

Reflective Piece

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS IN THE NEURODIVERSE SPACE  
– REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

Rachel Byars

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# LEARNING FROM OTHERS IN THE NEURODIVERSE SPACE – REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

Rachel Byars

## INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of education and diversity, the shift towards a more inclusive approach to the unique strengths and perspectives of neurodivergent individuals is at the forefront of applied tertiary education. My colleague, Rachel van Gorp, has been part of the Neurodiversity Community of Practice which has been championing the understanding of neurodiversity within our tertiary education setting for the past few years. It has been hard not to be involved in the dialogue without her mentioning something around the topic. As an experienced educator, did that mean that I knew and understood what all this meant? No! It was time for me to stop, take note, and understand this discourse so that I could better comprehend and reflect on my teaching practice to enhance my support of our learners.

My focus was to explore the significance of neurodiversity within the educational context and embark on a transformative journey inspired by a colleague who has emerged as a champion in the neurodiversity space. The educational landscape has long been characterised by a quest for innovation and a commitment to fostering an environment where every learner can thrive. However, the narrative surrounding neurodiversity has gained momentum only recently, challenging conventional norms and prompting educators to reassess their pedagogical approaches.

One of the most enriching aspects of working in tertiary education is the incredible diversity of our learners. We have opportunities to facilitate their learning and watch them develop their skills over one to three years. As an educator, I take the time to reflect on my practice regularly and through this consider my own self-development and learning journey. Reflective practice allows thinking and feeling about an event or an experience that can be developed by steering learning and enhancing professional development and practice. Reflective thinking is personal and empowering, not self-indulgent (McMillan & Weyers, 2013). It is a form of mental processing that can aid learning and can be undertaken to gain further consideration of something in more detail. As an educator, it is important to consider continuous improvement, reflective practice, and professional development which allows for the opportunity for self-development. Therefore, I aim to gain new insight and understanding into past teaching practices along with new enquiries into improving future practice. This is a useful way of looking back and identifying what I know, what I need to learn and understand, and what can be carried out differently to make future improvements to my personal performance and teaching practice.

My journey started by fostering self-awareness and recognising the need to have an improved understanding of neurodiversity, ensuring clarity about the terminology used in the neurodiversity space, and then asking how, as an educator, I could facilitate or improve my teaching style and the strategies that might assist my learners in the future. When I first encountered the term “neurodiversity,” I was largely unfamiliar with its implications and significance. I felt a mix of curiosity and uncertainty, as the idea of embracing neurodiversity seemed important. I needed to have a better understanding of how I could incorporate strategies into my teaching practice which would encourage individuals to celebrate and share their unique perspectives and talents.

## UNDERSTANDING THE TERMINOLOGY

The first step was to gain knowledge of the terminology that is used and to increase my understanding of the terms. I found that there was not necessarily a widespread understanding of the terms neurodiversity and neurodivergent, nor that they were the only terms to use. Regardless, it became clear that neurodiversity is not a diagnosis, but a broader term which is used to encompass a wider range of specific or non-specific diagnoses. Early literature referred to neurodiversity as naturally occurring diversity in human cognition (Singer, 1999), with it being used as an umbrella term for a range of neurocognitive disorders (Doyle, 2020; Kapp et al., 2013). Clouder et al. (2020) suggest that the umbrella term includes dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, the autistic spectrum, and Tourette syndrome. From a neurodiverse perspective, these differences in the way people perceive, learn about, and interact with the world are conceptualised as naturally occurring cognitive variations, which may bring unique strengths and challenges for those individuals (Hamilton & Petty, 2023), rather than being framed as disorders or disabilities. Within the broad spectrum of neurodiversity, some people are labelled as neuro-typical (or NT), that is, those whose way of processing information matches the assumed societal 'majority' or 'norm,' and others as neurodivergent (or ND), those whose processing differs from this expected norm (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023). The way that neurodivergent learners are likely to learn will deviate from the expectations that we may have as educators of the 'typical' (or neurotypical) learner.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LEARNERS

It is estimated that 15 to 20 per cent of the global population today falls within the neurodivergence spectrum (Daher, 2024). For some time the true figure has been hidden, with individuals often going to great lengths to mask their characteristics to conform, rather than embracing the exceptional skills, such as pattern recognition, memory and mathematics skills, that can significantly benefit their learning (Daher, 2024). Research has shown that most learners with learning disabilities experience frustrations in higher education if the necessary learning tools are not readily available, and that for those who may also leave behind familiar structures and environments, this also adds to the challenges that they can face (Clouder et al., 2020). Clouder et al. (2020) highlight the need for a better understanding from the perspective of neurodivergent learners who feel anxious when interacting with others and are inclined to isolate themselves from peers despite a strong desire to make friends. Vincent et al. (2017) highlight the perceived sense of *difference* which is a prominent part of the self-concept of neurodivergent learners which often makes their transition into higher education challenging, with many feeling out of place in what could be seen as a competitive environment (Shaw & Anderson, 2018). For many learners, their apprehensions are clouded by past experiences (Kwon et al., 2018). Neurodivergent learners are likely to learn and behave in ways that may deviate from the expectations of the implied (or neurotypical) learner (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023). Despite this, neurodiversity plays a significant role in shaping the learning landscape for all learners. It is not just about accommodating differences, it is about embracing them and creating an environment where every learner can thrive.

## COLLEAGUE TO COLLEAGUE

The next stage of my journey was to be guided by the appreciation of others' talents and abilities (Ghaye & Lillyman, 2010), namely those of my colleague Rachel. It was through her sharing of her journey, and her experiences as an educator (and learner) with neurodivergent traits, including Irlen syndrome and dyslexia, that I chose to take the time to have further conversations, having sought ethics approval. Rachel has certainly championed and fostered the sense of belonging for our learners within the academic community by getting to know the learners and encouraging all team members to do the same. Before presenting at the Neurodiversity Symposium in 2021 where she shared her own story, Rachel felt extremely vulnerable and had complete empathy with neurodivergent learners in a new learning environment (van Gorp, 2022). While she may advocate for our

neurodivergent learners in our School (Otago Polytechnic School of Business), Rachel is eager to empower colleagues to be better informed so that, as individuals and as a team, we can support and recognise our learners with various neurodivergent profiles and assist in providing them with the best possible learning environment and outcomes.

When you start to listen, you understand from Rachel the significance of proactive support and the role it plays in fostering an inclusive learning environment that meets the unique needs of our neurodivergent learners. She highlights that “by being aware of our learners’ neurodivergent profiles, we can anticipate challenges they might face and offer tailored support.” You gain the sense of embracing, rather than merely accommodating, neurodiversity within the pedagogical landscape. Often learners will have a sense of being lost in the system as they may not always have had the best education experiences in the past, or they may have had people assisting them and some ‘real micro-managing,’ whether they required it or not. Rachel addresses this by stating that “in the big wide world, we throw a lot of information at them, which generally neurotypical learners can take, but for others it is little bit too much.” We must consider the amount of information shared and how this is disseminated. Rachel stresses how important it is that learners are aware of the support channels that are available, and to ensure that they are asking for assistance early if needed.

## TAKING ACTION

Part of the learning was to trial initiatives, to see what worked and then further reflect and adapt. The implementation of flexible teaching methodologies is paramount and the opportunity to trial and adopt practices that accommodate varied learning styles is key to providing options for learners to express their understanding through alternative learning and assessment methods. This is in favour of more adaptable approaches and transparent communication channels, which would lead to a learning environment that minimises potential sources of confusion and overwhelm for our learners. This change is supported by the Community of Practice and the institutional culture and values that champion neurodiversity.

The Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) project was introduced to our year one learners at the start of 2023 as a catalyst for building and enhancing the connections of our learners, after the impacts of COVID-19 over the previous three years. The ILP was designed to help the learner set goals and achieve academic and professional success while prioritising personal wellness. The tool was also an opportunity to engage and connect with learners face-to-face and understand what their individual needs and goals were, providing a safe space for learners to share their past experiences and the learning support they might require. These meetings were conducted by a couple of team members, which Rachel said could be expanded with increased coverage across team members to provide an improved understanding of some of the challenges our learners can face. This was successfully managed to allow the wider team to engage one-on-one with learners, providing an opportunity to share information and to provide guidance on the support available to learners, such as assistive technology, learning tools and spaces available. Signalling that you are open to students engaging in different ways and giving them ways to get in touch if they have learning needs ensures the prioritisation of creating an environment where students feel comfortable to engage (Burgstahler, 2015).

My colleague emphasised the need to incorporate different teaching strategies; for instance, providing visual aids such as videos and handouts for those who need them, incorporating hands-on activities, and allowing for flexible pacing can benefit learners with different cognitive profiles. Starting with easy, practical steps such as consideration of the colour and font used in PowerPoint slides and any handouts, or having lights on or off in a classroom, were all useful ways to accommodate different learning styles and enhance engagement. Whilst these strategies are still in the early stages of implementation, the initial reaction from learners was acknowledged. Building in flexibility will enable students to work to their strengths and meet their challenges more safely and constructively (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023).

Although some of these strategies may be viewed as personalising teaching methods to support neurodivergent learners, they can enhance the overall learning experience for the entire classroom.

## WHAT DID I LEARN AND WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This reflective journey has provided a range of learning opportunities and valuable insights. What I have learnt so far is that eliminating unnecessary barriers to learning for our learners means they have a far better chance of success with our support. This realisation dovetails with actionable strategies, such as the integration of visual aids, provision of explicit instructions, and flexibility in seating arrangements, all of which collectively serve to enhance the neuro-inclusive quality of the learning environment. This approach is not about compromising academic rigour; rather, it engenders an environment conducive to the diverse cognitive and learning styles that are inherent within the neurodivergent learner population as well as enriching the learning experience for all learners, prompting a broader reflection on inclusive pedagogical practices.

My colleague is committed to fostering an environment of genuine comprehension and compassion. As an educator, it is important to have an informed approach, so that we can acknowledge the neurodivergent strengths of our learners and support them alongside the wider Student Success support services that are available to them through their academic journey. There are parts of this that are still a work in progress as we challenge the status quo. However, if we can signal to our learners that we can engage with them in different ways, it shows them that we genuinely care. We need to provide flexibility in how learners can participate (both in the classroom and online and in assessment practices).

Continual education, awareness and building on the initiatives that are provided can ensure that we are working as a team towards cultivating an environment that recognises neurodiversity as an opportunity to enhance the academic experience. Encouragingly, Rachel commented on a more personal level that “I have watched our whole School just slowly, but surely, change over time.”

In conclusion, the insights shared from my colleague Rachel's experiential knowledge, along with taking action, emphasise the critical need for continued professional development in tertiary education towards a more inclusive, understanding, and responsive approach to neurodiversity, and the significance of embracing our learners by incorporating key action points that can serve as a roadmap with tangible practices. The team approach is a testament to the power of shared knowledge and learning from others. Embracing the unique insights of a colleague deeply engaged in the neurodiversity space will provide further opportunities in the future.

**Rachel Byars** is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Business at Otago Polytechnic. Her key teaching areas are event management and business planning with a focus on service management and customer satisfaction. Rachel enjoys creating a learning environment where learners are encouraged to enjoy their learning and succeed.

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