

Towards a Neuro-Inclusive Assessment of Presentation Skills: Empowering Authentic Presenters

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Exclusively for Everyone

Inclusivity in Education

Edited by

Gerwin van der Laan, Tessa Leesen and Gil Keppens



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08. Towards a neuro-inclusive assessment of presentation skills: Empowering authentic presenters

Sinsemilla Blokvoort, Yvette Drissen & Hanne Jacobs

Abstract

Presentation skills are often considered important academic and transferable skills. Hence, many academic programs include acquiring such skills as one of their intended learning outcomes. However, existing research indicates that how these skills are typically assessed might impose an unfair burden on neurodivergent students, even when these students – like others – see the importance and value of the assessment of presentation skills.¹

In this paper, we offer various suggestions concerning how to teach, practice, and assess presentation skills in a way that aims to be more neuro-inclusive. These suggestions are based on the ongoing development of a neuro-inclusive innovation for a course in the Bachelor program of Philosophy at Tilburg University. Our innovation seeks to redesign both the learning trajectory for practicing presentation skills and the assessment of these skills. While the innovation is informed by the growing literature on neuro-inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming education practices,² its benefits may extend beyond neurodivergent students to improve the learning experience for all students.

Our paper first provides background on neurodivergent students, neuro-inclusion in higher education, and the universal design for learning approach, which aims to promote learner agency and remove barriers to learning by reshaping the educational design.³ We then introduce the context that motivated us to implement this particular innovation (the *why*) and describe the process involved (the *how*). Subsequently, we present some of the ways in which we aim to make the assessment of presentation skills more neuro-inclusive (the *what*). Our ultimate goal is to contribute to building a more neuro-inclusive and less ableist university and promote better educational practices overall.

Keywords: neuro-inclusion; neurodiversity; neuro-inclusive education; presentation skills; universal design for learning

¹ Hand (2023), 1608.

² In particular, Dwyer *et al.* (2023); Spaeth and Pearson (2023); Gillespie-Lynch *et al.* (2017).

³ CAST (2024).

1. Neurodiversity and Inclusion in Higher Education

Neurodivergent students are those who learn and thrive academically in ways that might be different from what is typically expected.⁴ Neurodivergence is generally understood as an umbrella term used to describe dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, dyscalculia, autism, and Tourette's,⁵ although some broader understandings of the term also include chronic mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression,⁶ PTSD, and head injury.⁷ In recent decades, we have seen an increase in institutional commitments to implement measures to make education more accessible and inclusive;⁸ and the number of neurodivergent students attending universities in the Netherlands and worldwide has risen as well.⁹ At Tilburg University, neurodivergent students are considered part of the larger group of 1,600 students with a disability (Tilburg University, n.d.).

While neurodivergent students can thrive in a higher education context,¹⁰ they might face distinct challenges, ranging from universities not providing an environment in which they can thrive¹¹ to questionable presuppositions in teaching and assessment practices about the “typical” student.¹² One existing attempt to make education more accessible to neurodivergent students relies on accommodations made for individual students, such as extended testing time or access to recordings of lectures. However, due to limitations on accommodations (such as requiring documentation or self-advocacy), fear of stigmatization, and the existence of highly tailored needs, these accommodations might not succeed in making higher education sufficiently accessible.¹³ Moreover, as Vandenbussche *et al.* (2024, 4) highlight, providing

⁴ Spaeth and Pearson (2023), 111 and Hamilton and Petty (2023), 3.

⁵ Clouder *et al.* (2020), 757.

⁶ Dwyer (2022), 78-9.

⁷ Spaeth and Pearson (2023), 110.

⁸ This is evidenced by the great number of countries that signed the 2016 UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (UN, n.d.-a), as well as the adoption of the 2021-2030 EU Strategy for rights of persons with disabilities (European Parliament, 2021; Eur-Lex, 2021). For instance, since the Netherlands signed (2007) and ratified (2016) the UN Convention (UN, n.d.-b), the country has to actively work on making society and its institutions more inclusive, including its educational institutions (ECIO, n.d.; UN, n.d.-c). Additionally, The Dutch Equal Treatment of Disabled and Chronically Ill People Act states that discrimination based on disability or chronic illness is forbidden and requires institutions such as universities to make effective arrangements to increase their accessibility (Wettenbank, 2020).

⁹ See Bakker *et al.* (2019) on the increase of enrolment by autistic students in higher education. Pino and Mortari (2014) provide a narrative synthesis of studies about students with dyslexia.

¹⁰ See Bakker *et al.* (2023) for study success of autistic students in the Netherlands.

¹¹ See Clouder *et al.* (2020, 768-770) for a narrative synthesis of research that focuses on the experience of neurodivergent students and see Dwyer *et al.* (2023) for concrete recommendations by and for neurodivergent students. Robertson and Ne'eman (2008) articulate these challenges from their own autistic perspective. Tai *et al.* (2023a, 410) report on students experiencing shame regarding requesting accommodations in general.

¹² See in particular Spaeth and Person (2023, 109); see also Vandenbussche *et al.* (2024).

¹³ See Dwyer *et al.* (2023, 6-8) for ways to overcome such restrictions by improving their accessibility, loosening the requirements on documentation, and recognizing the scope and variety of accommodations. See Nieminen (2023), who focuses on the experience of disabled students' experiences of assessment accommodations.

accommodations can even be considered an ableist practice, in which a disability is perceived as inherently flawed, while dominant pedagogies that might benefit (neuro)typical students go unquestioned. As Nieminen (2022, 65) has argued, accommodations are often seen on a par with medical treatment, and disability as something in need of fixing, treating, or curing.¹⁴

With an eye towards promoting neuro-inclusion, there is a growing body of literature on neuro-inclusive pedagogies,¹⁵ learning environments for neurodivergent student flourishing,¹⁶ strategies for promoting neurodivergence acceptance¹⁷ and neuro-inclusive practices on campuses,¹⁸ as well as inclusive assessment methods.¹⁹ Advocates of neuro-inclusive higher education have also promoted an educational design that is maximally accessible and inclusive according to the principles of universal design for learning (UDL).²⁰ UDL is a framework meant to foster an optimal learning environment for all students, based on the assumption that barriers to learning are in the *design of the environment*, not in the students themselves. Its goal is to encourage learner agency, understood as “the capacity to actively participate in making choices in service of learning goals” (CAST, 2024). Importantly, the design is to be understood – as argued by Dolmage (2007, chap. 4) – as a verb or activity, not only a noun or set of specifications. Accordingly, the design is an activity aimed towards a future that values disabilities and differences in minded embodiment rather than aiming to eradicate or fix them. In particular, Dolmage (2017, 124) interprets the three principles of UDL as “moves,” stating that: “The three major ‘moves’ of UDL mandate that there be multiple means of student engagement (why students learn), multiple means of delivering content (what students learn), and multiple ways for students to express themselves and act (how students learn)” (124).

In our innovation of how we assess presentation skills, we primarily worked along the third move, namely to design education such that it makes space (now and in the future) for different ways in which students express themselves and what they have learned, regardless of whether a student is blind, has ADHD, stutters, or comes from a minority cultural and/or working-class background. For other assignments, this might entail students being given the opportunity to present their work in several ways;

¹⁴ Criticisms on academic ableism resonate strongly with criticisms on the medical model of disability as they have been formulated within the neurodiversity movement. See Bertilsdotter *et al.* 2020 as well as Pellicano and Den Houting (2022) for a discussion of this movement and the new paradigm of critical neurodiversity studies is has ushered.

¹⁵ Friedman and Nash-Luckenbach (2023) advocate for student-centered (heutagogical) approach. Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) argue for an anti-ableist pedagogy, and Hamilton and Petty (2023) argue for a compassionate pedagogy for neurodiversity in higher education.

¹⁶ See Spaeth and Pearson (2023, 112-117) for concrete recommendations.

¹⁷ See Wilson and Dallman (2024).

¹⁸ See Dwyer *et al.* (2023).

¹⁹ For a host of concrete proposals with regard to assessment, see Nieminen (2024). Tai *et al.* (2023a) provide insights into students' experiences of inclusive assessment.

²⁰ See Levy (2023) for a general description of this approach. Spaeth and Pearson (2023) – among others – advocate for adopting this approach for neurodivergent students.

for instance, written, through a live presentation or a recording,²¹ by using assistive technologies,²² or in a different manner altogether (perhaps a comic). However, insofar as the assignment for the course in question is a presentation, adopting a UDL approach required an interrogation of (neuro-)normative assumptions in the assignment and assessment itself. Accordingly, what does the supposed need to make eye contact or not talk in a monotonous voice (as they typically appear in the assessment rubric of presentation skills) tell us about the normative presuppositions of successful communication and communicators? In line with UDL's move of multiple means of action and expression, all students should be given the tools and opportunities to develop themselves as presenters and philosophers in a way that does not reflect narrow, neurotypical expectations of successful communication.

In what follows, we first outline the context in which we – as students and educators – felt the need to change how we teach and assess presentation skills. Subsequently, we present the outlines of the new assignment and assessment that followed this process, which will be implemented in 2025. We would like to add that we see this project as an ongoing commitment to a neuro-inclusive future at Tilburg University and that our innovation was developed in a particular geographical and disciplinary context together with a group of neurodivergent students. As such, we are not proposing a template for assessing presentation skills for others to implement but instead we want to inspire others to innovate in their own particular locations.

2. The Why and How of our Neuro-Inclusive Innovation

We developed our innovation for the Contemporary Social and Political Philosophy course, which is a first-year course in the Bachelor Program of Philosophy at Tilburg University. In the original setup, each student was required to give a 30-minute presentation in front of the classroom and attend the other students' presentations. Presentations were graded summatively with a rubric. The assignment counted for 30 percent of the final grade, although students needed to have a minimum score of 5.5 out of 10 to pass the course, which in turn could have an impact on them being able to continue their studies after the first year (due to binding study advice requirements in the Netherlands). The setup provided the students with few opportunities to practice these skills in advance. In fact, after an information session on the rubric and further expectations, it was up to the students to undertake the one-off, high-stakes presentation of a complex primary philosophical text.

2.1. The Why

Several students found giving the presentation a significant challenge. Some expressed their concerns to the teacher and wondered whether they would be penalized for speaking with a monotonous voice, stuttering, having a twitchy eye

(both often aggravated by being nervous), or taking a breathing break in case of feeling overwhelmed. These and other concerns that students articulated strongly corresponded with some of the concerns signaled in the literature on presentation skills from the perspective of neurodivergent students.²³

Recognizing these challenges, we – the academic director and the teacher of the course – critically reviewed the assessment criteria and the school-wide assessment handbook. Both documents place a strong emphasis on traditional delivery styles, including maintaining eye contact, speaking at a moderate tempo, effectively using body language, articulating sentences clearly, and demonstrating enthusiasm. While these elements are often considered hallmarks of a “good” presentation, research by Hand (2023) highlights potential biases embedded in exactly such criteria, which might disadvantage neurodivergent students: “It may be the case that the ‘traditional’ requirements of presenters and what are typically considered ‘good presentation skills’ (e.g., eye contact with audience, confidence, well-paced fluent verbalisations; smooth and well-timed gestures) reflect unfair biases against neurodivergent individuals who may not be able to demonstrate these behaviors” (1603). Thus, while Hand's (2023) research highlights that conventional expectations for presentations might be particularly challenging for neurodivergent individuals, these expectations appeared embedded in the existing criteria at our institution. This emphasis on stereotypically “good” presentation skills also reflects an underlying assumption of neurotypicality as the standard, and precludes the recognition of diverse successful communication and presentation styles and – more specifically – more neuro-inclusive standards of communication.

Following our realization that we needed to change how we teach and assess presentation skills, our next steps were to increase staff awareness and develop a more neuro-inclusive approach to practicing and assessing presentation skills with input from neurodivergent students. In the upcoming (sub-)sections, we will describe the process (section 2.2) and the preliminary outcome of this process (section 3).

2.2. The How

Tilburg University already provides several facilities for people with disabilities. While there is no explicit mention of “neurodivergence,” their use of “disability” includes dyslexia, AD(H)D, autism, mental health difficulties, as well as physical disabilities, motor impairments, visual disabilities, hearing impairments, complaints to arms, neck and/or shoulders (CANS), and chronic diseases. Support for people with disabilities typically includes following a modified study schedule (such that the student is given more time to complete their studies), postponement of the binding study advice (BSA), financial support, and special arrangements. In order to receive a special arrangement, students have to submit evidence of their condition, e.g. a medical

²³ In particular, the studies by Spaeth and Pearson (2023, 115), who mention this as an example, and Hand (2023) who addresses this as an area of concern for neuro-inclusive education.

²¹ Levey (2023, 479-480) and Spaeth and Pearson (2023, 115).

²² However, see van Grunsven and Roesser (2021) on the risk of ableism in AAC technology.

certificate or supporting documentation in the form of a statement from a general practitioner, psychologist or psychiatrist, social worker, or a lawyer. The documentation is then reviewed by the dean of students, who decides for which accommodations the student in question is eligible, e.g. adjustment of deadlines, opting for an individual instead of a group assignment, extra time during written exams, recording the lecture if not already available, exemption from the obligation to be present during practice (Tilburg University, n.d.). While these forms of support may certainly be needed in a university setting, they mostly fit within the accommodations model mentioned above. A neuro-inclusive approach – while not in principle incompatible with accommodations – would aim to make room for various modes of learning and expression. In this case, given that the learning goal consisted in the acquisition of a skill, this meant to allow for different ways of embodying and expressing the skill of effectively communicating content by way of a presentation.²⁴ So, for example, we replaced one of the original assessment criteria “the student interacts non-verbally with the audience in an appropriate manner (eye contact, posture)” with a broader and more flexible “the student interacts non-verbally with the audience in a way that facilitates their presentation,” thereby giving students the freedom to fulfill this criterion in their own authentic way. A blind student, a neurodivergent student, and a student in a wheelchair will all be able to realize and embody this differently (e.g., sitting or holding an object may facilitate me as a presenter).

The development of our neuro-inclusive approach to assessing presentation skills was a collaborative effort led by an academic director, a teacher, and a student assistant paid by a TSHD Innovation grant. We raised awareness and actively gathered input from students, staff, and (other) experts to create a foundation of understanding and support for a more neuro-inclusive way of assessing presentation skills. We were supported by assessment specialists and specialists in educational innovation, and institutionally encouraged by the vice-dean, head of department, study advisor, students, and colleagues.

Scholars recommend engaging neurodivergent students in shaping the direction and priorities of neuro-inclusive initiatives. For instance, this includes active participation in decision-making, contributing to the content, and being involved in discussions and evaluations throughout the process.²⁵ Research likewise highlights the importance of the student perspective in designing inclusive assessment practices more generally.²⁶ We took this to heart by organizing a focus group with neurodivergent students from the Philosophy Bachelor’s program to gather input for the innovation. The student assistant took the lead in this. Students were invited to join the focus group through

²⁴ The existing articulation of the learning goal (“The student can give a clear presentation in an academic style that relates to but also goes beyond the content of the lectures”) is compatible with a plurality of effective presentation styles, though the existing grading criteria were less so.

²⁵ See Wilson and Dallman (2024, 2).

²⁶ See Tai *et al.* (2023a).

an invitation on the BA program pages. While the focus group was not restricted to neurodivergent students and students were not asked to disclose this information, the invitation encouraged neurodivergent students to participate. In line with Wilson and Dallman’s (2024) inclusion principle, we prioritized accessible participation by inviting students to contribute in multiple ways. Apart from the focus group, we also offered the options for individual interviews and written responses so that students could choose the format with which they felt most comfortable.

To raise awareness and reduce prejudice and stigma towards neurodivergent people and gain further teacher input,²⁷ we collaborated with the Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Committee of the Philosophy Department and organized two information and discussion sessions. During the first session, philosophers who are experts on the topic of neurodiversity (including a neurodivergent researcher) were invited to provide some theoretical background and practical insights regarding neurodiversity. During the second session, the academic director and teacher introduced the neuro-inclusive innovation in broad outlines – including some empirical research and information on UDL – to their colleagues. This occasion provided a valuable opportunity to gauge teacher buy-in and gather feedback. At the school level, the project was introduced to other academic directors and other lecturers on several occasions.

3. Preliminary Outcome: The What

After consulting our students from the focus group, assessment specialists, peers, as well as the literature,²⁸ we designed what we hope will be a more neuro-inclusive assignment and assessment of presentation skills. The assignment now focuses on progressive presentation skill development. Instead of a single, high-stakes presentation, students practice, reflect, and improve their presentation skills through a number of assignments throughout the semester, leading up to a final presentation. This allows them to identify and build on their strengths, work on areas for improvement, and develop their own presentation style. This development is documented through a portfolio submitted at the end of the semester in which students show how they practiced, grew, and developed their own authentic presentation style. The portfolio is divided into four modules, each comprising one to two assignments for students to complete, with each module starting with a tutorial by the instructor. For example, students will be asked to locate, discuss, and reflect on an online presentation they find particularly successful, and are invited to question the merits and demerits of typical hallmarks of “good” presentation skills (such as, for example tone of voice and non-verbal gestures). They will also be asked to reflect on their own presentation style

²⁷ As recommended by Dwyer *et al.* (2023).

²⁸ The vast literature on scaffolded learning, for instance, highlights the importance of breaking the learning (of a skill) into chunks, where the teacher initially provides more support and tools while gradually removing these ‘scaffolds’ until the students are able to perform the skill on their own (e.g. Belland, (2013); Davis, (2015); Gonulal and Loewen (2018); Gunawardena (2020, 44-45)).

– including strengths and weaknesses – with a small group of peers, and they will be afforded opportunities to practice a short presentation in a low-stakes environment. These assignments will allow the students to work towards a final presentation given to a small number of peers that will be recorded and included in the portfolio. By emphasizing the development of authentic presentation skills, the assessment criteria are reimagined to prioritize the presenter’s ability to effectively convey their message in a manner that works for them. In turn, reflecting on different successful presentation styles and normative assumptions also aim to make those listening open to different such styles. The assignments and tutorials pertaining to the progressive development of presentation skills run in tandem with lectures of the Contemporary Social and Political Philosophy course, the content of which will also be used in some of the assignments.²⁹

At the end of the course, the teacher will review the portfolio and assign an overall grade. Each module is assessed using a scale of insufficient, sufficient, good, or excellent, with the final module carrying more weight than the initial ones. This structure is designed to gradually increase complexity and challenge across the modules. The portfolio assignment will be implemented for the first time in the second semester of 2024–2025 and will be adjusted based on feedback from the instructor, students, and assessment specialists.

The assignment framework and the assignments themselves are informed by the following guiding principles:

Authentic Assessment

Through the portfolio approach and the specific scaffolded assignments, we aim for an assessment of presentation skills that is authentic. Authentic assessment emphasizes the design of tasks that reflect real-life situations and challenges. Specifically, by supporting students in developing their ways of being and interacting with others, authentic assessment becomes a transformative process that prepares them to navigate and contribute to a changing world.³⁰ However, as Nieminen (2022, 68) suggests, authentic assessment is also about redefining our futures, making assessment a way to bring about change, i.e. authentic assessment has an advocacy role. Thus, authentic assessment is not only about preparing students for the future but also about shaping and improving that future. Concretely, one of the assignments in the portfolio now includes a critical reflection on communication as a two-way street. We believe that it is important for students to recognize and appreciate the different ways their peers communicate, interact, and learn. This includes having students think about and assess how inclusive and accessible their communication is for different listeners and discussion partners. The self-reflection in which students exercise to

²⁹ For those readers who would like access to the instructions and assessment criteria for these assignments and the portfolio, please feel free to contact the authors.

³⁰ See Vu and Dall’Alba (2014, 779) and Tai *et al.* (2023b, 490-491).

critically think about their communication style during interactions/conversations is guided by questions such as: How would you describe your own communication style and attitude in conversations? How do you consider the reactions and needs of others during interactions? Do you think your tone, attitude, and way of speaking create a space where others feel comfortable contributing to the conversation? What specific aspects would you like to improve to make your communication more effective and inclusive? This reflective exercise is a small but meaningful step towards a future where people do not have to follow one standard way of presenting but can instead anticipate the diverse needs of their audiences.

Students as Co-Creators

The portfolio assignment draws on students as co-creators insofar as part of the assignment is to articulate individualized learning goals that align with the set assessment criteria of the presentation, such as structure of the presentation, use of aides, and delivery. Concretely, students will start their portfolio by formulating personalized learning goals and actionable steps to improve their presentation skills in these different respects. Hence, students need to think about what they are already good at and figure out specific areas in which they would like to improve. By choosing their goals, each student can focus on what they need to practice most throughout the process. For instance, one student might want to feel more confident speaking in front of others, while another might focus on better managing their time. Through individualizing learning goals, students actively work with the teacher to design and guide their learning experiences.³¹ An important part of the “student-as-cocreator” method is helping students to become more aware of their own thinking and learning (metacognitive awareness). This awareness lets students think about how they learn, the strategies they use, and how they are progressing.³² To support this, we use self-reflective assignments that encourage students to step back and think critically about their learning process and results. This helps students to become active learners instead of passive participants.

Nieminen (2022, 69) highlights that when designing authentic assessment for inclusion, it is important to create a “productive space” where students can negotiate quality criteria and question ableist assumptions. Concretely, in the first assignment of the portfolio, students will be asked to articulate what a given assessment criterion (e.g., delivery style) on the rubric means for them in light of their strengths and goals for improvement. As these individualized learning goals will be reflected on and discussed with peers, what a good delivery style amounts to concretely can be differentiated and questioned in light of problematic presuppositions. This again would make for a productive space to question problematic assumptions that one might have about what is required for a presentation to succeed and might lead to a more pluralistic conception of presentation success.

³¹ Bovill *et al.* (2011, 134).

³² Bovill *et al.* (2011, 138).

Internal Feedback

Authentic assessment helps students to learn how to recognize and define what makes a good performance.³³ To achieve this, we include several analysis assignments in the portfolio to help students to better understand what *they* consider a good performance. For example, one assignment asks students to choose and analyze an inspiring speaker and identify the key factors that make the speaker authentic and effective. Students will also consider the strengths and weaknesses of the speaker's presentation style and consider how these affect how the content is delivered and what the impact is. Another assignment involves analyzing power dynamics in interactions, such as between a speaker and an audience or between an interviewer and an interviewee.

These assignments encourage students to compare their presentation techniques with those of exemplary speakers. This reflective process generates what Nicol (2020) describes as "internal feedback," in which students compare their existing understanding or performances with external references: here, the exemplary speaker's strategies and approaches. By doing this, students can critically reflect and make changes to their own goals, methods, or strategies based on the insights that they derive.³⁴ Thus, through this reflective comparison with an exemplar, students might revise their understanding of effective communication and develop new presentation strategies that align with their authentic style.

Peer Feedback and Self-Assessment

Peer feedback and self-assessment are important parts of the portfolio because they help students to reflect on their progress and take ownership of their learning process. Peer feedback allows students to compare – in a non-competitive way – their understanding and performance with others. This comparison helps students to notice different approaches, strategies, or common mistakes to improve their work. For example, when students review the work of their peers, they identify strengths and weaknesses, which generates internal feedback as they assess how these elements might apply to their own work.³⁵

Peer feedback and self-assessment are also important for developing evaluative judgment, which is the ability to make informed decisions about the quality of one's work and the work of others.³⁶ Traditional assessments do not always help students develop this skill because they depend too much on feedback from the teacher. This can cause problems in other real-life situations (such as in the workplace), where people must be able to independently assess their own and their co-workers' work.³⁷

³³ Villaroel *et al.* (2018, 845).

³⁴ Nicol (2020, 5).

³⁵ Nicol (2020, 9-10).

³⁶ Tai *et al.* (2018, 468).

³⁷ Nicola-Richmond *et al.* (2024); Baerman *et al.* (2022); Tai *et al.* (2018, 470).

Our approach aims to aid students in developing evaluative judgment by giving them structured peer feedback and self-assessment opportunities. However, we understand that some students might feel unsure without direct feedback from the teacher. They might worry about whether they are doing things correctly or have the skills to judge their or others' work. For instance, research³⁸ suggests that working with standards and talking about these with students might teach them about what quality work looks like. To address this in our course, we offer individual feedback from the teacher after each module for students who desire additional guidance. This ensures a balance between creating independence and providing the support needed to build confidence and competence in evaluative judgment.

UDL Principle

We designed the portfolio with the UDL principle of multiple means of action and expression. This principle allows students to show their progress in different ways and recognizes that students have different abilities, preferences, and comfort levels when expressing their knowledge.³⁹ We implemented this principle as follows:

- Students are free to complete assignments and provide peer feedback in a way that best aligns with their strengths and preferences. While traditional written text is always an option, students might choose a different format, such as creating a video or vlog, recording a podcast or audio, or designing a creative visual piece.
- We offer flexibility in the structure and timing of group work. Groups are encouraged to determine their own meeting schedules, formats, and modes of collaboration. For example, they can choose to meet in person on campus (a designated time and space on campus will be accessible to groups on a weekly basis) or work remotely through online meetings and collaborative tools.
- We offer flexibility in how the final presentation is conducted. For example, students can present live on campus or give their presentation online, followed by a Q&A. Or they can send in a prerecorded video, which will then be discussed in real-time with peers to make sure the communication remains a two-way street.

Small Groups

Students will work in small groups to create a supportive, low-pressure space where they can practice and develop their skills. Working in small groups allows students to practice their presentation skills in a less intimidating setting and receive constructive feedback from peers. We hope that this will reduce anxiety about giving presentations. Moreover, when managed well, working in small groups can offer many benefits, such as self-development, interpersonal growth, peer support, and a sense of belonging.⁴⁰

³⁸ Nicola-Richmond *et al.* (2024, 299) and Tai *et al.* (2016, 669-670).

³⁹ Levey (2023, 479-480).

⁴⁰ See Cartney and Rouse (2006).

However, as Spaeth and Pearson (2023, 115) explain, group work might not work well for everyone. For example, neurodivergent students might find group work challenging due to differences in pacing, sensory sensitivities, the need to mask neurodivergent traits, or social pressure.

To make group work more inclusive and comfortable, teachers need to be aware of these challenges and handle group dynamics carefully. Spaeth and Pearson (2023, 115) suggest that setting clear expectations, assigning specific roles, and establishing “ground rules” for communication can help to mitigate potential issues and support neurodivergent students in navigating group interactions. We aim to achieve this during the tutorials in which the portfolio assignments are introduced. At the end of the semester, we will evaluate the portfolio assignments and how group work has helped students to achieve their goals and remain engaged. The course remains committed to flexibility and adapting through trial and error to create an inclusive learning environment in which all students can thrive.

4. Concluding Remarks

Our innovation will be put to the test in the second semester of the academic year of 2024-2025. While the renewed presentation skills assignment was carefully crafted, we will likely encounter some obstacles and limitations upon implementation. The lessons we learn from this will be used to further improve our innovation in the future.

One obstacle we anticipate are hiccups in the process of rolling out the different portfolio assignments for the first time.⁴¹ On paper, the different sub-assignments are nicely scaffolded, but we will undoubtedly encounter ways in which we can finetune the various subcomponents of the portfolio even more. To deal with this obstacle, we think it is important to communicate transparently towards students and invite them to give feedback throughout the course on what works and does not work. Another option would be to reach out to our focus group again.

A limitation of our innovation is that it is designed with a rather small group (between 30 and 40 students) in mind. It is expected that it will be easier for the teacher to manage classroom discussions on sensitive topics like power imbalances (between neurotypical and neurodivergent people) in smaller settings. The current set-up does allow for larger groups of students to work on their presentation skills portfolio due to the relatively big autonomy of the small sub-groups in which they work on their assignments. However, in large groups it remains equally if not more important to build a “productive space” in which students challenge rather than reproduce the status-quo, whilst fostering an environment where everyone can safely practice their skills.

⁴¹ We will use a platform called ‘FeedbackFruits’ for the first time.

While the innovation was developed with neuro-inclusion in mind, we hope that the renewed assignment and assessment design promotes more inclusive education overall and would benefit all students taking the course.⁴² By outlining the concrete steps that we took, the literature consulted, and the product developed, we hope to inspire others to innovate their own educational practices.

⁴² As inclusive assessment bears strong resemblance to good assessment, as Tai *et al.* (2023b) indicate.

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