Designed for Learning Ep14 Transcript

Effectively Teaching Learners with ADHD (February 5, 2026)
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Guest: Karen Costa

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[JIM LANG]
(cheerful upbeat music)
Welcome to *Designed for Learning*, a podcast from Notre Dame Learning. I'm your host, Jim Lang. Over the course of my teaching career, I worked with many students whose behavior confused me. They were often great students, vocal in class, performed well in the first assignment or two. Then they would miss a deadline for an essay, and I wouldn't see them in class for a few sessions. If I reached out and invited them to come see me or gave them a chance to submit their work late, sometimes they would show up in my office and say that they were ashamed of missing the deadlines and the classes, and that shame had been preventing them from coming back to the course. And in some cases, even after we had gotten the student back on track, it would happen again.

When I began reading the new book written by today's guest, light bulbs kept turning on in my brain as I recognized how many of these interactions could have been driven by a student's ADHD. With the number of students who have ADHD increasing, we have to make sure that we are supporting them in the classroom and on campus.

So what does it take to be an effective teacher for learners with ADHD? How do we ensure that we not only support these learners, but also take advantage of the valuable strengths and perspectives that they can offer everyone in the room?

Karen Costa is a faculty development facilitator, adjunct faculty, and author. She's the author of *99 Tips for Creating Simple and Sustainable Educational Videos*, and most recently, *An Educator's Guide to ADHD: Designing and Teaching for Student Success*, which will be the subject of our conversation today. Her interests are diverse and include supporting neurodivergent learners, climate action pedagogy, and inclusive teaching practices. You can learn more about her work at 100faculty.com. Welcome to *Designed for Learning*, Karen.

[KAREN COSTA]
Hi, Jim. Good to be here with you.

[JIM LANG]

Okay. So one of the features of your book that made it such an engaging read for me was the fact that you were very open about your experience as someone with ADHD, and your book opens with a great image of what it's like to live with an ADHD brain. Can you sort of describe that image for us, which included both the strength and the challenges of having that brain? Tell us a little bit about that.

[KAREN COSTA]
Sure. So one thing that I like to do is give people some metaphors that can help them think differently about ADHD because we've all been taught a lot of things that we need to unlearn about what ADHD is and isn't. So one of the metaphors that I use is to think of ADHD as an open house with all the doors and windows thrown open. And you can imagine that that would be a pretty lively, interesting house to live in. (laughs) Today, Jim and I are both in Massachusetts. It would be pretty cold in that house, but some squirrels and wildlife might come to visit us. Where I live, we have all kinds of little creatures in the yard. We might see our neighbors, we might get to holler out to them, perhaps they would be more willing to stop by. So that openness creates this combination of strengths and challenges.

And the ADHD neurotype is—increasingly, we are coming to understand it as this sort of open cognitive profile. So sort of more is getting in and out. And that results in a pretty consistent and unique set of challenges and strengths. The strengths are, I list a lot of them in the book, but for our limited time today, creativity, for example, is one of the strengths of that open profile. When you get more stuff in and more stuff out, there tends to be higher degrees of creativity. So ADHDers are really quite talented in making connections between ideas that other people don't see and creating things that other people just simply don't think of. But that more in and more out also results in a lot of challenges for us.

You spoke in the intro, Jim, about having students who were hesitant to come see you at office hours because they had missed a previous class and assignment. As you read that, I felt myself actually getting a little choked up because that happened to me this week—not as an educator, but as a student. So I'm taking French classes later in life. I had my first new session last week, and I screwed up the time. I thought it started at 10:00, and it started at 9:00, and I missed the class.

And the shame showed right up because it always does. And I at least now know how to name it and work with it, which I did. I had to go back today for the second class, and it showed up again. And I thought, I can't go back there and all these people know each other and I missed class and they're going to think I'm stupid. And I had to learn how to say, "I'm sorry I missed class" in French, on top of everything else. (both laugh) Which I did, which was a good learning opportunity.

But it really struck me that here I am, I'm 46 years old. I have degrees and certificates and I work with faculty in higher education, and that happens to me, too. So more getting in and more getting out means little details like the number 10 versus the number nine are not sticking in my

brain like they might for some folks. So that's that open house, more in and more out, lots of strengths, but also lots of challenges.

[JIM LANG]
A person in that house, just staying with that image for a second, so on the one hand, that house is great because you can see all things going outside. You might interact with your neighbors, the squirrels are fun to watch, but at the same time, maybe you have to do some work on your laptop in the house. And the challenge for you is staying focused on that laptop when this stuff is happening all around you. At the same time, the work you do on that laptop might be more creative work than for somebody else who doesn't have that same ADHD brain.

[KAREN COSTA]
Exactly. And that's why the learning environments that we design, the assessments and activities that we design can really, if we're aware of this, we can really harness those creative strength, and we can harness that divergent thinking and the fact that more is getting in there and that ADHDers draw from this intense curiosity that bounces from one idea to another—and also help them to mitigate those challenges. So things like structured notes or externalizing time through reminders, lots of things, we can talk more about that, can help to mitigate the challenges of that openness while still never trying to force the ADHDer to act like a neurotypical student, still honoring their unique way of being and thinking in the world.

[JIM LANG]
So you mentioned at the start of our conversation about the idea of unlearning some things that people know about ADHD. And so you gave a little bit of that sense of the open neurotype, and typically we tend to think about ADHD as something that just gets in the way of people. So tell me about the kind of unlearning that people need to do to really think more clearly and think more productively about working either—whether they have ADHD themselves or work with their children or students. So what's the big unlearning people have to do?

[KAREN COSTA]
Sure. So the name of the so-called disorder, which I do not consider a disorder, so I do use the term ADHD. ADHD stands for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. So we can start there with the unlearning. I have had folks who are proponents of the medical and clinical model argue with me that that is not a deficit-based framing, and it has the word “deficit” in the name. (laughs) So I beg to differ.

So the first thing that I would love for folks to unlearn is the idea that ADHD is a deficit. It is not a deficit. It is a neurotype that is part of the vast variety of neurotypes in this world. It is a unique way of being and experiencing the world. It comes with a combination of strengths and challenges. So it is not a deficit. And the idea that it is a deficit specifically of attention or that ADHDers lack attention is increasingly being called into question.

In fact, there's a growing body of evidence that when we are given the opportunity to explore things that interest us, that we are passionate about, that allow us to express our creativity, that the attentional capacity of ADHDers actually exceeds neurotypical folks. And this is, in the literature, we will refer to this as hyperfocus. I argue in the book that if you've ever heard of flow state, flow state is the non-pathologized version of hyperfocus. And it is the ability of ADHDers to—What was I working on the other day, Jim? I was working on some—oh, I was redesigning one of my courses to be more AI-resistant, which is one of my current passions. I'm not a girl that forgets to eat lunch, and five hours later, I had redesigned the entire course in that five-hour period. So I can deeply, deeply focus, I can work at an incredibly fast, intense pace, like many ADHDers, when it is something that I see the value. It aligns with my values. It feels helpful. It's something I'm curious about and passionate about.

So the idea that ADHDers can't focus or can't pay attention is a big thing for us to unlearn. It's not only harming ADHDers by placing that deficit-based label on them, it's harming everybody in the classroom because you've got students who have that capacity, who have that curiosity and that desire to learn. And if you are just classifying them in this sort of deficit-based bucket, you're missing out. You've got little sparks of engagement in your class in your ADHD students. You're missing out as an educator, their peers are missing out, they're missing out, we're all losing in this equation. So those are a couple of the big mindsets that I want folks to unlearn.

[JIM LANG]
Folks who have been listening to this podcast for a while will know we had a similar conversation with Sarah Silverman about autistic students and about the fact that, again, they have their own strengths and challenges they bring with them, but we can take advantage of those and see the many benefits that those students will bring into the classroom. And you make a good point in your book about the fact that, for example, a classroom conversation will be enhanced by not only the fact that those students who are maybe really focused on the discussion and are interested in it will be really vocal, really be engaged, and bring creative ideas into the conversation, as well. So that's an example for me of seeing where these ideas you're talking about can really come into the classroom itself.

[KAREN COSTA]
Yes. So first of all, I love Sarah and all of the work that she's doing. And I know she's working on a book related to neurodiversity and neurodivergence, which I'm really excited about. Sarah and I, I think, take slightly different approaches, but we are friends and colleagues, so I hope folks will find Sarah and follow her. And yeah, this neurodiversity umbrella, that is a term that is sometimes out there. Sonny Jane Wise is an educator I follow who has a great graphic on the neurodiversity umbrella. ADHD and autism are two of many, many ways of being in the world. They're two of many neurotypes. Neurotypical people are part of neurodiversity, we all are. There are so many ways of being in the world. And when we can kind of shift out of, there's one way to think, there's one way to learn, there's one way to behave in a classroom, I really think that opens us up not only to student success, but to faculty success, as well. Those two things, you and I have talked about this concept of mutualism in the past. Those two things are

intertwined. So honoring our students and helping them express their creativity and their interests in our classrooms regardless of their neurotype is good for everybody.

[JIM LANG]
So I've mentioned the example of the conversation, classroom discussions. Can you think of other places where teachers can sort of see the benefits and strengths of having ADHD learners in the classroom or in their courses, for example, like assessment or anything like that that will come to mind for you?

[KAREN COSTA]
Sure. I mean, one of the things that comes to mind is that many of my ADHD students will often stray, they will take the road less traveled in their assignments. And I think one of the things that can do for us is to open us up to a curiosity of, perhaps this could be an option for all students. So sometimes ADHDers will take the lead without our—they'll ask forgiveness, not permission. They might create a video instead of writing the paper, or they might go to a slide deck. Sometimes they will ask, "Can I try this? Can I try that?" I am very careful in my teaching, even though even I am sometimes like, What's that going to mean for me as a teacher? I really try to honor that as best that I can. So encouraging your ADHD students to follow those interests and those whims and seeing if that might be an opportunity to open that assessment up a little bit for every student is a great opportunity.

I also think that our ADHD students are often passionate and justice oriented, whether that's a sort of trait of ADHD specifically or because we are part of this marginalized group and we have kind of suffered from that, and it makes us more compassionate and willing to speak for others, I don't know. But there does seem to be a higher justice orientation and a willingness—not only a willingness to speak up, Jim, but almost a compulsion to speak up. An inability (laughs)—some people might think this applies to me—an inability to keep our mouths shut. (Jim laughs) And that can obviously, I think the sort of negative side of that is well known about ADHDers. It's labeled as impulsivity. It's the kid who is speaking out of turn in class. I think we need more people who are willing to not keep their mouth shut and to speak up and to speak on behalf of others. And I think that's a real opportunity in our ADHD students that will benefit them, educators, other students, society, the world, the future, all good things.

[JIM LANG]
That's great. I want our listeners to understand, as we keep our eyes open for ADHD students in our courses, these are the things that we might spot that are great for us to celebrate and really affirm. Which is really seeing a lot of connections in a classroom conversation, jumping in with thoughts and ideas that actually can help everyone think more deeply about issues or push things in a different direction, challenging us as teachers as they try to think about different ways to do our assessments, and speaking up for, as you say, speaking up for marginalized communities or speaking for viewpoints, which are maybe marginalized in society. So these are all great things we want to be able to support, affirm in our ADHD learners.

Now let's start moving the other direction a little bit here. So let's talk about that student, for example, that I talked about at the start of the podcast about who, let's say, missed a couple assignments and is not coming to see me, and what do I do [for] that student? How do I help reach that student and help them come back to the class and make a plan for them going forward in the semester?

[KAREN COSTA]
Sure. This is a great question. So the first thing I would encourage folks to think about is to sort of take a step back and depersonalize it a bit and recognize that the student who's not submitting assignments or not coming to see you, that likely has very little to do with you. If you're teaching at the college level, that student has, what, 12, 13, 14 years of previous experience in the formal educational system and likely is carrying quite a bit of harm because of the way that the system is set up and the way that—we're making a lot of strides in the right direction, but ADHD students, for example, are known to experience a lot more critical feedback from educators than their neurotypical peers. So we're bringing that into the classroom, and there might be a lack of trust for that reason. So I think just normalizing, this is not something to take personal, the student's not anti-my class or anti-me.

The second thing I would look at is I do outreach to all of my students regarding assignments, both proactive and reactive outreach. I've done this since I started teaching. For me, outreach is a huge part of my teaching. I don't hear it spoken about enough. It is particularly important for our ADHD students, but of course, like many of these things, it benefits everybody. So can we build in some more reminders ahead of assignment due dates? So what would that look like? Everything's got to be external is the rule for ADHDers. So if you, for example, yell out to us when the class is filing out the door, "Don't forget your paper's due next week," that goes in one ear and out the other. So anything you can do to put assignment reminders proactively into multimodal externalized communications.

So that might be, can you set up email reminders? Do you use text reminders? Which I do in my courses. Is it posted in your online course? Is it written on the whiteboard? You get the idea. So anything you can do to build in some proactive reminders. And then I do follow up for students who don't submit assignments. The day after an assignment is due, I do a warm message to my students saying, Hey, I saw that you didn't submit, and I want you to submit; what can I do to help? I am always surprised at my students being surprised by that message. That takes me usually less than five minutes. Some of the learning management systems allow me to automate it pretty easily. And I find that 90% of my students will get the work to me pretty quickly. Life happened for whatever reason.

So checking in with our students and letting them know that they can still submit. A lot of students assume that if they've missed the deadline, that it's done. And I hope that's not the case because I make a pretty strong case in the book for flexible structure, including with due dates and deadlines. So proactive outreach, reactive outreach, and just being in communication

with our students, not just sort of if we're yelling out to them at the end of class or reminding them verbally at the end of class, but also externalizing that, putting it in writing, sending regular reminders, can be a huge scaffold for our ADHD students.

[JIM LANG]
So I've written four quick little notes here, so a little way to approach this. First of all, depersonalizing it, making sure that this is not something against you and your class. Something might be going around in the student's life or their previous history of education. Secondly, outreach and proactivity. The students who might need these kinds of reminders and structures. Three, that structure built in and externalized structure. So students have reminders built in in multiple forms and not just doing these things orally in class. And finally, following up when things don't seem to go as you would have expected. And then especially warm follow-ups you mentioned, as well. And that's a pretty good wraparound structure for a student. And then again, as you pointed out, not just ADHD students, everyone would benefit from all these things.

[KAREN COSTA]
Yeah. I mean, I'm sure I'm not the only one whose mind is even more just (laughs)—my ADHD is on a 10 out of 10 today. The events of the world are quite distracting. It's flu season for many folks. People get sick, kids get sick. We could go on and on about those external distractions. But the only thing I would add to that, Jim, is that sometimes we can do everything right as ADHDers, and our brain just doesn't hold the details quite as well. So going into that without judgment, with compassion, with an understanding that the ADHD brain lets more in, but it also lets more out.

So one of the words I'm using is porous. So things are flowing in, but things are also flowing out. With the very best of intentions, we can do everything right as I did for my French class last week. I had it in my calendar. I had it written down. I had reminders. It was important to me. And my brain just didn't hold that number nine in it quite as well as it could have. So making sure that we're just setting aside the judgment, being compassionate, and understanding that it's nothing personal and it's not a personal failure of the ADHDer, our brains just work a little bit differently. And adapting to that whenever possible can be really helpful for our students.

[JIM LANG]
And again, I mentioned again at the start how valuable it was for you to share experiences in the book and talk about these little moments for yourself, but is this hard for you? Is it hard for you to sort of share these things publicly about your own experiences with ADHD?

[KAREN COSTA]
I'm glad that you asked that, Jim. Yeah, it is hard. We were talking before we started recording about the gifts and challenges of book promotion. And I think that's hard in and of itself to do this somewhat solitary work of writing and then to bring it out into the world in a very extroverted way. When the book is about you and your struggles, I think there's an added layer

of challenge. I talked on another podcast a few weeks ago about how one of the daily struggles that I live with is remembering if I brushed my teeth. And talking about that in higher education, which is quite a perfectionist, hierarchical, competitive environment is challenging. Talking about how I forgot to go to this class that's really important to me is embarrassing at times.

But I know enough to know what's going on, and I know enough to sort of name the shame and to push it back out because that's not mine. That's these ableist beliefs that are serving much bigger purposes. So yeah, it's very difficult, but it's important to me because I want things to be better for the young ones coming up. And I really think that we're moving in the right direction. There's a lot of pushback about and critique over who has ADHD, who is faking it, who is being over accommodated for it. It's just so utterly preposterous to me. So even when I feel these moments of discomfort, I just remind myself of why I'm doing it.

I'm pretty old, and I'm good. (laughs) I'm good with how the world sees me or doesn't see me. I'm kind of at that age where I'm quite settled in that, but I do want to make things better for the many younger ADHDers that are coming after me.

[JIM LANG]
Yeah, that's great. No, I just would affirm that what you're doing is really important. I think people need to see not only that what you're able to do with your ADHD—you've written two books and all these, you're having this great voice in higher education—but also it's helpful for them to see someone like you might be in the classroom with them and be able to see that potential is there, and they can help bring that potential out if they approach that student with the right mindset and recognizing that the strengths are there, and they can help them navigate the challenges as well.

So let's talk about two possible sticking points between faculty and students in higher education. So let's talk about, you already mentioned one, flexible deadlines. And of course, again, this is not an easy one. The flexible deadline might be great for the student, but not for all students and also not great for the faculty member who has to deal with things coming in different times. So how do you negotiate that issue of flexible deadlines?

[KAREN COSTA]
Yeah. So one of the things I found interesting—so as an adjunct, I teach at multiple institutions. And one of the things that I have been learning over the past few years is that what works at one institution does not work at another.

I recently, a couple of years ago, started teaching in an institution where I had more traditional-aged students, and I had been very, very flexible in accepting late work. And the previous students who I had worked with tended to be a little bit older, what I call the new traditional student. And most of those students, I would give them the leeway, and they would get things to me within the week. These traditional-aged students that I started working with, I started to have students who would actually wait until the last—I'd say, The only true deadline

in the course, hard deadline, in the course is the last day, and they took me quite literally on that. (both laugh)

And I had put it in writing, so that was my cross to bear. So what I've done, I've really had to adapt with that. So in that setting, I have learned that for most students, giving them an extra week and sort of setting—I don't use the term a hard or soft deadline, but I'm giving you a grace period on this, and I'll need you to get this submitted within the week, is what works best for them. And putting that date in writing in an email so that they are held accountable to that, that has seemed to work really well with this particular group of students and course that I'm teaching. In many of the other places where I teach, because I'm working with, I would say most of my students are in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, they seem to really treat—most of us have pretty flexible deadlines at work, and our bosses will work with us around things, and students seem to be a little bit more self-motivated and able to handle that flexibility. So that works really well for them and for me. They get things to me within a couple of days. It actually spaces my grading out a little bit more, but with these traditional-aged students, I had to adapt.

So my answer is always like, you know best. So take a look at your students, take a look at your campus culture, take a look at your institutional type. There is not one higher ed. Even if you're teaching different courses, first-year students versus students who are about to graduate, you might need to tweak your approach a little bit. But design a system that works for you and think—I like the metaphor of think like a tree.

So a tree is very, very structured. I'm not arguing against structure here. A tree is very structured, but it bends in the wind so that it doesn't break. So looking at what your students are doing, what they need, what they want, and full flexibility is not always the answer, as I learned. It didn't work for those students. So you might need to tack back and forth a little bit between flexibility and structure, collect some data, learn from your mistakes as I did, and adapt as necessary.

[JIM LANG]
Yeah, I like the idea. Again, we can take these different big ideas, like sort of principles and apply them to our own context. For example, you could say that, "Here's the deadline, this is the best deadline for your learning in this course. However, there's a grace period, and that grace period is a time where I'll reach out to you and follow up if you haven't turned it in." And maybe there's four assignments, there's two of them have grace periods and two don't. And again, we can think about these things building, again, our students, our context, and what's good for us as teachers, as well.

[KAREN COSTA]
Absolutely.

[JIM LANG]

I like that it's a flexible approach, not only for the students, but also for me as a teacher. So that's one example. The other example I'll just sort of note, and actually this came up to me as we were talking about the idea of discussions, for example. Discussion protocols. And you mentioned that it may be the ADHD students are the ones who jump in and always want to talk. And sometimes there'll be discussions about how do you stop the students who just want to talk all the time? Now, are those protocols targeting those kinds of students or can we, again, put structure on there without necessarily dampening those students' enthusiasm? What do you do about that in terms of having a discussion protocol that ensures that everyone contributes?

[KAREN COSTA]
Yep. So a couple of things come to mind. The first is having a conversation with students at the start of any course about what class participation is going to look like and trying to get some investment from them about what works for them around shared guidelines. So sharing the air I think is a really important concept. Sharing the air means that you are not going to dominate the conversation, but it also can mean that you're going to challenge yourself to share and to participate and to contribute. So that might look like reminding people that if you've already shared once, can you wait a minute before contributing?

Something I have experienced as an ADHDer in group settings is when people say, "If you've already contributed once, please hold back." And then if nobody else is contributing, in my mind I'm going, "Well, can I talk now? Nobody else is talking. How long are we going to sit here in silence?" So having that conversation with individual students or in the group. So if you've already contributed once, can you hold off for a minute and give people time? Some people need a little bit more time to process, I think is a nice guideline to start with.

[JIM LANG]
I really like that idea because I've often heard, too, a protocol where it's like, contribute twice and then you're done. And I don't like that because as you're saying, someone might just tune out at that point, "Well, I can't talk anymore. Why should I listen anymore?" And the idea of the flexibility, just say, "Hold yourself back a little bit until you hear a few more voices, then you can jump back in again." And so I think that's really great.

[KAREN COSTA]
Yeah. And I think to that point, Jim, another thought that came to mind was giving students different avenues for participation. So handing out structured notes that students could use during a class discussion would be a way—for example, for me, if I've already shared out and I'm trying to sort of hold back, as an ADHDer, that can sometimes be kind of uncomfortable. We've got these ideas that, again, we're porous, they want to come out. So could there be a space where students could be jotting down on paper what they wanted to share that would be another form of expression for them, or things like online polling can be used or shared Google Docs or if you wanted to bring some tech in. I'm trying to be a little more analog where possible

these days. But giving students multiple outlets for participation so that when they have those ideas, they don't feel like they're trapped in their head, that's a real challenge for us as ADHDers.

I talk about this a bit in the book. We get, it feels like billions of ideas on a daily basis—again, that openness comes in—and it can sometimes feel almost physically painful that those are not getting attention. So things like idea parking lots would be a nice place—if you have an online course site, a Padlet, whatever folks are using these days, Google Docs would work—an idea parking lot for people to be putting their ideas, it feels like, these ideas sometimes feel like little beings that live inside us. It's going to be safe in the idea parking lot. Even though I can't share it out because I've taken up enough air today, it's going to be held safely in this idea parking lot. When somebody gets a ton of ideas, like many ADHDers do, that can be important to consider.

[JIM LANG]
Yeah, that's great. These are great ideas. And I think the big thing about, I hope that listeners will take away from this conversation is just again, shifting that mindset and recognizing folks in the classroom who are struggling, who actually have ADHD, are bringing great stuff to the classroom, and we can help support them and get that stuff out and help them get through the class in the best possible way for them.

This podcast will come out in February, it's three or four weeks into the semester, and I always like to think about really concrete things that we should be able to do at any given moment. So let's say it's February, and I'm teaching a class right now, what's one thing I could do right now to help a student who might be at this point maybe juggling multiple things in their academic lives, their personal lives, their political lives, what's one thing I can do right now to help an ADHDer learn in my class?

[KAREN COSTA]
Yep. Make a checklist. So this is one of the best ways to help the ADHD brain, which again, I sometimes call it galaxy brain. A checklist is concrete, it's tangible. Help them list out everything they've got to do for your course and ideally work with them to get at least one of those things checked off to build that momentum. That will take the totality of all of these things I have to do and learn about and worry about and bring it down into, ideally, one page. I make checklists for my students for all of my courses, for all of the tasks in the course, proactively. But if you haven't done that yet, getting a checklist into an ADHD student's hands can be transformational and help them get clear about what they need to do and help them move forward.

[JIM LANG]
And listeners can check out the book to get ideas from a checklist and many other things they can do to help support ADHD learners in class in their courses.

Karen, thanks so much. The book is going to make a big positive impact on higher education, so thanks for joining us and for writing the book.

[KAREN COSTA]
Thanks, Jim.

[JIM LANG]
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