



Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning (NESTL) Toolkit

----- Case Study 6





Case Study 6: Teaching Improvisationally | Professor Sonya Freeman Loftis

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Nothing on my syllabus is fixed—not the readings, not the grading scale, not the daily classroom activities. I regard teaching as an improvisational art. This is in part because for me, it must be so: the sensory issues that are caused by my autism vary in severity from day to day, and what is possible one day may not be possible the next. If my sensory pain is too severe on any given day, I may need to change my lesson plan on the spot—a lecture might transform into small group work, or large group work might need to be online work, or I might dream up a writing exercise as I walk into the classroom. As a tenured professor of English, I am afforded the luxury of teaching improvisationally, but institutions rarely allow that kind of flexibility for neurodivergent students and graduate assistants. Some of our neurodivergent students deal with variable pain and are living life in improvisational ways. We can support the improvisation of our neurodivergent students by remaining flexible, being open to compromise, and practicing radical compassion.

There are ways that we can accommodate neurodiverse improvisation in both physical space and academic work. The “classroom etiquette” section of my syllabi contains the statement “The rules of neurotypical decorum do not apply in this classroom.” I often have to explain to students what this means on the first day of class. It means that it is okay to engage in stimming during class; it is okay to stand in the back of the classroom during class; it is okay to pace in the back of the classroom during class; it is okay to eat and drink during class. This flexibility around the use of classroom space requires compromise and understanding from the instructor but also from other students. Sometimes stimming can be distracting—to peers and to this highly distractable professor, as well. Conflicting access needs require communication and compromise. The academic portion of my syllabus is

Tequally flexible. At midterm, I allow students to vote on collective changes to the syllabus. They often change the grading scale: opting for reading journals instead of quizzes, lowering the weight of exams, or bargaining for a participation grade. I am also open to working flexibly with individual students if they have particular requests or needs. That kind of flexibility is not possible with every subject matter or curriculum, but when it comes to English literature, I have found that a high level of individual variation is possible. Be open to having conversations with students about access needs that may vary from day to day, that may change the look and feeling of your classroom space, or that might even change the structure of your syllabus.

By emphasizing flexible and individualized inclusion, by prioritizing compromise and compassion, we can help to include students with varying levels of pain and challenge and support their disabled ingenuity in a world designed for the able-bodied and neurotypical. In my experience, it can lead to some wonderfully improvised classroom adventures.

For more detailed guidance, examples, activities, and case studies, see the full [NESTL toolkit](#).

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NESTL Toolkit