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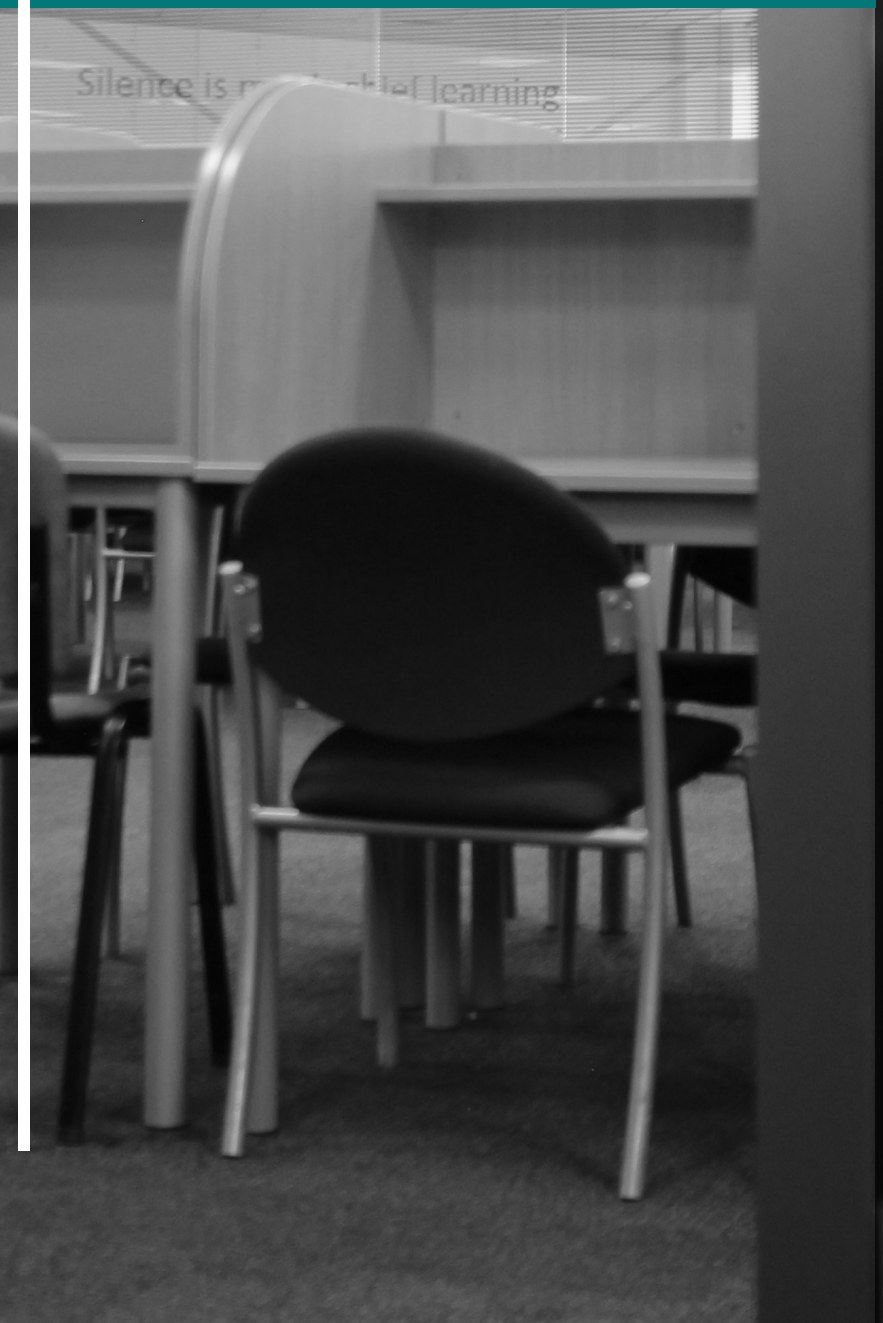

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Creating a neuroinclusive library – part one Charlie Parkinson – Library Learning Facilitator, Bradford College

Creating a neuroinclusive library: Part 1

Charlie Parkinson – Library Learning Facilitator, Bradford College

The saying ‘a canary in the coal mine’ refers to the caged birds that miners took with them when descending dark and dangerous shafts throughout the 20th century. If toxic gases – often odourless and clear – reached dangerous levels, the canaries would suddenly cease singing and drop dead. If your bird keeled over, you knew it was time to scarper, quick sharp, before succumbing to a similar fate. These days the “canary” has come to represent someone or something ‘whose sensitivity to adverse conditions makes [them] a useful early indicator of such conditions’ that ‘warns of the coming of a greater danger or trouble by a deterioration in its health or welfare’ (Wiktionary, 2024).

As an autistic person in full-time employment, I relate to those canaries – not just because I’m colourful, slightly skittish, and sometimes difficult to silence. Like sentinel species that have historically been used to detect conditions hazardous to human health, neurodivergent people are often some of the first to fall when working conditions deteriorate (Wikipedia, 2025b). Therefore, to create an inclusive, innovative and inspirational environment, it is necessary to consider the challenges faced by neurodivergent staff to discover ways of improving working environments for all.

How can we create a neuroinclusive environment and ensure equity for neurodivergent staff working in information services? This article is the first in a two-part series exploring this crucial question. In part one, we will define some sometimes-slippery terminology to clarify what it means to be 'neuroinclusive'. We will then delve into the theory of Universal Design and its potential benefits for neurodivergent employees and their supporters. Finally, we will provide an overview of sensory processing differences and discuss common barriers to accessing reasonable adjustments.

Part two, to be published in the Spring issue of CoLRiC Impact, will detail various sensory processing differences and their impact on individuals. It will also offer practical suggestions for achieving neuroinclusivity in the workplace.

Throughout both articles, I draw on my lived experience of being an autistic Library Learning Facilitator, but I will touch on other forms of neurodivergence at times. Please note that any personal experiences of neurodivergence that I describe are just that; each neurodivergent individual perceives the world uniquely. I hope to discourage baseless assumptions, generalisations and stereotypes.

Hitting a nerve

The last three decades have seen the coinage and propagation of several terms prefixed by neuro-. The precise meaning of the terms 'Neurotypical', 'Neurotype', 'Neurodivergent', and 'Neurodiverse' is a frequent source of confusion in casual conversation, inclusivity training sessions, and on social media platforms. In my experience, words are incredibly important to some people – particularly a certain autistic subset. To people like me, words carry much more weight than tone, gesture, or positive vibes, so let's get to the etymological root of the matter…

The prefix 'neuro-' stems from the Ancient Greek word 'νεῦρον', meaning 'sinew' or 'cord'; we use it today to refer to nerves or the nervous system (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). Words beginning with 'neuro-' tend to describe aspects of brain and nervous system function – the ways we are wired and how we respond to sensory stimuli. Australian sociologist, Judy Singer, is credited with coining the term 'neurodivergent', which she first used in her thesis, documenting the emergence of a new "disability and social movement" in 1998 (Lutz, 2023). Because it is important to consider what some are said to be diverging from, let's start with a related term that is often, misleadingly, thought of as the flip side of the coin.

At the time of writing, the term 'neurotypical' (short for 'neurologically typical') is used to describe the majority group that expresses themselves in ways that are seen as the societal "norm". The "neurotypical" brain functions, and processes information, in a way that society has come to expect. It was a term said to have been coined by neurodiversity advocates in the mid-1990s (Timberlake, 2019).

In contrast, 'neurodivergent' describes the minority group that deviates neurologically from said "norm"; people who have brains that work in alternative ways. Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and Dyspraxia, or Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) – are considered the most common types and are often categorised under the umbrella term of 'Neurodivergent'. However, some people may prefer that these neurotypes are considered separately. Other examples of how brains can process information differently include cognitive functioning difficulties or executive dysfunction, Dysgraphia, Misophonia, slow processing speed, Speech Disfluency, and Tourette's Syndrome (Cambridge University Hospitals, n.d).

The current estimate for the frequency of neurodivergence in the UK is 1 in 7, accounting for more than 15% of people (Every mind at work, 2021). Although neurodivergence is classed as a disability, not all neurodivergent folk identify as disabled, though we may need varying amounts of support at different times to live in a neurotypical society (NHS England, n.d).

According to the Labour Research Department, in the UK, 56% of diagnosed neurodivergent people are in full-time employment (Labour Research Department, 2024). However, the actual number is likely to be higher because the percentage only includes those who have disclosed an official diagnosis to their employer (Easby-Robinson, 2024).

On top of this, according to post-doctoral researcher Elizabeth O'Nions (UCL Psychology & Language Sciences), most autistic adults in England are undiagnosed (UCL News, 2023). Therefore, it is likely that you already work alongside some neurodivergent colleagues – whether or not you – or they – know it, or wish to use that label.

Your 'neurotype' is the way your brain works; it is unique to you – like your iris pattern. Because there are many varieties of neurotype – from all forms of neurotypical brain through to a growing number of neurodivergent categories – as a global collective, humans can be described as 'neurodiverse'. Judy Singer, inspired by the intricate web of interdependent ecosystems, asked: "Why not propose that just as biodiversity is essential to ecosystem stability, so neurodiversity may be essential for cultural stability?" (Lutz, 2023)

Creating a neuroinclusive environment, therefore, means fostering an organisation-wide ethos and habitat that welcomes, enables and celebrates every sort of human brain.

Workplace environment: Universal Design

In October 2024, the Neurodivergent Library and Information Staff Network (NLISN) – a peer support network for neurodivergent staff in the Library, Information and Knowledge sector in the UK and Ireland – hosted a conference with the tongue-in-cheek title: *Leading the Library's Neurotypicals: Neurodivergent viewpoints!* In a presentation entitled *Getting What You Need: Reasonable Adjustments,* a Librarian from Sheffield Hallam University discussed the concept of 'Universal Design', which was coined by the American architect, Ronald L. Mace in the 1970s. Mace defined Universal Design as 'Simply a way of designing a building or facility at little or no extra cost so it is both attractive and functional for all people disabled or not' (Mace, 1985).

To varying degrees, we are all affected by the built environments we inhabit in terms of our mobility, safety and ability to function, but a mismatch between the built environment and functional ability can cause significant problems for particular groups of people, such as those with physical disabilities, neurological differences or age-related health issues. The most vulnerable or sensitive amongst us – like the canaries – are the first to experience problems.

In an ideal world, every building would be built according to the principles of Universal Design. It must be said that, due to occasionally competing access needs, Universal Design does not address every need for every person in every situation. For example, in the same space, there might be an individual who requires low lighting to avoid sensory overload or migraines alongside a person who needs brighter lighting in order to see an interpreter or read documents (Independence Australia Group, n.d). Despite being unable to simultaneously meet everyone's every need, it would still be advantageous to a wider number of people if we constructed – or adapted – environments with accessibility in mind.

The Equality Act 2010 Code of Practice states that service providers 'should not wait until a disabled person wants to use a service that they provide before they give consideration to their duty to make reasonable adjustments. They should anticipate the requirements of disabled people and the adjustments that may have to be made for them' (EHCR, 2021). Although most workplaces have now been adapted to cater for those with physical disabilities – for example, by providing lifts, ramps and disabled toilets – many are lagging behind when it comes to neuroinclusivity.

It was no surprise to me that lively discussion erupted amongst the NLISN conference attendees following the aforementioned presentation. Many (but certainly not all) challenges faced by neurodivergent people in the workplace stem from issues with the environment due to sensory processing differences. Processing everyday sensory information, such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures, can pose problems. Senses may be over, or under-sensitive – or both at different times – which can affect how a person feels and acts (National Autism Society, 2020). Environmental factors that seem inconsequential to anyone with a typically-functioning nervous system, may prove incapacitating to the neurodivergent. I'm referring to such things as fluorescent lighting, fans, open-plan buildings, narrow corridors, bright screens, strobing sunlight, whirring processors, rough upholstery, hand-dryers, patterned carpet or tiles... To one person, these things are trivial, mildly irritating at worst; to anyone in possession of a differently-functioning – or dysregulated – nervous system, a journey into the office can feel like venturing into a war zone.

Numerous neurodivergent people experience sensory processing differences, but some so-called neurotypicals may too. These differences can be advantageous. For example, people with hyper-sensitivity to visual stimulus may be adept at recognising, or even replicating, patterns; those hypersensitive to sound could be highly-skilled at identifying nuances in musical arrangements. However, frequently, neurodivergent people report experiencing intense difficulties due to their sensory processing differences – particularly within built environments. These differences may be disabling – leading to cycles of burnout, mental health crises, long-term unemployment, and social isolation.

What are sensory processing differences?

One of the greatest challenges I experience in the workplace is managing sensory overload. This is when the brain receives different types of information simultaneously and is unable to filter out the irrelevant data. The National Autistic Society explains that 'too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and possibly physical pain. This can result in withdrawal, distressed behaviour or meltdowns' (National Autism Society, 2020). Whereas neurotypical brains are usually able to prioritise input so as to focus attention on what is likely to be important, neurodivergent brains may perceive all signals received by the body regardless of significance.

Imagine being constantly aware of – and distracted by – every tiny sound, movement, light, colour, and texture.

Right now, I'm aware of the sounds of traffic, the perpetual buzz of electricity, a conversation taking place in a different room; I'm annoyed by the movements of people wandering in and out of my peripheral vision, a fly walking across the window; I feel the sensation of different materials against my skin, a scratchy tag, a tight waistband; I'm conscious of my stomach digesting food; I smell the aftershave and body odour of whoever was in this room before me combined with the scent of frying food from the cafeteria. My attention is being drawn in multiple directions, frequently triggering sudden-onset headaches and migraines; regularly resulting in emotional dysregulation. It's overwhelming, uncomfortable and exhausting. When most heightened, it's like being trapped inside the pages of Finnegans Wake.

The feeling of being inundated and invaded by sensory stimuli may be exacerbated if the neurodivergent person is already suffering from stress, a mental health condition, co-occurring neurodivergence (e.g., Autism + ADHD + OCD), or if their basic needs have not been met. For example, if they have not had enough sleep, are hungry / thirsty, too hot / cold, or if they need to use the toilet, they may be more prone to experiencing overload.

Barriers to accessing reasonable adjustments

What prevents people from accessing the workplace adjustments they are legally entitled to? One of the greatest barriers to accessing adjustments is the prevalence of ableist attitudes in society. Because sensory processing differences are subjective, some people who have never experienced such challenges are unaware of the issues faced by those who do, and might find them hard to believe, or empathise with. Even after everyone has attended a mandatory one-hour training session about neurodivergence, not all are compassionate to those who live with invisible differences and disabilities; workers' discomfort may be minimised or ignored, with even quick-fixes considered inconvenient. Ableist, or disableist, language may be used without a second thought (Novic, 2021).

Furthermore, due to systemic ableism, policies and procedures can impede equity. Without significant systemic change, an individual's hard-fought – and occasionally won – battles may amount to little beyond personal conflict-resolution; in a year's time, another employee could be subjected to the same exhausting process from scratch.

However, one of the thorniest issues to contend with for a neurodivergent person (especially those diagnosed, or self-diagnosed, in adulthood) is internalised ableism. This occurs when a person experiencing disability has absorbed prejudiced attitudes. This may lead to the individual ignoring, or playing down, their own distress and pain to avoid being seen as 'fussy' or 'annoying' or 'weird' (Enhance the UK, 2024).

Conclusion

Creating a neuroinclusive environment will require much more than the provision of gimmicky toys and one-off training sessions. Neuroinclusivity can only be achieved in an organisation if all members of staff have awareness, understanding of, and empathy for *all* neurotypes. To clarify, this means that everyone – whether they identify as neurotypical, neurodivergent, or other – consciously endeavours to understand, care for, and support each other without judgment.

The theory of Universal Design can be used to inform the adaptation of existing workplace environments to achieve maximum accessibility for all neurotypes, to construct more accessible spaces in the future, and also to influence the creation of policies, procedures and curriculums within colleges and learning resource centres.

The focus of part two of this series will be the impact of specific sensory processing differences on the individual – with a variety of practical suggestions provided for supporting those experiencing sensory sensitivity. Finally, recommendations for tackling ableism (external and internal) will be made. In the meantime, may all your canaries cheep cheerfully.

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