

Creating Neurodiverse Affirming Spaces in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract

Neurodiversity is a paradigm that opposes the view that there is one normal view of neuro-cognitive functioning (Singer, 1991; Silberman, 2015). However, implementation of affirming practices for neurodiverse learners in online environments have been limited. As a result of the COVID 19 pandemic there has been increased urgency to provide accessible learning environments in online learning spaces. Within this manuscript, the concept of neurodiversity will be defined with particular attention to barriers and practical suggestions for neurodiverse learners in online learning environments.

Keywords: neurodiversity, online learning, COVID 19, barriers, affirming practices.

“Neurodiversity” is used to define differences in the way people’s brains work and affirms the wide range of ways that people perceive and respond to the world. Neurodiversity was coined in the 1990s to fight stigma against people with Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder, and Learning Disorders (Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, etc). The movement acknowledges that Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder, and Learning Disorders do cause impairment and obstacles that get in the way of neurodiverse people doing the things they want to do, and treatment should help them reduce symptoms that interfere with their goals. However, supporters of the neurodiversity movement suggest that some of the things identified as impairment are caused by problems in neurodiverse people’s environments.

Neurodiversity affirms diversity, validates that differences are normal, opposes the view that there is one normal type of cognitive functioning, acknowledges that normal is a social construct, provides more inclusive approaches to education, and lastly builds resiliency. Overall, the strength of neurodiversity is that it values differences between people and accepts and supports unmet needs without judgement or normalization (Chapman, 2021b; Fletcher-Watson, 2022).

In contrast to deficit-focused treatment approaches, strength-based interventions are strategies that identify and build on strengths and skills of autistic individuals. Strength-based approaches can simultaneously address systemic issues that harm mental health, including reducing negative stereotypes and biases, and shifting attitudes that reduce stigma and promote inclusion. Positive psychology as a field has grown in response to recognition that psychosocial interventions have historically focused on reduction of risk factors for psychopathology, instead

of psychosocial interventions to promote protective factors that allow individuals to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

We found that attitude towards autism closer to neurodiversity predicted higher self-esteem. This finding is particularly interesting, as it is well established that self-esteem serves as a protective factor in mental health. The results of this study show that understanding autism within the perspective of neurodiversity is not only a matter of theoretical debate but has a real-world significance with regard to the well-being of autistic people (Ferenc et al., 2023).

Online Learning

Covid 19 resulted in a rapid pivot to online instruction and caused an honest reflection on previous misconceptions that online learning is a less than alternative to in-person instruction (Munro, 2018). Mutual trust and respect can occur in online spaces and can help reduce power dynamics (Collins, 200). This can occur through digital forums which can reduce feelings of anxiety for students who do not have access to privilege and power in the classroom. There is a growing body of literature related to online learning environment design with active learning elements.

Implementing Neurodiversity affirming practices

Educators face challenges in implementing neurodiversity affirming practices in online learning environments. For example, educators may not have received adequate education on neurodiversity resulting in misconceptions and attitudes that impede inclusive practices. For example, attitudes towards diversity are often shaped by previous experiences and depictions in the media of neurodiversity that are not accurate (Hick et al., 2019). Too often, definitions of accessibility only involve physical accessibility like wheelchair ramps (Ladau, 2020). Recent research highlights the importance of accessibility as an indicator of social inclusion (Lucas

2012). Physical exclusion, geographical exclusion, exclusion for needed facilities (like shops, schools, health care), economic exclusion, time-based exclusion, and fear-based exclusion (Church et al., 2000).

Ableism is hard to define, but present in beliefs and practices that describe disability as negative, view disabled people as deficient, and in need of charity (Campbell, 2009). Broadly speaking, ableism is prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities which creates an expectation of perfect bodies; valuing people only for what they produce (Campbell, 2008; Keller & Galgay, 2010); Wolbring, 2008). Additionally, ableism creates isolation, prevents self-advocacy, and impacts individuals in a wide range of ways (Bell, 2013; Campbell, 2008; Keller & Galgay, 2010; Pivenza-Samarasinha, 2022; Ladau, 2020). One predominant way ableism rears its head is through microaggressions. It can feel overwhelming to tackle something as ambiguous and large as ableism; however, addressing microaggressions can be a good place to start.

Can slides be sent out ahead of lectures? Find creative ways for students to engage and participate. How do you typically grade participation in courses? Can you adjust that to include more than verbal participation.

Activity

Look at a current syllabus you have, and peruse the assignment descriptions and ask are they written clearly? Is the language easy to understand?

Conclusion

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