

# An Introduction to Neurodiversity in Higher Ed: Applying Your Knowledge in Teaching, Learning, and Advising

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Facilitator: Sarah Silverman, PhD

[www.sarahemilysilverman.com](http://www.sarahemilysilverman.com) | [Connect on LinkedIn](#) | [sarahsilverman24@gmail.com](mailto:sarahsilverman24@gmail.com) | [Newsletter](#)

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[Link to session slides](#)

## Session goals - participants will:

- Review key points about neurodiversity history and theory
- Consider the interactions of disability, diagnosis, disclosure, and neurodiversity
- Connect the policies for accommodations with the neurodiversity and pathology paradigms
- Navigate complex case studies related to neurodiversity in classroom and collaboration settings
- Reflect on your own relationship to neurodiversity
- Brainstorm goals for further neurodiversity-informed practice

## Case study activity

Instructions: This activity will be conducted in small groups. I have prepared a recommended discussion structure.

- Select one person to read the case out loud up through the end of part
- Provide time for each person to read the case quietly to themselves and take notes
- Phase 1: After reading and before discussing, go around your table providing each person an opportunity to add their own questions to the discussion questions provided.
- Phase 2: Provide each person an opportunity to share their ideas of how the characters could respond in the scenario. Going around the table could be a good way to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak
- For the large-group discussion at the end of the small-group activity, both spoken and text contributions will be solicited

## Case 1: The group project

**Part 1:** Chris teaches a lower-level economics course with a mix of majors and non-majors. During the first week of class, he announces that there will be a major group assignment that makes up 30% of the grade, and instructs students to form groups based on their seating arrangement at the desks that day. In an effort for the students to get to know each other more, he offers a short discussion prompt. Scanning the room, he sees that most students look engaged in the activity, so he works on setting up his laptop so that he can display his lecture slides. Over the next several weeks Chris provides group meeting time during class, circulating around the room to see if groups have any questions. He isn't totally sure how to gauge some of the more quiet groups' progress, so he sends out a survey on the course platform, asking students to provide an update on their group's project progress.

Chris received the following reply from a student named Serena:

*Hi Professor,*

*I am actually doing my project alone. When we formed groups during the first week of class I was part of a group but I wasn't included on the text message thread to meet outside of class to work on the topic, and by the next week it seemed like they were going ahead without me. This is fine with me, since I am working by myself on a topic that I am passionate about: the pricing of textbooks for college students.*

Chris is surprised by this email - he thought he had clearly communicated that this was a group project. In his mind, he had not presented working independently as a valid option, but this student had gone ahead and done so anyway. After a few emails back and forth, Serena tells Chris the names of the students she was originally grouped with before she was left off the email chain. Before class starts one day, Chris casually asks one of them, named Henri, about the initial formation of the group. Henri says that he remembers Serena talking with the group on the first day, but that her email address was accidentally recorded wrong and she was left off the communications. Henri mentioned that he and some of the other students felt that this was just as well because Serena's "vibe seemed off" and they found her difficult to talk to. Henri assumed that Serena had found a different group to work with.

In a consulting session, Chris tells you this entire story and is wondering if Serena might be neurodivergent. He is wondering how he can support her, and also support the other students in the class in thinking more inclusively about group work. How might you respond?

## **Case 2: The small seminar**

Elissa teaches a 10-person women's and gender studies seminar. When she first started teaching this class, she used a modified socratic method, modeling the course after one of her graduate school courses that she really enjoyed. After seeing how some students talked a lot in class and others spoke only very rarely, Elissa reached out to a teaching consultant for support about the design of the class sessions, and also attended a workshop on equitable participation opportunities for disabled and neurodivergent students. Elissa now works with the assumption that providing multiple ways to participate in class and providing additional structure to the discussions can help support neurodivergent students.

This semester, Elissa explained some of the format of the class discussions on the first day of class, including that for each discussion question there would be free writing time followed by a structured discussion where students could either contribute verbally or using a google doc. One of the 9 students, Jane, raises their hand and asks if the class can just use a "regular" discussion structure (i.e. more similar to their other seminars where students discuss more organically). Jane says that they understand why Elissa's method might be helpful for neurodivergent students, but it feels overly prescriptive to them. Another student, Harriet, asks if it would be possible to do an anonymous survey of the students to see what students prefer in terms of discussion style.

Elissa is speaking to you in the context of a monthly faculty program on inclusive teaching, and is wondering how she should respond to the students' concerns and suggestions. What might you say to Elissa to help her navigate this situation?

### **Case 3: The Strategic Plan**

In your workplace, you have been invited to a meeting tomorrow to discuss the library's strategic plan for the upcoming year. In the email invitation, the office's director, Kurt, notes that the full strategic plan will be distributed at the beginning of the meeting and everyone will be given 5 minutes to skim through it before discussion starts. Your colleague, Janet, and you have been working together for 3 months, and she has disclosed that she is dyslexic. She shared that it is helpful for her to receive written materials a few days ahead of time so she can have time to read and process them before discussing. You aren't sure if Janet wants other people to know if she is dyslexic but you realize how inaccessible the upcoming meeting is going to be for her, and likely for other attendees. You happen to walk by Kurt in the hallway during lunch, and he says that he is looking forward to sharing the strategic plan at the meeting and that "he is working overtime to get it done" so people can read it at the beginning of the meeting. "I'm sure people will be able to skim it for the important points pretty quickly," he says offhand.

What might you say to Kurt?

What might you say to Janet if you bump into her before the meeting?

## **Case 4: Fidget Toys**

You are a staff member offering a professional development program for other staff members from different units across campus. Over the course of a semester, participants are placed in small groups to discuss professional development related to collaboration across units and grant writing. One participant named Sandy shares with the group that they have ADHD and use fidget toys to help regulate themselves and pay attention during meetings and other work engagements. Sandy is excited about participating in these workshops. However, the meetings often involve long periods of sitting in one place, which is difficult for them to manage, so they bring something to occupy their hands. However, Sandy shares, one of the other staff members participating in the program has asked them to stop using the fidget toys, as toys are “unprofessional.” Sandy is asking you and the other facilitators for advice.

What might you say to Sandy?

What steps might you take to discuss this issue with your colleagues?

## Useful Resources

### Books

Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities by Nick Walker

[Link to WorldCat entry](#)

The Politics of Neurodiversity: Why Public Policy Matters by Dana Lee Baker

[Link to online version](#)

Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline edited by Steven K. Kapp

[Link to open access version](#)

(Chapter within) Autistics.Org and Finding Our Voices as an Activist Movement by Laura A. Tisoncik

(Chapter within) From Exclusion to Acceptance: Independent Living on the Autistic Spectrum by Martijn Dekker

### Posts

[Navigating "Access Friction" in Teaching](#) by Sarah Silverman

[In defense of a script](#) by Sarah Silverman

[A discussion protocol for teaching communities of practice](#) by Sarah Silverman

[Neurodiversity: Some basic terms and definitions](#) by Nick Walker

[Throw away the master's tools: Liberating ourselves from the pathology paradigm](#) by Nick Walker

### Articles

[Negotiating the Neurodiversity concept](#) by Robert Chapman

[Neurodiversity: Bridging the gap between the disabled people's movement and the mental health system survivors movement?](#) By Steve Graby

[The "Ransom Notes" Affair: When the Neurodiversity Movement Came of Age](#) by Joseph F. Kras

[Don't Mourn for Us](#) by Jim Sinclair

[Compassionate Pedagogy for Neurodiversity in Higher Education: A conceptual analysis](#) by Lorna Hamilton and Stephanie Petty

[More than Accessibility: A call for disability literacy](#) by Ada Hubrig

[The Neurodiversity Concept was Developed Collectively](#) by Monique Botha et al.

[On the ontological status of autism: the "double empathy problem"](#) by Damian Milton

Other

[Archived version](#) of the "Institute for the Study of the Neurotypical" by created by Laura A. Tisoncik

[Radical Neurodivergence Speaking](#) blog by Kassiane Asasumasu

["The history of the Neurodiversity concept"](#) Video talk by Martijn Dekker

[UDL Guidelines](#) from CAST

[UDL history and background](#)

[Exceptional Individuals](#) guide to Neurodiversity

[Think UDL Podcast](#)

[Care Work Through Course Design: Shifting the Labor of Resilience](#) by sarah currie and Ada Hubrig (an example of disability justice pedagogy written from perspectives of disabled and neurodivergent instructors)