

**Original Research Paper**

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# Learning With One Another: Storytelling, Community, and the Co-Creation of Neuroaffirming Educational Practice

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**Abstract**

This paper examines narrative and storytelling as mechanisms for supporting neuroaffirming educational practice in higher education. As a group of teachers and academic developers working across disciplines in universities in Australia and the UK, we observe that professional development in inclusive teaching does not adequately centre lived experience as a form of knowledge. Staff training often focuses on definitional understandings of disability and surface-level recommendations for inclusive practice, with limited space for the complexity and relational dimensions of neurodivergent experience. While many educators carry powerful stories shaped by neurodivergence, there are few structured opportunities within institutional contexts to articulate, share and collectively interpret these narratives.

Our project explored whether creative and reflective writing could provide a shared language for our knowledge and experiences, and whether storytelling might function as a mode of neuroaffirming practice in its own right. During Academic Writing Month (#AcWriMo), we came together as part of an international 'creative pedagogies' project to write and exchange stories of neuroaffirming teaching and learning. Initially, as strangers across geographic and institutional boundaries, we found camaraderie in shared experience. The paper centres four of these narratives, presenting selected extracts alongside engagement with literature on neuroaffirming pedagogy, expressive writing and communities of practice.

We argue that storytelling and freeform writing enable reflective meaning-making that extends beyond conventional professional development models. Writing stories of practice, struggle and growth created space for participants to surface tacit knowledge, interrogate assumptions and reframe experiences that might otherwise remain individualised. In sharing these narratives, participants contributed to a collective archive of experience that educates and empowers. The stories operate not

as illustrative anecdotes appended to theory, but as sites of knowledge production that complicate and enrich dominant discourses of inclusion.

In this context, storytelling functions simultaneously as pedagogy and community-building practice. The act of writing and reading each other's stories fostered relational connections across institutions and national borders, enabling educators to learn with one another rather than merely from one another. This shift from transmission of best practice to co-construction of meaning models a neuroaffirming approach grounded in reciprocity, compassion and attentiveness to difference.

Our unorthodox methodology borrows from the Dadaists sense play. Writing as separately authored pieces, we create a tapestry of voices woven together by a theoretical thread. A practice-based collaborative autoethnography using poetic inquiry to explore academic and neurodivergent lived experience.

By focusing on narrative as both method and outcome, this paper demonstrates how story-based practices can cultivate accessible communities of practice. We suggest that embedding creative, reflective storytelling within academic development initiatives offers a pathway for advancing neuroaffirming education across disciplines, institutions and geographic contexts.

**Keywords:** neuroaffirming, narrative, interdisciplinary, academic development, community building

## 1. Introduction

Neurodiversity is commonly defined as the natural variation in human cognition rather than a deficit, challenging traditional medicalised understandings of neurological difference (Singer, 1999). This perspective aligns closely with the social model of disability, which shifts the focus from individual "impairment" to the societal structures that produce exclusion and disadvantage (Azuka et al., 2024). Within this framework, neurodivergence refers to individuals whose cognitive styles diverge from dominant norms, including, but not limited to, autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and related conditions. Rather than positioning these differences as deficits to be corrected, the neurodiversity paradigm recognises them as part of the natural spectrum of human variation.

Building on this foundation, neuroaffirming (or neurodiversity-affirming) approaches emphasise strengths, autonomy, and identity, moving away from remediation-focused practices. Such approaches aim to work with, rather than against, an individual's neurotype, placing value on diverse ways of communicating, processing, and making meaning (Cohn & Harrison, 2025). In educational settings, neuroaffirming approaches seek to validate diverse ways of thinking, learning, and communicating, recognising behaviours often labelled as atypical as meaningful forms of expression rather than symptoms requiring correction. This reframing opens space for alternative modes of engagement and knowledge construction that better reflect the experiences of neurodivergent individuals.

Storytelling plays a central role in this process. In neurodiversity contexts, storytelling has been shown to support non-normative communication styles, facilitate peer connection, and foster shared understanding (Xiao, 2024). Storytelling resists normative academic discourse and creative writing legitimises alternative epistemologies. Narrative and creative writing approaches have been widely used in research with populations for whom experiences may be difficult to articulate through conventional and linear methods. For example, work with refugee and displaced communities demonstrates how storytelling and narrative inquiry enable expression of complex and often fragmented experiences (Saltsman and Majidi, 2021; Rieger et al., 2023).



Contemporary work on neurodivergent experiences has increasingly adopted a neuroaffirming perspective, emphasising strengths, identity, and lived experience. However, much of this work remains grounded in epistemological traditions that privilege analytical, individualised, and often deficit-oriented ways of knowing. Emerging research suggests that alternative approaches to meaning making, particularly those rooted in narrative and storytelling, offer a powerful way to resume how individuals connect, communicate and construct knowledge. While this may appear as a novel methodological turn within contemporary research, storytelling as a means of understanding human experience is far from new; rather, it reflects longstanding practices embedded within knowledge systems, where meaning is co-constructed, relational, and grounded in lived experience (Colla & Kurtz, 2024).

Storytelling shifts the focus from knowledge as something transmitted to knowledge as something relationally produced, allowing individuals to engage with multiple perspectives and shared meanings. This distinction highlights the importance of what has been described as an “ethical space,” where different epistemologies can meet, allowing for dialogue that is grounded in mutual respect, empathy, and co-construction of meaning (Colla & Kurtz, 2024). Such a perspective is particularly relevant in the context of neurodivergence, where dominant modes of communication and knowledge production may marginalise or exclude alternative ways of expressing and understanding experience.

Within educational contexts, narrative-based approaches have gained increasing attention as a means of facilitating meaning-making and connection. Narrative pedagogy, for example, positions learning as a collaborative process in which educators and students engage in reflection and interpretation of shared experiences (Brady & Asselin, 2016). Evidence suggests that narrative pedagogy can promote empowerment, interconnectedness, and the development of meaning as a central component of learning, shifting education away from passive knowledge acquisition toward active, reflective participation (Brady & Asselin, 2016). More recent work further emphasises storytelling as a mechanism through which learners articulate identity, negotiate personal and cultural experiences, and connect individual perspectives with broader social realities (Martins et al., 2025).

Creative and reflective writing practices provide a particularly rich medium for this form of meaning-making. Writing for personal and professional development has been shown to enable individuals to explore complex or inaccessible experiences, including those that may be difficult to articulate through conventional academic discourse (Lengelle et al., 2014). Reflective writing allows individuals to step outside immediate experience and consider alternative viewpoints, while reflexive writing extends this process by inviting the exploration and embodiment of multiple selves and perspectives. In this sense, writing becomes not merely a tool for communication but a space for experimentation, identity work, and transformation (Lengelle et al., 2014). Similarly, poetic and narrative forms of writing have been shown to support meaningful literacy and identity expression, particularly in contexts where language, culture, and personal experience intersect (Iida, 2016).

Narrative structures support the generation of new ideas, actions, and strategies, suggesting that storytelling plays a fundamental role in human creativity and adaptation (Fletcher et al., 2023). In educational contexts, this aligns with research highlighting the role of narrative creativity and written expression in fostering cultural understanding, empathy, and respect for diverse perspectives (Portnova et al., 2020). Through storytelling, individuals are able to connect personal experiences with shared human values, creating spaces for dialogue that extend beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries.

At a time when many voices risk being marginalised or lost within dominant academic discourses, narrative approaches provide a means of reclaiming and amplifying diverse experiences. In this piece of work, neurodivergent individuals are active contributors to knowledge, not subjects of a study. By



emphasising relational, embodied, and co-constructed forms of knowledge, storytelling has the potential to reshape how educators—and, increasingly, students through student–staff partnerships—engage with meaning-making processes.

## 2. Methodology

### Writing Apart, Together: The AcWriMo Project

In November 2025, we came together as part of *Academic Writing Month* (#AcWrMo), an international initiative that emerged and flourished during the height of Twitter’s academic communities. The premise is simple but powerful: to carve out dedicated time for writing within a supportive, collective structure. Our contribution sat within the broader *Creative Pedagogies* consortium, an evolving international network of educators (spanning the UK, the US and, increasingly, other global contexts) who share an interest in reimagining teaching and learning through creative practices and methods (see Appendix 1).

Within this consortium, participating institutions propose projects that invite colleagues into shared writing experiences. These projects vary in form: some offer daily prompts to spark individual writing, while others take a more collaborative, exploratory approach, such as capturing and reflecting on classroom experiences. Our project invited participants into a four-week, structured process of story writing, centred on the theme of neuroaffirming practice.

The project emerged from an authentic, practical and pedagogical challenge: how to design professional learning that meaningfully engages educators with neurodiversity and inclusive teaching. Rather than relying solely on definitional or compliance-based approaches to learn about neurodiversity, this initiative sought to centre lived experience. Specifically, it invited educators to reflect on their own encounters with neurodiverse students and colleagues, and to render these experiences as stories. For this project, five educators and academics from the UK and Australia expressed interest in participating, of which four were happy to share their stories; extracts from these are shared in the Findings section. In doing so, the project positioned storytelling not only as a reflective tool, but as a potential resource for future professional learning; one capable of fostering empathy, critical reflection, and a shared community of inquiry.

The structure of the project mirrored a classic three-act narrative arc (Field, 1979), coordinated across four weeks. Participants who registered for the programme received a weekly email introducing each stage of the process and guiding their writing:

Week One, *the set-up*, focused on establishing the narrative world. Participants were prompted to consider characterisation: who is present in the story, and how do they identify (as neurodiverse or neurotypical)? What is the setting, and who is telling the story? Importantly, this stage encouraged writers to attend closely to behaviours, emotions, and underlying assumptions, laying the groundwork for reflective depth.

Week Two, *the confrontation*, introduced narrative tension. Participants were asked to identify an inciting incident or catalyst: an event that disrupts the status quo and presents a challenge or moment of change. This need not be dramatic in a conventional sense; participants were equally encouraged to explore moments of surprise, discomfort, or even joy that reveal something significant about teaching and learning relationships.

Week Three, *the resolution*, turned toward meaning-making. Here, participants were invited to articulate what had shifted: What was learned? How had perspectives or practices changed? What insights or advice might be offered to others? This stage foregrounded the connection between narrative and professional growth, positioning reflection as both personal and pedagogical.



Finally, Week Four focused on *presentation*. In keeping with the ethos of the Creative Pedagogies consortium, participants were encouraged to consider how their stories might be communicated in creative and engaging ways. This extended beyond traditional academic prose, opening possibilities for multimodal expression and challenging conventional assumptions about what constitutes “academic writing.”

Central to the project was the principle of writing in community. Participants were invited not only to write individually, but to share, respond, and develop ideas collectively. A digital platform (Padlet, see Appendix 2) was used throughout the month to facilitate this exchange, resulting in a rich and varied collection of story fragments, reflections, and emerging narratives. The process underscored the generative potential of communal writing practices, where ideas are not only expressed but shaped through interaction with others. The participants' willingness to share openly created the conditions for others to take creative risks they may not have taken alone.

At the conclusion of the month, we found ourselves with a compelling archive of story ideas and a shared sense of the project's value. This prompted a new set of questions: What might these stories become? How might the collection grow, perhaps to include students, or interdisciplinary teams? How could it be mobilised as a resource for teaching and learning?

This article represents our first step in responding to these questions. It captures the project in its catalyst phase, offering an account of its design, intentions, and early outcomes, while also gesturing toward its potential as an ongoing, collaborative endeavour.

### **Methodological Approach: Collaborative Autoethnography and Poetic Inquiry**

The project adapted a collaborative autoethnographic approach, combining individually authored reflections into a shared, dialogical inquiry (see Appendix 3). The authors of this article are the participants of this collaborative. Collaborative autoethnography enables researchers to draw on personal experience while engaging in collective meaning-making, situating the self within broader cultural, social, and institutional contexts (Chang et al., 2013; Adams et al., 2015). In this work, each contribution is written independently, yet brought together to form a layered, multi-voiced narrative that reflects both convergence and tension across perspectives regarding their experience of neurodiverse education. This approach aligns with person-centred and participatory traditions, emphasising lived experience as a legitimate and valuable source of knowledge.

Alongside this, the study incorporates poetic inquiry as a means of extending beyond conventional academic discourse. Creative writing allows for ambiguity, emotion, and non-linear expression, capturing aspects of experience that may resist standard analytical representation (Prendergast, 2009; Faulkner, 2020). The methodology embraces a degree of Dadaist playfulness—disrupting coherence, resisting rigid structure, and valuing fragmentation as a productive space for meaning-making. Rather than seeking a singular, unified account, the juxtaposition of creative and reflective pieces invites readers into an open, interpretive process, where knowledge emerges through resonance, contrast, and relational engagement.

## **3. Results / Main Findings**

### **Our Stories of Neuroaffirming Teaching and Learning**

In this section, four individual narratives are explored (see Appendix 3 for full narratives) Each piece was independently authored, reflecting the distinct voice, experience, and perspective of each contributor. We have chosen some specific extracts from these narratives for the purposes of reflection and discussion. Alongside these narratives, brief reflective commentaries are included, offering insight into the authors' writing processes, intentions, and interpretations. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how participant contributions unfolded across the month, capturing the collaborative writing space from which the narratives in this section emerged.



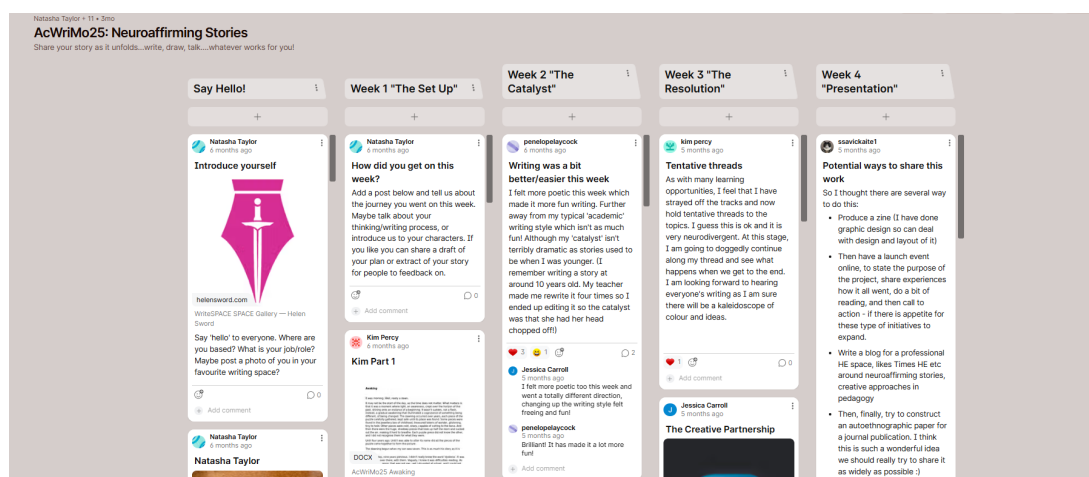


Figure 1. Participant contributions to the AcWriMo shared writing space (Padlet)

### Narrative 1 - A dialogue between oneself

The narrative is structured as a dialogue between two voices - "me" and "you" - which together reflect the multiplicity of self and the ongoing negotiation of identity. This dialogic structure allows for the exploration of uncertainty, contradiction and self-questioning. For example, the opening exchange immediately situates the reader within a space of ambiguity and inquiry: *"Me: Who am I speaking to right now?"* followed by the response, *"You: I'm not sure you fully know who I am. Still, you try."* This interaction highlights a central tension within the narrative - the difficulty of fully knowing oneself and the simultaneous drive to understand.

Throughout this extract there are recurring oscillations between connection and withdrawal - a theme that reflects broader human experiences of belonging and difference. The narrator reflects: *"I want to think I don't want to belong at the core. As if I am another species, not human."* This statement illustrates the tension between a desire for autonomy and an awareness of the fundamentally social nature of human existence. The counterpoint is introduced through the dialogic voice, which challenges this position and reframes it as part of a shared human condition.

The narrative does not resolve these tensions but instead dwells within them, allowing space for complexity and contradiction. This is particularly evident in the exploration of internal worlds as both sanctuary and risk: *"I think it's a sanctuary. When I'm alone, I feel calm... well, until I start thinking of other people."* Here, solitude is positioned as both restorative and destabilising, reflecting the layered nature of internal experience. The imager of the *"field of tall grass on a steep cliff"* further exemplifies how sensory and embodied descriptions can communicate experiences that may be difficult to articulate through conventional academic language.

This story also engages explicitly with themes of identity and difference, including reference to neurodivergence as an ongoing and pervasive aspect of experience: *"It's not 'again.' It's always. It's the filter, the volume knob, the way my neurons hum when others rest."* This framing shifts neurodivergence from a situational label to a fundamental mode of being. At the same time, the narrative resists reductive categorization by situating these experiences within broader existential concerns, such as the desire to be understood: *"I want to be understood. There's a difference."*

A further theme emerging from this narrative is the notion of visibility and recognition. The narrator reflects on relational experiences through the metaphor of being a *"floater"*, someone present but not prioritised: *"I was always the keen friend... But no one ever did that for me. I was always forgotten."* This articulation captures a nuanced experience of partial belonging, where individuals are included but not fully seen. Such experiences are not limited to any single population and may resonate across different contexts, including educational environments.



This story demonstrates how creative writing can function as a space for exploring internal dialogue, identity and relation positioning. Individual experiences are presented as fluid, fragmented and multi-voices and this enables a form of meaning making that is personal and broadly relatable.

## **Narrative 2 - Learning from neurodivergent people**

Many educator careers are shaped by the neurodivergent people in their lives - in both their industries and in teaching and learning spaces. The shaping is often quiet and cumulative, many educators carry stories that are powerful, formative, relational and the AcWriMo project offered me a structured occasion to surface them.

My narrative starts with three concepts - an early classroom encounter, a professional creative partnership and a student who couldn't submit their work. Each one carried a version of the same question: what has the narrator learned from the neurodivergent people in their life? The narrator has observed their peers' sharing stories and, as they modelled vulnerability, it shaped the direction of their thinking. The asynchronous structure of the month-long project meant the narrator could sit with their work, return to it and reorient themselves. Something shifted as the narrator began to experiment with expressive writing and the group's stories became a lens through which they could see their own narrative differently.

Nørgård et al (2017) argue that playful approaches in higher education open space for reflective risk-taking, experimentation, play and learning through making. My story surfaced - through open prompts and exploration without predetermined outcome - as a poem. This kind of poetic inquiry created conditions for a different kind of engagement with the experience, one that moved toward meaning.

*Fitting as I write, wind underneath.*

*Steel bird in the sky.*

*People were drawn to your unique creative energy and focus.*

*Your drive. Your unquenchable thirst to create. To express.*

*Your meticulous organisation and focus.*

*Until it was perfect. It stayed in the cloud.*

*I learned to wait. Be patient.*

*Let the process unfold.*

*Let you envisage and create.*

*You taught me a new side of creativity.*

*You pushed me forward.*

Poetic inquiry as a method condenses experience, attends to the connotative and ambiguous and creates the conditions for a different kind of knowing to emerge. This quality of attentiveness to what is not yet named is also at the heart of neuroaffirming practice. Both require a willingness to sit with complexity rather than resolve it and to stay with experience rather than extract a lesson from it. The poem surfaced tacit knowledge about what it means to learn with a neurodivergent collaborator. What the poem did that my usual reflective writing did not was hold the relationship rather than describe it. By saying less, I found I could stay closer to what was true.



Shulman (2005) identifies habits of heart as central to professional practice in fields that are fundamentally relational, what the poem surfaced was how much of that knowledge had come to me from the neurodivergent people I had worked alongside. It gave me language for a form of relational, reciprocal learning that sits outside conventional professional development. Neuroaffirming practices embody empathy, recognition of difference and a willingness to be changed. Professional development that aims to cultivate those habits must itself create conditions for play, vulnerability, sense-making and creative risk.

### **Narrative 3 - Neuroaffirming teaching practices**

Collaborative autoethnographic storytelling revealed an awareness of how neuroaffirming teaching practices are of value in higher education. By drawing on personal narrative to connect and enrich an understanding of teaching neurodivergent students, the narrator unearthed communal experiences of challenges and strengths through a language of visual representations. This abridged piece of writing reflects the narrator's neurodivergence awakening through their pedagogical approach.

*It was morning. Well, really a dawn.*

*It may not be the start of the day, as time is not relevant. What matters is that it was a moment where light, an awareness, crept over the horizon of the past, shining onto a beginning. It wasn't sudden, not a flash, instead, a gradual awakening of neurodivergence that illuminated a cognizance of something being different. The dawning occurred over years, each piece of the puzzle carefully gathered, kept safe. Some pieces were found in the jewellery box of childhood, treasured tokens of wonder, glistening, tiny to hold. Other pieces were cold, sharp, capable of cutting to the bone. There were the huge, shadowy pieces that took up half the room and sucked out the air, making it hard to breathe. Each puzzle piece did not know the other, and I did not recognise them for what they were.*

*This is the start of my story, and it is probably the start of many people's story. As an artist I draw on a language that communicates with visual stories. It is a language of symbols and metaphors, of colour and line, of light and dark. Visual language speaks heart to heart, mind to mind, by passing the defiance of words.*

*By the time I was in my thirties, I had survived the Y2K bug and discovered the freedom of country-life in a wee cottage climbing with roses. I still didn't know why I found spelling hard, why I missed details in emails, why instructions were like a foreign language or why seemingly easy tasks were like scaling a mountain. But I began to find ways to make things easier and found strategies to succeed. I built a ladder to climb out of the well with tools to forge different decisions. I discovered that I was something more than deficit.*

*I am now a teacher, an educator, a guide and a mentor. When I first started teaching, I had very little idea of what I was doing. My beginning was a baptism of fire. I had no guidance, or mentorship yet I met the classroom with ideas and experimented with techniques. Some worked, some failed.*

*When I began teaching art and design, my neurodivergent puzzle pieces were still nebulous, floating around in the corners of my mind. By this stage, I had compartmentalised them into manageable quirks and meaningful curios. Meeting a range of art students, I recognised a familiarity with my experiences, the way I thought and how they worked.*

*I use empathy as the starting block for teaching. Finding ways to connect to each student is a genuine joy and a privilege. As my knowledge of dyslexia and other neurodivergence grew, the challenges, the successes and the rationales my students approached their studies made sense.*

*My students are a collection of puzzle pieces within my story. But instead of hiding away in the shadows, I hold these pieces to the light, to be admired, cherished and learnt from. My students are pieces of me, echoing my dawn of awareness, and each carry with them a reflection of who I am as a neurodivergent and as a teacher. There isn't one student who has been the catalyst for change, instead each relationship has added colour to my puzzle. As my neurodivergence has gained depth and filled*



*the crevices of my understanding, my capacity to connect and understand the challenges and successes of each of my students has become brighter, sharper and more in focus.*

Writing this reflection has revealed the impact neurodivergence has upon teaching and how narrator connect with my students. Narrator's PhD research informed that there is a higher than average prevalence of neurodivergent students in art and design, especially dyslexics (Percy, 2025; Steffart, 2009; Wolff & Lundberg, 2002). For this reason, being dyslexic has enabled the narrator to empathise with students, and they have developed methods to strengthen positive neurodivergent attributes in the university classroom such as problem solving, visual spatial awareness and multidimensional thinking (Hewlett, 2018). Connecting with other pedagogical voices through this writing project has sparked mindfulness across disciplines and bridged geographical spheres.

#### **Narrative 4 - Neuroaffirming supervision and support**

My narrative is based on my supervisory experience teaching Social Policy at the University of Glasgow.

The narrative begins by foregrounding the role of space in shaping teaching and learning. It opens with the observation that *"it is often hard to find a sense of calm in a university setting. Offices are old and tired; chairs don't quite align with desks; windows let in more cold than light."* This situates supervision within environments that are not designed for reflection or relational engagement. In contrast, the story introduces an alternative pedagogical space. *"In the physical academic world of Bute Gardens, however, a different kind of space exists."* This room is described as *"larger, less rigid than the standard academic office,"* created with the intention of being *"part office, part meeting room, but also something more, a space that feels welcoming to anyone who enters."* The emphasis shifts toward relational design through the description *"A space that holds people rather than directs them."* Such attention to the environment reflects inclusive approaches that anticipate variation in how students engage with learning.

Within this space, the supervisory relationship unfolds. Over time, *"the room becomes a physical manifestation of a safe space, somewhere I can observe and guide, but also somewhere the student can think aloud, pause, and return to ideas without pressure."* This reflects trauma-informed pedagogical approaches, where safety and transparency support engagement (Carello and Butler, 2015). It also reinforces a key point: inclusive teaching does not require students to identify or disclose themselves as neurodivergent but instead involves designing learning conditions that support a range of needs.

Rather than attributing difficulty to the student, the narrative reframes it as a pedagogical issue. I begin *"recalibrating. Slowing down. Asking different questions,"* shifting toward a more dialogic approach. The interaction becomes collaborative. *"What if we start here, what stands out to you in this quote? What makes it similar to another? What would happen if we grouped these together?"* Hypothetically, *"I sketch the socioecological model on paper, mapping their data onto its layers, as a shared exercise."* What emerges is not deficit but need. *"Not a lack of ability, but a need for clarity and guidance that is explicit rather than assumed."* The student *"requires structured support as a way into the complexity of the task."* This aligns with inclusive pedagogical approaches that emphasise clarity and scaffolding as beneficial to all learners (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). From a neuroaffirming perspective, such structure supports access without requiring disclosure.

The narrative foregrounds the relational tensions inherent in supervision. *"Academic rigour and compassion."* I reflect, *"I do not want to over-direct, but nor do I want to leave the student navigating ambiguity alone."* Gradually, *"the student begins to articulate connections, tentatively at first, then with more confidence,"* and *"what had seemed like a barrier becomes, slowly, a point of entry."* This highlights learning as a process shaped through time and compassion.



## 4. Discussion / Implications

### What Stories Do: Reflection, Meaning-Making and Tacit Knowledge

Throughout this project, storytelling functioned as more than a mode of expression; it became a method for surfacing assumptions, making meaning, and accessing forms of tacit knowledge that often remain unarticulated in conventional academic discourse. Through the act of playful writing, participants were prompted to revisit familiar experiences with renewed attention examining not only what happened, but how it was interpreted, felt, and understood in retrospect. In this sense, stories created a space for reflective practice that is both critical and generative, enabling educators to notice the implicit beliefs and practices that shape their work. Storytelling, therefore, offers a way of working with complexity, holding ambiguity, contradiction, and emotion alongside analysis while also making such knowledge visible and shareable within a scholarly community.

### Storytelling as Community Practice

While the reflective dimension of storytelling is significant, this project also highlighted its relational potential. The process of writing and sharing narratives during AcWriMo fostered the development of a relational, cross-institutional community of practice. Through the exchange of personal and creative work, participants engaged in individual reflection and in collective meaning-making, where stories became sites of connection, recognition, and dialogue. Storytelling, in this context, functioned as a social practice, bringing together diverse voices across institutional boundaries and creating a shared space in which experiences could be articulated, witnessed, and responded to. Such practices align with the notion that learning and knowledge production are inherently social, emerging through participation and interaction within a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

This emergent community reflects key characteristics of communities of practice, including mutual engagement, shared repertoires, and a joint enterprise grounded in writing as both process and product (Wenger, 1998). The act of sharing narratives—particularly those that are personal, creative, or non-traditional—encouraged trust, vulnerability, and reciprocity among participants, strengthening relational bonds. In this way, storytelling extends beyond individual expression to become a collaborative, meaning-making activity that supports both personal and collective development. It also resonates with broader understandings of narrative as a tool for fostering empathy and connection (Bruner, 1991; Frank, 2010).

Importantly, the cross-institutional nature of this initiative highlights the potential of storytelling to create informal yet meaningful networks of support and exchange. By engaging in shared creative practice, participants contributed to a distributed and inclusive community that values multiple forms of knowledge and expression. This reflects growing recognition within higher education of the importance of collaborative, participatory, and relational approaches to scholarship (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

### Implications for Academic Development (and Teaching)

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate an important implication for academic development and professional learning in higher education, particularly in relation to fostering reflective, relational, and creative pedagogical practices. If, as this project suggests, storytelling can surface tacit knowledge, deepen reflection, and build relational communities, then it offers a valuable approach for fostering reflective, relational, and creative pedagogical practice.

Engaging educators in storytelling and creative inquiry offers a space to critically examine their own identities, assumptions, and positionalities within teaching and research. As highlighted in narrative



inquiry literature, such processes are not without tension; they require educators to navigate issues of credibility, authority, and vulnerability, which are often underexplored in formal professional development contexts (Bacova & Turner, 2023; Clandinin & Caine, 2013). However, it is precisely this engagement with vulnerability that can deepen reflective practice, enabling more authentic, empathetic, and contextually responsive approaches to teaching.

Positioning narrative and creative practices within academic development also aligns with broader shifts towards participatory, inclusive, and person-centred pedagogies in higher education. By first embedding these approaches within educator-focused spaces, this study highlights the importance of creating supportive environments where practitioners can experiment with alternative forms of expression and knowledge-making. This preparatory work is critical before extending such methods into student–staff partnerships, where power dynamics, assessment structures, and institutional expectations add further complexity (Healey et al., 2014; Matthews, 2017). In this sense, working with educators as participants allows for a more nuanced understanding of the affordances and challenges of narrative-based approaches, supporting more thoughtful and ethically grounded integration into teaching practice.

Furthermore, these findings contribute to ongoing discussions around academic identity and professional learning as socially situated and continuously evolving processes. Creative and narrative methodologies can support the development of communities of practice that value dialogue, reflexivity, and multiple ways of knowing, thereby challenging dominant norms of academic writing and knowledge production (Wenger, 1998; Barnett, 2009).

## 5. Limitations

This study has some limitations. Participants were from a range of disciplines and roles across universities in the UK and Australia, and all were English-speaking, which may limit the transferability of findings to other linguistic and cultural contexts. While some participants were from creative arts disciplines, most were not, and no prior experience with creative writing or storytelling was assumed. All participants, however, had an existing interest in neurodiversity and education, which may shape the perspectives represented. The project was exploratory in nature and did not seek to formally evaluate the efficacy of storytelling on knowledge or skill development. Rather, it represents an initial phase of a larger, ongoing inquiry.

We acknowledge the contributions of the additional participants in the project whose story artefacts do not feature in this specific article. All participants were invited to contribute, but some declined due to workload commitments.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, our project suggests that storytelling is not simply an adjunct to academic development, but a meaningful practice in its own right. The authors, by immersing themselves in narrative storywriting around neurodivergent teaching, have formed a community of practice that weaves diverse and experiences voices into academic discourse. In doing so, the work engages with established epistemological approaches to knowledge-making through experimentation with written form, leaning towards possibilities for inclusion and diversity rather than prescribing fixed models, and offering instead an alternative mode of educative, pedagogical exploration.



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### **Appendix 1: Webpage link to Creative Pedagogies**

<https://sites.google.com/view/creativepedagogies/2025-collaborations/neuro-affirming-stories>

### **Appendix 2: Link to the padlet**

<https://osf.io/pfxke/files/2kr3u>

### **Appendix 3: Webpage link to OSF for full narratives**

<https://osf.io/pfxke>

