



Neurodiversity and Dialogic Feedback in Higher Education: How Dialogic Feedback Fosters Neuro-Inclusion to Break a Part of the Silence

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Neurodiversity in Higher Education

Approximately 10-20% of the global population is considered neurodivergent, covering learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, dyslexia, related neurotypes (e.g., learning differences, sensory processing disorders; [1,2]), and subtle variations of the aforementioned [3]. Neurodiversity in educational settings is silent: neurodivergence is not always disclosed, partly due to feeling unsafe as a result of stigma and biased and/or limited understanding of/by involved parties [2,4] but potentially also due to a lack of consideration in curricular design [5]. From a more personal stance, fuelled by stigma and not wanting to be different, sometimes learners do not want it (i.e., being neurodivergent) to become an issue until it is too late (learning has failed to occur, mental health has been compromised [6]). However, this boils down to the hard reality of the following: if education is and remains unaware, responsive policies cannot be derived. The visibility of neurodivergence has been on the rise in recent years [1,7], much needed for responsive policies. Despite efforts, neurodiversity remains invisible and silent, with higher education displaying an unpreparedness to meet learners' needs [8]. In practice, neurodivergent learners feel the need to conform to existing systems—impacting mental health and well-being [9], diminishing learning [5], but also affecting requirements for contemporary higher education such as collaboration with different stakeholders [10].

From 'Harming' to Neuro-Affirming Terminology

Neurodivergent individuals are often considered an exception to be managed rather than integral to educational practices [11]. To encounter or manage this harmful distinction, recent contemporary research concerning neurodivergent individuals involves a focus on neuro-affirming [1,12] rather than 'harming' terminology (e.g., the brain is defective; more disastrous: something is wrong [with you]). Neuro-affirming terminology fits perspectives of neurodiversity that advocate neurodiversity as a part of natural variations of cognition and behaviour [13] and as a valid sociocultural context [11] rather than an obstacle and a deviation from typical cognitive processing and environmental response [14]. Such a lens can negatively and severely impact daily lives with subsequent consequences for all aspects of an individual's life, including education [5,9,15]. Adopting neuro-affirming terminology positively contributes to inclusivity and acceptance of individuals with brains that work differently. Within this line of reasoning, implementation of these terms requires conscious efforts from all involved individuals on various levels [3,12]. However, it starts small by acknowledging assumptions one might hold in practice. For example, if neurotypical individuals perceive eye contact as a sign of engagement and, therefore, the lack of eye contact as disengagement and disinterest, the dialogue might be different. By changing the term 'disinterest' to—for example—regulative, this dialogue changes because the assumption is challenged; a

different meaning is assigned to specific non-verbal cues. In fact, gaze reduction (i.e., eye contact) can be used as sensory regulation, concentration and/or protection. In a similar vein, low affect is often associated with emotional absence, but this can also mean a stable communication style and/or regulation strategy [12]. To this end, engaging in dialogic feedback—enriched with neuro-affirmative language—sufficiently backs up a shift from potentially harming to affirming and facilitating neuroinclusive (educational) practices.

The individuals involved comprise both teachers and learners because adopting neuro-affirmative terminology is not only relevant for learners but also for teachers/ colleagues. In that sense, despite that all teachers can be seen as role models [16], neurodivergent teachers often experience similar issues with stigma and biases [2]. As a result, what could be a relevant representation in education remains invisible for those who need neurodivergent role models the most. The power of role modeling becomes apparent in its positive association with sense of belonging [17,18] and, in turn, this sense of belonging is crucial to academic success and well-being [19]. One way to practice neuro-affirming language—whilst stimulating a sense of belonging—is by adapting communication practices surrounding critical feedback moments in education by engaging in dialogues (i.e., dialogic feedback).

Dialogic Feedback to Break the Silence

By adapting communicative practices, such as those surrounding feedback, neurodivergent individuals are more likely to effectively participate [11]. Yet be/remain aware that feedback practices often contain many assumptions [11,20] and pitfalls [21], negatively impacting learning. These assumptions and pitfalls rest upon a shared understanding on how to implement feedback, but with a different way of processing, organizing and expressing knowledge—as is known from neurodivergent individuals—that shared understanding will miss its mark. At the same time these efforts also diminish motivation and validation [11]. By approaching feedback practices as dialogic in nature, the teacher and learner collectively create meaning and understanding [22]. Daily conversations can hold cues that become relevant in dialogic feedback, in particular cues that hold assumptions (such as those related to eye contact and low affect; see Niederlohmman, [12]). The two-way street created here should adhere to quality dimensions, in which teachers/ learners should: (a) provide emotional and relation support, (b) maintain dialogue, (c) allow and create opportunities for learners to express themselves, and (d) contribute to individual growth [23] whilst—at the same time—recognize that within these quality dimensions there is a need to acknowledge individual differences, even and also amongst neurodivergent students. Whereas for neurotypical individuals, non-verbal communication is often part of dialogic feedback [23], non-verbal communication—such as eye contact and facial expressions—for neurodivergent learners often has a different place in the dialogue. By explicitly addressing assumptions in the dialogue (e.g., by a feedback talk; see [24]), neurodiverse needs are acknowledged and respected and, therefore, laying a foundation for inclusive educational practices. Moderation is key, because too much interaction can be overwhelming [5]. By challenging

and discussing these underlying assumptions [12] and potential stigmas and biases [2] with appropriate neuro-affirmative terms [12], all involved individuals can focus on the right aspects of the dialogue—to support a sense of belonging, and to foster well-being and learning.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of Interest.

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