Article

FACILITATING SUCCESSFUL LEARNING: PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

Glenys Ker and Rachel van Gorp

FACILITATING SUCCESSFUL LEARNING: PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

Glenys Ker and Rachel van Gorp

INTRODUCTION

In today's educational landscapes, acknowledging neurodiversity is crucial for fostering inclusive learning environments. This article delves into the journey of two educators, Rachel and Glenys, whose collaborative exploration intertwines personal experiences, transformative learning, and the subtle art of effective facilitation for neurodiverse learners. Neurodiversity, a concept recognising and celebrating neurological differences, forms the backdrop for Rachel's profound personal journey. As we navigate Rachel's discovery of her neurodiverse challenges, her recognition of her gifts ('work-arounds'), and her pursuit of a master's entitled "Neurodiversity in Vocational Education: Facilitating Success," we unfold the narrative of two educators committed to understanding and enhancing the educational experience for neurodiverse learners. This article aims to distil the collective insights gained from their journey, emphasising the significance of effective facilitation strategies in empowering neurodiverse learners to succeed.

UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiversity views human brain function and mental health conditions from a different perspective (Clouder et al., 2020). It understands that differences in how people think are normal. Some conditions, usually seen as disorders, are just variations, not necessarily something wrong. Neurocognitive differences are considered natural. Shifting away from deficit-focused thinking, neurodiversity acknowledges that each person's mind may have unique strengths and challenges, encompassing conditions such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and others. Neurodiversity challenges the one-size-fits-all approach, emphasising that understanding and supporting each learner's unique style is essential for a more inclusive and effective educational system (Clouder et al., 2020; Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2020).

CHALLENGES FACED BY NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS

Neurodivergent learners often face challenges in traditional educational settings due to differences in processing information and interacting with their environment. For instance, learners with autism may struggle with social communication and sensory sensitivities, while those with ADHD may have difficulty with attention and impulse control (Clouder et al., 2020; Jansen et al., 2017; Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2020).

Individuals with autism may also have difficulties understanding the perspectives and intentions of others, impacting their social interactions, and individuals with ADHD may struggle with organisation, planning, and self-regulation, affecting their ability to focus and complete tasks. Neurodivergent learners may encounter barriers such as rigid teaching methods that do not accommodate diverse learning styles, social expectations that are challenging to meet, and sensory environments that can be overwhelming. These challenges can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation, and academic underachievement.

As van Gorp (2022) suggests, addressing these challenges requires adopting inclusive practices that provide individualised support and accommodation. This may include modifying teaching strategies, providing sensory-friendly environments, promoting self-regulation skills, and fostering understanding and acceptance among peers. By embracing and implementing inclusive approaches, educational settings can better support the diverse needs of neurodiverse learners.

FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE FACILITATION

Glenys has an extensive background as an educator, not only in the classroom but in guiding the learning journeys of experienced adults in professional settings. She utilises valuable insights acquired from feedback given by over 170 learners as well as ongoing feedback through a variety of mechanisms. Themes that have emerged include delving into the independent learner journey, perspectives on new learning, the facilitator's role, and the elements contributing to educational success. This comprehensive feedback guided Glenys in formulating a Model of Effective Education (Ker, 2017), crafted from the invaluable perspectives of both learners and facilitators. This incorporation of feedback was a crucial component of her doctoral studies.

This comprehensive model for effective facilitation of learning, particularly in the context of the Independent Learning Pathway (ILP) approach, features four key principles for effective facilitation, based on learner feedback and effective practices observed across various contexts.

Principle 1: Fit – Establishing alignment

It is crucial that there is a close fit between the learner and facilitator. Feedback underscores the effectiveness of the learning process when a noticeable fit exists between the facilitator and the learner. Discovering commonalities, shared understandings, and hobbies enhances the overall relationship.

Principle 2: Relationship – Building mutual respect

The relationship between facilitator and learner should be characterised by mutual respect, trust, and empathy. Facilitators must quickly gain insights into their learners by familiarising themselves with their CVs, self-assessment results, and other provided information. A strong rapport is established when facilitators demonstrate care, understanding, and the ability to 'walk in the learner's shoes.'

Principle 3: Skills, knowledge, attitudes – Facilitator competence

Facilitators must possess a range of skills and attributes, including passion, energy, empathy, and the ability to be an effective role model. Learners value accessible, available, and responsive facilitators who provide timely feedback. The facilitator's competence in understanding adult learning theories, reflective practice, subject-specific knowledge, and workplace practices is essential.

Principle 4: Learners first – Prioritising learner needs

Effective facilitators prioritise learners by being responsive and available, and always acting in the learner's best interest. This involves flexibility in working hours, acknowledging that learners often study in the evenings and weekends. Facilitators need to embrace this flexibility for successful facilitation, aligning with the professional nature of the role.

Related concept: Āta

Incorporating the Māori concept of ''āta'' (proceeding slowly and with purpose) into the learner-facilitator relationship emphasises the importance of relational behaviours, respect for values and traditions, and a willingness to invest time in resolving matters.

Professional role of facilitators

Viewing facilitation not merely as a technical skill set but as a professional activity aligns with the notion that facilitators are experts in the field of teaching and learning. They need expertise in adult learning theories and the ability to apply them. Facilitators also recognise the importance of cultural competence, and the model emphasises the need for them to effectively work with learners from different cultural backgrounds, particularly highlighting the relevance of Māori values. Adding to the skill base of facilitators, Rachel believes that they need to be well-equipped to work with all learners who present with a range of challenges and characteristics, including those who are neurodiverse.

Learner characteristics

Recognising the unique characteristics of learners who are professionally experienced but lack academic experience, the model addresses the need for support and scaffolding in the reflective process. For classroom teaching, Rachel believes that recognising the unique characteristics of every learner is crucial to the learning environment; therefore, teaching needs to be tailored to a range of learning styles and challenges.

Some of the key themes in Ker's (2017) study, which still hold well today, suggest that the role of the facilitator is crucial to successful outcomes for learners. Key insights that learners shared include the observation that one facilitator was "knowledgeable, encouraging and [a] highly skilled communicator, she provided me with challenges/stretch, and it pushed me to do great rather than just good." Another learner said of their facilitator that "his people skills were excellent – he was always available – questioning was always underlined by his knowledge of adult learning."

There were many paradoxical comments, with seemingly contradictory attributes seen as important; for example, patient yet persistent. "Empathetic, understanding, bossy, kept pushing me," was one comment. This suggests that the facilitator needs good judgment as to when to assume different roles in relation to the learner. Acting in the best interests of the learner requires a facilitator who cares yet is willing to hold the learner to account to make progress and keep to deadlines.

Other facilitators identified in Ker's (2017) study were caring, passionate, had a sense of humour, and were trusting. This latter quality meant believing that the learner could and would succeed:

> She had so much passion and energy that she poured into the whole process and me, and I always felt like I was the most important person in her day, that this is the most important thing on her agenda, but when I actually talked to other learners, they all felt the same.

> I guess it is how a facilitator actually can get inside your head, and I truly think that I could have had another facilitator, and I would not have done so well … her emotional intelligence, understanding, and listening and hearing and seeing the little flags I put up and understanding it from another person's perspective … she always challenged me.

In the exploration of qualities that define an effective facilitator, participants not only identified common beliefs but also revealed unique, individualised factors. The key factors deemed significant by facilitators include:

- Possessing knowledge of teaching and learning theories, particularly those related to adult learning, such as experiential learning and recognition of prior learning.
- Demonstrating a passion and drive for the educator role.
- Sharing common beliefs and outlooks with the learners.
- Maintaining regular contact with learners while establishing clear boundaries and parameters from the outset.

- Holding a fundamental interest in understanding people.

- Exemplifying trustworthiness, openness, and honesty.

- Having the ability to monitor and track learners' progress and keep them on the right path.

- Exhibiting the skills to motivate and mentor learners effectively.

- Balancing the ability to challenge learners with understanding the boundaries for such challenges, preventing the undermining of learner confidence.

The above snapshot of the facilitation study outlines the principles and values that contribute to a holistic understanding of effective facilitation in an ILP setting. The incorporation of cultural values and the emphasis on professionalism add depth to the model. As with all models, there is a need to constantly refine and add value as learning expands and learners provide further feedback.

NEURODIVERSITY IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

To update the model, it became timely to acknowledge Rachel's work, particularly the tools and strategies informed by feedback from both learners and staff in the neurodiverse environment. Unified in their belief that learners play a pivotal role in their learning journey, Rachel and Glenys expanded the model to incorporate expectations for learners (van Gorp, 2022). This collaborative initiative sought to develop a more inclusive framework, considering not only the facilitator's role but also empowering learners to actively engage in and contribute to their learning journey.

The themes uncovered in van Gorp's (2022) master's study resonate with Ker's (2017) insights, particularly regarding the relationship between facilitators and neurodivergent learners and the supportive role this connection plays in the learner's experience.

Learners, as indicated by some key insights, emphasise the pivotal role of a positive relationship with their facilitators in ensuring successful outcomes throughout their learning journey. For instance, one learner expressed the sentiment that "once the facilitator knows I'm neurodivergent, they should come to me to build that relationship."

All learners stressed the importance of fostering an open relationship with their facilitator. As articulated by one learner, this approach led to the realisation that an open dialogue and normalisation were conducive to producing their best work: "they soon realised that that was how they got the best work from me."

For others, it translated to a more welcoming environment, enabling them to "open that dialogue, keep the conversation going, just normalise it." Another learner said, "I've spoken to my facilitator, and I said I've got dyslexia ... [they] were really good about it." The same learner expressed satisfaction with the understanding demonstrated by the facilitator, noting "they're very patient."

These responses from learners underscore the evident significance of establishing a strong rapport with facilitators for effective support throughout the learning journey. An integral aspect of this process involves providing learners with opportunities to leverage their skills and strengths to attain their learning goals.

As facilitators become increasingly acquainted with neurodiverse learners, the ability to adjust teaching methods grows, resulting in a more personalised learning experience. This continuous dialogue between neurodiverse learners and facilitators represents a positive stride forward. Experts emphasise that building relationships with neurodivergent learners and comprehending their unique needs are paramount to their success. New concepts are gaining prominence, such as the availability of someone who understands the neurodivergent learner experience and can adapt teaching approaches for optimal learning outcomes.

Encouraging learners to take responsibility for their challenges and actively engage with facilitators is essential for fostering autonomy, a core principle of Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory. Facilitators play a pivotal role in empowering learners by inviting them to contribute ideas and solutions, which fosters a collaborative environment that accommodates neurodiverse learners through personalised teaching methods. By prioritising ongoing dialogue and relationship-building, facilitators gain valuable insights into diverse perspectives and learning styles, enabling a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. This shared responsibility not only enhances learners' autonomy but also ensures that all learners can thrive academically and reach their full potential (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Jansen et al., 2017; Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2020).

In Rachel's classroom, this involves employing various methods to cater to the diverse needs of all her learners. As an illustration, Rachel has developed a valuable 'tool' (Figure 1) intended for use by fellow educators, showcasing her commitment to personalised education within the broader educational context.

	As an educator, you can use these suggestions to aid and support your learning and teaching environment for the neurodivergent learner. These are also suggestions for improving your effectiveness as a facilitator.
N	**Note** to discuss **neurodiversity** with the class so they can feel empowered to engage with the facilitator early.
E	**Engage** with learners about their learning styles.
U	**Undertake** to find a range of ways each class likes to learn: for example, PowerPoints, notes in a handout, project-based learning in groups.
R	**Read** the information to the class so that they will clearly understand and hear the critical pieces.
O	**Observe** your learners and how they interact in class.
D	**Diversify** your practice and constantly come up with new ways for learners to engage with understanding information and share ideas.
I	**Inclusion** in teaching and learning is the term used to describe the goal of treating everyone equitably.
V	**Value**-added measures that individual facilitators can apply so learners learn through dignity, truthfulness, fairness, and independent thinking.
E	**Enhance** and engage with the learners using multiple teaching methods.
R	**Rapport** is key to building a relationship with your learners: learning something about them, their interests, hobbies, and aspirations. Learn to call your learners by their names.
S	**Safe** learning and teaching environment. Ensure a classroom is safe. Dim the lights and have some fidget toys or stress releasers available for learners.
I	**Independent** study provides learners with opportunities to test out their learning. Some neurodiverse learners prefer not to work in large groups.
T	**Try**, where possible, to work with the positives of neurodiverse learners: their strengths, strategies, and skills.
Y	**You** bring your whole self to the learning and teaching environment. Engage with learners, tell them a little about yourself and encourage them to do the same. Build a learning and teaching environment that cares about everyone.

Figure 1. Effectiveness in the learning and teaching environment (van Gorp, 2022).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the exploration of qualities that define an effective facilitator, feedback from learners, colleagues, experts in neurodiverse learning, and student support, key factors were identified and deemed significant for successful learning. These factors include:

Possessing knowledge of teaching and learning theories: Proficient facilitators grasp teaching and learning theories, emphasising adult learning concepts like experiential learning and recognition of prior learning.

Cultural competence and clear expectations: Facilitators are expected to actively integrate cultural competence, understanding cultural subtleties, and establishing clear expectations for creating an inclusive space that celebrates differences. This ensures effective engagement with learners from diverse backgrounds, fostering inclusivity.

Importance of neurodiversity: The model highlights understanding neurodiversity, urging facilitators to enhance practices for various cognitive styles. This inclusivity reinforces the model's commitment to creating an accessible learning atmosphere for all participants.

Demonstrating passion and drive: Successful facilitators exhibit a genuine passion and drive for the facilitator role, showing enthusiasm for the learning process and fostering a positive learning environment.

Sharing common beliefs and outlook: Establishing a connection with learners is crucial. Effective facilitators find common beliefs and outlooks with their learners, fostering a sense of connection and understanding.

Maintaining regular contact with learners: Regular communication is key. Facilitators maintain consistent contact with learners while establishing clear boundaries and parameters from the outset to create a supportive learning environment.

Interest in understanding people: Effective facilitators possess a fundamental interest in understanding people, contributing to a compassionate and empathetic approach.

Exemplifying trustworthiness, openness, and honesty: Trust is foundational. Facilitators embody trustworthiness, openness, and honesty, creating an atmosphere where learners feel secure and encouraged to share openly.

Monitoring and tracking learners' progress: Facilitators should monitor and track learners' progress, ensuring they stay on the right path and receive the necessary support for their learning journey.

Motivating and mentoring skills: Effective facilitators exhibit the skills to motivate and mentor learners effectively, providing guidance and encouragement to enhance the learning experience.

Balancing challenge and confidence: Striking the right balance is essential. Facilitators challenge learners to stimulate growth but are mindful of boundaries to prevent undermining learner confidence.

These factors collectively contribute to the effectiveness of a facilitator in supporting the diverse needs of learners and creating a conducive learning environment.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the personal journey of the authors, intertwining experiences, transformative learning, and effective facilitation for neurodiverse learners. It emphasises the importance of understanding and incorporating neurodiversity in educational settings and presents a model for effective facilitation, in both the Independent Learning Pathway approach and in classroom settings. Rachel introduces the concept of neurodiversity, emphasising individual neurological differences and the need for personalised approaches, which she draws from her master's study. Ker's (2017) Model of Effective Facilitation, derived from her doctoral research, emphasises principles like fit, relationship, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and putting learners first. Acknowledging the Māori concept of āta in the learner-facilitator relationship stresses relational behaviours and respect for values. This

article recognises the complexity of facilitation, highlighting professional qualities, adherence to standards, and continuous self-assessment and improvement. It discusses Rachel's contributions in incorporating tools and strategies for neurodiverse learners and empowering learners to actively engage in their learning journey. The article underscores the critical role of effective facilitation in supporting neurodiverse learners, presenting a holistic model informed by personal experiences, learner insights, and professional expertise.

Rachel van Gorp is an accomplished Principal Lecturer with a wide-ranging background, including experience in banking, personal training, massage therapy, business ownership, mentorship, and volunteering. As a member of the Otago Polytechnic School of Business, Rachel brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to her undergraduate teaching programmes. Rachel is a dedicated advocate for neurodiverse individuals in vocational education and serves as the chair of the Neurodiversity Community of Practice. She is committed to promoting inclusion and equal opportunities for individuals with diverse learning abilities. Her recent Master of Professional Practice reflects her focus on the essential topic of "Neurodiversity in Vocational Education: Facilitating Success." With her unique combination of experience, Rachel is able to bring a practical perspective to her teaching, engaging students in real-world scenarios and helping them to develop the skills they need to succeed in their future careers. Her dedication to the field of vocational education has made her a highly respected member of the academic community, and her commitment to promoting neurodiversity is making a significant impact on the lives of her learners and the wider community.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9407-0143

Glenys Ker is a highly experienced work-based learning and professional practice facilitator and assessor, drawing on an extensive and highly successful background as a teacher and career practitioner in both university and polytechnic settings, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. She is also an active researcher in the field of work-based learning, integrating her research into the development of facilitators of independent learning. Glenys is the primary architect of the independent learning pathway (ILP) approach to qualifications offered through Capable NZ, Otago Polytechnic's work-based and practice-based learning school. Glenys is an experienced leadership and management practitioner, again in multiple educational contexts, including academic and service departments and leadership of independent learning programmes. In her 19 years' experience in this field, she has worked with and supported many neurodiverse learners – something she is hugely grateful for and has learned so much from. Glenys has co-authored with her colleague Dr Heather Carpenter a book on her work: *Facilitating Independent Learning in Tertiary Education – New Pathways to Achievement.*

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9665-8752

REFERENCES

Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M. V., Fierros, G. A., & Rojo, P. (2020). Neurodiversity in higher education: A narrative synthesis. *Higher Education, 80*(4), 757–778. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behaviour.* Plenum Press.

Jansen, D., Petry, K., Ceulemans, E., Noens, I., & Baeyens, D. (2017). Functioning and participation problems of students with ASD in higher education: Which reasonable accommodations are effective? *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 32*(1), 71–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2016.1254962f

Ker, G. R. (2017). *Degrees by independent learning: A case study of practice at Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand* [Doctoral thesis, Middlesex University, London]. https://repository.mdx.ac.uk/item/87489

Mirfin-Veitch, B., Jalota, N., & Schmidt, L. (2020). *Responding to neurodiversity in the education context: An integrative literature review.* Donald Beasley Institute. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/learning-support/responding-to-neurodiversity-in-the-education-context

van Gorp, R. (2022). *Neurodiversity in vocational education: Facilitating success.* [Master of Professional Practice thesis, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand]. https://doi.org/10.34074/thes.5859