# Case Study 1: Knowing & Responding to Your Student's Diverse Needs

## Contextual Background

MA Commercial Photography (of which I am course leader) has a diverse, talented, international cohort with varying levels of English, neurodiversity, and confidence in their ability as image makers. During our first unit, Commercial Photography in Practice, we aim to level the students up through extensive technical workshops and seven short, sharp photographic briefs (each with a two-week turnaround). At the end of each brief, students are expected to give a five-minute presentation of their research and authored outputs to a tutor and the cohort.

## Evaluation

In our recent Spring Course Committee, some of our students fed back – via the course reps – that they had felt under too much pressure within Unit 1. I initially wondered whether this may be due to the number of two-week briefs and had planned to reduce them. However, another likely reason has dawned on me. As a neurodiverse practitioner myself, participating in the TPP unit of the PGCert and experiencing the pressure of being observed when teaching (both the cohort and in micro-teaching sessions) reminded me first-hand what it must feel like for our students to 'perform' for the class. Becoming a student again has made me more aware of the additional pressure that repeated group presentations may place on members of our diverse cohort.

Panoptic performativity (Perryman, 2006) teaches us that surveillance – or even the possibility of it – can shape behaviour. For some students, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, being visible can feel like being under scrutiny and can add an extra layer of anxiety.

## Moving Forwards

I am now taking several steps to rework Unit 1: Commercial Photography in Practice, with the aim of reducing pressure on our diverse cohort and giving them more agency over their work and methods of presentation.

Firstly, I will reduce the number of photographic briefs from seven to five. This will allow for two briefs to run over a longer period, enabling a work-in-progress tutorial to take place halfway through. The aim is to ease pressure during the development phase and support students in evolving their ideas in a less intensive, more reflective space.

In response to both student feedback and my own experiences during the PGCert, I am also re-evaluating the expectation that all students present their work verbally to the group. While this format was originally designed to build confidence and critical communication skills, I now recognise that it may privilege certain forms of expression and unintentionally increase anxiety – particularly for neurodivergent or international students.

Drawing on Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally responsive pedagogy, I aim to introduce more inclusive and equitable ways for students to share their work. Presentation should not be narrowly defined. Students will be given the option to present through spoken delivery, recorded video, written commentary, or even by asking a classmate to present on their behalf.

In the spirit of bell hooks' work in Teaching to Transgress (1994), I will move away from traditional classroom hierarchies and invite students to help shape how learning is shared. As hooks writes, "when we teach with love, we are able to offer our students the opportunity to have their experience validated" (hooks, 1994, p. 209). I will also introduce anonymous feedback via [Mentimeter](), so classmates can reflect on and respond to one another's work in a way that feels safe and inclusive. This not only addresses presentation anxiety, but the social pressure of peer feedback.

Additionally, I will incorporate a reflective check-in sign up session halfway through the unit to give students space to voice how they are experiencing the course and suggest any necessary adaptations. As Goodley and Perryman (2022) note, the pressure to be "inspection-ready" can destabilise one's sense of self. I want to avoid recreating this effect in the classroom by promoting openness, flexibility, and care.

Ultimately, my aim is to create a learning environment where students are not performing success, but discovering what success means for them – and how they want to express it.

## References

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