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Developing a neurodiverse approach to learning on Foundation Art & Design

Jera May. (Conversation contributors: Victoria Chisholm (AIS), Pete Gomes, Heidi Wigmore, Ian Tucknott, Ute Kreyman, Lauren Ilsley and Rod Judkins).

Last year on the Foundation Art & Design Level 3 Diploma we had a more than the usual number of neurodiverse students with different learning styles, strengths and needs. Some classes had 70% of learners that had a RAP (Reasonable Adjustment Plan), or an undeclared learning difference. As the year progressed the teaching team decided we wanted to reflect together about it, and we invited one of our students' support tutors from the Access, Inclusion and Support (AIS) Dept. We had two brilliant tutor conversations on how we might best support these learners whilst also positively impacting on the rest of the class. It was so good to make the time to talk about individual learners, and the different strategies the tutors and the Support Tutor had applied - what worked, what didn't, and how could we adapt one-to-one methods to whole class settings.

The main shift in our thinking, and impact on our teaching, was to start from the premise that everyone in the class is neurodiverse – and to work to everyone's strengths, recognizing and valuing diverse thinking and approaches, and planning our lessons accordingly. This also captured other learners who were either not comfortable declaring, didn't see any value in declaring, or were not aware of their learning difference. One of the changes we made was to have a 15 min rule where any traditional lecture with a PPT was only 15 mins long. The same applied to any instruction we were giving, or qualification information. If necessary, we would scatter these throughout the day's session, but where possible turn any theory aspects of the class to practical activities.



The first lesson I taught with this approach covered the topic of curation and preparing students for their exhibition (see examples from shows above). In the past this session would start with questions about what the students already knew about how curation can impact the interpretation of an artifact or artwork. Students would work in groups and do mind maps on set questions. We would then go into the history of curation and relate this to contemporary exhibitions and current thinking. Finally, we would discuss how they might apply what they had learnt to their own work. Most of the teaching would be delivered through a seminar type session with the help of a PPT. All very interesting for those students who suit that style of delivery, could process, and apply theory to practice, as well as keep up with the discussion - without losing focus or engagement in a sit-down classroom situation for 2 hrs!

With a neurodiverse approach to teaching and learning instead of starting with a question we started with a practical task, everyone was to pick an object in the room - it could be a chair, a bin, a piece of paper, a shoe- anything. They then worked in small groups and curated the objects in relation to the studio/gallery space as if they were works of art, design, craft, or historical artifacts. I gave them some prompts and things to consider, but pretty much left them to it.

Whilst students actively engaged with this task, all the relevant discussions around the relationship the objects had with each other and the relationship to the space occurred: how the placement of an object can transform its meaning and impact on the audience; how a title or label can influence the interpretation etc. We then regrouped as a whole class and spent time discussing each curated group of objects. Students thought about applying the different curatorial decisions that they had made in the context of their own work.



Learning to curate - Art and Design Diploma

I was nervous about the change in my delivery of this class but am so glad I did it. Happily, it was a success, the learning objectives were met and the whole session was full of excited conversations. All the relevant questions were being asked, and the general tone of engaged enjoyment from all students was very affirming. As a team we are only just at the beginning of exploring this idea of having a neurodiverse base approach to teaching and learning, we are still trying out different methods and discussing outcomes. Devising more collaborative projects for students is another change to our teaching we have been implementing this term - it is very much an evolving conversation which has made us all think more about now a shift in our thinking and sometimes even small changes can alter the teaching and learning potential for all students.



Dyslexia and Shame

(based on an article by Phil Ruddock, FE Lecturer, 2023)

Dyslexia is a different way of thinking – not a deficit. Dictionary.com defines it as '*an approach to problem-solving, assessing information, and learning, that involves pattern recognition, spatial reasoning, lateral thinking, and interpersonal communication*'.¹ Dyslexic thinkers excel particularly in areas such as the creative arts, in problem solving, and in communication skills. A quick internet search will produce names of many talented and extraordinary people who also happen to be dyslexic. Dyslexic thinking is an asset – a superpower even.

Unfortunately, 89%¹ of people who are dyslexic have difficulty with spelling and grammar, and also with other mainstream skills such as the traditional organisation of academic writing and remembering linear sequences of instructions. This can lead to a long history of being 'failed' in mainstream education. But given the opportunity to work to their strengths they can flourish.

Phil Ruddock, an English lecturer in a Further Education college, recently wrote about Shame in. *Think Further, Thoughts on Leadership in FE* (Association of Colleges)

Dyslexic himself, he writes.

'It seems to me that you can almost have a sense of pride in being bad at Maths. It is almost a badge of honour. Yet, being bad at English, in any way, carries a stigma. It carries shame.

'Shame focuses on the self, and the feeling that you are flawed, broken or not enough. By being unable to read, by being unable to spell or by not being able to master skills that society has deemed important, it places you on the path to shame.

'Shame is that moment a student puts their head down in class and disengages. Shame is that moment when someone begins to shrink into the core of who they are and doubts their worth. Shame is that moment when a student explodes in anger rather than ask for help. Shame appears in multiple ways. I have had students beg me to tell them what is "wrong with them" and to "fix them." Yet, they don't need fixing. We just need understanding and empathy.

¹ Kat Nicholls (2022) [The power of dyslexic thinking \(happiful.com\)](https://happiful.com)



Dyslexia is the second most common disability or learning difference identified by students enrolling at City Lit. Students will often carry shame with them from their earlier experiences of education.

Referring students to Access and Inclusion for one-to-one help will be invaluable but is usually only available to those on accredited courses. Even where support is available, the tutor also needs to be involved.

Tutors can develop their teaching approaches to help, in consultation with their learners. This might be to present the big picture first, give instructions more than once and back them up with handouts, draw on different senses in teaching – visual and kinaesthetic as well as verbal, send students PowerPoints before their session, allow them to record sessions. Supporting learners with dyslexia is more than using coloured backgrounds on handouts.

The most important thing tutors can offer to counter shame, however, is empathy and belief. 'You can' rather than 'you can't.'

For more support with supporting learners who are neuro diverse see:

Access, Inclusion and Support Hub: Specific Learning Difficulties Help sheet:
[SpLD & Dyslexia Info Sheet 8.docx - Google Drive](#)

Teaching and Learning Issues Autumn 2020 on Neurodiversity [20 TL Neurodiversity Autumn2020.pdf \(citylit.ac.uk\)](#)

Interesting articles:

Phill Ruddock (2023) How we counter shame among our dyslexic learners, in Think Further, Thoughts on Leadership in FE Association of Colleges. Available on [\(21\) How we counter shame among our dyslexic learners - Phill Ruddock | LinkedIn](#)

Kate Griggs (2022) [\(21\) Dyslexic Thinking is now officially recognised as a valuable skill! | LinkedIn](#)

Kat Nicholls (2022) [The power of dyslexic thinking \(happiful.com\)](#)

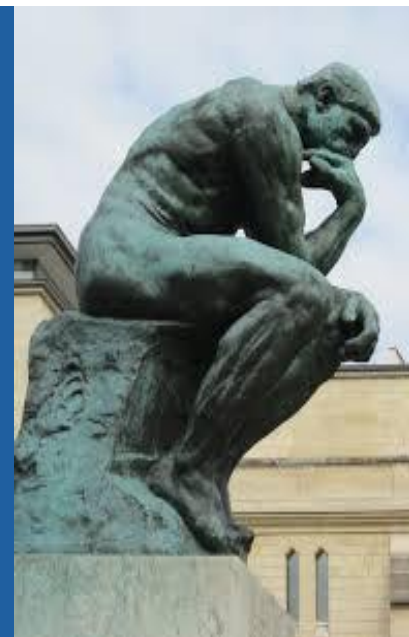
Prof. Amanda Kirby (2023) [Neurodiversity 101: why it is time to modernise our views of ADHD and other ND traits \(linkedin.com\)](#)



Lessons from my Drawing Class – the value of reflection

Wendy Moss

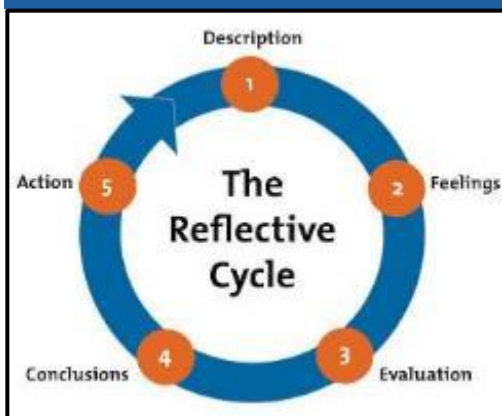
I am a student on a beginner's drawing course at City Lit. Our tutor (Kim Scouller) regularly asks us to walk round and look at each other's work and comment on what we like. At the end of the session, in twos and threes we share each other's drawings and talk about them. Kim and the whole group then consider everyone's piece of work, starting with how we feel about it ourselves. Kim always finds something positive to say about each piece, and we mimic her when we look at each other's. 'It's very contemporary' and 'you got this bit right in the end' she said about my deeply unimpressive piece last time. Although I hated the drawing, with my classmates and Kim's support I was also able to say that there were a couple of things I had got right and identify on my own what to try next time.



What Kim is doing is encouraging reflection – self-reflection and peer reflection – in order for us to embed learning. It builds confidence. There is no shaming. There is only learning.

'Reflection is something I try to embed in the class, so it doesn't feel daunting to reflect on one's own work as well as each other's says Kim. 'Also, it helps students to build reflective language and to repeat the art terms we use in class in relation to their own work.'

There is a theory about reflection and its importance called the Gibbs Reflective Cycle. Many tutors will have come across this in their teacher training.



Gibbs Reflective Cycle

The cycle was developed by Graham Gibbs in 1988 and outlines a way of learning from experience.

Following the stages of the cycle enables us to reflect and learn from experience - from things that either went well or didn't go well.

It covers 5 stages (6 in the original) – the cycle in the image is adapted by mindtools.com.

Stages of Gibbs cycle

Description of the experience

This can be a description of an activity or project, or in class, considering what we have done.

Feelings and thoughts about the experience

How do we feel about what we have done? Proud? Uncertain?

Evaluation of the experience, both good and bad

What do we like about what we have done? Where are we not sure?

Is there any technique or advice that would help?

Conclusion

What can we do more of and where can we develop?

Action plan

What will we do next time?

Learning from experience is common sense in many ways. We do something, it doesn't quite work, so we adjust and try again. It's how we learn. However, reflection is a very important stage in this process. Without reflection, we can simply repeat mistakes over and over again - we leap into action without thoroughly thinking through what we have learned from our experience the first time.

There are many ways of incorporating reflection into learning – and many tutors will use variations of these:

- Group reflection on each person's work as described above in my drawing class.
- Two/three questions for students at the end of a session/activity *How do I feel? What have I done well? What questions do I still have? What is my next challenge?*
- Adding reflection questions at the end of a written task e.g. *What am I pleased about? What did I find hard?*
- For a longer project you might provide a template for a written reflection with questions based on Gibbs cycle.

You will think of others....

My drawing class has reminded me about the value of regular and embedded reflection – and how important it is for learning from experience.



Figure 1 Matisse



Figure 2 Wendy Drawing 1

Teaching and Learning Issues is produced by Quality and Tutor Development at City Lit.

Thanks to all who contributed to or reviewed articles - you know who you are. If you have more teaching and learning stories, do send them to wendy.moss@citylit.ac.uk

The archive of previous issues can be found here: <https://www.citylit.ac.uk/newsletter-archive>