

Bridging Distance:

Re-Imagining Distance Education for Autistic Learners

Presented by Trish Hoang



autismqld.com.au

Participation | **Opportunity** | **Choice**

Acknowledgement of Country

Autism Queensland (AQ) acknowledges the importance and value of the reconciliation journey with Traditional Custodians and Owners of all the lands and waters on which we live and work.

We acknowledge the wisdom of Elders past and extend our respect for the valuable contributions of Elders present and those emerging leaders who willingly share cultural knowledge. We recognise the significance of connections between country and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as we walk together toward participation, opportunity, and choice.

 **Artist: Yvonne O'Neill.** The artwork represents the way cultural conversations interact between AQ and the wider community.



Overview:

- Autism Queensland (AQ) context
- Why Distance Education (DE) for autistic learners?
- What does AQ School DE look like?
- Autistic learners and stakeholder perspectives
- Future opportunities / evolving understandings

AQ School

- Queensland's peak body and longest-standing provider of autism-specific education, therapy, and support services for children, adults, their families, and the professionals and communities who support them.
- Accredited independent school (approx. 280 students across the state)
- Prep – Year 12 (full time and part-time enrolments)
- 6 physical campuses + Distance Education program (*Years 3-10 only*)
- Accredited Educational Program approved by NSSAB and QCAA, providing highly personalised education to autistic students.

AQ School

Neurodiversity-
affirming practices

Clear, positive,
structured learning
environments

Proactive and positive
engagement,
wellbeing and
behavioural supports

Restorative justice
practices address
conflicts and
incidents

Whole school
universal supports +
personalised
adjustments

AQ School

- Small class learning opportunities
- Interdisciplinary team support
- Personalised learning plans & curriculum adjustments
- Explicit teaching of skills
- Supported and predictable learning with holistic approach to engagement
- Incorporation of student experiences and strengths
- Collaboration and consultancy with key stakeholders (including students)
- Supported transitions

Why DE?

- **45%** of autistic students are regularly absent from school
- Up to **25%** may demonstrate severe absences

**Autistic students
face significant
challenges in
School settings.**

*(Adams, 2022; Bowden et al., 2025; Totsika et al., 2020;
Connolly et al., 2023; E.K. Jones et al., 2020)*

How did we get here?

Covid 19 – Global Pandemic

- Increased experience of disrupted schooling for many students
- Limited understanding of how to support students personalised needs during flexible attendance
- Further impacts to students experiencing reduced school connections
More visibility of / increased 'School Can't' after the pandemic.

Bridging the distance

When school becomes the barrier:

- Social and sensory overload of traditional schooling
- Limited personalisation of access and engagement adjustments
- Limited student voice in goal setting, solutions and programming
- Impact on school connections / 'attendance protective factors'
- Disrupted schooling

School Distress

- School Distress > School Refusal, school non-attendance and more recently school-can't.
- School distress accounts for around half of all days absent for autistic students.

(Adams, 2022; Connolly et al., 2023; Leslie et al., 2025; Smart et al., 2024; Totsika et al., 2020)

Drivers of the DE program

- School attendance directly influences learning outcomes and achievement.
- A growing understanding of the urgent need to make schooling more accessible for neurodivergent students.
- Increasing evidence and parent requests for more flexible approaches to supporting students with disrupted school attendance
- Access to quality personalised educational program throughout Queensland

(Hancock et al., 2013; Totsika et al., 2020)

Reframing School Attendance And Engagement Through a Neurodiversity Affirming Lens

- Safe and Supportive Environment
- Student Voice
- Personalisation and meaningful participation
- Flexibility
- Collaboration between stakeholders

A life of participation, opportunity and choice.

(Neilson and Bond, 2023; O'Hagan et al., 2024)

Holistic approach

- Beyond academic support
- Wellbeing
- Designed to address individual barriers



Beyond Boundaries: What Makes AQ School Different?

Adjustments to support:

- ✓ Connection
- ✓ Agency
- ✓ Access
- ✓ Belonging
- ✓ Collaboration



Supporting Connection

To help build connection we embed various opportunities to:

- Check In
- Engage with peers and build relationships
- Be heard and valued



Check-Ins

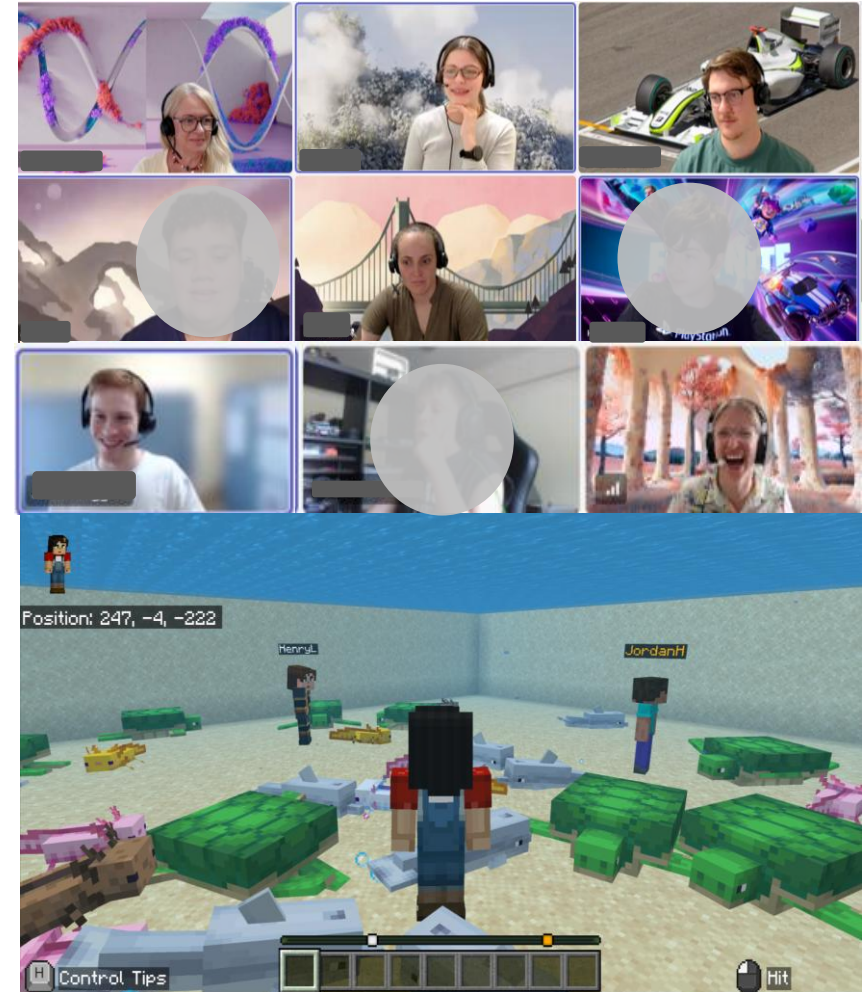
- Routine check ins
- Opportunities throughout the day
- Modelling from staff

Talking Point	
I slept	
Breakfast	
My energy is	
I feel	 I am Great  I am Good  I am Okay  I am Struggling  I am Upset  I don't feel like sharing

Supporting Relationships

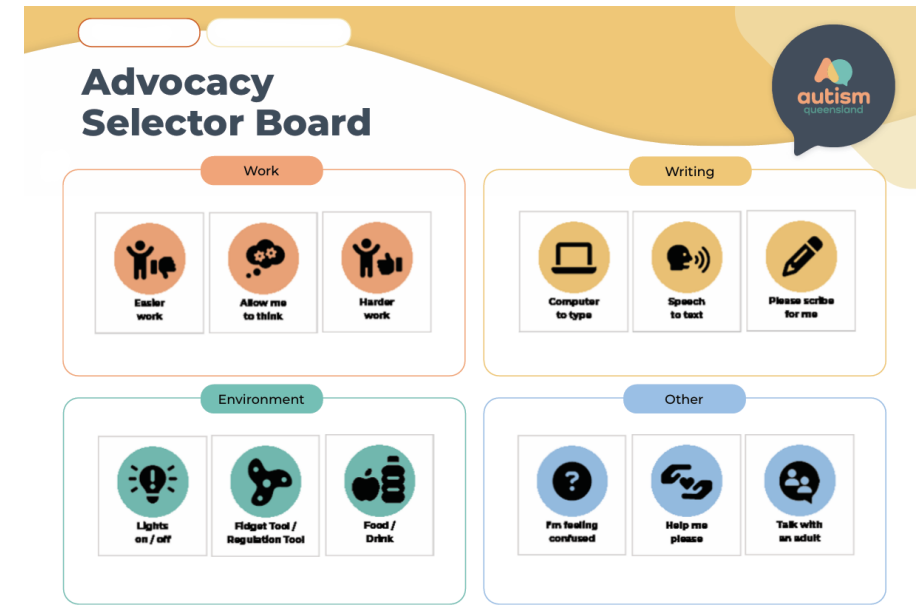
Opportunities for social online connections:

- Daily Restorative Circles
- Scheduled Virtual Lunch/Clubs
- Social Groups



Supporting Agency

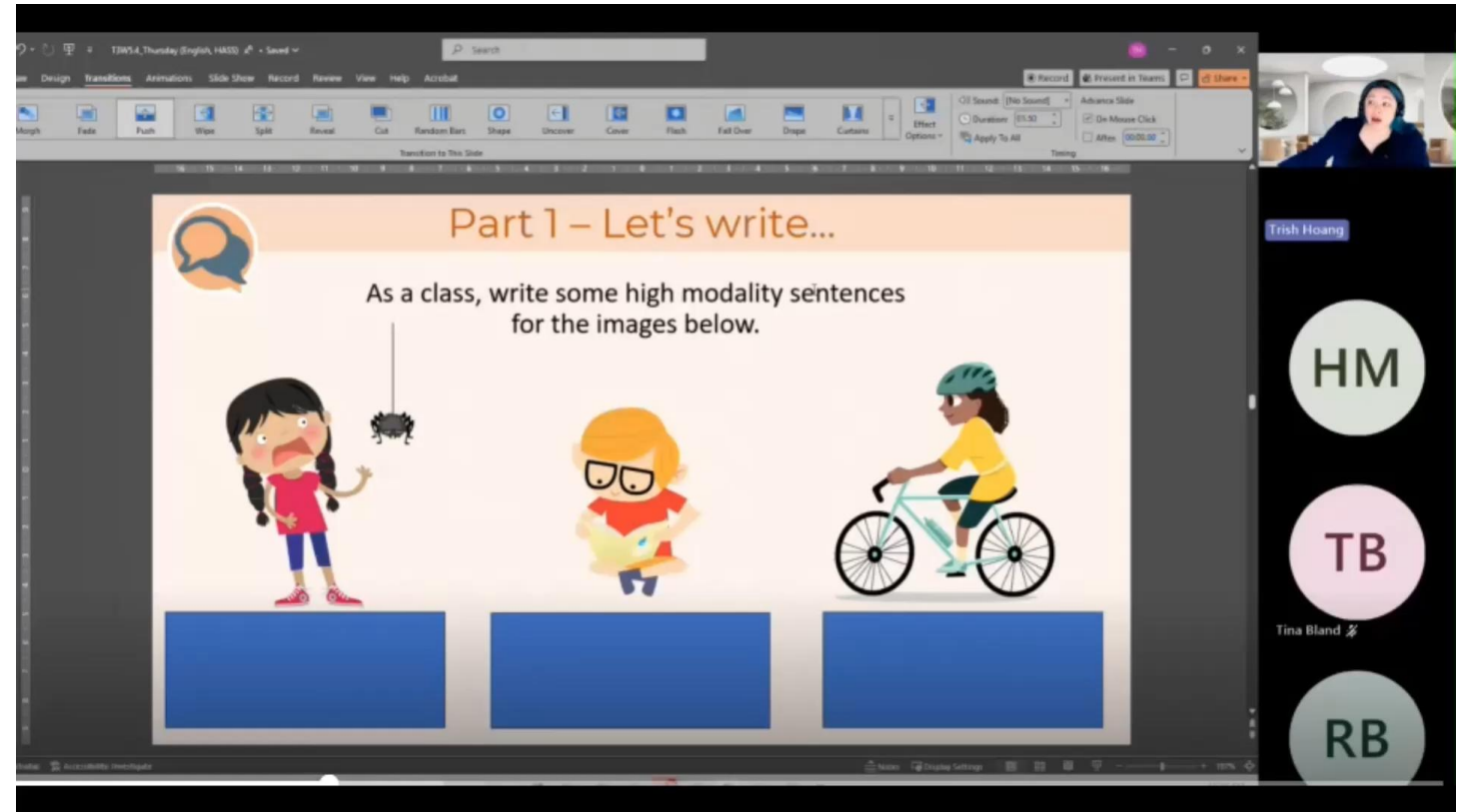
- Students have an active role in goal setting and learning
- Their voice is heard and encouraged to make choices relating to their learning



Student Space			
Reflect			
	I got it!	I got it with some help	I still need help
The Work			
	Easier Work	About the same	Harder Work
Reading			
	On my own	With help	Read for me

Supporting Access

- Interdisciplinary team support
- Tools and technology to support access to learning



Supporting Belonging

- Clubs
- Connection with the rest of the campus
- Other inclusive opportunities



Supporting Collaboration

- Teacher as class teacher and case manager
- Using technology for efficiency
- Release time for teachers



Interdisciplinary Team

- Distance Education Coordinator
- Distance Education Teacher
- Teacher assistants
- Therapy team
- Behaviour Support Facilitator
- Student Wellbeing Facilitator

**Our
interdisciplinary
team work
collaboratively**

AQ DE Taster

**LeARNING
in DE**

Measures of Success

**HERE ARE
SOME OF OUR
THOUGHTS ON
DE..**

Student & Family Feedback

“I just want to take a moment to appreciate your amazing patience and compassion in your teaching with W. I honestly sit listening to W’s classes 3-4 days a week when I support him, just so grateful we found AQ. Each week that goes by I see W settling into this new way of learning and becoming such a happier kid.”

Parent of Student W.

“I love this school and you guys help me understand so much that I am left with no questions” and “Thank you for helping me through the highs and the lows. You guys saved me.”

Student AP.

Looking Ahead

- Continued review and development
- Ongoing co-design for educational barrier solutions
- Building internal capability and confidence
- Stronger push for evidence- informed policy and practice alignment
- Contribute to national and international education models and research.



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Questions?