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Heterogeneity and creative expression: A creative writing artistic approach to focus on emotions surrounding disabilities

Abstract:

Does heterogeneity matter in creative expression? If so, what impact do creators and disability have on the *development* of emotive art? Art, of any medium, has the ability to transcend barriers, and therefore it was decided to establish a method to test the skills of gathered creative individuals, to look “beyond convention and prejudice” (Kanari & Souliotou, 2023, p. 294). This paper focuses on collaborative inquiry with members from the Critical Creative Reading and Writing Collective (CCRWC) who have produced and authored the work contained in this paper. Heterogeneity in creativity is significant when investigating the connection between the art, the artist, and the audience. Through methods of applying limitations to our creativity, we produced new pieces of art which demonstrated how limitations can alter the self-perspective of our own creative skills, which was made available through creative inquiry. The outcomes were shared, and positive feedback was sought regarding the differences between the pieces, as interpretation by others can provide new insights for future creativity. Our paper creates a narrative for heterogeneity in the creative space and the importance of continued inquiry when focusing on disabilities.

Biographical note:

Anne Brady-Clark (she/her) works at UniSA College teaching into the enabling programs and the Aboriginal Pathway Program. Anne holds a Master in Arts (Writing and Literature), Graduate Certificate in Professional Writing and a Graduate Certificate in Education Research. Anne has published almost 70 novels (1995–2018) with HarperCollins (Harlequin), which have been translated into over 20 languages. She has commenced her PhD in Education Research at Deakin University.

Chloe Cannell is a writer and ECR who completed her PhD at the University of South Australia. Her PhD explores the challenges of writing underrepresented LGBTQIA+ characters in contemporary young adult fiction. More broadly, she is interested in diversity

in young adult literature, queer writing, and collaborative creative practice research. Her research has been published in *New Writing*, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, *Writing from Below*, and the *Journal of Further and Higher Education*.

Steph Daughtry (she/her) is a multi-disciplinary artist and current PhD candidate within the Creative People, Products and Places (CP3) Research Centre, UniSA Creative, University of South Australia. Steph's research interrogates the viability of a performing arts career in Australia and explores how we can better support artists to sustain their professional creative practice.

Dante DeBono is a PhD candidate at the University of South Australia with the goal of promoting social inclusivity and equality through work focussed on diversifying queer representation in research and creative outputs. Her current thesis is focused on the queer potential of revisionist adaptations in fiction through screenwriting-based practice-led research that has seen the development of a queered modernisation of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. She has been on the central committee for the Gender, Sex and Sexualities Conference since 2021, and is an advisory team member for the UniSA Oral History Hub.

Kendrea Rhodes (she/her) is a visual artist, writer, and Creative Writing PhD candidate at Flinders University. Using Mad Studies as a framework, Kendrea's thesis, "Footsteps and Corridors: Walking with the Asylum Gene", takes a creative approach to the fragmented histories of the Ballarat Asylum in Victoria. Kendrea draws on lived experience, historical research, and creative practice ethnographies. Kendrea's recently published articles appear in *Provenance* journal (Public Record Office Victoria), *Art/Research International*, and *NiTRO Creative Matters*.

Stef Rozitis (they/them), a Masters student researching Early Childhood Educators, is an educated bogan, a casualised academic, a single mother, and a queer tree-hugger. Their varied experiences and fluid social identity have led to a passion for transformative knowledge production. Stef enjoys writing climate-centred or post- human stories based on classics such as *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as poetry that is heavy on wordplay and anger. Stef's previous research explored what is "valuable" university learning for students, as well as a discourse analysis of a video promoting single-sex boys' schools. Stef's interests are social justice, the environment, critical sociology and especially gender.

It was during his high school years that **Eugene Tabios** was first lured by the wonder of the minutiae, discovering and eventually submitting flash fiction to *Sobrang Short Stories*. When he moved from the Philippines to Australia, Eugene decided to pursue a career in humanities, a stark contrast to his initial plan to be an accountant. Since then, he has dedicated himself to discovering new things, studying their intricacies, embracing their fleetingness, and putting them in writing, guided by his mantra to "observe and preserve". He has a BA in English and Creative Writing from the University of South Australia.

Keywords:

Creative research, mental health, disability, heterogeneity, limitations

You can be a little ungrammatical if you come from the right part of the country.
– Robert Frost, 1962

Introduction

As a creative collective of artists, we utilise different mediums for our creative purposes, and come from different backgrounds (Walker et al., 2023; Cannell et al., 2020; Gou et al., 2021; Sandford et al., 2024). Our intersectional experiences allow us to create from what we know, to discuss and understand diversity and the need to bring variability to the data. This creative heterogeneity offers a unique perspective when focusing on creative outputs. Variability provides the opportunity for new understandings, new ways of learning and accepting how others see things differently. Everyone who took part in the creative exercise for this article identifies as neurodivergent and/or having physical and/or mental health challenges. We shared diagnoses related to autism or ADHD, and some shared diagnoses of chronic anxiety and/or depression. We use the word “challenges” rather than “struggles” to continue a positive outlook when faced with adversity. The creative collective provides a safe space where consideration of diversity is encouraged, and discussions of challenging topics are accepted.

Our focus for this work is on the long association between art and disabilities, and how we can use creativity to unpack emotions associated with being disabled. For the purpose of this article, the words “disabled” or “disabilities” will encompass aspects such as physical disabilities and mental health challenges. The key focus is that when you apply a limitation to yourself and are forced to discover a different way of doing something, the opportunity to view disability in a new way presents itself.

For the creative and collaborative writing project, we began with Kanari and Souliotou’s (2023) research on an educational program for children with disabilities who had the opportunity to view a travelling art exhibition at a museum in Greece, in which the artworks were created by disabled and non-disabled artists. After the exhibition, the children were asked to create their favourite memory of the day. Kanari and Souliotou (2023, p. 293) express the importance of “improving and enhancing access, inclusion, and participation of disabled people in arts”.

Creative writing, at its core, is a process of experimentation, of provocation, of seeking to find a new way of understanding emotion. In the process followed during the CCRWC session, the word “limitation” was used. Experimentation, writing with constraint, avant-garde are all forms used in *Ouvrior de literature potentiell* (OuLiPo) (Bray et al., 2012). To this end the limitations used during this writing exercise are considered a form of experimentation in literature potential as viewing and discussing the results post instructions, provided a means of unlocking new, or perhaps hidden, emotions for the different participants. As Baetens (2012, p. 406) highlights, OuLiPo can assist when there is a need to “invent new formulas of writing” which also have no “obligation to produce texts intended to ‘illustrate’ the constraints”. In looking at the limitations used for this experiment, it was the *answer* to the prompts that created the work, thus if a person were to simply look at the pieces produced using the limitation, the constraint may not be visible.

Research often focuses on looking at disabilities from the external perspective, as though those with disabilities, limitations and invisible disabilities are lab rats to be studied. The ability to empathise and sympathise with the subjects does exist, but there is also a level of disassociation between researchers and the output. It is as though understanding the way disabled people think, feel, and create is something foreign, and needs to be dissected (Lawson & Beckett, 2021, p. 349). This research is built on the “misapprehensions about disability and impairment” (Grue, 2016, p. 840). Focusing on the work of disability advocate Stella Young, Grue (2016, p. 840) unpacks three key ways researchers often depict those with a disability: “objectification, devaluation and individualisation and mystification”. This continues to highlight the need for disabled researchers (White, 2019; Yergeau, 2018; Lewis & Arday, 2023) to continue the never-ending fight for equity, inclusivity, and acceptance of intersectionality, and to avoid the objectification, devaluation and individualisation and mystification that surrounds disabilities. Indeed, the majority of people undertaking this challenge of creating with a limitation self-identified as having a disability, operating instead from a position within this demographic while acknowledging the diversity of forms disability can take.

Throughout the process of creating art with a chosen limitation, we experienced varying emotions. Some felt elation and freedom from the restraints imposed by a predominantly neurotypical society. Others experienced a negative range of emotions, from pre-panic attack, disdain for their abilities, and rage. It must be noted that these emotions, whether positive or negative, resulted from creating with a new limitation. They were not focused on the limitation itself. Several people had an increased understanding of the emotions that the new self-imposed limitations might evoke, and these were discussed during the final reflective piece of the session.

Recruitment

For the purposes of this writing exercise, the recruitment process was voluntary. During a monthly Critical Creative Reading and Writing Collective (CCRWC) session, people were able to choose to participate in all aspects of the limitation writing, or some. Those who were interested in developing their work for publication were invited to submit a post-session piece where they could explain in more detail what emotions had been raised and how this made them feel. In submitting a post-session piece to the lead author, this was significant acceptance for that person’s work to be included in this article.

There were two attendees who participated in some of the limitation writing aspects, but not all. Other attendees were happy to discuss the process during our CCRWC session, but chose not to participate in the post-session write-up. Three members of CCRWC, who were unwell and unable to attend the CCRWC in person, were sent instructions by the lead author and offered the opportunity to participate. Thus, four participants whose work is represented in this article were in person at the CCRWC monthly session, and three participants followed the same instructions and produced work for inclusion in this article.

No ethics approval was sought as participation was voluntary by the members of CCRWC who displayed an interest and provided verbal or written consent for their work to be included in this article. All consenting participants are listed as an author on this paper, ensuring their words and work are accurately represented.

Creativity through a different lens

We attended a two-hour Critical Creative Reading and Writing Collective (CCRWC) session, having been provided with the Kanari and Souliotou (2023) reading that focused on how children with disabilities reacted when they saw art pieces that were created by disabled artists. While the focus of the peer-reviewed paper was to discuss how children responded to art, the exhibition the children viewed also posed the question, “What would our world be like if art travelled beyond convention and prejudice?” (Kanari & Souliotou, 2023, p. 294). A key focus was that not every disabled artist created in the same way, which relates to the intersectional heterogeneity of the individual artist including and beyond their disability. Not all disabilities are the same and therefore, manifestations of creativity become increasingly unique (Grue, 2016; Kanari & Souliotou, 2023; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Robin, 2024).

Everyone responded positively to the contents of the reading. One element that was a point of discussion was the image of a piece titled *Olympic* by artist Philippos Tsatsis. The artwork depicted two hands using Sign Language (SL). A deaf child who was attending the exhibition was instantly able to understand the art as it was in their language. As Kanari and Souliotou (2023) explained, the children viewing the art exhibition were able to look at the techniques used by the artists and understand that our own thoughts and feelings can assist with choosing colours, shapes, and words to create our own art. “All people can create art together and communicate in their own way” (Kanari & Souliotou, 2023, p. 298). In essence, this is how the CCRWC functions, to communicate and provide an individualised perspective on the prompt (Cannell et al., 2020; Crimmins et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2023). Reflections on the reading were positive, with DeBono sharing, “Inclusive initiatives are such an important aspect of progress in society ... minority groups (of any kind) can never be represented as a monolith”.

After a brief discussion about the reading, we were asked to write to the prompt *How disability makes you feel/How my creativity can help me*. Approximately fifteen to twenty minutes were assigned to this task. Everyone could choose the medium they preferred such as prose, poetry, or drawing. Once initial thoughts had been developed, we took some time to discuss what people had written for this initial prompt, providing an avenue to focus on “ideasthetic imagining” (Prendergast et al., 2023, p. 2). The technique introduced by Prendergast et al. (2023, p. 2) states this as “the way that writers sense concepts, translating ideas into concrete and specific narrative detail”. We were able to take the prompt and undertake “blurt writing”, getting something onto the page that is often built from that initial ideasthetic imagining, often related to a memory, emotion, shape, or colour.

After discussing the varying imaginings from this first prompt, we moved onto the second. *Give yourself a limitation – focus on the emotion you wrote about in the first piece*. The idea

was for everyone to challenge themselves to step out of the comfort zone. For example, if they did not like the texture of playdough, then creating with this medium would challenge them. LEGO™ was another suggested medium as some people do not like the feel of the blocks. People were free to choose more than one limitation, with some choosing to switch half-way through while others combined both limitations for the duration of the timeframe. When time was up, the discussion that followed unlocked more ideasthetic imagining. Why had they chosen the limitation? How had this made them feel? Were they surprised by what they had created? Was it a positive or negative experience?

With discussion and theories as to why certain emotions had developed, we began the final writing prompt for the session, *Reflection on experience of having a limitation*. The outcomes were surprising for everyone who participated. Four contributors were able to meet in person, with three other contributors providing information post-session. One participant, following the prompts at home, chose dance as their limitation stating, “I am glad I chose dance to maximise the difference between lovely comforting words and scary dance (but I admire dancers when it is not me)”.

By undertaking a writing task with one or two limitations, the scope of work was forced to change, to employ new techniques and, for some, foreign techniques, to explore the application of heterogeneity. Encompassing creativity provides the ability to “form new knowledges [that] arise through creative writing composition” (Magee, 2016 as cited in Sandford et al., 2024, p. 4). Furthermore, when writing as a collective, we have the opportunity to develop new practices and discuss the process with regards to emotional impact, comprehension of the task and unlocking the next level of connection through peer-reviewed articles and discussion (Sandford et al., 2024). In practicing the art of literary creativity in such a forum, we are performing art and combining it with philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984; Wiame, 2018, p. 534). Hence, being together in a collective, with set time limits for writing exercises, assists us individually as artists to harness a new perspective on the task, aligning our own diversities within a unique piece of creativity.

Through a different creative lens, more creativity can be unlocked. Challenging ourselves as writers to push the boundaries of our own creativity, provides the opportunity to avoid stagnation or lack of interest in a medium that has, in the past, provided a release, a refuge, a revelation. As creatives, we know how to look at something – anything – and we can create, build, weave and apply our personal form of ideasthetic imagining (Prendergast et al., 2023). We applaud, we appreciate, we... alliterate! We educate about the impact and importance of creativity, of striving to engage the academy in a consistent, and sometimes exhausting, effort of nuances required to sculpt something from nothing.

Heterogeneity surrounding creative expression

From discussing the reading, participants were asked to write a piece about how their disability made them feel, or if they did not identify with having a disability or felt uncomfortable, to focus on how creativity can help them. The importance was to focus on using a preferred

medium, for example: poetry, prose, or drawing, as the second task would impose a limitation, thus forcing the creative from their place of comfort and into a foreign way of creative expression.

Rhodes focused on how, as a teenager, they were institutionalised, yet that specific institution no longer exists, the building and records all gone.

Lost Institution – erased history
I got out
Governments – silencing, demolishing, decommissioning
What people have said to me
You're weird
In 2018
Always different
In 1994
OMG Typical (almost normal)
All childhood
Who said that
Specifically high school
Wow, don't you sleep
Recently – 2023–24
You can't say that
All my life
She's so loud
All my life
Calm down
Most of my life

Rhodes further states:

I erased myself for 3 decades, boxing off those memories, blaming myself for being incarcerated, being too loud, too impulsive, too creative. As an adult I blamed myself for my dissociation, my deliberately forgetting – because now I want to remember. But all I have are jumbled snapshots of corridors, medicines, dormitories. ... 1984 unacceptable behaviour – 2024 neurodivergent, all good.

When focusing on how art can help, Rhodes says, “When I can laugh and not judge, not be judged, not be classified, not be me. When something that wants to be said ... appears.”

These words corresponded with the heart of ideasthetic imagining. For Rhodes, when focusing on how art can unlock emotions, the imaginings have been brought into a clear concept (idea). In writing powerful poetry from a previous negative emotion, one filled with constraints, Rhodes brings sensations to life (aesthesis) (Nikolić, 2016 as cited in Prendergast et al., 2023,

pp. 2–3). The creative leads way to comprehension, to reconciling with a traumatic past and build a further bridge towards future healing of the self (Gallagher, 2022, p. 103).

In addition, DeBono discusses how those who identify as neurodivergent are offered “coping mechanisms and strategies” to help with executive dysfunction via the role of the therapist, counsellor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. Grue (2016) utilises the work of Tobin Siebers who states, “We grow anxious because life is full of uncertainties, and we blame ourselves for our failure to adjust, but we blame ourselves for a thousand and one reasons. The inability to manage many reasons is neurosis” (Siebers, 2008 as cited in Grue, 2016, p. 845).

DeBono writes:

The guilt. It’s deafening. It’s weakening. It’s immense. It’s the day spent immobile and feeling every second of it in your bones, in your brain, in your chest where your heart beats too fast for sitting still.

It’s the knowledge of what you could be doing, what you *should* be doing. It’s your body holding you back while your mind loops it, again and again. The guilt stops it from feeling like recuperation, rest, recharging. You wake up more tired than yesterday. You stay in bed to stew in it. You know you need to break the cycle with something other than the tasks at hand, the ones with deadlines fast approaching. The brain is a muscle, it needs exercise, it needs to be stretched and warmed up and eased back into routine.

So, what then? How then? Why is it so difficult?

When DeBono follows a suggestion from the therapist to create, to do something with the hands, DeBono is able to focus on the act of creating.

And you know that act of creation, how it feels to form and thread and fill and finish. You’d forgotten how satisfying it can be. You need to relearn that small, godlike act. ... Create something to feel more than guilt for not following the rules others have set for you and everyone else.

In researching the social and human rights models of disability, Lawson and Beckett (2021, p. 365) explain that “Through its identification of disability as socially created, it also produces the concept of an unjust, disabling society with disabling barriers. Further, [the social model] produces two categories of person – the disabled person and the non-disabled person”. The rules for the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentalities can not only become confusing but can often breed an ableist attitude. “Ableism, like other sociopolitical issues, references a combination of discrimination, power, and prejudice related to the cultural privileging of *able-bodied* people” (Eisenhauer, 2007, p. 8). At times, it can be these societal aspects that inhibit creativity for the creative practitioner. We are expected to behave a certain way and the pressures can lead to confusion for the neurotypical.

Tabios created poetry focusing on the frustration and confusion of detangling headphone cords, using it as metaphor for detangling past childhood experiences.

Fingers quivering
This bit goes to that hole
That would make a loop
But where does it go again
In this one?
No, that one
No, it's coming off again
How do you tighten it?
I just want to go to work

Fingers quivering
Just pull everything away
Then it'll slowly come off –
It just tightened
Will this come off already
How did this even happen
This tangled mess
I just want to play my music

Where does everything go?
When does it get resolved?
Can I ever get out?
Will I make it through?

To add to this, Tabios continues to tell a story about how, as a young child, they would play “house”, happily lost in their own world:

[My mother] said that my tendency to stay up late got so bad that she brought me to the doctor to have me checked, at which point I was diagnosed with ADHD. I was surprised to find that out. I might have been playing house until the break of dawn, but no one had told me stores were supposed to be closed around that time.

For Tabios, being diagnosed by one doctor with ADHD as a child, not as an adult, provided not only a label but limitations of expectations. Punch and Vanderbeck (2018) state that intergenerational relations are responsible for shaping children and providing the blueprint for necessary socialisation. There are expectations from extrafamilial intergeneration relationships and spaces, such as educational institutions. Where parents may not understand what the term ADHD means, the expectation that an educator *will* understand, is false. According to Ryan (2007, p. 436) even tertiary lecturers equate problems with learning to be a shortcoming of the individual student rather than the failure to adjust previous teaching and assessment practices

for that student's benefit. This can result in a cycle where the teacher blames the parent, who blames the teacher, and the individual receives no support from any familial or extrafamilial relationships.

Cannell, instead of focusing on how disability made them feel, or how creativity can help, opened with the statement:

I'm more often concerned about accessibility than disability. I think about how I, a non-disabled person, am accommodated by my glasses. We don't think of such sight impairment as disabled because it's catered for, but the thought creeps in my head that in another society and time without the privilege to access such healthcare I would be disabled.

Indeed, this returns to the ever-present issue of defining what the term "disabled" means (Carlson, 2015; Eisenhauer, 2007; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Ryan, 2007; Temple Jones et al., 2024).

Carlson (2015, as cited in Temple Jones et al., 2024, p. 1306) contextualised and identified "intellectual disability" as a term that "exposes forms of oppression". Carlson continues:

a picture emerges that challenges assumptions that have been made about people with intellectual disabilities: that they do not have a meaningful sense of self, that intellectual disability is a static condition, and that having an intellectual disability necessarily means a diminished quality of life. (2015, p. 39)

Rozitis begins their piece, sharing their thoughts on what these words might mean.

Disability is such a strange term. Am I dis Abled? Un Able. There are things I cannot do. Sure. I accept that. Why should it be such a big deal?

To try and provide an honest definition of what it is to be disabled, intellectually disabled, physically disabled, mentally disabled, can lead down the proverbial rabbit hole, and consequently negate the purpose of this paper. It is not an all-encompassing definition of disability that is needed, but a shift in social perceptions of what it means to have a disability. What is important, is how self-identifying as not being part of the typical, makes us unique. Rozitis continues:

Creativity doesn't "help" me, creativity is me. Other people's creativity is my community. Other people enjoying my creativity is my balm, my reason for living. We are a critical creative reading and writing collective and I feel like we have lit a warm little fire here in the wilderness (world, university, universe city) and we draw each other to the fire to tell stories and sing songs.

If I was not disabled ("mad", BAD, bipolar, ODD, oppositional, defiant, mary-mary-quite-contrary, overthinker, depressed, anxious, insomniac, autistic, awetistic, adhd, put the HD in ADHD, nerd, obsessive, tragic romantic, heretic, mental, medicated, meditated, hospitalised, detained, sectioned, let loose, what a goose, dysfunctional, dyspraxic, painful, oversharer) I am convinced I would not be creative. I would not need to think divergently so I wouldn't. If I could be happy in a vanilla scented capitalist life with a

designer ivory picket fence and exactly 2.4 children and a partner who fits a norm and work-life balance and expensive holidays and online shopping and ... who am I kidding? Not one of those people is happy!

Malley and Silverstein (2014) put forward the thesis that arts education and special education need to intersect. This promotes engagement between students who do not identify as having a disability with those who do, through art activities. In looking at the impact of the first prompt of writing from both Cannell and Rozitis, greater understanding and respect for the differences presented is accepted. This is the ethos of groups like the CCRWC, that no one person is greater than the other, and that acceptance in creating a safe space is paramount. In addition, Rozitis names this:

[...] our ethic of care. The winds of capitalism blow. The hailstones of stigma come down upon our heads. But we are here by the fire practicing care. Self-care. Other-care.

“Other-care” is an accurate term to describe the bonds of the CCRWC and the supportive creative environment it provides within the bowels of the academy. The work we do, the value we understand creative practices to have, align with arts activism efforts including those concerned with disability. As Robin (2024, p. 3) states, “Narratives, thus, drive our collective understanding of disability, creating spaces in which disability and the disabled can (or cannot) operate”.

Daughtry writes about that self-care, of fighting with anxiety when making music and performing in public. After years of not performing, Daughtry found a safe space at a queer venue called *My Lover Cindi*:

Despite being weighed down by the crippling anxiety that has been my constant companion for as long as I can remember, I felt a little something in myself want to take a risk and put something new out on stage. Unapologetically.

So I got on stage and immediately apologised for being there. But that was part of my schtick back then, to manipulate the audience into giving myself the validation I couldn't yet have for myself.

I dug out a spoken word piece I'd made in my head at 17 when I was at home alone, in my bedroom, feeling crippled by social anxiety.

I still have pretty debilitating anxiety and stage fright, but being able to share what I used to see as my biggest flaws – my low self-esteem, my self-inflicted isolation, my social anxiety, my crippling shyness, a general sense of what used to be “kookiness”

before the internet opened up people's minds a little more – publicly in a safe and welcoming space, where those “flaws” were not only accepted, but understood and even celebrated, helped open up something inside of me that has given me the confidence to take up space in other parts of my life.

Daughtry raises an interesting point, that finding a safe space can make all the difference when it comes to sharing creative works. Art is subjective and it is that subjectiveness, where the response to the creative work is unknown, that it can lead to the “debilitating anxiety” that Daughtry speaks of. According to Robin (2024), when unpacking how Hemingway viewed ableism, the need to dig deeper and see what the artist is saying takes time. “Narratives are not passive artifacts. They exist in conversation with space both shaping and being shaped by that which surrounds them” (Bérubé, 2018, as cited in Robin, 2024). While one person might appreciate the creative works being presented, others may have a differing view and due to the uniqueness of individuals, both opinions are correct. For the creator, however, the work presented breeds a desire to express, to understand their own drive. Brady-Clark highlights how using a variety of colours when creating can calm the constant anxiety which brews daily beneath the surface.

Why do colours help me in an uncomfortable situation? Is this the neurodivergent in me? Needing colours? Why do they quieten my brain? When in conferences and meetings, I rely on the colours, to write notes, to make them look pretty, to calm my senses, to appease the brain gods!

Other things I like to do is to write around the edges. Why is this considered weird? It's when you have too many thoughts – the brain is too busy that you won't start another sheet of paper. It's blank with no colour on it and it's scary.

Is that why? Anxiety over the blank page? I mean, I started with a blank page and yet I wasn't scared. It's only when I'm forced to turn over the page that I do so, but not before.

Perhaps that's why I have many different coloured pens – and a love of stationery. I can fill the blank page with colour, the way my hyper-aphantasic brain fills the void in my life – by folding a world of make believe around me.

Now that time is running out, my brain is slowing down. How many more hours before I can be back in my SAFE ZONE. We all have them ... don't we? A safe place where the mind, anxiety, body can rest?

For the majority of creative practitioners, there is a necessary process in order to achieve the vision in the mind's eye. However, for those creators who identify as having a disability, creating is a solution to the challenge of life, a place where a moment of calm can be discovered (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984; Gallagher, 2022; Kanari & Souliotou, 2023; Robin, 2024; Sandford et al., 2024; Walker et al., 2023; Wiame, 2018).

Rozitis provides a solid end to their piece that resonates with those who participated in this venture.

Does creativity help me? Maybe. Like language helps me. Like friendship helps me. I don't want to sound dark, but I feel the uncreative life would not be worth living. But it's also possible that if we didn't have creativity, we would invent it. It feels a bit like breathing, intrinsic to the experience of being human!

Applying heterogeneity to develop new concepts and emotions

After documenting pieces about how creativity/disability made everyone feel, the next prompt was to choose a limitation – eyes closed, non-dominant hand, different medium – and create something new, trying to focus on the same emotions raised in the first piece. This task was done over a fifteen-to-twenty-minute timeframe, and the results for everyone were not what they expected. Just over half of us ended with a positive experience, while the others had a more negative response. The outcomes of the limitation exercise are included below and have been grouped into those with a positive (Figures 1–4) or those with a negative outcome (Figures 5–7).



Figure 1: Rhodes – Limitation non-dominant hand



Figure 2: Tabios – Limitation eyes closed and different medium



Figure 3: DeBono – Limitation eyes closed



Figure 4: Daughtry – Limitation non-dominant hand

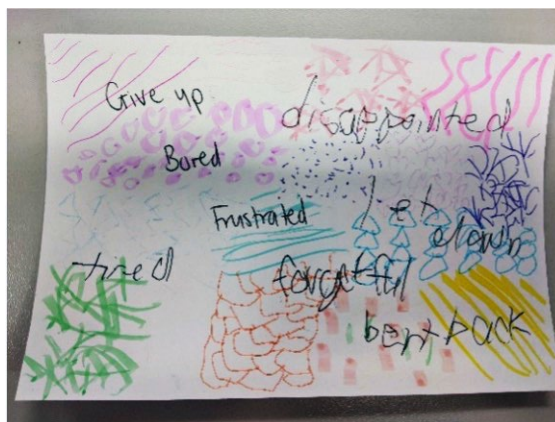


Figure 5: Cannell – Limitation non-dominant hand and glasses removed (impacting vision)

What happened is after putting it off all weekend it was Sunday night and I suddenly kind of got the zoomies because it was cold and I flowed into my old bellydancing moves from when I was still trying to do girl things and fit in with normal people. And I was aware I was doing them badly and wrong but sort of enjoying the feeling so then I thought- this is my prompt 2. This is how I do my homework, this is my creativity battling the ways I am disabled by anxiety the ways I am disabled by the ways I am positioned.

And as soon as I thought words about it the movement got clunky so then I tried to remember that dance is not words it is dance and it's ok not to play music and I just enjoyed for a few short minutes the feeling/s of being a queer disabled body-mind moving flowingly albeit without grace or aesthetic value.

Figure 6: Rozitis – Limitation different medium

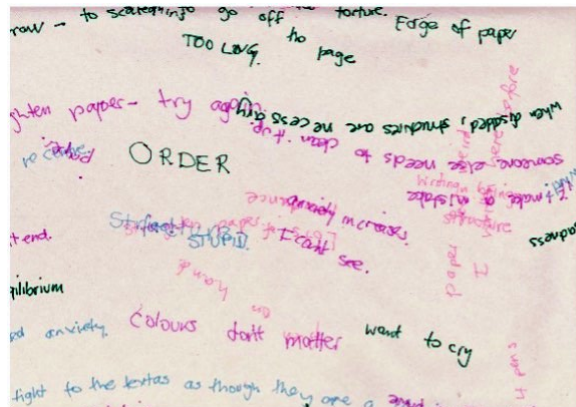


Figure 7: Brady-Clark – Limitation eyes closed

The third prompt for the session was to write a reflection on the emotions and process of the limitation exercise with a fifteen-to-twenty-minute timeframe. Positive responses for the self-imposed limitation came from Rhodes (Figure 1), Tabios (Figure 2), DeBono (Figure 3), and Daughtry (Figure 4). Rhodes and Tabios felt a freedom at not having to do things the “normal” way. DeBono enjoyed the challenge but was reflective on the limitation, and Daughtry labelled the experience as “cathartic”. Non-positive responses to the experience, not on the limitation but rather on the emotions raised, were described by Cannell (Figure 5), Rozitis (Figure 6), and Brady-Clark (Figure 7). Rozitis undertook the challenge to use a different medium, namely dance. Rozitis writes about the discomfort and past trauma surrounding the times they were encouraged to dance by friends who tried to “help” them fit in. Cannell used the non-dominant hand and instead of closing their eyes, they removed their glasses, thus heightening emotions surrounding the reality of their true vision. Brady-Clark chose the limitation of eyes closed and, like Cannell, faced heightened emotions regarding visual impairment.

Rhodes (Figure 1) used the non-dominant hand to create a pencil drawing of three people in the room who had chosen the limitation of eyes closed. Rhodes writes:

Joy in being present, freedom in sharing a personal story with the people in this room, encouragement at seeing people closing their eyes and creating art, grateful for lack of judgement. I feel safe with these people.

Rhodes continued, stating they felt “freedom from the need to mask out in society”. Art “allows me the freedom to get away ... I loved getting to be me, so the constraint allowed that”.

When discussing the process after writing this reflection, Rhodes stated that the non-dominant hand had no “rules” applied to it and therefore a child-like freedom of being able to do whatever they wanted was experienced.

The term Rhodes used – masking – is becoming a familiar term used when discussing Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) where people wear a proverbial mask, adjusting their behaviours in order to be accepted by society. Fede and Laurent (2020, p. 1) state that “society is often not supportive of the differences and neurodivergence of autism”. The term “masking” has been used by neurodivergent people for decades, and it is a strength that the term has been taken up in recent research to better align the community concerned. “Many autistic people end up using ways to blend in and camouflage in an attempt to be able to pass as neurotypical and ‘fit in’” (Fede & Laurent, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, masking becomes a tool for those who do not think in the neurotypical/societal construction of “normal”. According to Baumer and Frueh (2021, p. 2), “Judy Singer, an Australian psychologist, coined the term neurodiversity to promote equality and inclusion of ‘neurological minorities’”. Having a name to assign to non-neurotypicals has given authorisation to the neurodivergent emotions experienced by people who needed to mask in order to find acceptance.

In Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2023, p. 1237), the researcher Yergeau is quoted as saying, “This, my body, this was autism – and suddenly, with the neuropsychologist’s signature on my diagnostic papers, I was no longer my body’s author”. This is how Tabios and others who were participating often felt when being boxed into a neurotypical framework. Tabios (Figure 2), who had already disclosed that they were diagnosed with ADHD as a child, chose to challenge themselves with two limitations – eyes closed and using a different medium. A creative writer and poet, Tabios chose to use LEGO™ blocks to make something new:

I sought to create a structure that I would build entirely by feel. I also feel uncomfortable with building in general – although I have spent hours and hours on Minecraft, I have never felt confident about building structures and always felt like I try to limit myself too much. Interestingly, the results of having these two discomforts together felt more refreshing and gratifying compared to when I was writing my piece in my comfort zone.

Tabios continues to analyse the process, stating that when attending other CCRWC sessions, they are concerned they misinterpret prompts, which can breed anxiety. “In comparison, though, building the LEGO™ structure with my eyes closed felt like I was unrestrained with what I could make.”

Yergeau (2018) states, “I believe that autistic stories reconfigure what it means to be self- focused and without self, in all of the paradoxicality of that simultaneity”. Tabios writes in their explanation of the limitations:

It was an interesting form of puzzle-solving that brought my sense of feeling to the forefront. During the creation of the structure, my one consistent objective is to ensure

that the structure feels smooth in my hands. The result was an interesting kind of surreal metropolitan diorama that I would never have dreamed of making with my eyes open. There was even a happy accident of symmetry that came out of it. It does bother me a bit that I felt good about making my structure, whereas other people felt constrained by the limitation they put upon themselves.

Would I still feel happy if I truly had these limitations? It had stuck in the back of my mind after the fact that I may have been enjoying this based on the idea that this is play- limiting myself, and I know that I can take control any time I want to. I cannot come up with a conclusive answer to these thoughts.

Likewise, DeBono (Figure 3) experienced similar emotions when drawing with closed eyes:

If I was really blind, I would never actually know what I had created. I could have had people describe it to me, but the nuance of the lines and shapes and colours are a truly visual language that can't be translated directly in their entirety as a piece of art. It's quite tragic a thought, but not definitively. Just a hurdle amongst the endless possibilities when it comes to creative work.

Gallagher (2022) focuses on how emotion is linked with empathy and compassion, and art is intrinsically linked with emotion. In all of the reflections post limitation, we all experienced heightened emotions of varying degree. However, although DeBono felt empathy through the limitation exercise, it was also a fun and unique challenge:

I wanted to try and draw a vase of flowers as a pretty standard, traditional image in visual arts. Even though it isn't perfect, it is clearly legible as a picture. I quite enjoy the simplicity of shapes and wonder what it would have looked like if I hadn't been limited. The unknown is kind of fun to sit with, I wouldn't want to try and draw the same thing with my eyes open because it wouldn't have the same spirit behind it, it wouldn't be as visually interesting. ... I would never draw blue leaves on a flower. Except now I have and I kind of like it.

The catharsis of having freedom to let go of constraints was particularly experienced by Daughtry (Figure 4). They started off by "choosing materials I found aesthetically unpleasing allowed me to have no ideals about the outcome". The paper chosen was thin and the pencils were predominantly blacks and browns:

The most interesting part of the artwork for me was the state of the pencils once I'd finished. As the piece ended up being an expression of an emotion, rather than an aesthetic product, the site of the pencils being completely ground down reflected how I was feeling as much as the strokes on the page.

I intentionally used my left hand to begin with. Then subconsciously reverted to my right hand. However, the use of my left hand opened up a freedom to use my right hand

unconventionally. I shifted my grip on the pencil from the “traditional” grip to more of a “grab”. This also felt very childlike, which gave me the freedom to just put marks on paper without overthinking where everything was going or if it made sense.

Expressing a deep emotion, which was linked to the first prompt, Daughtry brings forth new context with the reflection on the limitation. “Where authorial decisions result in the presentation of emotional context of great weight, then that context ought to form part of, rather than exist alongside, the analysis” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 105). Daughtry, via the first and second prompts, was able to unlock an emotion hidden beneath the surface, and thus the trilogy of work created by Daughtry during this CCRWC session is complete. When initially discussing the closure of a venue which had provided Daughtry with a sense of belonging, the key emotion that surfaced was rage:

And while I’m completely heartbroken, I have realised that I am also burning with rage. Rage that something that to me is so pure in its intentions to provide safe, accessible, queer-friendly community and arts events to the public cannot survive in the current economic system. Rage that there will be people who won’t have access to this community when they may need it the most. Rage that it took me until my 30s to even know that these types of communities can exist. Rage that for most of my life I was taught, or made to feel, that I was somehow wrong. Rage that I look around at what is available to me and it looks ugly. Rage that queer joy won’t have a home to thrive in Adelaide.

While Daughtry felt the emotion of rage, they were able to use the limitation to help regulate:

While I was making bold strokes on the page, I think I was holding my breath. Then I began to incorporate softer pink strokes, and it allowed me to breathe. Just like these spaces allow those who have been holding their breath their whole lives as they navigate a mainstream that seems foreign, to relax.

Daughtry’s experiences contained negative and positive emotions, however Cannell’s emotions were negative but mainly due to frustration. Again, the negative, or non-positive emotions surrounding the exercise were not due to the limitation but rather how that limitation connected to the emotions of the participant.

Cannell (Figure 5) writes, “I felt so drained. My limitation was removing my glasses and using my non-dominant hand to draw patterns.” In the first prompt, Cannell discussed how they were able to as a “non-disabled person” be accommodated by the ability to wear glasses. Choosing to remove those glasses plunged Cannell into a reflective stance, of when they initially realised their eyesight needed testing, and how their dyslexic father might have felt when looking at their handwriting:

My headaches associated with my poor vision contributed to my exhaustion. I remember how tired I was after school from struggling to read the whiteboard. I ignored

instructions in class because I knew I'd have to wait until the paper or other resource was handed out to catch up to what the teacher had described on the board. My tiredness and headaches pale to the chronic pain experienced by some disabled people.

The handwriting reminds me of my dad's. He has dyslexia and didn't finish high school, so I rarely asked him for help with homework growing up.

Like Daughtry, Cannell, who began using their non-dominant hand, unconsciously reverted to using their dominant hand. However, where Daughtry applied freedom to the dominant hand, Cannell experienced self-frustration:

After drawing patterns, I still had time remaining in the prompt, so I switched to writing words. I forgot my own rule about using my non-dominant hand and this intensified the emotions I wrote on the page. My desire to give up because I was so frustrated, bored, tired, and disappointed in the process and outcome. The comparison to people nearby made it worse. Her drawing is calming; it looks like what it's meant to be and the colours are complimentary. Mine is scribble.

Bertilsson Rosqvist et al. (2023, p. 1239) state, "We have tried to narrate ourselves in a mother tongue of another neurotype, transforming our pre-diagnostic mind-bodily experiences into a sorted and structural diagnostic narrative". Cannell presents a self-diagnostic of matching past childhood traumas of having low vision, and a parent with a learning difficulty, with the limitation prompt. When past traumas arise, creative means are the way the artist expresses themselves, giving an exorcism of sorts to the repressed emotions and of a time when being forced to fit into the neurotypical form. Rozitis articulates how the term "dis Abled" in the first prompt made them feel. In choosing a limitation, Rozitis pushed themselves out of their comfort zone and chose dance.

Malley and Silverstein (2014, p. 40) claim that dance can provide "creativity, self-esteem, self-discipline, cooperative learning skills and increase peer acceptance" when students with disabilities work with dance educators. Rozitis (Figure 6) does not dispute this but knows this limitation of dance is not "their language":

I kept putting it off and making excuses to myself (note that I would never have dared to do this if I was in the room with everyone else). I was going to choose just the best track to symbolise what I was wanting to dance and then mindfully choreograph ... yeah none of that is what happened.

After a few minutes I thought "this could communicate something but it's not my language" and I thought about how real dancers do communicate/express/live through dance, but my dancing is more the equivalent of echolalia, I am just making random syllables that feel good ... which is OK but not very effective for anything. I felt echoes of old resentments of people trying to force me to "get out of myself" and dance and

“put myself out there” and it was meant to be good for me, it was meant to make me less broken and this all came from an assumption that I was “broken”.

These “old echoes” that Rozitis mentions can be equated to how neurodivergent people have masked for too long in order to find that small slither of acceptance from the neurotypical strictures of society. “For autistic individuals, it is commonly held that navigating social life is achieved through a combination of “masking” and “camouflaging” (Lewis & Arday, 2023, p. 1307).

In the same way, Brady-Clark deals with past trauma, which resulted in almost triggering a panic attack when doing the limitation prompt. The need to mask, to camouflage in society, has increased Brady-Clark’s anxiety. For their prompt, Brady-Clark (Figure 7) chose eyes- closed. Like Daughtry and Cannell, there was the expectation from Brady-Clark to create a piece of drawing art, but instead, gripped with fear at using the eyes closed prompt, only words came out. Words, like Cannell’s, that highlighted frustration:

I chose to use the same colours as before, but using texters so I could write more easily. I was astonished at needing to write words. No longer was I going to draw – mainly because I don’t consider myself an artist, but I found that with one limitation, I didn’t need another. I know that people with disability often have multiple limitations but one was enough for my anxiety today.

I am surprised how anxious I felt, surprised that I didn’t draw shapes but rather needed to use words. With words, I was able to clearly express. With words, the emotions could be named and released ... well not “released” as I remember writing “re-focus” a few times. ... I feel very discombobulated from the experience. Masking will now be necessary and I’m angry at myself as the limitation was my idea and now, I’m triggered.

Brady-Clark self identifies as visually impaired with no vision in their left eye and decreasing vision in the right. Being diagnosed as “legally blind” is a strong possibility for their future and thus, the chosen limitation depicted the trauma surrounding this. Emotions expressed from those with the creative abilities to do so, only enhance and further the development of understanding for others. According to Hooks (2006, p. 33) “Our solidarity must be affirmed by sharing belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth”.

Conclusion

In meeting together as creative beings, the ability to investigate whether heterogeneity can raise unique perspective has been achieved. With everyone undertaking the three prompts, each have shared and analysed their own designs, comprehension, and emotions. Limitations, chosen by the individual, have created new creative forms of heterogeneity and opened perceptions that allow for the reflection on how we can collectively encourage for understanding of both visible and invisible disabilities.

Perhaps the biggest lesson from this creative writing task was not the immediate impact of limitations each participant chose, but rather the way these were processed. Hidden traumas are always present for the artist, otherwise it may be said that there would be no art to make. As creative people, we utilise our talents to not only express for others, but to express for ourselves.

Brady-Clark refers to a “safe zone” in all three prompts, a place where they feel free to unmask. Rhodes states they enjoyed having the constraint as it promoted freedom from the self and the ability to unmask. Daughtry felt the cathartic nature of the exercises, being able to find names for the emotions felt.

DeBono, Cannell and Tabios became acutely aware of those who create having these limitations as constants in their lives. Cannell states, “Students with disabilities [...] share resources that read their papers aloud, become adept at navigating student support services and systems, advocate for themselves and find creative ways to adapt assessments for their needs”. DeBono continues, “If I couldn’t see, I might turn my attention elsewhere, to sound, to sculpture, to textiles.” Tabios began their reflection by stating, “One of my greatest fears has always been losing my sight”, and yet they persisted and ultimately found comfort in their choice of limitation.

Rozitis provides an excellent summation of the task:

I hope my words can help build a more accessible world, a kinder world. I hope I will be allowed to lean on people when I need to. I hope that when I am strong people trust me to support them. I hope no one has to be always strong.

Cathartic creativity is a necessity and creative heterogeneity provides the scope for increased knowledge. It is through creative practice that we are able not only to empathise with people experiencing challenges we are not privy to, but also to explore our own limitations and capacity for endurance, our potential in finding creative solutions.

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