

WE LEARN

# LEARNING WHEN TO SHUT UP

**Shifting learning and development design  
from engagement to enfranchisement**



As learning designers, we sometimes fall into the trap of talking a lot about our ideas and spending relatively little time listening to the experiences of others. Sometimes you just need to shut up.



The contemporary world of work is increasingly invested in bringing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives to bear on the various facets of working life. This is particularly apparent in learning and development circles, where upskilling and professional development are seen as a ready means of enfranchising otherwise marginalized populations.

Employees who identify as neurodiverse are among those seeking, but not always achieving, greater representation in the professional landscape. A relatively recent term, neurodiversity is the perspective that neurological differences, rather than being “defects,” are normal variations in the development of the brain. Those who identify as neurodivergent, a nonmedical designation but one nevertheless resonant with many within the identity and ally community, see themselves not so much as suffering from a disorder, but as experiencing the world through a different lens that naturally comes with its own advantages and challenges.

Learning and development initiatives designed for neurodiverse learners attempt to create programs that capitalize on these advantages and compensate for the challenges. In doing so, professional L&D makes important strides toward a world in which a professional skill set is equitably accessible.

However, despite their designers’ best intentions, these initiatives too often fall short. Maybe the interface design presents unintended barriers. Perhaps your carefully curated content fails to capture and retain attention. Programs launched with the highest expectations go unused and ultimately fizzle out, relegated to the dustbin along with so many other employee experience initiatives.

# SHIFTING THE DESIGN PARADIGM: ENGAGEMENT TO ENFRANCHISEMENT

So, how do you avoid this Christmas yet to come? How can you design through a lens of neurodiversity in order to create learning opportunities that excite and inspire everyone, driving excellent outcomes for those within the neurodiverse community and without? That's a heck of a question. It's also one we've spent a lot of time thinking about.

## HERE'S OUR ADVICE: ASK THE EXPERTS.

In recent years, learning and development leaders and program designers have made considerable strides toward *engaging* target audiences in the creation of the products, solutions, and services they use. These creators are increasingly taking important steps to incorporate neurodiverse perspectives in the design process.

### These include:

- Leveraging perspectives by **interviewing neurodiverse stakeholders** to inform the initial design
- Validating design choices through **product testing with neurodiverse users** prior to launch
- **Messaging testing with neurodiverse cohorts** to improve product placement and user connection
- Post-launch updates or improvements that take **neurodiverse user experiences** — often sourced through customer satisfaction surveys — into account



## **ADVOCACY AS ENGAGEMENT IS TABLE STAKES.**

Engaging neurodiverse learners is still important, for sure. But learning and development leaders and designers can push beyond this guidepost. Recent DEIB movements have emphasized that merely having **a seat at the table isn't enough.**

What the previous examples of advocacy have in common is that while they take strides to engage neurodiverse stakeholders, the stakeholders themselves are mainly observers or — at best — passive participants giving a thumbs up (or down) to a product with which they've had little direct involvement.

To experience true equity and belonging, learning and development leaders should strive to surface neurodiversity as an active voice in the design process.

# ADVOCACY AS ENFRANCHISEMENT

Designing for a target population benefits from the authentic, embodied, lived experiences of that population. Intentionally working to infuse those experiences in design is **advocacy as enfranchisement**.

Despite many learning and development initiatives being created for neurodiverse learners, the direct involvement of neurodiverse perspectives in the design process is often unclear. If you are a designer of such products, ask yourself this question: How many neurodiverse folks did you talk to when creating your learning solution?

It's a litmus test that surfaces an important reality: No matter how skilled a creator you might be, no matter how visionary or inspired you are, and no matter how good your intentions are, you can't truly walk a mile in someone else's shoes. This is what makes enfranchisement in design essential. By recognizing our individual limitations, we recognize the need for and potential of experiences outside our own. By mobilizing these perspectives that exceed one (relatively narrow) point of view, we can build more authentic learning and development programs; solutions that more truly resonate with their intended audiences, that more effectively address their unique challenges and opportunities, and that ultimately enfranchise a greater diversity of learners because they speak to that learner's experience.



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Enfranchisement is design for everyone, by everyone.

# ENFRANCHISEMENT IN PRACTICE

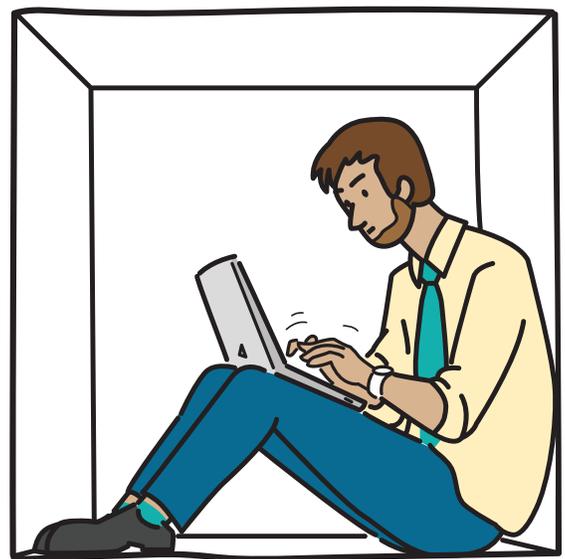
This, of course, is easier said than done. If it were easy, then everyone would be doing it. We get it. We have tried, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully, to practice an enfranchisement approach to L&D design. Rushing forward with big ambitions only to sometimes realize that we left our constituents behind (or entirely out).

## ENFRANCHISING NEURODIVERGENT FOLKS IN PARTICULAR ALSO PRESENTS UNIQUE OBSTACLES.

Most neurodivergent people suffer in the workplace invisibly. They do so often on purpose. Many do not want to readily disclose their status, masking their challenges in the workplace so as not to be “outed” and thus judged, ridiculed, or pandered to. When neurodiverse folks do, it’s typically in the strictest of confidence and only in places of immense trust. Unfortunately — but understandably — the workplace does not often meet these criteria.

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The reality is that the vast majority of employers aren’t going to have neurodivergent people to lead a design charge.



This presents a double bind. Employers need to respect their employees' privacy in this regard. But they also need to design learning and development initiatives that take their experiences into account. What to do?

Your best bet is to partner with a learning consultant who specializes in designing for neurodiverse audiences. A consultant can bring the expertise and empathy needed to address learner needs while maintaining respectful internal anonymity. Even so, we can recommend a few beginner tips and tricks for designing for neurodivergence to get you started. These are some of our core learning ideas, grounded in universal design — the process of creating things that are accessible to a wide range of abilities and individual characteristics.

**If you're going to pursue inclusive design, here are the absolute basics:**



## DO YOUR HOMEWORK

The best way to start a new initiative on the best possible footing is to do some research. There is a growing collection of useful literature on neurodiverse experiences and inclusive design. Drawing on this background information, learning and development leaders can begin to develop a foundation for tackling the nuances of inclusive design.



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## LEVERAGE INCLUSIVE DESIGN

Now that you have a foundation, it's time to analyze your design. You may have all the talent in the world, but it won't amount to much if what you produce fails to connect with the target audience.

Consider your core design philosophies and processes. What are the rhythms and best practices that structure your creative process? To what extent are these practices and dispositions capable of creating something that empowers and delights neurodiverse learners?

**Neurodiverse learners don't learn deficiently. Rather, they learn differently.** Optimizing your learning and development programs to meet these learners may require a retooling of your design process. It may require a complete overhaul of your design philosophy.

This may sound daunting, but it doesn't have to be. While the best course of action is to partner with experts who can provide bespoke guidance for your unique operation and desired outcomes, you can take some concrete steps today to create more inclusive learning. .

- **Go small to get big.** Improve accessibility by dividing larger learning and development initiatives into more manageable engagements. Divide lessons into smaller, 5- to 15-minute segments. Keep videos in the 2- to 5-minute range, and never more than 7 minutes long. Write economically and stick to the core message. Some neurodivergent people read much faster than the average population and are scanning for keywords and concepts. Others struggle with reading and get frustrated with extra "fluff." Try the [Hemingway Editor app](#) if you aren't sure where to start.
- **Chart a clear course.** Empowering neurodiverse learners to navigate your content and platform is key. Make sure site mapping is clear, and that pages and modules intuitively flow together. Check navigation on all devices (iPhone, Android, iPad, other tablets, PC, Mac). In our experience, if you design for mobile first, your designs will be better suited to the neurodivergent.

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- **Remember that we're all adults here.** So treat your learners like adults. Don't "gate" the learning experience. You can do this by empowering learners with control over how learning is presented and paced. Make sure there are tools available to increase text sizes, or if using a browser-based tool, make sure the default browser settings for increasing text sizes work with your platform. Do not read to your audience. Either have text for learners to read, or create a narrated video. Audio-only content will lose neurodiverse people who will often fill the lack of visuals with multitasking and completely lose attention. Screen readers are valuable tools: If those who need one don't already have one, you can provide suggestions for screen reader apps.
- **Incorporate friendly design.** Create with accessibility in mind. Use color appropriately. Colors should be pleasing, work together in harmony, and never clash. Avoid red text and red highlighting. Check your contrast ratios.

Minimize elements that flash or move. Leave plenty of space around GIFs, and make sure they don't move too fast.

Captions are essential, but transcripts help neurodiverse learners even more. Provide downloadable transcripts for videos and such. Neurodiverse people can benefit from color coding. Highlighters and colored pens can help learners take notes and process their learning. Text-only versions of other learning components are very helpful, as well as downloadable highlights or summaries.

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These are just some suggestions based on our experiences. **Your design will ultimately depend on the use case and its target population.** What is most effective for you will ultimately depend on the unique needs and ambitions of your learners. The best place to start is to open up the design process, talk to people, listen to their needs, and work diligently to create something that engages and empowers everyone.

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## PROFIT!

Students and practitioners of universal design are likely familiar with the curb-cut effect, a phenomenon in which increasing accessibility for certain members of a population improves the overall experience for the entire population. The effect takes its name from curb cuts, the small ramps on sidewalks that enable wheelchair users to better access public walkways. In this case, curb cuts had the added benefit of increasing sidewalk access for many beyond the target population.

People with other mobility challenges benefit from curb cuts, as do caregivers pushing strollers. If you've ever taken advantage of a curb cut while helping a friend move house, you've directly benefited from more inclusive design.

**When you design with inclusion in mind, you improve experiences and outcomes for everyone.** If you slow down your design process, for example, to accommodate someone who benefits from that pace, you also increase the amount of time other team members have to review and test the product. This added time thus contributes to a better experience for the end user.

When you design accessibility features into a product, you often design a more pleasant product. High-contrast text and screen reader features may benefit someone with dyslexia, but they also improve readability for someone with tired eyes or who is trying to catch up on a learning module while doing the dishes. Exciting imagery can help someone with ADHD focus, but meaningful illustrations and infographics can delight neurotypical learners just as well.



If you're worried about the ROI of inclusive design, remember that **the more people who can not only use, but enjoy your product, the better.** When you make accessibility the heart of design, you inevitably design for everyone. It's not just good practice. It's good business.

## DESIGNING A CULTURE OF BELONGING

When designers create meaningful opportunities for neurodiverse learners, they ultimately create initiatives everyone can benefit from. And designing through a lens of neurodiversity has impact beyond creating accessible and delightful products.

**Expanding inclusion in learning and development initiatives has a cascading effect for organizations.** Working to create a product that more people can use subsequently includes even more users than originally intended. Striving to enfranchise neurodiverse learners enfranchises increasingly broader circles of team members, building connections between colleagues and between organizations and their employees. And if people feel their futures are being invested in, they'll feel more ready and more confident to invest themselves elsewhere in organization. Small changes ripple outward, touching more and more processes and lives, creating an ever-expanding impact.

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Learning and development creators are uniquely positioned to move past exclusive paradigms. Through inclusive design, we can ensure a world in which everyone has a voice.



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Are you ready to shift your approach  
to learning and development design?  
Reach out to WeLearn today.

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