# Attending to (neurodivergent) identity: universal design and professional identity formation

## Abstract

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UDL 3.0 increasingly recognizes learner identity as a crucial element in learning, yet many programs, particularly in health professions, hold implicit or explicit expectations for students to develop a specific professional identity. This tension can create significant challenges, particularly for neurodivergent students, who may experience identity dissonance or minority stress when their neurodivergent identity does not align with the dominant, often ableist, archetype of a health professional. This is further compounded by the fact that professionalism is frequently a direct assessment criterion, requiring students to perform a specific professional identity. Our research examines the intersection of learner identity and professional identity within health professions education, drawing on critical disability theory and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to interpret a series of 10 interviews and 182 survey responses from neurodivergent health professions graduates.

We draw on respondents’ stories to illustrate how to broaden pedagogical and assessment approaches to create learning environments where diverse student identities, including neurodivergent identities, are not only welcomed but celebrated, fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning experience for all. While accommodations to learning and assessment can play a role, what is required is a reframing of systems and cultures of learning and assessment such that ableist, exclusionary assumptions and practices are shifted. This necessitates a reframing of how we understand and evaluate professionalism. Drawing on critical disability theory, we argue that UDL and Universal Design for Assessment (UDA) must evolve to encompass cultural shifts that empower educators to critically examine their own assumptions and standards related to professional identities.

Many programs, particularly in health professions, require neurodivergent students to navigate a tension between their neurodivergent identity and a narrow ideal of a professional identity, compromise student learning and wellbeing. Through interviews and surveys, we identify the need for a shift in educational culture to foster truly inclusive learning environments.

## Slides

### Attending to (neurodivergent) identity: universal design and professional identity formation

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### Acknowledgement of country

* Wadawarrung land
* Image: photo of a path leading over a green headland, looking out over the sea

### Student quotes

* “*It was deemed unprofessional to be myself”*
* *“I felt concerned that I might not be allowed to graduate if I was more authentic”*

### Identity in UDL3.0

* UDL3.0 *“emphasizes learners' multiple and intersecting identities as part of variability”*
* *“Creating a learning environment that welcomes learners’ whole selves is a critical step to ensuring learners are able to access and engage with the learning process.”*

### The Role of Identity in Learning and Belonging

* Identity is not static: Learning environments shape, constrain, or affirm identity
* Identity is integral to learner engagement, motivation, and persistence
* Attending to identity enables learning, but is also part of learning

### Shaping Learner Identities through curriculum and assessment

* Identity development is often a core part of curriculum and assessment
* We require learners to shape new identities as they learn: professional identity formation
* We require learners to enact these identities: professional behaviour and assessment of professionalism
* Educational cultures reinforce these identities (particularly in health professions)

### Marginalised Identities

* Students are never just ‘learners’
* Identity dissonance when norms of identity don’t align with student identity
* Marginalized students often feel pressure to mask or adapt

### Our research: Understanding Neurodivergent Student Experiences

* 10 interviews, 182 survey responses from neurodivergent graduates of health professions programs (nursing, medicine, OT, physio etc)
* Complex stories of navigating identity formation

### Key Theme: Developing an Identity

* Many didn’t identify that they were neurodivergent until well into or after their training
* Internalised blame, low self-worth, misdiagnoses (e.g., anxiety, depression)
* Quotes: *“[I] just thought I was weird/flawed”*
* *“…it never occurred to me that any difficulties I was having could be accommodated, rather than me just ‘working harder’.”*

### Identity Dissonance

* Neurodivergent identities not always seen as compatible with professional identities
* Masking used as a survival strategy: linked to burnout and distress
* Quotes: *“…even sitting cross legged in my chair was singled out by staff in front of the class and told I was being unprofessional…”*
* *“Unmasking is incompatible with what is conventionally considered "professional behaviour“. I was criticised every time I didn't monitor my behaviour closely enough.”*

### Limitations of accommodations

* Accommodations often generic or unsuitable
* Implementation depended on disclosure, student self-advocacy and variable implementation
* Quotes: *“While the extensions were helpful in some ways, I never felt like part of my cohort because I was always behind and stressed.”*
* *“…like continually offering band aids whilst ignoring what was causing the injury and resulting bleeding.”*

### Strengths: Self-awareness, agency and connection

* Many developed self-awareness, learning strategies, and stronger agency
* Fostered self-compassion and protected mental health
* Peer connection and role models were impactful
* Quotes: *“Learn how to work with your brain.”*
* *“…we all need community to flourish.”*

### Opportunities: UDL and learner agency

* Can we create safe, inclusive environments which foster belonging and community?
* Can we enable learners to build self-awareness and reflective capabilities?
* Can we provide explicit teaching on learning skills, tailored to differing ways of thinking?
* Can we provide visibly diverse/divergent role models?

### Opportunities: questioning professional identities

* Can we question assumptions about professionalism or implicit norms?
* Can we consider how professional identities are built and modelled?
* Can we consider how professionalism is enacted and assessed?

### What is a professional identity?

* *“It was deemed unprofessional to be myself. There is an expectation that neurodivergent traits = unsafe practice…”*
* *“I often felt I masked reflexively for safety, and consciously to avoid being "disruptive“ or “unprofessional“. I felt concerned that I might not be allowed to graduate if I was more authentic, such as not trying to make eye contact, leaving when I was overstimulated, and more visibly showed my experience of trauma in my body”*
* *“I felt like I needed to be a perfect, confident yet humble, pretty and well groomed, good banter, private school kid who the consultants would actually like so they would give good end of run assessments. Some of that wasn't within reach but the constant masking was to try to get as close as possible to someone they could like.”*

### Opportunities: reframing professional identities

* Professionalism remains important: but is there room for plurality?
* Professionalism centered around values
* Students should not have to choose between being “professional” and being themselves
* Education should *support* the development of complex, integrated identities

### Opportunities: building professional identities

* Do students have opportunities to build and enact a professional identity in a way that feels authentic to them?
* How do our learning and assessment tasks foster this?

### Messages to educators

* Recognise the diversity of student identities
* Consider how we enable students to positively explore, reshape or develop their identities as they learn
* Attend to normative expectations of identity and stereotypes or archetypes of professional identities in our educational cultures
* Think critically about how curriculum, assessment and culture foster professional identity formation

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* Participants of the study