

Active learning in a neuroaffirmative classroom

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Abstract

Purpose – Traditional learning methods and norms may not adequately support, and instead can further marginalise, a neurodivergent population of students. The purpose of this paper is to describe the theory and strategies that underpinned the author's development of a module on autistic representation in literature. These strategies aimed to create a neuroaffirmative learning experience, and ultimately resulted in transforming her understanding of active learning and therefore her own teaching practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that refers to natural neurocognitive variation among people. It exists in contrast with an assumed "normal" cognitive, affective and sensory type to which higher education has traditionally catered. The current prevalence of neuronormativity in higher education results in epistemic injustice, where neurodivergent learners may not be afforded full access to the production of knowledge. This paper takes an approach informed by both self-study and autoethnography to reflect on a radical reconsideration of the author's teaching practice, precipitated by the discovery of her own neurodivergence. By analysing her changing practice across course materials and reflective writing, the author reconsiders what she had previously understood as active learning.

Findings – This paper argues that learning should be designed in order to more fully empower neurodivergent students to engage actively with the material, potentially improving academic, personal, relational and social outcomes that might result from the learning experience. The key strategies employed could include reconceiving of active learning, redesigning space, making the invisible visible, rethinking participation and co-designing learning.

Originality/value – Neurodivergent students are at risk of unbelonging in higher education. While individual teachers may not be able to dismantle the systemic issues that create or compound this risk, it is nonetheless possible for them to explicitly challenge neuronormative practice within the classroom and to shift neurodivergent students from the edges to the centre of design in a way that will benefit all students. This paper makes some recommendations about how to achieve this.

Keywords Autism, Neurodiversity, Neuroaffirmative, Epistemic injustice, Active learning, Pedagogy

Paper type Case report

Introduction

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that refers to neurocognitive variation found within humankind (see, for example [McLennan et al., 2025a, 2025b](#); [Pellicano and den Houting, 2022](#)). It exists in contrast with an assumed "normal" cognitive, affective and sensory type, and it conceives of neurological difference as natural rather than impairment or deficit ([Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2020](#)). Traditional learning methods, however, may not sufficiently accommodate this variation, and so may not adequately support and empower a



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neurodiverse population of students (see, for example, [Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#); [1] [Burgstahler, 2009](#)).

It is therefore imperative that teachers reconsider how we enable (or disable) neurodivergent students to engage with the learning context and content of our classes.

This reflective study describes the development and delivery of a seminar module on autistic representation and literature. The module's focus on epistemic injustice ([Fricker, 2007](#)) led to explorations of what constitutes a neuroaffirmative learning experience, and ultimately transformed how I thought about and facilitated active learning in my classes.

Background: from late identification to reconceptualisation

Understanding one's neurodifference can be fundamentally disruptive, forcing a reconfiguration not only of one's identity but also of how one's understanding of the world has been constructed ([Corden et al., 2021](#)). Many people who are identified as autistic in later life (whether through self-identification or formal assessment), for example, only then come to realise the extent of the poor fit between their neurotype and their environment ([Gellini and Marczak, 2024](#)). This paradigm shift often results in a critique of previously accepted norms, and an attempt to identify any adaptation strategies that one may have adopted to fit in, often at a cost to the self ([Radulski, 2022](#); [Cook et al., 2021](#); [Pearson and Rose, 2021](#); [Hull et al., 2017](#)).

I had been teaching for over twenty years when I learned that I was autistic. Mine seemed to have been a successful teaching career with formal qualifications and multiple awards – both institutional and national – validating my work. Yet, as I pondered my own history in the light of my new discovery, I considered how I had experienced higher education as an unidentified autistic student, particularly the challenges I had faced and the areas in which I had flourished. I realised that my current classroom design, structure and practice had not been built for autistic thriving. Despite all of the measures I had taken towards inclusion, my teaching and learning was, at its heart, neuronormative – that is, both explicitly and implicitly designed for an imagined neurotypical student ([Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#); [Milton et al., 2016](#)). Open conversations inviting students to volunteer responses to novel questions, loosely structured group tasks, norms around participation and communication, and implicit expectations of the environment itself meant that the learning space I had facilitated was not accessible to many ([Neilson et al., 2025](#); [Vernon and Dervan, 2025](#); [Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#); [Martin, 2020](#)).

Concurrent with this realisation was an attempt to understand how the social construction of autism was reflected in writing about autism and the autistic experience. Social constructionism acknowledges that the ways in which reality is defined and expressed are socially contingent: created by and upheld by a group of people in any one place and time ([Steedman, 2000](#); [Berger and Luckmann, 1991](#)). Such contingency is evident in two prevailing and competing models of disability that influence how autism is perceived (see [Goodley, 2011](#)). The medical model conceives of disability as individual impairment requiring treatment, intervention or cure; it regards autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder manifesting in a set of deficits [[Sauermilch, et al., 2025](#); [WHO \(World Health Organisation\), 2019](#); [APA \(American Psychiatric Association\), 2013](#)]. The social model of disability, on the other hand, conceives of disability as resulting from a mismatch between individual and environment ([Sauermilch, et al., 2025](#); [Botha and Cage, 2022](#)); it considers how to be autistic is to experience differences (for example sensory and processing differences) that may be poorly accommodated within the environment.

Since deficit-based understandings of autism have historically prevailed, the medical model has traditionally informed Anglophone literary representations, where autism is often

perceived from the outside as manifesting in particular behavioural traits or responses that, in turn, are written as tropes and stereotypes in fiction (see, for example, [Sauermilch, et al., 2025](#); [Jones et al., 2023](#); [Mittman et al., 2024](#); [Orm et al., 2023](#); [Freeman Loftis, 2015](#); [Murray, 2008](#)). Yet, increasingly popular is literature embracing the neurodiversity paradigm, which, as defined by Walker, recognises the value of different neurocognitive types, rejects the neuronormative as the ideal, and acknowledges that power dynamics surrounding neurodiversity are similar to those that are enacted in relation to other forms of human diversity ([Walker, 2021](#)). It is within the neurodiversity paradigm that I situate my own approach.

Methodology

This research is underpinned by autoethnographic self-study (see [Hamilton, 2021](#)). While I borrow from self-study methods to reflect on my own practice as a teacher within the higher education context, I also consider that self autoethnographically – that is, in relation to broader sociopolitical concerns in a wider epistemic context (see [Hamilton et al., 2008](#)). Self-study, concerned as it is with the individual teacher in practice, recognises that teaching is an “intensely interpersonal, highly complex, always changing, moral and political act [that] requires continual monitoring and adaptation” ([LaBoskey, 2004](#), p. 820). Through self-study, I enquire of and strive to challenge my own assumptions and biases, improve my own practice and processes, and share my learning with others. Yet self-study is, by the very nature of teaching and learning, bounded by questions of power relations. Such considerations therefore complement an autoethnography of teaching that reads personal experiences through a cultural lens to contest and challenge the dominant paradigm ([Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009](#)).

Autoethnography and self-study can serve to improve practice for the individual researcher through reflection on individual knowledge construction, assumptions and actions; in turn, they can elicit empathy through which a reader might enter into a perspective that they had not previously considered ([Méndez, 2013](#)). While an autoethnographic self-study can elucidate some of the complexities of learning, teaching and assessment processes, these are multiply and intricately entangled not only with each other ([Hauge, 2021](#)), but also with the context in which (and the parties among whom) they take place; as such the results are not easily generalisable. It is my hope, though, that the reflective practice described below will evoke questions about neuronormative practices and assumptions that are bound up with learning, teaching and assessment, and thus drive further change.

To analyse the reappraisal of my own teaching practice that was catalysed by learning about my own neurodivergence, I compared the development of course materials of the seminar under discussion across three iterations – in particular, the design and organisation of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and my written communication to the student groups. I considered these materials in terms of three themes that emerged from the redesign: how I conceived of student engagement; the classroom environment; and the norms of academia itself. I contextualised the learning and design within current scholarship; I neither gathered nor used data from third parties in this research.

In its development, and throughout the course of the seminar, I took reflective notes on, and conversed with others about, various elements of the design. In addition, after each iteration of the seminar, I presented on the redesign to groups of peers who served as critical friends ([Noor and Shafee, 2020](#)). These reflections and oral presentations considered emerging changes in my practice within wider frameworks of learning and teaching.

I bring to this research the lived experience of not being able to understand one's own identity as a result of the proliferation of bad hermeneutic resources; this has steered my

interest in both the theme of the seminar and the neuronormativity embedded within traditional education. The redesign of the module inspired memory work on my own experiences as an unidentified autistic undergraduate. The overlap of these aspects of my identity with my role as educator critiquing epistemic injustice from within a structure of epistemic power is complex. I sought to manage influence in my teaching by being open about my own insider status and positionality, while demonstrating the diversity of autistic perspectives and attitudes. I created opportunities to explore topics from various, often competing, perspectives (including within assignments). In addition, I maintained reflexivity through the collection and analysis of multiple forms of data: memory work, module documentation and written reflections. I explored emergent insights and sought feedback in conversations about the redesign with peers who served as critical friends. In addition, I strove to test and integrate the autoethnographic self-study with scholarship on both teaching and learning and neurodiversity.

Autism fictions, autistic writing

The teaching took place in a large publicly funded higher education institution in Ireland with a strongly articulated commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, including around neurodivergent belonging. The institution is committed to Universal Design, with many projects in train to advance this goal. In addition, students can access a range of supports through a proactive and informed disability service within the institution.

In this context, I planned to develop a seminar for a Bachelor of Arts module in English through which students could consider the difficulties of representation. The seminar would examine how representation is affected by epistemic injustice (discussed further below); analyse the cultural construction of identities and experiences; and evaluate the representative techniques of a variety of texts about autism and the autistic experience.

I proposed a final-year elective seminar course called “Autism Fictions, Autistic Writing”. Beginning in the academic year 2024–2025, and taught over 24 contact hours per semester, with an enrolment of up to 25 students per iteration, it would consider the ways in which literature is socially contingent and socially influential in how it constructs and responds to fluid understandings of autism and autistic identity. Students would examine autism as a contested concept in which many groups (among them, autistic people, parents and carers, professionals, lobbyists and charities) claim a stake; they would analyse how this contestation manifests in often conflicting representations (see, for example, [O’Dell, 2024](#); [Tan, 2024](#)).

The course would introduce students to a range of texts, fiction and non-fiction: medical case studies and diagnostic criteria, allistic- (non-autistic) and autistic-authored fiction, autistic life writing, and writings from the Autistic Rights and Neurodiversity Movements. In particular, students would examine two allistic-authored novels ([Moon, 2002](#); [Haddon, 2004](#)); an autistic-authored memoir ([Prahlaad, 2017](#)); an autistic-authored novel ([Lloyd-Barlow, 2023](#)); as well as introductory chapters from a range of autistic life writing ([Gibbs, 2021](#); [Kurchak, 2020](#); [Toeps, 2020](#)). Through these texts, students would explore the sociopolitical construction and consumption of knowledge about autistic people, and the intricate issues surrounding the representation and narration of identity. They would learn to analyse a range of representative techniques; critically evaluate the relationship between various contested understandings of autism and the fictional construction of autistic experience; and consider issues of epistemic justice in relation to representation. I designed the course for an imagined autistic student, and so sought to embed epistemic justice as a foundational principle of that design.

Epistemic justice as foundational design principle

Epistemic injustice proliferates in autistic representation. Autistic people, like other minoritised groups, are frequently discounted as knowers or disseminators of knowledge about their own experiences (Kidd *et al.*, 2017). In this case, this form of injustice is exacerbated by deficit-based models of autism that regard communication differences as impairment (see, for example, Spaeth and Pearson, 2023; Chapman and Carel, 2022; Catala *et al.*, 2021). Epistemic injustice is rooted in what Fricker refers to as “identity power”, whereby power is conceived of, coordinated and enacted, in terms of social identity (Fricker, 2007). Such injustice may take one of two forms: testimonial injustice disregards an individual’s testimony because of prejudices in the hearer; hermeneutical injustice disadvantages the individual in making sense of their own experiences because of a gap in collective knowledge (*ibid.*). The operation of these two forms of injustice is cyclical in the representation of autistic experience: where autistic people are not accorded credibility in representing their own experiences, good hermeneutic resources cannot proliferate (Chapman and Carel, 2022; Catala, Faucher, and Poirier, 2021). In turn, if these good hermeneutic resources are absent, then autistic people are not fully equipped with the resources by which to make sense of their own experiences, and are therefore further undermined as knowers.

Yet, this issue of epistemic injustice did not merely inform the content of the module, but also my own teaching practice. As Walker notes:

Education is demonstrably a space where epistemic justice matters; it is after all where being a knower and being able to act as a knower to gain epistemic access and develop epistemic agency is rather important. (Walker, 2019, p. 165)

Whose voices and perspectives dominate the learning space is very much a matter of epistemic justice (Wallis and Rocha, 2022). Injustice can be enacted whenever a student’s learning practices and preferences are not sufficiently valued in the design, preventing that student from participating in the construction of knowledge (see, for example, Catala *et al.*, 2021); this is further compounded by the intersection of multiple forms of marginalisation (see Kidd *et al.*, 2017). Given that this module was explicitly addressing epistemic injustice as a matter of representation, I undertook to re-evaluate and redesign as much of the learning experience as was under my control to hold a mirror up to epistemic injustice as well as to facilitate opportunities for justice. For each element of design, I imagined how an autistic student – often, through memory work of my own undergraduate experiences – would move through that design. I therefore hoped to shift autistic ways of inhabiting the classroom from the edges to the centre of how we would operate (see Nieminen, 2023) and, in so doing, challenge neuronormativity within the teaching context.

Beyond neuronormativity

The term *neuronormativity*

[...] refers to the prevalent, neurotypical set of assumptions, norms, and practices that construes neurotypicality as the sole acceptable or superior mode of cognition, and that stigmatizes attitudes, behaviours, or actions that reflect neuroatypical modes of cognition as deviant or inferior. (Catala *et al.*, 2021, p. 9016)

This set of “assumptions, norms, and practices” is, at its heart, exclusionary (Catala *et al.*, 2021; see also Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). It can exclude not only neurodivergent students, but individuals of all neurotypes who experience their learning uniquely as well dynamically across the span of their degree. This broader exclusion results from the fact that executive

functioning, focus and attention, energy levels and access to existing skills can vary between and within individuals, fluctuating based on well-being, time, place and other factors (Wang *et al.*, 2021; Bennett *et al.*, 2008).

Neuronormativity is visible where, for example, reasonable accommodations are seen as *the* solution to access. Mandated by law in the Irish context, higher education institutions are required to take appropriate measures to ensure that a disabled student has access to education and university facilities, once these measures do not impose a disproportionate burden on the institution (see, for example, [Equal Status Act, 2000](#)). Such adjustments recognise the effect of an unaccommodating environment in creating barriers that result in disablement, but reasonable accommodations do not address the exclusionary design that is the root of the problem. By themselves, they are concessions to access (limited by what might constitute a disproportionate burden on the institution), and they only offer adaptations instead of transformation.

Typically, in higher education institutions, students who wish to avail of adjustments such as early access to course materials, extensions to assignment deadlines, learning supports and assistive technology, need to supply formal evidence of their need from a third party (for example a medical professional). Burdensome and repeated epistemic labour is often undertaken by the student, who may have to advocate for their needs to a range of individuals they might encounter across these institutions (Horlin *et al.*, 2024). They are therefore positioned as educators on their neurodivergence, and yet the process of seeking such accommodations involves multiple experts in a way that may inadvertently diminish the agency of the student as knower (see, for example, MacLeod *et al.*, 2018). If self-advocacy is not successful, then the student may be subjected to further epistemic injustice by being prevented full access to the production of knowledge (see Spaeth and Pearson, 2023).

Research has repeatedly shown that only a minority of students experiencing disablement engage with their disability services in their institutions, and that even when they do, they often have poorer outcomes in terms of retention and completion than their nondisabled peers (Blasey *et al.*, 2022; Clouder *et al.*, 2020; Newham, 2020; Sarrett, 2018; Dong and Lucas, 2016; Marshak *et al.*, 2010). In addition, since there is no general public pathway for autism assessments in Ireland at the time of writing, it would not be unfair to assume that there are many neurodivergent students in higher education in Ireland who are unaware that they are neurodivergent or who do not have formal confirmation of such (see Hartman *et al.*, 2023). Many neurodivergent students experience a tension between the possible benefits of disclosing their difference and the risks of discrimination and stigma, and those who do disclose often find that the cost of repeated self-advocacy is high in terms of cognitive and emotional load, time and overall well-being (Horlin *et al.*, 2024; Bruce and Lynn Aylward, 2021).

For all of these reasons, I felt it was imperative that I reposition the module and the experience of learning, teaching and assessment away from neuronormative practice to minimise epistemic injustice. I sought to remove as many barriers to learning as were under my control: particularly those involving use of space, student engagement and epistemic agency. While considering the imagined autistic student in my design process, the overarching principle in development of the module was flexibility for individual learners regardless of neurotype. I desired a learning environment developed with particular attentiveness to both the personal and the holistic – to how any individual differs (from others and from past and future selves) in how they inhabit and engage with the learning. This could also have significant relational and sociopolitical impacts (Cappiali, 2025; Cappiali, 2023); it could expand the potential for neuroaffirmative practice and model examples of transferrable

solidarity. The redesign would seek to redress the balance of neuronormativity by democratising access to knowledge and ways of knowing (Cappiali, 2024).

There were therefore several key actions that I took in redesigning the module, which I discuss in further detail below:

- reconceiving of active learning;
- redesigning space;
- making the invisible visible;
- rethinking participation; and
- co-designing learning.

Reconceiving of active learning

Active learning is usually conceived of in relation to the dichotomy of student-centred versus teacher-centred learning and it is considered to be one of the hallmarks for the former (see, for example, Bergström *et al.*, 2023; Murphy *et al.*, 2021; Kranzfelder *et al.*, 2020). It is, however, often described in terms of in-class instructional activities such as group work, debate and interaction (see, for example, Spaeth and Pearson, 2023; Lumpkin *et al.*, 2015; Freeman *et al.*, 2014; Bonwell and Eison, 1991). While I desired that students engage deeply and actively with the learning, I realised that I needed to reconsider what active learning might look like in a module that sought to reject neuronormativity (see Børte *et al.*, 2023).

Previously, I had only thought of active learning in a very narrow way: as verbal participation, immediate responses to new questions, peer-to-peer conversation and loosely structured group work. Validating different modes of participation (see Spaeth and Pearson, 2023) would broaden my understanding, as I facilitated new ways for students to take the learning from the module, bring it into their wider lives, and return to the seminar with new data from the world outside of the classroom. I would encourage rereading of familiar cultural artefacts; critical analysis of pertinent news stories; and reflections on other examples of epistemic injustice. For these, I would facilitate sharing in a range of modes: in select-and-analyse continuous assessment tasks, in live collaborative written work, as oral contribution or in post-seminar informal discussion. I wanted the students to use the tools and skills they had built to critique representation, to challenge cultural coding, and perhaps even to create better representations of the autistic experience. It was clear to me, then, that active learning would not be confined to the classroom and would not always be visible to me as teacher in its fullest extent, but it would be evidenced in the transfer of ideas from inside the classroom to outside and back again.

To learn actively in this way students would need to be freed up to engage with the learning itself, so that they could apply their time, focus and energy to higher-level tasks. University students, whether neurodivergent or neurotypical, repeatedly encounter significantly high levels of demands on executive function – those goal-directed functions involving behaviours, thoughts and emotions (García-Campos *et al.*, 2020), such as cognitive flexibility, attention, working memory, organisation and planning. These demands may be higher for neurodivergent students who may experience differences in processing, in attention and in perception (see Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). In addition, executive function can be overtaxed by stressors, including sensory over- or under-stimulation (Blair, 2017). I therefore strove to avoid overloading students with surface-level demands, and sought to provide as much information as possible in as concise and structured a way as possible.

The framing of active learning as “student responsibility” is one that pervades the literature on active learning, and here it is often conflated with tasks such as organising

workloads, meeting deadlines, completing readings before class, paying attention, self-directing (see, for example, [Nelson and Bianco, 2013](#)). This could lead students and teachers alike to believe that demands on executive function are a rite of passage at third-level. However, responsibility in learning is not remembering to enter a date in a calendar; it is the decision to bring oneself to the learning with intentionality, and this may look different for every student.

In previous modules, I had released the learning material on a week-by-week basis, with each new section posted on the VLE between a week and a day in advance of the class in which it would be discussed. This, I felt, would allow the students review the material to better support deep and active learning within the classroom ([Baig and Yadegaridehkordi, 2023](#)). For this seminar, though, I made all of the material available in advance, with a clear schedule and path through it ([Hammond, 2024](#); [Hamilton and Petty, 2023](#)). Recognising that neurodivergent time, energy, resources and processing styles can be varied, fluid and dynamic, this decision would therefore allow students the agency to decide what materials, if any, they would engage with in advance of class, and how.

On the homepage of the VLE I wrote a syllabus letter to students so that they could develop a sense of familiarity with various aspects of the course: with me, with my teaching philosophy, and with the venue [[Maddox et al.](#) note that the autistic adults informing their research expressed a preference for direct communication and explicit expectations ([Maddox et al., 2020](#))]. The syllabus letter developed significantly over the three iterations of the module. The first version, in fact, was an address rather than a letter, as it seemed to me at the time that information about the “where, when and what” of the course should be its primary focus. After attending a workshop on Pedagogies of Care and being convinced of the value of personal (rather than transactional) first contact with students, however, the document became an offer of welcome ([Stommel, 2024](#); [Stommel, 2025](#)). While much of that first version had been in bullet point format, subsequent iterations of the letter opened with a greeting and introduction, told the students where to find me outside of class and why they might wish to do so, and contained information about the physical learning environment (as well as how they might like to participate in it) and about my teaching philosophy, discussed below. Later versions of the letter excised information about the course content, and came to be titled “Me, You, and Our Shared Classroom;” these versions were written in a narrative and largely conversational style.

Deadlines for all key actions, such as reading, assignments and class sessions and topics, populated the calendar of the VLE. In other seminars, I had previously only provided these in list form within a syllabus document along with all key course information, but now their inclusion within the VLE calendar (and its daily reminders) was intended to reduce the need for students to organise this material for themselves. I provided a hierarchy of readings, organised by session, explaining what was core and what was optional ([Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#); [Milton et al., 2016](#)). Any students enrolling in the module would therefore have ready access to, and reminders of, what they needed to do and by when.

Redesigning space

The physical classroom and its implicit norms could be a barrier to active learning for many students: expectations of how to sit in a chair, how and when to move one’s body or use one’s voice are part of the norms of educational spaces that students have inhabited since early childhood. Classrooms are often hierarchical by design; this can stifle student engagement more broadly, but is also often at odds with autistic social and community practice ([Caldwell-Harris and Schwartz, 2023](#)). Dolmage reminds us of the importance of physical infrastructure and what it signals:

[...] we need to care about space. To begin with, we do think spatially – we readily perceive the world in terms of physical space and spatial relations. Thus, spaces already convey information, and reconstructing or reimagining these spaces is an act of persuasion [...] Spaces, and how we write about them, think about them and move through them, suggest and delimit attitudes. (Dolmage, 2017, pp. 42-43)

I reconceived of the classroom within the limits that were available to me. The syllabus letter noted that the classroom was a shared space, and I invited the students to be present in whatever way suited them, including using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) [an umbrella term for a range of non-oral long-term or short-term communication methods (Donaldson *et al.*, 2021)]. In the syllabus letter, I explicitly addressed the fact that norms around stillness, attentiveness and eye contact would not be expected; in fact, I welcomed the use of fidget tools, the playing of silenced phone games or drawing or crafting while learning see (Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). In this, I trusted student agency and choice, and also signalled understanding of difference. In later iterations of the module, I resolved to welcome all students to explore one or more of these to reflect on how that felt, hoping to avert any self-consciousness around engaging in those activities in a group setting.

I included video and text directions to and of the room, the nearest facilities and my office, as well a video of that (visually busy) office and the invitation to meet in another venue if preferred (see Neilson *et al.*, 2025). To ensure that individual learners could make advance decisions about how to accommodate their own sensory needs within the classroom space itself, I made a sensory map and video of the room, indicating particular areas where noise or light levels may be relevant (see Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). I shared both map and video on the VLE in advance of the start of the course, so that students could gain a sense of familiarity with the space. I alerted them to particular considerations around light and sound (low winter sun; harsh strip lights; corridors becoming busy at ten minutes to the hour as other students changed classrooms) and measures we would take to mitigate against stressors [slightly lowered blinds, but natural light where possible (Spaeth and Pearson, 2023); a break at ten minutes to the hour so that students could leave the area if desired]. This information was designed to signal belonging, to demonstrate attentiveness to neurodivergent needs, to implicitly invite conversation if unforeseen barriers arose, and to reduce demands from the physical space itself. In the same syllabus letter, I invited students to occupy the room in a way that they felt was most appropriate: to sit on the floor or a chair, to stand, to move to another area of the room, or to leave the room and return at any point. Before designing this module, I had assumed that these permissions would be self-evident to students; in doing so, I now realised, I had upheld the norms of how students should attend and be present by failing to signal the alternatives.

Tablet chairs were positioned around three walls of the room in a semi-circular configuration. The fourth wall contained a whiteboard and was served by a projector, making it the primary location for instruction to take place. I was conscious of not occupying that space for the entirety of the class, in so far as possible, so that the space itself did not signal hierarchical norms (Stommel, 2024). I determined to occasionally sit on a chair among the students along one of the other three walls; sometimes to sit on the floor, especially during student-led learning; and at times even to step out of the classroom itself when appropriate (for example, during module evaluation or polling).

Making the invisible visible

Hamilton and Petty observe that the hidden curriculum – the unwritten norms of how the institution functions and how students should respond – as well as past experiences of education, can further marginalise neurodivergent students:

For many neurodivergent students, experiences of personal confusion, navigation of multiple identities and labels through which to view themselves, and experiences of bullying and marginalisation, are all threats to holding a robust, compassionate view of the self within a university environment. Understandably, students often assume high personal responsibility for trying to make a success of their education. (Hamilton and Petty, 2023, p. 2)

I therefore sought to make the invisible visible: not only to highlight the invisible curriculum but also to ensure clarity and create expectations around how I would communicate with the students in the hope that they would be empowered to ask questions (Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). I provided clear information by email and in advance of the start of the module on the structure of the introductory session.

I offered consultation periods in my office during assigned hours each week. I provided examples of why this might be useful to students, and in later iterations of the course some sample scripts that they could use to seek information or assistance (see Hammond, 2024; Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). While I had previously invited students to ask for help, I had, in the past, omitted information on how to do so. For neurodivergent students whose negative educational schema, past experiences of testimonial injustice in education, or the cost of repeatedly advocating for themselves may make seeking assistance more difficult, this information on *how* may remove or mitigate a particular set of barriers (see Spaeth and Pearson, 2023).

To further elucidate what is often hidden from students, I sought to explain the choices I had made in the learning design, and to invite students to ask questions or suggest alternatives (Neilson *et al.*, 2025; Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). This was intended to decrease the need for students to draw inferences or to make assumptions about the direction of the learning. In the syllabus letter, I included some statements detailing my teaching philosophy and explained how I would put this philosophy into action. Some examples from this statement include:

- I believe learning is best when it is rewarding in and of itself. I will endeavour to help you see the purpose and value of your learning.
- I value learning communities and am eager to learn as much from you as I will teach.
- I strive to be open and approachable, and I welcome your input and insight.

Much of my teaching philosophy is based on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and I wanted to inculcate in students an appetite for such praxis so that they could create a dialogue between their lives inside and outside of the classroom.

Rethinking participation

Neurodivergent students frequently report that traditional lecture-based delivery is not accessible; they might prefer, for example, to read slide presentations outside of class and engage in interactive activities (often facilitated by anonymous use of technology) within the classroom space (Durgungoz and Durgungoz, 2025). As previously mentioned, I supplied readings of all in-class materials in advance, and although I frequently displayed slide presentations they were interspersed with activities, videos and reflection, often using technology. I employed a bulletin-board-style web-based communication platform for discussion where students could post and comment both in and outside of class (Hammond, 2024; Hamilton and Petty, 2023; Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). This tool was set up in sections that corresponded to each week's main topic, with additional areas for assignment topics and general questions. Each section was further subdivided into milestones for each session, and contained questions or topics that students could review in advance (Hammond, 2024).

Initially, I designed the contributions to be anonymous so that I could offer feedback and model critical and respectful dialogue skills without adding social pressure or competition. In later iterations, I removed the anonymity to allow for more interaction, with the intention of building a sense of relational learning (see [Cappiali, 2025](#)).

In the syllabus letter, I reassured students that they could participate in whatever way suited them. All members of the group would wear name badges that explicitly signalled communication preferences using coloured dots:

- green signified that the wearer was happy to speak and be spoken to;
- yellow indicated that the wearer would prefer to initiate communication; and
- red meant that the wearer did not wish to communicate at this time. (adapted from [ASAN, 2014](#))

These dots could be swapped for another colour at any point during the class, and they would be respected during the learning as well as during breaks.

Where there was to be group work, I would also include the option to work independently. While group work can assist with the relational aspect of learning, it can be made more difficult for autistic students because of the sensory environment of a conversation-filled room ([Hammond, 2024](#)). In addition, unstructured discussions with a lack of clarity around expectations can prove stressful ([Hammond, 2024](#); [Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#)). Group work was only ever implemented as an option where it was pedagogically justified, and its value and usefulness for that particular learning experience was clearly communicated to the students. Tasks were broken down into small steps, quiet spaces were offered away from the hum of the background conversation, students were offered the chance to work independently and silently on a particular task of their choosing within a group ([Hammond, 2024](#)). To provide more structure, in later iterations I defined a number of possible roles for group tasks (note-taker, researcher, observer, facilitator, reporter, questioner, organiser) to allow students to work to their strengths and interests ([Salvatore et al., 2024](#); [Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#)). Group work was never summatively assessed and I resolved never to place groups into competition with each other; I wanted to ensure that the stakes of such work were low. I determined not move between groups to monitor the discussions as this would add pressure and alter the dynamic; instead, I would make it clear that students could ask for assistance individually or collectively if they needed it. Group work, I resolved, would be enhanced if I asked students to help design the tasks and to feed back on possible improvements for the next iteration.

Co-designing learning

Collaborative forms of learning design, in which students and teachers work together to design the curriculum, pedagogies or aspects thereof, have been shown to be useful across the higher education context for democratising entrenched hierarchies, promoting inclusion and increasing motivation ([McConnell, 2023](#); [Hill et al., 2021](#)). Much work has been done on co-design and co-facilitation of learning at higher education with autistic students (see, for example, [Brownlow et al., 2023](#); [Hamilton and Petty, 2023](#); [Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#); [Waisman et al., 2023](#)). Some of the efficacy of this work rests on self-determination theory that posits autonomy as a core human need ([Brownlow et al., 2023](#)). In addition, co-design is a way of redressing the balance of epistemic justice in favour of marginalised students, thus facilitating belonging.

Collaborative forms of design may be particularly useful in teaching contexts where students' own lived experiences about the teaching content. Such co-design shifts the focus

away from teacher as authority. In considering where and how to implement it, I reflected on possible ways in which the intersection of my autistic identity and my role as seminar leader might complicate my perceived epistemic power (see [Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#)). Since any student group is likely to be neurodiverse, and since students attending this seminar would be explicitly engaging with the topic of neurodiversity, co-design was intended to deepen engagement, foster belonging and embed cooperation ([Zeivots et al., 2025](#)). My responsibility for design was in the constructive alignment of learning outcomes, assessment methods and core activities ([Biggs, 1996](#)); this provided a pedagogic framework within which elements of co-design could be embedded (see [Spaeth and Pearson, 2023](#)).

Initially, I conceived of co-creation of assessment in which I would engage students in select-and-analyse style tasks; in these tasks they would be offered agency to locate material that they felt was pertinent to the topic. Assessment was designed to build in a scaffolded way on new concepts, theories and incipient skills, but selection would mean that it would also be led by student interest. The select-and-analyse assignments asked students to choose and critique a particular type of writing through a conceptual lens that had been applied in practice during class time. Here, self-selection of material was intended to facilitate learner engagement; however, this was not a core outcome of the module, so in addition I posted some options for students to choose from if they preferred.

I determined a collaborative approach to various aspects of grading. I developed rubrics for the assignments to demonstrate the requirements of each piece; these I would share with students for discussion, feedback and refining. Morton *et al.* suggest that such rubric co-creation clarifies the assignment as well as the purpose of rubrics themselves, and it helps to ensure that students can attain the learning outcomes ([Morton et al., 2021](#)). Students would be encouraged to engage in reflective practice throughout the semester, and invited to append a self-assessment form to each piece of assessment on which they would indicate:

- what they did well in the assignment;
- opportunities for improvement in the next assignment;
- what they enjoyed about the work they had completed;
- what they found most challenging;
- a suggested grade; and
- a justification for the same.

To clarify the purpose and method of this approach, I wrote on the VLE:

“In this class, we will use *collaborative assessment methods*. This means that:

- as a group we will work together to refine a rubric (set of grading criteria) for both continuous assessment and final project;
- you can submit a brief report for both continuous assessment and final project on how well you believe you met those grading criteria; completing this report will help you identify areas of particular strength as well as opportunities for improvement. I will provide detailed guidance on this; and
- your self-assessment will help us to have a conversation (in person or in writing) about feedback on the work that you submit; this feedback will likely be more meaningful and useful to you, as it will be a two-way conversation.

In the third iteration of the module, I awarded a small number of marks for completion of the self-assessment form to incentivise its use, and rather than merely including free-text boxes, I asked students to rate each of the criteria on a three-point scale:

- (1) "I have an opportunity to develop these skills".
- (2) "I think I did fairly well".
- (3) "I feel like I demonstrated good skills here".

In later iterations, students were also invited to help decide the materials studied. Many of the novels on the course, along with short stories, and other forms of writing and cultural artefacts, are meant to be representative of some of the issues under discussion rather than definitive objects of study. Self-selected materials are, in fact, encouraged for the assessment task. In the second and third iterations of the course, the seminar has therefore worked more dynamically with the allistic-authored works, supplementing them, closely reading selected chapters, and so on. Here, I privileged depth of engagement over breadth, learning outcomes over expansive content, and student interest and skills over coverage (Petersen *et al.*, 2020).

In the third iteration of the module, I used live polling tools to assess expectations, hopes and preferences for the module, as well as to gauge levels of understanding of some of the elements of the course design. I asked questions such as:

- Q1. What do you hope to gain from doing this course?
- Q2. What would your "success" in this class look like?
- Q3. Do you understand the purpose of the self-assessment forms?

I also asked about preferences for engaging with slides and readings in order to assess students' practices and expectations.

While these questions may seem relatively low stakes, they are an important tool in equity-centred education and promoting inclusion (Killam, Lock, and Luctkar-Flude, 2023). De Bie *et al.* suggest that pedagogical partnerships can allow students and teachers to work together to create more inclusive teaching and learning, and to thereby reposition students from being receivers to co-creators of knowledge (de Bie *et al.*, 2019). This, in turn, they insist, can:

[...] recognize and reposition underrepresented and underserved students as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 106) by reconceptualizing knowing/knowledge production in the academy in a way that bolsters epistemic confidence and students' comfort sharing and contributing what and how they know. (de Bie *et al.*, 2019, p. 36)

Co-creation of learning design with students can therefore create more "equitable conceptions of knowledge" and foster epistemic confidence (op. cit., p. 41).

The future of the module

In the next enrolment of this module, I will expand on the principles of co-creation and, together with the students I will include in the design process questions of space, environment and access (Spaeth and Pearson, 2023). Together we will consider how the group might organise itself in conception and use of the space itself.

Reflecting on this seminar for the current study, I realised that I had inadvertently created unintended barriers to inclusion over the course of the seminars: my own visual hyposensitivity meant that even when I was conscious not to turn the harsh strip-lighting on, I was not always aware if it was already on when I entered the classroom. In future sessions, I will make a habit of checking the lights immediately upon entering. In addition, my preference for the written word, and a career dedicated to it, meant that this mode of

communication dominated the VLE and assessment methods; in the next iteration of the course, I will therefore provide more multimedia materials, including audio and visual versions of the syllabus letter.

As the texts used in the module are illustrative rather than core, in the future I intend to produce a handbook with a wider range of selections from allistic- and autistic-authored content so that students can engage with more samples of written material over the course of the semester. I will invite them to select one or more of these texts for their final assignment to engage with in full. Students will also be facilitated in practicing application of the assessment rubrics on teacher-authored mock assignments.

A truly neuroaffirming classroom is not one that can be developed over three semesters; it requires constant reflection, receptiveness and responsiveness to each individual who brings themselves to it. It demands continuous rethinking and readjustment in the light of new learning and understanding, particularly given the fact that higher education policy is frequently shifting and changing. To facilitate active learning at all, teachers must empower students to bring themselves fully to the material, and this, in turn, means letting go of much of what we think is best for them, and listening to them instead.

Conclusion: implications for higher education practice

Neurodivergent students, and autistic students in particular, are at risk of thwarted belongingness in higher education (Cage *et al.*, 2020). This state of distress results when an individual's need to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging is unfulfilled (Mitchell *et al.*, 2021; Van Orden 2012). It has significant impacts on the individual's own well-being and mental health outcomes, and can hamper retention and progression (Butcher and Lane, 2025; Müller *et al.*, 2024; Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2020). These issues are compounded by whether the individual discloses their neurodivergence in order to access support, by any stigma they encounter for doing so, or by whether, indeed, they are aware that because they are neurodivergent the challenges that they encounter are structural and systemic (see, for example, Cage *et al.*, 2020).

In a meta-analysis of research from 2021 to 2024, Horlin *et al.* seek to understand the experiences of autistic students and staff in higher education (2024). From the perspective of learning design, they note that unstructured and unclear teaching materials, and the sensory pressures of the environment itself can pose significant challenges to learning. These challenges are compounded by thwarted reasonable accommodation requests and “the despair, frustration, and helplessness resulting from continual cycles of self-advocacy and repeated disclosure to academic staff who may have variable degrees of understanding or willingness to accommodate” (Horlin *et al.*, 2024, p. 772). Reasonable accommodations therefore occupy a precarious space in terms of inclusion: where granted, they may help the individual navigate certain barriers, but they may bear a significant cost in the need for disclosure and request, and in the possibility of denial.

Autistic students in Irish higher education have identified issues of inconsistency and inflexibility in teaching design and methods, lack of understanding among academic staff, the cost of disclosure and the potential of stigma (Neilson, *et al.*, 2025). While higher education institutions grapple with important questions of redesigning access and creating a neuroaffirmative culture, teaching staff might consider ways to embed flexibility, clarity, structure and support within their own practice.

Individual teachers may not be able to directly and immediately eliminate the structural issues that entrench neuronormativity in higher education and society more

broadly, but it is nonetheless possible to conceive of the classroom space as a site of resistance where one can:

- explicitly challenge neuronormative practice by inviting students to attend to their own needs rather than received norms around attentiveness;
- reconceive of learning design in order to reduce the need for students to self-advocate for accommodations;
- redress epistemic injustice within the classroom space by democratising course design and implementation;
- reconsider what active learning might look like when students are supported in their learning rather than compelled to juggle demands on executive function; and
- reduce sensory stress by mapping the classroom, minimising its potential stressors, and offering alternatives to how to inhabit it.

As Hamilton and Petty insist:

Neurodivergent students, like all students, deserve fit-for-purpose learning experiences, and should not hold responsibility for educating their educators about their differences. The structures and policy context of higher education can act as a disincentive to personalised learning and teaching (Waddington, 2018). Nonetheless, compassion-informed pedagogy, in which educators actively recognise the particular struggles that students face and seek to mitigate them, can be transformative for neurodivergent learners. (Hamilton and Petty, 2023, p. 2)

To move towards a classroom in which the exclusions and injustice enacted by neuronormativity are identified and disrupted, teachers must strive to decentre norms about “ideal” forms of learning and teaching, and imbue with the students with the power of design rather than just use.

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Note

- [1.] After this work was almost completed, I discovered Spaeth and Pearson, 2023, which considers practical ways of facilitating a positive educational experience for neurodivergent students. Although my work developed independently of this article, I have revised this current text accordingly to cite that prior analysis throughout.

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Further reading

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