

## Effective Learning Advisor Strategies for Neurodiversity: Time to Get it Right

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### Abstract

In the current tertiary landscape, learning advisors (LA) are frequently tasked with supporting diverse classrooms that include neurodivergent individuals or learners facing unidentified learning challenges. This article delves into the essential principles and strategies for LAs in their interactions in teaching and learning environments. By fostering environments of inclusiveness and encouragement, LAs play a crucial role in empowering learners to thrive academically and personally. This article aims to enhance the understanding and application of effective strategies that contribute to the success of neurodivergent individuals within learning contexts in the tertiary environment. The article discusses the inspiring story of Rachel van Gorp, a neurodivergent learner and facilitator in Otago Polytechnic's School of Business, and Glenys Ker, an experienced LA and assessor, in Capable NZ, as they navigated Rachel's Master of Professional Practice programme. Rachel and Glenys share some of the strategies that they believe have been successful when working together and that could also be applied when working with other learners who present as neurodivergent.

*Keywords:* Learning advisor, neurodivergent individuals, support strategies, higher education, academic success, personal growth

Rachel van Gorp is a neurodivergent learner and facilitator in Otago Polytechnic's School of Business. In Rachel's master's study, she and Glenys Ker, an experienced learning advisor (LA) and assessor, in Capable NZ, fostered an environment that embraced diversity, paving the way for innovative and inclusive support strategies. By leveraging Rachel's first-hand experiences and Glenys' extensive expertise, they forged a partnership that benefitted not only Rachel but also the wider learner community at Institution.

The effective collaboration between the neurodivergent learner and the LA was pivotal in ensuring the success of the research endeavour. At the core of this collaboration were several key elements, or 'gems,' that contributed to its effectiveness. Firstly, open and clear communication laid the foundation for mutual understanding and trust between both parties. The openness and transparent discussions that Rachel embarked on with regards to goals, expectations, challenges, and ways of working together were key to building a relationship straight away. A shared commitment to the research objectives fostered this collaboration where they both were fully invested in the project's achievement. Flexibility, adaptability, honesty and staying open and responsive were seen as essential qualities. Respecting each other's expertise and perspectives was key to the relationship, which ensured deep and effective listening so as to encourage the exchange of ideas and contributions from different vantage points. As a result, the research process was enriched by the combined efforts and insights of both the learner and the LA, accommodating a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Rachel and Glenys willingly acknowledge that during the research journey, there were moments of shared tears, laughter, and absolute honesty, which created an atmosphere of trust between them. These personal bonds not only enhanced the relationship but also highlighted the depth of mutual respect and empathy that characterised their working relationship. Such genuine interactions surpassed the boundaries of traditional academia, leaving a lasting mark of respect and camaraderie on them both, shaping not only the research process but also their shared understanding of the richness of the teaching and learning environment.

## **Neurodiversity and Intersections**

Neurodiversity includes a wide range of learning disabilities, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyscalculia, autism spectrum disorder, and Tourette Syndrome (Clouder et al., 2020). The concept of neurodiversity advises that neurological differences are inherent in human diversity, similar to other forms of diversity such as race, gender, or culture. It emphasises that individuals with neurodivergent conditions possess unique cognitive abilities that can be supported to excel in creative tasks and problem-solving (van Gorp, 2022). LAs should be encouraged to adopt a holistic approach that goes beyond just looking at the challenges of neurodivergent learners to also recognise and welcome their inherent strengths and abilities. Neurodivergent individuals often possess unique capabilities that can deepen and improve the learning environment and contribute to innovative problem-solving and creative thinking. These strengths may include excellent attention to detail, pattern recognition skills, divergent thinking, and an ability to hyperfocus on areas of significance. By acknowledging and harnessing these strengths, LAs can create tailored learning experiences that benefit from the individual strengths of neurodivergent learners, fostering encouragement and confidence in their abilities. Observing and acknowledging these strengths helps to nurture a more inclusive and supportive learning environment where neurodiversity is welcomed and appreciated for the varied viewpoints and contributions it offers.

The relationship between the range of neurodivergent conditions is not fully understood, and there is limited information about the exact overlaps between them (Brimo et al., 2021). While some challenges may occur independently, others may coexist. For example, ADHD and autism share numerous similarities and are often closely linked, including attention issues, emotional impulsivity, a lack of self-awareness, and difficulty reading social cues (ADHD, 2022; Antoniou et al., 2021; Brimo et al., 2021; Sewell, 2022).

### **Accessing Higher Education with Inclusive/Supportive Approaches to Learning**

Neurodivergent learners face significant obstacles in accessing higher education due to historical perceptions of academia as a space reserved for the privileged (van Gorp, 2022). Even with more learners from diverse backgrounds entering higher education, it is our experience that those from privileged backgrounds still show higher rates of advancement.

Research from the Australasian region indicates that learners with neurodivergent conditions, such as dyslexia, are underrepresented in higher education and encounter substantial challenges due to a lack of support and resources (The Donald Beasley Institute, 2024). The lack of representation of neurodivergent individuals symbolises a global challenge for LAs and employers as the number of learners with learning disabilities linked to neurodiversity is increasing.

In her 2022 research, van Gorp highlights the importance of adopting a more inclusive and supportive approach to teaching and learning. She points out that learners with neurodivergent conditions should not face exclusion due to barriers beyond their control. Glenys argues that higher education institutions must provide tailored support and accommodations to ensure these learners can succeed and flourish. This inclusivity benefits not only individual learners but also society, as after graduation, neurodivergent individuals bring unique perspectives and strengths that contribute to a more diverse and innovative workforce.

It is worthy of note that some neurodivergent learners may opt not to disclose their condition(s) for personal reasons and might hesitate to share due to past negative experiences or bias. Additionally, some may not even be aware of their diagnosis. Some learners may not perceive themselves as disabled or may simply feel uncomfortable sharing personal details. Educational theorists contend that the practice of calling on learners who do not voluntarily participate in class, despite the perceived advantages of engaging silent learners, is considered inappropriate. According to Kirby (2021), Hayes (2020), and Jansen et al. (2017), the act of singling out students who may choose not to actively contribute to classroom discussions raises ethical concerns and potentially undermines the principles of inclusive and respectful learning environments.

This perspective underscores the importance of recognising and respecting diverse learning preferences. Advocates argue that LAs should explore strategies to foster engagement from all students, such as creating open and inviting spaces for voluntary participation, implementing inclusive teaching methods, and providing additional avenues for communication that accommodate various comfort levels. Such inclusive practices are in sharp contrast with attempting to coercively prompt non-voluntary participation, however well-intended such efforts might be. In essence, it is crucial that LAs prioritise supportive practices that respect the autonomy and preferences of all learners.

## **Research Methodology**

van Gorp (2022) embarked on a research project titled *Neurodiversity in Vocational Education: Facilitating Success*, utilising both qualitative methodology and autoethnography. The qualitative approach aimed to delineate how the project's outcomes contributed to the advancement of practices with neurodivergent learners. Simultaneously, autoethnography was employed to capture the personal experiences of both the participants and Rachel.

Thirteen individuals, comprising six neurodivergent learners, five lecturers, and two experts, participated in interviews. The ensuing themes were carefully extracted, revealing noteworthy insights. It is crucial to highlight that throughout Rachel's thesis, a profound understanding developed between her and the LA (van Gorp, 2022). Reflection on the learning journey highlighted a successful collaboration marked by laughter, tears, and continuous learning. The establishment of courage and vulnerability was evident from the project's inception, contributing to a harmonious and effective collaboration.

## **Findings and Contribution to the Field**

Through the analysis of data, van Gorp's (2022) research project identified several emerging themes related to neurodivergent learners in higher education:

- Theme One focussed on the significance of early disclosure, emphasising that neurodivergent learners could reveal their conditions early to ensure they receive appropriate support. It is still acceptable for those learners that choose not to disclose until such time as they feel comfortable.
- Theme Two delved into the difficulties neurodivergent learners face in educational environments, revealing barriers and obstacles they confront and how these affect their learning experiences.
- Theme Three was the significance of building relationships and support networks. This underscored the critical role by both staff and peers in establishing inclusive and supportive learning environments for neurodivergent learners. Through cultivating and nurturing relationships and fostering a sense of belonging, LAs and fellow

learners could contribute to the overall success and well-being of neurodivergent individuals in higher education.

- Theme Four centred on exploring the strengths neurodivergent learners bring to the learning and teaching environment, fostering discussions highlighting the positive aspects of neurodiversity.

Based on Rachel's findings (van Gorp, 2022), some important strengths that neurodivergent individuals often have are:

- **Logical Thinking:** They may be very good at solving problems and thinking logically. They often can effectively analyse information, identify patterns, and draw logical conclusions.
- **Creativity:** Neurodivergent people are often very creative and can come up with innovative ideas easily. They often present a unique perspective on the world, allowing the generation of novel ideas and approaches to challenges. They often think outside the box, exploring unconventional solutions and pushing the boundaries of traditional thinking.
- **Passionate Interests:** They may have strong interests in specific subjects and have an extensive knowledge base. This intense focus can lead to the development of a strong and extensive knowledge base in their areas of interest. They may immerse themselves in learning opportunities related to their passions, acquiring expertise and insights that surpass those of their peers. This depth of knowledge can be advantageous in academic pursuits as it allows neurodivergent learners to excel in specialised fields and contribute valuable perspectives to classroom discussions and topics.
- **Memory Skills:** They often have proficient memory skills, which can be particularly advantageous in teaching and learning settings. They may have very good recall abilities allowing them to retain and retrieve information easily. This can be advantageous where they are required to absorb and recall a lot of information across a range of subjects, in studying for exams, and recalling information from lectures or readings.

By appreciating these strengths, LAs and educators can create curricula and teaching methods tailored to neurodivergent individuals and their unique strengths and capabilities.

This strengths-based approach transfers the emphasis from challenges to capabilities, fostering an inclusive and encouraging learning environment where neurodivergent individuals can flourish and contribute to varied perspectives. Encouraging open and positive dialogue about neurodiversity helps to build awareness and appreciation for the different ways people think and learn. It is important to create learning spaces where neurodivergent learners feel valued for their contributions and where their abilities are harnessed to foster academic success.

The findings of van Gorp's (2022) research project make a significant contribution to the neurodiversity field, enriching the knowledge base encompassing the learning experiences of neurodivergent learners. The study's insights support practical significance for LAs and those in the early stages of their advisory roles. These findings provide valuable knowledge and strategies, enabling practitioners to establish inclusive learning environments tailored to the distinctive requirements of neurodivergent learners.

### **Strategies for Facilitating Learning for Neurodivergent Learners**

As Rachel and Glenys navigated Rachel's learning journey, they discovered and developed several effective strategies that could be helpful for LAs in similar situations, including:

1. **Creating a supportive learning atmosphere:** Neurodivergent learners often flourish in an environment that embraces inclusivity, acceptance, and support. LAs can foster such an environment by setting clear expectations, implementing structure and routines, and offering personalised opportunities. Equally important is the creation of a safe space where learners can freely express their thoughts, ideas, and challenges without fear of criticism
2. **Employing multi-modal learning approaches:** Neurodivergent learners typically possess different learning preferences. Using a range of learning strategies that cater to various senses can enhance learner engagement and comprehension. For instance, integrating visuals, hands-on activities, and technology-based tools can effectively convey information to neurodivergent learners.
3. **Providing clear and concise instructions:** Neurodivergent learners might encounter struggles with processing and following complex instructions. Supplying instructions

that are straightforward, concise, and presented in various formats can aid learners in comprehending and following tasks or assignments. Utilising visual aids, written instructions, and verbal clarifications can effectively support their learning.

4. **Fostering learner agency and self-determination:** Neurodivergent learners thrive when they feel they have control and independence over their learning. Facilitators can empower learners by engaging them in setting goals, making decisions, and self-evaluating their own progress. This encourages learner autonomy and self-determination, which can boost their motivation and engagement in the learning journey.
5. **Offering regular feedback and support:** Neurodivergent learners might benefit from additional feedback and reinforcement to strengthen their learning. Frequent and timely feedback that is specific, constructive, and encouraging helps learners track their progress, identify areas of improvement, and boost their confidence.
6. **Demonstrating flexibility and adaptability:** Neurodivergent learners may exhibit distinct strengths, challenges, and learning speeds. LAs need to be flexible and adaptable, tailoring their approach to accommodate the individual requirements of each learner. This could entail adjusting instructional methods, offering additional support, or implementing accommodations as necessary.

In the interest of promoting effective educational outcomes, Ker's (2017) Effective Facilitation Model can be seen as central, stressing the significance of building strong relationships, fostering trust, establishing rapport, nurturing connections, and promoting effective communication. Within this model, LAs are equipped with a varied set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes essential for their key role. Embracing a learner-first approach, LAs aim to empower learners, encouraging them to manage their own learning and cultivating a sense of autonomy. Ker's (2017) model highlights the importance of relationship-building as a foundation for facilitating learning effectively. Through fostering trust and rapport, LAs create a supportive environment where open communication and cooperation can thrive. Connecting with learners on an individual level enables LAs to tailor their approach and meet their unique needs. Effective listening skills are crucial, enabling LAs to genuinely comprehend learners' perspectives and adapt their strategies accordingly.

LAs not only excel in their respective fields but also possess a diverse set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. They exhibit a deep understanding of instructional techniques and



methodologies, employing a wide array of strategies to engage learners effectively. Following the themes outlined by van Gorp (2022), LAs integrate innovative approaches, such as interactive activities, problem-solving exercises, and technology-enhanced learning, to enhance learner engagement and retention of knowledge.

Adopting a learner-first perspective, LAs can motivate learners to actively participate in their own learning journey. By adopting principles from self-determination theory (SDT), a psychological framework developed by Deci and Ryan (2008), LAs can empower learners to take ownership of their learning experience, enabling them to set goals, make choices, and assume accountability for their outcomes. This approach can nurture a sense of agency among learners, cultivating intrinsic motivation and a genuine desire for learning. SDT is highly relevant for learners in higher education as it emphasises the importance of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and support. It focuses on human motivation and explains how individuals can be motivated by intrinsic factors rather than relying solely on external rewards or punishments. According to SDT, three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness – are fundamentals for human motivation and well-being.

In the context of higher education Ker's (2017) model stresses the importance of fostering learners' intrinsic motivation. When learners are motivated intrinsically, their engagement in learning activities is driven by a genuine interest, enjoyment, or recognition of value in the subject matter. This intrinsic motivation leads to heightened levels of engagement, deeper learning, and ultimately better academic outcomes. However, Ker believes that the desire to learn alone is insufficient. Learners also require support and encouragement to sustain their intrinsic motivation and continue their efforts. This is where the role of autonomy-supportive environments becomes crucial. These environments offer learners choices, opportunities for self-direction, and a sense of control over their own learning experiences. By respecting and supporting learners' autonomy, they are more likely to stay motivated and actively participate in the learning process. Fostering a sense of competence and providing learners with feedback that recognises their progress and accomplishments are essential elements in their learning journey. When learners perceive themselves as competent, their motivation is more likely to be maintained, and they are encouraged to strive for higher levels of performance.

Ker (2017) states another crucial aspect of the learning context is the establishment of positive relationships and a sense of relatedness. When learners feel connected to their

facilitators and peers, they experience a sense of belonging, which greatly contributes to their motivation, well-being, and persistence in their academic pursuits.

In summary, Ker's (2017) model emphasises the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation in higher education. By implementing these principles, facilitators can create an environment that encourages learners to actively engage in their learning journey, resulting in improved academic outcomes and overall learner well-being. The themes discussed by van Gorp (2022) provide additional insights into effective facilitation of learning, addressing the dynamic nature of learning. LAs adapt to the changing needs of learners, encouraging a flexible and responsive environment. They recognise and appreciate the diverse backgrounds and experiences learners bring, encouraging inclusivity and promoting a supportive learning community.

### **Conclusion**

Supporting the success of neurodivergent learners in higher education is an ongoing concern, as emphasised by van Gorp (2022). To support their progress, it may be helpful to align Ker's (2017) Model of Effective Facilitation and SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Facilitating the learning of neurodivergent learners necessitates a high level of skill and deep understanding, encompassing tailored support, relationship-building, and acknowledging the unique challenges and strengths of these learners.

The insights that van Gorp discusses shed light on the importance of providing effective support to neurodivergent learners in higher education. By recognising and appreciating the diversity of neurodivergent individuals, LAs can create inclusive and accessible learning environments that cater to their specific needs. This involves employing strategies that accommodate different learning and communication preferences, and sensory sensitivities, fostering an environment where all learners can thrive.

In summary, LAs must possess a high level of skill and understanding, so that they may cater to individual needs, build strong relationships, and acknowledge the unique challenges and strengths of neurodivergent learners. LAs must adapt to the evolving learning landscape of higher education and the diverse needs of learners within it. By staying attuned

to these changes and embracing ongoing learning and development, LAs can effectively support the success and well-being of all learners.

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