

Poem/Research

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.3008011>

UNLOCKING THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Rachel van Gorp

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of
Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

© 2023 the authors; © illustrations, the artists or other copyright owners.

UNLOCKING THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Rachel van Gorp

Thrive Through Connection: Building a Supportive Learning Community

Building connections, piece by piece,
creating a bond that will not cease,
between learner and lecturer, support staff too,
all working together to see it through.
For the neurodiverse, it's about more,
understanding strengths and challenges at the core,
but with a personal connection in place,
learners can thrive and find their own space.
Learner and lecturer, a partnership to build,
a safe and welcoming space where learners are thrilled,
to open up, share their unique ways,
and find support in their learning days.
For lecturers, it's about compassion and care,
understanding the learner's needs, always being aware,
building that connection, earning their trust,
and in doing so, learners can adjust.
Experts, too, lend their hand,
providing support, understanding their demands,
assessments and feedback, tools to succeed,
Grammarly and AI helping them lead.
So, let's build connections, piece by piece,
creating a bond that will never cease,
between learner and lecturer, support staff too,
all working together to see it through.

INTRODUCTION

The poem “Thrive Through Connection: Building a Supportive Learning Community” is a tribute to the power of building relationships in education. The poem emphasises the significance of understanding and accepting neurodiversity and how building a personal connection can help learners thrive and find their own unique space in the world of education. It also highlights the crucial role of lecturers and experts in providing care and support to learners and the value of using modern tools and technology to facilitate learning.

This article explores the relationship between connections, particularly in the context of neurodiverse learners. In 2022 I completed a Masters study (MProPrac) project asking learners and educators about their experience with neurodiversity in the classroom in vocational education, conducting semi-structured interviews with 13 participants (Ethics approval #928).

Drawing on the findings from my study, one of the themes was “Building relationships and support with neurodiverse learners - making a connection and acknowledgement to create an inclusive learning environment”. This emphasised the importance of building strong relationships between neurodiverse learners, lecturers, and support staff, and the impact of this on the learner’s higher education journey. The ways in which learners, lecturers and experts view emphasise the significance of personal connections, understanding, and support in creating a positive and inclusive learning environment for neurodiverse learners.

CHALLENGES FACED

Neurodiversity encompasses a wide range of learning disabilities, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, ADHD, dyscalculia, autism spectrum disorder, and Tourette Syndrome (Clouder et al., 2020 as cited in van Gorp, 2022). These learners often face unique challenges in academic environments and require specific support for their learning.

My study explored the importance of building relationships between neurodiverse learners, lecturers, and support staff in creating an inclusive learning environment. All participants recognised the value of building connections with neurodiverse learners and the positive impact this can have on their academic journey. However, building relationships with these learners can be particularly challenging for educators needing more knowledge or experience to understand their needs fully.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Learner experience of partnership

Learners emphasised the role of building relationships with their lecturers and support staff to feel safe and comfortable. They reported feeling more relaxed and comfortable in the learning environment once they connected with their educators. For example, one participant said, “... spoke to my lecturer, and I said I’ve got dyslexia I find these lectures, assignments, written assignments really difficult. They were really good about it... we made a plan, and I got a slightly better mark than expected”.

They also appreciated when lecturers shared their own experiences of being neurodivergent, which helped them feel less isolated and more understood. These findings highlight the importance of creating a safe and welcoming learning environment where neurodiverse learners feel comfortable sharing their experiences and asking for help.

EDUCATORS’ ROLE, INSIGHTS SHARED

Lecturers recognised the role of building relationships in supporting their academic success. They emphasised the need for compassion and caring when working with neurodiverse learners and the importance of being

open-minded and willing to adapt their teaching style to meet individual needs. For example, one participant said, "It's obviously your engagement; it's the first bit of contact that you are finding out about them and how they learn". Another mentioned, "Conversations lots of conversation, based interactive engagement, in class".

The lecturers also acknowledged the importance of providing accommodations to support the needs of neurodiverse learners, such as allowing them to take breaks or use assistive technology. One participant mentioned, "Some learners cannot handle too much noise ... It's the classroom environment it can get way too overwhelming for them... I have learnt to watch for eyes clouding over ... I offer mini breaks and online learning".

These findings highlight educators' crucial role in creating an inclusive learning environment that supports the diverse needs of their students.

INDIVIDUALISED SUPPORT

Expert participants (those who had worked with neurodiverse learners) in the study emphasised the importance of building relationships with neurodiverse learners to understand their needs fully. They emphasised the need for individualised support to help learners succeed academically. For example, installing tools such as Grammarly on the learner's computer to help support their learning and reduce frustration. These findings highlight the need for educators to work collaboratively with other experts, such as learning support specialists, to provide the necessary support for neurodiverse learners.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of my study highlight the importance of building relationships with neurodiverse learners to create an inclusive learning environment that supports three critical aspects we know impact learner success: their safety and wellbeing, academic success, and meeting their learner needs. Educators must be willing to adapt their teaching style to meet individual needs and provide accommodations to support neurodiverse learners' unique challenges. Collaborating with others and building a network of support can also help provide the necessary support for neurodiverse learners to succeed academically. By focusing on building relationships and understanding the unique needs of neurodiverse learners, educators can create an environment that fosters health and well-being and supports their academic success.

Rachel van Gorp is a Senior Lecturer with a wide-ranging background and a passion for neurodiversity. She is dedicated to promoting inclusion and equal opportunities for all learners. Her practical teaching approach is helping students to develop the skills they need to succeed.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9407-0143>

Correspondence to: Rachel van Gorp, Rachel.vanGorp@op.ac.nz

REFERENCE

van Gorp, R. (2022). Neurodiversity in vocational education: Facilitating success. (Unpublished document submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Professional Practice). Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand. <https://doi.org/10.34074/thes.5859>