

Creativity, clarity, and compassion: The essential components of inclusive academic practice

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ABSTRACT

The neurodivergent student experience can be a negative one with a focus on deficits and support needs rather than strengths and unique and valuable contributions. Viewing inclusive practices, including creative pedagogies, through the lens of neurodivergency and the differences experienced by neurodivergent individuals gives us an opportunity to examine how we create learning environments that enable and value diversity of thought, skill and behaviour. By creating learning spaces that set the conditions for belonging, students of all neurotypes will benefit. Creative pedagogies can provide a more inclusive and equitable basis for which students with differences and disabilities can connect with the learning experience more effectively.

It is my opinion that creative and compassionate approaches to learning are an essential approach in an inclusive classroom. Ensuring a learning space that encourages curiosity, expresses compassion, and is demonstrably clear in how diversity is valued is a key responsibility of educators in today's higher education. It is also my opinion that creative pedagogies are heutagogical (self-determined learning) in nature which strongly aligns to neurodivergent cognitive strengths, while not disadvantaging neurotypical individuals. Based on the key literature presented and my own expertise, this opinion piece provides taxonomies of creative pedagogies, cognitive skills and strengths in neurodivergent individuals, and creative heutagogies. A set of recommendations is provided for practitioners which have been developed through the lens of neurodivergency and with an inclusive approach that benefits all students by encouraging engagement in learning through creativity, clarity, and compassion.

Keywords: creative pedagogies, inclusive practice, compassion, heutagogy, neurodivergence

Introduction

The rates of diagnosis for differences and disabilities under the umbrella term of 'neurodivergent' conditions is increasing (Clouder et al. 2020). Similarly, as the understanding and awareness of neurodivergent conditions increases, more individuals recognise their own lived experience, resulting in self-diagnosis and/or seeking formal diagnosis (Lang, 2024). Despite increased awareness and diagnosis there remains high numbers of individuals who are unaware of their neurodivergent characteristics. Without self-awareness of difference, students cannot request adjustments, indicate what they need, or advocate effectively for themselves and equity for their learning experience. It is this concept of need without awareness of students that should drive our classroom inclusive practice.

Creative pedagogies are a true inclusive practice which encourage a growth mindset, increase connection in a learning community, and offer more opportunities for students to flourish without the constraints of traditional pedagogies and normative assumptions (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023). A creative mindset is a growth and learning mindset, and without curiosity-driven learning students may have limited engagement

in their learning, and reduced depth of connection with one another. Creative pedagogies and curiosity-led learning is an approach which offers all students, with or without disabilities and differences, a much greater opportunity for effective learning. With a more positive classroom experience students are more able to connect with their peers resulting in a greater sense of belonging overall (Crawford et al., 2023).

What are creative pedagogies?

Creative pedagogies are often misunderstood as either only relating to artform teaching and learning (Cremin & Chappell, 2021) or to only be possible in disciplines relating to the creative industries (Loudon, 2021). While the medium of art may be a valuable context for learning, creative pedagogies are not solely about art or solely possible within a creative discipline. Similarly, creative thinking is not a skill only possessed by ‘creative’ individuals, but a skill that all individuals have, and which can be developed further (Vasquez et al., 2021).

At their essence, creative pedagogies are approaches to learning that are characterised by features (Table 1) that encourage the generation of new ideas, solutions, and thinking. Creative pedagogies can be in any mode, any discipline, and take many successful approaches. Perhaps the only approach to learning that prevents creative thinking, is didactic teaching where learners are passive recipients of information. Creative pedagogies are inherently student-centred and allow students to explore their own interests and passions, use their strengths, and have fewer expectations that they must fulfil (Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Table 1 Taxonomy of creative pedagogies

Type	Description
Agency	Students can see that their actions result in learning and their contributions are valued. Autonomy and agency are closely linked as students take control and ownership of their learning, their agency and impact of learning will also increase.
Autonomy	Students take ownership of their learning and can self-direct their own learning journey.
Exploration	Activities that focus on generating and exploring ideas, allowing development of an explorer mindset where curiosity is valued.
Playfulness	Encouraging play, fun, and enjoyment in activities which create an environment for experiential and constructivist learning.
Problem-solving	Engaging students in real-world problems that necessitate entrepreneurship, enterprise, and creative thinking skills.
Risk-taking	Embracing failure by encouraging experimentation in a safe and supported environment.
Teacher-as-learner, collaborator and facilitator	The teacher is facilitator and co-learner, supporting students to have full agency and autonomy. The only potential transmission should be directing a group to value the contributions of all learners and empowering all to have creative freedom.

The underlying principle of creative pedagogies is that there is a student-centred approach of flexibility, and the teacher is a facilitator and not a dictator of the pace, direction, or approaches within a creative learning session. There is an inherent tension between the more common teaching approaches which give a specific structure or a pathway to follow, and the openness of a creative and interest-led session (Cremin & Chappell, 2021). Tutors who are less familiar with creative pedagogies, or who are lacking in confidence to

join students in learning may find the transfer of control from them to the student as being particularly challenging. Tutors can have greater confidence in trusting their students as developing autonomous learners by making space for creativity and curiosity and supporting them to build their resilience.

Neurodivergent learners

The dominant disorder and deficit-based misconceptions about individuals with neurodivergency overlooks the high-value of the range of cognitive skills offered by divergent thinkers (Axbey et al., 2023). The language associated with some types of neurodiversity is inherently negative (i.e. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder) emphasising the challenges and differences that an individual may experience without acknowledging their strengths (Beardon, 2022). Thinking in a different way than the typical includes skills such as strong visual-spatial skills, systems thinking, pattern recognition, hyperfocus, attention to detail, and creative thinking (Chrysochoou et al., 2022; Grant & Kara, 2021) which are all cognitive skills that offer high value to both individual and collaborative learning and working. Table 2 outlines some of the cognitive strengths that may be demonstrated by neurodivergent students. These cognitive skills are not unique to neurodivergent individuals, nor would they all be seen in a single individual; however, they are likely to be seen in combinations and in greater emphasis than in neurotypical individuals.

Table 2 Taxonomy of neurodivergent strengths in cognitive skills

Type	Description
Attention to detail	The ability to see the detail and research or investigate a topic or concept thoroughly.
Creative thinking	Approaching problems in new ways and generating new ideas using creative approaches.
Entrepreneurialism	Ability to recognise and evaluate opportunities for innovation and growth.
Hyperfocus	Ability to focus intensely on a single topic of investigation and single interest without distraction. An attention to detail is usually combined with hyperfocus.
Hyperlexic and linguistic thinking	Enhanced reading, writing, and linguistic abilities with an aptitude to notice patterns and themes in written language.
Idea generation	Ability to generate novel ideas without constraint or preconceptions as barriers.
Logic and analysis	A systematic, analytical and logical approach can be valuable for problem-solving and recognising gaps or opportunities.
Originality	An interest in novelty and new can result in original ideas, new approaches, and innovations.
Pattern recognition	An ability to notice patterns in numbers, words, or visual information.
Systems thinking	A bottom-up approach building understanding of detail and connections are understood to then be able to generate a complete picture of the whole system.
Verbal comprehension	Advanced verbal comprehension, vocabulary, and creative use of language including an ability to notice patterns and themes in spoken language.
Visual interpretation and thinking	An enhanced ability to interpret and process visual information. This may be more rapid interpretation, a more detailed interpretation, or both.

Neurodivergent individuals are often strongly interest driven in their motivations for learning (Bailey, 2023). Therefore, by creating learning environments that cater for self-determined and interest-led learning, supporting use of the cognitive skills and strengths in table 2, the classroom can be a place where the strengths of neurodivergent students are used more effectively, and they flourish as learners.

Heutagogical pedagogies

Creative pedagogies are inherently more heutagogical (self-determined and directed learning) and student-centred (Lock et al., 2021). Neurodivergent students are more likely to respond to a heutagogical approach as they can direct their own learning, pursuing their special interests and passions more effectively and in a way that avoids normative assumptions (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023). Heutagogy includes creative learning and is suited to neurodivergent thinkers, but equally benefits neurotypicality. By centring learning to the learner, students can develop their ownership of learning, autonomy as an adult learner, and use their strengths to maximise their learning and development (Lock et al., 2021; Friedman & Nash-Luckenbach, 2024).

Creative pedagogies provide true inclusive practices where all learners are compassionately supported to flourish (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). The presented dichotomy of neurodivergent and neurotypical learners simplifies the complexity of human neurodiversity. There are clearly individuals who would be at the boundaries of these broad neurotypes who would never be formally diagnosed with a specific 'condition', and those who would not seek out diagnosis and/or support (Friedman & Nash-Luckenbach, 2024). In the creative classroom, all students with all types of cognitive skills have meaningful agency to drive their own learning. Diversity within a group of learners is likely to add much more value with enhanced productivity and creativity and ultimately be much more rewarding an experience for all (Axbey et al., 2023). Bringing more creative and heutagogical approaches to learning into the classroom maximises the learning efficacy of both the neurodivergent and the neurotypical student (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). With less mandated structuration of learning by the tutor, and more space for curiosity-led engagement with learning, all neurotypes can flourish. Such an approach is inherently compassionate because it does not demand, it supports and guides learning. Therefore, the core features of a heutagogical approach are creativity, clarity, and compassion, and the specific approaches that deliver a heutagogical learning experience are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3 Taxonomy of creative heutagogical approaches

Type	Description
Choice-based	A variety of choices are available to the learners to select their preferred approach to a learning activity or goal.
Goal-oriented	A shared end-goal is agreed at the beginning of the session but the pathway, method, approach or activities to reach the goal are open.
Negotiated	Negotiation is undertaken for the curriculum content, choice of learning goal(s), or the how or what of an assessment task.
Scaffolded	A scaffold is provided to enable students to have a framework, but flexibility is encouraged. More scaffolding may be necessary earlier in the student journey as they move from a pedagogical basis, through an andragogical context, into a heutagogical environment.

Problem solving	A problem is presented, and learners are supported to find their own way to one or more solutions.
Idea generation	Like problem solving, learners are given creative space to generate new ideas and innovations.
Flipped learning	Learners are encouraged to do learning, research, and exploration before a session. The session is shaped by what is shared.
Collaborative	Learners work together to share their knowledge, experience, ideas, resources, and practice
Reflective	Learners reflect on their own learning, knowledge, experience, and engagement. By reflecting on their learning, they are more able to take agency and act with autonomy.
Action learning	Learners work together to solve real problems. An open questioning approach is taken to develop solutions.
Compassionate	A caring and compassionate approach to learning with the view of overcoming barriers, particularly for students who have been marginalised.

Conclusion & recommendations

Higher education is often a highly structured learning environment layered with expectations that inadvertently values neurotypicality and conformity. By taking a heutagogical, creative and compassionate approach to learning, both neurotypical and neurodivergent students can have the best possible opportunity to develop as autonomous and lifelong learners. To generate inclusive learning environments for all, the following recommendations are made to tutors for establishing a heutagogical, compassionate, clear, and creative learning experience:

1. Demonstrably value difference and diversity; taking an appreciative and strengths-based approach.
2. Reaffirm that there is no single ‘correct’ approach to exploring a topic and learning new things.
3. Challenge stigmatising and outdated perceptions of disability and difference, and support learners to challenge their own assumptions.
4. Provide flexible learning opportunities where interest and self-efficacy can be leveraged.
5. Provide a loose structure and direction for a shared purpose and goal so that the interests of learners can be explored.
6. Encourage variations on collaboration that are not dependent upon a single mode of interaction between students.
7. Challenge your own expectations and preconceptions of the what, how, and why of learning.

Biography

Alison Purvis is an Associate Dean Teaching and Learning at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, and a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (PFHEA) with over 25 years of higher education experience. She is actively researching in the areas of higher education practice and leadership, digital learning, and inclusive practice.

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