

Neurodiversity and Ancient Studies: From Accommodation to Inclusive Design

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1. NOT EVERY DIFFERENCE IS A PROBLEM TO SOLVE

The cover of this issue, illustrated by Arturo Galindo, offers an appropriate point of departure. Rather than attempting to give neurodivergence a single visual form, it brings Antiquity into dialogue with multiplicity: different ways of seeing, connecting and organising information around the same object. That plurality is also where this issue begins. There is a recurring contradiction in the way universities talk about neurodiversity. We have become considerably better at recognising it, considerably more willing to discuss it, and increasingly capable of building institutional structures around it. Disability services identify reasonable adjustments, teaching centres produce recommendations for accessible learning, universities publish equality and inclusion strategies, and lecturers are more likely than they were twenty years ago to encounter students who openly describe themselves as autistic, dyslexic, dyspraxic, ADHD, or otherwise neurodivergent. All of this represents real progress. Yet beneath that progress lies an assumption that has proved remarkably difficult to dislodge: neurodiversity enters the classroom primarily when something goes wrong. A student cannot cope with a particular form of assessment, struggles with an oral presentation, becomes overwhelmed in a synchronous environment, needs instructions reorganised, requires more time, or asks for an alternative format. At that point, the system responds. Support is activated, the barrier is identified, and the student is helped to navigate an educational structure that was already there before their difference became visible. What remains less frequently asked is whether the structure itself deserves the same scrutiny as the student.

This distinction matters because the language of support can remain deficit-based even when the intentions behind it are entirely inclusive. We ask how an autistic student can be helped to participate in a seminar, how a dyslexic student can be helped to read a dense text, how an ADHD student can be helped to organise a long assignment, or how a dyspraxic student can be helped to function within an academic environment built around assumptions that were never designed with

them in mind. What we ask much less often is what these students and academics may already be bringing into the classroom that the conventional model fails to recognise: attention to detail, pattern recognition, unusual associative thinking, intellectual persistence, alternative forms of empathy, precision, resistance to implicit conventions, or an ability to notice contradictions that others have learned to ignore. The first formulation asks how neurodivergent people can survive the established system. The second asks what the established system might learn from them.

This issue of *AI & Antiquity* begins from that second question. It is not a volume about lowering expectations, replacing academic standards with individual preference, or assigning different intellectual tasks to different diagnostic groups. Indeed, one of the strongest threads connecting the contributions collected here is precisely the opposite. Again and again, these articles show that academic standards can remain intact while the conditions through which students encounter them change. A Roman History tutorial can still require interpretation, debate and evidence without obliging every participant to use a microphone or appear on camera. A Latin test can still assess morphology, syntax and translation while giving students an opportunity to experience its structure before the summative assessment begins. An Ancient History project can still require primary-source analysis, engagement with scholarship and evidence-based argument while allowing students to organise those operations through a guided sequence, a systematic comparison or a more synthetic and visual pathway. The intellectual demand does not disappear simply because the route becomes more transparent.

This may sound obvious, but it has substantial consequences. University education has historically bundled together knowledge, method, performance and convention so tightly that separating them can feel like weakening the task. If a seminar discussion is intended to evaluate a student's ability to analyse evidence, we may still assume that analysis should become visible through rapid spoken participation. If an essay is intended to assess historical reasoning, we may still confuse the continuous prose through which that reasoning is normally presented with the reasoning itself. If a test is intended to evaluate knowledge of Latin, we may still allow unfamiliarity with the structure and emotional environment of the test to become part of what is effectively being assessed. These conventions are not necessarily bad. Spoken discussion, essays and timed examinations all have legitimate academic purposes. The problem begins when their historical or pedagogical usefulness is taken for granted rather than articulated.

Neurodiversity makes that hidden architecture visible. This is one reason why the subject belongs so naturally within *AI & Antiquity*. Artificial intelligence has already forced us to distinguish more carefully between the products of academic

work and the intellectual operations behind them. A grammatically correct essay is no longer sufficient evidence that a student has reasoned independently; a polished bibliography is no longer sufficient evidence that every reference exists; a plausible historical reconstruction is not necessarily a reconstruction supported by sources. In the same way, neurodiversity forces us to distinguish the historical competence we want students to acquire from the particular route through which we have traditionally required them to display it. AI and neurodiversity may appear to belong to very different debates, but both confront educators with the same uncomfortable question: what, exactly, are we evaluating?

The answer cannot simply be 'whatever we have always evaluated'. If Ancient Studies wishes to maintain its claim to rigorous disciplinary training, then that rigour should survive changes in format. A student should still be able to contextualise an ancient source, distinguish evidence from interpretation, compare conflicting documentation, recognise anachronism, engage modern scholarship and construct an argument. Those expectations can remain demanding. What this volume asks is whether every organisational convention surrounding them must be equally immutable.

2. FROM ACCOMMODATION TO DESIGN

The difference between accommodation and design is not absolute, nor should it be. Individual reasonable adjustments remain essential, and no general pedagogical model can anticipate the circumstances of every student. Some barriers are personal, some medical, some temporary, and some sufficiently specific that only individual support can address them properly. The danger lies not in accommodation itself, but in treating accommodation as the only point at which inclusion begins. If a predictable barrier can be reduced before the student has to identify themselves, disclose a diagnosis, request permission and wait for an exception, then the alternative can often be incorporated into the design of the learning environment itself.

Several of the contributions in this issue illustrate how small that change can be. No one here proposes rebuilding the university from the ground up. A tutor can announce in advance that students will not be unexpectedly called upon. Slides can be made available before an online tutorial. A class can be told that webcams and microphones are optional. An assessment can be rehearsed once in conditions resembling the eventual test. A Virtual Learning Environment can provide deadlines and instructions in several accessible forms. A seminar can allow students to place an idea on a whiteboard before being asked to articulate it orally. These are not spectacular technological innovations. In fact, one of the most useful findings across the volume is that inclusive teaching often depends less on the acquisition of new technology than on removing hidden uncertainty.

This is particularly visible in relation to anxiety. Anxiety is sometimes discussed as though it were an external condition that students bring into the classroom, something the educator should acknowledge compassionately but which remains separate from course design. Yet educational environments can manufacture anxiety very effectively through unpredictability. 'You may be asked to speak without warning', 'you will enter an unknown breakout room', 'the examination will contain familiar content but you will discover its practical form only when the clock begins', or simply 'the rules of participation are obvious enough that they do not need to be stated' are all instructional decisions, even when nobody experiences them as decisions. Making those expectations explicit does not remove intellectual challenge; it removes the need to guess the rules before beginning the challenge.

Predictability should not, however, be confused with uniformity. This is where some well-intentioned approaches to neurodiversity become restrictive. There is an understandable temptation to turn research findings into profiles: autistic students prefer structure, ADHD students require movement, dyslexic students benefit from one form of presentation, neurotypical students can follow the conventional route. Yet every attempt to make neurodivergence more visible risks reconstructing it as a new set of homogeneous categories. The papers in this volume repeatedly complicate that assumption. A format designed around autistic needs may benefit students with chronic illness, caring responsibilities or simply a difficult day; the same text-chat system that reduces pressure for one student may create difficulty for someone with dyslexia; a student who benefits from highly structured guidance in one task may prefer much greater autonomy in another. Neurodiversity is not a timetable that tells the lecturer which method corresponds to which brain.

This is why choice appears so frequently in the contributions that follow. Not unrestricted choice, because unlimited choice can itself become cognitively demanding, but transparent and bounded alternatives. Conventional tutorials can coexist with relaxed ones. Different routes through the same historical project can coexist under common criteria. Students can experience a formative rehearsal before a summative Latin test without changing what the final examination assesses. In each case, the aim is not to identify the perfect format for a category of student but to reduce the number of situations in which one pedagogical convention unnecessarily becomes the gatekeeper for disciplinary competence.

There is also another perspective that deserves considerably more attention than it normally receives: neurodivergent educators themselves. Discussions of inclusion often place the lecturer in the position of the supposedly neutral designer and the neurodivergent student in the position of the person to be accommodated. The distinction does not survive contact with real universities. Neurodivergent

academics teach, supervise, assess, research and manage departments; they bring their own sensory, organisational and communicative needs to these environments and, as several contributions demonstrate, their lived experience can become a source of pedagogical insight. The person who has experienced cognitive overload is often especially alert to a slide that contains too much information. The person who has found an oral intervention difficult can recognise the difference between silence and disengagement. The person who has struggled to infer an unstated academic convention may be more likely to make that convention explicit for students.

This should not be romanticised. Neurodivergence does not automatically produce a better teacher any more than it automatically produces a better historian. Nor should lived experience exempt pedagogical claims from evaluation. What it does provide is another form of expertise that universities have often overlooked because the academic has historically been imagined as cognitively unmarked. The supposedly ‘normal’ lecturer did not need to explain how they processed information, organised work or coped with the sensory environment because the institution had been built around enough of their assumptions for those questions to remain invisible. When neurodivergent academics describe what they notice, the resulting insights may benefit the entire classroom precisely because they make the invisible visible.

A similar argument can be made about strengths. Academic inclusion has understandably concentrated on barriers because barriers produce immediate harm, but a model that sees only support needs can inadvertently reproduce the idea that neurodivergence is a collection of deficits compensated by institutional generosity. Ancient Studies should be particularly resistant to this simplification. Our disciplines depend upon unusual forms of attention. Philology rewards an ability to detect patterns across linguistic systems; epigraphy depends upon microscopic precision; archaeology requires the organisation of fragmented material evidence; historiography frequently advances because someone refuses to accept an inherited explanation that appears obvious to everyone else. These skills are not exclusively neurodivergent, and claims that archaeological or linguistic expertise can simply be mapped onto autism would be reductive. Yet neither should we pretend that cognitive differences have only negative educational consequences.

The question is therefore not how to create a university without difficulty. Intellectual difficulty is not a defect. Ancient Studies is demanding because the evidence is incomplete, the languages are complex, interpretations conflict and the distance between antiquity and the present cannot simply be wished away. The task of inclusive design is to protect that productive difficulty while reducing forms of difficulty that contribute nothing to the learning outcome. A dense passage of

Thucydides may need to remain difficult. Guessing whether the lecturer will suddenly require a student to turn on a camera does not.

3. HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS ISSUE

With this distinction in mind, the present issue has been structured as an itinerary rather than a collection of unrelated case studies. It moves deliberately from neurodivergence as intellectual contribution, through lived experience and access, towards specific interventions in learning and assessment, before concluding with a transferable framework that connects inclusive pedagogy to critical artificial-intelligence literacy. The order matters because we did not want the issue to begin with the assumption that neurodivergent students are problems waiting for solutions. It begins instead by asking what Ancient Studies may gain when difference is recognised as intellectually productive.

The issue therefore opens with Jenny Read-Heimerdinger's *'The Positive Contribution of Neurodivergence to Ancient Studies'*, a contribution that challenges what she describes as the persistent deficit-based framing of neurodivergence. Drawing on her own late autism diagnosis, decades of work in ancient languages and textual research, and experience teaching neurodivergent students, Read-Heimerdinger turns attention towards strengths that are often ignored when institutional discussion begins from disability and adjustment. Detail-focused thinking, clarity, empathy, pattern recognition, intellectual flexibility and willingness to challenge received assumptions emerge not as compensations for an underlying deficiency but as capacities that can contribute positively to the study of languages, texts and ancient cultures. The article is especially valuable because it does not idealise these characteristics. Extreme attention to detail, for example, can also make selection and communication difficult; a cognitive strength can require learned strategies before it becomes academically productive. Yet that complexity is precisely the point. A student or scholar is not reducible to a diagnostic category, and the contribution of a particular cognitive profile cannot be understood through a list of deficits alone. Read-Heimerdinger ultimately asks educators to recognise not simply what neurodivergent people need from Ancient Studies, but what Ancient Studies itself may receive from them.

That perspective leads naturally to Julia Tomas's *'The Neurodiverse Teaching the Neurodiverse: Case Studies and Reflections of a Dyspraxic Ancient History Lecturer'*, which shifts the focus from strengths in the abstract to the pedagogical knowledge produced through lived experience. Tomas begins with a question once put to her after explaining how dyspraxia and Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome affected her studies: 'How do you do anything at all?' The article traces the long distance between that question and her own work as an Ancient History lecturer, showing how experiences of misunderstanding, insufficient adjustments and sensory

barriers subsequently shaped an approach to teaching centred upon empathy and access. Two case studies give the discussion particular force. The first concerns a student whose autism and anxiety created major barriers to seminar participation and oral presentation, and shows how relatively limited individual support and preparation could alter the student's confidence without changing the academic task. The second moves from individual support to general course design, examining a first-year Ancient History class with a substantial number of disclosed disabilities and describing the use of advance materials, accessible Virtual Learning Environments, structured breaks, altered visual presentation and kinaesthetic learning activities. In one seminar, replacing a conventional discussion with a simple whiteboard activity broadened participation from the same four or five habitual speakers to the entire class; in another, the unlikely teaching aid of a British Museum rubber duck became the entry point for learning how to interrogate material culture. The humour of the examples should not obscure the broader argument: accessibility often emerges from comparatively modest alterations to the learning environment, and those alterations may improve the experience of neurotypical students as well. Tomas's conclusion brings the opening section of the issue full circle by insisting that neurodivergent people should not be seen as problems to be solved, but as people capable of succeeding when environments cease to make unnecessary barriers part of the test.

The third contribution, *'Relaxed Tutorials: Adapting Front-of-House Practices to Accommodate Autistic Students in Distance Learning'*, moves the issue from personal and reflective accounts towards a more systematically evaluated intervention. Developed within Classical Studies at The Open University, the Relaxed Tutorial Project adapts principles already familiar in British theatre, cinema and heritage settings. A relaxed performance does not change the play; it changes the environment in which audiences encounter it. The project transfers that distinction to synchronous online teaching and identifies five recurrent sources of anxiety: webcams, microphones, being unexpectedly put on the spot, breakout rooms and uncertainty surrounding the demands of a session. Instead of treating these as individual problems to be negotiated privately, the project turned their removal into a clearly advertised package. Students knew in advance that cameras and microphones would not be required, that nobody would be singled out without warning, that breakout rooms would not be used, and that key materials and expectations would be communicated beforehand. The effect was substantial: attendance exceeded typical tutorial numbers, participation through text chat was very high, and students repeatedly reported reduced pressure and improved control over participation.

Perhaps even more important than the positive results, however, is the refusal to convert them into another universal prescription. Text-heavy chat was difficult for some dyslexic students, while others preferred spoken or camera-based

interaction; the relaxed format therefore works most effectively as an additional option rather than a replacement for all tutorials. This distinction is one of the intellectual hinges of the volume. Inclusion does not require discovering the one correct accessible environment and imposing it on everyone. It requires understanding that different forms of participation can preserve the same analytical work. For a discipline in which interpretation, debate and close reading are central, the Relaxed Tutorial Project demonstrates that reducing social and affective cost does not require reducing intellectual engagement.

The issue then turns from the tutorial environment to assessment with '*The Case Study of the Simulacrum in Latin Teaching*', developed in Latin-language courses at the Universidad de Costa Rica. The Simulacrum is deceptively simple: approximately one week before a graded assessment, students complete an ungraded formative exercise designed to reproduce the eventual test as closely as possible in structure, instructions, content and time. Its purpose is therefore not to reveal the answers in advance but to remove one form of uncertainty. Students can discover what the task feels like, identify where their declarative or procedural knowledge remains insecure, and plan accordingly before the summative assessment begins. The author connects the exercise with learning by doing, neurodidactics and inclusive instructional design, but its strongest contribution may lie in demonstrating how much of assessment anxiety can arise not from the disciplinary content itself but from the hidden curriculum surrounding assessment: what the task will look like, how time will feel, what forms of response will be expected, and which apparently obvious conventions students are expected to infer without practice.

The Simulacrum also broadens the geographical and disciplinary range of the issue. Inclusive practice is not presented as a model developed exclusively within one British or northern-European institutional culture, nor as something applicable only to historical discussion courses. Here the object is Latin grammar and translation, a domain whose learning outcomes can be defined with considerable precision. The formative rehearsal does not replace the final test and does not change the content students must know. It changes the relationship between preparation and evaluation. The article's conclusion is therefore particularly important for the volume as a whole: the challenge may lie less in choosing between 'traditional' and 'modern' pedagogy than in recognising the emotional and cognitive implications of how knowledge is taught and tested.

The final peer-reviewed contribution, '*Same Standards, Different Pathways: Forgotten Voices, Neurodiversity, and Critical AI Literacy in Ancient History Teaching*', draws many of these threads together and extends them towards artificial intelligence. Developed through the UAB teaching innovation project *Veus oblidades a l'Antiguitat*, the article examines two Ancient History implementations before

translating them into a transferable framework. The first combined evidence-bounded historical reconstruction with generative AI, requiring introductory students to construct fictional but historically situated actors in Hammurabi's Babylon and the Roman Republic during the Second Punic War and then determine which generated details were documented, plausible, unsupported or anachronistic. The second, developed in an advanced course on war and imperialism, moved from content to organisation by offering three possible learning pathways—guided and sequential, systematic and comparative, and synthetic and visual—without assigning them to diagnostic categories and while preserving identical historical expectations across all three.

The central argument deliberately returns to the question with which this editorial began. If a student must contextualise evidence, distinguish source from interpretation, engage scholarship, identify anachronism and construct an argument, those disciplinary requirements should remain common. It does not necessarily follow that every student must organise them through one identical sequence. The article describes this distinction as same standards, different pathways, but it also discovers a contradiction within its own implementation. The project had diversified the organisation of historical work while continuing to require all students to interact personally with generative AI. Student reactions made this inconsistency visible. The revised framework therefore separates critical AI literacy from compulsory AI adoption: a student may generate material directly, analyse a documented instructor-provided corpus, or compare several controlled outputs while being assessed through the same historical criteria. The aim is not to produce more users of AI, but historians capable of deciding when a technological tool contributes to historical reasoning, when it distorts that reasoning and when it is unnecessary.

The issue concludes with a Book Reviews section that broadens this pedagogical discussion beyond the peer-reviewed contributions. The three reviews engage with Santos, Pedro and Cabero-Almenara's *e-DigCompEdu: Marco de Competencias Digitales para la Educación Superior en Línea*, Olmos Rueda and Márquez Cebrián's *Prevenió de l'absentisme*, and Marvin Rees's *Entstehung, Angebot und bildungsrelevante Lerneffekte des Digitalen Spiels ›Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece‹*. Together, they extend several of the concerns running through this issue—from digital competence and educational participation to the possibilities and limitations of digitally mediated learning.

4. WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY INCLUSION

The contributions in this volume differ considerably in method, voice and scale. Some begin from autobiographical reflection; others present structured teaching interventions or formal classroom projects. They range from online Roman History

tutorials to Greek and Latin language learning, introductory Ancient History, material culture, historiography and generative AI. Yet they repeatedly arrive at the same boundary. Inclusion becomes difficult when the university cannot distinguish the disciplinary challenge from the convention surrounding it.

This does not mean making everything easier. In fact, the language of ‘easier’ is often part of the problem. Turning off a webcam does not make Roman History easier. Knowing the structure of an examination one week earlier does not make Latin morphology easier. Allowing a student to prepare an argument through a comparative matrix rather than through linear notes does not make primary-source criticism easier. None of these alterations gives the student the answer. What they can do is stop unrelated cognitive, sensory or social demands from obscuring whether the student knows the answer and, more importantly in the Humanities, whether they can reason towards one. It is also worth recognising that the benefits need not remain confined to students with formal diagnoses. This is sometimes treated as an argument against neurodiversity-focused teaching: if everybody benefits from clear instructions, predictable tasks or varied routes of participation, why describe these as neurodiversity-aware practices at all? The answer is that universality of benefit does not imply equality of need. A ramp may be useful to someone carrying a suitcase without ceasing to be essential for a wheelchair user. In the same way, advance information may be convenient for one student and decisive for another. Neurodivergent experience helps us identify barriers whose removal can improve the environment more broadly.

At the same time, we should resist the comfortable idea that universal design removes every difference. It does not. Some students will require individual accommodations, some formats will remain inaccessible to particular people, and some academic competences genuinely depend upon a specific form of performance. A language course may reasonably assess oral language if oral production is one of its outcomes. A professional qualification may require a student to demonstrate a particular practical skill. Inclusion cannot mean pretending that all activities are interchangeable. The discipline must retain the right to define its competences. What it should lose is the habit of leaving those competences undefined. This is perhaps the most important contribution of the present issue. Neurodiversity-aware teaching requires us to become more precise about standards, not less. We cannot decide which parts of an activity may vary until we know what the activity is actually for. We cannot offer equivalent pathways unless we can say what makes them equivalent. We cannot distinguish accommodation from dilution unless the learning outcome is sufficiently clear to survive a change in form.

The same lesson applies to AI. At the time of writing, one could be forgiven for thinking that the most urgent question surrounding artificial intelligence was

whether there would still be universities left to educate anyone in. In September 2026, headlines reported warnings from current and former researchers at Anthropic that future superintelligent systems might pose an existential risk to humanity, with one researcher placing the probability of such an outcome at more than ten per cent within the following decade (Booth, 2026). The seriousness of such claims deserves scrutiny, as does the considerable uncertainty surrounding them. Yet between technological utopia and human extinction lies a rather more immediate educational question: what, exactly, do we want students to be able to do with these systems?

That question has acquired particular urgency with the publication of the PISA 2025 results in September 2026. Across OECD countries, reading performance has fallen sharply over the past decade, including precisely those skills that become more rather than less important in an AI-mediated environment: evaluating information, connecting evidence across sources and thinking critically about what we read. The findings on artificial intelligence are equally uncomfortable. Students who reported using AI to draft text for assignments tended to perform less well than those who did not, while students who had been explicitly taught to evaluate the quality of AI-generated information performed better than AI users who had received no such guidance (OECD, 2026). These associations do not demonstrate that AI itself causes educational decline, nor do they justify technological rejection. They do, however, make it increasingly difficult to imagine digital competence as a substitute for foundational competence. Reading, reasoning, sustained attention and the ability to evaluate evidence are not skills rendered obsolete by artificial intelligence. They are the skills on which any meaningful form of AI literacy depends.

For several years, debate around generative AI in education has oscillated between enthusiastic adoption and attempts to prohibit or detect it. Both positions can become technologically obsessed. The more useful educational question is the same one posed throughout this issue: what competence do we want the student to demonstrate? If the objective is the ability to evaluate generated material against historical evidence, then direct prompting may be one route but not necessarily the only one. If the objective is independent historical argument, then producing polished prose through an LLM is not equivalent to performing the reasoning that the prose is supposed to communicate. Technology changes the environment; it does not relieve us of the need to define the intellectual work.

This is why I would resist describing the articles collected here simply as contributions about ‘supporting neurodivergent students’. They are about something broader and, I think, more interesting. They are about making academic expectations visible. Sometimes that means listening to the experience of the person who has spent years negotiating an environment that others barely notice.

Sometimes it means asking a student to practise the test before the grade matters. Sometimes it means stating clearly that nobody will be forced onto camera. Sometimes it means allowing three routes towards one historical argument. None of these changes is revolutionary on its own. Taken together, however, they challenge a deeply rooted assumption: that equality requires everyone to encounter the same barriers in the same way.

Ancient Studies has never depended upon sameness. The evidence itself refuses it. We work with papyri and pottery, inscriptions and landscapes, fragments and literary texts, coins and skeletal remains, each requiring different forms of attention before they can contribute to a historical argument. We would find it absurd to insist that all evidence must be approached through one analytical method simply because uniformity looks rigorous. There is no particular reason to treat students with less methodological imagination. The objective remains what it has always been: to train people capable of reading difficult evidence, asking precise questions, recognising uncertainty, challenging easy narratives and constructing interpretations that can withstand criticism. The articles in this volume suggest that we may protect that objective most effectively not by requiring everyone to travel towards it in exactly the same way, but by becoming far clearer about what the destination actually is.

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