



Supporting Inclusive Learning: A Handbook for Neurodivergent and Diverse Learners

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Audience: New Tutors, LSAs, and Workshop Leaders supporting mixed-ability, multilingual, and neurodivergent learners

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“Fairness does not mean everyone gets the same. Fairness means everyone gets what they need.”— Rick Riordan

INTRODUCTION

This handbook provides practical and evidence-informed tools to help educators deliver inclusive learning. It focuses on neurodiversity, language variation, learner voice, and intersectional equity.



UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVE LEARNING

- **Equality ≠ Sameness:** Inclusion means tailoring support, not making it uniform.
 - **Equity:** Offering tools and adaptations so every learner has access.
- **Valuing Diversity:** Neurodivergence, language, background and communication styles enrich learning.
 - **Social Model of Disability:** Disability is created by barriers, not impairments (Oliver, 1990).

Inclusive learning isn't a checklist; it's a mindset, a commitment to designing environments where **everyone can thrive**, no matter their background, brain type, language, or learning style.

Equality ≠ Sameness

Equality is often misunderstood as treating everyone the same. But giving every learner the same worksheet, deadline, or teaching style ignores real-life differences. Inclusion means **tailoring support**, not applying one-size-fits-all methods.

● *Example:* A dyslexic learner may need text read aloud or given in chunks, while an autistic learner might need a quiet space to process it.

Equity

Equity is about removing barriers and offering the **tools, time and support** each learner needs to succeed. It's not lowering expectations, creating **fair access to high expectations**.

● *Example:* Giving one learner a visual schedule and another extended time helps both meet the same learning goal, on their terms.

Valuing Diversity

Diversity is more than a buzzword; it reflects the richness of different **cultures, languages, communication styles, and neurotypes** in your group. Neurodivergent learners bring deep focus, creative thinking, and unique problem-solving approaches.

● *Example:* A learner with ADHD might struggle with sitting still but shine in fast-paced creative tasks. Inclusion sees their strengths, not just their challenges.

"Different is not less." — Temple Grandin

Social Model of Disability

Coined by *Michael Oliver (1990)*, this model shifts the view of disability from something 'wrong' with the person to **barriers in the environment**. These might be physical (e.g., steps without ramps), sensory (e.g., loud classrooms), or attitudinal (e.g., stigma).

● *Example:* A learner who doesn't speak in group settings may be seen as "unengaged", but if given a safe space, a visual aid or a typing tool, they may communicate brilliantly.

Intersectionality

A learner's experience is shaped by the **intersection** of their identity, including disability, race, gender, class, and language. These layers affect how they're perceived and supported.

● *Example:* An autistic learner who is also multilingual and from a minority background may face **double exclusion** unless your approach reflects their whole identity.

Voice and Choice

Inclusive practice invites learners to **co-create learning**. Ask how they learn best, offer different ways to show progress, and build in feedback loops.

● *Example:* Let learners choose whether to give feedback in writing, audio, or using emojis, especially helpful for those with communication differences.

Psychological Safety

Learners need to feel safe to ask questions, get things wrong, or share a need. This is especially important for neurodivergent learners who may have past experiences of masking, shame, or being misunderstood. When psychological safety is embedded into the classroom culture, learners are more likely to take risks, engage deeply, and stay motivated.

For educators, this means modelling vulnerability, welcoming feedback, and showing that mistakes are part of learning, not something to be punished. It also means recognising subtle signs of anxiety or disengagement and creating calm, low-pressure spaces to re-engage. Small changes like saying "thank you for asking" instead of "that's already on the slide" or offering private check-ins can build trust.

A psychologically safe classroom actively values learner voice and difference. When learners know their identity won't be questioned, whether that's how they speak, stim, process, or communicate, they're more likely to access learning meaningfully and consistently. In inclusive teaching, **safety isn't just emotional — it's a foundation for progress.**

"Inclusion is not tolerance. It is unquestioned acceptance." — Wes Stafford.

LEARNING THEORIES AND COMMUNICATION MODELS

Inclusive Learning Theories

| Theory/model | Application |
|--|--|
|  Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) | Offer multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression |
|  Vygotsky's ZPD | Scaffold support just beyond current skill level |
|  Kolb's Learning Cycle | Learn through doing and reflecting |
|  Transaactional Communication Model (Schramm, 1954) | Communication includes sender, receiver, feedback, and noise |
|  Active Listening & Feedback | Builds trust and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) |
|  Builds trust and psychological safety | Use open questions and neutral tone |

Universal Design for Learning

1.Key Insight: Offer multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression

Application: Give learners the **choice** of how they access and share information, through **writing, drawing, speaking, audio, or digital formats**.

● *Why it matters:* No two brains learn the same way. Some learners prefer reading, while others understand better by listening or watching a video. UDL helps everyone access content fairly, not just those with formal diagnoses.

“One way of teaching excludes. Many ways of learning include.”

2.Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Key Insight: Scaffold support just beyond the current skill level

Application: Use **peer pairing, modelling**, and step-by-step instruction to help learners stretch their skills with guidance.

● *Why it matters:* Learners may lack confidence, but with the right support, like a buddy system or scaffolded worksheet, they can reach the next level. This theory reminds us to **build from where the learner is**, not where we think they should be.

Reflection prompt: What scaffolds am I putting in place for learners who need extra support?

3. Learning Cycle

Key Insight: Learn through doing and reflecting

Application: Use **hands-on tasks**, **role-play**, **journals**, and **debrief discussions** to deepen learning.

● *Why it matters:* Many learners (especially those with ADHD or dyslexia) engage best through practical experience rather than abstract instruction. Kolb's cycle ensures they not only try things out but also make meaning from it.

Inclusive tip: Allow learners to reflect in different ways, such as voice notes, drawings, mind maps or simple checklists.

4. Transactional Communication Model

Key Insight: Communication includes a **sender**, **receiver**, **feedback**, and **noise**

Application: **Simplify language**, **check understanding**, and use **visual supports** to reduce misunderstandings.

● *Why it matters:* Learners process information in unique ways. Some need visuals to decode meaning; others need repetition or rephrased language. This model shows us that teaching is never one-way but a constant dialogue.

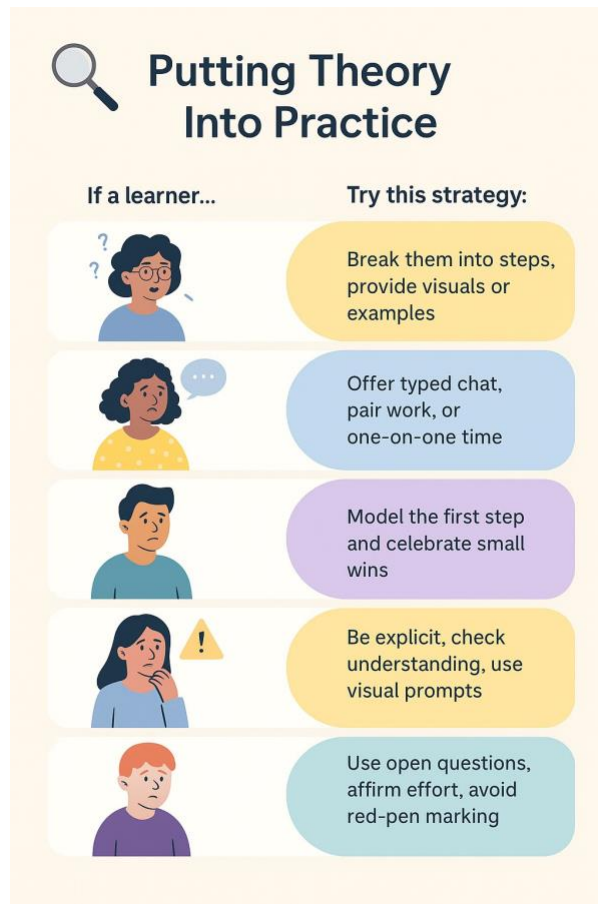
Barriers ('noise') can include background sound, unclear instructions, unfamiliar vocabulary, or even anxiety.

5. Active Listening & Psychological Safety

Key Insight: Learning only happens when learners feel **safe**, **heard**, and **respected**

Application: Use **open questions**, a **neutral tone**, and **non-judgmental feedback**.




● *Why it matters:* Neurodivergent learners may mask, second-guess themselves or fear asking for help. Active listening builds **trust** and encourages **authentic participation**. "**Psychological safety means learners know they won't be embarrassed or punished for speaking up.**"






PRACTICAL INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES




- **Use sans-serif fonts (OpenDyslexic, Arial)**
- **Chunk tasks into manageable steps**
- **Give multiple output options (poster, video, short text)**
- **Avoid red pen – use green or neutral tones.**
- **Provide quiet reflection time after activities.**
- **Use plain English and visual supports for instructions.**

| Learner profile | Challenge | Adaptation | Outcome |
|---|------------------|--|-------------------------|
|  Multilingual beginner | Complex text | Use dual-language glossaries, pictorial cues | Increased comprehension |
|  Dyslexic learner | Dense text | Bullet points, audio option | Reduced overload |
|  Autistic learner | Group activities | Offer opt-out and structured roles | Reduced anxiety |
|  ADHD learner | Long sessions | Movement breaks and checklists | Improved focus |

SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT LEARNERS

| Tool | Purpose | Inclusive Tweak |
|---|---|--|
|  Talking Token | Encourages turn-taking | Use colourful objects, include mobility adaptations |
|  Think-Pair-Share | Promotes reflection and discussion | Ensure pairing with complementary strengths, visually clear prompts |
|  Sticky note Gallery | Collect visual input in varied ways | Offer choices in size, shape, or color of sticky notes, do not restrict to text |
| | Offer choices in size, shape, or colour of sticky notes | Offer choices in size, shape, or colour of sticky notes, do not restrict to text |

 **Neuro Empower**
CIC

Using Inclusive Tools to Support Neurodivergent Learners

Neurodivergent learners often benefit from structure, flexibility, and choice in how they engage and communicate. Simple tools like Talking Tokens, Think–Pair–Share, and Sticky Note Galleries can be **adapted inclusively** to reduce anxiety, build participation, and offer safe expression routes. Below is guidance on how to use them effectively.

● Talking Token

Purpose: Encourages turn-taking in group conversations. **Why it helps:** Many neurodivergent learners experience social processing differences, making spontaneous verbal contributions difficult.

● Think–Pair–Share

Purpose: Encourages private reflection, followed by structured peer interaction.

Why it helps: Learners with autism or ADHD may need extra time to formulate ideas; this method supports cognitive processing and builds confidence before sharing with a group.

Inclusive tweak: Match learners intentionally, e.g. pairing a highly verbal learner with a quieter peer. Use a visual cue or timer to mark the phases (think, pair, share). You can even allow written or drawn responses instead of spoken sharing.

● Sticky Note Gallery

Purpose: Collects visual ideas or feedback from the whole group.

Why it helps: This tool allows learners to participate without having to speak aloud. It's beneficial for learners with situational mutism, dyslexia, or social anxiety.

Inclusive tweak: Provide sticky notes in different shapes, sizes and colours. Let learners draw, symbolise, or use a single word if they prefer. Don't assume everyone can or wants to write complete sentences.

Facilitating Inclusive Group Discussions

Creating a safe, structured environment helps all learners, especially neurodivergent individuals, feel confident to participate.

Setting Ground Rules

- **Co-create group agreements** (e.g. "One mic at a time" or "no interrupting")
- **Model inclusive, non-stigmatising language** – speak about needs without judgement
- **Establish psychological safety** by normalising questions, mistakes, and individual preferences
- Highlight values such as **confidentiality, kindness, and respect for communication differences**

Troubleshooting Participation

Even in safe, well-structured spaces, some learners may still face barriers to engaging fully. Here's how to recognise and respond inclusively:

- **Dominant speakers:**
Gently reinforce group norms. Use tools like a **talking token**, a visible speaking order list, or timed turns to create balance.
- **Quiet or anxious learners:**
Offer **private chat boxes**, one-to-one reflections, or **low-pressure sharing formats** (like emoji responses or visual choice cards). Never force contributions; instead, provide time and space.
- **Learners with processing delays:**
Give **advance access to questions**, summarise key points aloud, and pause before expecting replies. Allow learners to "pass" or contribute later.
- **Access barriers:**
Provide all materials in **multiple formats** (PDF, visual map, audio summary), check lighting/sound, and offer **noise-cancelling options or captions**.
- **Non-verbal communicators:**
Use tools like **visual response cards**, digital boards (Padlet, Jamboard), or allow learners to type instead of speak.

CHECKLISTS AND TEMPLATES

Inclusive Planning Audit

- Tick all that apply:
- ☐ Provided visuals or diagrams
- ☐ Offered multiple ways to access content
- ☐ Allowed extra time
- ☐ Planned for sensory needs
- ☐ Used trauma-informed language
- ☐ Included learner voice in planning

Why This Works: Theory into Practice



These inclusive teaching strategies are grounded in research-informed theories that help learners feel supported, empowered, and understood.

- **Follows Universal Design for Learning:** Encourages multiple means of engagement, expression, and representation. This means learners can access content in ways that make sense to them, through visuals, movement, sound, text, or technology. It avoids a one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Creates Psychological Safety:** Learners are more likely to take risks, ask questions, and stay engaged when they feel emotionally safe. Inclusive teaching builds this safety through non-judgmental feedback, open communication, and respect for different processing styles.
- **Uses Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development:** Learners develop best just beyond their current ability level, with support from a more experienced peer or adult. Scaffolding (step-by-step support) helps build confidence and independence over time.
- **Engages Multiple Modalities of Communication:** Recognises that learners process information in different ways. Inclusive practice integrates **visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and written** methods, from graphic organisers and verbal instructions to hands-on learning and gesture-based cues.
- **Promotes a Strength-Based, Anti-Deficit Approach:** Rather than focusing on what learners can't do, inclusive teaching highlights **what they bring to**

the table, creativity, lived experience, problem-solving, cultural knowledge, or hyperfocus. It reframes neurodivergence and difference as a **positive aspect of learner identity**.

- **Reflects the Social Model of Disability:** Recognises that learning difficulties are often created by **barriers in the environment**, not by a learner's impairment. Inclusion means removing those barriers through flexible teaching, accessible materials, and empathetic communication.
- **Builds on Humanistic Education Principles:** Puts the learner's wellbeing and self-actualisation at the heart of the process. Encourages autonomy, choice, and personal growth.

Final Reflections & Further Support



Reflection Questions

Use these prompts to reflect on your inclusive teaching practice or as discussion starters in training sessions:

1. **What does inclusion mean to me in my current role?**
2. **Have I asked learners how they learn best and listened?**
3. **What barriers might be in place in my current learning environment?**
4. **Have I built in multiple ways for learners to express what they know?**
5. **How can I use learners' strengths more actively in my teaching?**
6. **Am I creating a safe space where mistakes are seen as part of learning?**
7. **Which theory (UDL, ZPD, Kolb, etc.) do I naturally align with — and why?**
8. **What's one change I could make this week to improve accessibility or belonging?**

Supportive Links & Further Reading

The official UDL framework with examples for inclusive classrooms.

Neurodiversity in Education – ADHD Foundation

<https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk>

Practical support and resources for teaching neurodivergent learners.

Inclusive Teaching Toolkit – UCL

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/inclusive-education>

Inclusive curriculum design and classroom Strategies.

Understanding the Social Model of Disability – Scope UK

<https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability>

Explains the shift from “fixing the learner” to “fixing the environment.”

Kolb Learning Styles Explained – Simply Psychology

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

Need More Help?

If you work in a college, school, or adult learning setting, speak with your **SENDCo, Inclusion Lead, or Learning Support Coordinator**. Share this resource and start a conversation.

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