

Learning Neurodiversity and Cognitive Alterity by Doing: A Game-Based Pedagogy for Developing Cognitive Empathy

Rebecchi Kevin

Abstract

This communication presents the design of a 3h lecture-workshop that replaces slide-based delivery with play-based learning to interrogate interculturality, neurodiversity, and cognitive alterity in higher education. The pedagogical aim is to cultivate cognitive empathy (*the ability to understand another person's perspective and mental state, including their thoughts, feelings, and motivations, without necessarily feeling their emotions*) by rendering students' tacit assumptions visible and actionable.

The session combines four main activities: 1/ eliciting preconceptions through a one-word association (neurodiversity, cognitive diversity, autism) followed by micro-fiction (creating an autistic character) to surface stereotypes; 2/ a Duplo construction/reconstruction task with asymmetric information to demonstrate misalignment despite a "shared" language; 3/ a tabletop role-play on cognitive diversity adapted from a chapter accepted in *Games for Higher Education* (book from the University of Stuttgart, Germany), where players play distinct cognitive profiles (e.g., aphantasia, autism, ADHD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, dyslexia) and must leverage strengths and coordinating supports; and 4/ an abridged version of *Sign: A Game about Being Understood* (*Thorny Games*) inspired by the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language to experience communication without speech.

Delivered under cross-linguistic conditions (different first languages between the lecturer and the students and students' uneven English proficiency), the session integrates multimodal instructions. Evaluation relies on an exit questionnaire capturing perceived learning, appreciations, limits, and improvements. At submission, the session is scheduled for the deadline date so no empirical results are yet available. This communication argues that experiential and game-informed pedagogies can foster intercultural understanding and cognitive empathy more effectively than conventional lectures based only on slides.

Keywords: neurodiversity; cognitive alterity; interculturality; play-based learning; role-play; inclusive higher education.

Biography

Rebecchi Kevin, PhD, is researcher and lecturer in education, psychology and communication at the University of Liège (Liège Game Lab, Belgium), University of Lumière Lyon 2 (Development, Individual, Process, Disability, Education research unit, France) and Østfold University College (Development Learning and Psychological Processes research group, Norway). His research interests are neurodiversity, autism, creativity, video games and alternative and inclusive education.