

Promoting Learner Autonomy Through Mentoring

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Sheffield Hallam University has a good reputation for effective support of students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Practical and social aspects of University life; and generalising learning across contexts often present people with Asperger's Syndrome with the greatest challenges. (Beardon & Edmonds, 2007; Madriaga et al. 2008; Martin, 2008). The specifics of what makes a mentor-mentee relationship effective as a way of developing learner autonomy is under researched, particularly in relation to the requirements of students with Asperger Syndrome.

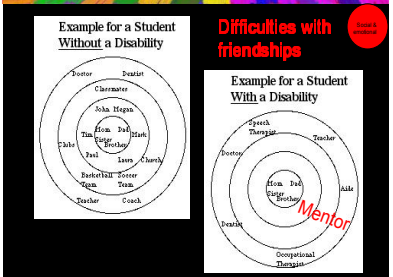


Aims & Objectives:

This project will work with both students and mentors to establish what effective support strategies look like; to develop practical resources; and to devise a training protocol to enable mentors to facilitate developing learner autonomy.

Progress to date: successes and challenges

- Mentors have been effectively matched to students and appropriate initial training successfully delivered.
- An ongoing literature review is being conducted: there is a paucity of material which details the experience of mentors working with individuals with AS in co-developing appropriate student-led, bespoke support strategies & resource material.
- Mentor documentation has been developed and piloted.
- Extensive feedback on praxis is currently being collated through mentor group discussions and individual interviews, as part of ongoing staff development and professional reflective practice.
- Understandable difficulties in engaging students with AS are being addressed through consultation with individuals, and participants are being identified and recruited to the study.



Difficulties with unstructured parts of the day

	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5
M								?	?
T									
W			?	?	?	?	?	?	?
T	?	?	?	?					
F			?	?	?	?	?	?	?

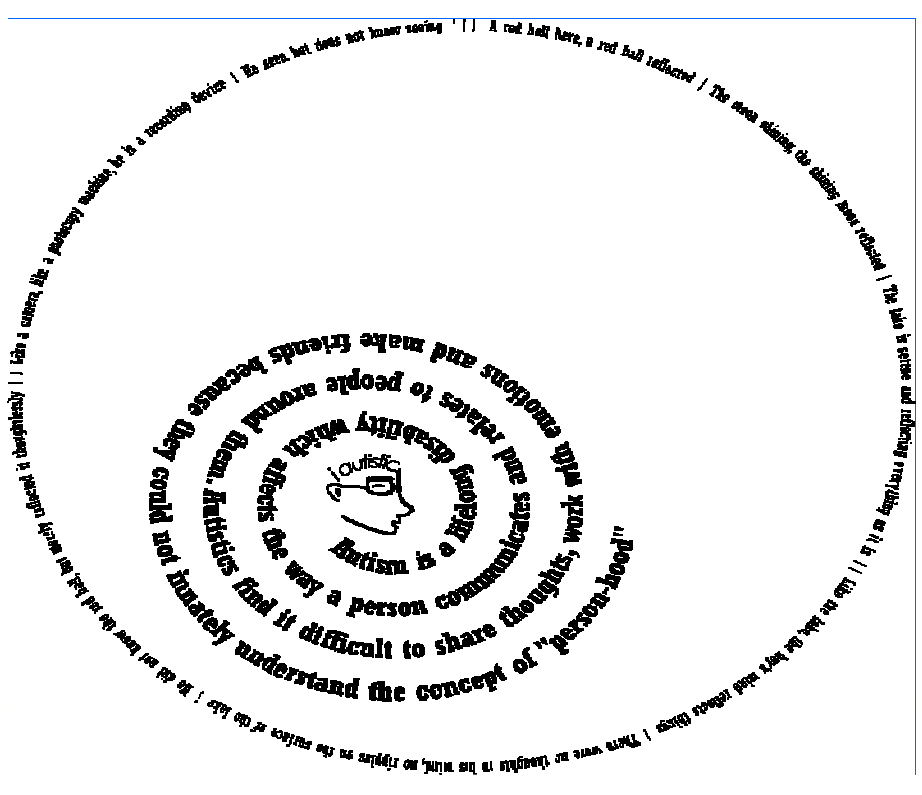
Organisational skills

[My mentor] will make sure that I am getting on okay. She will write a LIST of things for me to do, like by next week, so that she keeps tabs on me. I need someone to remind me that I do need to do these things. (Madriaga et al., 2007:40)

Focus on detail

All I ever do is go back to my room. My specialty in film was British television drama. I just sit there watching DVD after DVD. (Madriaga et al., 2007:30)

So I think just knowing there's a mentor there and knowing I can use her if I need to get my work sorted and stuff like that... (Madriaga et al., 2007:41)



Next stage & future plans:

- Trial & evaluation of student planner by mentor-student pairings.
- Use of resource material for mentoring students with other disabilities (as well as those with AS) in keeping with the wider research interests of both the Autism Centre and the Disabled Student Support Portfolio (DSSP) at SHU.
- Dissemination of findings at national conferences and in relevant academic journals

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Working at SHU

- Social model of disability
- Equal access to learning
- Student led support
- Uniqueness of individuals

is for MENTORS...

- R...eliable
- E...mpathic
- A...nticipatory
- L...ogical

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

CETL project

I didn't get any help because I didn't want any help. I waited to do the project by myself and I did a very good job actually. It was the very first time and I was very proud of it. I felt while I was doing the project, I didn't want to go and ask for any help because I wanted to show people that I can do something by myself. I wanted to show people that I have got the ability. I just need the chance to prove myself. (Madriaga et al., 2007:41)

Two respondents who found their mentors quite helpful towards the beginning of the year; however, eventually sought independence from them as they became more settled. (Madriaga et al., 2007:40)

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

How effective really is mentoring at SHU in helping students with ASDs to achieve their goals, and especially that of being autonomous in life and learning?

CETL project

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

- Difficulties with processing and retaining verbal information
- Interpreting things very literally
- Difficulties understanding jokes and sarcasm
- Difficulties with social use of language
- Difficulties understanding body language, facial expression, gesture, emotions

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Difficulties with processing and retaining verbal information

Sometimes, I can only understand things when it makes sense. Sometimes, they say something, and everything goes around in my head and I am thinking does it mean that? Does it mean that? (Madriaga et al., 2007:23)

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Coping with changes

- Finding way around a new city/ places/ buildings
- Timetable or room changes
- Adjusting to life at University