

# Applied or Denied? The eLearning Experience of an Autistic, Mature-Aged University Student

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## ABSTRACT

*As universities expand so too does the diversity of students. Widening participation requires higher education providers to be responsive to the needs of all students by ensuring an accessible and engaging learning environment. Today's cohort includes an increased number of students with autism, a spectrum condition that has the potential to be either beneficial or detrimental to their success in higher education. This article reports on a mature-age student with autism who publicly announced his struggle with the eLearning environment, somewhat ironically, in the asynchronous discussion board. While eLearning offers designers and teaching staff an opportunity to adopt an applied and collaborative approach to the learning environment, for this student it created a challenging landscape dominated by steep mountains and roadblocks. What the student revealed has implications for course designers, teaching staff, and university administrators as they undertake to provide an eLearning environment that is suitable for all students, including those with autism.*

*Keywords: Applied Learning, Autism, eLearning, Higher Education, Learning Design, Non-Traditional Students, Online Learning, University*

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## INTRODUCTION

As every researcher knows, unexpected data should not be ignored. Indeed, it is the data that does not 'fit' with what is expected that can often be the most illuminating to the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Such is the case presented in this article, describing how a participant in a doctoral study made a single comment that changed the course of the research and undoubtedly the broader findings. It aims to provide a reminder that assumptions must be challenged and a lone voice is as important as a group chant, if social justice (and credible research) is truly valued. This is a story of one student who taught the researcher that

however well-designed, an eLearning environment should never be considered a 'one-size fits all' solution to an increasingly diverse cohort in higher education. If we value one student as much as we value all, then the designers and the teaching team must have eyes and ears tuned for when the eLearning environment becomes a mysterious, confusing place and know how to respond appropriately.

The research was conducted within a broader doctoral study that is exploring the effectiveness of specific design principles for an eLearning environment in a higher education setting. The principles aim to ensure an applied, authentic environment within the fully online course, and are being studied for

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their effectiveness over an eighteen month period. The research participant is a mature aged student who made a public disclosure of his struggle with the eLearning environment, somewhat ironically in the asynchronous discussion board. In an emotive posting, Steven (not his real name) revealed his despair when he posted the comment:

*Life lately seems to be overflowing with learning and different learning environments... I feel that the online environment throws up many obstacles to my learning which may ultimately prove overwhelming. On-campus I am shown what is to be learned and I am able to set about learning it. The paths are clear, efficient and not hidden behind e-portfolios, Wikis and blogs. When I click on my [online] units I am confronted by all three. I must first climb these mountains in order to get to the actual subject matter.*

His posting triggered a series of responses from his peers and the lecturer, ensuring a vibrant and engaging discussion. The discussion was even more poignant because the unit itself was focussed on theories of learning and teaching so the relevance and value was obvious to all. It was, indeed, a 'teachable moment' in more ways than one. In a follow-up posting, Steven revealed he was autistic and that he believed this to be the reason why the eLearning environment was so difficult for him. Steven's disclosure offered a valuable opportunity to explore his lived experience in more depth and understand his perspective more clearly. Critically, in an era of large online cohorts and reduced time for individual consultation Steven's cry of frustration could easily have been missed or ignored. Yet for the researcher, exploring his story proved to be a rich and rewarding experience. Steven's story has implications for the design and delivery of the particular course and more broadly to those who teach in higher education, particularly in eLearning environments.

The three questions guiding the research are:

1. What are the characteristics of Steven that have a significant impact on how he experiences higher education?
2. What specific challenges does Steven face in his eLearning course?
3. What are the implications for the design of eLearning environments, particularly for students like Steven?

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

Steven is enrolled in a four-year undergraduate teacher-education course. The majority of students are teachers employed in vocational education and training (VET) settings who are seeking a university teaching qualification to augment their vocational training qualifications. For about half of the students it is their first experience of university. The course attracts students considered 'non-traditional' (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011); typically mature-aged and balancing study, work and family life. Given the nature of the students and university's strategic plans, the entire course is offered through an online mode of study with a small number of units also offered on-campus. It is quite feasible that a student could complete the entire course without ever coming on campus or meeting any of their lecturers face-to-face, though Steven has chosen to complete some units online and some on-campus.

Critical to the course design is an explicit focus on applied learning and authentic assessment strategies that can be seen as a model for the students' own teaching environments. The challenge of providing this type of student experience within an eLearning environment gave rise to the creation of six design principles to guide the course development and the impetus for a doctoral study to examine their effectiveness. The design principles are intended to support the applied learning focus and ensure a productive and engaging eLearning environment. Major theoretical influences informing the design principles are authentic learning (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010), applied learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Blake, 2007),

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