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Grant Tyler Peterson & Libby Vogel

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Thematic Essay

Harmonising neurodiversity in musical theatre training: a teacher-student dialogue

Grant Tyler Peterson  and Libby Vogel

At the conclusion of an undergraduate module that embedded inclusive approaches to singing musical theatre, the following dialogue between Grant (teacher) and Libby (student) emerged about co-creating neuroinclusive learning spaces.

This exchange seeks to highlight how an egalitarian learning environment can benefit both neurodiverse and neurotypical students and staff, while fostering more dynamic learning experiences.

Grant: Hi Libby, this class was eye-opening for both of us – if that’s fair to say? I’d love to know what you thought and felt during the module. If learning can be understood as a set of feelings tied to the process, what physical experiences or emotions were key to your engagement?

Libby: Hi Grant – you’re absolutely right about it being an eye-opening journey! I accomplished things through this class that my younger self, even as of a year ago, would have never thought possible.

One of the aspects of the class that stood out to me was the freedom of creativity. The module felt student-led, from developing our final projects to collating music, and from piecing together personal narratives to seminar discussions. It didn’t feel like going to lessons, it felt like an experience.

This helped when I shared my piece and sang “Part Of Your World” with my rewritten lyrics. This was a semi-comedic depiction of my struggles as a neurodivergent individual and my desire to experience the world the way a neurotypical person can.

For me, musical theatre had always been a performative thing first and foremost, and though I understood its deeper nature, in that it could be

used for spreading messages and challenging conceptions, it wasn't truly until I was able to, for lack of a better phrasing, hold it in my hands and personally mould it into what I wanted it to be, to shape it into the image I wanted to create and develop the message I wanted to share, that I *truly* understood the power of musical theatre. It's all well and good to delve into the works of others, whether that's in a purely theoretical nature, or to perform them. But it's something else entirely when it's a piece of your soul that you're shaping and holding up for an audience to bear witness to.

I have written in a different font, both because black on white makes my brain hurt, and because it helps me differentiate between who's written what. I hope this is also okay with you.

Grant: Absolutely. Italic text is welcome! Your reworking of "Part of Your World", with the clever line, 'I want to do what the "normies" do,' showed how a personal, creative process helped you express your identity while developing your vocal skills. How you reshaped the song – and even the font here – are examples of your creative input shaping your learning journey and others. You've mentioned to me about struggling in other classes, what was different with this class?

Libby: I mentioned, in regard to changing the colour, my struggle with focus, and this is something that plagues every aspect of my life, including in classes. I focus better when I'm multitasking. If I didn't write or draw or crochet or solve a Rubik's Cube, I'd end up unable to focus.

While there were parts of the class where this is exactly what I would do, much of the class was such an active structure that I had no need. Taping sheet music, for example, occupied my hands and required just enough brain power to get the pages in the right order, the right position, etcetera, and the rest of my brain would be engaged in conversation with classmates or occupied by thoughts of my performance or portfolio. Since the sheet music contributed to the completion of the songbook repertoire assessment, the nature of the class was extremely neurodivergent friendly, keeping my mind and body on a track that fed directly into related assessments. I could breathe easier, and my shoulders relaxed.

To speak about it in terms of feeling, I'd have to say not only was it welcoming, creating a safe space where I wasn't constantly on the back foot or wary of getting in trouble for 'not paying attention', it was almost joyous to be able to simply *engage* the way I should be able to, and experience the class without needing to run extra laps, so to speak.

Grant: These are helpful examples. I hadn't realised how multitasking elements might lend themselves to serving neurodivergent students and create more inclusive options. I will certainly consider this for future modules, allowing both neurotypical and neurodiverse students to more fully engage on their own terms.

In a similar vein, I'm interested in the feelings you had in areas of your singing. In a previous article I co-wrote with Broderick Chow, we theorised ways of democratising singing in educational settings (Peterson and Chow 2016). Since singing is often felt as a deeply personal mode of expression – entangled with vulnerabilities around technical skill and gendered notions of identity – a student's early experiences of singing, we

argued, can benefit from what Jaques Rancière (1991) proposed as ‘a community of equals’. This is opposed to classes with a powerful ‘guru’ teaching top-down to an ‘unknowing’ pupil. In this respect, do you think the learning environment fostered an exchange of ideas between pupil and teacher (or could do better)? What do you recall as examples that enabled you to reflectively embody your singing voice?

Libby: The structure of the class was beneficial, in that it fostered an open environment, allowing open and honest conversation. For example, we were able to share and discuss topics such as body image and intrusive thoughts in a comfortable and safe manner. This was aided largely by the nature of the other students and module leader, with everyone amicable and welcoming. In my understanding, fostering a ‘community of equals’ requires an ability and willingness from everyone involved to create such an environment, and the attendees of the class must both have a capability to do such, and be able to garner from the module leader that that is the desire for the structure of a class, creating something of a positive feedback loop. Additionally, having the one-to-one discussions provided a space where we could discuss deeper things we may not have been comfortable discussing in front of the entire class in the early stages.

The idea of standing up in front of the class and sharing this vulnerable part of myself was inherently terrifying, but others had stood and shared experiences of difficulties with body image and being LGBT+ and received genuine responses – not pity, or sympathy, or some kind of aversion, but simply an understanding of the topic and advice for the *performance* of the song and topic.

Additionally, if it’s okay for me to say, you mentioned having dyslexic traits and a dyslexic son in one of the first lessons, and this openness from the *module leader* regarding a disability went a long way to making the environment a safe space to share and explore the topics I wished to cover in my piece, and generally exist as a person.

Grant: That’s reassuring to hear. By openly sharing our experiences and challenges, we hopefully create an environment where people feel valued and supported to develop their voices from their authentic position. Your reflections echo a ‘community of equals’, where learning is a mutual exchange. I also gained a lot from the class, particularly how your portfolio assessment creatively applied a neurodivergent lens to interpreting selections of canonical musical repertoire

I want to extend my thanks to you for critically engaging in the class and taking part in this retrospective essay on the power of neuroinclusive learning approaches. Both experiences expanded my thinking around teaching and will guide my approaches going forward, as this method not only empowers neurodiverse students but also enriches the learning experience for neurotypical students through a more inclusive, empathetic exchange of ideas.

Libby: Well, if a practice as freeform and effervescent as musical theatre can’t encourage neurodiverse learning and creativity, what else can possibly hope to? Truly though, I am of the opinion that the strength of the bonds between cohorts is only as sturdy as the foundation provided

by those in guidance, and it is those who lead as you did, with equality that bolsters the co-creation of learning journeys. In the end, my main takeaway is that learning is a two-way street, a quid pro quo arrangement, if you will, in which a safe learning environment is fostered by a degree of honesty and willingness to be vulnerable from all parties involved.

I'd like to extend those thanks back to you Grant, for allowing me this opportunity to share my thoughts and opinions. Both experiences helped shape me as a creative and guide me on my path towards a future in the creative industries.

Grant: Cheers to that! And here's to more harmonising who we are with finding our voices.

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