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Anticipating effective pedagogy for autistic entomology students: listening to the student voice.

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Abstract

Inclusive teaching has progressed somewhat in the past ten years and should be synonymous with effective pedagogy. We collaborated with a group of seven autistic students at a specialist institute with a focus on land-based sciences, including entomology and ecology, to explore limitations and potential improvements in entomology teaching. We present the findings from one 140-minute focus group and 375 minutes of one-to-one interviews. Three superordinate themes emerge: the autistic journey, challenges around education/support and institution/university specific issues. We explore the connection between autism and entomology and present a set steps for effective teaching and learning. First and foremost is to take time to know the student and prioritise a caring and interactive pedagogy. This can be achieved by cultivating an inclusive and non-judgmental campus culture, ensuring equality across all students. Further, we can engage autistic students as collaborators in assignment moderation, student messaging, lecture planning and campus design. A sense of inclusion will feed into varied teaching sessions and assessments that ensure that hyper-focus interests are fostered while developing general discipline specific skills. Finally, students identified a number of barriers that can - and perhaps should already - be addressed by the university (e.g., unreliable access to campus, unclear signage and outdated communications). Overall, students consistently identified a similar set of core issues and provided tractable solutions. Thoughtful provision of student care was considered to be essential to student success. However, it is worth noting the large variation in student journey and the centrality of considering the individual voice whilst implementing change.

Keywords: University, teaching, science, assessment, culture, neurodiversity

Introduction

There are ~19,000 autistic students in UK higher education ('https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-15', 2022) and less than 700 specialist autism mentors (Irvine, 2022).

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Inclusive teaching is a moral obligation and an effective means of broadening participation at Higher Education Institutions. Autistic students can have heightened sensory awareness (Brinkert and Remington, 2020) and a strong sense of justice (Dempsey *et al.*, 2020), anecdotally detecting suboptimal teaching before their neurotypical peers. Further, the support scaffold required for effective teaching of autistic students aligns with neurotypical student needs, that is to say, good teaching for autistic students is often good teaching for all students ('autism gain') (Irvine, 2022). It becomes clear then that we need to emphasise the autistic voice across all elements of higher education (Laciny, 2021). Irvine and MacLeod (Irvine and MacLeod, 2022) do just this in their far reaching review paper, that serves as a blueprint for HEIs and identifies non-inclusive institutions as an important area for improvement. We work with students to explore the lived reality ('warts and all') within a university focussed on small group delivery and student experience.

Anecdotal evidence connects autism and entomology (Laciny, 2021). National and institutional commitments to inclusive learning and accessibility dictate equal opportunities. We have seen progress in terms of provision for autistic students (several 'toolkits' discuss how to engage, communicate, prepare and teach in an autism friendly way) at institutions (e.g., Morris, 2011). However, within the biological sciences in general and entomology in particular we have scant idea on motivations to learn, preferred means of delivery and discipline specific approaches.

The focal institution is reliant on tutors trying hard to overcome the 'double empathy problem' whereby there is misunderstanding between neurodivergent groups (Milton, 2019). This may be compounded, not just by the power dynamic between a minority and majority neurotype, but also by the dynamic between expert and lay seen in other professions in the 'triple empathy problem' (Shaw *et al.*, 2024). As lecturers we are in no position to mark our own homework! Participants in the 'Shaping Research' seminar series (e.g., Pellicano, Crane and Gaudion, 2017), have put forward a powerful argument for going beyond tokenism to meaningful bi-directional action research involving autistic students and their allies from the very start (Fletcher-Watson *et al.*, 2019). Participatory research is inclusive and ethically informed, ensuring that students on all parts of the spectrum have an equal say and ownership in the final set of guidelines. Here we follow this philosophy and work alongside autistic students to develop discipline specific and institution specific guidance. It is our hope that these findings will be of use to educators and students alike.

We work with autistic students to discover motivations and desires. We take an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (MacLeod, 2019), grounded within local community participation (Bush, Singh and Kooienga, 2019).

Methods

Data collection included a focus group and one-to-one follow up interviews. All known autistic students on qualifying undergraduate and postgraduate entomology courses at Harper Adams University were contacted and invited to take part in the study. All seven interested students participated. One author (STS) conducted a 140-minute whole group interview with six students out of seven participants (five in the room and one on Microsoft Teams). The students were emailed a copy of Irvine and Macleod (2022) in advance and several copies of the paper were printed for the session. Students were also sent an informed consent form prior to participation in the focus group

and this outlined the aims and expectations of the study along with their role (Appendix 1). The focus group, held in November 2022, was left deliberately open-ended and exploratory, however it was necessary to avoid ambiguity throughout. We endeavoured to allow all voices to be heard. The session was recorded using Otter AI (https://otter.ai/) and transcribed into text for downstream analysis in Taguette v1.4 (Rampin and Rampin, 2021). The complete (anonymised) transcript was coded using a hierarchical system with major themes ('tags') being given up to three levels. The aim of the session was to identify as many general themes to inform downstream interviews as possible, the data were semi-quantitative in that it was possible to rank each theme based on the frequency it was mentioned in the focus group.

Following Seidman (2006) we designed interview questions within four categories: i) grand tour, ii) mini-tour, iii) subjective and iv) reimaging questions. The focus group identified 42 themes across 82 in-transcript 'highlights', the most frequently mentioned themes are given in Table 1. Combining these themes, we extracted 15 'areas of interest' for sharing with students. The questions outlined below stem from these data and discussions among the authors, keeping in mind student input from the focus group. There were three mini-tour questions to allow for an element of choice. Questions were designed to be open so as to facilitate a conversation and exploration of lived experience, but ambiguity can be difficult for autistic students, so a degree of explanation was required during the interviews (especially question iv). The questions were as follows:

Grand tour questions:

i) Tell me about your experience as an autistic student in the years directly before and after enrolling at HAU.

Mini-tour questions:

ii) Please recall your most rewarding and disappointing experiences with assessment and feedback.

iii) Can you tell me any stories about communication?

iv) Do you feel enabled as a student?

Subjective questions:

v) What is the university culture like for you?

Reimaging questions:

i) Do you have suggestions for better ways to study on campus and in lectures?

We planned on 30-minute interviews, but ultimately this became a rough guideline. All seven interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams in a period spanning December 2022 to February 2023. Anonymised transcripts were recorded and uploaded to Taguette for detailed coding. Coding for interviews followed the same procedure as for the focus group, but each interview was coded separately and sequentially.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

A summary of tags and frequency along with the highlighted sections was exported from Taguette. A summary file of all tags and highlights was also generated for all seven interviews combined. These

objects were explored in Excel using pivot tables to identify superordinate themes and their constituent subthemes. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) can benefit from a nested sub-setting of themes and as such we calculated the additional themes raised with each successive interviewee, these excluded themes raised by previous interviewees. The first author led these analyses and has experience as a lecturer inside and outside of the classroom and, he has also taught some of the collaborating students. This places him in a non-independent position, in that he hoped to find meaning in his students' thoughts rather than minimising the researchers influence (as in qualitative positivism).

Principal Components Analysis

For the purposes of data exploration and to identify groups of student narratives, we ran a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) in R (v.4.2.2.) (R Development Core Team, 2016) to visualise the variability in theme composition among interviews.

Results and Discussion

Focus Group

The discussion with all seven students provided a comprehensive list of challenges faced by students, along with a number of positives. A total of 42 tags with 82 instances were identified. The most frequent themes identified in the focus group are given in Table 1 along with those identified in the one-to-one interviews.

Table 1. The major tags included within the three emergent superordinate themes. Numerical values represent frequency across focus group and interview transcripts. Focus group tags indicate those with a frequency of over three while the cut-off for inclusion of interview tags was a frequency of 15 (bold font). Reciprocal tag frequencies are given when under the cut-off to complete the table (normal font). Some tags were represented by multiple levels in the interviews (diagnosis encompassed 11 variables while education. Assignments was represented by two variables in the interview transcripts).

Superordinate Theme	Tag	Focus Group Frequency	Interviews Frequency
The autistic journey	livedexperience.canary	4	7
	diagnosis	**5**	61*
	livedexperience.overload	1	**28**
	livedexperience.transition	1	**15**
Education and support	education.assignments	**6**	24**
	education.structure.overload	**3**	7
	education.lecturedesign.interactions	1	**16**
	education.assignments.briefs	2	**16**
	practical.communication	**3**	8
	practical.timetabling.celcat	**3**	2
Institution/university	institution.culture.negative	**11**	**19**

	institution.culture.positive	**4**	3
	institution.facilities.studyspace	**3**	8
	institution.courses.zoology	2	**16**
Total		82	458

The superordinate themes grouped: i) autism specific subthemes, ii) challenges related to education (pedagogy and support), and iii) challenges relating to university in general as well as institution specific issues. We summarise these challenges in Table 1 and Figure 1. It is important to note here that students were generally extremely positive about the level of support provided by learner support specialists at HAU, opinions varied across most other aspects of student life. We also place these findings within the context of the prevailing university culture between the years 2019-2022.

Interviews

A total of 79 tags and 458 instances were generated across all seven interviews, the most frequent tags are given in Table 1. The mean interview duration was 53.6±7.2 SE minutes. Briefly, students felt that their experienced overload (on all fronts) made their time at university challenging. Exhaustion from masking was mentioned specifically by several students, while this challenge was not caused by the university setting or institution *per se*, the demands of on-campus attendance were clear. It was clear that "put[ting] on this play all day long and then go[ing] home and perform[ing] these tasks like…an actor…8-9 hours a day" made home and social lives much harder than for neurotypical students.

Interviewee one was a mature student who was particularly insightful and we identified 42 tags in their transcript, an additional 23 tags were generated in interview two with six additional tags being identified in interview three such that 72/79 tags were recovered within three interviews (Figure 2). Figure 2 illustrates the nested nature of the themes identified in each tag, details relating to diagnosis and lived experience were far more apparent (33/79 tags) than in the focus group discussions. Practical, institution/university specific and issues around support were apparent in the remaining tags. We note that while issues around institutional experiences sometimes highlighted important issues specific to our setting, almost all could be usefully generalised across the sector. We therefore try to frame our more specific findings within a wider context where possible.

Figure 1. A word cloud generated using the 79 tags and 458 instances from a thematic analysis of the transcripts from the seven individual interviews. Note that tags have multiple levels.

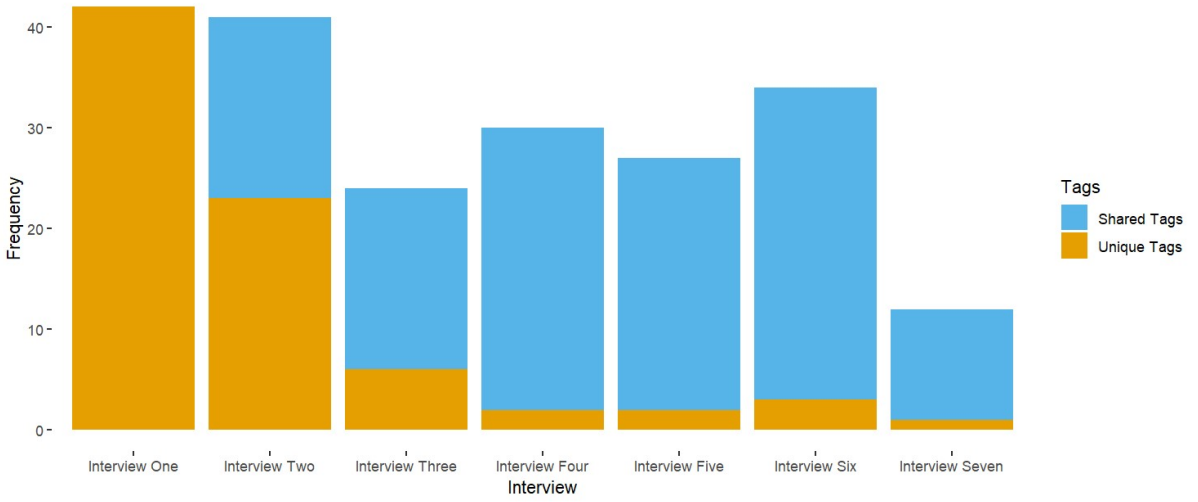

Figure 2. Unique and shared tags across each interview. The PCA revealed clustering, but interviews one, two and six were dissimilar both to each other and the remaining interviews (Figure 3). These interviews were rich in tags related to certain issues, for example, interviewee one discussed comorbidity extensively, interviewee two talked about interactions in lectures and sensory overload while interviewee six outlined issues with assignment brief clarity. The first two principal components explained 69.2% of the total inertia.

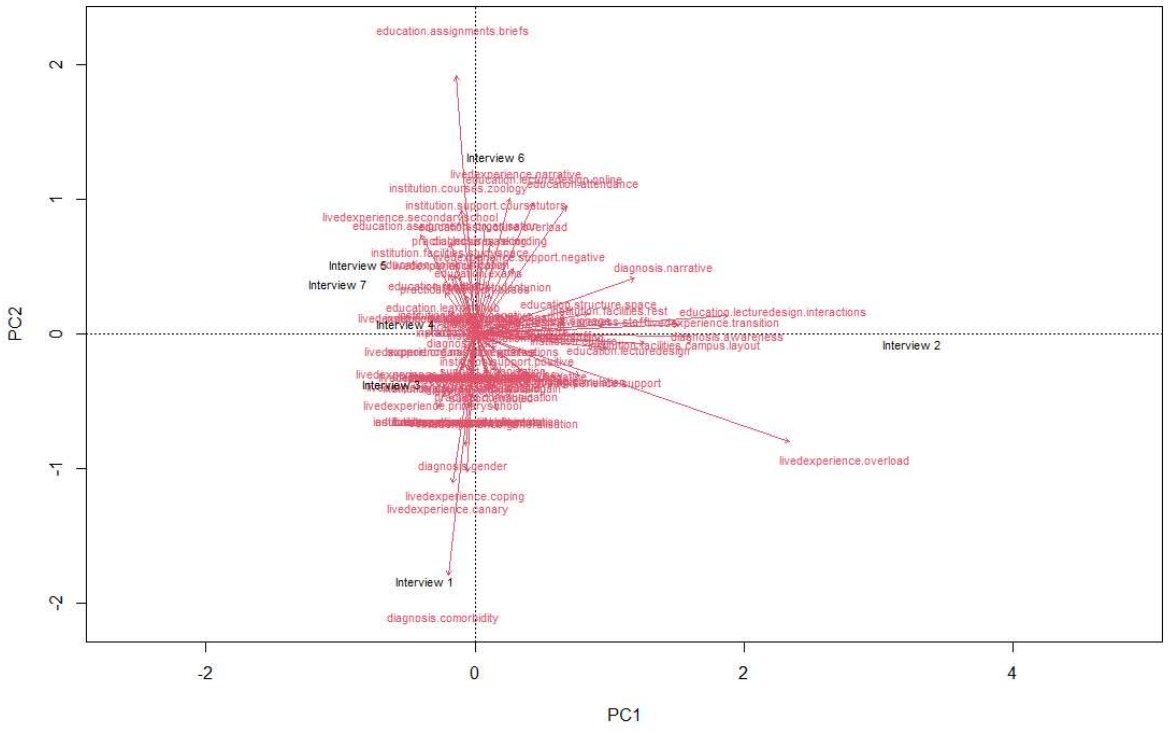

Figure 3. Biplot of the Principal Components Analysis. Red lines represent tags while the black text denotes the individual meetings. The length of the red lines denotes the proportion of total variance explained and show the relationships among variables: parallel lines are directly correlated (e.g., they tend to co-occur in transcripts), those at 90 degrees are uncorrelated and those at 180 degrees are negatively correlated. Arrows pointing towards black text denote tags associated with a given interview (e.g., interviewee one frequently discussed co-occurring issues while other students tended not to). Principal component one explains 41.4% of the explained variance while principal component two explains 17.8%.

Unique narratives

Our student collaborators consisted of three postgraduate students and four undergraduate students. Two of the graduate students were female and one was male while two undergraduate students were male and two were female. All postgraduate students were studying on entomology related courses while all undergraduate students were enrolled on the Applied Zoology courses, two on the Applied Zoology with entomology route. Journeys were all unique. All quotes are from participating student interviews or from the focus group: they will tell their own story. We have categorised student voices to correspond roughly with our three emergent superordinate themes: the autistic journey, education and support, and institution/university. Finally, we recognise that these quotes represent our perception of 'examples' and may not be representative of all individuals outside (or even inside) of this study.

The autistic journey.

All students agreed that teaching and support staff should get to "know the student, not the diagnosis". Praise was given to support and lecturing staff that had taken the time to do so, while students did acknowledge that general training around autism and neurodiversity may potentially be useful, especially for academic staff and course tutors.

Levels of previous support and experience were variable, but for those that had received support to study it has consistently improved academic performance. The timing of diagnosis also varied, with four students being diagnosed at primary school and three being diagnosed in HE. Those with later diagnoses were all female, and independently emphasised improved masking in female students (Alaghband-Rad, Hajikarim-Hamedani and Motamed, 2023). The majority of students had an awareness prior to diagnosis, for those unaware diagnosis explained a lot:

> "It definitely clarified a lot and…with my autistic friends as well".

Especially relevant here is that age of diagnosis influenced what students needed once they arrived at university (Norris, Harvey and Hull, 2024). One student had gone through cycles of needing or accepting support, to only needing to know that it was there when it counted; a recent diagnosis often sought support while others with longstanding knowledge valued the level playing field that support offered.

Students identified a link to entomology, mentioning highly attuned affinities for organisational taxonomy, sensory beauty and a sense of awe. This formalises previous suggestions (Laciny, 2021):

> “Most of the people who are really interested in insects are a bit autistic”.

> “Entomology is probably the most autistic discipline that there is, because autistic people have special interests”.

Hyper-focus on entomology was clear across the group and it is important when teaching these students to cultivate this innate fascination in a way that is sensitive also to the fact that entomology is a fully quantitative field. We need to allow students to capitalise on their interests in specific groups of insects.

Each student’s journey shaped their own university experience. For MSc students the transition to the focal university often represented a relaxation of environmental constraints, moving from city to a rural setting.

> “It’s a nice quiet place in the countryside. Not a big metropolis. It’s not a middle of some crime ridden city”.

Transition to university can be challenging for autistic students (Sefotho and Onyishi, 2021). Almost all the undergraduate students struggled almost as much with the transition to year two than the move to university. The COVID-19 pandemic had a highly deleterious impact on student learning, particularly impacting autistic students (Cage and McManemy, 2022).

> “On the transition to [university], it was quite difficult. It was very, very isolating because of COVID”.

Although the university setting was valued:

> “Like how university is set up and then you obviously have free periods and things and study and so it's much more self-guided and I found that really, really helpful. I really enjoyed having that more flexible style of work”.

However, we should not underestimate the toll that everyday life has on students with autism, nor the cost that is paid once the busy working day is over:

> “I get home from work sometimes, and I'm just, like, completely incapacitated”.

This is especially true for students with co-occurring conditions and neurodivergences (Khachadourian *et al.*, 2023).

> “But a lot of autistic people are comorbid with ADHD. So, a lot of my problems are, like, I love being organised, but also, I can't be organised and it's really conflicting”.

As educators it is our responsibility to manage what is asked of our students, adopting a caring pedagogy can go a long way, but it is essential to place classroom interactions and assignment expectations within the context of diagnosis and overload. Enabling students to succeed post-HE requires careful consideration of what students are comfortable with and what skills they need to succeed.

Education and support.

It is of little surprise that students expanded widely on educational issues – they are the ones that live it. These were inextricably connected to the practical, systematic and institutional barriers

(support). With an increased sensory perception, Autistic students can start each day with an existing 'stress burden' (Estabrook, 2023), so that the unpredictable problems of getting on to campus, finding their way around and dealing with conflict or negative culture may quickly cause overwhelm. In some instances, this is not at all helped by unclear communication from staff and other students which can make picking up on cues nigh on impossible. The education and support theme encompassed many practical solutions for making life easier.

The study provided a wealth of information on what might be unfortunately be perceived as trivial by the majority, but served to generate unnecessary barriers to success for the autistic minority. Transport to and from campus was highly stressful for many: "I found that [late buses] a really big issue and that sort of throws off like a whole schedule I had in my mind when I get on the bus at this time go to town, get some shopping back this time". A lack of communication was also a key issue for many, especially when instructions are taken literally. One student related the story of being told to sew on clothes labels, as advised online, only to be told that this was unnecessary on arrival. Clear and up to date information would have prevented considerable anxiety and confusing social cues in the first week of term. This is true also for campus signage and confusing abbreviations for lecture rooms. Communication of last-minute changes to timetables, locations and expectations were particularly challenging.

> "I feel like autistic people are the best people to consult on communication. because we don't get any fucking memos".

It is easy to gravitate to that which needs changing, but we must also mark out the benefit of approaching action research like this - there was a real sense of support amongst the group members:

> "I guess like I expected it to be reasonably well set up for neurodiversity, and I think I think that it is".

> "I could have done with support at college level as well, and I think actually not having support had a big impact on me".

On learner support:

> "She helps me sort of digest information".

It is essential that we listen and support this valuable part of our community and recognise the best routes to success inside and outside of the classroom, indeed:

> "A lot of autistic people are like, hypersensitive and like hyper empathetic, like the reason why they come across as a non-feeling robot is because a lot of us have tone control issues".

We emphasise here the need to develop enabling care frameworks, where scaffolding helps students to achieve their best both within and outside the university setting. Dedicated and understanding learner support staff in Higher Education face increasing demands as our understanding and awareness of neurodiversity grows, and it is important that these departments are well resourced and able to focus on both general issues and specific cases. Regular, friendly and personalised communication was seen as hugely helpful, again emphasizing the centrality of a 'personal touch'.

Next, we consider pedagogic issues arising from students' narratives. A need for clarity, space, structure and an opportunity to develop skills (e.g., those around presentation and group work) in a non-judgmental environment were core themes.

> "Universities can be really good places for autistic people, because if you choose to study a subject that you're really interested in, that's your special interest".

For example, students were frustrated by the degree of ambiguity in assignment briefs or last-minute introduction of assessment elements around presentations.

> "A lot of them [assignment briefs], they're really vague and I am just a bit like I've got no clue what it's asking me to write about, like at all, and I feel like a lot of students, not just ASD students, struggle with that".

Exemplars were widely praised as removing a degree of anxiety. Bringing students in as collaborators while drafting assignment briefs and schemes of work, soliciting real-time feedback on lecture design, and offering high quality recorded lectures were all seen as important steps forward.

> "Sometimes you just don't have kind of the mental capacity to be sat there listening".

Many more questions arose. Can we equate attendance with engagement? How do we best balance exams and course work? How can we better integrate undergraduate and postgraduate students? How do we structure collaborative relationships between students and staff? The timing of assignments and related overload were also key concerns:

> "When we've gone too far in like sort of where we can stop as well. Timing and the scheduling properties. Assignments needs to be set up so that so that we can finish one before having to move on to the other or at least sort of doing one or two things at the same time".

More generally, the interviewees placed a high value on space within the curriculum: time to discuss, learn, interact and exchange ideas (Stengers, 2018). Structured, relaxed and inclusive debate was welcomed.

A varied teaching diet and mature interactions with teaching staff, interactions that upheld the students' dignity, were also considered more effective ways to learn:

> "Calm, sort of jovial sort of back and forth, way of learning and discussing and talking".

This relational grounding sat alongside a need for study and 'escape' space availability. Indeed, for some students this meant having to work off-campus:

> "Kind of work yourself up to doing that, so sometimes it is kind of needed to just kind of be able to be in your own space, kind of in your safe space".

It was hard to escape some of the more negative themes associated with the focal institution's historic culture (Hazell, 2021). A strong sense of justice (Hughes-Lynch, 2021) allowed students to pick up on events quickly (a 'social canary' phenomenon in which perceptually astute autistic students may struggle most with institutional malaise) (Irvine, 2022), unsurprisingly, these issues formed a great barrier to learning. This finding points towards the importance of addressing overall issues of exclusion and intolerance present in society at large. Universities should strive to represent

the best that society has to offer, and important lessons have been learned and implemented in the focal institution's 'Respect Policy'. It is essential that universities confront discrimination of any sort quickly and directly, implementing safety checks and embedding cultural changes. Only by recognising and celebrating diversity will we flourish.

Conclusions.

We all need to listen to what is being said, and not worry overly much about how it is said. If we are to make any wider suggestions on pedagogy, it is only that we need to slow down and spend less time racing through the day, time spent engaging students is always time well spent. If we let these students take the lead in creating space for mature and thoughtful interactions and assessments we will benefit our whole learning community. Increased inclusion and the removal of barriers will naturally follow. For the entomologists out there, we would only say this: anticipate need, keep the passion alive, foster a broad range of practical skills as well as embedding theory and take time to communicate complex ideas clearly using a diverse and caring pedagogy. Have fun and learn from a highly perceptive section of our society.

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