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Navigating the Social-Emotional Landscape of Neurodiversity in AI Education

Ren Butler, Carnegie Mellon University

Ren Butler is a Ph.D. student in Human-Computer Interaction at Carnegie Mellon University. Ren researches psychological safety in neurodiverse AI engineering teams. Ren aims to discover design principles for software development tools that support psychological safety among engineers with social and emotional differences. These principles can foster team learning, well-being, and productivity.

Dr. D. Matthew Boyer, Clemson University
Andrew Begel, Carnegie Mellon University

Dr. Andrew Begel, PhD is an Associate Professor in the Software and Societal Systems Department at Carnegie Mellon University. Prior to this, he spent over 16 years as a Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research. Andrew's goal is to create inclusive workplaces where all people, especially those with disabilities and the neurodivergent, can be successful, without discrimination. His recent work has helped people on the autism spectrum gain employment and facilitate social interaction, helped blind software developers collaborate with their sighted colleagues, and used affective computing and biometrics to better understand how software developers do their work.

Rick Kubina, Pennsylvania State University
Prof. Somayeh Asadi, University of Virginia
Taniya Mishra
JiWoong Jang, Carnegie Mellon University

Joon is a Ph.D. student at CMU's School of Computer Science, where he focus on understanding, designing, and building AI-equipped assistive technology (AT) and how such tools affect and alter existing social dynamics in intro- and extra-spective ways – tackling stigma, user-assimilation, and the AT adoption/abandonment problem through his research.

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Introduction

Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into education and industry has created unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges for learners and educators. While AI education has emerged as a critical pathway for developing technical competencies needed in the evolving workforce, current pedagogical approaches often fail to address the nuanced social and emotional dimensions of learning, particularly for neurodivergent students. This oversight represents a significant barrier to achieving meaningful inclusivity in fields where cognitive diversity drives innovation.

The convergence of AI education and neurodiversity presents a compelling area for investigation. Neurodivergent individuals, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and other cognitive variations, often possess exceptional capabilities in pattern recognition, detail orientation, and innovative problem-solving. However, their potential contributions to AI and related Computer Science fields remain largely untapped due to persistent systemic barriers. Employment statistics underscore this disparity: while the general U.S. unemployment rate approximates 3.5%, the rate among autistic adults exceeds 85% despite their aligned technical aptitudes [1].

Current AI education practices primarily emphasize technical skill acquisition at the expense of developing crucial interpersonal and collaborative competencies. This myopic focus creates particular challenges for neurodivergent learners, who may require targeted support in developing the social and communicative skills essential for success in collaborative work environments. Educators often lack adequate preparation and resources to create genuinely inclusive learning spaces that support the holistic development of neurodivergent students.

In this study, we examine the intersection of social-emotional learning (SEL) and neurodiversity within AI education through the lens of a specialized summer training program for neurodivergent community college students. By analyzing qualitative data from program participants and instructors, we investigate three primary questions:

1. What challenges do instructors encounter when supporting neurodivergent students in AI education?
2. How do social and emotional factors shape the learning experiences of neurodivergent students in AI?
3. What strategies effectively foster inclusive learning environments for neurodivergent learners?

Through this investigation, we aim to advance understanding of how social-emotional factors influence educational experiences of neurodivergent students in AI and to develop evidence-based recommendations for professional development and curricular design. This research contributes to the broader goal of creating more equitable and effective educational paradigms in AI that leverage, rather than minimize, neurocognitive diversity.

Literature Review

Neurodiversity and Educational Contexts

Recent scholarship has shifted away from deficit-based models of cognitive difference toward recognizing neurodiversity as a valuable source of human variation [2]. This shift emphasizes the unique cognitive strengths often exhibited by neurodivergent individuals, particularly in domains requiring pattern recognition, systematic thinking, and precise attention to detail. Research demonstrates these capabilities align notably well with the cognitive demands of computer science and artificial intelligence [3]. Traditional academic structures frequently create barriers that obscure these strengths, particularly when rigid pedagogical approaches fail to accommodate diverse learning styles and communication preferences.

Studies examining educational outcomes for neurodivergent learners highlight a persistent gap between cognitive potential and academic achievement [4]. This disparity stems largely from systemic barriers, including inflexible assessment methods and limited accommodation options. Without explicit instruction in navigating social and professional contexts, many neurodivergent students struggle to translate their technical capabilities into career success [5].

Social-Emotional Learning in Technical Education

Integrating SEL frameworks into technical education has become a critical strategy for creating inclusive learning environments. SEL encompasses the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, which are competencies particularly vital for neurodivergent learners [6]. Research indicates that SEL interventions can enhance academic outcomes and social integration, though implementation in STEM fields remains limited [7, 8] Traditional STEM curricula often emphasize technical competency at the expense of emotional intelligence and collaborative skills. This imbalance becomes problematic in project-based learning environments, where team dynamics and communication skills significantly influence outcomes [9]. Studies of diverse technical teams suggest that enhanced emotional and social competence contributes substantially to group performance and innovation [10].

AI Education and Universal Design

We describe AI education as using intelligent systems in teaching and learning. AI can serve as a pedagogical tool or as the object of study. We focus on AI education as learning about the development and application of artificially intelligent software - not only learning *with* AI but also *about* AI.

The emergence of AI technologies has created new opportunities for personalized learning while simultaneously highlighting persistent challenges in educational accessibility. Research examining AI education programs reveals a critical need for explicit instruction in collaborative skills, particularly within project-based learning environments [11]. Borsotti et al. found that the design of the student-mentor selection process at a university created an invisible social access barrier for students with anxiety disorder [20]. Social structures impact student function; instructors must design project-based AI education as a social structure that supports all students.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles offer a promising framework for addressing accessibility challenges, emphasizing flexible instruction methods and multiple student engagement means [12]. UDL practices relate to beneficial student outcomes such as increased

social and academic inclusiveness, autonomy, and self-efficacy [20]. These outcomes are crucial for neurodivergent students, who face additional barriers to developing these skills. As UDL practices reinforce neurodivergent strengths and remove barriers, students receive more avenues to improve essential skills. Programs integrating technical instruction with structured social skills training demonstrate the potential for more inclusive AI education models [13]. Successful implementation requires careful attention to the diverse sensory and cognitive needs of neurodivergent learners, including considerations for processing time, communication preferences, and environmental factors [3, 14]. However, AI education research lacks insights into the challenges instructors face when promoting inclusion in the unique context of AI education.

Emotional Labor in Inclusive Education

Implementing inclusive educational practices places significant demands on educators, who must navigate complex classroom dynamics while supporting diverse student needs. Research indicates that teachers often feel inadequately prepared to create emotionally supportive environments for neurodivergent learners, citing gaps in professional development and institutional support [15].

The emotional labor required to manage classroom interactions, provide individualized support, and facilitate communication in neurodiverse teams often goes unrecognized [16]. This invisible workload contributes to educator stress and burnout, particularly when institutional structures fail to provide adequate resources and support systems [17]. Studies of successful inclusive programs highlight the importance of comprehensive professional development that addresses both the technical and emotional aspects of teaching neurodivergent students [18].

AI Summer Training Program

Developing inclusive pathways into artificial intelligence careers requires careful attention to technical competency and social-emotional development. This study examines a novel training program to support neurodivergent community college students through integrated technical and interpersonal skill development. Building on best practices for neurodivergent workforce inclusion, the program combined intensive technical training with structured internship experiences at firms specializing in neurodivergent employment.

Program Structure

The initiative spanned twelve weeks, beginning with a four-week virtual training phase (20 hours/week) and an eight-week paid internship (40 hours/week) at partner technology firms. Student recruitment targeted community colleges nationwide through disability service offices, neurodiversity affinity groups, and the College Autism Network. Eligibility required completing two introductory programming courses and one mathematics course, preferably in statistics.

Technical instruction leveraged SureStart's established AI curriculum, enhanced with specialized adaptations for neurodivergent learners. Students engaged with machine learning principles through hands-on exercises in Python, working with frameworks including TensorFlow and Keras. The curriculum emphasized responsible AI design, particularly addressing machine learning bias, a critical consideration given emerging research on algorithmic fairness. Project

work spanned affective computing, computer vision, and natural language processing using industry-standard tools, including GitHub and Jupyter Notebooks.

Pedagogical Approach

The program's pedagogical design reflected the current understanding of neurodivergent learning preferences. Technical content delivery incorporated frequent active learning exercises, think-pair-share methodology, and sustained engagement with specific data types based on student interests. This approach aimed to maintain deep engagement while supporting diverse processing styles and attention patterns. Graduate student mentors, trained in "Mentoring across Differences," facilitated team projects and guided students in developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and collaborative skills. This integrated technical and interpersonal skill development approach differs from traditional computing education models.

Support Systems

The program implemented a multi-layered support structure. Students worked in consistent teams throughout the training phase, fostering community through shared project work and peer learning. A Discord server facilitated ongoing communication, while twice-weekly career development webinars addressed professional skills, including leadership, interviewing, and multimedia communication. During the subsequent internship phase, weekly online social meetings and mentor-led discussion sessions helped students process workplace experiences and maintain peer connections.

Building on best practices in neurodivergent workforce development, the program emphasized explicit instruction in workplace navigation skills. Mentors received specialized training in supporting autistic students, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of informed mentorship in technical education. The curriculum structure deliberately balanced independent work with collaborative projects, allowing students to develop teamwork skills while maintaining autonomy over their learning process.

Program Evolution

In its second year, the program will expand to include alumni involvement, with first-cohort students participating in social events and sharing experiences with new participants. This peer mentorship component will add another dimension to the program's support structure, though its impact requires further study. The program's emphasis on technical competency and social-emotional development represents an emerging model for inclusive AI education, which actively addresses the barriers often faced by neurodivergent students in traditional technical training programs.

Methodology

This study investigated the intersection of social-emotional learning and neurodivergent student experiences in AI education through qualitative analysis of a summer training program. The research design emphasized understanding instructor experiences and student outcomes while acknowledging the complex dynamics of inclusive technical education.

Research Context and Design
The investigation centered on a 12-week AI training program serving neurodivergent community college students. Sixteen students participated alongside five instructors, eight industry mentors, and two job coaches specializing in workplace support for neurodivergent individuals. Drawing from established frameworks in design-based research [19], the study examined program implementation through multiple analytical lenses, focusing mainly on adapting technical instruction for neurodivergent learners.

Data Collection
The research employed qualitative interview methods to capture the nuanced experiences of team members with the student participants. Semi-structured interviews with instructors and mentors explored themes including:

- adaptation strategies for diverse learning styles
- management of classroom social dynamics
- assessment approaches in neurodiversity-focused settings
- perceived program effectiveness and challenges

Additional data sources included program documentation and Discord communications.

Analysis Procedures
Thematic analysis followed an iterative approach grounded in design-based research methods. The coding process combined both inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive coding captured emergent themes from participant experiences. Deductive coding examined predetermined areas of interest, including:

- communication challenges and strategies
- emotional labor in instruction
- impact of social-emotional learning activities
- technical skill development patterns

Methodological Limitations
The study's scope, while allowing for deep examination of participant experiences, presents inherent limitations. The sample size and single-program focus constrain generalizability, though they enabled detailed analysis of program dynamics.

Findings
Analysis of instructor interviews and program documentation revealed multiple intersecting themes around the challenges and opportunities in neurodiversity-focused AI education. These findings extend the current understanding of inclusive technical education while highlighting persistent barriers to implementation.

Communication Dynamics and Social Interaction
The program surfaced fundamental tensions between traditional collaborative learning approaches and the diverse communication preferences of neurodivergent students. Instructors consistently noted challenges with student engagement in group settings. One instructor observed: "You could make them react to you if you ask them a direct question, but it's very unclear whether any of them ever communicate with each other without us prompting."

Many students defaulted to minimal interaction, with one instructor noting that "Their default was basically to clam up, turn off the camera, turn off their audio and type in text only when spoken to." This communication pattern aligns with characteristics of autistic learning preferences, though instructors' responses sometimes reflected a limited understanding of neurodivergent communication styles.

Instructional Adaptation and Emotional Labor

The demands of adapting technical instruction for neurodivergent learners created significant emotional labor for instructors. One instructor described the experience as "both rewarding and draining," highlighting the need for sustained attention to student engagement and emotional states. Instructors struggled particularly with assessment and participation expectations. One participant noted: "Other than instructors' testimonials each day, there's no way to tell exactly what really happened in that class."

Student Experiences and Self-Advocacy

The program revealed complex dynamics around disclosure and self-advocacy. Students expressed varying comfort levels discussing their diagnostic status, particularly regarding workplace implications. One participant shared that "some of them private message me and said, 'You know, I want to ask this question anonymously...if I have such and such... pre-existing condition on top of being autistic-like, how do I deal with that in a workplace situation?'"

Students who engaged with the program's structured support systems reported positive outcomes. One noted, "The team exercises helped me understand how to collaborate better, but it was really hard to speak up sometimes, especially when I didn't agree with someone."

Systemic Barriers and Resource Limitations

The compressed program timeline created tensions between technical content delivery and social-emotional support needs. One instructor highlighted this challenge: "I think [presenter] gave a lot of factual information, but... there was a lot of stuff about, just like, how do you actually pay attention to younger students, which is... not something... it's something they were adapting from working with high school and college students who are not, who are neurotypical."

Limited resources and preparation time affected program implementation. Instructors noted insufficient training in neurodiversity-informed teaching practices, reflecting broader systemic gaps in technical education. One instructor emphasized, "The workshops were a good start, but we needed more practical strategies for managing group dynamics and emotional support."

Recognition of Neurodivergent Strengths

Despite implementation challenges, the program highlighted the unique capabilities of neurodivergent learners in AI education. Instructors noted students' strengths in pattern recognition and detailed analysis, though assessment methods often failed to capture these capabilities effectively. One participant observed: “That's when we wanted to know who was good at the particular topic, and that turned out to be like, more about how much the instructors had personally interacted with the student than about any assessment vehicles we have had in the course."

These findings suggest the potential and persistent challenges of creating truly inclusive AI education programs. The experiences documented here point toward needed shifts in pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, and support structures.

Discussion

This study reveals fundamental tensions in creating inclusive AI education programs for neurodivergent learners. While traditional technical education emphasizes standardized assessment and uniform participation metrics, our findings suggest the need for more nuanced approaches that recognize diverse cognitive styles as assets rather than challenges to be overcome.

Beyond Technical Accommodation

The emotional and social dimensions of learning emerged as critical factors in program effectiveness. Traditional assumptions about classroom engagement often conflicted with students' natural communication patterns, creating unnecessary barriers to participation. Rather than viewing diverse interaction styles as deficits, successful instruction required reimagining collaboration and engagement through a neurodiversity-affirming lens.

The documented struggles with traditional assessment methods highlight more profound questions about measuring learning in technical education. When instructors moved beyond conventional metrics to more flexible evaluation approaches, they often discovered unexpected strengths and capabilities in their students. This finding suggests that current assessment practices may systematically undervalue neurodivergent contributions to technical fields.

The Hidden Costs of Inclusion

The emotional labor required of instructors in creating genuinely inclusive learning environments emerged as a significant finding. Beyond technical expertise, educators needed to develop sophisticated emotional intelligence and adaptability skills, often without adequate institutional support or preparation. This gap between institutional expectations and classroom realities created unsustainable burdens on teaching staff.

The compressed program timeline exacerbated these challenges, forcing difficult tradeoffs between technical content delivery and social-emotional support. This tension reflects broader systemic issues in technical education, where institutional structures often fail to accommodate the time and resources needed for meaningful inclusion.

Rethinking Communication and Collaboration

Our findings challenge conventional wisdom about "best practices" in technical education. While structured communication and collaboration remain essential, the study reveals the need for more flexible approaches that accommodate diverse interaction styles. Success required moving beyond simple accommodation to fundamentally rethink how knowledge sharing and teamwork can occur in technical settings.

The program's experience with SEL activities suggests promising directions for integration with technical instruction. When thoughtfully implemented, reflective journaling and structured

feedback created valuable opportunities for skill development while respecting diverse communication preferences.

Systemic Barriers and Institutional Change

The challenges documented in this study point to deeper structural issues in technical education. Limited resources, rigid assessment frameworks, and inadequate professional development create persistent barriers to meaningful inclusion. Addressing these challenges requires institutional commitment beyond individual program modifications.

The experiences of both students and instructors suggest that truly inclusive AI education demands fundamental shifts in how we conceptualize learning, assessment, and professional preparation. While programs like this demonstrate potential paths forward, realizing that potential requires sustained investment in developing new pedagogical approaches and support structures.

Future Directions

These findings highlight several critical areas for future research and development:

- Creating assessment frameworks that effectively capture diverse forms of technical understanding
- Developing sustainable models for instructor support and professional development
- Exploring ways to better integrate social-emotional learning with technical instruction
- Investigating institutional structures that enable rather than inhibit inclusive education

The study demonstrates the possibility and complexity of creating genuinely inclusive technical education programs. Moving forward requires careful attention to pedagogical innovation and the broader systemic changes needed to support sustainable implementation.

Recommendations for Advancing Inclusive AI Education

Drawing from our research findings, we present a comprehensive framework for enhancing inclusivity in AI education, addressing structural, pedagogical, and systemic program development and implementation dimensions.

Pedagogical Infrastructure Development

The foundation of inclusive AI education relies on robust pedagogical infrastructure. Our findings indicate the necessity of comprehensive instructor preparation programs that address the complexities of teaching AI concepts to neurodivergent learners. These programs must extend beyond traditional pedagogical training to encompass specialized methodologies that support diverse learning modalities and communication styles.

Professional development initiatives should emphasize UDL principles, integrating multiple representation modes and engagement pathways. This approach necessitates the development of varied assessment strategies that accurately capture learning outcomes while accommodating diverse expression methods. Implementing project-based evaluations, portfolio development, and reflective practice provides more nuanced insights into student achievement than traditional assessment models.

Social-Emotional Learning Integration

Integrating SEL into technical curricula is critical to successful AI education programs. Our research demonstrates that embedding structured opportunities for developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal competencies significantly enhances learning outcomes. This integration requires careful attention to:

- Structured group dynamics that facilitate meaningful peer interaction while respecting individual communication preferences
- Explicit instruction in collaborative skills that acknowledge and validate diverse interaction styles
- Development of self-advocacy capabilities through targeted workshops and ongoing support mechanisms

Systemic Program Enhancement

Program effectiveness requires systematic attention to structural elements that support inclusive learning environments. Key recommendations include:

- Extended Program Timelines: Implementing flexible program durations that accommodate varying learning paces and allow deeper engagement with complex concepts.
- Resource Allocation: Directing institutional resources toward developing accessible learning materials and adaptive technologies that support diverse learning needs.
- Partnership Development: Establishing collaborative relationships with industry partners committed to neurodivergent inclusion, integrating job coaching and mentorship opportunities into program design.

Research and Evaluation Framework

To ensure continuous program improvement and contribute to the broader field of inclusive AI education, we recommend implementing:

- Longitudinal Assessment: Systematic evaluation of program outcomes through extended timeframes, examining immediate learning outcomes and long-term career trajectories.
- Expanded Scope: Investigating program efficacy across diverse institutional contexts, including four-year institutions and varying STEM disciplines.
- Impact Analysis: Rigorous evaluation of specific interventions' effectiveness in promoting technical competency and social-emotional development.

Implementation Considerations

Success in implementing these recommendations requires institutional commitment to:

1. Creating sustainable support networks for educators managing the complex dynamics of inclusive classrooms
2. Establishing clear communication protocols and feedback mechanisms
3. Developing partnerships with autism self-advocacy organizations and neurodiversity experts
4. Disseminating evidence-based practices through accessible channels

Through systematic implementation of these recommendations, AI education programs can evolve toward truly inclusive learning environments that support the success of all learners while contributing to the development of a more diverse and innovative AI workforce.

Conclusion

This research illuminates the complex interplay between technical education and social-emotional development in AI learning environments, mainly through interactions with neurodivergent student experiences. Our findings demonstrate that effective AI education transcends traditional pedagogical approaches, requiring a fundamental reconceptualization of how we structure learning spaces and support diverse cognitive styles.

The integration of social-emotional learning emerges as a cornerstone of successful AI education programs, not as an auxiliary component but as an essential element that shapes technical comprehension and professional development. This understanding challenges conventional approaches to STEM education that often prioritize technical mastery over holistic student development.

Our investigation reveals that creating truly inclusive AI learning environments demands systemic transformation across multiple dimensions: pedagogical practice, professional development, and institutional infrastructure. The success of programs like the AI Summer Training Program underscores the potential of intentionally designed learning spaces that validate and support diverse cognitive approaches while maintaining high academic standards.

These findings carry significant implications for the broader field of AI education and workforce development. By cultivating learning environments that embrace neurodiversity, we enhance educational outcomes for individual students and enrich the AI field through increased cognitive diversity and innovative problem-solving approaches. This perspective aligns with emerging research on the valuable contributions of neurodivergent individuals in technical fields, particularly in areas requiring pattern recognition, systematic thinking, and creative problem-solving.

As we look toward the future of AI education, our research suggests that the path to excellence lies not in standardization but in the thoughtful cultivation of inclusive spaces that celebrate cognitive diversity. This approach requires sustained commitment from educational institutions, ongoing professional development for educators, and continued research into effective practices that support neurodivergent learners. The transformation of AI education into a genuinely inclusive field represents both a challenge and an opportunity. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this study and maintaining focus on both technical and social-emotional dimensions of learning, we can create educational environments that accommodate and actively celebrate neurological diversity, ultimately strengthening the AI field through increased representation and diverse perspectives. We invite interested colleagues to contact us for collaboration and feedback.

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