



NO.8

THE EDUCATION CONVERSATION

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Neurodiversity and Learning Pathways

Beyond the “Standard” Learner

Welcome to the March 2026 issue of our newsletter.

Many learning environments are still shaped by an unspoken assumption: that there is one “normal” way to focus, process, participate, and demonstrate understanding. Students are often expected to adapt to fixed structures, standard pacing, and narrow definitions of engagement, even when these do not reflect how they learn best.

Yet learners do not think, respond, or make meaning in identical ways. Some need more time to process. Some engage more deeply through movement, visual structure, reflection, experimentation, or quiet observation before contribution. Some thrive when given choice, clarity, and space rather than pressure to conform to a single method of learning.

This is where neurodiversity invites an important shift. Instead of asking how learners can fit the system, we begin asking how learning can be designed more thoughtfully around the reality of cognitive diversity. Experiential learning offers a powerful pathway for this shift because it opens space for multiple forms of participation, meaning-making, and growth.

With care,
Zeina

Editor’s Note



“INSTEAD OF ASKING HOW LEARNERS CAN FIT THE SYSTEM, WE BEGIN ASKING HOW LEARNING CAN BE DESIGNED AROUND THE REALITY OF COGNITIVE DIVERSITY.”

Why This Matters Now



The conversation around learning is changing. Across educational settings, there is growing recognition that learner variability is not an exception to plan for after the fact, but a starting point for thoughtful design. More educators are questioning inherited models that reward speed, compliance, and uniform participation while overlooking the many ways students engage, process, and demonstrate understanding.

This shift matters because neurodivergent learners have too often been asked to carry the burden of adjustment. Rather than redesigning environments, institutions have frequently relied on individual accommodations that are reactive, inconsistent, or too narrowly applied. While accommodations remain important, they should not be the only mechanism through which learners gain access to meaningful learning.

At the same time, growing attention to student well-being, belonging, retention, and success has made one thing increasingly clear: learners are more likely to thrive when they feel seen, understood, and supported by the design of the environment itself. This is not simply a matter of access. It is also a matter of dignity, participation, and educational quality.

IN THIS CONTEXT,
NEURODIVERSITY IS
NO LONGER A
PERIPHERAL ISSUE. IT
IS CENTRAL TO HOW
WE THINK ABOUT
EFFECTIVE TEACHING,
INCLUSIVE DESIGN,
AND THE FUTURE OF
LEARNING.

“LEARNER VARIABILITY IS NOT AN EXCEPTION TO PLAN FOR AFTER THE FACT, BUT A STARTING POINT FOR THOUGHTFUL DESIGN.”

What Neurodiversity Means in Learning

Many students are not struggling because they are incapable of learning. They are struggling because the pathway to learning was too narrowly designed. When classrooms privilege speed, verbal participation, fixed pacing, or one mode of demonstrating understanding, they often confuse compliance with capability.

Neurodiversity reminds us that variation in attention, processing, communication, memory, sensory experience, and problem-solving is a normal part of human learning. In educational settings, this means learners will not engage with the same task in the same way, or at the same pace, or with the same visible signs of understanding. Yet far too often, learning environments are still built around the idea of a standard learner, with everyone else expected to adjust around that model.

This perspective shifts the conversation away from deficit. It asks us to look not only at the learner, but also at the design of the environment. Difficulty does not always sit within the student. Sometimes it emerges from a mismatch between the learner and the structure, timing, format, or expectations of the learning experience.

This is why neurodiversity matters beyond labels or formal accommodations. A more inclusive approach begins by assuming variability from the start. It considers whether learners have multiple ways to enter the task, process ideas, participate meaningfully, and show what they know. That shift does not dilute learning. It strengthens it by making it more responsive to the realities of human cognition.

IN PRACTICE

REFLECTION

WHERE IN MY
TEACHING AM I
STILL REWARDING
SAMENESS MORE
THAN LEARNING?

BEFORE INTRODUCING
A TASK, ASK: DOES
THIS ACTIVITY
REQUIRE ONE
SPECIFIC WAY OF
ENGAGING, OR DOES
IT ALLOW MORE THAN
ONE ROUTE TOWARD
UNDERSTANDING?

“INCLUSIVE TEACHING CANNOT DEPEND ONLY ON IDENTIFYING WHO QUALIFIES FOR SUPPORT; IT BEGINS BY ASSUMING VARIABILITY AND DESIGNING WITH IT IN MIND.”

Why Experiential Learning Matters Here

“EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING BECOMES MORE INCLUSIVE WHEN IT OFFERS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO ENGAGE, REFLECT, AND DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING.”

Experiential learning offers an important opportunity to rethink what participation looks like. In many traditional learning environments, success is tied too closely to passive listening, fast verbal response, note-taking under pressure, or one high-stakes way of showing understanding. These structures can exclude learners whose strengths emerge through movement, observation, experimentation, visual thinking, reflection, or applied problem-solving.

By contrast, experiential learning creates room for learners to make meaning through doing. It invites them to interact with ideas, test possibilities, reflect on experience, and build understanding in ways that are often more flexible and more human. This does not automatically make experiential learning inclusive, but it does make inclusion more possible when the design is thoughtful.

For neurodivergent learners, this matters greatly. A well-designed experiential task can reduce dependence on one narrow form of participation and instead open multiple pathways into the learning process. A simulation, case, role-play, project, design challenge, inquiry task, or reflective activity can allow students to engage through different strengths. One learner may thrive in discussion. Another may need time to process before speaking. Another may show deep understanding through building, mapping, organizing, or writing after the experience rather than during it.

This is where the real promise lies. Experiential learning, at its best, does not force all learners into one visible performance of understanding. It creates richer conditions for meaning-making. It allows learners to connect concepts with action, reflection with agency, and challenge with support. When designed with cognitive diversity in mind, it becomes not just active learning, but responsive learning.

The key, however, is intentionality. Simply making learning more active is not enough. If an activity is noisy, rushed, socially demanding, or vague in its expectations, it may create new barriers rather than remove old ones.

Experiential learning supports neurodiversity when it includes structure, clarity, options, and space for learners to process in different ways.

In practice

WHEN DESIGNING AN EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY, ASK NOT ONLY, “IS THIS ENGAGING?” BUT ALSO, “WHO MIGHT FIND THIS HARD TO ENTER, AND WHAT ALTERNATIVE ROUTES CAN I BUILD IN FROM THE START?”

Reflection

WHEN I THINK OF PARTICIPATION, AM I STILL IMAGINING ONE VISIBLE MODEL OF ENGAGEMENT, OR AM I MAKING ROOM FOR DIFFERENT FORMS OF LEARNING TO COUNT?

Practical Design Shifts That Support Diverse Learners

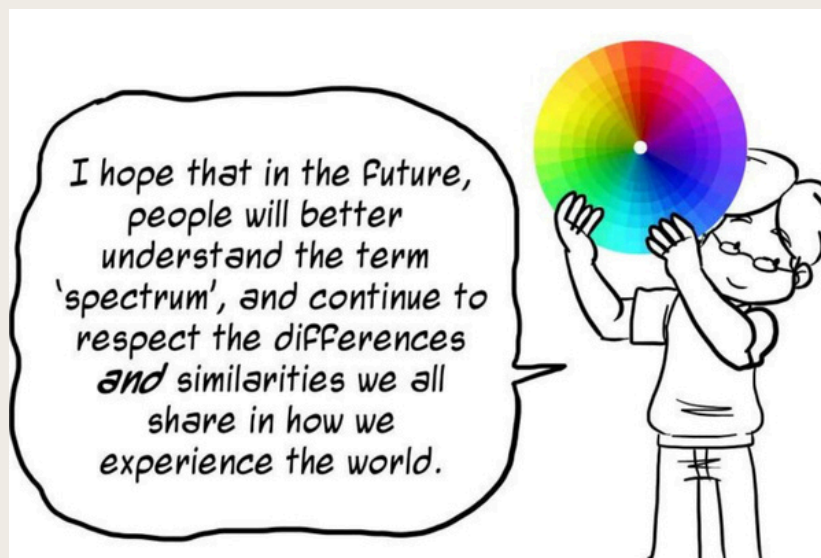
“Designing for neurodiversity does not begin with adding more content. It begins with rethinking access, flexibility, and how learning is experienced.”



If neurodiversity asks us to recognize cognitive variation as part of every learning environment, then the next question is practical: what does that look like in design? The answer is not to create entirely separate systems for different learners, nor to overload educators with unrealistic expectations. More often, the most meaningful shifts are small, intentional, and built into the structure of learning from the beginning.

One important shift is to create multiple entry points into a task. Not every learner connects best through the same starting format. Some need a visual prompt. Some benefit from a concrete example before abstraction. Some need a moment to read, reflect, or observe before being asked to respond. When learning begins through only one channel, many students are already working harder just to access the experience. When it begins through more than one route, participation becomes more possible.

A second shift is to offer more than one way for learners to process and demonstrate understanding. This does not mean removing rigor. It means recognizing that understanding can be expressed through different forms. A written reflection, a short oral explanation, a visual map, a prototype, a discussion contribution, or an applied response may all reveal meaningful learning. What matters is alignment with the intended outcome, not attachment to one preferred format.



Reflection

WHICH PART OF MY CURRENT TEACHING ASSUMES THAT ALL LEARNERS SHOULD MOVE, RESPOND, OR DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING IN THE SAME WAY?



Clarity is another essential part of inclusive design. Neurodiverse learners, like many others, benefit when instructions are explicit, expectations are visible, and the purpose of a task is easy to understand. Clear structure reduces unnecessary cognitive load. It helps learners focus their energy on the learning itself rather than on decoding what the educator wants. At the same time, clarity should not become rigidity. A well-designed learning pathway provides direction without becoming so fixed that it leaves no room for variation.

Pacing also deserves more attention than it often receives. Learning environments frequently reward immediacy: immediate answers, immediate discussion, immediate performance. Yet many learners need processing time to think deeply, organize ideas, and respond with confidence. Building in pauses, reflection moments, preview materials, or opportunities to revisit a task can make participation more authentic and less performative.

Finally, inclusive experiential learning takes regulation seriously. Noise, transitions, group dynamics, sensory input, ambiguity, and social pressure all shape a learner's ability to engage. A task may be exciting for one student and overwhelming for another. Designing well means asking not only whether the activity is active, but whether it is manageable, supportive, and clear enough for different learners to enter successfully.

These shifts are not only good for neurodivergent students. They improve learning conditions more broadly. When educators design with flexibility, clarity, and multiple pathways in mind, they create environments where more learners can participate with confidence and depth.

In Practice

TRY REVIEWING ONE UPCOMING LESSON THROUGH THESE FIVE QUESTIONS:

- WHERE ARE THE MULTIPLE ENTRY POINTS?*
- WHERE IS THERE CHOICE?*
- WHERE IS THE STRUCTURE CLEAR?*
- WHERE IS THERE TIME TO PROCESS?*
- WHERE MIGHT LEARNERS BECOME OVERLOADED?*

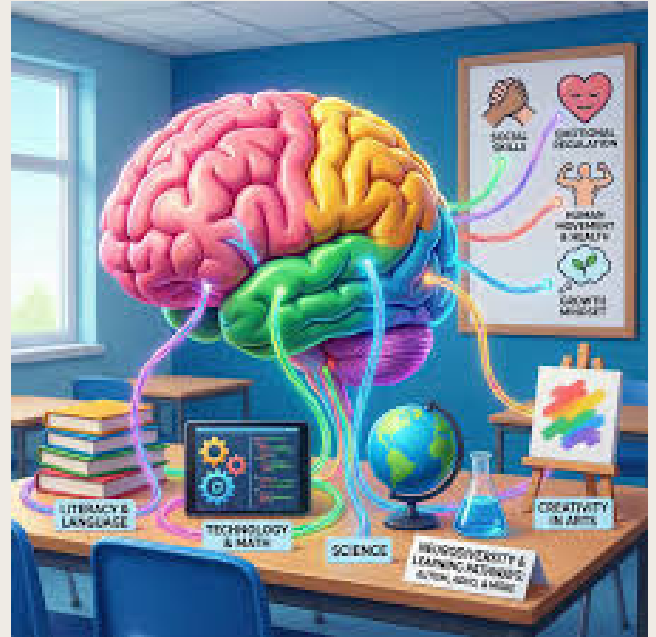
The Leadership Lens

Building Systems That Adapt

“Inclusive learning pathways do not depend on individual goodwill alone. They are shaped by the cultures, policies, and priorities that leaders choose to build.”

Designing for neurodiversity cannot rest only on the efforts of individual educators. While teaching practices matter deeply, the conditions that make inclusive learning possible are also shaped at the leadership level. What institutions value, support, reward, and normalize has a direct impact on whether diverse learners are expected to adapt quietly or are genuinely considered in the design of learning itself.

This is why neurodiversity is not only a pedagogical issue. It is also a leadership issue. Educational leaders influence whether inclusion is treated as a reactive support function or as a core principle of learning design. They shape the language used across the institution, the kinds of professional learning that are prioritized, the flexibility educators are encouraged to exercise, and the systems through which students experience belonging.



·In many settings, support for neurodivergent learners still sits at the margins. It is often tied to individual accommodations, isolated interventions, or the efforts of particularly committed staff members. While these supports are important, they are not enough on their own. A more mature institutional response asks broader questions. Are learning environments designed with variability in mind from the start? Are faculty given the time, language, and training to think inclusively about experiential tasks, assessment, pacing, and participation? Are students expected to disclose and navigate the system alone, or are systems designed to reduce friction before barriers escalate?

Leadership matters here because culture matters. When leaders signal that flexibility is a mark of thoughtful teaching rather than lowered standards, educators are more likely to experiment with inclusive approaches. When they frame learner variability as a normal part of education rather than an exception to manage, they help shift the institutional mindset from compliance to responsiveness. And when they invest in professional development that helps staff design for a wider range of learners, inclusion becomes more than intention. It becomes practice.

There is also an ethical dimension to this work. If an institution claims to value student success, engagement, and belonging, then it must also examine whether its structures make success more accessible to some learners than others. Neurodiversity asks leaders to look closely at these structures, not defensively, but honestly. It asks whether excellence is being defined too narrowly and whether inclusion is being pursued deeply enough to change how learning is actually experienced.

The most meaningful leadership response is not to create a separate initiative and move on. It is to embed this thinking into the everyday life of the institution: into curriculum conversations, faculty development, learning support, quality assurance, assessment design, and the broader student experience. That is where real change begins to take root.



In practice:

A useful question for leadership teams is this: Are we asking educators to be inclusive in systems that were never designed to support inclusive teaching?

Reflection:

What would shift in our institution if we treated cognitive diversity not as a support issue at the margins, but as a design reality at the center of learning?

A Final Reflection

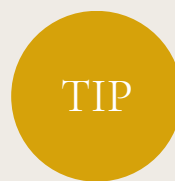
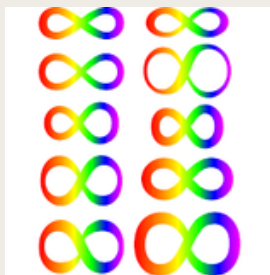
Neurodiversity invites education to ask a more honest question about learning: not whether students are capable, but whether the pathways we create are wide enough, flexible enough, and humane enough to meet the reality of human difference. For too long, many learners have had to work around systems that were never truly designed with them in mind. They have been asked to adapt quietly, compensate constantly, and interpret difficulty as personal limitation rather than as a signal that the learning environment itself may need to change.

This is why the conversation matters. It is not only about support. It is about dignity. It is about whether learners can participate without first having to disguise how they think, process, communicate, or engage. It is about whether education makes room for difference as a normal part of learning rather than as a disruption to it.

“The goal is not to make every learner follow the same path more successfully. It is to create pathways in which more learners can thrive.”

Experiential learning offers one powerful way forward because it allows us to design learning as something more flexible, reflective, active, and responsive. But its value lies not simply in making learning more dynamic. Its value lies in making learning more accessible to different minds. When learners are given multiple ways to enter, engage, reflect, and demonstrate understanding, the learning experience becomes stronger not only for some, but for many.

Perhaps that is the real invitation here. To move beyond asking who can keep up with the system, and instead ask what kind of system is worth asking learners to enter. A more inclusive future in education will not come from expecting more sameness. It will come from designing with greater care, greater imagination, and greater respect for the diversity of human learning.



Before planning your next learning experience, ask: Who is this design working well for already, and who may still be doing the extra work of adaptation?

[Coming in Issue #8: Universal Design for Learning in Real Classrooms](#)

[Center equity by designing flexible pathways for access, expression, and engagement.](#)

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