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The Neuroinclusive Classroom Series: Assessment & Feedback for Neurodiverse Learners

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.



ACCESS CHECK

Access is a shared responsibility among everyone in this space. While attention has been paid to reduce barriers to participation, I encourage interventions on the following (and more!) to enhance access.

Technology

Space

Pace

"We all have bodies, hearts, and minds. We all have needs and capacities, strengths and vulnerabilities"

— Skin, Tooth, and Bone: A Disability Justice Primer



NeuroInclusive Classroom Series

Calm & Connected Classrooms

Environment

The Paradox of Gen AI & Neuroinclusive Teaching

Materials

Assessment & Feedback for Neurodiverse Learners

Methods

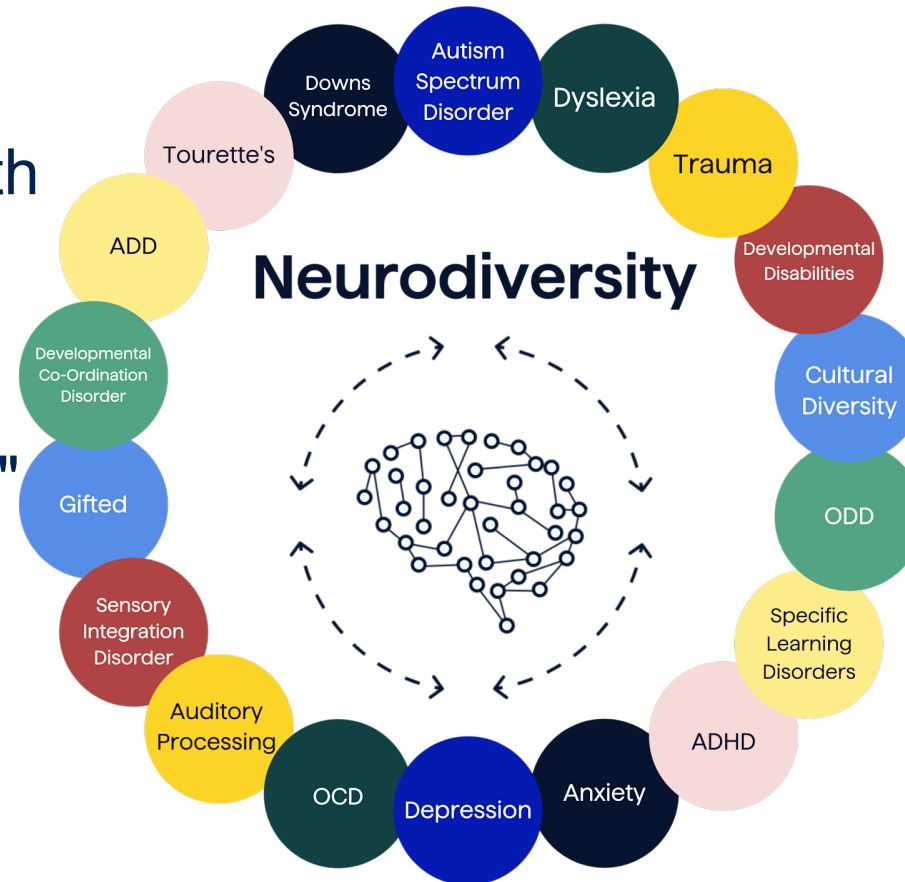



Session Outcomes

- 1 Explain how neurodiversity, Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria, and assessment practices interact emotionally and cognitively
- 2 Explore compensatory strengths commonly associated with neurodivergence
- 3 Apply UDL principles to assessment and feedback design
- 4 Use multimodal, strengths-based feedback structures
- 5 Diagnose and redesign feedback

What is Neurodiversity?

- People experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways
- Neuro-affirming lens: no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are viewed as strengths not deficits.





Recall a piece of feedback you've received that was ambiguous, vague, or harder to receive than you think it was meant to be. A student evaluation, a peer review, an appraisal.

What did you do with it?

Inclusive (Re)Framing

Assessment and feedback are not neutral

They can shape:

- Belonging** who can demonstrate knowledge
- Motivation** what counts as knowledge
- Learning** how to acquire and synthesize knowledge
- Identity** one's self-concept as a student



Gavin Newsom ✓

@GavinNewsom

To every kid with a learning disability:
don't let anyone — not even the
President of the United States — bully
you.

Dyslexia isn't a weakness.

It's your strength.

Compensatory Advantages

ADHD

Divergent thinking, creativity, synthesis, idea generation

Autistic

Pattern recognition, systems thinking, precision, depth

Dyslexia

Big-picture thinking, storytelling, problem reframing

Anxiety

Anticipatory planning, ethical sensitivity, detail orientation

↑ Divergent thinking is negatively correlated with working memory capacity — lower capacity in high-fluid-intelligence ADHD students predicts higher divergent thinking ability.

(Fugate, Zentall & Gentry, 2013; Wallbank, 2026, p. 28)

Higher Education Context

Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education (2024)

1 in 3

neurodivergent students do not have a formal diagnosis, limiting access to supports and accommodations

<1/2

disclosed their identity or diagnosis to anyone at their institution

2–3x

more likely to report Executive Function challenges than any other challenge

When Assessment Misreads Strength

A student with dyslexia answers a multiple-choice question.

Their big-picture thinking leads them to conclude: 'all of these are relevant' or 'it depends.' They overcomplicate the question — and select the wrong answer.

The feedback says:

"You haven't understood the material."

"You haven't done the work."

"You lack the required knowledge."

What's happening:

The student did the work. They understand the material, perhaps even better than a peer who selected the 'correct' single answer. The problem is the format, not the knowledge. Their strength is being penalized by the task design.

The problem is not a deficit — it is a square peg being asked to fit a round hole. (Wallbank, 2026)

The Emotional Dimension of Feedback

Researchers estimate that children with ADHD hear 20,000 more negative or corrective statements than neurotypical peers by age 10.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)

Dysphoria induced by perceived or real rejection and/or criticism — even when that rejection is only anticipated.

Withdrawal

- Pre-emptive disengagement to avoid anticipated pain
- Delay or avoid submitting assignments
- Submit work below their ability — to create an excuse for a lower grade
- Avoid applying for opportunities entirely

Masking

- Project toughness or nonchalance to hide sensitivity
- Leads to dissociation from authentic self
- Seeking reassurance feels risky — feared as 'oversensitive'
- Creates a vicious cycle: mask → misread → more rejection

Bodily Sensations

- Heart closing up, heat flooding the body
- Nausea, paralysis, physical pain
- Reactions can last hours to weeks
- The expectation of rejection is often worse than the rejection itself

We assume feedback is neutral.

Same comments → same impact.

Feedback = information.

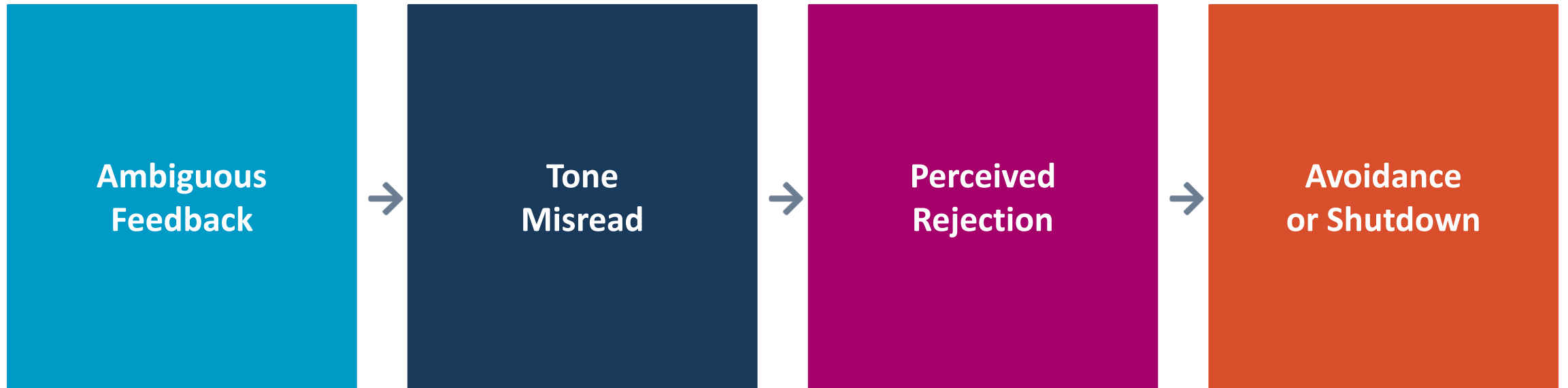
But students don't just read feedback — they experience it.

Can't act on it → Cognitive mismatch

Won't act on it → Emotional impact

The Ambiguity Chain

How written feedback breaks down for neurodiverse students



"If tone is unclear, feedback can feel like rejection — even when it isn't."

What This Looks Like in Practice

Students experiencing feedback-related distress may:

Avoid submitting

Work withheld to prevent anticipated pain

Delay intentionally

Procrastination as emotional self-protection

Submit below potential

Lower stakes reduce fear of harsh evaluation

Disengage early

Exit before evaluation to avoid rejection

Mask confusion

Hide uncertainty rather than risk asking

Appear 'fine'

Surface compliance conceals internal distress

Universal Design for Learning

Multiple Means of ENGAGEMENT

The WHY of learning
How learners get interested and
stay motivated

Multiple Means of REPRESENTATION

The WHAT of learning
How information is presented to
learners

Multiple Means of ACTION & EXPRESSION

The HOW of learning
How learners demonstrate what
they know

These principles guide our three design strategies for neuroinclusive feedback.

3 Design Strategies for Neuroinclusive Feedback

- 1 Clarity & Transparency
- 2 Account for Learner Variability
- 3 Foster Meaningful Choice & Autonomy

Clarity & Transparency

Ambiguity creates anxiety, guesswork, and a hidden curriculum.

- Separate what demonstrates learning from what supports process
- Make assessment criteria explicit and multimodal
- Explain the purpose and tone of feedback before returning it
- Reduce tonal ambiguity in written comments, especially for sensitive feedback
- Normalize struggle before naming problems: 'This is hard work, and here's how to move forward'

Account for Learner Variability

Different students need different feedback structures — and some need protection from ambiguity's capacity to overwhelm.

Written

Strengths: Precise, referenceable, asynchronous

Watch for: Easy to misread tone — no facial cues. Vague phrases ('needs work') can feel like rejection.

Audio

Strengths: Tone clarifies intent; reduces ambiguity; more detailed than written

Watch for: Requires transcript for some learners. Harsh tone can be amplified.

Video

Strengths: Facial expression adds warmth; highest dialogic potential; students rewatch

Watch for: Most time-intensive. Requires controlled environment.

Foster Meaningful Choice & Autonomy

Build metacognitive awareness of feedback needs not just compliance with feedback.

Proactively build in reassurance

Students may not ask. Affirm effort alongside critique.

Create revision opportunities

Feedback only works if students can act on it. Build in cycles instead of one-shot grades.

Provide choice in feedback mode

Offer written + audio, or allow students to request video. Autonomy reduces anxiety.

Name executive function support as legitimate

Say out loud: using support structures is not cheating, it is equitable access.

Strengths-Based Feedback in Practice

Feedback can activate — or bypass — the cognitive strengths of neurodiverse learners.

Instead of...

"Lacks clarity"

"Needs more development"

"See me"

Summative grade + no feedback loop

Try...

"Your argument is here — let's make the connection to evidence explicit in sentence 2"

"You've identified the big picture well. Now zoom in: what's the specific evidence for this claim?"

"I'd love to talk through this together — here's one specific question to bring to office hours"

Grade + one forward-facing action + revision opportunity

Activity: Diagnose & Redesign

Step 1: Diagnose — cognitive mismatch, emotional impact, or both? · Step 2: Redesign — rewrite it.

A · Essay / Humanities

"Unclear argument — needs significant development before this is ready to submit."

Diagnose: cognitive? emotional? both?

Redesign →

.....

.....

B · Lab Report / Sciences

"Good ideas here but the structure lets you down. See me."

Diagnose: cognitive? emotional? both?

Redesign →

.....

.....

C · Presentation / Any discipline

"This doesn't meet the expectations of the assignment."

Diagnose: cognitive? emotional? both?

Redesign →

.....

.....

Debrief: what changed, and why does it work?

Key Takeaways

1 **Assessment & feedback are not neutral**

They shape belonging, motivation, learning, and identity

2 **RSD is real and measurable**

Anticipated rejection can hurt more than actual rejection and often looks like disengagement

3 **Cognitive and emotional barriers are distinct**

Can't act on it (unclear) ≠ Won't act on it (feels like rejection). Both must be addressed

4 **Mode matters for equity**

Multimodal feedback is an accessibility issue

5 **Neuroinclusive feedback design benefits everyone**

Clarity, choice, and emotional safety improve learning across all learners

Reflection

What is one minor change you can make this or next term that would make your feedback more usable?

Consider: cognitive clarity + emotional safety



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Thank You!

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