

## Why inclusive learning shouldn't always be fun

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### *Presentation abstract*

'I hated every minute of training, but I said, "Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a Champion".' (Muhammed Ali)

A recent blog post on the SEDA educational development forum led to a stimulating discussion about whether learning should be fun (Saunders, 2022). As learning developers, it makes sense to make learning activities enjoyable for students where we can. However, this lightning talk contended that some aspects of learning are unlikely to - and perhaps even cannot - be fun. Indeed, we may limit the inclusiveness of our approach if we fail to address this idea in our work. As such, it is important for learning developers to be clear with students that some aspects of their learning experience may involve struggle and discomfort.

Whilst it is pleasant for us when students end interactions with learning developers feeling reassured and with a smile on their face, it may at times be more helpful to see them leave with a look of grim determination. For example, threshold concepts scholarship identifies dimensions of learning that may require transformation not only of one's understanding but also elements of one's identity. Wrangling with troublesome knowledge within often uncomfortable liminal states of 'in-betweenness' is therefore necessary for students to progress in their understanding or ability (Land et al., 2008).

Drawing on recent educational and learning development discourse, in this talk White argued that recognising that learning cannot always be fun is important in creating an inclusive learning experience for students. Indeed, students can take comfort, confidence, and even a sense of belonging from understanding that their peers and lecturers struggle with some aspects of learning. At times, we may need to 'suffer now' to gain satisfaction

and achievement in the longer term. We need to be up front about this in our interactions with students.

**Keywords:** learning theory; LD pedagogy; threshold concepts; troublesome knowledge

### ***Community response***

White's lightning talk stimulated a thought-provoking question for the community to consider: what kind of pedagogy should underpin our work as learning developers? In their responses, participants emphasised their awareness that students are often deciding to engage with us outside of the formal requirements of their degree courses. It takes confidence for students to approach us in this way. In recognising this situation - and the sense of trust students put into us - learning developers can perhaps fall into the temptation to make it as easy as possible for students to partake in our sessions. In aiming not to scare students off, we may simplify concepts to make our teaching appear 'fun'. Yet, through doing so, participants at the conference questioned whether this approach unintentionally does a disservice to the complexities of the topics we are teaching and, as such, to the students who have sought us out in the first place. Through simplifying ideas and concepts, we may make students feel happy in the moment. But, in turn, we may accidentally stop them from having a more worthwhile and transformative experience in the longer term. Alexander Cuthbert's tweet captures this sentiment: the sugar rush that comes from drinking a fizzy drink, followed by the inevitable sugar crash.

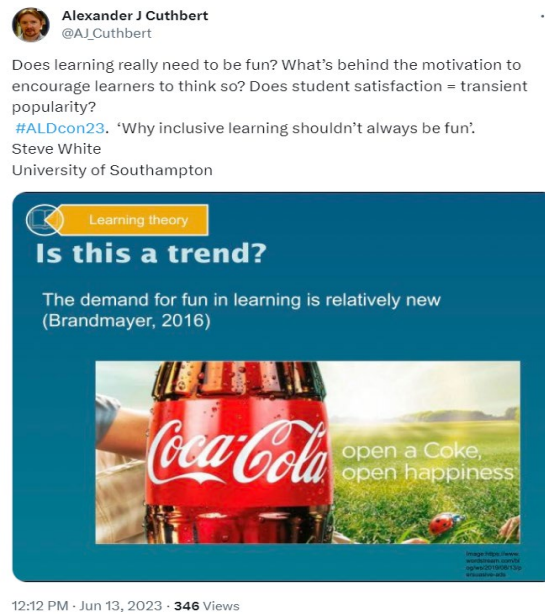


Image: Alexander Cuthbert's tweet. [see: [https://twitter.com/AJ\\_Cuthbert/status/1668576969686958080](https://twitter.com/AJ_Cuthbert/status/1668576969686958080)].

Participants suggested that a focus on short-term happiness could result in an emphasis on 'pedagogies of comfort' and 'pedagogies of service' within learning development. In line with Saunders' (2022) comments, some participants questioned whether these pedagogies presented a dangerous combination that negatively affected students' resilience and lifelong learning abilities. Foregrounding 'pedagogies of discomfort' was posed as one way to encourage students to engage in the 'grim determination' sometimes required to progress and to develop their own learning. This process might not be enjoyable in the short-term. But we can make it clear to students that these challenges will pass: the discomfort can be overcome.

Our teaching can support students to embrace this discomfort. For example, the fostering of 'brave spaces', which were further explored in the conference's resource showcase, was discussed as one such opportunity to encourage difficult conversations as a way to support students' learning (Sillence et al., 2023). Arao and Clemens (2013) developed brave spaces as a challenge to the notion of 'safe spaces', especially the latter's implication that conflict can be minimised or eliminated. Brave spaces emphasise the courage required to engage in genuine dialogue as a prerequisite for learning.

In this way, pedagogies of discomfort are not intended to imply that students are somehow deficient or lacking. It is not about making students feel uncomfortable for the sake of it.

Instead, it is about recognising that we need to acknowledge the place of discomfort within the lives of the students we teach. As Dickinson (2023, no pagination) has eloquently shown, students are currently facing a plethora of concurrent challenges, the solutions to which are beyond their control, including 'the aftermath of Brexit, the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, industrial action and the onset of generative AI'. As learning developers, we cannot just recognise the enormity of these challenges in passing, but instead we must find ways to integrate them into our lived practice to help students to make sense of it all.

Through telling our students the truth that things can be tough, we may unsettle them. Our lack of immediate solutions to their problems will undoubtedly disappoint them in the short term. But we can also reassure them and, over time, build their trust as we guide them through one difficulty and onto the next. Framing our pedagogies in this way does not set out to pander to our students, but, more importantly, it also does not frame them as antagonists (Denial, 2019). Such a pedagogy is not about providing a bootcamp mentality of 'tough love'. Instead, it foregrounds a compassionate approach that is direct and truthful, even if that truth can be uncomfortable to hear and difficult to sit with. As bell hooks (1994, p.43) reminds us: 'There can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches'. Through their encounters with this pain, we can guide our students through the discomfort not through an emphasis on fun but with an overwhelming sense of kindness.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

Participants at the conference emphasised that this paper should be read in tandem with White's paper on threshold concepts in learning development presented at the same conference, as they effectively work together as companion pieces.

Taking the presentations together, we might ask if we can effectively cultivate the trust required from our students to develop meaningful pedagogies within learning development when the nature of our work means we might only meet them during fleeting, one-off encounters. As learning developers, do we face unique complications in trying to go beyond the surface with students when we may only know as much about them as they are willing to share when crossing the (physical or digital) threshold into our sessions? Conversely, does our lack of wider knowledge or preconceptions of the students drawn

from beyond our sessions ameliorate potential risks or barriers that may prevent them from grappling with discomfort when surrounded by peers and in the presence of their lecturers (who ultimately mark their assessments and offer letters of reference at the end of their degrees)?

### ***Author's reflection***

It is hard to reflect on the presentation itself, as the lightning talk seemed to pass in a flash (heehee!). I was nervous about how the talk would be received, but the comments, questions, and subsequent feedback at the conference was, of course, very constructive thanks to the contributions of the learning development community. I have heard from one ALDinHE colleague that their team was not impressed by the idea, and I am happy to have the argument challenged, of course. All I would ask is that if you think learning *should* always be fun, then prove it. Thanks to the contributors above, I now have Mohamed Ali *and* bell hooks on my side—what a team! With the other admittedly somewhat cherry-picked quotes from the presentation, that's Vygotsky, Aristotle, and the *British Journal of Learning Technology* to complete a very promising ALDinHE five-a-side squad.

I really appreciate the additional comments from participants and am glad that participants made the connection between the discussion of threshold concepts and this talk. I would very much welcome further commentary or explanation of that: are we suggesting that 'stop having fun!' is a threshold concept for learning development? I cannot wait to integrate that into the threshold concepts workshop, perhaps as my first example. I am also very thankful for the reference to bell hooks, which I will certainly follow-up in relation to this subject. It is so useful to have these suggestions from the community, as they help develop my thinking and work, even well after the conference has finished. The generosity of the learning development community helps to underscore the value of ALDinHE's innovation in relation to this reflective writing process.

As a further and excellent example of the value of this community approach, the link to Sillence et al.'s (2023) concept of brave spaces (rather than safe spaces) for discussion is a great insight here. It exemplifies another potential threshold concept for students: having challenging conversations can be troublesome, liminal, but also potentially transformative.

It is a great example of how learning might not always be fun, but could potentially be extremely rewarding. I think brave spaces are needed more than ever in universities, communities, families, and even friendship groups to help resist the seemingly accelerating polarisation that can be said to characterise our times. I intend to use this idea in my practice and future writing so, once again, thanks to the contributors for highlighting this insightful link.

## ***Acknowledgments***

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Steve White has been lurking in teaching, learning and research-related third spaces in HE for about 20 years. He worked in interestingly ill-defined roles while developing online MA courses and MOOCs for the University of Southampton, leading him to complete PhD research on the third space in HE. More recent roles have straddled Learning Development and Educational Development at Arts University Bournemouth and the University of Southampton.

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