

Reflective Piece

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REFLECTIONS FROM TWO NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS
THRIVING IN LEARNER-CENTRED DEGREES

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Steve Henry and Deane Patterson

In this article, two learners in self-directed degrees based in the workplace reflect on their experiences in learning from each other and in communities of practice. Deane and Steve will each introduce themselves and their relationship to learning through their neurodiverse lenses. Then they explore designing for inclusion in formal education through the three dimensions of Student Centred Learning: humanism, cognition and agency (Starkey, 2019). They explore “ako,” which in te reo Māori means being in a reciprocal learning relationship where teachers are not expected to know everything. In particular, ako suggests that each learner brings knowledge with them from which all are able to learn (Keown et al., 2005). Their discussion is transcribed from a speech-to-text app because both speak better than they write.

INTRODUCTIONS

Deane: I'm Deane Patterson, a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Leadership for Change (BLFC) and current Master of Professional Practice (MPP) learner at Otago Polytechnic.

I was working in the online education space and seeking to enhance my teaching skills. I was assured I could learn anything I wanted – the BLFC programme is based on self-directed learning and your own professional practice.

The first thing that impacted me was consciously accepting and interacting with a wide range of cultures, temperaments and viewpoints. A facilitator and a learner whom I connected with both frequently referred to their autism/neurodiversity. Not in an “I'm disabled, please forgive/excuse me” way, but rather from an “I think and act differently – have you considered how things look from here?” position.

My awareness of my ADHD began while I was in the BLFC, as two of my four kids started getting counselling and medication for ADHD and other neurodivergent behaviours. But despite all this being around me, it was only by chance I watched a YouTube video (How to ADHD, 2018) that listed behaviours (for example, hyper-focusing, attention deficit, object permanence) and I began to recognise my own patterns.

I'd never considered myself in this light, but the labels fit well and went a long way towards me understanding why I felt and acted differently. Because I already had a strong community with peers in the BLFC programme, there was no shame for me. Rather it was a chance to have a fresh look at my personal and professional life.

My greatest transformation was moving from a need to be 'the expert' to being a collaborator: a practitioner who is simultaneously a learner and teacher.

I began to realise I had abilities that allowed me to better see things from an end-user perspective than my colleagues. I could quickly distill the big picture, and then develop the essential ingredients to simplify or strengthen communications and products. Helping others with these skills did not require me to be 'the expert' or even the leader. I could complement my co-workers with a unique perspective and set of experiences.

The freedom to think, operate and relate in a learner-directed ako programme meant there was acceptance and space to develop the positive sides of my differences. I also received better supervision from having facilitators who understood neurodiversity, and a programme that had the latitude for my diversity to be an advantage to me, not a disability.

I'm currently enrolled in the Master of Professional Practice programme (MPP) to redesign my professional practice with these new, and clearer, perspectives at the forefront.

Steve: I'm Steve Henry, a facilitator and doctorate learner at Capable New Zealand, part of the College of Work Based Learning at Otago Polytechnic, Te Pūkenga. Deane and I first met in 2018 and we have journeyed in learning together through the BLFC and MPP programmes, with me as his mentor–facilitator in those programmes until the present (June 2022).

I identify as neurodivergent, with high functioning autism, or “awesomism” as we call it in our whānau. This is something I learned about 15 years ago, when my youngest son was diagnosed as autistic and my eldest son with ADHD. Realising they are mirrors of my own neurodivergence, I have learnt so much while holding space for them. Each person's perspective and how they can reach their potential has become a career focus of mine, as those who are different may get marginalised. Those who are marginalised watch from the edges, often feeling belittled, othered or alienated (Berryman et al., 2015). I have sought to make a space for such learners.

I'm in my fourth decade as a professional educator, and over that time I've changed immensely to adjust and cope with the way education is perceived, changed and delivered. My early years were spent with learners who failed in mainstream formal systems in alternative education and since returning to the mainstream, I have always been drawn to develop programmes that are inclusive, particularly of the marginalised. When I am invited behind the walls of their trauma, I can see that they just didn't fit – just like me. I had spent most of my career developing programmes for learners who are neurodiverse without knowing it, until relatively recently. In 2016, I was a part of a team that had the opportunity to design the Bachelor of Leadership for Change (BLFC) – a capability degree rather than a subject specific degree. If you stop and consider what capability means, it must have students at the centre because it's up to them to determine their capabilities in their context, and hence their curriculum.

I'm currently completing the Doctor of Professional Practice and am a facilitator on the Master of Professional Practice (MPP). I'm having a look at me as an educator, with my changing narrative of being the extrovert, the expert, the clever one, through to now being one who really designs for learners to be accepted, no matter what culture they come from. My doctoral research is showing that sensemaking is a highly desired output for learners generating meaning (or purpose) from reflection on their experiences.

I find neurodiverse learners are a mirror for me to be accepted for being unique. And as I found and navigated my way to being a facilitator, rather than a teacher, I found a freedom in supporting learners who are curious and interested in learning with a principal focus on reflection on their experience. This means a learner cannot 'fail' – only reflect insufficiently at the right depth to meet the level of the degree they are studying.

EMPOWERMENT AND SHOWING UP

Deane: The very first thing about Starkey's model (Figure 1), reading from the top, is participation and empowerment. And I think participation without empowerment was my experience of high school. When they [high school] said "participation," I felt that meant, "Answer the right questions. Give us the memory dump to prove that you're listening." But I think the BLFC puts participation and empowerment together. Yes, it's more volatile. We've seen that in class. But it's also where you get the most dynamic shifts and transformations because people collide and have to figure out: "Do I believe what I believe or am I going to change the way I think about this?"

Learner experience

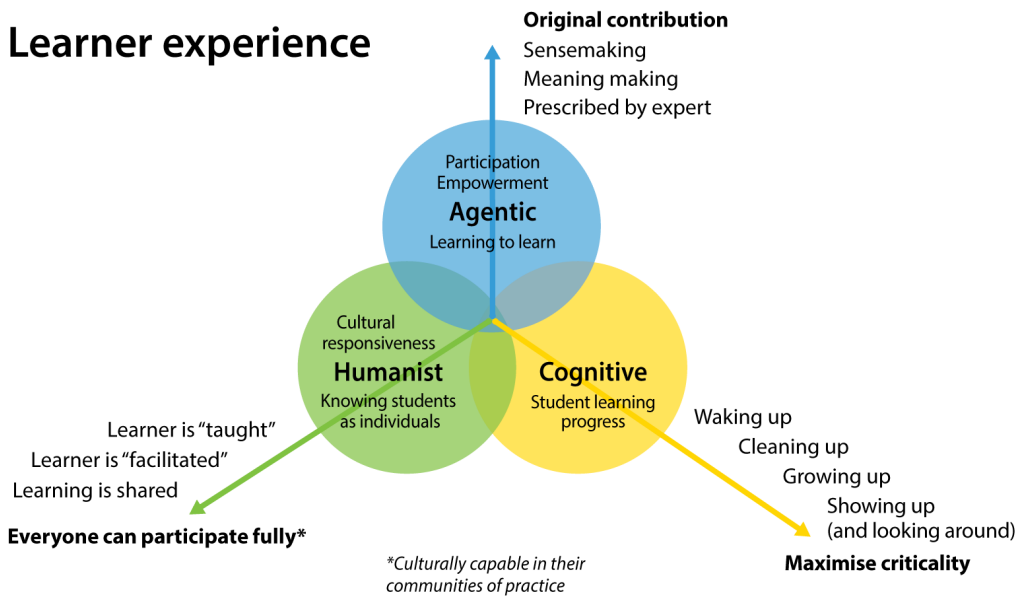


Figure 1. Dimensions of student-centred learning development (modified from Starkey, 2019).

Steve: So, the power of having diversity in a community of practice, or a class, which is acting in *ako*, is that there's always a question being asked. What am I in relation to this? Yeah, I'm witnessing this thing going on in front of me. Do I dismiss it from my old default paradigm? Am I willing to look at it through their lens? What is the lens?

Deane: *Ako* needs both [empowerment and participation]. You and I and others have had really great classes. And then there are all the students I've never met. They've never shown up for a single class. I wonder what their experience was like. Do they do well on their own? Maybe some people do?

Steve: Yeah, [they do]. I mean, both the MPP and the BLFC are *independent* learning programmes, which means maximising agency for the learner, so it's up to each learner. Some people are lone wolves and prefer to work alone and can achieve high things alone. I think you and I have spent many, many years doing that as experts working [alone]. Actually, my big breakthrough was to realise that one plus one equals three when it comes to sharing expertise. So, there is this idea of cognitive progress. How do we measure? In the traditional approach it would have been around how much knowledge you have, but I'm of the view that being able to maximise our criticality is the key measure of success. If I can look at my own narrative in a new light, or my own practice in a new light, then I'm succeeding. I do like Ken Wilbur's (2016) Integral theory for examining the phases of waking up, cleaning up, growing up and showing up. All of these may be occurring simultaneously.

I need to wake up to my patterns. I need to clean up the mess that's getting in the way of me participating in the way I'd like, such as not believing in myself as an expert or not validating my own view or feeling left out or on the fringe. Or, [believing] that my view is not valid and dismissing it. I think growing up for me is to realise that my mind's neurodiversity means I see things differently and earlier than others. So I have to be very patient if I want to participate in learning communities and accept that other people are bringing other things that I can't necessarily understand. That enables me to show up in a new way without judgment and with much more curiosity about myself and others.

Deane: According to Robert C. Barkman (2018):

When you see a pattern, it can change your life. Seeing a pattern can even make you smarter. Recognizing a pattern is like looking through a telescope for the first time. As if with new eyes, you see things that you have never seen before. That same experience can happen when you see a pattern for the first time.

Without the participation of others, I could not see my own patterns because I had nothing else to compare to. Knowing that you were openly neurodiverse and having a classmate who was neurodiverse made me stop and say, "Well, what's different about you then?" Then I began to see things and started observing, "Oh, I do that. Oh, I do that too! I wonder ...". Then observing by contrast people who are not neurodiverse, I think, "I don't function like they do," and my patterns begin to emerge. But when I operate without collaboration all the time, and there's nothing or no one to compare my work with, I'm never going to see those patterns and I'm doomed to repeat cycles. I believe my patterns of behaviour [in the past] were not productive and I have not been as successful as I should have been.

AGENTIC AND HUMANIST LEARNING

Steve: If we look at the whole humanist idea that the learner is at the centre, and this idea of [being] culturally responsive to know students as individuals, then surely one of our responsibilities as an educator is to understand the diversity that the learner brings, because actually all learners bring diversity.

Deane: And that's the point of an ako practice. That everybody brings something, and everybody shares something. It's clear how this is reflected in the agentic dimension.

Steve: Yes. And there is this progression. How do you get to the point where everyone can participate fully? Because there are so many layers of trauma and conditioning around the risk of showing up and being put down for it and excluded and marginalised. There's no question that the marginalised have suffered in our formal education system to date when learning as 'prescribed by an expert,' because they don't fit the bill of what someone else decides their learning should look like. As soon as this is dropped, that's when you move to a shared learning or ako model. Then you get to a point where you begin to explore the value each person's bringing. And the perspective they bring is valid.

This piece about being agentic is really important. It relates to the Māori concept of *tūrangawaewae* and the place I stand strong, or the Welsh concept of *Cynefin*, which is about this idea of my purpose, my unique perspective and sensemaking (Snowdon, 2002). If your sense is *prescribed* by an expert – for example, "this is the way you should be doing it," versus how I'm finding meaning by creating my own purpose and meaning – then the difference between meaning-making and sensemaking as I understand it, and in the literature, is that meaning-making has to do with purpose. Once your purpose is clear, then it's about sensemaking in coherence in order to get to what I consider to be the highest actualisation. If everyone contributed originally, then there would be no need to 'fit in.'

DESIGNING FOR INCLUSION

In light of this, let's talk about the design of the Bachelor of Leadership for Change and the Master of Professional Practice. These courses are highly humanist because each diverse learner's experience is highly valued. We want the original contribution from each participating learner and this maximises the agency of the learner, who has the power to decide what is important. We want people to maximise their criticality and we want everyone to participate fully in their communities of practice. So that means only *they* can prescribe what their context and community is. Not someone else. For me, this is why the neurodiverse struggle so much in formal education, trying to fit someone else's inflexible design. Similarly, their version of what is original must be up to them and how they make sense of things. And you know, the role of the facilitators in the program is to gently enable people to wake up to their patterns. By witnessing themselves in communities of practice, learners often surprise themselves and deepen their reflection as they wake up to what is really going on for them.

Deane: One learner I interviewed formally for my BLFC research said: "This [BLFC] program is what high school should have been!" I keep unpeeling new layers of that and being really intrigued. One of the things that really helped him was this agentic idea of learning to learn and being told, "You might learn differently. Let's explore different ways that you can learn, research, and frame ideas." That was a transformational idea for them.

Steve: I think this "aha" and surprise of the non-linear experience model is crucial for breakthroughs in transformation. Having a disorientating dilemma is needed for transformational learning (Mezirov, 1997). We are not talking about incremental capability development here, or incremental knowledge development. We're talking about breakthrough. And we're talking about perspectives changed through transformational learning (Mezirov, 2000). Agency has been described as the force or compass that drives the transformation (Green, 2021).

Deane: I never really remember there being a great distinction between personal and professional transformation in the BLFC. I think they go hand in hand.

Steve: I have little distinction between my personal and professional change because I strive to be authentic wherever I am. So when I am able to show up without fear, then I can clarify my own purpose rather than the one imposed on me by my conditioning. I can then refine my purpose and have it meaningful and then make sense of it. This sets the scene for me to discover my original contribution and have the power to do so. The other dimension is cognitively comprehending, no matter the source of knowledge or values in the context. For both you and me, learning appears to be a natural phenomenon which maximises criticality. How well can I see my and others' perspectives without agenda and be present to the phenomena I am a part of? (Van Manen, 2007).

An often invisible aspect of formal learning is whether the design can enable everyone to participate fully. My experience is changing because of the design of learner-centred degrees I feel lucky to participate in as a facilitator and as a learner. The New Zealand Disability Strategy states that

Disability is something that happens when people with impairments face barriers in society; it is society that disables us, not our impairments, this is the thing all disabled people have in common. It is something that happens when the world we live in has been designed by people who assume that everyone is the same. (Ministry of Social Development, 2016, p. 12)

I face barriers and am therefore disabled. That's quite a difficult thing to say (or write), since I feel so able in so many ways and this is the first time I have said it out loud. This article was generated through a voice-to-speech application, so the barrier to creating an article like this is reduced. This tool helps me overcome one of my writing disabilities in using such formal language. The BLFC and MPP were designed with this flexibility in mind, so that the learner and their culture are at the centre. They are the expert in their learning, and the job of staff is to reduce barriers so learners can show up. Both programmes begin with extensive reviews of learning that

both honour the learner's uniqueness and enable the learner to become reflective about the experiences that have shaped them, so they can recognise their known and yet unknown perspectives.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Deane: As part of my research for the recent reset of the BLFC programme, I had to ask, from a learner's perspective, how much does the learner need or want to be informed of the process:

When students become reflective about the teaching and learning process, they are strengthening their own capacity to learn. Central to this is the principal of reflection as metacognition, where students are aware of and can describe their thinking in a way that allows them to 'close the gap' between what they know and what they need to learn. (Te Kete Ipurangi, n.d.)

Authentic agentic practice requires awareness of how the process works. So during the BLFC reset, the onboarding process for new learners places a strong emphasis on the value of a *community* of learners.

I do feel that Steve was a clear role model for me around disclosure of his neurodiversity and new reflections and investigation. But at no point did he or other facilitators imply facilitators were the 'standard' to be replicated. In ako practice, everyone contributes, and in authentic agentic learning, everyone must consciously develop their own meaning.

Steve: Groups amplify the individual experience. It's therapeutic to be witnessed by others who can relate, as it is to imagine a reader getting value from sharing our experiences. Designing for inclusion is both our greatest opportunity for student-centred learning and a big challenge to overcome the assumption that people are different to how they appear. Deane and my relating shows we learn so much when we bring who we are as unique. I am so glad I am unique. It can be lonely, but more often than not I am glad to be in the presence of myself.

Steve Henry is a Tasman-based facilitator working for Otago Polytechnic's College of Work Based Learning. The focus of his doctorate is on making sense of his practice with marginalised learners in their transformation and agency.

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Deane Patterson is a Dunedin-based content creator with an extensive history in film and television. He is completing his Master of Professional Practice with a focus on developing a community of practice for musicians to enable them to access resources for thriving.

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