



Communication Te Whakawhiti Kōrero

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Introducing Communication

Whilst traditional views of autism view communication difficulties as being a deficit on the part of the autistic person, it is important to remember that communication is a two-way street. This is the crux of the 'double empathy problem', which argues that autistic people experience social and communication difficulties not because they are inherently deficient, but because both autistic and neurotypical people struggle to empathise and communicate effectively with members of the other group (Milton, 2012). In the decade since the 'double empathy problem' was first theorised, it has been supported by several experimental studies (for example, Crompton et al., 2020a; Crompton et al., 2020b; Edey et al., 2016; Rifai et al., 2021). Understanding the double empathy problem, acknowledging that different people communicate in different but equally valid ways, and recognising that both people in a conversation need to work together to arrive at a shared understanding, will help tertiary educators and staff communicate more effectively with their autistic learners.

Survey Findings

The autistic learners in our survey wanted compassion and patience from their teachers. Instead, they often felt they were misunderstood or judged when they approached tutors and lecturers with questions or requests for accommodation. One student pointed out that it is worth assuming people's questions and concerns are genuine, stating that "compassion when people ask for extensions, and assuming that everyone is trying their best, would go a long way." Another student acknowledged that they sometimes struggled to articulate exactly what they needed, but pointed out that patience would enable them to figure that out: "I don't always know or can't always communicate properly what my problems are and how it can be helped. All I want is patience and understanding as I figure that out."

One communication challenge learners commonly experienced was in understanding exactly what exam and assignment questions were asking, with one student stating "my biggest challenge was understanding exactly what was being asked, and then working out how they wanted the question answered, especially without the weird tangents/links that I saw with stuffs [sic]." Many learners saw their unique perspective and ability to make links that others might not as a strength that they brought to their tertiary education; thus, when learners do seek to clarify what assignment questions mean, it is important to remember that learners are genuinely uncertain about what the assessor will be looking for and are seeking help because they care about doing well. Equally, it is important to hear how they interpret the question; their perspective might raise ideas that had not previously been thought of! Unfortunately, learners were often discouraged from asking questions, with one student saying that they were told by lecturers and tutors "stupid questions get stupid answers."

Finally, it is important to recognise that autistic learners will not always be comfortable communicating using spoken language; some autistic people use alternatives to spoken language like sign language or augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to communicate, and even autistic people who do speak can become selectively mute which is an anxiety disorder in which a person who is otherwise capable of speech becomes unable to speak when exposed to specific situations, specific places, or to specific people. Some can find communicating in writing easier as it gives them more time to process information. Both selective mutism and differences in processing speed presented challenges in the tertiary learning environment. One student commented: "I take longer than some to take in and process information, which means I struggle in lectures and tutorials when we're expected to ask questions or discuss materials on the spot." Speaking up in class was also a challenge for this student: "Tutorials were hard when I was expected to speak up - I have selective mutism and am really triggered in those situations- my mind just goes blank in those situations and I can listen and take in info really well but I can't produce any language or ideas of my own in those instances. (Perhaps if I were able to write my thoughts I would be able to contribute)."

You Can Support Your Learners by:

- **Offering different options for learners to get in touch.** Many of the learners in our survey preferred email as a way of contacting lecturers and tutors, as this avoided the social anxiety and processing speed issues that communicating face-to-face could cause. However, it is important to offer learners different ways of contacting you: one student mentioned that they preferred to ask questions after lectures, as otherwise they would forget to email and ask, and sometimes learners will find it easier to have a message communicated for them by an advocate or whānau member. Establishing clear channels of communication means learners can feel comfortable asking questions and discussing accommodations with you.
- **Making expectations clear.** Clearly communicating what will be expected of learners in the course, both in writing and during the first class of the year, helps to reduce anxiety and ensure learners can be successful in the course. This is particularly important in first year courses where learners may be new to the tertiary learning environment. Explicit instruction around things like attendance requirements, assignment deadlines, how to apply for an extension and where to go for extra support helps to ensure that everyone has the information they need to succeed.

- **Recognising that learners ask clarifying questions because they genuinely need help.** Many of the learners in our survey had negative experiences when they sought clarification around what instructors were looking for in assignments; they often felt like their concerns were dismissed or their perspective was not heard. It is important to be compassionate when learners ask for clarification: recognise that questions come from a place of genuinely wanting to learn, and that an autistic student may not understand a question in the same way a neurotypical student would because of their ability to focus on specific details and make links that others may not see. This is a strength that many autistic learners in our survey felt they brought to their tertiary education, and it should be fostered.
- **Making previous exam questions available for learners to practise with.** Learners also struggled to understand exactly what exam questions were asking for, with the added challenge that in an exam situation they couldn't seek clarification. One solution to this problem is to make sure that there are plenty of exam questions available for learners to practise with, and that the questions in the actual exam are written in the same style. This means learners can familiarise themselves with what types of answers each style of question is looking for, so that they have a better chance of correctly interpreting the question in the exam.
- **Offering different options for participating in tutorials.** For learners who experienced selective mutism or processed information more slowly than others, being expected to speak in tutorials presented a major barrier. There are several solutions to this problem, however. One option is to allow learners to participate in writing- for example, they could bring written responses to the questions that will be discussed in the tutorial with them to class, write a reflection on what was discussed in the tutorial after the class, and then hand that in. Another option would be to have one tutorial stream run as an online discussion board, instead of a traditional in-person class.
- **Being willing to communicate with the student's family/whānau or other support people, if the student agrees to this.** Autistic learners are, of course, adults, and so it is important to always communicate directly with them. However, some learners find it useful to have a support person to assist them to communicate - allow learners to bring a support person with them to meetings and include them in emails if the autistic student requests this.

Final Words

Effective communication relies on both parties remaining front-of-mind when communicating with your autistic learners. By listening with empathy and patience, you will contribute positively towards your student's experience of tertiary education and may also encounter an interesting new perspective.

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Meet Rachael Wiltshire



Rachael Wiltshire is an Autistic person and a member of the Altogether Autism Consumer Advisory Group. She is passionate about increasing societal awareness of neurodiversity and designing systems that are flexible enough to meet everyone's individual needs. She is particularly interested in education and enjoys working with other neurodivergent students in a peer support and tutoring capacity.