they may also find it hard to read facial expressions to determine the emotional state of others. It has further been argued that people with autism can only see their own point of view and cannot understand the idea that others may have differing opinions; this rigidity of thought and behaviour can make it a struggle to see there are other ways of doing things. Some students with autism may insist on a routine or set order of events or have a compulsion to finish what was started, leading to restricted interests and resistance to change, which would arguably not be conducive to a harmonious group work experience. Also, issues with the sensory environment can make it physically uncomfortable for learners with autism to work, whilst social anxiety can manifest in obvious ways such as ticks and stimming behaviours which can be a source of embarrassment for students. These autistic characteristics may create difficulties in group work situations as students with autism may feel inhibited about speaking in front of others; not know when their input is required unless directly asked; or may dominate conversation and not realise they need to allow others to

contribute.

However, there is evidence to suggest that many people with autism enjoy working with others and make good team players. Many enjoy some social interaction, especially when it has a context such as working on a group project. They may also get to focus on tasks that they like such as fact checking, and with high expectations of themselves and others, they can help to keep the group on track. Furthermore, as working with others is seen as a key employability skill, it does not seem right that the strategy for supporting a learner with autism through group work is to allow them the alternative of doing work on their own. This denies them the opportunity to develop their skills and the right to participate in learning on par with their peers. I have found that the majority of learners with autism develop as they progress through their degree work in much the same way as their neurotypical peers do; their academic skills develop, confidence grows and most develop socially over time as they mature and learn strategies to employ in social situations. **Consequently, it was intended that the principles of good practice developed as an outcome of this research should act as a guide for academic staff to follow as their students' skills develop, rather than a set of rigid rules to be adhered to.**

The research programme

The research was conducted in two phases with a group of physics undergraduate students in the 2017/18 academic year. Phase 1 involved the production of the draft good practice principles using a review of existing best practice and an online student questionnaire. Phase 2 then involved the review of the draft principles by a smaller sample of students in order to produce the final set of principles for dissemination to colleagues.

Phase 1

Phase 1 began with a thematic review of 36 examples of existing best practice guidance including that produced by the Higher Education Academy, the National Association of Disability Practitioners, and the National Autistic Society, along with guidance from a number of higher education institutions including the University of Leeds, University College London, and the London School of Economics. This review produced 13,500 thousand words of data relating to advice on group work, and from this a number of themes were identified. **These themes included the importance of training for all staff – academic, support and administrative - in disability confidence and autism awareness; consideration of the environment students are asked to work in; the need for clear instructions and deadlines, and clarification of staff supervisory roles.**

Following this, an online questionnaire was conducted with physics undergraduate students. Physics was chosen as they had the highest number of students with autism on the programme; in the 2017/18 academic year, this was 14 of which 8 filled in the questionnaire and two were further interviewed as part of phase 2. The physics department also has some form of either assessed or unassessed group work on all their modules so all of the participants regardless of which year they were in would have experience of working with their peers to draw upon.

From the questionnaire, 75% of respondents reported that they did not need alternatives to group work as it was an activity they enjoyed, although 25% did say they might need reasonable adjustments to how the group work was set up. Workshops were cited as one of the easiest group work environments because they were more informal and students could work with their friends. Lab work was almost unanimously named as the most challenging type of collaborative work to undertake, due the length and intensity of lab sessions, having to work in random groups, not having enough time to complete the experiments and the busy environment of the lab. Students also reported

that clear structure and deadlines, working with people who will do the work, understanding from their peers and smaller group sizes made working with other people easier. Conversely, things which make working with others more difficult included **'working with people you have nothing in common with, working with people you don't want to be there with or who don't do the work they're supposed to have done and people talking over each other'**. Students also identified a lack of clarity of the work that needed doing and noisy working environments as making work more difficult.

Students were also asked to rate whether they agreed with some suggested strategies to help them make group work easier. All of the students strongly agreed that having an outline of what will be covered in the group sessions along with clearly defined tasks would help make group work easier, as would working in smaller groups, working with people they knew, and having a named member of staff to oversee the work or report difficulties too.

A draft set of good practice principles was then developed.

Phase 2

As participatory disability research was a further aim of the project in phase 2 two students gave further feedback on the draft principles through semi structured interviews. They confirmed that the ideal group size would be four or five students depending on the task and that academic departments need to advertise their existing support structures more effectively to students; for instance, in physics students are allowed to take breaks during labs when they need to but both students interviewed said they had not done this until their friends advised them they could because it had not been made explicit to them by staff at the start of the year.

The emerging principles

The principles were then finalised into the following ten points:

1. Sharing of information and reasonable adjustments
2. The environment
3. Group size and structure
4. Clear defined tasks, deadlines and outcomes
5. Communication
6. Support, supervision and accountability of the group – conflict resolution
7. Staff training and support
8. Student training
9. Consultation with, and feedback from, autistic students
10. Advertise your existing good practice

Read the full version of good practice principles.

Many of the principles are self-explanatory but it is worth commenting on the rationale for some of them. **Point 2** refers to the need to consider the sensory environment students are asked to work in. In my experience few people are aware of the sensory difficulties associated with autism. The National Autistic Society UK campaign 'Too Much Information' has done much to address this lack of public awareness and understanding (NAS, 2020), but it still remains that many students are expected to work in large classes within noisy environments which will

not only increase anxiety and stress levels but also impair focus and concentration. Therefore, this second point advises staff to be mindful of the environment they ask students with autism to work in because providing calm safe environments to work in improves their experience of not only working with others but attending university altogether.

The third point makes suggestions around the optimum group size and the importance of considering how you structure the groups' students with autism are asked to work in. The student feedback in Phase 2 suggested that there should be no more than 5 people in a group, whilst allowing students to work with their friends or with people they know was fed back as a popular strategy in the student questionnaire. Therefore, it is advised that random groupings are avoided wherever possible.

Point 5 relates to communication between staff and group members, and amongst group members themselves. An interesting issue that came up in both phase 2 interviews was around the use of technology for communication, especially official university email. The use of technology to help facilitate group work is outlined in guidance produced by JISC (2020) which suggests the use of Facebook or a Twitter hashtag to engage those who may be socially anxious, which is something many students with autism experience. Students are also encouraged to use their university email account for group work communication as it's the best way for the institution to keep in touch with them, to verify the email is going to the intended recipient, and so that if there is a dispute about the work (who has or hasn't done it for instance) then the emails can be used as evidence to settle it.

However, in the course of both interviews students described how in one case a business project had started on email, as advised by their supervisor, but then moved over to a Facebook group messaging facility, and in the other, the student reported that they relied on being able to quickly communicate with people and as such again preferred Facebook messenger or WhatsApp to email. When questioned as to why they didn't like to use email both stated they found it too formal; one said they didn't know how to structure an email, and that they felt 'weird' sending an email to someone they had never sent to before, whilst the other stated that not only did he not feel comfortable writing formal emails but that he got his friend to proofread them for him as he felt he was a 'scatterbrain' he didn't have to worry about this on a social media platform as it's more informal. It is therefore suggested that as students will use social media anyway then, to protect the involvement of students with autism, institutions might consider ways in which they can support students to utilise more informal modes of communication rather than inadvertently encouraging abandonment of their use altogether.

Finally, **point 7** relates to the importance of staff training in disability and autism which appeared most regularly in the review of existing best practice, and in a smaller number, a further point was made that training should be for all staff who have contact with students, not just academics. Although training does not relate directly to group work it is important for staff in order to

> 'further their understanding of the possible impact of AS (Asperger syndrome) in the HE context. Stereotypical ideas about AS should be avoided and the requirement to treat people with the condition as individuals is paramount' (Martin, 2008, p7).

Training in autism awareness and understanding would, therefore, help staff to fully appreciate the importance of

all the other principles suggested.

It is arguable that we should go further and consider putting these principles into practice for all students as what benefits learners with autism is likely to benefit all. This point around wholesale adoption of best practice was outlined in numerous guidance reviewed in phase 1, for instance

> 'It's important for further and higher education settings to create a culture of inclusion and aspiration, as this will lead to progression and positive outcomes for all learners' (NAS, 2017)

and is in keeping with the idea of UDL. Perhaps the final word on this should go to one of the interviewed students who, during the course of our discussion around wanting to keep his autism confidential but still be able to access support, when asked if he thought the principles should be put in place for all students answered **'if it was there universally it would be lovely, I'd love that'**.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although this was a limited piece of research, based partly on feedback from a small sample of learners with autism in one subject area, in one institution, it is hoped that the resulting resource is of use to academic staff, disability practitioners and support staff within further and higher education. In many ways, I don't feel my research is particularly groundbreaking because its findings seem quite obvious to me. That said, in discussion with a colleague about the project she summed up the spirit of much of my professional practice when she pointed out that it may be common sense but it is not yet common practice, something we should all continue to work towards.

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Classifications:

DSM V - The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

ICS-10 2016 – World Health Organisation.

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