A Communication Skills Group for University Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Overview

- Characteristics of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

- Why prioritize this group?

- Why a communication skills group?

- Selection

- What we actually did in the group

- Preliminary evaluation

- Challenges and Future Directions

What is a student with ASD like?

- Diagnosis

is not the person!

- Academically able

- School trauma

- Autistic Disorder

- Asperger's Disorder

- Pervasive Developmental

Disorder NOS

Challenges with social interaction with at least two of the following:
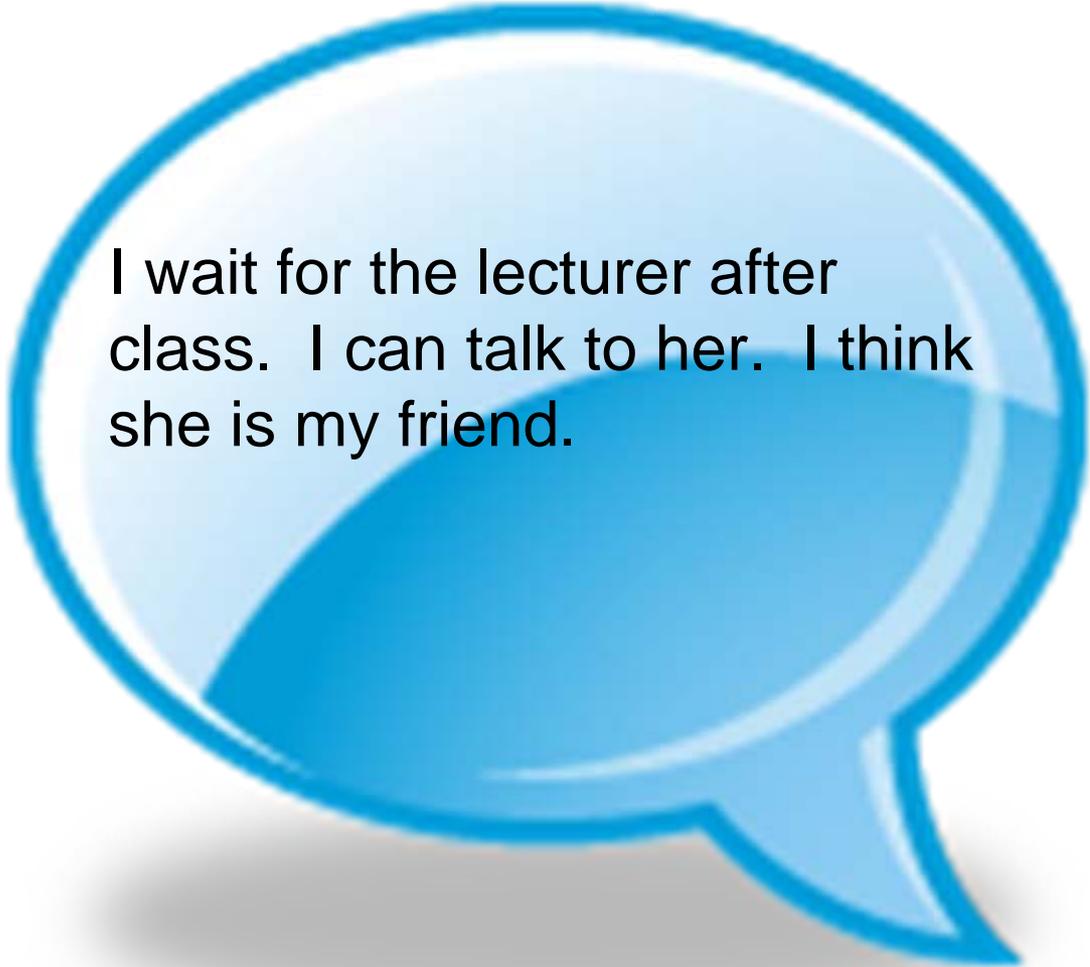
Problems regulating social interaction by using body posture and gestures, eye contact and facial expression

May even find eye

contact

painful,

therefore avoids

and misses

other cues.

Can be

learned.

Peer relationships not appropriate to age.

I wait for the lecturer after class. I can talk to her. I think she is my friend.

Doesn't seek to share achievements, interests or pleasure with others.

I can't do the group work in the lab. Group work really stresses me..I get pains

Lacks social or emotional reciprocity

May not be about not caring…but emotions are complex and confusing and many cues are missed.

Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities with at least one of the following…

Interests of abnormal intensity or focus

I spent a lot of time in my room composing Baroque music using math formulae.

Inflexible adherence to non functional routines

If I don't do my math during my scheduled math time I can't do it.
Then because I haven't stuck to my schedule I can't do any of my work.
Then I can't eat, sleep or go out of my room

Stereotyped, repetitive motor mannerisms

I have to hum and rock during exams
so I need to sit in an Individual room

Also, in addition maybe…Motor Planning Problems?

I can't write as fast as I think, I get so frustrated. Academics can't read my work. I get so angry. (I send angry emails to staff).

….Sensory Disorders?

….Anxiety?

I couldn't choose between two colours for my web page project…I was so anxious about it that I couldn't function for 36 hours
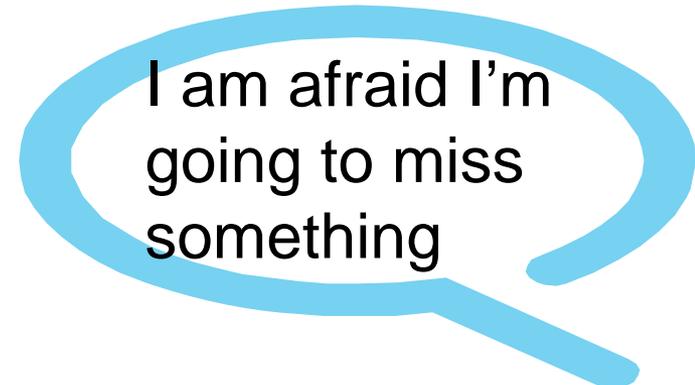
…pedantic, formal language/ trouble initiating or sustaining conversation/trouble judging when conversation partner has lost interest?

I am afraid I'm going to miss something

I harp on

Are we seeing more of these students?

YES! New UniAccess Students Registering with ASD

2002-2008	5
2009	7
2010	5

Why are we seeing more students with ASD?

- prevalence has increased in general society (around 1:150)

- increase in early diagnosis

- Increase in early intervention (0 – 5 therapy)

- Increase in training and funding in schools

>more ASD students reaching their potential !!!

Why a Communication Skills Group?

If not supported ASD students have an increased risk of:
- Anxiety
- Depression and
- other mental health problems

Mary E. Stewart, Louise Barnard, Joanne Pearson, Reem Hasan and Gregory O'Brien (2006)
Presentation of depression in autism and Asperger syndrome: A review
***Autism* 10; 103-116**

Poor social skills are a major deficit of this disorder and are linked to failure and drop out.

Why a communication skills group?

- (Some) evidence for this approach

- Discuss common problems together

- Normalize feelings and experiences

- Make a friend, network,

- Practice skills in a controlled "safe" environment

Social Hurdels 1101

- Speaking to the person next to you in a tutorial

- Sharing a microscope in a lab class

- Asking the way to your new lecture venue

- Buying a cup of coffee in the student café

- Checking a book out of the library

- Walking with other students to class

- Choosing a seat in a lecture venue

- Parking your bicycle in a busy bike rack

Facilitate Successful Transition

and Academic Success!

Evidence

- More studies with young children than with teenagers and young adults,

- Studies vary in participants' age, diagnosis, length and type of intervention

- Few Controlled studies: Cotugno (2009) suggest ASD children can make significant gains in anxiety management, joint attention, flexibility and transitions.

- Hillier, A. Fish, T Cloppart, P and Beversdorf, D. (2007) 13 participants aged 18-30 attended an 8 week social and vocational skills support group benefits from interacting with others going through same challenges

Participants

- Registered with UniAccess

- prior diagnosis of an ASD,

- offer of a place at UWA via standard entry pathway (as we are not measuring IQ this criteria is used as a proxy for IQ in the average or higher than average IQ range),

- aged between 18 and 25 years and

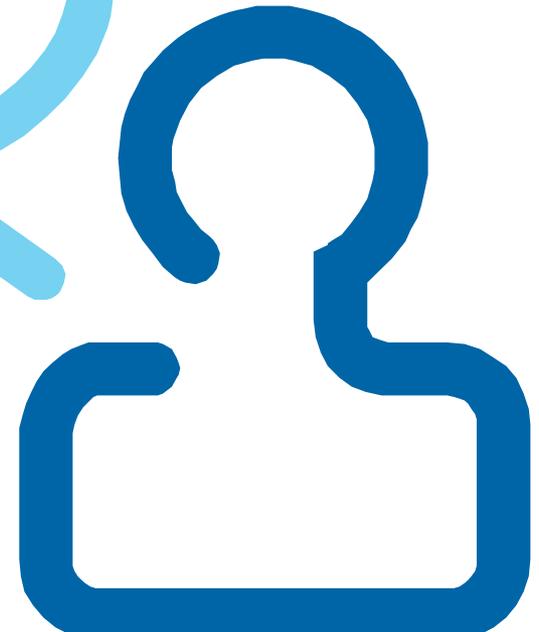- a commitment to attend the group sessions.

Recruitment, Screening and Response

- "Sounded out" student at regular consultation

- Letter of invitation

- Email reminders

Is it starting soon because I need a friend!

- Some who fit the criteria were

not invited to participate

Group Composition

- 3 males, 2 females

- Aged 16-19

- 3 first years, 1 second year and one fourth year student

- Faculties: Engineering, Mathematics and Computing (3), Physical Sciences (1) and Arts (1)

Group Techniques

- behavioural demonstrations and modelling,

- rehearsal and role play

- coaching and performance feedback

- cognitive behavioural therapy

Overview of each session

- Group Rules and "catch up time"

- Review of techniques learned

- Troubleshooting application of skills and techniques during the week

- Activity to build skills

Overview of 8 sessions

1	Introduction	Special interests. Overview . Opportunity for participants to identify their challenges. Group rules. Data
2	Managing Anxiety	Personal symptoms, triggers at uni, self soothing, adapting strategies to uni life
3	Managing Anxiety	Thought replacement. Practice in the uni context
4	Social Problem Solving	Social rules in the university context. Mentors,

5	Social Problem Solving	Social rules in the university context. Mentors
6	Stress Management Plan for Exams	Participants will be encouraged to develop individual plans for stress management.
7	Review stress manage plan	Evaluate and review. Issues for new semester. Troubleshoot. Data
8	Future networking	Celebrate

Informal conversation and eating

Example Activity: Anxiety Mangement

Pauline gets into work early in an attempt to clear her email box. All day she strives to get through every email despite numerous new appointments and interruptions which she deals with well, she feels she is failing when she gets to the end of the day and still has 60 unopened emails. She remembers that in her old job, she used to be able to answer her emails on the day they arrived. She goes home late feeling a failure and feeling tired and anxious with a headache from tensing up her shoulder and neck muscles all day.

Can you see what is happening? How can Pauline change her thinking to set more realistic goals? Do ever do this to yourself, say with your expectations for marks? Can you spot any unhelpful thinking…remember catastrophising and black and white thinking?

Social Problem Solving/Informal rules

Corridor Greeting

You pass a lecturer in the corridor. She asks "how are you" as she walks by.   You have a bad cold and a headache. What should you say?

Good Marks

Ben received an A+ on his programming assignment. Ben's friend Nick said he was disappointed with his own mark. Ben decided not to mention his mark to Nick, even though he was happy about it. Instead Ben told Nick he "didn't do badly".

Evaluation of group

Qnnre / Session	Social Problem Solving Inventory	Academic Self Efficacy and Stress	Qualitative
First=Before	☑	☑	
Seventh or Eighth=After	☑	☑	☑

Self report measure of real life social problem solving ability (Social Problem Solving Inventory R: SF)

25 item self report measure of real life social problem solving ability.

Has been shown to represent a reliable and valid instrument for measuring social problem solving ability in Australian undergraduates (Hawkins et al 2009).

Average scores showed improvement or no change

Social Problem Solving Inventory R:SF Higher Score = More Effective

Total Problem Solving, Rational Problem Solving and Positive Problem Orrientation
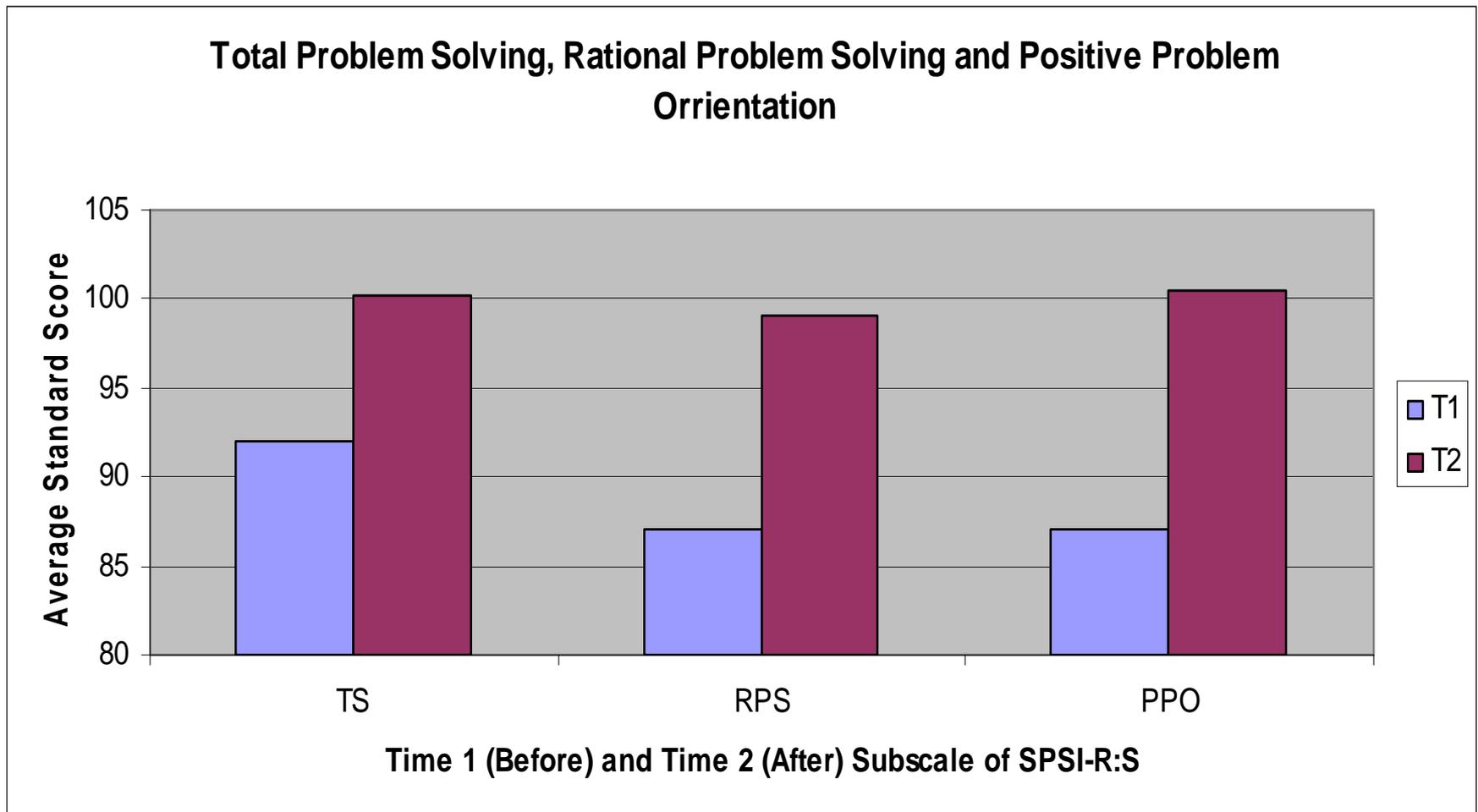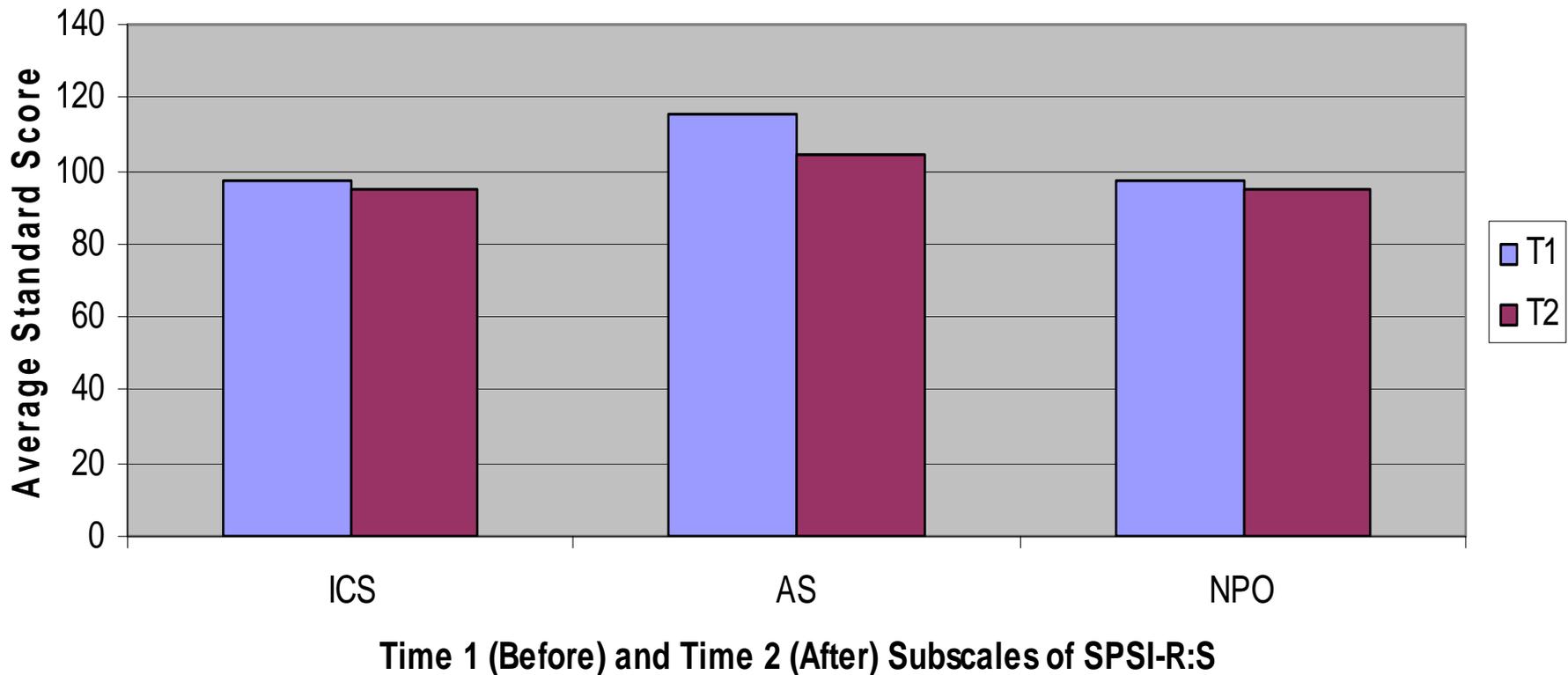
Social Problem Solving Inventory R:SF Lower score = More effective style

Impulsivity/Carelessness Style, Avoidance Scale, Negative Problem Orientation

Time 1 (Before) and Time 2 (After) Subscales of SPSI-R:S

Academic Self Efficacy and Stress

Self report measure of participant's confidence in their ability to carry out academic tasks and how stressful they found these

Adapted from Zajacova et al 2005 to suit UWA terminology and tasks.

Participants are asked to rate each of the items on two 11 point Likert scales

TASKS RANKED FROM MOST TO LEAST STRESSFUL (BEFORE)

Getting the grades I want
Doing well in my hardest unit
Submitting work on time
Managing time efficiently
Having a few assessments in the same week
Finding time to study
Preparing for exams
Taking good lecture notes
Doing well in exams
Asking questions in class
Completing major assignments
Having enough money
Making friends at UWA

TASKS RANKED FROM MOST TO LEAST STRESSFUL (BEFORE) CONTINUED

Keeping up with required readings
Working in a group or pair
Talking to my unit coordinators or lecturers
Getting help and information at UWA #
Finding other students to have lunch or study with
Talking to tutors/lab facilitators
Understanding my lecturers
Participating in class discussion
Getting along with family members
Understanding UWA regulations
Understanding my text books
Meeting my parents' expectation of my marks

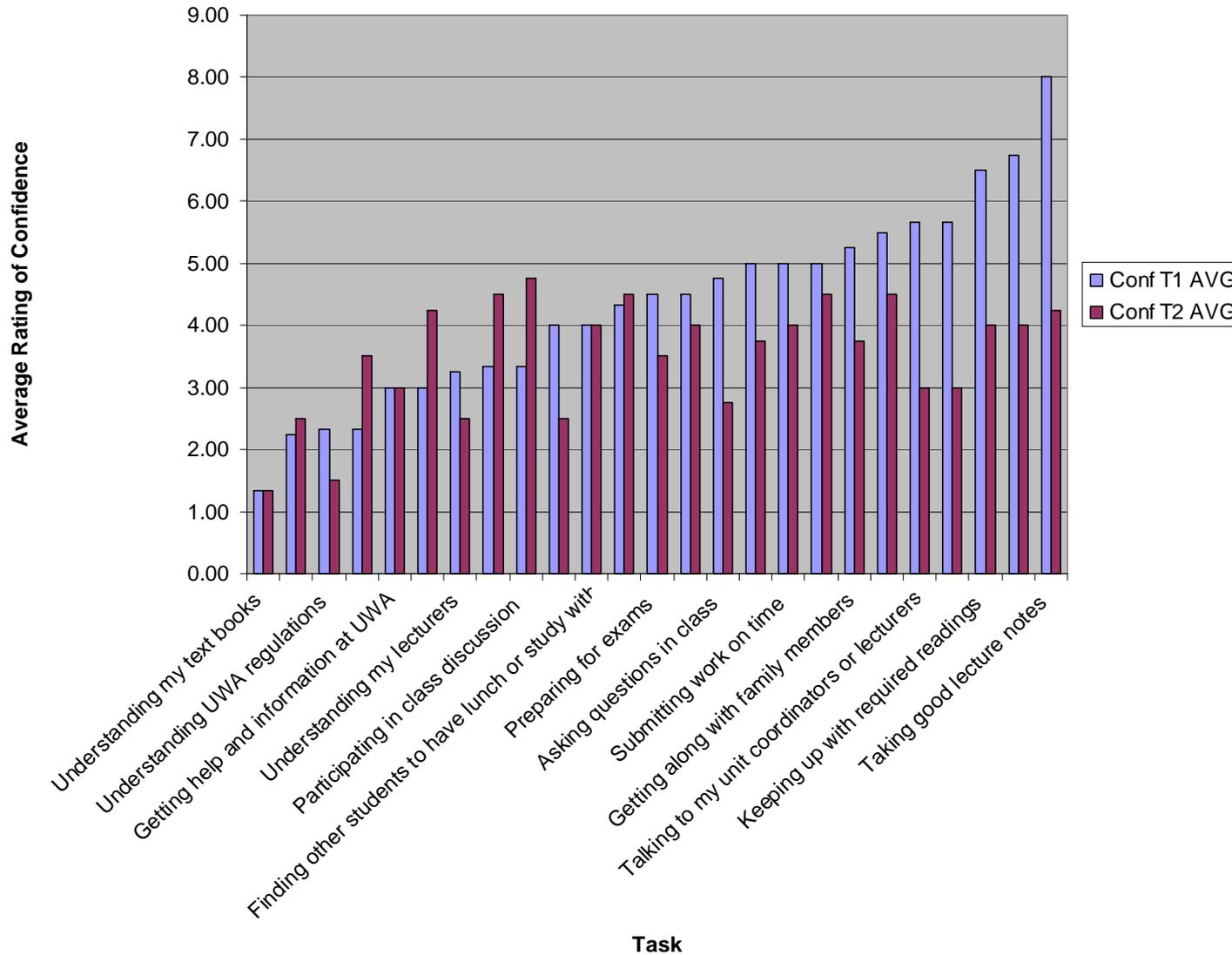**Stress Associated with Academic Task Before and After Group Intervention**

Average Rating of Stressfulness

- Stress T1 AVG
- Stress T2 AVG

Academic/Social Task

Tasks (x-axis):
Meeting my parents' expectation of my marks, Understanding UWA regulations, Participating in class discussion, Talking to tutors/lab facilitators, Getting help and information at UWA, Working in a group or pair, Making friends at UWA, Completing major assignments, Doing well in exams, Preparing for exams, Having a few assessments in the same week, Submitting work on time, Getting the grades I want

•Lower score= Lower stress

•For most tasks No change or less stressed after group

•Exceptions

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Confidence Associated with Academic Task Before and After Group Intervention

Trend for confidence and stress to improve (or stay same)

Became less stressed and more confident about:

- Finding time to study

- Keeping up with readings

- Taking good lecture notes

Became more stressed and less confident after group about:

- Participating in class discussion

- Talking to tutors and lab facilitators

Generally both before and after

- Most stressful/least confidence meeting their academic standards, organisation, time management

- Least stressful and most confidence: family expectations and understanding subject matter

- Moderately relaxed and confident about social task such as finding another student to have lunch with.

Qualitative feedback:

Has the group been helpful?

"*very helpful*"

"*yes, meeting and discussing things with the other students in itself is the most helpful thing, and especially about social skills*"

Qualitative Feedback:

Has anything changed about how you participate in tutorials or lab work?

*"I feel **more confident** in them"*

Has anything changed about how you manage social interactions with fellow students?

*"I feel **more confident**"*

"I've learned not to harp on about things"

Other comments

"I've made a couple of new friends here. It's a lovely group"

The best thing was the social connection…without this group I might be on campus all week but not actually talk to anyone

I go to the campus Badmington Group and the Sci-Fi Group but I wouldn't say I'm connected there…when its not my turn I sit on the side and read…(unlike here).

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Highlights

"So…I'm not the only one" Students had shared experience of anxiety and isolation> relief

Social glue: anxiety about uni, piano, mathematics, science fiction;

Genuine friendship formed between two students

By session 6 students able to explain strategies for managing exam stress…(but not all could necessarily act on these)

Challenges

- Matching students for social competence

- Managing inappropriate comments and disclosure

- Managing conversation so that no single student dominates

- Completing rating scales…difficulties with decision making

Future Directions

- The students have formed an informal coffee group and meet regularly.

- Longer intervention: 10 – 15 sessions

- More time for informal component at each session

Is a group like this a reasonable adjustment?

Disability Standards in Education 2005

In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable consider…

- The barriers, needs or challenges confronting a student with a particular disability

- All likely costs and benefits including **learning and social outcomes** for the student

Calls for Universities to provide..

- Explicit teaching of social skills as a support

- Supports including for fine motor, organization and planning, time management, computer resources, exam accommodations which include attention to sensory dysfunction

- Social support should included life skills and sexuality and relationship counseling.

VanBergeijk, E., Klin, A and Volkmar, F. (2008) Supporting more able students on the autism spectrum: college and beyond. Journal of autism and developmental Disorders (38) 1359-1370.

A broader the role for Disability Officers?

- Prophylactic…recruiting, rather than waiting for students to present with problems

- Collaboration with campus counselling services

- New knowledge and skills

- Transition plan for students with ASD including exposure to the curriculum, careful selection of courses, supported social and study skills

- Resourcing priority (staff time)

Further Reading

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