

Creating a Sense of Belonging in a Maker Camp for Neurodivergent Middle Schoolers

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Abstract

This chapter describes the design and pilot of *NeuroVivid: A Maker Camp for All Brains*, a weeklong maker program created to engage and support neurodivergent middle schoolers in inclusive, meaningful STEM learning experiences. Grounded in principles of project-based learning (PBL) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the camp engaged participants in hands-on exploration of brain-computer interface (BCI) technology, allowing them to use their own brain signals with circuits and block coding to power small lights and motors. Through a participatory co-design process, neurodivergent teens and young adults helped create accessible, engaging activities and supports that addressed diverse sensory, executive function, and social-emotional needs.

The chapter details how our intentional design of physical and social environments—combined with asset-based facilitation, choice-driven activities, and executive function scaffolds—supported autonomy, confidence, and a sense of belonging among campers. Qualitative data collected through observations, conversations, and daily feedback highlighted strong engagement, emerging STEM identities, and moments of connection and empowerment. Findings from this pilot inform the next phase of design research and contribute to a growing body of work on creating neuro-inclusive STEM learning spaces that broaden participation.

INTRODUCTION

Growing evidence shows that many neurodivergent (e.g., ADHD, autistic, dyslexic) youth possess cognitive assets that are important for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) problem-solving, yet they often face systemic barriers to participation in high-quality STEM learning experiences and may be missing opportunities that could spark or further their interest and success in STEM careers (Gottfried et. al, 2016; Shattuck et. al, 2012; Baron-Cohen, 2020; Eide & Eide, 2011). Sensory differences, challenges with social interactions, and a lack of autonomy in educational activities can lead to high levels of anxiety, low/compromised academic performance, and feelings of exclusion from STEM (Connolly, 2023; Fielding et al., 2024; Schindler et al., 2015; Salvatore, S., White, C., & Podowitz-Thomas, S. (2024). For their talents to truly flourish, neurodivergent learners need to feel understood, valued, and safe—to feel they belong (Asbell-Clarke, 2023; Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hamond, Krone, 2018).

Maker spaces have demonstrated promising evidence for promoting a sense of community and belonging among neurodivergent learners (Jenson & Lee, 2024; Martin et al., 2020; Hughes, Laffier, & Reiterer, 2021). These flexible learning spaces afford ample opportunity for differentiation, customization, and project-based learning (PBL)—an approach that empowers learners to generate ideas, questions, predictions, and interests from their own experiences (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010; Yssel, Prater, & Smith, 2010) and to engage in student-directed inquiry processes to develop products with real-life connections and applications (Capraro, Capraro, & Morgan, 2013; Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016). When paired with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies that value learning and social differences and support individualized needs (CAST, 2024), maker and PBL environments can further increase neurodivergent learners’ interest and confidence in STEM (Jenson & Lee, 2024).

TERC partnered with EDC and the New York Hall of Science (NYSCI) to develop and pilot *NeuroVivid: A Maker Camp for All Brains*, a program designed to introduce neurodivergent middle school learners to neuroscience and technology. Middle school is a critical window for engaging neurodivergent youth before they enter high school, where expulsion and dropout rates for neurodivergent learners are disproportionately high (Fleming et al., 2017). *NeuroVivid* aims to shift neurodivergent learners’ trajectories by fostering confidence, community, and sustained engagement. This chapter describes how principles of PBL and UDL shaped the pilot version of the camp’s content, facilitation, and physical and social environments into a neuro-inclusive experience where campers felt they belonged.

ABOUT NEUROVIVID

Leveraging BCI: Brain-Computer Interface (BCI) technology—the focus of *NeuroVivid*—aligns naturally with PBL and creates opportunities to explore the brain, celebrate neurodiversity, and connect these ideas to cutting-edge STEM careers. Electroencephalogram (EEG) headsets are a type of BCI that work by acquiring brain signals, analyzing them, and translating them into usable information. EEG headsets safely, painlessly and non-invasively detect the brain’s natural electrical activity through electrodes placed against the scalp or forehead—much like a microphone picking up sound. Even simple EEGs can measure brain activity linked to focus (Benedek et al., 2014).

Activity Structure and Sequence: The *NeuroVivid* camp focused on daily themes for building skills related to BCI (e.g., circuits, coding), culminating in a capstone project in which campers paired inexpensive EEG headsets with basic circuitry components and a block coding environment to harness their brain power for tasks such as lighting an LED or powering a small fan (Figure 1).

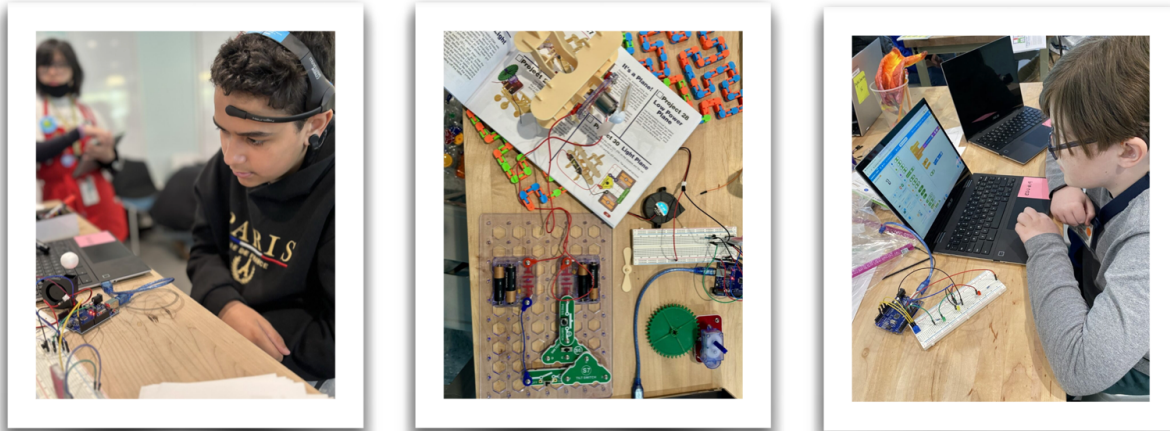
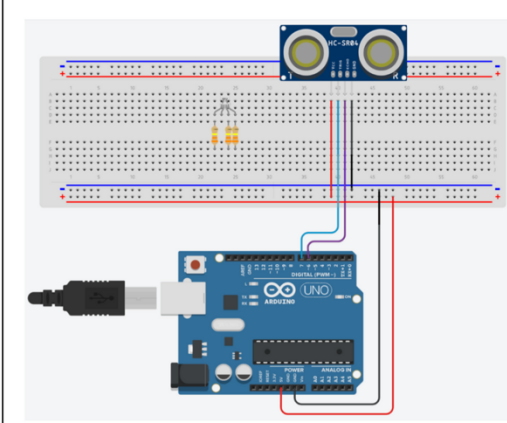


Figure 1. (left) *NeuroVivid* camper using a NeuroSky Mindwave Mobile 2 EEG headset to power a fan and levitate a small ball; (middle) circuitry components and fidget toys, (right) camper writing code for a circuit using the mBlock block coding environment.

Co-Design of *NeuroVivid* Materials: To meet the unique needs and preferences of neurodiverse learners, we developed *NeuroVivid* activities through participatory co-design with a cohort of 10 neurodivergent high school and college students selected from 45 applicants based on personal essays about their interest and experience and why they wanted to work with us. Over 8 months, co-designers and developers met weekly via Zoom to brainstorm activity ideas collaboratively, build and test circuits, discuss the scaffolds and supports co-designers would have wanted themselves as middle schoolers, and to build community. Between meetings, co-designers completed short assignments such as trying out draft activities with family or friends; providing written feedback on difficulty level, fun factor, clarity of instructions, or visual layout of activities; or proposing ideas for new activities or improvements to the camp to make it more accessible and inclusive for participants. This process was integral to shaping the content for the camp.

UDL + Executive Function Supports: We designed camp activities using the UDL framework to offer participants multiple ways to engage with the content, access information, and demonstrate their understanding. To ensure accessibility for a wide range of learners, we provided activity guides in multiple formats—written and visual—available both digitally through Google Slides and as printed handouts. Each guide used clear visuals and chunked steps to help learners navigate complex tasks and build confidence in their STEM capabilities. To further support learners, we intentionally embedded executive function (EF) scaffolds in activities to support attention, working memory, and metacognition (Figure 2). These scaffolds helped campers break complex problems into smaller, manageable steps and use metacognitive strategies to monitor their progress—skills that can be challenging for both neurodivergent and neurotypical learners (Armstrong, 2012; Asbell-Clarke, 2023; Zentall et al., 2001).



Step 5

Add three **resistors** to the **RGB LED** to prevent it from getting too much power.


- Insert one end of the **resistor** in a hole in the **same row** as the **R leg of the LED**.
- Insert the other end of the **resistor** in an **empty row** in **any column (f-j)**.
- Repeat for the **G** and **B** legs of the LED.

Reflect

1. Ask questions such as:
 - What did you find challenging or difficult about building and programming the circuit?
 - Where do you see connections between the circuit you built today and BCI?
 - What was something you found interesting or surprising during the activity?
 - What new skills did you learn today?
2. Encourage learners to share their circuits and/or any extensions they built.

resistor

A component that “resists” or limits the flow of electricity in a circuit



NeuroVivid

Figure 2. Examples of EF supports: Step-by-step instructions (attention), vocabulary reference cards (working memory), and facilitated reflection questions (metacognition).

CAMP PILOT

We piloted *NeuroVivid* as a free, 5-day camp at NYSCI for 6th-8th grade students during a local school vacation week. Enrollment was open to all students, but recruitment efforts focused on encouraging neurodivergent youth to participate. Twelve students enrolled (11 male, 1 female; 50% white, 50% Hispanic/Asian/Black), all of whom had previously attended a camp at NYSCI. Every participant self-identified as neurodivergent, and most identified with more than one of the following: ADHD, ASD, Aspergers, Autism, Learning Disability/Difference, Neurodivergent, NVLD.

Camp was led by two NYSCI facilitators who identify as neurodivergent. About one month before the pilot, TERC developers led a 2-day training session to prepare facilitators for the technical aspects of the camp. Because the facilitators had experience and expertise working with neurodivergent learners, the training focused primarily on reviewing the maker activities and facilitation guides, practicing the circuit-building and coding tasks, and experiencing the activities from a learner’s perspective. Each facilitator guide included the daily agenda, a link to support slides, context for the maker activity, preparation and set-up instructions, differentiation strategies, and detailed activity procedures.

Structure and Implementation of Camp: Each camp day followed the same general routine to give campers a predictable schedule, with staff leading a structured maker activity in the morning and allowing unstructured exploration in the afternoon. Staff prominently displayed the daily schedule and reviewed it several times each day, reminding campers what to expect next. The schedule also included ample break time for eating, visiting the museum floor, and outdoor activities. It was not overcrowded, giving campers freedom to explore their own interests without feeling pressured by time. On Day 5, we modified the schedule to include a project showcase for family and friends.

Each morning, staff introduced a BCI-themed maker activity that built off the previous day’s project. As the week progressed, each maker activity increased in complexity and equipped campers with the skills and tools to build their own BCI project. During unstructured time, campers selected from a variety of suggested activities (e.g., making paper circuits, continuing or extending the morning’s maker activity, building with Snap Circuits®, watching BCI career videos, playing with a BCI game), or freely used materials available in the makerspace.

Data Collection and Analysis: We collected qualitative data through observations, written feedback, and ad hoc interviews and conversations with participants and facilitators. Throughout the camp, we took detailed notes to capture participant quotes, document the overall experience, and identify areas for improvement. We also engaged participants in informal conversations about their activities and their feelings toward the camp and the maker projects, which often revealed moments when they felt included and connected. In addition, we asked campers to complete brief exit tickets (Figure 3) each day to rate their enjoyment of the structured maker activity and how challenging they found it. We used this feedback to identify campers who needed additional support as well as to inform revisions to the activities. At the end of each day, researchers, developers and camp staff debriefed, reflecting on the day’s successes and challenges, and participants’ needs. Qualitative data were coded inductively, to identify recurring patterns and themes in participants' comments and observed behaviors (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).



The form is titled 'Activity feedback exit ticket' and contains the following sections:

- NAME:** A blank line for the participant's name.
- DAY:** A line with checkboxes for 'M', 'T', 'W', 'T', 'H', 'F'.
- HELP US IMPROVE!** A heading followed by the text 'Your honest feedback is appreciated.'
- THIS ACTIVITY WAS:** A row of five smiley faces with different expressions: a red sad face labeled 'BORING', an orange neutral face labeled 'MEH', a yellow neutral face, a green happy face, and a bright green happy face labeled 'FUN'. Each face has a corresponding checkbox below it.
- THE DIFFICULTY LEVEL WAS:** A row of three icons: a blue mountain labeled 'TOO HARD', a blue scale of justice labeled 'JUST RIGHT', and a brown cake labeled 'TOO EASY'. Each icon has a corresponding checkbox below it.
- COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS:** A heading followed by the text '(Use back if needed.)' and a large blank area for writing.

Figure 3. Activity feedback exit ticket

RESULTS

A theme of belonging emerged from the pilot study, which has roots in the content, facilitation, and physical and learning environment of the camp.

Creating a Sense of Belonging Through Content: Working with BCI and seeing their own mental focus control a device helped campers build confidence in their technical abilities and in how they saw themselves in relation to STEM. While using the EEG headset to light an LED, one camper exclaimed, “Look at how powerful my brain is!” Because the activities connected directly to their minds and attention, campers were able to make sense of STEM through their lived experience:

“It’s like we’re real scientists – but for fun!” Parents also noticed this shift, with one noting their son initially “didn’t want to go because he’s interested in the universe, not interested in the brain. But after an hour of being at the camp, he loved it.”

For many campers, the hands-on nature of the activities invited a deeper level of engagement and appeared to strengthen their confidence with science. One camper reflected, “At school I feel like I did not get it, but here I feel like I get it.” Working directly with BCI technology also may have helped disrupt common narratives about who gets to do high-tech science; if they could use BCIs, they could imagine themselves in other advanced STEM roles as well. A camper who initially felt disengaged with the content shared, “Even though I don’t like it, I know I can do it” and proudly added, “Now I’ll become a girl scientist!”

NeuroVivid campers were able to make meaningful choices in what they did as well as how they worked and learned. They could choose to work with a facilitator, independently, with a partner, or in small groups—and they could change their choice at any time. During circuitry activities, they also selected the tools that best matched their comfort and skill, choosing either traditional breadboards and components or Snap Circuits®, depending on their experience, visual acuity, or manual dexterity. To support reading, vocabulary, and technology use, we offered a list of optional unstructured activity ideas and a set of reference cards with text and graphics. For coding tasks, we provided starter code and clear instructions in the activity guide for adding or modifying lines of code. Campers who preferred could write their own code, while those who wanted extra support or did not want to code independently, could use pre-written code with help from facilitators. This ability to differentiate the learning experience provided autonomy and agency, which is critical for neurodivergent learners (Asbell-Clarke et al., 2024).

Creating a Sense of Belonging Through Facilitation: Two NYSCI facilitators led the camp with support from four “explainers”—high school and college students from the museum’s education and employment program—who circulated throughout the room, offering help as needed and often working one-on-one with campers. For example, when one camper struggled with the EEG headset, an explainer wore it while the camper tested the circuits he built and the code that he wrote.

Before each structured maker activity, facilitators introduced new content and led brief activation activities that connected to previous activities. They demonstrated or displayed examples of the finished project, explained the purpose of the activity, and reviewed behavior norms and expectations. After each activity, facilitators used provided discussion prompts to guide reflection, gather feedback, and help campers transition to the next part of the day. Throughout camp, facilitators flexibly responded to learners’ individual needs, making real-time adjustments to balance structure with autonomy to pursue personal interests. We believe that this attention given to each participant, without stigmatization or alienation, was a key factor in their sense of belonging.

Creating a Sense of Belonging through Learning Environment: At the start of camp, facilitators introduced and modeled a classroom norm of “space and grace” to guide both the physical environment and the social culture. They regularly repeated this motto to remind campers to give others the physical space to move and learn comfortably and the emotional space to be themselves without fear of judgment. Facilitators also set up the environment intentionally to reduce sensory overload and social anxiety. This inclusive approach helped cultivate a sense of belonging by

ensuring every camper felt safe, respected, and free to engage in ways that worked best for them. As one participant shared, “I didn’t feel like I was trapped like I do in school.”

One explainer described *NeuroVivid* as a “lovely opportunity” for neurodivergent youth, noting that they rarely have access to programs designed for their specific needs where they can fully be themselves and share their interests freely. Parents echoed this appreciation, reporting that their children came home excited, saying they “had so much fun” and that the camp was “amazing.”

Physical Space: We intentionally set up the physical learning environment with large tables to encourage teamwork, while still giving ample space for those who preferred to work alone or spread out. One camper often chose to work independently on the floor, while others worked in pairs or small groups with peers and explainers—many mixing it up throughout the week. We also laid out the space to support sensory needs, designated zones for different activities, and provided easy access to materials. Each table had fidget toys to help with self-regulation and pre-organized containers with maker materials to reduce stress and keep campers focused. Fidgets were widely used and even sparked a connection for two campers who usually worked alone but bonded over combining multiple fidgets into a mega-fidget “snake.”

Campers could move freely around the room at any time as long as they did not disrupt or upset others. Facilitators built frequent movement breaks into the schedule, including morning outdoor time, afternoon visits to the museum floor, and a special mini-golf outing at the end of the week. They also always kept a separate calm room available for anyone who felt overwhelmed, overstimulated, tired, or simply needed a change of scenery.

Social Grace: Neurodivergent individuals often consciously or unconsciously “mask” their neurodiversity by mimicking neurotypical social behaviors, suppressing stimming or self-soothing actions (such as hand flapping, rocking, or pacing), hiding their interests, or otherwise altering their natural behaviors in order to fit in or appear “normal” (Morris et. al, 2025). This masking can drain mental and physical energy, leading to burnout, mental health struggles, lower self-acceptance and confidence, and poor academic performance (Keen, Webster, & Ridley, 2016). *NeuroVivid* took an asset-based approach to neurodiversity, emphasizing social grace and authentic expression. Through this approach, the camp created a counterspace where neurodivergent learners could feel understood, supported, and empowered to build positive STEM identities and a genuine sense of community and belonging.

For many campers, this experience marked one of the first times they felt recognized and valued for their unique ways of thinking and problem-solving. By giving campers autonomy over how they spent their time, facilitators empowered them to create projects that held personal meaning and inspired pride. Campers chose freely whether or not to participate in the structured maker activities and the project showcase, and those who joined the showcase could present any creation from the week. Facilitators encouraged campers to seek help at any time by raising a hand or writing their name and request on one of the whiteboards, and to assist others when they felt confident in their skills.

Camp leaders embraced the “space and grace” approach and created an environment in which campers felt safe to take risks, make mistakes, and express themselves openly. Campers formed peer relationships organically through shared exploration rather than forced group work, which led to genuine collaboration and moments of mutual support. As the week progressed, campers turned

online gaming into a group activity during break times, sparking new and unexpected friendships. At the end of camp, several campers exchanged contact information to continue these new friendships beyond the program.

CONCLUSIONS

Belonging involves feeling accepted, comfortable, and part of a community. The *NeuroVivid* pilot demonstrated that the BCI context positively engaged neurodivergent learners with STEM concepts directly connected to their own brain activity and fostered a sense of belonging through collaborative project-based learning, expert facilitation, and an environment in which learners felt free to be themselves and had the agency to pursue their own interests.

This pilot also surfaced valuable insights for iterative improvement toward the full research study. Some refinements were straightforward, such as improving clarity and detail in instructional diagrams and offering material alternatives for learners with sensory sensitivities. Other challenges proved more complex. For instance, two campers and one staff member experienced discomfort or barriers when using the EEG headsets in ways that may have negatively impacted their sense of belonging (at least temporarily). For one, the earlobe clip posed a sensory issue. For another, the headset did not fit comfortably over their hair and for the third, a religious head scarf prevented use of the headset altogether. These cases highlighted tensions between the affordances of BCI technology and the sensory or cultural needs of some learners. Camp staff mitigated these barriers by volunteering to wear the devices while still involving the uncomfortable camper in other aspects of the activity such as coding or troubleshooting, thereby maintaining meaningful engagement and inclusion.

Insights from this pilot, combined with input and feedback from co-designers, guided subsequent revisions to both materials and facilitation strategies. One limitation of this pilot study was having only 1 female participating in the camp. For future sessions, we will recruit more heavily to audiences that serve girls. Future iterations of the *NeuroVivid* camp will implement these improvements and include formal data collection to further explore how participation influences neurodivergent middle school students' sense of belonging in STEM. This work contributes to a growing body of research on informal STEM learning environments that provide neurodivergent youth with accessible, interest-driven opportunities to build confidence, community, and positive STEM identities.

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