Postsecondary Education & Autism: Developing an Online Community

Scott M. Robertson  
The Pennsylvania State University  
The College of Information Sciences & Technology  
srobertson@ist.psu.edu

Abstract

This paper will discuss a research project to develop an online community that supports the transition from secondary to postsecondary education for autistic students. It first will highlight the impact of inadequate existing support resources for postsecondary education and autism. The paper will then share how semi-structured interviews with five key stakeholder groups will inform the development of the online community. Finally, the paper will discuss potential technological and social-cultural infrastructure for the community, as well as this project’s long-term implications for academia and practice.

1. Introduction

Autistic individuals share several neurological differences that influence how they think, feel, and interact with the surrounding world in a way that differs greatly from non-autistics. Researchers and professionals have typically grouped these neurological differences into the following areas: a) language, communication, and social interaction, b) sensory processing and motor skill planning, and c) executive functioning (reflective and goal-oriented thought [1, 2]. Large diversity in the expression of these neurological differences and of autistic individuals reflects a continuum known as the autism spectrum. The American Psychological Association has diagnostically identified this spectrum as a set of five pervasive developmental disorders: Kanner’s autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), Rett Syndrome, and Heller’s Syndrome.

In the last five years, postsecondary education for autistic students¹ has increasingly received greater media attention [3, 4, 5] as the number of autistic students identified in primary and secondary education has risen sharply. Instructional and classroom supports under the Individuals with Disabilities Education (Improvement) Act [6] have enabled many autistic students to flourish academically at the primary and secondary educational levels. Yet, when these students leave the setting of secondary education at age 21 or earlier, fewer support resources exist. Postsecondary education for students with disabilities does not conform to IDEA, but rather to the Americans With Disabilities Act [7]. Less stringent support requirements in ADA (in comparison to IDEA) has meant that most colleges and universities do not yet have specific programs in place for their autistic students other than learning disability resources (e.g. test-taking in quiet rooms, extended time on exams). Only a small number of colleges and universities have launched autism-specific programs (e.g. Marshall University, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Keene State College, Western Kentucky University).

At the secondary level, many high schools do not yet have adequate transition programs in place for teaching skills to their autistic students that are required for life in postsecondary education. Schools often do not yet provide specialized assistance for these students in navigating the admission process and the process of beginning their academic studies at a postsecondary school.

2. Research Methods & an Emerging Topic

Postsecondary education for autistic students is an emerging topic. At present, only a relatively small number of conference and journal papers on postsecondary education and autism exist, as well some books, articles, and papers from outside of academia. This emerging status makes the topic a prime candidate for qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews with stakeholder groups will be employed as the primary method of inquiry for this

¹ While postsecondary education typically refers to any education or training after secondary school, for the purposes of this paper the definition will be limited to four-year colleges and universities and two-year community colleges.
project. This choice of methods reflects the social-cultural nature of an online community and a core epistemological view that knowledge in the social world is generated interactively through conversational dialogue in face-to-face and other communication.

3. Stakeholders & Inquiry

Postsecondary education transition spans two separate educational systems: secondary education (i.e. middle school and high school) and postsecondary education. In the specific case of autism and postsecondary education, two primary stakeholder groups belong to each of these educational systems, autistic students and educators (including administrators). A fifth major stakeholder group, parents and family members, crosses both educational systems.

Semi-structured interviews with these five stakeholder groups will examine several factors that influence their work and interaction in the domains of autism and education. These factors, which will inform the online community’s development, include: a) present usage of information technologies (e.g. email, websites, instant messaging, telephones, etc.), b) formats and methods used to share information with colleagues, peers, and others, c) usage of adaptive and educational strategies for autistic students and other students, d) what autism means from their perspective, and e) usage and means for collaboration with other educators and students to support instruction and other educational efforts.

4. Social-Technical Infrastructure

The prototype online community will provide many outlets for discussion and interaction by the membership. These discussion outlets will likely include threaded discussion forums, blogs, video and audio podcasts, instant messaging, and email lists. These technologies provide complimentary roles in how they support discussion and exchange of information and resources in current online communities. Enabling high rates of adoption and usage by the community membership will require tying these community features into existing technological resources for autism (e.g. existing website pages, communities and blogs; social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube; and email lists).

Equally important to adoption is creating a social-cultural infrastructure that fits a diverse community membership. This social-cultural infrastructure will both be informed by knowledge gained from the semi-structured interviews and social psychology theories and frameworks for understanding online communities, such as bond and common identity theories [8].

5. Project Implications

This research project has several key implications for practice and academic research. First, the creation of an online community will aid future efforts to understand and support autistic students’ transition to postsecondary schools. Second, an online community infrastructure developed for supporting postsecondary education transition for autistic students could prove to be useful for understanding and developing supports for postsecondary education transition of students from additional special education groups supported under IDEA, as well as secondary students in general. Finally, this project will examine autistic individuals’ perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes and those of people who work with them (educators and parents). This will guide a wide range of support efforts for autistic individuals outside of postsecondary education (e.g. employment, living and housing services).

6. References


