Seeking Refuge: A Community Educator's Reflections on Neurodivergent Teaching and Hope

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Abstract

How does art help to engage youth, and how can educators help create spaces where art can be created in ways that are critical and that connect with everyday life? In this reflective narrative essay, Courtney Fowler, a community educator and performer, shares her approach to teaching and learning by exploring her experiences with the *Blackout* Project. The piece examines how shame-free spaces can help neuroqueer youth use art to affirm their identities and to frame complex issues through storytelling and artistic performance.

Keywords: neurodivergence, neuroqueer, community-based arts education, community-educator

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Teaching and Hope

Searching for Hope and Connection

What do I do when I feel hopeless?

I search for hope, and connect with others in my search in the company of many who support and believe in the vision I see for education as a safe, shame-free space of acceptance, autonomy, and agency. I believe in them, and that provided me the hope I needed to continue.

I do not have a degree, nor did I thrive within the current education system. I am someone who traded my emotional regulation and safety for academic success until the burden became too heavy to bear in post-secondary education during my undergraduate music degree. Consequently, writing this paper felt like I was voluntarily retraumatizing myself. I am not afraid to fail, but I am afraid of misrepresenting myself. After experiencing failures within the education system, and as my love for the therapeutic and narrative power of the arts grew, I founded a performance academy that offered experiential, kinesthetic learning opportunities rooted in connection and acceptance. *Courtney Fowler Performance Academy* is a space where students have a choice over what they learn and how they participate.

I created the space that I needed, and I became the listener I craved. Here, in this essay, I call this space 'refuge,' a shame-free learning environment where students can regulate, belong *and* create, without hiding their neurodivergence. I begin with why I see refuge as important, name the practices that help build it, and finally describe how those practices shaped the development of *Blackout.*

Breaking Free from Enclosures

Where to escape, when there is no escape?

Imagine being a deer in an enclosure, thinking you are safe, yet wearing an orange vest that makes you easy to spot. You, a deer, are put in an enclosure with a hunter for hours upon hours a day, with no way out and no resources to help you succeed, with little vegetation to hide. This is how our neuroqueer children feel in our schools, celebrating their uniqueness without 'a place to hide' or 'escape.'

Worse yet, what if the deer's homes are full of hunters? What if their teachers are hunters? What if their sense of threat is heightened because their lived experience has taught them not to trust those in authority, or because they have experienced trauma from not having their voices heard, or their needs met (Ragan, 2020)?

Where do we go, as youth, when we have huge questions that seem incomprehensible to us? Where do we go, as youth, when the answers that we receive scare, frighten, and take on a life of their own? Where do we go, as youth, when the support given to you is perceived as a threat, when trusted adults set off your fight or flight responses, or when you have not been taught how to regulate in a way that works for you emotionally?

Where do we go, as youth, when we have no one living in the home that we trust? Where do we go when we are experiencing body dysmorphia, severe loneliness, yearning to belong, uncertainty about sense of self, a biological need to fit in?

Where do we go, as youth, when school is a place where we see posters celebrating our identity? In the same halls, we experience micro-aggressions, or hateful acts, or violence, or feelings of neglect, or feeling unsupported by watching exhausted adults in working jobs that have no authority to discipline and have not enough resources to support all of the students in their care. What happens when the identity with which we align is being targeted with acts of hatred and violence?

We listen to stories about brilliant humans who made it their mission to have their stories survive. They hid, they protected, they wrote, and their voices lived on. We tell stories to teach them the skills to rise above their 'hunters.' We share stories that answer questions, and we share stories of words of comfort and wisdom that were shared with us. We reach out to the communities of storytellers for support.

Safe space is rarely guaranteed for neurodivergent and neuroqueer students. Refuge begins before instruction; it is relational and begins as a shame-free space to exist where you are accepted as you are. There is no talking about accommodations; they are freely given, whatever you need. Bar none, everyone is accepted.

Then it is the power of stories. When neurodivergent and neuroqueer students share their stories, they carve out a space to exist and relate. Telling your story with others fosters community and belonging. I believe in narrative therapy.

From Rigid Enclosures to Shame-Free Circles

The rigidity, structure, and emphasis on the final product in Western classical music education left me feeling unsupported and isolated. After leaving formal opera studies, I studied at Kindermusik University, where participation is welcome, there is no final product, the journey is celebrated, and classes are centred on connection and regulation. Kindermusik, a research-based music and movement class, introduced me to shame-free learning and acceptance at a time I needed them most.

I learned early on the importance of setting the tone and space for learning. In Kindermusik, we sit in a circle to be on the same level, without any parent or child above or below the others. Every class begins and ends in this circle, to connect with every student as an equal. No one was singled out for needing something different; they were taught to notice objective actions and label them as observations without praise. I often had trouble reassuring parents that their children were behaving in the 'right' way, that, in fact, there was no 'right way,' only each child's autonomous, authentic curiosity, and sense of play (Lillemyr, 2009).

Intention matters for educators as they are the ones who walk in and bring their energy into the classroom. At Kindermusik University, we learn how to position ourselves, what questions to ask others, how and when to check in, and how to show genuine care. We are taught to pay attention to social cues and how to engage with people in a caring manner, especially helpful for those who do not understand social interactions easily. Some neurodivergent thinkers require different explanations, question things differently, and are motivated to learn differently. Understanding what motivates each person changes how we respond as educators.

The Kindermusik classroom usually starts as a blank room; if there isn't one, we minimize distractions. Our job is to hold the attention in the room, and if we let it drop, we have dropped the ribbon. With attention comes responsibility. One must be prepared to direct that attention because once it is given, it is special. We have the power to create magic in those moments. We also talk

about being present in our bodies and how building small, actionable steps creates trust within our bodies that we can do hard things. By keeping steps small enough so that they are achievable, we show people how to believe in themselves, rather than telling everyone they need to fit into the same box to be accepted.

Opening My Own Performance Academy

I enjoyed teaching this way so much that I wanted to transition my entire studio into a play-based (Pyle & Danniels, 2016), wide attention model where the student was the center of the experience. I transitioned to a home-based studio, and within a couple of years, the studio had blossomed into an *Academy for Performance Arts.*

Kindermusik set the framework for shame-free learning, encouraging students to enjoy the journey of being a forever student, to follow their curiosity, and to be the narrators of their own story. I immediately began integrating these methods into my classes with older students in music and theatre education, adapting them to suit the needs of each group. Every student was provided with a role to perform and grow into, regardless of skill level, and learned to support one another through an ensemble-focused approach. Sounds were not judged. Rather than labelling sounds as good or bad, I offered to help students achieve their tonal outcome goals. There was no way to fail. Everyone had an understudy, so there was no pressure to perform.

In my teaching approach, the most important piece of the puzzle was ensuring that every student felt seen, heard, accepted, safe, and able to regulate their emotions. Play and learning cannot happen when basic needs are not met. I had volunteer teaching assistants provide support to the younger students. These volunteers would participate in activities with focused attention, provide alternative solutions for activities that needed accommodations, and take students who could not focus on regulation breaks. This peer support increased student success by improving class conditions and helped assistants deepen their own learning by teaching younger students.

These methods fostered an environment where students were eager, imaginative, and had the agency to create and shape their own material. When they became interested in writing and recording, I opened studio time for them to start learning. When students asked questions I couldn't answer, I would find the necessary resources and often hire professionals to provide professional development and expand our shared knowledge.

My evolving teaching approach emphasized understanding the whole person. To teach or support young people well, I had to understand where they were developmentally since their brains, bodies and sense of self were still forming. Youth development reflects this understanding: young people are building a sense of self, becoming aware of where they are developmentally, and recognizing how their biology makes them vulnerable.

As instructors, we are taught to translate everything into benefits and outcomes: to tell parents the benefits of learning from the activities we do in class, and to communicate the academic research that underpins these courses. In practice, that often means speaking the language of people who are already in education and who possess time and money, because those are the families who can pay and who see education as an investment. However, many youths born into families or other circumstances beyond their control are still deserving of an education. Imagine a young person who is unable to escape their surroundings, their home, their circle, their school, their circle of influence, and who is constantly being told, directly or indirectly, that their needs are too much

or that their voice does not matter. For these students, a safe, creative space can be a refuge, their first experience of being addressed and accepted as a full, worthwhile person.

Developing Blackout in the Light: Finding Refuge

In the shame-free environment we created, students felt safe to be open and honest. In our Pre-Professional Broadway class, I challenged them to write a musical about some difficult experiences they were navigating in school, including trying to make sense of "inclusive" events that did not always feel safe or affirming in practice. Events like Pride Day or joining groups like the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) highlighted differences that aimed to celebrate their communities, yet had become a way to target individuals and students' experiences. This became one of the main plot points in *Blackout the Musical* during our script-writing classroom sessions. Students who aimed to bring harm to the participants of Pride celebrations or GSA meetings had a way to discover their identities by following GSA meetings, so they could be followed on walks home from school, or in other instances where students endured hateful acts due to participating in the meetings. As a result, students were more likely to hide wearing black clothing than celebrate by wearing rainbow clothing during Pride days to avoid being targeted and isolated from the community. Some went so far as to create a Pride Day Protest by wearing black as a group. As a class, we aimed to understand and connect the stories by questioning all students' world views, motivations, traumas, and how their beliefs were shaped to understand why someone would behave this way. We developed connections, compassion, and empathy for all of the characters in our stories and analyzed how each person would have benefited from different supports. All students wanted to connect and feel a sense of belonging within the group as a whole, as opposed to standing out and feeling separated from others. To come back to our neuroqueer students, those wearing black during Pride Day, they felt polarized within the student body they were trying to be a part of. It is also impossible to separate students from the social and political climate that they are witnessing in social settings that polarize their worldview politically and interfere with acceptance as a whole.

Students were presented with questions such as: "Why are queer students joining in Pride protests at school, when the goal of a Pride Day is to celebrate the identity they are hiding from? If these spirit days are not appreciated by queer students, who are they for? What kind of representation, event or public display achieves the goal of fostering safety, affirmation and acceptance?"

Answers to these questions led us to find that many of the students who were applying masking techniques in social settings were also neurodiverse. This intersectionality between the LGBTQAS2+ and neurodivergent communities, or the 'neuroqueer' community, became significant to the musical *Blackout*'s narrative. Students also explored well-intentioned but harmful allyship, and deconstructed the term "bully," including how actions that further isolate the 'bully' rather than rehabilitate or educate them compassionately can polarize both sides, resulting in an "us versus them" dynamic.

Students contributed to the project however they wanted. While we were discussing these topics, students contributed by writing an essay or monologue, submitting art connected to these themes, and writing music and lyrics. There was no wrong way to respond, and submissions and interactions were student-led. Different students excelled in different areas; there were no negative consequences for trying something new, no pass or fail, so this freedom led to exploration. Students developed skills in creative writing, music production, research, choreography, costume and set

design, directing, and stage management, ultimately culminating in the production of the musical before a live audience at LSPU Hall in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Being able to take credit for creating this work, bringing their own stories to life, and seeing and feeling that connection through audience feedback developed new confidence in all the students who participated, regardless of whether they were seen on stage in the final performance or not. The students were empowered by my decision as an educator to give them agency over how they participated and how they created the project, having gone through the whole process of creating, developing, and performing in an original musical. As an educator, my role was to collaborate with students, support their ideas, and provide the resources they needed to succeed, defined as specific, manageable, and achievable goals.

By researching and sharing the benefits of writing musicals with youth and sharing neuroqueer stories, we help legitimize a pedagogy grounded in fostering hope and encouraging others to share their stories. I believe this is meaningful work. Why do I keep bringing up safety concerns? The world is not safe. However, our classrooms must be safe to provide a conducive learning environment. To get to real, deep, passionate learning, we need permission to step away from our unsafe, terrifying world, and within these walls, we can be silly. Not dividing people is important here, but instead focusing on our commonalities and strengths makes all the difference.

Finding Questions and Framing Space

Youth-written theatre initiatives, with adult supervisors acting in good faith to support their learning journey, are student-led and driven by curiosity and kindness. They begin from a place of not knowing the answer to a question and needing to find one. At the same time, it places a responsibility on educators to avoid letting their biases shape how they perceive different student groups and their needs. Since students' behaviours are strongly influenced by their environment and experiences, it's unrealistic to expect children from diverse backgrounds to enter a room and behave the same way with the same level of support.

Theatre and arts-based education are often autoethnographic in nature. In my experience, to tell a story, young people first have to build it by reflecting on their own experiences and organizing into strengths-based groups to tackle the work that needs to be done. Keeping the work in-house gives the youth in the room permission to be creative, learn, ask questions, conduct research, and build the skills they need. This process fosters community, builds self-esteem, and demonstrates how empowering community partnerships can facilitate positive growth.

Intention matters. Don't drop the ribbon. In a world where youth attention is mined by algorithms and context is accessible and engaging, we have to match and meet that expectation. What need is the student expressing? How can the student lead me to understand what they want to experience or learn? Can we explore concepts and grow together? Can we scaffold together, build on those concepts, and receive an individualized learning plan so I can tailor it to your needs, your style, and your passions? Can I learn what excites and motivates you authentically as a human being, and can I use that to thread through our learning?

The point of *Blackout* was not to produce a perfect play with all the right answers. Its purpose was to give students an opportunity to ask questions and search for the answers on their own, in their own way. It invited them to direct their questions out into the world, propelling them on a quest for discovery and encouraging them to tackle hard questions that we do not yet have the answers to. It was about doing memory work the hard way: hands-on, in the flesh, being brave in

the face of failure, celebrating failures and turning them into learning opportunities. A failure is an opportunity to grow by living out these lessons the hard way as a community of learners and educators.

Learning to Trust the Process

Blackout was the result of a safe and creative learning environment. My team and I created a forgiving, affirming space to work in, and tried to become the person who believes in them when they do not believe in themselves. Loneliness stings, and we are biologically programmed to feel the pain of rejection. In neurodiverse people, this pain can be amplified into rejection sensitivity disorder, which can intensify emotional hurt, create mental fog, and overwhelming physical sensations (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). To fight a loneliness epidemic, we build communities that empower each other and provide the support and resources people need to succeed.

To build a community, we have to build its parts, starting with the self. We cultivate a self that is bold enough to question and brave enough to look for honest answers. We build a self that is forgiving, open to learning, and engaged with all types of people to improve and expand their knowledge. These self-building techniques are especially important for neurodivergent learners. As neurodiverse people, we need a space to safely practice new skills in activities in a forgiving environment, with the training and support required to succeed. We need safe opportunities to practice empathy in real-life settings, while making meaningful connections and learning how to put these skills into action.

Theatre, drama, art, and music give a community of people who find it hard to navigate social situations a safe way to practice how to move through complex situations and to connect meaningfully so they do not feel so isolated and alone. Students develop trust in themselves and their abilities. In *Blackout,* I saw what that kind of practice can do. The result was unmistakable, as I witnessed the growth and joy in the eyes of the students who participated. Students thanked me for restoring their agency in learning and for seeing what is possible when given the opportunity.

Too often, educators forget the struggles they encountered in their own learning journeys. Was their education perfect? Would it have been improved with more agency, kindness, a shame-free space, and someone willing to go at their own pace? Was it led by curiosity, joy, and a love of learning? I am grateful for the time I've spent reflecting on my needs and creating space where hope for the future of education can thrive. Having a framework where students can access and apply research to an active project and see results in real time can create hope for the future, where we have our next generation of students empowered, connected, confident, supported and full of dreams, knowing they have the formula for success: to fail, learn, edit, grow, repeat, and then succeed.

We can let today's youth be shaped by the many influencers around them, or we can be involved in their development. We can enrich their lives with knowledge delivered in ways they can understand emotionally, in environments that clearly explain the benefits, and through techniques that allow scaffolding to work. Tiered information helps. So too do tools for thinking critically and looking up trustworthy sources on topics that engage them.

Successful inventors often have a method that involves failing and correcting over and over, much like how an AI learns. We can apply the same principle in education by providing soft,

safe places for failure. I spend a lot of time teaching students that it is okay, and even encouraged, to fail.

When students fail, as educators, it is an opportunity to offer them a skill they can use next time or a tool to add to their toolkit for assessing that problem again. Student-led education means supporting students in pursuing what they are most passionate about and helping them reach their goals (Blum, 2020). For many adults, it is ingrained that they have to do it perfectly, and they are missing one of the most significant learning opportunities by not allowing their bodies the chance to be free, be bold, be silly, be loose; truly engaging with life rather than simply trying to produce it synthetically, plastically, in an artificial way. Whether we are the target of our own violence or the violence of others, the arts have proven to be a medium for self-expression, community, and healing for students I have supported in this process.

What is an escape into the self?

Look to the darkness. Investigate it curiously. The best academics are passionate, or driven, driven mad by a question, a desire.

Where to escape, when there is no escape?

We start by finding those who are hiding in the dark.

Listen to their stories. Let their pain live somewhere else. Let them know their human experience matters, and that their voice can be used meaningfully to communicate (Ragan, 2020).

I had the question: What do I do when I feel helpless?

I hide and write.

The best advocates are full of passion.

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