

Exploring perceptions of
‘canine assisted academic learning:’
new ways of working in higher education

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- Students register with Additional Learning Support
 - Conditions range from specific learning disabilities to physical and sensory loss
 - Also students with autism, complex language profiles and social communication difficulties
 - Other conditions include ADHD and mental health difficulties
- ‘Research@ALS’ - the ALS research hub**
- **New research hub** integrated within ALS: launched 2018
 - Research hub: inter/intra Faculty
 - Collaborative research informs and illuminates professional practice
 - Current, dynamic, evolving: **‘Action Research’**

Jack: The B.U. Learning Assistance Dog C.V.

Jack's Profile

- Breed: Shih Tzu; 8 years old
- Calm temperament



What does Jack do in the one to one ALS support sessions?

- Jack sits at Carolyn's desk. Students can choose to touch him, talk to him, interact with him during their 1 to 1 ALS support session
- Jack role is a Learning Assistance Dog (as distinct from a therapy dog).

Believed to be the first dog in the U.K. to work full time in higher education.

Jack's role is to aid and assist in the learning process

'Research@ALS': current research study

Why:

Anecdotally students told us Jack helped with their studies.

We wanted to explore these reports through a formal research study

Aim: To explore student perceptions of 'canine assisted learning'

How: Qualitative: unguided interviews to elicit data rich narratives

Data / Results: early data analysis stage, early results to share today

Participant Profile

- Variety of students with varying conditions took part - all Jack's students were invited - no ascertainment bias
- Conditions included specific learning differences such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, mental health difficulties, pervasive developmental disorder and autism

What do our results show us (so far)....?

Results and data from each interview are arranged into themes

Interviews were chosen to provide insight into how each individual perceives the effect Jack has on their learning

Impacts

- ‘I get stressed out so easily, I worry about other people and it’s all, it’s all like, arrrrgggh’
- ‘When I was really panicking, crying and whatever’
- **‘I panic about my breathing coming up the stairs, I worry I’m too loud when I’m walking up the third floor of the library.’**
- ‘I suffer from anxiety, I get tense and speaking to new people I’m a bit unsure, so I do get anxious with that’
- *‘Sometimes I come out of counselling, it can be exhausting and I come out feeling worse than when I went in’*
- ‘It’s just one of those things with depression, you internalise everything, you think ‘oh it must be something I’m doing wrong’”

Depression

- ‘Having something to do for more than just myself, it’s very easy just to disregard it, because you have such a low opinion of yourself’
- ‘One of the things with depression is that you think you’re not good enough, maybe it’s because you’re setting the bar too high’
- *‘I had depression and I didn’t have my family and I didn’t have my dog’*
- ‘You’re talking to someone you always have at the back of your mind, you know, it’s a part of depression.. they’re calm and kind and if you say all these negative things about yourself you know they’re going to say: ‘well actually no, it’s just this...’ **and you think there has to be a point where the person goes: ‘would you wise up and catch a hold of yourself and just stop being so miserable all the time’**”

Loss

'In university I find it's dangerously easy to just completely isolate yourself'

- 'It would be really great to be a part of something'
- Physical loss away from home: 'to touch a dog just having that familiar experience was really, really, it really helped my emotional wellbeing'
- 'I have a job here so it's hard for me to go home so when I'm here once a week, it's nice to just touch a dog'
- 'I found that it compounded my feelings of isolation 'cos I had depression and I didn't have my family and I didn't have my dog and just being able to come here and just, you know, touch something'
- 'It's nice to have a dog around, I can be like 'this feels like home', because I don't go home very often'

Contact

Physical

Emotional

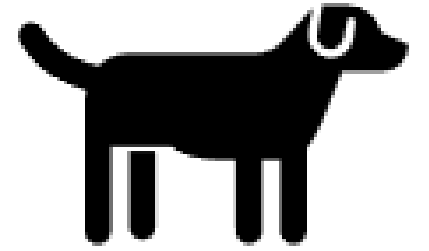
Isolation

Touch



Not Human

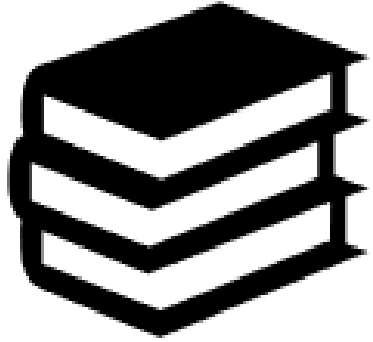
- ‘One of the main things for me... they’re unjudging.... with mental health, you know the dog has no opinions’
- ‘I was really panicking, crying, he didn’t react to that and that made me feel better, **because humans react differently, but the dog just sits there and you can just cry, stroke it and it doesn’t react, then it kind of brings you down to a grounded level**’
- ‘Jack’s there to help me, it’s really helpful, it’s more as I say, a tool. He was described to me as a member of staff so that’s just how I see him’
- ‘When you’re talking to someone when you have depression, you always have at the back of your mind, if you say all these negative things about yourself that they’re going to say ‘well actually no, it’s just this...’and you think there has to be a point where the person goes: **‘would you wise up and catch a hold of yourself and just stop being so miserable all the time’ and with the dog there isn’t any of that**’



Academic & Memory

- ‘Academic wise he does have that effect where he can give you ways to remember information. For me, I can look at him and remember a few bits of what we did last week coming in to next week’
- **‘Sometimes the way he’s lying – if he lays a certain way I’ll be like ‘oh yeah!’ – I remember him laying that way when we spoke about ‘whatever’**
- ‘I do have quite short term memory, what I remember and stuff, but sometimes I can memorise what we spoke about that week just by the way he’s laying.....’
- ***‘I’ve managed to pass both my January exams, I’ve never passed an exam – until now – so you can see the effect that Jack is making’***





Academic & Calm

- ‘I would be distracted half the time in a session and feeling unwell, but *with Jack here I feel a lot calmer, it kind of puts my mind at ease*’
- **‘He’s like an emotional stabiliser, he helps me engage with my academic work again** because I’m not worrying about things I shouldn’t be worrying about’
- ‘I have two presentations by the end of the year and I fully intend to just present to Jack in a room, I’ll find that really helpful.... *once again the calming influence of Jack is helpful, it’s like talking to a wall that can hear you, but it’s not going to tread you down after*’
- ‘Support with Jack was different to my first impression, it was actually a lot more academically focused, which I think was better in a way’



Engagement/daily living



- *‘In university I find it’s dangerously easy to just completely isolate yourself’*
- *‘It’s very easy to just withdraw from your course and not have anyone to be accountable to, so these meetings, knowing it’s there it’s helpful’*
- It helps me engage with my academic work again because I’m not worrying about things I shouldn’t be worrying about’
- ‘I’m not thinking ‘oh I should be doing this, I should be doing that’ and then being paralysed not doing anything’
- The calm zone with Jack: ***‘It was almost like having a society where people went when they felt uncomfortable but you didn’t have to sign up for it’***

Keeping it real

- ‘It doesn’t matter how much training I think someone has, every human has a point called ‘compassion fatigue’ where you reach a point where you just need time off because you can’t care anymore, you’re just exhausted and I think with a dog you don’t get that, there’s no opinions, or ‘they’re not just saying this to make you feel better’
- ‘If you’re talking to a person you know they can, I know this sounds really weird and deep, you know they can deceive..... but with a dog you know, you know it’s real, it’s just real and there’s no strings attached, there’s no judgement ...’
- ***‘I don’t think I could get genuine comfort from not a real dog, if it was like a robot dog I know it’s just ones and zeros re-arranged in a certain way to give this response’***
- ***‘With depression you’re always wondering, ‘is it real, or are they just saying that to comfort me?’”***



Key thoughts so far: the 'Jack effect'

'He gives you company, but makes **no demands**'

'No need to explain yourself, or pretend, or not pretend to be anything else, **you can just be how you want** at that moment'

'Animals who can take on the role of **not expecting** anything from you, I think that's more of a miraculous thing'

'I don't have to be an actor, you can just stop, you can just stop... being with Jack you can just stop being anything and that's quite **a release**'

'**It gives me a break from being me**'

'He brings, **calmness, no judgement, no labels**, no 'I need help' label

Canine Assisted Academic Learning: OUTCOMES

- ‘Relaxed’ feeling: patting
- **Pauses** provide mini breaks: calming; ‘re-calibrate myself’
- Changes the **mood** in the room; alleviates tension, evokes feelings of ‘home’
- **Touch**: comforting, feelings of connection; helps with compensating sense of loss – family, home, physical closeness
- **Academic achievement**: ‘mini’ mental breaks, ‘puts your mind at ease’; ‘I’ve never passed an exam – until now’
- **Switch off** from and mini distractions from relentless demands of study
- **Non-judgemental**; ‘be myself’
- Helps with **memory** – posture of dog = visual prompt/links
- **Calmness**; ‘puts my mind at ease’
- **Engagement**; provides situational accountability

Quotes:

‘It’s a reassurance that you don’t have to explain anything, you’re just being, it’s like Jack makes everything fine’

‘It wasn’t a distraction, it was like someone had come to be on my side, no questions asked’

The Jack Effect: Academic

‘**Academic wise he does have that effect** where it’s more a kind of... he can give you ways to remember information’

‘Academic wise he does have that effect where he can **give you ways to remember information**, I can look at him and remember a few bits of what we did last week.... Sometimes the way he’s lying – say he lays a certain way – I’ll remember him laying that way when we spoke about whatever...’

‘I do have quite a short term **memory** and what I remember, sometimes I can remember what we spoke about that week with just by the way he’s lying there’

‘I get distracted either way with him, I save my rest breaks in sessions for just having a few seconds to say something to Jack. I’ve managed to pass both of my exams and I’ve never passed an exam – until now – so you can see the effect that obviously Jack is making... **it puts your mind at ease**’

‘**I can switch off for a bit** before it was got to revise, got to revise, got to revise, and I was saying I’m not taking a break until I’ve done this section. I see Jack once a week and it’s not a break as such, but you have a dog here and it kind of puts something else in your mind to get distracted for only a few minutes so it’s nice that way and it yes made that difference’

‘It’s more self directed this year, which for me is the worst thing to happen because I go ‘it’s going to be too stressful and it’s very easy to withdraw so it’s important to have these **appointments** with Jack and I think it wouldn’t work, it wouldn’t have been as much help if it had been just an emotional support dog’

The Jack Effect: *Calm*

‘I suffer from anxiety, I get tense and speaking to new people I’m a bit unsure, so I do get anxious with that, whereas when **Jack’s around there’s a calmer effect**’

‘It’s nice having Jack about to have **something different to a human** I would say’

‘I think he puts a more **calming approach** on people especially on stressful times like exams, it is very calming because you get distracted by him for a few minutes to take your mind off everything’

‘I think it’s just about **taking yourself out of the world** for a few minutes’

‘It kind of puts your mind at ease, my days with Jack, that’s **my stress free days**’

‘I can be like, **‘this feels like home**’ because I don’t go home very often’

‘Having him around, it just **brightens up your day** to see him’

‘I had **physical contact** with Jack and that was a great comfort to me, he’s like a surrogate’

Next: new directions and follow up.....

Early analysis: so far, our data suggests there may be a 'Jack Effect' (for the students we spoke to)

Next: identify elements of the Jack Effect...

Now: integrate what we have learned into our professional practice: **'Action Research'**

Conclusions *(so far)*.....

“I’m not a dog person, I’m a Jack person”

The ‘Jack Effect’ seems to be **different things for different people**

Maybe he offers to each different student what each different student needs

This may be because **each student approaches this support in different ways, according to their different needs**

But, there are some ***common threads***

We have shared just a few examples with you, today

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Thank you!

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