

# The Neurodiverse Teaching the Neurodiverse: Case Studies and Reflections of a Dyspraxic Ancient History Lecturer

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**ABSTRACT** — “How do you do anything at all?” my brilliant, but by now very confused, MA supervisor asked me when I explained to them the effects that my neurodiversity had on my day-to-day life and ability to study. It was then, 18 months or so after my diagnosis, that I realised that neurodiversity and higher-level academia were not comfortable bedfellows. This became even more apparent during my doctorate when an appointment with a disability advisor resulted in me being told that they could do very little to help as there were not enough people like me to carry out research studies on, when I was told to hide my neurodiversity from future employers if I wanted to become an academic, and when I learned that there was no policy in place for reasonable adjustments for PhD Vivas. When I started teaching after completing my doctorate, by now a decade after my diagnosis, the increase in recognition and diagnosis of neurodiversity had become evident, yet the understanding of these students’ needs amongst the academic community was lagging behind this progress. This paper aims to provide some insights into three different areas. Firstly, I will discuss my experience as a neurodivergent student and academic. Secondly, I will show how my own neurodiversity has influenced my teaching practices and my approaches to student support, with a particular focus on creating empathetic and accessible learning environments. Finally, I hope to show how working with neurodiverse students within both classroom and virtual learning settings can and should inform overall teaching practice, improve students’ confidence in their own abilities, and ensure that students succeed in their studies and gain the qualifications that they deserve.

**KEYWORDS** — Dyspraxia, Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome, accessible pedagogy, empathy, student support

## INTRODUCTION

My name is Dr Julia Tomas, and I am a neurodiverse academic. My neurodiversity is something that, ten years ago, I was told to hide from prospective employers if I wanted an academic job. I invite you to take a moment to consider my opening statement.

An estimated one in seven people in the UK are neurodiverse (Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, 2025), and the growing awareness of, and support for, neurodiverse children in schools has led to more neurodiverse students entering higher education. Yet whilst provision in universities for

neurodiverse students has improved immensely in the 17 years since my own diagnoses, the understanding of these students' needs amongst the academic community has not always caught up with this progress. No longer (I hope) when faced with a neurodiverse student do academics ask, "How do you do anything at all?" as my brilliant, but very confused MA supervisor did when I plucked up the courage to explain to them the effects that neurodiversity had on my day-to-day life and studies and the support I needed. Yet, saying that, despite no longer being a rarity, I have never received compulsory training on supporting neurodiverse students where I have subsequently worked. This paper has three aims. The first is to present a personal account of what it is like to be a neurodiverse student, academic, and human being. The second is to show how my own neurodiversity has influenced my commitment to accessible teaching practices and my empathetic approach to student support. Finally, it will demonstrate how working with neurodiverse students within both classrooms and Virtual Learning Environments can and should inform overall teaching practice, improve students' confidence in their own abilities, and ensure that students succeed in their studies and gain the qualifications that they deserve. All case studies and testimonies are used with permission.

I was diagnosed with Dyspraxia, or Developmental Coordination Disorder, just before my 20th birthday, and with Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome three months later. Dyspraxia is a complex neurological disorder which affects muscle co-ordination and perception (Dyspraxia UK, n.d.). It affects not only my movement and co-ordination, but also my ability to process information, regulate my emotions, avoid becoming overwhelmed, and plan, organise, and follow instructions or directions. Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome, sometimes known as Irlen Syndrome after the psychologist Helen Irlen, who first identified it (The Irlen Institute, n.d.), and more recently as Visual Stress (Dyslexia UK, 2025), is a term used to describe visual perceptual difficulties that may affect reading and visual comfort. Symptoms vary, but my ability to concentrate, especially in unfavourable lighting, my ability to process visual contrasts such as black letters on a white background, and my speed and depth perception are all affected, as illustrated in Figure 1. These two conditions affect most aspects of my life and can be managed, but not cured.



extra-curricular conversations for which I remain grateful today. It was not until my MA year that I had the confidence to disclose the extent to which I needed support and my needs were taken seriously.

Later, having moved to Durham to start my doctorate, I realised that the support for neurodiverse students decreased as the level of the qualification increased. A disability advisor there told me that they could do little to help as their provisions were mostly tailored towards taught undergraduates, and there were not enough people like me to conduct research studies on to develop sufficient and effective support strategies. Furthermore, I learned only weeks before I was due to submit that there was no policy for reasonable adjustments for PhD Vivas and I had to arrange these with my examiners myself. More recently, requesting employers to purchase assistive software, and explaining to editors that I need my reviewers to take my neurodiversity into account when critiquing work for publication, have become familiar occurrences.

The remainder of this paper focuses on two main themes, empathy and access, which have not only shaped and defined my own experience as a neurodiverse student but also guided my own approach to teaching and student support as a neurodiverse academic. It aims to show how a little empathy can make all the difference to a neurodiverse student, and how teaching and learning practices can be used to not only improve access for neurodiverse students but also to benefit neurotypical students. It presents two case studies which particularly show how my experiences of being neurodiverse were used to create a safe and empathetic space for neurodiverse students to gain support, and to ensure that they learned in ways which are accessible to them whilst encouraging neurotypical students to think outside the box and consider new approaches to their learning.

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### **CASE STUDY 1 - STUDENT E**

Student E was a first-year Ancient History student at Durham who was in one of my seminar groups. I taught this class four times in the academic year, and unusually for the first seminar of their first year, the majority were chatty and highly engaged with the material and the discussions. Student E was not: they sat at the back of the class, looking terrified, in silence, for the entire hour. Student E was the only student absent from the second seminar, so I emailed them after the class, and they said that they were unwell.

It was when I emailed them after they had also missed the third class that Student E disclosed that they had been absent because they were autistic and the difficulties they had been facing since starting university had led them to also be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. They said that the panic attacks they experienced were often severe enough that they were unable to leave the house. The reason that they gave for not attending the class, despite being interested in the course and wanting to engage, was the fact that the third seminar was a class

debate, and that speaking in public or to people they did not know for fear of not being able to say the right thing was something that triggered their anxiety. Whilst anxiety disorders are considered a disability under the Equality Act (2010), they are not usually considered forms of neurodivergence. However, recent research has shown that many neurodivergent people are affected by anxiety disorders and other mental health conditions alongside their neurodiversity (van der Meer et al., 2018; National Autistic Society, 2021; Kroll et al., 2025). When such comorbidities exist, the need from educators for empathy and measures to ensure accessibility and facilitate participation is only increased.

In the final seminar of the academic year, the students had to independently research then give a presentation on a Greek pot. Knowing how difficult this would be for Student E to participate in, I responded to them, asking whether they would like to meet for a conversation about how I could support them, which we arranged for later that week. When we met, Student E was visibly nervous, struggled to articulate what they were thinking under the pressure of a one-to-one situation and became overwhelmed and upset. It was at this point that I disclosed to Student E my own diagnoses and how I had overcome my own crippling fear of public speaking. Students who I disclose my diagnoses to often become more trusting, because they know that I can empathise with them and have had similar experiences, and this was the case with Student E. You, of course, do not have to be neurodiverse to be able to empathise with those who are, but showing an openness and a willingness to learn without judgement is the best thing you can do to support your neurodiverse students and colleagues. In my experience, neurodivergent people would rather be asked to explain more about ourselves than be ignored, or have assumptions made about us, so do not be afraid to ask what you can do to help.

At our initial meeting, Student E and I agreed that we would meet again the week before the final seminar so that they could practise delivering their presentation and obtain feedback. At this meeting they were still extremely nervous, but delivered the presentation and, having received guidance on how to improve and the sort of questions that their peers and I might ask them in the class, went away to make independent refinements. During the Greek pottery seminar, I ensured that Student E was not chosen first to present, nor left so long that their nervousness became overwhelming. After watching some of their peers present and answer questions, I called upon Student E to deliver their work, which they did clearly, fluently, and confidently, with no hint of any of the crippling nerves they had demonstrated on the two occasions we had met previously.

After the class, I emailed Student E to congratulate them on their presentation, though I received no reply. However, I would like to share a quote from Student E which was emailed to the department's Director of Undergraduate Studies eight months later, and then shared with me:

“She helped me prepare myself for how to speak in class but also reassured me that I wasn’t alone in how I was feeling; supporting me without judgement during what was a very lonely period. I was at a point in the year when I potentially would have left Durham, but after meeting with Julia, I attended the seminar and left feeling a little more confident in my ability to study the degree and carry on at Durham.”

I recently learned that Student E achieved a 2:1 and is now working for an educational charity providing long-term support to disadvantaged young people to access higher education. I spent less than an hour working one-to-one with Student E, but that hour of kindness and empathy, I truly believe, was enough for Student E to feel listened to, to gain confidence in their own abilities, and be able to go on and achieve the academic qualification that they were capable of and deserved.

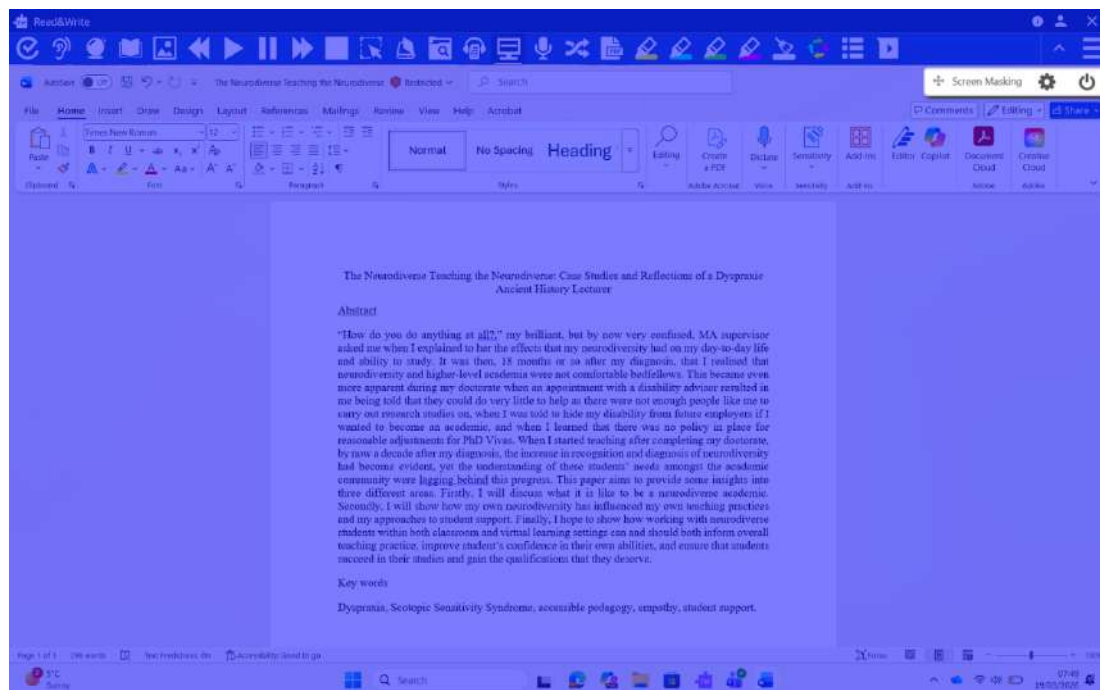
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## **CASE STUDY 2 - CLASS R**

Class R was a first-year Introduction to Ancient History class at Roehampton University. In Class R, there were 20 students, of whom 7 had a disclosed disability. These included a range of neurodivergent conditions, including dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, and autism. During a three-hour teaching slot both a lecture and a seminar were delivered. Before entering the classroom, I was given a list of reasonable adjustments for these students: rest breaks; handouts and lecture slides made available on the Virtual Learning Environment in advance; recording of lectures; a guaranteed two-week extension on all assignments. Whilst this information on the one hand was welcomed, and evidence of the huge strides that higher education had made in supporting neurodiverse students since I was an undergraduate, on the other hand it presented an immense challenge. How should I curate an ideal teaching environment where every student feels supported and confident, and thus able to challenge themselves to obtain the best outcome possible in the module, whilst working within my own capabilities as a neurodiverse academic? The following discussion elaborates on the techniques that were used within the Virtual Learning Environment and the classroom which proved particularly effective for this class and some reflections on why such techniques may be beneficial for both neurodiverse and neurotypical students.

Virtual Learning Environments are invaluable for all students, but particularly for neurodiverse students. You can tell from looking at my undergraduate transcript which modules used a Virtual Learning Environment effectively. Having all the resources available after the classes ensured I could catch up with my notes where I missed information, having struggled to listen and write at the same time, or fast enough to keep up, or when I had momentarily lost concentration. Several students in Class R required the learning materials in advance to prepare themselves and know what was coming up, so I ensured that they were made available at least a fortnight before each class. I ensured that key reading materials were available as E-books through the library, or I uploaded a copy to the Virtual Learning Environment. While I find it easier to read a “real” book and use a

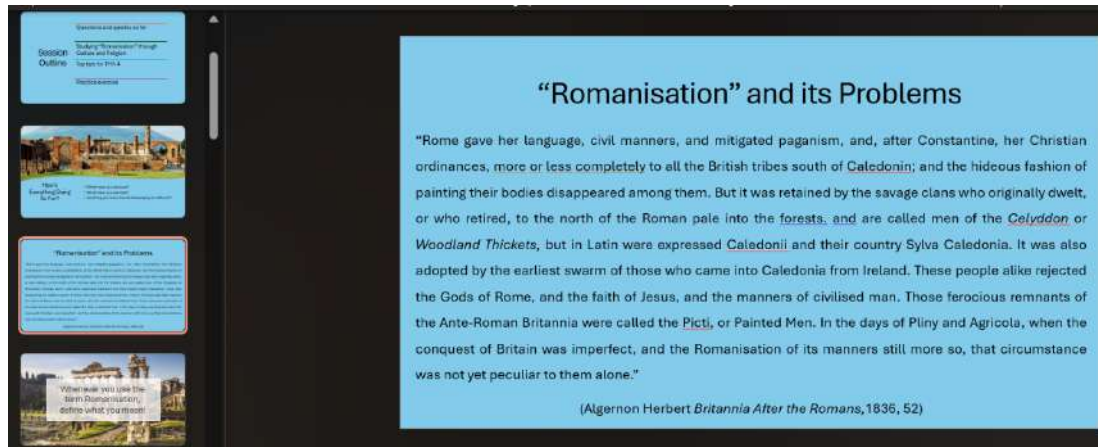
coloured overlay, many neurodiverse students use assistive technology to help them read and process text. Read&Write, for example, is an excellent resource which allows users to tint their screens to a colour they find more comfortable, turn a printed text into an audiobook, and highlight and make notes on the text as they go along (Read&Write Software: © Everway UK). I also made essential information, such as deadlines or assessment guidelines, available in multiple formats, such as in print and in a short video on the Virtual Learning Environment, in addition to verbally in class, to cater for those who may have needed extra time to, or have different ways of, processing information.



**Figure 2.** A screenshot of Read&Write's Screen Masking function, set at the ideal colour and opacity for the author to prevent eyestrain, fatigue, and visual distortions caused by Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome (Image: Author's own, March 2026. Software: © Everway UK).

Within the classroom I was particularly able to teach in a way that accommodated the needs of neurodivergent students, benefitted and challenged the neurotypical students, and accommodated my own neurodiversity. Before I began delivering the first lecture, I disclosed my neurodiversity. It always works as an icebreaker and allows me to laugh at myself when I trip over my own feet or get my words tangled whilst lecturing. I then adjusted the lighting so it was suitable for everyone, me included, as incorrect lighting can affect concentration in some neurodivergent people. Similarly, I ensured that my PowerPoint slides did not feature white backgrounds, as contrasts can be difficult to process for some who are neurodiverse. I once attended a research presentation where the speaker's presentation featured black letters on an all-white background and halfway through, I had to close my eyes and breathe deeply to stop myself from vomiting, as focusing on such a high contrast for so long had given me visual distortions and

nausea akin to those experienced by migraine sufferers. This simple adaptation can make your teaching materials instantaneously more accessible to neurodiverse learners, without compromising on the experience of neurotypical learners.



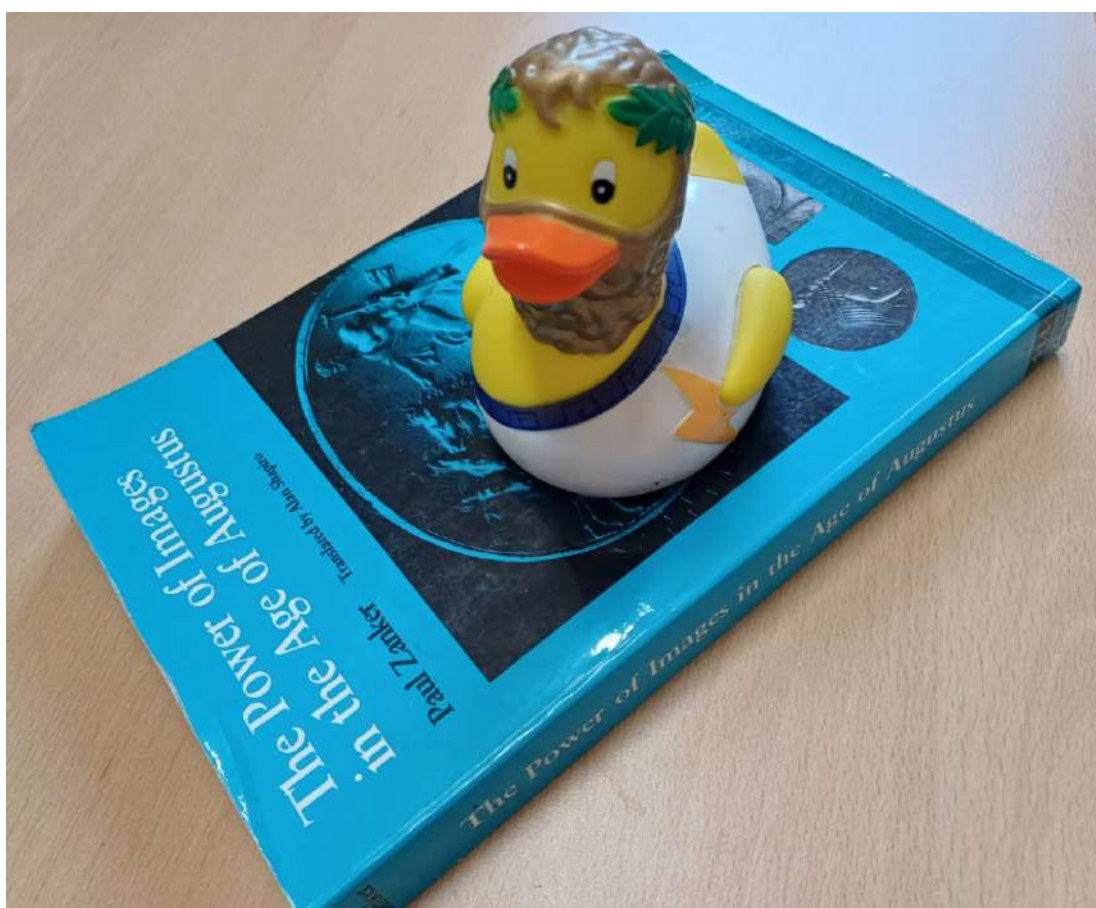
**Figure 3.** Screenshot of a teaching presentation for my current third year module *The Roman Empire*. The background colour is a compromise between my needs and those of a neurotypical viewer (Author's own, March 2026).

Breaks during classes or exams are a common reasonable adjustment for neurodiverse students, so I allowed time for breaks between high-attention sessions such as between the lecture and the seminar, and between activities within these sessions. For example, in one class, I gave a 1-hour 15-minute lecture, followed by a 30-minute break, followed by a 45-minute debate activity, followed by a 10-minute break, followed by a summary section to finish the class. This structure not only fulfilled the needs of the students who required rest breaks as part of their reasonable adjustments, but it also allowed me to keep the three-hour teaching slot focused and recharge my own energy levels between tasks so that I could deliver them to the best of my ability. Furthermore, it was clear that the whole group benefitted from structured breaks as even the most engaged neurotypical students' attention may wane by the end of a lecture.

The final technique was incorporating kinaesthetic learning activities into teaching sessions. Neurodivergent people may benefit from being taught in a range of ways and I, unusually for a Dyspraxic, learn far better from kinaesthetic methods of teaching, which use movement and practical tasks. For context, my MA Field Trip report scored about 15 marks higher than I had averaged for the rest of the degree. In one session I encouraged the students to write their first responses to, and any questions about, Lysias's *On the Murder of Eratosthenes* on the whiteboard. This approach to a difficult, challenging text had several benefits. It facilitated peer-to-peer learning, as everyone saw how, and on what level, the rest of the group interpreted and understood the text, and they could both ask and answer questions posed by me and the other students. It allowed those who became restless in class to move about, and enabled the students, neurodiverse or

neurotypical, who found it difficult or were reluctant to verbalise their ideas in the context of a seminar discussion the time and space to be able to gather their thoughts and articulate them. During this activity, the whole class wrote at least one statement or question on the board, whereas previous seminar discussions had been driven by the same 4-5 students. A simple change of the seminar's structure, needing only a whiteboard and some pens to facilitate, made the teaching session accessible to the whole group, and by working on the text together, the students' understanding of both the text, and how to analyse textual sources more broadly, increased.

A second kinaesthetic teaching activity I used with Class R was in a seminar on analysing material sources. Unable to bring real artefacts to the seminar to facilitate this activity, I used my favourite teaching aid, my rubber duck from the British Museum, Jupiter Optimus Quaximus, seen in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Jupiter Optimus Quaximus preparing for a Roman material culture seminar (Author's own, March 2024).

Presenting the students with a relatively familiar object, allowing them to handle it, and asking them to measure its dimensions, describe its form, what it was made of, what the decoration on it might mean, before asking them to suggest what it might tell a 31st-century archaeologist about life in 21st-century London if

it was found during an excavation of my office, enabled them to develop the skills needed to examine material culture in an engaging and practical way. They were then shown images of Roman material sources and asked to apply the same skills they had used to examine Jupiter Optimus Quaximus to them. It was immediately apparent from their responses that this kinaesthetic activity had been beneficial because we had discussed material sources in previous seminars and they had struggled to engage with them, having never had the opportunity to work with them previously. By the end of the class, they were confidently analysing sources including statues, coins, and public monuments. Furthermore, several students who attended that seminar chose to work with material sources over texts in their end-of-term assessment portfolios.

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## CONCLUSION

The provision of support for neurodiverse students in higher education has improved significantly since my own diagnoses. However, there is much work still to do, and in my opinion, working with and for neurodiverse students and colleagues with empathy and with improving accessibility in mind is the most effective way forward. I do not mind admitting that my biggest barrier as a student and now academic in higher education is worrying that people will not understand or empathise with me when I ask for help, but I have been able to achieve what I have thanks to understanding, empathic lecturers and colleagues. Highest amongst those ranks is my aforementioned MA supervisor, who after setting their confusion and inexperience of neurodiversity aside, worked to ensure I received the support I needed from the whole department, and even now rarely allows an email thread to pass by without telling me how proud they are of me for what I have achieved since. Students like me and Student E are testimonies to what neurodiverse students can achieve with the right amount of empathy and support. My experience of working with and designing learning materials for Class R showed that whilst improving access for neurodiverse students does involve some extra work and imagination, it does not have to be particularly ground-breaking or rely on innovative technology or complex training courses. Furthermore, it is clear from my experience that teaching methods which can improve access for neurodiverse students also benefit neurotypical students, so it is possible to create an accessible set of learning activities which neither compromises the learning of neurotypical students nor singles out neurodiverse students and treats them differently.

I would like to conclude by returning to the question I was asked all those years ago: “How do you do anything at all?” The answer I gave that day was a nervous laugh and something along the lines of “I am not really sure but I manage because I really want to do it, and by working really hard.” However, since that day I have realised that everything I have achieved has resulted from far more than my own stubborn determination. The gentle empathy of a hand on my shoulder after I had

trembled through a presentation showed me that I belonged right where I was and this security later allowed me to guide Student E through their own fears and feelings of inadequacy. Software which turns a computer screen dark blue allows me to be an academic without the fear of not being able to read everything I need to or becoming physically unwell in front of my peers. The understanding and trust of a Head of Faculty and the greater commitment in higher education to support neurodiverse staff and students allowed me to curate an accessible curriculum and experience for everyone in Class R's lecture room on those Tuesday afternoons. And perhaps, most importantly of all, I have achieved what I have today because the world is becoming a place where people will listen to—and read, as you have just done—the stories of neurodiverse people and see not a problem to solve, but a person capable of achieving anything that they want to.

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