

Relaxed Tutorials: Adapting Front-of-House Practices to Accommodate Autistic Students in Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT — Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent students encounter persistent barriers in higher education, including sensory overload, social anxiety and uncertainty around interactional expectations. In this case study I report on the design, implementation and evaluation of the ‘Relaxed Tutorial Project’ in the Department of Classical Studies at The Open University, a UK-based distance learning university delivering primarily online teaching. Adapting ‘relaxed’ front-of-house practices from the Arts and Heritage sectors, our team translated five common anxiety triggers in synchronous online tutorials – webcams, microphones, being ‘put on the spot’, breakout rooms, and uncertainty – into a set of explicit commitments communicated to students prior to tutorial sessions. Across the two years of the project, attendance at our ‘relaxed tutorials’ substantially exceeded typical tutorial numbers; participation via text chat was unexpectedly high; and students reported reduced anxiety, improved comfort and better concentration. Benefits extended beyond autistic students, to learners managing long-term health conditions, caring responsibilities or employment constraints. This case study will cover design choices, limitations, and implications for inclusive digital pedagogy in the Humanities. I argue that relaxed tutorials constitute a feasible and low-cost addition to online provision that reframes ‘inclusivity’ as affective, sensory and social design rather than content modification. The project demonstrates that transparent choice architecture – advance slides, clear norms, and opt-in participation – can reduce anxiety-related barriers to attendance and retention without affecting academic standards; and that insights from autistic teachers can offer new ways of looking at educational inclusion.

KEYWORDS — neurodiversity, autism, anxiety, distance learning, inclusive pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been recognised for a long time that social anxiety and related stress are common in autistic students and young people (Bellini, 2004; Freeth et al., 2013); but it is only recently that research has begun to highlight how these forms of autistic stress contribute to burnout and high rates of withdrawal (Cage & McManemy, 2022; Cage & Howes, 2020). Scholarship is finally beginning to explore the multiple barriers autistic students face in higher education; and in doing so it has also drawn attention to how inadequate institutional responses to those barriers have been (Horlin et al., 2024; McPeake et al., 2023).

The current situation is bleak for autistic students, both during and after their studies. Recent figures show that autistic students have the highest dropout rates of any disability group (North East Autism Society, 2023), while the Buckland Review in the UK has established that autistic graduates have the worst post-graduation outcomes of any disability group (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024), and far worse outcomes than non-disabled students.

As an autistic person in academia myself, and a ‘sea glass survivor’ (Shepherd et al., 2024) of an education system that was not built for autistic learners, I have a personal and professional insight into the problems encountered at university by autistic students. The role of autistic teacher insights in developing inclusive practices has only recently been acknowledged (StEvens, 2024); but early indications from studies all over the world (e.g., O’Neill & Kenny, 2023; Wood et al., 2025; Zaks, 2025) suggest that autistic educators have a valuable perspective to contribute. Specifically, we tend to notice accessibility gaps that other teachers might not observe.

The Relaxed Tutorial Project grew out of my own observations on one of those accessibility gaps. It became a Faculty project within the Department of Classical Studies at The Open University (OU), supported by an internal scholarship and innovation fund and involving a team of two tutors and two managers; and it ran for two years, from 2021 to 2023. Since then, ‘relaxed tutorials’ have become a standard feature of teaching within the Department of Classical Studies; have been the focus of research projects within Mental Health and Social Care modules; and have been rolled out by the OU’s Library Services to reach more than 200,000 people (staff and students) worldwide.

The goal of the Project was to investigate how synchronous online tutorials might be reconfigured for students to anticipate and meet neurodivergent (and particularly autistic) needs.

2. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Online and distance learning, by definition, remove some of the main autistic campus-based stressors from university study; but I was keen to investigate whether there was more that could be done to make distance learning more accessible to autistic students, in order to move from ‘surviving’ to ‘thriving’ (Long, 2023). Certain areas of the autistic student experience – particularly the need for sensory adjustments – have been recognised as areas in which very few interventions have been trialled in a university setting (Anderson et al., 2019). So in designing this research project I looked for a model beyond academia, considering adjustments which have become standard in other settings.

‘Relaxed’ events are common in the UK Arts and Heritage sectors. They offer a variant experience which is suitable for autistic families. The relaxed principles were originally designed for theatre performances, so that autistic children with

sensory sensitivities or social communication barriers would not be excluded from seeing a play in the theatre. To make a performance ‘relaxed’, no change is made to the content. Instead, the theatre adjusts the environment, including lighting, sound levels, movement permissions and quiet spaces, focusing on the ‘front-of-house’ elements of the experience rather than on the play itself (Kempe, 2015, p. 60). Similar principles were soon adopted by cinemas; and relaxed showings of movies have now become common, offering a low-arousal and accepting environment in which families of autistic children are free to enjoy a movie without barriers.

Through the Relaxed Tutorial Project, the Project team set out to explore how similar ‘relaxed’ principles could map to the online classroom.

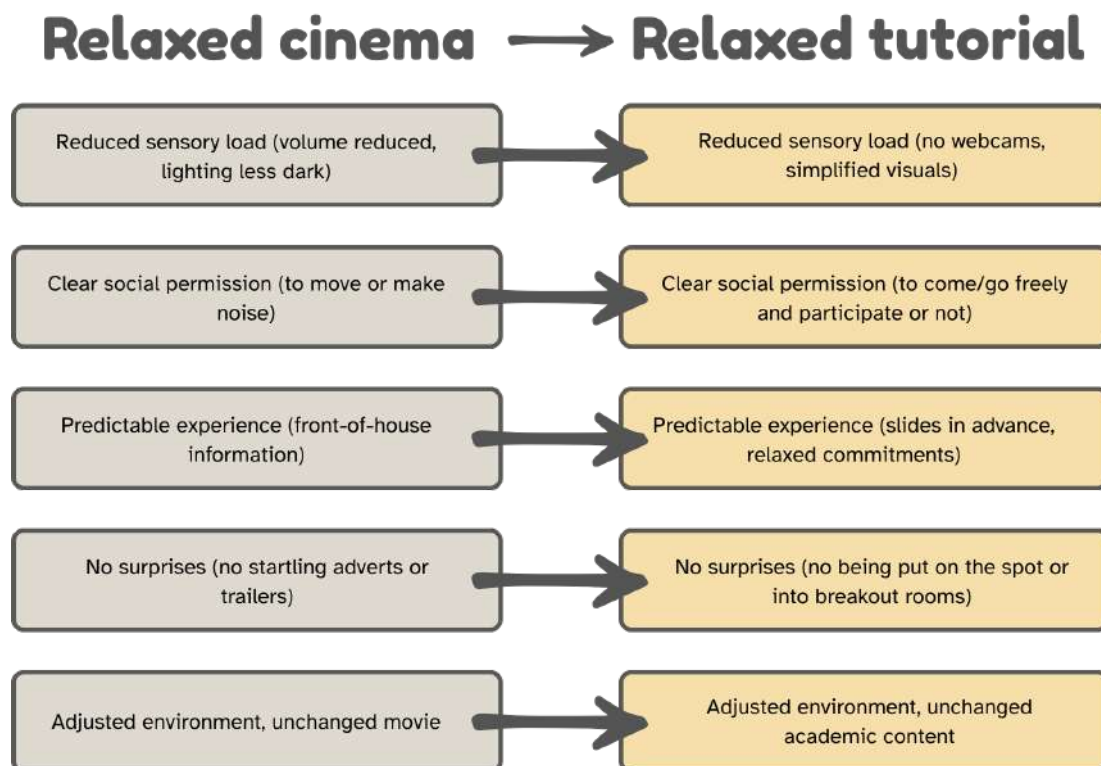


Figure 1. Front-of-house ‘relaxed’ cinema adjustments mapped to online tutorial adaptations.

Two design imperatives informed the Project’s approach: not expecting the student to fit the system; and removing both existing and perceived barriers (Krcmar, 2019). Drawing on my lived experience as an autistic academic, and on the literature on autistic and neurodivergent student experiences (Anderson et al., 2017; Schembri-Mutch et al., 2024), I identified five recurrent autistic anxiety triggers in synchronous online teaching: webcams, microphones, being put on the spot, breakout rooms, and uncertainty about session demands.

3. DESIGN AND METHODS

The Project team piloted the Relaxed Tutorial Project across two academic years on a Level 3 (final year undergraduate) Roman History module in the Department of

Classical Studies. In year one (2021–22), I delivered six relaxed tutorials to a cohort of 298 students. In year two (2022–23), I and another tutor offered twelve relaxed tutorials across afternoon and evening slots to a cohort of 336 students. Relaxed tutorials ran alongside standard provision as an additional option. Institutional ethics approval was granted (HREC/4330/Fear). Data sources included end-of-module surveys (constrained by institutional survey limits: 36/101 responses in Year One; 22/162 in Year Two) which were sent out to students at the end of each year (for our survey questions, see Fraser et al., 2025, Appendix); tutor notes from participating academics; qualitative feedback in the form of emails from students; and attendance figures. Alongside the formal feedback routes, each of the four project members attended relaxed sessions as observers, and our collective observations informed a process of continuous improvement and refinement.

The project addressed three research questions: (1) whether advertising a tutorial as ‘relaxed’ attracts students, and why; (2) how the set-up of a relaxed tutorial affects experience; and (3) whether attendees wanted more relaxed tutorials. We conducted thematic analysis of open comments aligned to these questions, focusing on mentions of anxiety, comfort and barrier removal.

4. IMPLEMENTATION: FIVE TRIGGERS AND ADJUSTMENTS

4.1 WEBCAMS

In line with disability practitioner guidance to minimise multi-modal overload (NADP, 2020), we told students that they would not be expected to switch on their webcams during a relaxed tutorial. Research with autistic adults links cameras to self-consciousness, a sense of judgement, and the disorienting ‘mirror’ effect of seeing one’s image (Zolyomi et al., 2019). Discomfort with cameras is found more generally (Kozar, 2016; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021) but appears particularly acute for autistic learners (Exceptional Individuals, 2020), who point to the concentration benefits of being able to learn without being visible (Saigot, 2023).

4.2 MICROPHONES

We also told students that they would not be asked to use their microphones during a relaxed tutorial. For many autistic students, speech can be unreliable or can require considerable effort (Zisk & Dalton, 2019), while some autistic students will be non-speakers. Instead, we offered a communication channel via a constantly monitored text chat facility. Written communication affords more processing time and control (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021), and it also comes with fewer hidden social barriers. Even for non-autistic cohorts, it can be more productive to enable multiple contribution routes than to insist on microphones (Chandler, 2022).

4.3 BEING ‘PUT ON THE SPOT’

We were very clear about our commitment to ‘not putting people on the spot’, by which we meant asking questions directed at named individuals; not because this

is a particularly common practice, but because it was highlighted by students as a particular worry. Our focus on the perceived as well as the existing barriers became important here, because sometimes a worry about something that might happen can also act as a barrier, even if it is unlikely to happen. Being singled out without warning (or the possibility that this might happen) is a major anxiety source for autistic and anxious students (Beardon, 2021). Making this into an explicit policy had the effect of attracting students who might otherwise have been reluctant to attend.

4.4 BREAKOUT ROOMS

We avoided breakout rooms entirely, throughout all of our trial relaxed tutorials; and this was probably the most popular of our adjustments. Students of all neurotypes frequently describe breakout rooms as socially awkward and anxiety-provoking (Radhakrishnan, 2020); while enforced collaborative working can adversely affect some learners (Macfarlane, 2017), particularly autistic learners (Drexler, 2024). Because small-group work was not a compulsory element of the assessment in this module, we were able to keep sessions whole-room without affecting student success.

4.5 ADVANCE NOTIFICATION AND ADVERTISING

Following common best-practice guidelines, we sent out slides in advance of each session. However, we were careful to state that students were not required or expected to look at the slides before the session, to reduce anxiety; and we limited the advance slides to key concepts and questions only, to reduce the risk of discouraging students from attending the live sessions.

The Project team thought about clarity and advertising in relation to ‘choice architecture’, a term coined by Thaler and Sunstein to describe the way people’s choices can be influenced by controlling the context in which the decision-making process happens (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Although no single one of our adjustments was innovative in itself, our real innovation was in advertising our relaxed commitments as a complete and transparent package of adjustments which was associated with the badge of ‘Relaxed Tutorial’. In addition we branded materials with a logo; we emailed slides beforehand to registered attendees; and we reiterated the relaxed tutorial parameters at the start of every session.

This helped students to self-select into a format aligned with their needs and reduced uncertainty. It also reframed accessibility adjustments as a free-to-choose option, without the emotional burden of asking for reasonable adjustments.



Figure 2. The logo of the *Relaxed Tutorial Project*, alongside the relaxed tutorial commitments which were repeated at the start of each session.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 ATTRACTIVENESS OF RELAXED TUTORIALS

Attendance at relaxed tutorials throughout the two years of the Project substantially exceeded typical tutorial numbers. In year one, 40–57 students (13–19% of a 298-student cohort) attended each relaxed session, compared to typical module tutorials of 12–18. In year two, across two relaxed streams, attendance ranged from 36 to 78 per session (11–23% of 336). Survey comments indicated that participants appreciated the reduced pressure and the increased control over participation levels.

5.2 EFFECTS ON EXPERIENCE

Students consistently welcomed the absence of breakout rooms and the explicit confirmation of expectations in advance. Receiving slides before the session and knowing they would not be put on the spot reduced anxiety and enabled selective engagement on low-energy days, including for students balancing health and caring responsibilities (see Table 1 for a selection of free-text comments from our student surveys).

"Since the slides were sent out in advance it was possible to have an idea of what the session would be about and if I didn't feel well enough to attend I still had most of the information available. The ability to use the chat box allowed interesting discussions to take place without feeling self-conscious and the presentations were informative and fun."

"Due to a stroke I had ten years ago, there are times I find it difficult to recall information I have studied immediately, when I am put on the spot. Relaxed tutorials took any anxiety regarding this prior to a tutorial away."

"There are times participation away from the chat box is helpful, although there are other times, depending on the day a student has been having where being put into a breakout room can be overwhelming. It was really useful knowing there was the option of both types of tutorial and I hope to continue to see the option of both."

"I am often disturbed when attending a tutorial so the relaxed option proved so much better. I am definitely not a fan of attending online 'anything' - so the relaxed tutorial option took a lot of pressure of 'having to perform' in the spot. Much prefer it."

"Anxiety, borderline personality disorder and depression often make me feel like I can't attend in case I have to participate and am not feeling up to it."

"I could not have asked for more. All of us had a voice in the relevant conversations and the tutor was attentive to all of our questions. If we had any additional questions which we did not feel comfortable sharing with the group, then they were very happy to answer via email as soon as the session ended."

"Knowing in advance that I could join the relaxed tutorials and not be called upon to interact was very comforting. I work full time, as many other students do. My time is stretched so I'm not always completely on top of my reading by the time the tutorials take place so I find it stressful to be called out for input during tutorials."

"I love that I didn't have to talk and could just use the chat box to communicate."

"The atmosphere was relaxed since there was no pressure to contribute if I didn't want to. A great amount of information was provided and I managed to concentrate and take it in because I wasn't worrying about being asked to answer a question I didn't know the answer to."

"I believe the relaxed tutorials promote inclusivity, as students who have disabilities or illness can listen to the tutorial without worrying if they are able to answer questions."

"I was having chemotherapy treatment at the time, the relaxed tutorial allowed me to receive relevant information for my course without worrying if I was well enough to interact and answer questions."

"Sometimes it is good to sit back and listen, other times it's great to have the opportunity to participate. The relaxed tutorials gave the opportunity for either. A relaxed tutorial takes the stress factor out of the session."

Table 1. Sample Feedback from Student Surveys

However, our survey responses also identified mismatches for some learners, including dyslexic students who found text-heavy chat challenging, and students with reduced mobility, including osteoarthritis. The adjustments which worked for autistic students and students with anxiety or illness did not meet the needs of all disability and learning difficulty groups.

5.3 DESIRE FOR CONTINUED ACCESS

Across both years, 80–90% of respondents indicated Yes or Maybe when asked if they were interested in future relaxed tutorials. Comments frequently requested the continued availability of both relaxed and conventional formats, highlighting the value of choice. Responses showed that students had already begun to self-select based on fluctuating levels of need, with some students commenting that they chose a relaxed tutorial whenever they had been having a bad day or a flare-up of chronic illness.

5.4 PARTICIPATION DYNAMICS

Contrary to concerns, both within and outside the Project team, that relaxed commitments could produce passive lectures, participation via chat was very high in every tutorial. In sessions where we measured active and visible involvement, more than 90% of attendees posted questions, answers or comments in the chat box; and many participated enthusiastically throughout the sessions. This pattern aligns with strong preferences for text-based communication in autistic adult groups (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021).

5.5 NEEDS BEYOND DIAGNOSIS

Focusing on developing a package of preference-based adjustments, rather than relying on diagnostic labels or a statement of requested adjustments, had the effect of accommodating the under-diagnosis and non-disclosure common in adult distance cohorts. It also enabled us to support a wide range of students, from students in full-time employment to students with chronic illness, consistent with universal-design approaches (Higbee, 2009; Udo & Fels, 2010).

6. DISCUSSION

Relaxed tutorials proved effective in reducing anxiety, increasing attendance, and sustaining engagement by re-channelling interaction into a lower-visibility, lower-immediacy mode that many students found less affectively costly. Explicit norms and predictable interactional demands appear central to these effects.

Feedback showed that the relaxed format does not suit everyone, because for some students the experience did not feel relaxing at all. Some students will always prefer mic/camera interaction; others find text chat difficult or unwelcome. The relaxed format should therefore be positioned as an additional option, not a replacement, within a plural provision where formats are clearly described so that students can self-select.

Limitations of our research project include self-selection into sessions and surveys, a single subject area (Classical Studies), and the absence of diagnostic categorisation by design. Future work could compare outcomes across disciplines, co-design accommodations for dyslexic students in chat-intensive sessions (e.g., paced chat, periodic mic-mediated summaries), and evaluate learning outcomes

alongside affective measures. Language is another potential area for exploration, because prioritising clear and unambiguous language, particularly in instructions, could support autistic students further.

For humanities pedagogy, including Classics, chat-mediated participation supports close reading, comparative analysis and historiographical debate without imposing mic/camera demands. Where synchronous spoken debate is pedagogically important, expectations should be explicit in advance and paired with parallel relaxed options.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR ANCIENT-WORLD TEACHING AND DIGITAL PEDAGOGY

This project highlights the value to neurodivergent students of teaching tools being opt-in, sensory-conscious and clearly disclosed. More broadly, treating affective and sensory design as core online pedagogy principles can expand equitable participation without requiring extra teaching time, using additional resources or diluting disciplinary standards.

This is particularly important in Ancient-World teaching. Ours is a discipline in which learning is often mediated through discussion, debate and interpretation. We routinely ask our students to analyse literary and material evidence, evaluate competing viewpoints, and participate in collaborative exploration of complex questions for which there may be no single correct answer. Recent articles in the *Journal of Classics Teaching* emphasise the importance of deep analysis and interpretative engagement in Classics education (Markoglou, 2026) and highlight the role of the discipline in developing skills of debate and argumentation (McGuire, 2026). Such discussion-based approaches may present particular challenges for some autistic students, especially where participation requires rapid responses, interpretation of social cues or speaking in front of peers. Relaxed tutorials offer an alternative model that preserves opportunities for critical engagement while reducing social and communicative demands. By creating a more flexible environment in which students can contribute in ways that suit their individual preferences and needs, relaxed tutorials can support autistic students' participation in the analytical and dialogic practices that are central to the study of Antiquity.

If we think about three related areas – sensory, social and safety – when designing online environments for learning and teaching, we can make progress towards including and supporting the autistic students in our classes. Importantly, these adjustments do not require diagnosis or disclosure from the student, so they avoid possible areas of social stigma or worry.

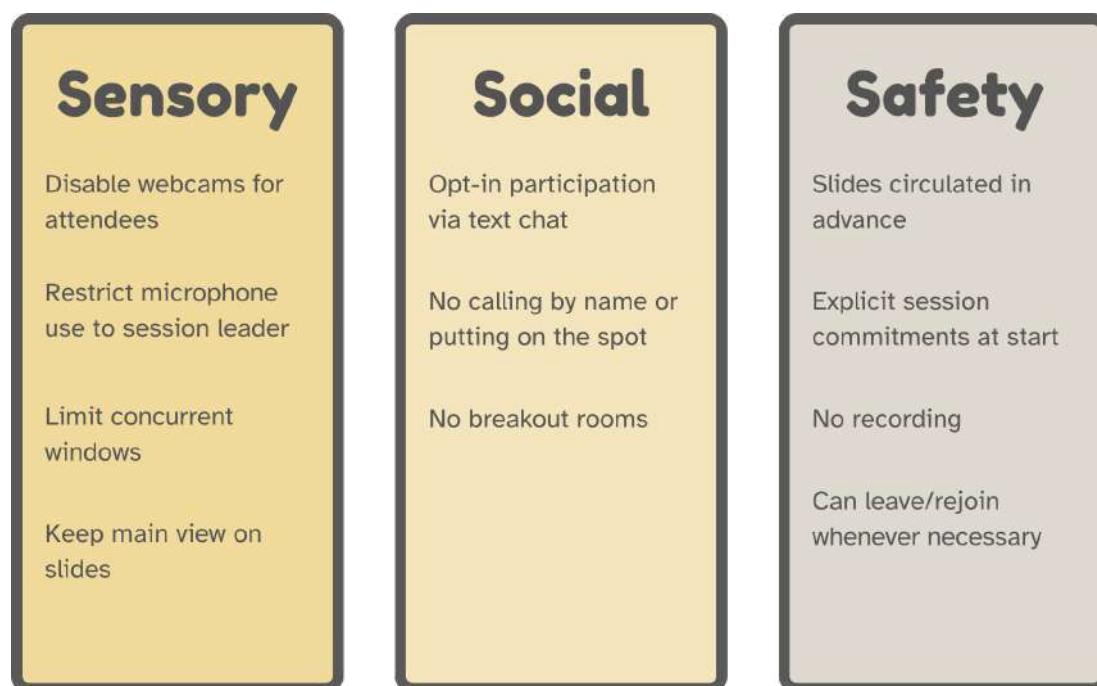


Figure 3. Schematic of sensory, social and safety adjustments.

It is also worth considering the implications of drawing on university staff's lived experience of neurodiversity. There have already been calls for such an approach in schools, on the basis that 'paying greater attention to autistic and other neurodivergent school staff will create a necessary shift in our perceptions of educational inclusion' (Wood, 2022, p. 25). Within universities, including both in-person and online learning environments, autistic staff can bring about a similar shift in the perception of educational inclusion, when institutions listen to – and act on – their insights.

8. CONCLUSION

Relaxed tutorials offer a low-cost and feasible addition to online provision. By centring affective, sensory and social design, we reduced anxiety-related barriers for autistic and otherwise neurodivergent students while observing broader benefits across the cohort. Because adjustments in a relaxed session are minimal (no recording, no webcams/mics, no breakout rooms, no calling on individuals, and advance clarity), implementation and scaling are straightforward, requiring no special expertise, equipment or training.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

This work was supported by FASSTEST at The Open University. Ethical approval was obtained in advance in accordance with institutional procedures (reference HREC/4330/Fear). The author reports no competing interests.

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