ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Designing for connection: Person-Centred Autism and kindness as pedagogy in digital higher education

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This panel explores the design and development of Person-Centred Autism, a newly launched subject within the Master of Education. The subject foregrounds kindness, human rights, and neurodiversity-affirming practice, reframing autism as human diversity rather than deficit. Grounded in a heutagogical, learner-driven curriculum, connection is positioned not as an outcome of learning, but as a condition of its design. Within a digitally mediated learning environment, kindness is operationalised as pedagogy through inclusive language, psychologically safe online learning experiences, flexible assessment, and self-determined inquiry, modelling the person-centred principles it seeks to cultivate. The panel brings together the subject's design and leadership team to reflect on co-design, autistic-led research, and lived experience shaping digital curriculum and assessment. Discussion focuses on educator identity formation and the role of higher education in cultivating advocacy-oriented, ethical, and inclusive professional practice, aligning with ASCILITE 2026's theme The Future is Connection.

Keywords: Human-centred learning design, neurodiversity, autism, pedagogy, heutagogy, inclusive curriculum design, connection.

Panel proposal

Area of focus and relevance

This panel responds directly to the ASCILITE 2026 conference theme *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society* by exploring how meaningful human connection can be intentionally designed within digitally mediated higher education. It aligns strongly with the *Digital Wellbeing and Compassionate Technology* subtheme through its focus on neurodiversity-affirming design, and by examining how digital learning environments can support dignity, psychological safety, and human flourishing rather than overload or deficit thinking. (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022; United Nations, 2006). Drawing on the design and launch of *Person-Centred Autism*, the panel will present a practical, values-driven example of how kindness, social justice, and human rights can be operationalised through digital curriculum and learning experience design.

Position and areas for discussion

The panel proposes that kindness, compassion, and inclusion can be deliberately designed into educational systems rather than left to individual educator disposition. It challenges deficit-based models of disability and traditional hierarchies of knowledge by foregrounding autistic-led research and lived experience in curriculum design (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022).The session will facilitate discussion around key questions relevant to contemporary higher education practice:

- What does it mean, in practical terms, to design kindness into digital learning experiences rather than position it as a personal or moral disposition?
- How can digital learning environments balance learner agency and flexibility with institutional requirements for standardisation and scalability in heutagogical contexts (Blaschke, 2012)?
- Does prioritising psychological safety enhance or challenge traditional notions of academic rigour and quality in online contexts (Leif et al., 2025)?
- How might co-design and lived-experience input reshape educator identity, power, and knowledge production in universities (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022)?

Panel perspectives

The panel brings together complementary perspectives across learning design, academic practice, and program leadership. Panellists will reflect on the design choices, and tensions involved in developing a person-centred, neurodiversity-affirming subject, highlighting the intersection of pedagogy, disciplinary expertise, learning technologies, and organisational context.

Format and engagement

The 55-minute session is designed to prioritise dialogue and audience engagement:

- Short panel provocations outlining key digital curriculum and learning design decisions and tensions
- Guided audience reflection and small-group discussion
- Whole-group dialogue and Q&A

Participants will be invited to reflect on their own teaching contexts and consider how principles of connection, compassion, and inclusion might be enacted in digitally mediated learning environments in ways that support wellbeing and sustainable practice (Leif et al., 2025).

Intended audience and outcomes

Relevant to educators, learning designers, educational technologists and academic leaders, the panel offers transferable approaches to co-design, inclusive language and learner autonomy, with practical strategies for embedding compassionate, neurodiversity-affirming practice, connection and psychological safety into digital curriculum and assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Blaschke, 2012).

Contribution to knowledge

By sharing an institutionally embedded case of values-led curriculum design, this panel contributes to scholarly and professional conversations on inclusive education, heutagogy, and digital learning. It offers a concrete example of how kindness and connection can function as intentional design principles for digital higher education, extending consideration of educational technology beyond access and delivery to the relational, ethical, and affective qualities of digitally mediated learning. In doing so, the panel responds to growing calls to rebalance educational systems toward equity, digital wellbeing, and collective flourishing (Blaschke, 2012; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022).

References

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