Blogging: A System to Encourage Asperger and Neuro-Typical Students to Become Independent Learners

Abstract

Asperger Syndrome (AS) students appear to have difficulty successfully undertaking extended pieces of written work that include a major element of research, a problem that also extends to many Neurotypical (NT) students. Previous research by the authors had investigated the use of a Web 2.0-based blogging system to help such students develop the proposal section of the Undergraduate Major Project, undertaken in the third year of undergraduate study. A further action research project has now been undertaken to extend the blogging system to encompass the whole dissertation production process. The results suggest that extending the blogging process helped the AS students in particular to complete their dissertation project and to become independent learners.

Keywords

eLearning, blogging, community of practice
Introduction
In 2010 the researchers applied for and were awarded a second Learning and Teaching Project Award to extend a piece of action research (Bowman & Scaife, 2010, 2011) to produce a blogging system to encourage students with AS and NT students to write the dissertation proposal section of the Undergraduate Major Project. This new research was intended to see how prepared students felt, having used the blogging system for the proposal, to tackle the entire project. The intention was to highlight any areas of concern and to recommend change in the different stages of the final project and to see how the blogging system impacted on the lecturer and support staff.

An Introduction to Asperger Syndrome
Commonly, AS is identified as a triad of impairments, which includes problems with social interaction, social communication and social imagination. For instance, people with AS may not understand the unwritten social rules that most people take for granted. Therefore, they can struggle to make and maintain friendships and find people unpredictable and confusing. This can lead to withdrawal and depression. They may have difficulty understanding gestures, facial expression or tone of voice, knowing when to start or end a conversation, use complex words and phrases when not fully understanding their meaning and have problems understanding jokes, sarcasm and metaphor. They may have a limited range of imaginative activities, which can be pursued rigidly and repetitively, and may have an idiosyncratic interest or obsession. However, an alternative view argues against the triad of impairments and promotes positive traits of AS, such as honesty, focus and attention to detail in line with a social model of disability. In contrast, the term Neuro-typical is recommended to describe people without autistic spectrum disorder who have a normal ability to process spoken information and social cues (Doherty, McNaly & Sharrard, 2000; Bleach, 2001).

Methodology
This study follows an initial case study (Bowman & Scaife, 2010) and an action research project funded as a Learning and Teaching Project Award (Bowman and Scaife, 2011) that reported on the production of the blog and its utilisation by five students at the beginning of their final project. The results of this research were also disseminated at the Staff and Educational Development Agency, Higher Education Academy and Anglia Ruskin University Learning and Teaching Conferences in 2010.

This new part of the action research cycle was based on piloting the use of the blogging system for the entire duration of the final project and collecting opinion via taped interview of the students involved about their experience of the final project itself and the value of the blog. The interviews were to be carried out using structured questions, inquiring into all aspects of the final project. Two AS students were interviewed two weeks after the hand-in date for the final project. Unfortunately, it proved difficult to interview the three NT students and no input was received from them, as one has left the university and the others were unavailable for interview. The interviews that were undertaken were taped and transcribed. The two AS students will be known as Respondent A and Respondent B.

Factual Findings from the Research
The project proposal blog made the students think about their project earlier, which they found very helpful, and ‘helped me to develop and share the ideas I had for my dissertation’ (Respondent B). The timing for working with the proposal blog was good, just before the summer holiday. ‘I think the timing was good because it was pretty much just as I had finished all of my assignments so it didn’t get in the way of anything else I was doing and I had plenty of free time to think about it and look at it’ (Respondent A). It was stated that the Learning and Skills development module in the first year helped to introduce the respondents to what the dissertation process is like.

The blog enabled Respondent A to write his proposal before he returned for his third year, which gave him a head start. The most beneficial aspect of the blog was ‘the fact that I could simply just share what I had so far and then have (the Supervisor) comment on my work and help me build my idea.’ The blog was also ‘a useful place to store ideas I had over the summer, merge them together and write almost part of my dissertation before starting it’. Respondent B managed to complete his literature review before returning to university.

The blogging system ensured that the supervisor was always fully briefed on the students’ progress. Consequently, the respondents found the one to one tutorial sessions with their supervisor to be helpful:
they were always relaxed and informal which is nice, because it means I can share my work in a much more comfortable manner’ (Respondent A).

When the respondents were asked how they would advise their friends on their approach to the dissertation, both respondents felt that starting early definitely made a difference, and that they would recommend that their friends should start gathering sources or write their literature review over the summer holiday. ‘It wasn’t much work to do really considering how long the summer is, and how little you have to write, it wasn’t much pressure at all’ (Respondent A). The blogging system allowed communication between the supervisor and the students over the normally unproductive summer period. The lack of personal contact with the supervisor during this period encouraged the students to research the dissertation independently of direct academic support.

The respondents mentioned that the use of a drop box would be helpful where a folder could be created to share parts of the dissertation between the student, the supervisor and possibly learning support. This would have the benefit of backing work up. They suggested that the blog would be used for the proposal, and a drop box for the dissertation. ‘Learning support you would be able to see everything that I do so I wouldn’t have to send email, just look in my account’ (Respondent B).

The respondents felt that for those who were struggling with the final project or those who hadn’t started required further encouragement outside of their regular supervisor meetings. When asked if a similar system to the piloted blog would be advantageous to all students undertaking their dissertation, there was a resounding ‘yes’! When asked if the students felt driven by this research project, both students were indignant at the suggestion that the researchers had helped to write the dissertation. The response was: ‘it has helped to guide us in the completely correct direction I think’ (Respondent B) and ‘this way, I feel I have a dissertation that is acceptable rather than a mystery’ (Respondent A).

Both respondents agreed to the idea that year two students are approached at Easter in order to put the proposal together using the blog, and that this would also be a good time to look at ethics approval and Personal Development Planning (PDP).

The respondents felt that students should be offered the choice of using the traditional method or the newer format: ‘you would literally have to ask people, offer an option, if some want to consider their dissertation with this method, or just want to stay with the old method, I mean show people how the system works’ (Respondent A).

**Recommendations**

1. The proposal blog should continue to be used for the full dissertation process, particularly in the area of finding and defining the project. Both AS and NT students should be advised to start using it between Easter and the end of the semester of their second year. This will allow the students to make a start on difficult areas such as the literature review and research methodology.

2. Rather than a blog, a drop box is more relevant for the actual writing of the dissertation. This will allow students, supervisors and learning support staff access to the project document for comment and advice. The drop box facility on our virtual learning environment (VLE) could be utilised for this. This would benefit students with AS, as they can communicate electronically rather than face to face.

3. The blog system will be offered alongside the traditional system so that students have a choice in how they develop their work.

**Conclusions**

The research has identified that the use of the blogging system significantly helped both AS and NT students undertaking both the dissertation proposal and the initial stages of the dissertation itself. Much of the blog usage was during the summer vacation period when the students were much less dependent on the supervisor. The blogging system did help the students become more independent as learners.
References

