

Hello, and welcome to my session on supporting neurodiverse students in education and university. My name is Onyinye Udokporo. I'm an award winning entrepreneur and educator, a neurodiversity consultant, published dyslexic author, and content creator. And I'm going to go more into my story about how I've been able to do so many things and have so many roles and what life in school and university was like and how I got to this point. But before going ahead with that, I'd like to share with you what you can expect in today's session.

So what to expect in today's session? Firstly, I'm going to start off by sharing my lived experience, my story. I think human beings connect best through story, and through other people's experiences. So I really hope that me being a bit vulnerable and sharing what life was like for me at school and in university, my challenges and as well as my strengths as a neurodiverse student. I hope that that really inspires and empowers you and also informs you of perhaps the student's perspective.

I'm also then going to share research on neurodiverse students that I've done, and through sharing this research, also hopefully giving you tangible tips, and takeaways, which you can see is also part of what to expect in today's session. This research is hopefully going to give you insights into what it means to be a neurodiverse student, and what you can do well, hopefully, the findings can help you as educators refine or perhaps make changes or at the very least reflect on your practice as educators and think about how to be more inclusive in the classroom. I'm then going to give you an exploration of assistive technology. I'm going to be speaking specifically about assistive technology. I have used as a student, and that has helped me to do all these different things and have all these different careers.

And then, like I referred to earlier, the 5 takeaways that I've put together for you to think about, for you to use in the classroom, and for you to discuss amongst yourselves as educators. So I am going to go to the next slide and talk a little bit about me, one of my favorite things to do. And if I'm being completely honest, I can't believe that I've managed to carve out a successful career through talking a lot of the time about myself. And I say this in the humblest way possible, I to do it. So like I said in my very brief introduction, I'm an award winning entrepreneur.

I actually started my first business which is in the education space at the age of 12. And that business has now grown, and we've served people across the world, and we're doing lots of stuff on the ground in the UK. We're online, and we have face to face centers. And it's so beautiful, and it's so special. And I love the fact that my journey in education inspired me to start something, so impact for at a young age.

I'm an educator, so I give a lot of talks, like this. I do a lot of learning and development content for organizations, for schools, for businesses, for universities on the topic of neurodiversity, neuroinclusion, and, equality, diversity, and inclusion, or what I like to call equity, diversity, and inclusion. And the things I'm gonna be talking to you about today will hopefully make your classrooms a more equitable space for students. And so in that sense, I'm an educator. I'm a published dyslexic author, and I'll talk a little bit more about my first book later, and I'm a neurodiversity consultant and content creator.

So, again, going back to that work with organizations, helping them with the policy development, refining processes and systems, workshops and training and development content. So who do my clients include and how did I get here? I started off by creating content on LinkedIn, sharing my story as a dyslexic, individual. And something that I don't talk about a lot is the fact that when I was just before my 25th birthday, I decided to finally pluck the courage and read my educational psychologist report, around it's all about my neurodiversity and and my diagnosis. For those of you who don't know what happens if you're fortunate enough to have a diagnosis as a as a child is you're assessed at, you know, maybe I was assessed first at 11.

That was my first diagnosis of dyslexia. I then had to do the assessment again, when I was just just after I turned 16, and then I had to do the assessment again at 18. I'm not really sure why that's the

case. I'm not sure if it's because people think that you grow out of your neurodivergence, which fun fact, you don't. Life has shown me that, and that's totally okay.

But I went from being diagnosed, 11, 16, 18, but only discovering at the age of 24 when I was able to read my very long report that I'm also mildly dyspraxic which was quite interesting. So I'm multifaceted even in the realm of neurodivergence. But I went on to go to university. I went to King's College London. I was the first ever student of the year at King's College London, which I still can't believe.

I'm so grateful to have been recognized in that way. And then I went on to also become top 10 black student in the UK for my postgraduate degree there. So I was first ever student of the year. My undergrad postgraduate degree was, where I was top 10 black student in the UK awarded by Rare Recruitment. And then I went on to write a book and starting these organizations with regards to neurodiversity, neuroinclusion, learning and development, and providing advisory and consulting services.

I took that passion and I also went to work in educational institutions. And these are just some of the schools that I've had the pleasure, the honor, and the universities as well. The pleasure and honor that I have had the opportunity to work with. And the reason why I was so honored to have been asked to do this is I noticed that educational institutions are really struggling with neurodiverse students. We have a gap in the workplace, which I won't talk about too much today, but it's quite difficult to integrate into many workplaces and organizations as a neurodiverse individual, but even more so difficult to integrate as a neurodiverse student.

There are different challenges at different levels. There are challenges at primary school level. There are challenges, at secondary school level, but the challenge that posed the most difficulty or I found most difficult to cope with was actually at university. Because the safety net of support that you get in primary and secondary school is quite literally pulled from under your feet, like, quite rapidly. You're 18.

The world expects you to just get on with things as an adult, and so I found it difficult to integrate, but King's College London were fantastic. I was given buckets of support, which I will talk about in a moment which enabled me to go on and have this phenomenal career that I have now. So life as a neurodivergent student was challenging and I'm gonna focus, my energies in this session on life as a university student, both undergraduate level and at postgraduate level. I decided to do my first degree in religion politics and society, society essentially being sociology. And then my post graduate degree in education, policy and society.

Can imagine that there's lots and lots of writing in these subjects. Lots of essays and an enormous amount of reading. And as a dyslexic individual, I really struggled with the reading and the writing that was assigned to me, and these are tasks that I absolutely had to complete. There was no way of avoiding these tasks. I mean, my first degree was in the arts and humanities faculty, and my second degree was in social sciences and public policy.

No avoiding writing. And in fact, the second degree also threw in some numbers and looking at quantitative data, which I also really struggled with. I then also struggled with meeting deadlines and I really needed extra time due to having a slower processing speed. For my undergraduate degree, I also needed the extra time and rest breaks in my exams. And these accommodations and reasonable adjustments were made for me with no issues, whatsoever.

But these were challenges that I didn't know how to mitigate. I didn't know who to ask. I didn't know where to get help. I, luckily enough, had a fantastic relationship with my personal tutors. And so for both degrees, I was able to voice my concerns and they were able to signpost me to a brilliant disability department at King's that kind of helped me get myself together and get all the right paperwork to enable me to have these reasonable adjustments.

As a result of being afraid, many a times afraid of reading and writing and essays and deadlines, I develop crippling anxiety. And I'm not just talking about, you know, having a little bit of a wobble. I'm talking about struggling to leave my accommodation, to leave my flat on time, to get to university. The wave of anxiety with regards to submitting my work was also something that was quite when I look back quite sad and I know that a lot of neurodiverse students feel this this sense of shame almost, especially when I had to use what the university I attended called a mitigating circumstances form, an MCF. I submitted so many MCFs.

Both dissertations were not submitted on time. I had to have an extended deadline, and there was a lot of anxiety around that. And coming to dealing with low self esteem, a lot of shame. A lot of shame that I just wasn't able to operate like the other students in my class, and I couldn't understand why. I then had to put in so much effort to maintain organization.

University, is a very busy place. You have to maintain student societies and activities, which are a vital part of university life. You also have to maintain, you know, just carry the right books, taking the right papers, printing off the correct reading. These are things that I really struggled with. And then to make matters worse, masking everything I just mentioned.

So, this photo is of me at my postgraduate graduation ceremony. Wonderful day. But I remember thinking on that day, wow. I no longer have to put on a front or make people believe that I've got it all together because I've already put on social media. Do you know what?

I'm dyslexic and, oh, I'm a neurodiverse person and and this is the reality of my life and this is what it's really like. But for 4 years, especially because I was in the humblest way possible, a really high achieving student, had loads of accolades, very prestigious scholarships and bursaries and given the opportunity to study abroad as well. I felt this need to mask my challenges, to mask my anxiety, and to always put on a smile and a brave face so people didn't know that deep down, I was crumbling and suffering with low confidence and low self esteem. So what can we do to make sure that people don't have that difficult experience? Well, before I go into those tips, it's important that I now bring to you my story in line with what research is showing us about neurodiverse students in the classroom.

And this this will help well, this helped me. Certainly helped me have a better understanding of why I was having having the challenges I was having. Firstly, I, like research it shows, had difficulty with traditional teaching approaches. My very first lecture at university, honestly, reminded me of something out of the eighties. They were still using Blackboard and Chalk, and this was in I started university in 2016, really not that long ago.

So we're still using Blackboard and Chalk. Wonderful. Lecturer at the front of the room, students all sat down taking notes. Even at that time, very few students were using laptops. I used a laptop, to type my notes and to make use of my assistive technology, which I'll come on to a bit later.

But I had difficulties with the traditional teaching approaches. I just couldn't seem to absorb the content that I was being taught in a very traditional, and dare I say, boring way. And so one way you might want to combat this is keep your educational content stimulating and varied. It's okay to throw in a YouTube video to explain a concept that maybe you just explained, but that YouTube video gives the students a different perspective and also gives people like myself a little bit of stimulation. It switches things up a bit.

I then faced challenges in organizational and time management. Now I have what they call directional dyslexia. I cannot read them out and I don't know my left from my right. The only thing that lets me know my left from my right is that I have a scar from when I broke my arm when I was a child, and I rely on that scar to let me know this is my left hand and this is my right hand. Otherwise, I have no idea.

Recently, I've been, resorting to my watch telling me which is my left and my right. And my watch also is running a timer to help me with time management, an assistive tool right there, and a simple one too. But I really struggled to get to even my lecture rooms on time, know where I was supposed to be. My student digs, my room literally had, like, timetables and post it notes all over the wall so that I could just keep myself together and at the very least show up. And so what I encourage educators to do is to encourage their students to use assistive technology tools.

And there are simple ones. Like, I'm literally just using a timer on my watch to keep me in my time slot, for today's event. But simple tips and tricks like that can really help. I think when we use the term assistive technology, it makes people believe that it's something really fancy or really complicated. There are simple tools that you can use that are assistive technology.

And then another thing that research showed me, and my own lived experience echoes this, is sensory overload and environmental distractions being a big challenge that neurodiverse students have to face in the classroom. From the lighting, the clinical white lighting, the classrooms throughout all the ages, primary, secondary, further education, college, university, all these places use lighting that isn't great, it's very sharp, it's very bright. You're obviously having to contend. In my case, I was having to contend with going from a school that had about 800 students in to a university that has over 30,000 students. Now don't panic, we're spread across several court court campuses that are placed that are, well, dotted around London.

But the bottom line is I really struggled with going into and coming out of lectures where there was like a swarm of people people, of different noises, of, everyone's lunch, the smells of everyone's lunch, of the printer, of general chitchat. These things were they were they were a lot. They were a lot. And and so what you can take away from this is being aware of the things in the classroom that can cause sensory overload. So for example, being aware that, the lighting being set too brightly is probably going to trigger some, a neurodiverse student in the classroom.

And if possible, which many of these classrooms do now have, thankfully, if you can set the lighting to something more moderate, something more accessible that would be really beneficial and helpful to neurodiverse students. So how do you transition from simply surviving by chaotic student life of surviving to thriving, and what can you do as an educator to support that neurodiverse individual. There are 2 things I want to focus on today. The first is coaching and the second is assistive technology. I'm going to go into a lot more detail about assistive technology today.

Coaching offers personalized support to neurodiverse students, enhancing focus, time management, and organization skills. This assistance aids in overcoming academic challenges, boosting self confidence, and achieving goals. By fostering positive relationships, coaches help leverage unique abilities for success. This was certainly by experience. The university invested in me having some sessions, with a dyslexia specialist coach who taught me how to tap into my excellence.

So for example, I've got an amazing photographic memory which made exams a lot easier for me. And I would sit down with my coach and I would pick I would strategically pick my modules so that I had more exams than coursework, and that took the stress away from panicking about the constant reading and writing. I still had to do it, but it was a lot more manageable. And so that's how coaching helps. And I wish I had more time to go into, the power of coaching for neurodiverse individuals, but you're in for a better treat because I'm going to focus on assistive technology.

Assistive technology benefits neurodiverse students by accommodating their learning needs through tools like text to speech for dyslexia, speech to text for writing difficulties, and organizational apps for ADHD. These tools enhance learning, improve time management, and boost academic success and self confidence. Assistive technology was and still is my lifeline. It really is. And I'm now gonna go into some of my favorite tools that I like to use.

The Pomodoro timer. This is an inexpensive, assistive technology tool. In fact, you don't need to buy the physical physical timer, you just need to follow the method, which is that you set your timer for 25 minutes and focus on a single task until the timer rings. When your session ends, mark off 1 Pomodoro and record what you completed. Now the reason why this has been particularly beneficial to me is I have a very busy brain.

As I'm delivering this talk, I'm also thinking about what I might have for dinner today, thinking about where my next holiday might be. I'm thinking about what I might say in my next book. And what tends to happen with a lot of neurodiverse students is rather than sitting down and focusing on the task at hand, like me sitting here and doing this talk rather than going off to make dinner or think about dinner. This method, allows us to run away and and and start different tasks because that's what we're, that's what we're inclined to do. I know on the clock, 25 minutes, sit down, focus, and that reward I get by ticking it off makes me feel really good.

Then there's a EOA, and EOA is such a great tool for educators to vary the ways in which they teach. So IOWA provides learners with a comprehensive solution for assignment planning, task management, collaboration, and organizational skills improvement through modern mind mapping and planning tools. IOWA has been such a gift to me because it stopped me from making these giant a 3 bind maps, which I would then probably lose as a neurodivergent student. And I now had it all accessible to me on my computer. I could change the background to the color.

I work on yellow paper. And so I could change the background to yellow, which made reading and writing so much easier. I could collaborate with others. More importantly, I could keep track of my progress. Because a bit like my brain going off and thinking about lots of different things, if I don't track my progress, I don't know when something is finished, which is really important.

Or I don't know whether I'd need to start something. Then there's Texthelp. Texthelp provides tools for individuals with writing and literacy challenges, including those with dyslexia and ADHD. Their products include readwrite for literacy support, Equiteo for math equations, and fluency tutor for reading improvement. And what I really like about Texthelp is that it's not just about qualitative, it's a form of assistive technology that also looks at quantitative.

So it looks at the numbers. Because people who students who struggle with numbers that are neurodiverse, maybe they have dyscalculia. It can be a real challenge. And can you imagine doing, like, a really math c degree or, you know, math a level or even GCSEs? Like, having a tool like this can really make the subject and the content that's being taught more accessible.

And then a tool that I spoke about extensively in my book and I have so much love for is Microsoft Word. What I love about Microsoft Word is, like Texthelp, it includes features like text to speech and speech to text. For me, the text to speech is a lifesaver. There isn't a single essay or dissertation that was not read out to me by the wonderful voice on Microsoft Word, and this stopped me from missing words. I miss out a lot of words in my sentences, and my spelling isn't fantastic.

And so this tool, again, really simple but is a huge game changer. It's also, really accessible and tells you as an educator what you might find most useful is that Microsoft Word will tell you when the content you're producing is not accessible to others. So if you're using certain shades of colors, in your text on, for example, a white background and it isn't very readable, it will flag that up, which I think is such an incredible feature, that all educators should be using in order to produce the very best and most accessible important. Some audible stuff. Do some kinesthetic stuff.

Get your students moving. Also, it's important to still do that read write stuff. I'm not saying ignore it, but don't let that be the only way in which you teach. I don't want students to have my experience of, give or take, almost 3 years of watching my lecturers stand at a blackboard in some cases and a

whiteboard in many other cases, Writing, talking at me, and expecting you to take it down. Vary your teaching style.

Number 2, create a structured environment. At the beginning of this, talk, I gave you expectations. I told you what to expect. Hopefully, I have stuck to what those expectations were. This is really important.

That's how to create a structured environment. Let your neurodiverse students know where you're going with your content, with your teaching. It makes a big difference and it keeps them engaged, which is really important. 3, incorporate assistive technology. I'm just gonna go back a slide.

I've given you what my top four tools would be, and I encourage you to explore and find tools that work best for you and your students. But it is so important to incorporate assistive technology in the ways in which you work. 4, foster a supportive environment. There is an intersection between mental health and neurodiversity, and I don't have enough time to go into that intersection today. But the most important thing I want you to take away from this is being kind and being patient as an educator when it comes to looking after your neurodiverse students makes a world of difference.

I have come so far in my career and I was able to be a phenomenal student throughout my, education because I was always in support supportive environments with supportive teachers and lecturers and staff. And then lastly, and a simple one that people often forget which is provide clear and concise instructions. This is so important. Say what you mean and mean what you say, particularly for your students with autism. They're not very good with, you know, innuendos or idioms or or what a friend of mine likes to call unwritten rules.

Provide clear and concise instructions. It not only helps your neurodiverse students, but it also helps support your neurotypical students. These takeaways actually are great for everyone involved. If you want to find out a bit more, about my takeaways, I go into quite a lot of detail, I talk about assistive technology quite a bit. Then feel free to, have a read of my book, dyslexia and to me, how to survive and thrive if you're neurodivergent.

It goes into a lot more detail about my story, my challenges, my strengths, and how I was able to overcome everything and do what I'm doing today, which is talking to you. I'd like to thank you for listening, please feel free to follow me on social media for more insights on neurodiversity or if you have a question after listening to today's talk, then feel free to send me a DM on LinkedIn or on Instagram. That's my watch. That's my assistive technology going off there, which means that I have completed this in time, which is brilliant. And if you'd like to work with me, if you want me to come into your institution, your organization to deliver a training workshop or to deliver a talk, or if you want me to speak to your students, then please feel free to get in touch with my team.

The email address is on the screen, and you can visit my website to see all of my work. Thank you so much for your attention, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the event.