

Reflections on the Development of the Otago Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga Neurodiversity Community of Practice

Kristen Bracey

Otago Polytechnic, Te Pūkenga, Dunedin, New Zealand

kristen.bracey@op.ac.nz

Marje Schaddelee

Otago Polytechnic, Te Pūkenga, Dunedin, New Zealand

marje.schaddelee@op.ac.nz

Sarah Wood

Otago Polytechnic, Te Pūkenga, Dunedin, New Zealand

sarah.wood2@op.ac.nz

Abstract

There is growing recognition of the needs of neurodivergent ākonga in tertiary education and the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment. In mid-2021, a small group of interested kaimahi and a neurodivergent ākonga at Otago Polytechnic Te Pūkenga formed a Neurodiversity Community of Practice (NDCoP). The steering group meets regularly to strategise, share good practice and resources, arrange speakers and organise other personal development opportunities for the wider community at OP. In October 2023 the NDCoP hosted the Neuroability Symposium at Otago Polytechnic, with more than 350 in attendance. This article aims to provide a narrative of the development of our NDCoP, present the actions and reflections of some of its members, and include a tertiary learning advisor (TLA) and ākonga perspective. Finally, the article looks ahead to the future of our NDCoP through the eyes of some of its members.

Keywords: neurodivergent, neurodiverse, tertiary, community of practice, education, learner, student

Our Neurodiversity Community of Practice (NDCoP) at Otago Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga shows strengths in terms of its broad participation, inclusion of kaimahi (staff) and ākonga (learners), both neurodivergent and neurotypical, and its outputs and activities. There is growing recognition of the needs of neurodivergent ākonga in tertiary education and the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment. This article aims to provide a narrative of the development of our NDCoP, present the actions and reflections of some of its members, and include a tertiary learning advisor (TLA) and learner's perspective. Finally, the article looks ahead to the future of our NDCoP through the eyes of some of its members.

Background and Establishment of our NDCoP

Prior to 2021, TLAs, accessibility advisors, lecturers and other kaimahi worked to support neurodivergent ākonga and attended professional development (PD) in neurodiversity through forums like Ako Aotearoa. However, our story begins in 2021 when a number of strands converged, leading to the establishment of the NDCoP at Otago Polytechnic. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a CoP as a group of people with a common interest and a genuine concern for learning how to improve their practice through regular interactions.

Amy Benians (Learning and Teaching Specialist) and Stella Lange (Principal Lecturer, School of Design) were attending an online Ako Aotearoa NDCoP hui and noticed that they shared an Otago Polytechnic email address. They arranged to meet for a coffee on campus and to attend the next Ako Aotearoa NDCoP together. Amy and Stella started thinking about organising an event to raise awareness of neurodiversity at Otago Polytechnic. Amy and Stella shoulder-tapped a few obvious allies, such as the TLAs and accessibility advisors, to help plan a half-day symposium event. This was during the uncertainty of COVID, with all the challenges this would involve.

Potential guest speakers were identified: Mike Styles and Jolene Stockman. The organisers also wanted to give Otago Polytechnic kaimahi and ākonga the opportunity to present and strengthen connections. The kaimahi intranet and informal networking were used to promote the symposium. Kaimahi and ākonga were encouraged to submit abstracts, which were peer-reviewed for approval. Adding this research component meant that the organisers could

apply for funding for the symposium. The inaugural NDCoP symposium was held in November 2021, attracting about 75 participants, face-to-face and online. There were informative and moving presentations, particularly those from neurodivergent kaimahi and one neurodivergent ākonga. At a post-symposium debrief, speakers and organisers expressed their enthusiasm for further hui every few months. This desire for ongoing PD to support neurodivergent learners was supported by the survey feedback of symposium participants.

Other strands that contributed to the development of our NDCoP sit with the Foundation Learning and Learning and Teaching teams. In 2021, Foundation Learning lecturers were engaging in professional development through Ako Aotearoa, Learning and Teaching and other networks, and invited kaimahi from Student Support and Learning and Teaching to join them for an on-campus presentation. Learning and Teaching specialists and Foundation Learning kaimahi who are active in literacy and numeracy PD had been considering how some of the strategies for ākonga with literacy challenges might work for ākonga who are neurodivergent. Through their research into effective models of PD, Amy and other kaimahi from the Learning and Teaching team identified the potential of CoPs. In 2021, with increasing requests for professional development from lecturers across different schools to better support neurodivergent ākonga, it was a natural response for the Learning and Teaching team to contribute to the emerging NDCoP at Otago Polytechnic.

Post-symposium the NDCoP evolved organically; organising committee members were now joined by some of the conference presenters, including a neurodivergent ākonga and kaimahi. Over regular meetings and discussions, the group formalised aspects of the structure, terms of reference, and purpose as they got to know each other. For example, members decided to create a steering and reference group within the wider NDCoP. The steering group meets regularly to strategise, share good practice and resources, arrange events and ongoing education and speakers, working with partners across Otago Polytechnic. Current kaimahi members of the steering group come from Learning and Teaching, Human Resources, Business, Design, English Language, Automotive, Vet Nursing and Student Support. In response to survey feedback from the symposium, the steering group committed to organising a short PD hui (1-2hrs) for the wider kaimahi and community around every 2-3 months to raise awareness and share good practice. A digital presence has been created on the intranet to share resources and ideas about how to foster

an understanding of neurodiversity at Otago Polytechnic, explain terms, and advertise upcoming events. Wenger (2000) highlights “doing things together” (p.227) and “maintaining a spirit of enquiry” (p.230) as elements that contribute to a strong CoP focused on learning. The steering group seeks to keep growing and strengthening the wider NDCoP and is planning a national neurodiversity conference in October 2023.

Reflections on the NDCoP

We asked five members of the NDCoP what the community meant to them, how it had made a difference and what they most wanted out of the community. Their reflections provided some insight into the community; what makes a good community, and what is important for neurodivergent stakeholders.

All the members referred to the NDCoP as a safe place. CoPs work best when members trust each other, feel comfortable and are able to speak truthfully (Wenger, 2000). Rachel van Gorp (Senior Lecturer, School of Business & Capable NZ facilitator) described her presentation at the first symposium as her public reveal as neurodivergent. She was nervous, but at the same time, she saw it as a real opportunity to be part of the ‘greater good’. Other members also talked about the ‘greater good’ as an important driver. Rachel felt inspired and had a sense of empowerment from presenting at the symposium and being part of the community:

I was in it for the greater good. I want to share my story so that others can learn, and I can hear others. I want to educate, empower, encourage, and care for others, and understand what I can do to help people reach their full potential.

All members commented on the sharing of resources and ideas as a real strength of the community. Amy mentioned the genuine concern and real understanding that binds everyone together in the community. This sentiment was echoed by other members of the group. Rachel described the community as “non-judgemental”, and Stella referred to an open approach where no one says, “it’s too hard”. Ākonga member, Rammy El Dessouky, spoke about the ability to take things “higher up” as an important feature of the community. Rammy was excited to report that senior management kaimahi now come to him and the NDCoP for feedback or advice. This all contributes to creating a safe place.

The actions and impacts of the NDCoP can be likened to the phenomenon of the ‘ripple effect’. The ‘ripple effect’ can be understood as the ripples emanating from a pebble dropped in water (specific knowledge about neurodiversity), with each ripple leading to a deeper understanding of neurodiversity and how to support ākongā. These ripples can lead to a change in practice. Daniel Oskam (Senior Lecturer, Engineering Trades) has a son with dysgraphia and has experienced first-hand, through advocating for his son, the real need for alternative ways to learn and be assessed. Daniel was invited to speak about formative visual literacy assessments at the first hui. The ‘ripple effect’ manifested when Daniel was then invited to talk at an Ako Aotearoa NDCoP session and at the School of Vet Nursing. Wenger (2000) explains that through talking to peers, professional development can occur, leading to the development of practice, in this case, supporting neurodiverse ākongā. Daniel has made various changes to learning materials, such as the use of neurodiverse-friendly colours on PowerPoints and adding recorded voice to create resources for ākongā. Daniel believes “the content should be challenging, but not the format of the assessments and learning materials”. Daniel regularly reports back to colleagues in automotive and encourages them to attend the NDCoP hui. A significant ripple is that Daniel talks to ākongā regularly to check that materials and assessments are working for them and has since made changes to summative assessments.

Other members discussed how the NDCoP had influenced their assessment practice. Stella talked about trying to normalise the different assessment formats she offers, to support neurodivergent ākongā, by making these options available to all ākongā in her class. For instance, she might offer the option of a poster, a recorded PowerPoint, or an essay for an assignment. Processing a lot of information at once can be difficult for neurodivergent ākongā, and breaking down assessments into smaller tasks or steps can be helpful (Lange, 2022). Rachel mentioned that offering ākongā the option to complete an assessment individually or in a group is good for all ākongā, especially for neurodivergent ākongā. Amy adds that there are many areas of education where what is good for neurodivergent ākongā is good for all ākongā. For instance, having empathic and compassionate teachers who understand the learning differences of neurodivergent ākongā can lead to flexible assessments which will benefit all ākongā (Benians, 2022). A narrative synthesis of the experience of neurodiverse students in tertiary education found that offering alternative forms of assessment and adaptations to assessment conditions can benefit learners (Clouder et al., 2020). In essence, flexible assessments are part of

the ‘greater good’ that members talked about, and a goal of the NDCoP is to continue to advocate for choice for neurodivergent ākongā.

Results or Outputs from the NDCoP

The 2022 edition of the Otago Polytechnic research journal, *Scope*, featured a section on neurodiversity and included research outputs from the symposium. The NDCoP has actively sought to make neurodiversity more visible across Otago Polytechnic, to create a higher profile and engage as many kaimahi as possible in the journey. This has been achieved through a presence on Microsoft Teams, a caring and sharing online group; a presence on the intranet, to communicate with all kaimahi and the wider community; engagement in the Ako Aotearoa NDCoP; and through several hui each year. The group has also given presentations to the Diversity and Equity Committee and the Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics Committee and has worked with Human Resources to review Otago Polytechnic policies and neurodiversity-friendly recruitment processes. In September of 2022, Otago Polytechnic began its journey towards achieving the Dyslexia-friendly Quality Mark by focusing on four areas: Business, Design, Foundation, and Student Success. The neurodiversity symposium in 2021 increased the visibility of the NDCoP and the planned national conference for October 2023 will likely increase the community's visibility even further.

A Tertiary Learning Advisor’s Perspective

The NDCoP has enabled TLAs to strengthen connections with other kaimahi and this has impacted how they work with neurodivergent ākongā. Learning advisors are talking more about neurodiversity in general and are finding ways to improve their support of neurodivergent ākongā, which has led to small shifts in their practice. For example, involvement in the NDCoP has given TLAs a greater understanding of the language to use with ākongā and more confidence to initiate conversations about ākongā learning preferences and challenges (with the understanding that not all ākongā want to engage in these conversations). TLAs also feel they are better able to recognise and commend the effective strategies and “workarounds” that neurodiverse ākongā have developed over the years to self-manage their learning (van Gorp,

2022, p.143). Neurodiversity is now consciously considered when TLAs are creating in-house promotional material or sending out communications to their ākongā. Learning advisors recognise that the support they give one learner might be different to that they provide to another learner. This could be a 15-minute check-in once a week to set small, time-bound goals; supporting an ākongā to create a template to manage the text-heavy instructions of an assignment; or issuing an ākongā a free subscription to Grammarly Premium to help them craft their writing. These are the ripples created by the NDCoP, raising awareness among TLAs with its active presence.

Ākongā Laura Embraces her Superpowers

Laura MacDonald used the learning advice service regularly throughout her Bachelor of Nursing. At one appointment back in 2021, Laura articulated her frustration over an essay she was finding particularly difficult. This experience “brought back emotions of being a young kid with dyslexia and feeling stupid in school.” The timing of the appointment coincided with an Ako Aotearoa presentation the TLA had recently attended about neurodiversity and superpowers. The TLA and Laura discussed how Laura’s superpowers might be applied to her nursing practice and she later described this meeting as a “turning point.” She went on to embrace her dyslexia wholeheartedly, becoming a passionate researcher of dyslexia in nursing and connecting and presenting to local interest groups within the nursing community. Laura’s efforts culminated in an article, “The Dyslexia Disadvantage in Nursing”, being accepted for publication in the peer-reviewed journal, *Kaitiaki: Nursing New Zealand* (MacDonald, 2022). This is an example of the NDCoP spreading small ripples across the institution, in this case, enabling the TLA to actively engage the learner in a conversation about their neurodiversity and approaches to learning. Of course, Laura’s experience is not the experience of all ākongā at Otago Polytechnic and TLAs remain aware of the struggles of many ākongā.

Going Forward

Finally, we asked members to comment on what they wanted out of the group and to voice their hopes and wishes. Members expressed a desire for assessments that allow ākongā

flexibility and choice and more opportunities to tell stories about neurodiversity to those in the wider organisation. Raising awareness of neurodiversity was at the forefront of members' minds. Members expressed the wish that neurodiversity is not perceived as a 'disability' and that this is reflected in internal documentation, and enrolment processes, as well as external sources. One participant hoped that the group would be flexible and fluid enough to meet the current changes and challenges in the tertiary sector. Another member stressed the importance of maintaining ākonga voice, gender balance, and neurodivergent representation on the steering group of the NDCoP. Members looked forward to working towards the Dyslexia Friendly Quality Mark. One member expressed hope that the symposium in October 2023 would attract presenters and participants from throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. And finally, all members expressed the wish to continue to connect with others with the motivation to make a difference.

The NDCoP at Otago Polytechnic is an anchor stone, led by a tight steering group, chaired by a neurodivergent chair, with neurodiverse, neurotypical, ākonga and kaimahi representation, all invested in a common good. It is a community where one can feel "braver", "embraced", and among "like minds" or, in the final words of Daniel, "feeling we're like a river, working with others to make a difference."

Acknowledgement

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