

CHAPTER VII

FROM PAGES TO PRACTICES: NARRATIVE IDENTITY, HISTORICAL INQUIRY, AND NEURODIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

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7.1. Humanities and special pedagogy in neuroeducation: designing for neurodiversity

The increase in diagnoses related to neurodevelopmental disorders and specific learning disabilities has reshaped the morphology of contemporary classrooms, prompting a structural reconsideration of relational and pedagogical dynamics⁽¹⁾. Situated within the broader horizon of global educational policy, this shift aligns with institutional frameworks that define inclusive education as a matter of equity and shared responsibility. The *OECD Learning Compass 2030* emphasizes student co-agency and the mobilization of diverse cognitive resources as integral to

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(1) Butcher, L., Lane, S., (2025). Neurodivergent student experiences of access and inclusion in higher education: an ecological systems theory perspective, *Higher Education*, 90, pp. 243–263.

meaningful participation in social life⁽²⁾. Within this landscape, inclusion has frequently been organized through medical vocabulary and compensatory adjustments, stabilizing access by identifying points of friction between learner and task. Diagnostic categories provide orientation, yet when they become the primary lens for evaluation, the educational gaze gravitates toward alignment with normative standards, leaving alternative cognitive architectures underexplored. Recent scholarship in special pedagogy and neurodiversity studies calls for an expanded vision that integrates support with the recognition of cognitive plurality as an educational asset⁽³⁾.

A strengths-based perspective directs attention toward perceptual sensitivities, associative patterns, divergent intuitions, and interpretive capacities embedded within neuroatypical profiles. In this respect, the humanities offer a particularly fertile terrain. Literature and history are structured around multiplicity, interpretive tension, and sustained engagement with alterity; they cultivate the flexibility required to inhabit variance within a shared intellectual space⁽⁴⁾. When anchored in lived experience and dialogic practice, these disciplines become environments where empathy, reflective judgment, and cooperative meaning-making develop together, allowing cultural transmission to unfold as participatory signification rather than passive reception.

(2) OECD (2019). *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: OECD Learning Compass 2030*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

(3) Cook, A., (2024). Conceptualisations of neurodiversity and barriers to inclusive pedagogy in schools: A perspective article, *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 24, pp. 627–636.

(4) Giusti, S., Tonelli, N., (2014). *Comunità di pratiche letterarie: il valore d'uso della letteratura e il suo insegnamento*, Loescher, Torino.

Narrative immersion activates processes of emotional and cognitive decoding that weave individual experience into collective memory, strengthening the learner's sense of agency within their educational trajectory⁽⁵⁾. Building communities of literary practice⁽⁶⁾ capable of sustaining such plurality requires attention to spatial organization, material design, and instructional sequencing. Universal Design for Learning proposes anticipating human variability at the level of representation, expression, and engagement, embedding flexibility directly into the architecture of the lesson⁽⁷⁾. Conceived as a porous ecosystem open to differentiated rhythms and channels, the curriculum situates students with specific needs within a shared dynamic and expands access for the entire group. Within such an environment, neurological configurations circulate as intellectual resources, contributing to a common cognitive capital oriented toward attentive and responsible citizenship.

The connection between neuroeducation and the humanities becomes fully visible when these disciplines are approached as *loci hermeneutici* and spaces of empowerment. Engaging the neuroatypical mind within the classroom takes shape as an exercise in intercultural pedagogy, since literature and history expose learners to conflict, partiality, and perspectival positioning as structural features of

(5) Harker, S. et al., (2024). *Adapting Programs for Autistic Adults across the Lifespan: A Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach*, Healthcare, 12.

(6) Baum S.M. et al, (2021). *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled: Strength-Based Strategies for Helping Twice-Exceptional Students with LD, ADHD, ASD and More*, Routledge, New York.

(7) Cast, (2024). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines*, version 3.0, CAST, Lynnfield MA.

knowledge itself⁽⁸⁾. At this intersection, diverse perceptual frequencies enter the shared labor of interpretation, enriching collective inquiry and consolidating the classroom as a site where cognitive plurality acquires epistemic dignity.

7.2. Designing for neurodiversity

For inclusion to become pedagogically effective, reflection must enter the concrete grammar of classroom life: space, tempo, materials, and everyday interaction. Designing lessons through the mechanisms that summon and sustain attention requires anticipating variability at a structural level, shaping environments capable of holding differentiated rhythms while preserving rigorous engagement with disciplinary content⁽⁹⁾. Educational experience begins with the material encounter with texts⁽¹⁰⁾: books function simultaneously as intellectual artifacts and physical objects whose layout, typography, and spatial organization mediate access to meaning. When students become aware of their own reading mechanics and of the supports that stabilize perception, learning takes shape as a modifiable practice grounded in self-knowledge.

Providing differentiated editions, calibrated typography and spacing, or integrating digital formats alongside print affirms that a cultural object can be accessed through

(8) Guetta, S, Calò Livne, A.E., (2024). *Laboratori e strategie di comunicazione attraverso le arti. Sentieri verso la pace con noi stessi e con gli altri*, Aracne, Roma.

(9) Cottini, L., (2017). *Didattica speciale e inclusione scolastica*, Carocci, Roma.

(10) Arcangeli, L., (2019). *Studenti con DSA: Pratiche di Empowerment all'Università*, Carocci, Roma.

multiple perceptual pathways, transforming variation into shared intellectual capital. Attention to material design extends to the organization of space itself. A classroom conceived as a living ecosystem calls for intentional spatial and relational architecture: desk arrangements that encourage circulation, quiet corners for sensory regulation, permission for noise-reducing tools, and acknowledgment that brief movement or withdrawal can sustain participation. Shared space thus becomes a structure capable of holding diverse nervous systems within a common task.

A strengths-based orientation can assume tangible form through practices such as the “help wanted/skills offered” board described by Susan Baum and colleagues⁽¹¹⁾, where students articulate requests for mediation alongside explicit offers of competence. Over time, this visible map of resources fosters reciprocity and distributes expertise across the group. Structural thinkers, visual-spatial organizers, rapid readers, and analytical interpreters contribute distinct capacities to collective work, normalizing mediation as a mode of participation and allowing competence to circulate relationally within the class. Visual planning, sketching, and cognitive externalization accompany reading and writing, enabling imagery-oriented students to access demanding intellectual tasks through aligned channels, while verbally oriented learners sustain analytic trajectories. Meaning thus emerges through differentiated yet convergent expressive forms.

Within a neurodiversity-informed environment, visible movement, gaze aversion, silence, or fluctuations in attention enter the class’s relational micro-language. Drawing on the premise that communication permeates every

(11) Baum S.M. et al, (2021). Op. cit., p. 309.

interaction⁽¹²⁾, teachers and students learn to interpret bodily and behavioral signals as meaningful expressions within a shared system. Literary and historical narratives provide a protected terrain for rehearsing this literacy: asking which textual clues signal Cosimo's sensory saturation in *Il barone rampante*⁽¹³⁾ trains students to infer states of mind, de-center perspective, and respond with calibrated awareness. Through this transfer from textual analysis to lived interaction, the classroom develops a vocabulary for navigating difference that strengthens both its internal cohesion and its civic orientation.

Olivia Fialho underscores the importance of preparatory scaffolding and artistic mediation in sustaining attention and interpretive engagement⁽¹⁴⁾. In the humanities, where interpretation entails inhabiting multiple viewpoints and revising hypotheses, cooperative redistribution of interpretive labor becomes structurally generative. Tasks organized horizontally allow students to assume differentiated roles — structural mapping, close reading, affective decoding, synthesis — integrating contributions into shared constructions of meaning⁽¹⁵⁾. The pedagogical aim concerns the redesign of access pathways so that demanding intellectual work becomes broadly reachable. Rendering cognitive trajectories visible supports self-monitoring and strategic recalibration,

(12) Watzlawick, P., Bavelas, J.B., D., Jackson, D., (1967). *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*, W. W. Norton, New York.

(13) Calvino, I., (1957). *Il barone rampante*, Mondadori, Milano 2019 ed. or.

(14) Fialho, O., (2012). *Self-Modifying Experiences in Literary Reading*, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

(15) Giusti, S., Tonelli, N., (2014). *Comunità di pratiche letterarie: il valore d'uso della letteratura e il suo insegnamento*, Op. cit.

strengthening resilient forms of self-determination⁽¹⁶⁾. Within this architecture, the teacher crafts a porous curriculum that preserves disciplinary density while multiplying entry points, allowing mediation and competence to function as constitutive elements of classroom culture.

7.3. Cognitive apprenticeship through narratives

Grounded in a conception of learning that understands meaning as an architecture students actively construct and inhabit, inclusion within the humanities acquires structural clarity. Educational inequality frequently emerges where mediating forms fail to enable learners to appropriate cultural content as lived experience; within this horizon, narrative theory offers a rigorous grammar for agency. As the mode through which human beings configure time, interpret events, and project possible futures, narrative operates simultaneously as epistemic structure and pedagogical instrument. Jerome Bruner's cultural psychology frames meaning as a situated achievement shaped by shared symbolic resources and by the stories through which individuals come to recognize themselves and others⁽¹⁷⁾. Within the classroom, literature and history thus function as disciplines that organize experience and sustain civic agency, cultivating interpretive patience, perspectival awareness, and the capacity to negotiate conflict within a shared world⁽¹⁸⁾.

(16) Termine, C., Ventriglia, L., Staffolani, A., (2020) *Didattica inclusiva e disturbi del neurosviluppo*, Carocci Faber, Roma.

(17) Bruner, J., (1990). *Acts of Meaning: Four Lectures on Mind and Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

(18) Sclavi, M., (2003). *Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili. Come si esce dalle cornici di cui siamo parte*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano.

Paul Ricœur's hermeneutic perspective extends this framework by describing identity as a dynamic composition emerging from the interplay between lived events and narrated accounts⁽¹⁹⁾. Identity unfolds through continuity and transformation, through the dialogue between character and selfhood sustained by responsibility and recognition. Read through this lens, the classroom becomes a liminal space⁽²⁰⁾ in which learners can discern the plurality already active within their own identities, tracing the layered interplay between inherited descriptions and emerging possibilities. Diagnostic language finds its place within a broader horizon of meaning, and the self appears as stratified and evolving, continuously reconfigured through encounter with texts and through reflection on experience. In this sense, identity participates in what McAdams terms a "storied life"⁽²¹⁾ open to revision and oriented toward dignity and agency. Sustained textual engagement thus supports processes of self-interpretation in which cognitive plurality acquires epistemic legitimacy rather than marginal status.

From this perspective, literary teaching becomes a structured practice of mediation. Giusti underscores the necessity of linking research, classroom experimentation, and cultural transmission within a coherent pedagogical trajectory⁽²²⁾, while the "communities of literary practice" developed with Tonelli frame reading and discussion as collective

(19) Ricœur, P., (1992). *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

(20) Turner V., (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine, Chicago.

(21) McAdams, D.P., (1993). *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, Guilford Press, New York.

(22) S. Giusti, (2023). *Didattica della letteratura italiana: La storia, la ricerca, le pratiche*, Carocci, Roma.

interpretive labor⁽²³⁾. Reading aloud exemplifies this mediation: the teacher's voice stabilizes executive demands and redistributes cognitive load, enabling students to direct attention toward structure, affective resonance, and interpretive depth⁽²⁴⁾. Conceived as a space of co-production, the classroom aligns with strengths-based orientations in neurodiversity education, embedding inclusion within shared inquiry.

Empirical research on literary engagement further clarifies the transformative potential of such environments. Fialho describes literary experience as a traceable process through which interpretive habits and self-understanding undergo modification⁽²⁵⁾. By integrating phenomenological accounts, linguistic analysis, and reader-response research, literary study emerges as a structured site of cognitive and affective work, particularly significant for learners whose educational trajectories have been shaped by deficit framings. Within this pedagogical architecture, aesthetic experience⁽²⁶⁾ functions as a mode of attention in which perception, anticipation, and interpretation converge. The encounter with literary form activates processes linking emotion and durable memory, so that the pleasure accompanying interpretation contributes to the consolidation of understanding. Schaeffer's reflections on the cognitive dimension of literary studies⁽²⁷⁾ reinforce this account of the

(23) Giusti, S., Tonelli, N., (2014). *Comunità di pratiche letterarie: il valore d'uso della letteratura e il suo insegnamento*, Op. cit.

(24) Batini, F., (2022). *Leggere ad alta voce*, Giunti EDU, Firenze.

(25) Fialho, O., (2024). *Transformative Reading: Literary Engagement and Self-Modification*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

(26) Dewey, J., (1934) *.Art as Experience*, Minton, Balch & Company, New York.

(27) Schaeffer, J-M., (2015). *Piccola ecologia degli studi letterari*, Loescher, Torino.

aesthetic as a domain that reorganizes perception and refines attention. Designing interpretive tasks with differentiated entry points preserves disciplinary density while accommodating varied cognitive rhythms⁽²⁸⁾, while emotional resonance strengthens empathy and reflective judgment⁽²⁹⁾, and learning acquires durability aligned with broader visions of *whole-person education*⁽³⁰⁾. Cultural transmission thereby unfolds as mediated appropriation, as students integrate complex texts into lived repertoires and engage them through argument, reinterpretation, and sustained decentering within democratic life.

7.4. Usable activities for a meaningful education of the Humanities

Through deliberate encounters with cultural forms, students come to recognize themselves as capable of reading the world, shaping interpretations, inhabiting perspectives, and engaging in argument⁽³¹⁾. Authority materializes as pedagogical design: in the selection of texts, in the modulation of tempo, and in the calibrated space offered to each learner to enter a shared horizon through a distinct rhythm. Translating this orientation into everyday practice

(28) Immordino-Yang, M.H., (2015). *Emotions, Learning, and the Brain: Exploring the Educational Implications of Affective Neuroscience*, W. W. Norton, New York.

(29) Nussbaum, M.C., (2010). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

(30) Higgins, C., (2024). *Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

(31) Goodman, N., (1978). *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis.

requires transferable structures that can travel across genres and historical contexts.

Inclusive sequences embed narrative and hermeneutic work within ordinary curricular time while anticipating variability at the level of task construction. Disciplinary depth, cognitive scaffolding, distributed interpretive roles, and moments of reflective consolidation converge within a coherent design that clarifies the logic of each activity. In such an environment, cognitive differences circulate as shared intellectual resources, and the classroom evolves responsively in relation to its own internal dynamics.

Activity 1: words of feeling, feeling words.

Dimension	Description
Context	Foreign language / Literature
Duration	60–90 minutes
Focus	Sensory language, embodiment, translation as mediation
Source Text	Donna Williams, <i>Notes</i> , in <i>Not Just Anything</i> ⁽³²⁾
Task Sequence	Close reading of the poem in the original language. Students underline words expressing physical or emotional contact with the page. Brief collective mapping of sensory vocabulary (touch, sound, texture, pressure). Individual translation, allowing students to prioritize meaning, rhythm, emotional tone, or structure. Creative extension: students add one stanza describing their own relationship with language or writing. Optional sharing (from desk or alternative classroom position).
Materials and supports	Noise-cancelling headphones Digital drafting tools Fidget objects

(32) Williams, D., (1995). *Not Just Anything: A Collection of Thoughts on Paper*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Learning Goals	Develop deep awareness of communicative mediation, actively engage embodied narrative learning to validate diverse physical processing styles, ⁽³³⁾ explore synesthesia, and reflect on translation as a deeply relational act.
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Activity 2: Writing rights

Dimension	Description
Context	History / Civic Education
Duration	80-120 minutes
Focus	Historical causality, political negotiation, perspective-taking, civic agency
Source Text	Declaration of the <i>Rights of Man and of the Citizen</i> , 1789. ⁽³⁴⁾
Task Sequence	Contextual framing of the 1789 Declaration, highlighting the fracture of the <i>Ancien Régime</i> and the contradictions of universal rights. Individual textual analysis mapping the explicit beneficiaries and the systemically excluded populations (women, passive citizens, enslaved individuals). Role assignment representing diverse historical demographics (bourgeois revolutionary, noble, dispossessed peasant, female intellectual, enslaved person). Mixed-role constitutional convention to negotiate and draft a “New Declaration” addressing the identified exclusions while maintaining strict historical coherence. Plenary debate evaluating the negotiation dynamics and how political power shapes the language of rights.
Materials and supports	Segmented excerpts Graphic organizers for clause analysis Written scaffolds preceding oral negotiation

(33) M. Jahadakbar, Y. Yao, (2025). Embodied narrative learning as an inclusive practice, *Journal of Literacy Research*, 57/1.

(34) NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF FRANCE, (1996). Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Paris 1789; in L. Hunt (ed.), *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, Bedford/St. Martin’s, Boston.

Learning Goals	Develop historical reasoning through primary source analysis, understand universal rights as negotiated constructs, practice perspective-taking, and experience civic deliberation as structured disagreement.
Inclusive Architecture	Role differentiation empowers students to leverage strengths in analytical mapping, argumentation, synthesis, ethical reasoning, or structural organization. Written scaffolding preceding negotiation honours individual processing time. Role embodiment legitimizes diverse cognitive styles, while collective drafting redistributes the interpretive labour.

7.5. A school beyond cognitive disability

When pedagogical design anticipates human variability, the texture and rhythm of the classroom shift accordingly, as time, space, mediation, and role distribution are orchestrated with awareness that learners process language, emotion, and abstraction through differentiated channels. Cognitive diversity becomes structurally embedded within classroom life, and inclusion consolidates as a premise of shared inquiry capable of preserving disciplinary rigor while widening access to it. Historical education responds with particular clarity to this orientation. Every document bears the imprint of conflict, negotiation, exclusion, and perspective; constitutional charters, chronicles, diaries, and testimonies emerge from voices positioned asymmetrically within structures of power. Engaging foundational texts through role assignment and collective drafting renders visible the contingent formation of rights and the labor through which language crystallizes political interests. Students refine judgment, deepen contextual awareness, and situate civic agency within an articulated narrative of responsibility.

Literary study intensifies this movement. Translation, interior monologue, and perspectival shifts confront

learners with the density of human experience, where meaning emerges through sustained interpretation and revision. Narrative identity is exercised as an ongoing practice in voice, distance, and empathetic recognition, and the plurality within the self finds articulation through encounter with textual alterity. Across the humanities, mediation provides the structural thread binding these processes together. Texts approached as living matter invite interaction, and tasks calibrated to redistribute interpretive labor enable demanding material to be accessed through differentiated contributions.

The educator's craft unfolds within this orchestration. It requires reflective judgment, metacognitive awareness, and theoretical literacy: professionals capable of reading themselves in and on action, and of understanding classrooms as dynamic systems. The viability of inclusive schools rests largely on the preparation and sustained formation of such educators. For this reason, the role of the scientific community remains decisive, as only sustained dialogue among researchers, teacher educators, and practitioners⁽³⁵⁾ can translate pedagogical insight into durable practice.

Within this framework, historical reasoning and literary interpretation converge in cultivating attention, deliberation, and the capacity to inhabit unfamiliar perspectives. Neurodiversity, understood as an expression of human plurality, sharpens collective intelligence and refines common inquiry. The curriculum that emerges remains permeable and responsive, able to sustain complexity while expanding participation.

(35) Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, New York.