

The Vocal Mask: The Role of Vocal Conformity in the Workplace for Neurodivergent Employees and its Impact on Authentic Communication

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1. Introduction

Authenticity in the workplace has received extensive research in recent years (Cha et al., 2019). A person's vocal presentation influences how authentic they perceive themselves to be and how they are perceived by others (Noufi, May, and Berger, 2023).

For neurodivergent people and those from other stigmatised groups (such as those with different racial or cultural backgrounds, gender, or sexual preferences from the dominant culture (Cha et al., 2019)) presenting oneself authentically in the workplace may be more complex than for people from the dominant group (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens, 1988; McCluney et al., 2021; Opara et al., 2023; Roberts, 2024). Self presentation for such individuals involves a complex balancing act between conforming to expected communication behaviours and presenting oneself authentically (Opara et al., 2023).

This essay examines the intersection between literature from three core areas:

1. Autistic masking strategies, as an example of a stigmatised group that is systematically required to present themselves in an inauthentic way to survive in the workplace (Hull, Petrides, et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2020; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).
2. Workplace authenticity and its impacts on businesses and employees (Cha et al., 2019).
3. Voice work and its use as path to foster personal authenticity (Schlichter, 2014).

In combining these three areas of literature, I aim to address the following themes:

- The strategies used by neurodivergent individuals to alter their vocal presentation to conform to neurotypical standards in the workplace.
- The impact of these alterations on the individual's authenticity as felt by themselves and perceived by others, and the implications for businesses that employ them.
- The role of voice training as a method to promote authenticity.

1.1. Rationale for this research

My decision to explore the role of authentic voice in the workplace for neurodivergent employees stems from both personal and professional experiences.

As a neurodivergent person, I have first-hand experience of the challenges associated with altering one's vocal behaviour and communication style to align with societal expectations. This phenomenon, known as masking or camouflaging, can profoundly affect a person's internal sense of authenticity and can negatively impact their mental health and well-being (Hull, Levy, et al., [2021](#)).

As a voice coach operating in the business world, I have observed that many communication skills training programs, perhaps inadvertently, emphasize conformity of speaking style. This may lead individuals to adopt a communication style that undermines their authentic selves, exacerbating issues of inauthenticity (Cha et al., [2019](#)).

This research will lay the foundation for developing recommendations and teaching strategies for my voice practice that encourage authentic communication in business settings. While the focus is on neurodivergent individuals, the practical outcomes can apply to anybody looking to communicate more authentically in the workplace.

1.2. Key definitions

A key term to define is authenticity, which is used across various academic disciplines. I use the broad definition presented by Cha et al. ([2019](#), p.634) that emphasizes an "alignment between a person's internal sense of self and outward behaviour". I also differentiate between experienced authenticity — a self-rated measure alignment with a person's sense of self — and externally perceived authenticity — which is based on how authentic others think the person is (Cha et al., [2019](#)).

I use the term masking, drawn from autism research to mean the strategies an individual employs to hide particular behaviours or aspects of their authentic identity (Cook et al., [2020](#)), though masking is not unique to autism (Miller, Rees, and Pearson, [2021](#)). Broader terms like camouflaging or passing as non-autistic can incorporate a wider range of strategies, such as engaging in innocuous or passive communication styles (Cook et al., [2020](#)). However, I have chosen to use the

term masking throughout, as it is the term I most often use in my voice practice. I also use the term masking when drawing from research into overlapping concepts that involve hiding a person's authentic identity, including code switching, identity suppression, impression management, identity flexing, and identity management (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Cha et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2021; Opara et al., 2023).

I use the term autism to refer to any condition on the autism spectrum, encompassing those previously distinct diagnoses like Asperger's syndrome and high-functioning autism; and the term autistic to refer to individuals diagnosed or living with these conditions (Joon, Kumar, and Parle, 2021). I also use the terms neurodivergent and neurotypical to describe individuals whose neurological development and functioning differs or aligns with societal norms (Dwyer, 2022). I use the identity-first language of autistic people (as opposed to the person-first language of people with autism) as it is the preference of autistic individuals and autism self-advocacy groups (Smith, Horton, and Fitzgibbons, 2023; Taboas, Doepke, and Zimmerman, 2023).

1.3. Reflection on practice

I use the three-question reflective model proposed by Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001) — What? So what? Now what? — to guide critical reflection, examine the implications of my research findings on my practice, and create actionable strategies for voice teaching in business settings.

1.3.1. What?

I have both personal and professional experience of some of the challenges and implications of neurodivergent masking. In this essay, I combine this experience with literature from three relevant fields (autistic masking, workplace authenticity, and voice training for authenticity) to provide a research-based foundation for my voice practice in business settings.

1.3.2. So what?

In my voice practice, I strongly focus on teaching methods that the foster authentic voice use. This is partly influenced by my background in performance disciplines that prioritize authenticity, such as French clown training (Gates, 2011) and embodied voice practices (Schlichter, 2014). By developing my understanding of the complexities surrounding vocal presentation and authenticity among neurodivergent employees, I can better serve these individuals through my teaching. Given

the presence of corporate emotional display rules (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., [2013](#)), I anticipate resistance to authentic communication in some businesses and this research will allow me to more effectively explain the need for such training.

1.3.3. Now what?

In each section, I draw actionable insights to inform my voice practice by generating two interrelated strategies:

1. Guidelines for businesses looking to foster more inclusive, authentic communication within their teams, with a focus on neurodivergent employees.
2. Specific voice teaching strategies to incorporate into the training services that I offer to such businesses.

These guidelines are summarized in their relevant sections and provided in full in the appendix.

2. How neurodivergent and stigmatised groups adjust vocal presentation to conform

Members of stigmatised groups often have to adjust how they present themselves in workplace and social settings to avoid discrimination and improve career opportunities (Leary and Kowalski, [1990](#); Cha et al., [2019](#); McCluney et al., [2021](#); Opara et al., [2023](#)). For autistic individuals, this involves modifying their natural social behaviours – either consciously or unconsciously – to conform to norms in primarily neurotypical social settings (Cook et al., [2020](#)).

Cook et al. ([2020](#)) identify 37 distinct strategies autistic individuals use to modify their innate behaviours. For this voice research, I have grouped these strategies into three categories:

1. Content related — What you say. — Strategies for adapting those communication elements that convey meaning; including limiting personal disclosures, allowing partner to guide the conversation, and restricting communication to traditional small talk topics (Cook et al., [2020](#)).

2. Voice related — How you say it. — Strategies for adapting vocal elements and qualities; including modifying tone of voice, slowing speech to enhance clarity, and adapting vocal prosody (Shriberg et al., [2001](#); Cook et al., [2020](#)).
3. Body language related — How you move. — Strategies for adapting non-verbal behaviours through physical movements; including smiling, mirroring, and suppressing atypical hand movements (Cook et al., [2020](#)).

I have chosen these three categories after reflecting on how I isolate teaching elements in my voice practice. As an embodied spoken voice practitioner (Schlichter, [2014](#)), I often find it useful to separate the content of students' communication from the vocal work itself. I have observed that when students focus too much on content they can struggle to fully engage with the embodied nature of voice work. Although there is some crossover between body language and voice strategies in my practice, I distinguish between them here to focus this research on vocal masking strategies alone.

2.1. The autistic voice

The voice patterns of autistic individuals influence both their communication style and others' perceptions of them (McCann and Peppé, [2003](#); Paul et al., [2005](#); Vogindroukas et al., [2022](#); Boucher et al., [2023](#)). Autistic people often demonstrate marked differences in vocal patterns and quality (including prosody, tone and stress) compared to non-autistic people (Shriberg et al., [2001](#); McCann and Peppé, [2003](#)).

I hypothesise that autistic individuals attempting to mask their innate social behaviour will adapt these vocal patterns to manage others' perceptions of them. However, studies of autistic masking strategies rarely distinguish specific vocal changes (Cook et al., [2020](#); [2022](#)). Only three of the 37 self-reported strategies presented by Cook et al. ([2020](#)) are exclusively vocal: laughing, tone of voice, and slowing verbal communication for clarity.

This discrepancy either suggests that autistic individuals use few vocal strategies to mask or they are unaware of the specific vocal changes they make. Based on my experience with students new to voice work, I believe the discrepancy is more likely due to a limited awareness of vocal dynamics by both autistic participants and researchers, resulting in a lack of vocabulary to describe the vocal adjustments. For instance, new students often refer to changing their tone of voice when they

are actually altering various vocal elements such as pitch, loudness, quality, stress, and prosody. This highlights a need for further research into vocal masking strategies that incorporates a deeper understanding of vocal dynamics.

2.1.1. Vocal difference between autistic and non-autistic voices

In light of this lack of data, one way to gauge the potential vocal modifications used in autistic masking is by drawing from the extensive literature into the vocal differences between autistic and non-autistic individuals (Shriberg et al., 2001; McCann and Peppé, 2003; Holbrook and Israelsen, 2020; Vogindroukas et al., 2022; Grice et al., 2023) and established therapeutic interventions that attempt to reduce these differences (Paul, 2008; Gillon et al., 2017; Holbrook and Israelsen, 2020).

A review by Shriberg et al. (2001) separates autistic vocal differences into those related to prosody and those related to voice. Prosody refers to a combination of spoken language features operating at a level above individual words, phrases, and sentences; including rate, pitch, intonation, stresses, pauses, intensity, and duration (Holbrook and Israelsen, 2020). Atypical prosody is typically associated with autism (McCann and Peppé, 2003).

Prosody related differences in autistic voices compared to non-autistic voices include (Shriberg et al., 2001; Fusaroli et al., 2017; Asgari, Chen, and Fombonne, 2021):

- Phrasing — Autistic speakers tend to use less frequent non-grammatical pauses, perhaps due to differing cognitive processes (Thurber and Tager-Flusberg, 1993; Shriberg et al., 2001).
- Rate — Autistic speakers often produce sentences with longer durations and greater duration variability (Shriberg et al., 2001; Patel et al., 2020).
- Stress — Autistic speakers tend to have more misassigned stresses, often misplacing grammatical stress onto function words instead of content words (Baltaxe and Guthrie, 1987; Shriberg et al., 2001).

Voice related differences in autistic individuals compared to non-autistic individuals include (Shriberg et al., 2001):

- Loudness — Autistic speakers often show wide variations in vocal intensity (Pronovost, M.P. Wakstein, and D.J. Wakstein, 1966; Shriberg et al., 2001; Fusaroli et al., 2017).
- Pitch — Autistic speakers display a range of pitch differences including exaggerated or narrow pitch ranges and inconsistent intonation patterns (Baltaxe and Simmons, 1985; Shriberg et al., 2001).
- Quality — Autistic speakers may demonstrate extensive variations in voice quality including hoarseness, harshness, and hypernasality (Pronovost, M.P. Wakstein, and D.J. Wakstein, 1966; Shriberg et al., 2001).

2.2. Reflection on practice

Reflecting on my practice using the framework from Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001):

2.2.1. What?

Literature into autistic masking strategies offers relatively limited information into specific vocal strategies, highlighting a need for research that incorporates deeper understanding of vocal dynamics. This lack of data led me to draw instead from literature into the differences in vocal properties between autistic and non-autistic people, which allowed me to identify a range of vocal properties that may be involved in autistic masking.

2.2.2. So what?

The wide variability in vocal traits of autistic individuals highlights the need for targeted voice work that takes into account each person's unique voice. Traditional interventions often aim to align autistic vocal patterns with societal norms (Paul, 2008; Gillon et al., 2017; Holbrook and Israelsen, 2020). However, the goal of my practice is to identify voice teaching strategies that instead encourage authenticity. By equipping autistic individuals with tools to better understand their unique voices, they can make informed vocal choices that preserve their sense of self, fostering authentic and effective communication styles.

2.2.3. Now what?

My proposed guidelines for businesses that are looking to foster more authentic communication, provided in the appendix, prompt companies to scrutinise their existing communication norms and

provide training to employees to foster authentic voice use. Proposed voice teaching strategies include incorporating exercises that promote authentic voice use and creating shared experiences to help students unlearn culturally-imposed patterns.

3. The impact of masking adjustments on experienced and externally perceived authenticity

The literature on authenticity in the workplace spans various disciplines including authentic leadership, identity management, and philosophy (Cha et al., 2019). Academic interest in the topic has risen the past two decades with proposed reasons including increased social mobility, scandals of inauthentic leadership, and a cynicism of marketing by the general public (Cha et al., 2019; Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani, 2021).

Cha et al. (2019) synthesise this siloed literature to explore the multifaceted impacts of authenticity in workplace settings, identifying clear benefits to promoting authenticity; authentic leadership – “a manager’s externally perceived authenticity as related by followers” (Cha et al., 2019, p.642) — is linked with positive outcomes for employees including increased trust in leadership, workplace performance, and commitment to the organization. Additionally, when employees feel able to express themselves authentically, they have higher job satisfaction, well being, and lower job anxiety (Martinez et al., 2017).

Despite these benefits, employees often make strategic adjustments to their social identities at work, particularly if they perceive those identities to be stigmatised, irrelevant in the workplace, or conflicting with their role (McCluney et al., 2021). These adjustments can create internal conflict jeopardizing an employee’s well being, self-esteem, and self-worth (Martinez et al., 2017; Cha et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2021; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

For employees from stigmatised groups, such as autistic individuals, workplace masking is highly prevalent and comes with a range of detrimental effects including extreme exhaustion, increased barriers to support, and feeling like a fraud (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

3.1. Constructs of authenticity by neurodivergent employee voices

Cha et al. (2019) identify ten constructs of workplace authenticity, most relating to knowing one's true self and values, and behaving in accordance with this knowledge in the workplace. While most constructs play some part in neurodivergent masking, reflecting on my practice leads me to choose two constructs — identity suppression and emotional labour — as most relevant for examining vocal behaviours employed in neurodivergent masking.

3.1.1. Identity suppression

Identity suppression involves minimizing or hiding one's stigmatised identity through strategies like refraining from engaging in negative stereotypical behaviours (Madera, King, and Hebl, 2012; Cha et al., 2019). Prevalent stereotypes of autistic individuals — such as having poor social skills, difficult personalities, and poor communication (Wood and Freeth, 2016) — are often negative and may lead to bullying and social exclusion (Treweek et al., 2019).

Specific vocal stereotypes of autism are strongly influenced by a distorted depiction of the autistic voice in popular media, including a monotonous, atypical prosody with no inflections or emotion, and frequent word repetition (Felepchuk, 2021).

In my practice, it is important for me to recognize that autistic individuals may attempt to actively distance their vocal use from these stereotypical patterns. I have observed that some autistic individuals modify their vocal tone with exaggerated pitch ranges, referred to in some autism literature as a singsongy intonation pattern (Baltaxe and Simmons, 1985; Shriberg et al., 2001; Wehrle et al., 2022). I hypothesize that this could be a masking strategy, in some cases, that the autistic individual uses to distance themselves from the monotone stereotype, though research would be needed to verify this.

3.1.2. Emotional labour

Emotional labour involves strategies for managing emotions and emotional expression to what is deemed appropriate in a particular setting (Glomb and Tews, 2004). It includes both deep acting —

changing how one actually feels to convey expected emotions – and surface acting – trying to fake those emotions (Cha et al., 2019).

Such strategies may be actively encouraged in some workplaces, such as when businesses have emotional display rules for customer-facing roles (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Surface acting in particular is cognitively taxing as employees must continually monitor their words, facial expressions, and voice (Humphrey, Ashforth, and Diefendorff, 2015). For neurodivergent employees, such rules add to the already high emotional labour cost of masking in the workplace (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Longmire, Vogus, and Colella, 2024).

In my practice, I should thus address emotional labour and energy management to allow students to engage in surface acting strategies, where necessary, while honouring their energy needs. While my ultimate goal is to remove the reliance on such strategies, in the short term surface acting strategies are similar to those I would teach to professional actors developing a new role and can be taught in a playful, fun way that reduces the onerous nature of this emotional labour.

3.2. Reflection on practice

Reflecting on my practice using the framework from Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001):

3.2.1. What?

The literature on workplace authenticity highlights the positive effects of promoting authenticity on employee well being, work engagement, and job satisfaction (Cha et al., 2019). Despite these benefits, some businesses actively encourage inauthentic behaviour, either explicitly or implicitly, requiring employees to engage in emotional labour and identity suppression strategies (Cha et al., 2019). This may place extra strain on neurodivergent and other stigmatised employees who already engage in emotional labour to mask, leading to negative outcomes including extreme exhaustion and feeling like a fraud (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023).

3.2.2. So what?

The impact of vocal masking to conform to workplace expectations has practical implications for my teaching of neurodivergent employees and the businesses that employ them. When neurodivergent and other stigmatised employees are required to suppress aspects of their authentic identity, the cost isn't just personal to them — the business may also lose out from that employee's reduced

job satisfaction, workplace performance, and commitment to the organization (Longmire, Vogus, and Colella, 2024). This is important because neurodivergent employees can contribute to distinct competitive advantages (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023).

This has clear implications for the voice work that I offer to businesses, as I can position my services to benefit both employee well-being and organizational outcomes. By working with neurodivergent and other employees to better manage their vocal authenticity and reduce the strain of masking, I can work with businesses to foster a healthier, more inclusive work culture.

3.2.3. Now what?

Reflecting on these points has reinforced the importance of creating an inclusive, safe, and supportive environment that encourages authentic communication in both my voice teaching practice and in the businesses I work with.

My proposed business guidelines, provided in the appendix, encourage companies to develop inclusive communication practices and provide training to facilitate an environment that does not rely so heavily on emotional labour, while being wary of patterns like hiring for culture fit that can exacerbate such problems (Keren Dali, 2018). Proposed voice teaching strategies involve incorporating energy management and using playful exercises that allow students to explore emotional labour and stereotypes in a constructive way.

4. The role of voice training to foster authenticity

The use of voice training as a pathway to an authentic sense of self has a long history within both vocal pedagogy and therapeutic settings (Linklater, 2006; Schlichter, 2014; Austin, 2015; Gumble, 2019; Cazden, 2023). Voice work can act as a disciplinary regime that develops a person's natural voice both physically and emotionally; and is employed across various fields — including actor training, therapy, business, and politics — to remove the physical and emotional blocks imposed by modern social and cultural environments that inhibit people from using their voices naturally (Schlichter, 2014).

Modern voice work has roots in traditional oratory training with history as far back as Ancient Greece (Sansom, 2019). However, unlike traditional elocutionary training, modern vocal pedago-

gies draw from a wide range of diverse influences, including somatic and embodied practices like bodywork, breathwork, self help, and martial arts (Schlichter, 2014; Sansom, 2016).

Disciplines that use voice work to affect a person's authenticity include:

- Speech and language therapy — Changing an individual's habitual vocal patterns in such therapy settings often requires them to renegotiate their self-image linked to those patterns (Cazden, 2023).
- Vocal psychotherapy — This psychology-based framework employs breath, sounds, vocal improvisation, songs, and dialogue to facilitate an individual's psychological and emotional healing (Austin, 2015; Monti and Austin, 2018). It has some precedence in the teaching of non-verbal autistic individuals (Warnock, 2012).
- Gender-affirming voice work — This work aims to align a person's vocal expression with their gender identity to reclaim a voice that may have been previously stifled or unrecognised (Gumble, 2019).
- Spoken voice pedagogy — My own vocal practice is rooted in the work of embodied voice practitioners for actor training, who emphasise the use of voice work as a means to unlock a more authentic and expressive sense of self (Rodenburg, 1992; Houseman, 2002; Linklater, 2006; McCallion, 2013)

The presence of this wide-ranging literature justifies the potential of embodied voice work to foster a person's authentic voice. However, Schlichter (2014) warn that liberation of a person's authentic voice is not a certain outcome; it is possible for voice work to inadvertently impose societally acceptable communication patterns onto students.

4.1. Reflection on practice

Reflecting on my practice using the framework from Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001):

4.1.1. What?

The wide-ranging literature on using embodied voice work to unlock authenticity reveals its potential as a teaching approach. However, the warning from Schlichter (2014) that voice work can

inadvertently impose societal communication norms is important; it highlights the need to tread carefully when designing teaching interventions that focus on a person's authenticity.

4.1.2. So what?

Reflecting on this, it is clear that I must be intentional when creating voice training that addresses neurodivergent masking. As societal norms are a key factor in neurodivergent masking, the social and cultural dynamics that create a person's physical and emotional blocks will almost certainly play a part in the voice work. These blocks may be even more prevalent in a workplace environment. For this reason, it is important for me to actively address this dynamic in the design of my voice training for businesses.

4.1.3. Now what?

Reflecting on these points, my practical takeaways relate to the design of voice teaching strategies to unlock authenticity in the workplace.

Proposed voice teaching strategies include incorporating discussions of authentic and inauthentic voice use into the training environment and developing proactive plans to handle potential situations that could arise as students explore their authentic voices in a workplace group environment.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have highlighted the intricate ways neurodivergent individuals and those from other stigmatised groups adjust their vocal presentation patterns and communication styles to align with social and cultural norms. By combining three distinct fields of literature — neurodivergent masking, authenticity in the workplace, and embodied voice work — I have explored how vocal masking can negatively affect both the individuals and the businesses that employ them. I have proposed the use of embodied voice work as a pathway to help such individuals to develop more authentic voice use in the workplace, provided guidelines for businesses looking to promote authenticity in their teams, and proposed teaching strategies for my voice practice in such businesses.

Key themes that emerged through my reflections on this literature are:

- Conflict between masking and authenticity in the workplace — Both neurodivergent and other

stigmatised employees face internal conflict in the workplace between hiding aspects of their true identity and presenting themselves authentically (Madera, King, and Hebl, 2012).

- Mental health consequences — The mental and emotional strain caused by masking are particularly strong for neurodivergent individuals, leading to increased stress, reduced well-being, and extreme exhaustion (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Conversely, there are clear personal and organizational benefits to presenting a more authentic self in the workplace including higher job satisfaction and well-being, and lower job anxiety (Cha et al., 2019).
- Variability of masking strategies — Autistic individuals, as an example of a stigmatised group that is systematically required to present themselves in an inauthentic way to survive in the workplace (Hull, Petrides, et al., 2017), use a wide variety of voice, content, and body language strategies to mask aspects of their identity (Cook et al., 2020).
- Voice work as a pathway to authenticity — There is clear precedence across literature fields for using embodied voice practices to facilitate individuals in unlocking their authentic voice (Linklater, 2006; Schlichter, 2014; Austin, 2015; Gumble, 2019; Cazden, 2023). This supports its use in tailored voice training aimed at promoting more authentic communication in the workplace.

Reflecting on gaps in the literature highlighted a lack of studies into the specific vocal strategies that neurodivergent individuals employ when masking. I hypothesise that this gap is due to a limited awareness of vocal dynamics in researchers and study participants. I also identified a lack of literature on the specific use of voice work as a pathway to develop neurodivergent authenticity, although some limited research exists into using voice work with non-verbal autistic individuals (Warnock, 2012).

These findings have direct implications for my voice practice and further research. I plan to conduct further research into the specific vocal adaptations neurodivergent individuals employ when masking. This will enhance my recognition of such vocal adaptations when teaching neurodivergent individuals and allow me to develop more targeted voice teaching strategies that meet their unique needs. I aim to develop teaching plans and workshops that apply embodied voice work techniques to help neurodivergent individuals to explore the intersection between their own self of authenticity and the strategies used when masking.

Appendices

Strategy 1: Guidelines for businesses

These are the guidelines for businesses looking to foster more inclusive, authentic communication within their teams, with a particular focus on neurodivergent employees:

How neurodivergent and stigmatised groups adjust vocal presentation to conform

- Offer communication training that addresses the diverse vocal behaviours of each individual rather than promoting conformity. If conformity is required in specific situations (e.g. customer-facing roles) recognise this and address it through promoting energy management strategies.
- Equip employees with the knowledge and practical skills to understand their own unique voices and communication needs.
- Scrutinise existing communication norms to identify those that might cause employees to hide their natural vocal patterns.
- Recognise and celebrate individuality in the workplace, particularly around vocal use and communication styles.

The impact of masking adjustments on experienced and externally perceived authenticity

- Develop inclusive communication practices that promote and celebrate varied communication styles, particularly for employees from stigmatised groups.
- Provide training that allows people to recognize when they are engaging in emotional labour and create a safe space for exploring identity within the workplace.
- Facilitate open, honest discussions around identity, belonging, and authenticity within the organization.
- Be cautious when hiring for "culture fit" and scrutinize existing policies for areas where they may require people to change who they are (Keren Dali, [2018](#)).
- Start with authentic leadership - Invest in voice work and training for the entire organization, not just employees, to ensure leaders are modelling the desired authenticity.

Strategy 2: Voice teaching strategies

These are specific voice teaching strategies that I can incorporate into the training services that I offer to businesses looking to foster more inclusive, authentic communication within their teams, with a particular focus on neurodivergent employees.

How neurodivergent and stigmatised groups adjust vocal presentation to conform

- Teach students a foundational understanding of voice, allowing them to begin the process of detaching how they speak from their felt sense of self.
- Incorporate exercises from my authenticity-based performance training, such as clown and improv (Gates, [2011](#); Keates and Beadle-Brown, [2023](#)) that foster individuality and have been shown to benefit neurodivergent lived experiences (Keates and Beadle-Brown, [2023](#)).
- Provide opportunities for students to constructively reflect together on how particular vocal behaviours are prioritised or discouraged in their workplace. To do this, I should first create a space where all participants have co-created a confidentiality and disclosure agreement so they feel safe to share these reflections.
- Give employees shared experiences of using their voices in non-habitual ways to begin to loosen existing cultural and mental barriers that may be holding them back from using their voices authentically, as has been shown in embodied voice practices applied to acting training (Rodenburg, [1992](#); Houseman, [2002](#); Linklater, [2006](#)).
- Conduct individual voice assessments of students to tailor specific recommendations to each person's individual voice.

The impact of masking adjustments on experienced and externally perceived authenticity

- Incorporate energy management training and explore with students the demands of surface acting and emotional labour.
- Incorporate games and exercises to let people explore how they already show up in different situations in the workplace.

- Incorporate exercises around what is deemed "appropriate" communication in this particular business context to reveal existing group dynamics.
- When working with neurodivergent individuals, recognize their existing vocal masking strategies and be sensitive to where they may have hesitance to release them.
- Use playful exercises to explore stereotypes about people's own stigmatized groups; play games with creating new personas; and ultimately, allow people to experience using their authentic voice in this setting, maybe for the first time.

The role of voice training to foster authenticity

- Incorporate both discussions and safe vocal explorations of authenticity and inauthenticity, allowing participants to engage with these concepts in a safe and incremental manner.
- Develop a proactive plan to address potential dynamics that could lead to tension as people explore their authentic voices in a group.
- Plan various different exercises for each teaching point, allowing me to adapt in response to the group dynamics.
- Include clear mechanisms for participants to seek emotional or other support during the sessions, to both prepare them for the potential of internal tension and provide a structure.
- Design exercises that allow participants to explore their voice and body both individually and in connection with others, allowing them to explore their authentic voice even when the environment may not feel entirely safe for full expression.

Personal Development Plan

The questions I am asking for my personal development plan are:

- What's my overall goal?
- What areas of development will help me achieve this goal?
- What actions will I take to reach this?
- What resources and support do I need to succeed?
- What have I achieved already? (affirm what I've already done)
- What fears or obstacles might hold me back, and how can I address them?
- What does success look like? (big picture)
- How will I measure that success? (expressed with SMART)
- What is my target date for completion?

Overall goal	Areas of development	Actions I'll take	Resources and support	Already achieved	Fears, obstacles and mitigation	Big picture success	Measuring the success	Target completion date
Learn how voice coaching is applied to people from stigmatised groups	Undergo structured learning into how voice work is already used to help people to uncover their authentic voices.	(1) Take ITOL course in Gender-Affirming Voice Work (2) Short course: Why we think we hear race (Nida Eidsheim)	Courses available through MA	Started the ITOL course	I fear that I will learn these things but not put them into practice. A mitigation is to use the learning from the course to inform a group coaching/discussion group with friends that are transitioning, as a pilot group.	I'll feel confident to teach gender affirming voice and have set this part of practice in motion to feel it out as a potential direction.	Complete the ITOL course by the end of December. And arrange a date for the first group session with transitioning friends for December.	20/12/2024
Learn how to create safe spaces for people to open up authentically	Undergo structured learning into how to create supportive teaching spaces for groups.	(1) Finish facilitation group program by Holly Stoppit (2) Apply the learnings to my group coaching practice through one-to-one guidance by Holly	Clown training network and coach Holly Stoppit	Started facilitation course and already doing one-to-one coaching with Holly	I fear that I will not have practical groups running that I am leading and will thus not implement the things I've learned. Running a course, say in the new year, is going to be a big part of my theory to practice.	I'll have a grounded framework I can use to create truly transformational and inclusive spaces for people to grow.	I will finish the facilitation course by the end of the year and formalize a process so I can easily create lesson plans for new workshops.	31/12/2024
Prepare myself for how trauma might inform voice practice	Learn about trauma and voice and prepare an action plan for how to address trauma related issues in voice work.	(1) Watch short courses: 2 trauma-informed voice care courses (Dr Geneva Mayne and Megan Durham) (2) Create a lesson plan style database with signs of trauma issues to watch out for and suggested paths to address them for my practice	MA short courses	Already putting lesson plan design in to practice as part of the ITOL Accent and Phonetics course that's just finishing	I worry that I'm creating too much work for myself, too many small projects. I will keep to my main goals for my business I've already created and this can be an added extra.	I'll feel confident to handle trauma situations in the voice classroom and have a process to deal with them.	Watch short courses by the end of November and create a lesson plan style by mid December	15/12/2024

Learn from people in the business world about how to approach authenticity in business	Talk to/interview people in the business world from my existing network about authenticity in business	(1) Contact the 10 people I have listed to check in with them and suggest a chat to reconnect. (2) Write an interview plan for interviewing people. (3) Propose video podcast-style interviews with those people, maybe one to one but maybe also roundtable discussions.	My network	Listed 10 people I can talk to who would be interesting for this study. Already have skills and experience creating and conducting video podcast interviews.	I'm afraid of reaching out to people to ask them for things, or even to just reconnect. I think a mitigation can be to do an exercise where I remind myself why I genuinely love connecting with the 10 people I have listed, because I do, to remind myself that there really is nothing to fear because they are good people and probably appreciate connecting with me too.	I'll be connected with people again in the business world, have inspiring discussions, and feel like I can really offer something that helps people.	By the end of the year, I will have reached out to all these people and have dates to catch up with them in the diary. Then planned interview dates with them in the new year.	31/01/2025
Learn more about the prosody of autistic voices	Learn more about spoken prosody and conduct a personal research project on the "autistic accent."	(1) Watch short courses: prosody in conversation (Beatrice Szczepek Reed) and mental health and inclusivity symposium. (2) Complete the Accent and Phonetics ITOL course (3) Design a small research study into autistic accents.	MA short courses	Almost finished the ITOL course and have identified some recorded interviews I could study to look at the autistic accent.	I fear this is the sort of project that can actually derail me from the other, more proactive tasks that I set myself. So I'm actually going to put this one off until the new year .	I'll become an expert in autistic voices and masking that I can apply to my voice practice.	I will have finished the ITOL course by the end of November but will hold off my research until the new year.	28/02/2025

Reflection on whole learning experience

Here I shall reflect on my whole learning experience of this research using the framework from Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001):

What?

The research I have carried out in this module has led me to realise several key factors about my existing research practice that can both impact future modules in this MA and my application of research onto practice.

In summary these learnings are:

- When researching a new topic, I have a tendency to amass huge numbers of research papers very quickly then become overwhelmed by the large number of things to read. This is related to what I have learned are the tendencies of my own neurodivergent brain which craves novelty, downloads papers impulsively, and wants to learn "everything all at once." In this module, through the support of my tutor, I instead focused on deep reading just three research papers and then used these to anchor my research process. This was a good start but I still have some way to go to work better with my brain's natural tendencies.
- My brain also has a tendency to make a large number of connections between topics faster than I can consciously explain the connections, which I don't always lay out explicitly when writing about literature review research. At various points in my research process, my tutor indicated areas where I needed to make a point explicit when I had considered it implicitly but not laid out all the steps.
- I am beginning to see that I have a natural inclination towards theoretical research and some resistance to trusting my own existing knowledge and expertise. This module prompted me to make assertions and draw hypotheses from my own lived experience and practice working with voice students. This is an area that will become increasingly important during the future modules which involve applying theoretical research to practice then reflecting on those experiments.
- The reflection process prompted me to slow down my thinking and make explicit some research steps that my brain has a tendency to mix together. For example, sometimes I have

a tendency to jump straight to the "Now What?" (practical steps) without making explicit the "What?" and "So What?" steps that describe the learning and help to decide whether it is relevant. This can lead me to taking action on learning that isn't actually relevant to my practice or the hypothesis. Other times, my brain fixates on amassing as much "What?" as possible in an attempt to understand everything, leading to a huge depth of theoretical understanding but no reflection on how I could apply the learning practically.

So what?

Reflecting on these patterns, I can see some learnings that will be important for future modules. In particular, it will be important for me to keep using the reflective framework to slow down my thinking and keep bringing me back to the hypothesis I'm trying to answer by looking for new papers. When applying research to my practice, it will also be important for me to generate clear practical experiments with simple action steps, deadlines, and measures of success. This is necessary to help me avoid getting overwhelmed by my brain's tendency to instantly create dozens of feasible and exciting potential actions that I then struggle to know how to prioritize.

In this research process, I also amassed many more pieces of literature that I am interested to read and learn from more deeply, which didn't make it into the essay. There are also some references I did use that I would like to read more deeply. This will mean applying a research reading practice to my work day, so that I can continue to grow my understanding of the topics I am researching. As I work better when I am producing a specific piece of work, I am considering a plan to create videos for my YouTube channel where I describe each new research paper I have read deeply that week. These videos can also help to feed the marketing content for my voice practice into business.

Now what?

From these reflections, I plan to take the following practical steps to apply the learnings I have gained in this research:

1. Keep applying the reflective framework to my reading of academic papers and other learning activities that feed my practice.
2. Create a regular practice of deeply reading one or two academic papers a week and turn these into a video for my YouTube channel.

3. Follow the actions in my Personal Development Plan to keep growing my learning and practice in specific areas.
4. Start to consciously look for the physical and behavioural signs that my brain is going into a frantic "learn everything all at once" mode. Learn to use these signs as a trigger to remind myself to slow down and reflect on what I am actually trying to achieve or learn in that moment.

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