



Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning (NESTL) Toolkit

----- Case Study 5



Case Study 5: Neurodivergence and Class | Dr Cora Beth Fraser

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Neurodivergence is an intersectional issue, and one of its intersections is with social class. A lot of the barriers encountered by neurodivergent people in education or employment are similar to those faced by working-class students or employees; so when a neurodivergent person also comes from a working-class background, those problems are compounded.

One particular problem is disclosure. Working-class students who come to university sometimes encounter hostility, and they can feel that they have to prove both that they 'fit' and that they are capable of high achievement. In that situation it does not always feel safe to disclose a neurodivergence, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed. It certainly doesn't feel safe to ask for extra help or even reasonable adjustments.

As a teacher of Classics - and as a working-class autistic person myself - I focus on one key principle in my teaching practice: **inclusion by design**. If a student needs help but does not feel able to ask for it, or even to disclose that they might require an adjustment, the best approach is to design a learning environment which provides that help to everyone as standard (or as an acceptable option), without anybody having to request it. In developing my own approach to inclusion by design, I've concentrated on two main areas: reducing anxiety, and promoting a sense of belonging.

Reducing Anxiety

Anxiety is a significant barrier to neurodivergent learning for students from all backgrounds, but particularly for working-class students. So anything that we can do, as teachers, to reduce student anxiety will benefit multiply marginalised groups. Adjustments that I have made include:

Sensory adjustments to the teaching environment to make it a calm space for everyone. This is important even online, which is why I developed 'relaxed tutorials' at The Open University.

Advance notice of activities, particularly group work, with clear expectations set out early enough to leave time for preparation, and with an alternative activity offered for anyone who won't be able (or willing) to take part.

Careful **explanation of regulations** and official procedures - particularly those which require interaction with other departments or offices.

No expectation that every student should speak in front of the group.

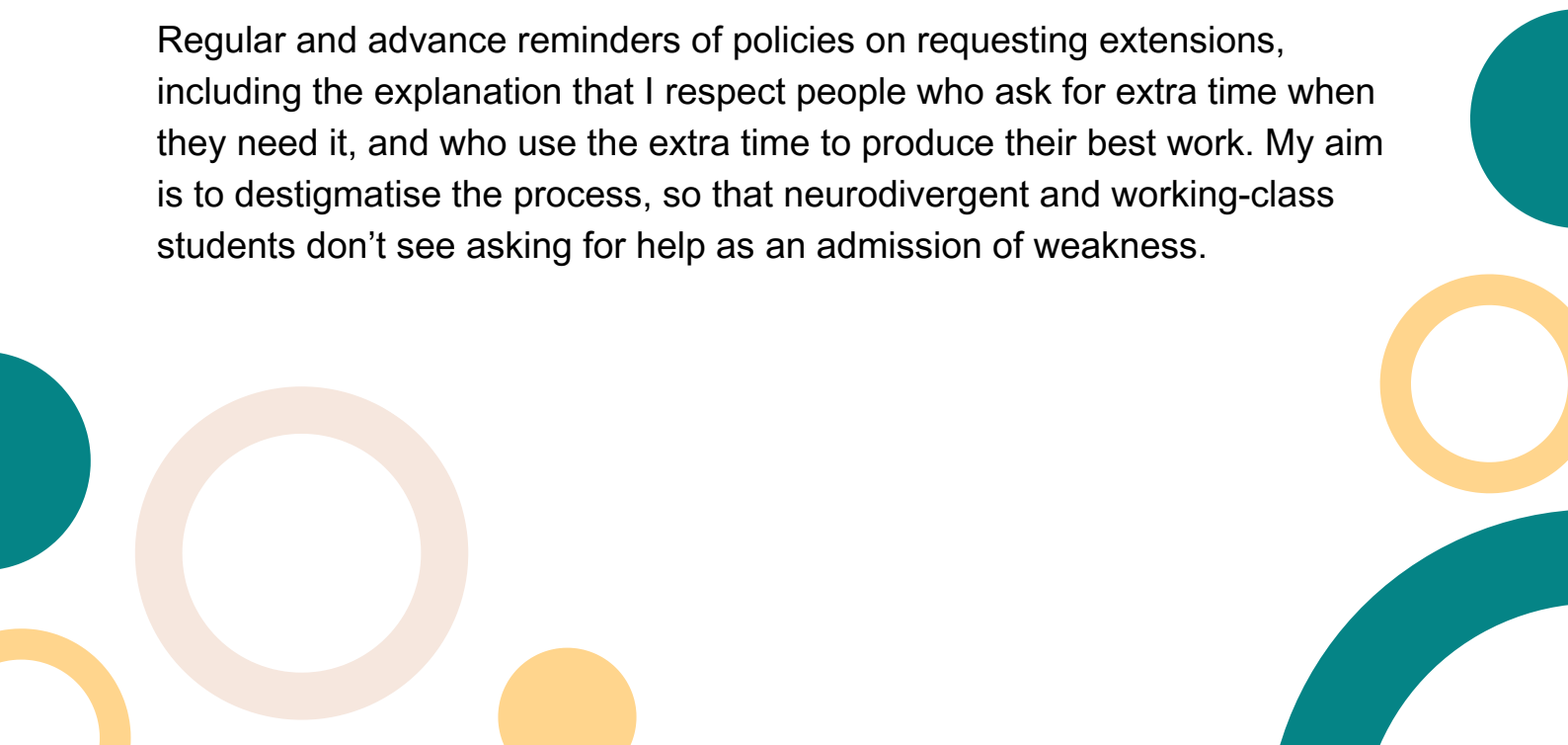
They may speak if they want to, and their contributions are welcomed and appreciated; but my teaching is never designed around the assumption that they will.

Discussion of all assignment questions, rephrasing them in several ways.

The wording of questions can be a particular area of concern for autistic and dyslexic students, as well as working-class students who may be encountering a specific assignment type for the first time.

Clear **explanation of the standard pronunciation** of key terms and names, using resources like Emily Wilson's Pronunciation Guide, for students who may only ever have seen them written down. This is a disproportionate source of anxiety for many working-class students, neurotypical as well as neurodivergent, because while it isn't important on an academic level, it is often perceived as a class marker and can contribute to social exclusion.

Regular and advance reminders of policies on requesting extensions, including the explanation that I respect people who ask for extra time when they need it, and who use the extra time to produce their best work. My aim is to destigmatise the process, so that neurodivergent and working-class students don't see asking for help as an admission of weakness.



Promoting a sense of belonging

Belonging is an acute problem in Classics, because class inequality is a significant factor in access to Classics and retention of students and staff; and it is an even more acute problem for neurodivergent students who might struggle to find neurodivergent role models among successful classicists. These are a few of the approaches I have implemented to tackle the problem of belonging:

Unpicking the 'hidden curriculum', following the [QAA Guide for Educators](#), because understanding the terminology and cultural assumptions of the discipline is a particular area of difficulty for both autistic and working class students.

Making time to showcase **the importance of different perspectives** in research, including feminist approaches, queer theory and disability studies, and to emphasise the value of lived experience.

Talking explicitly about money; particularly student bursaries, hardship funds, small grants funds and other sources of help for buying books or attending events. Money is a major concern for working class students; but it can also be a worry to neurodivergent students (especially autistic students) from other social classes, because autistic people of all backgrounds tend to be underemployed and have a higher cost of living.

Running weekly, optional **online drop-ins**, more like a casual group-chat than a formal lesson, to build a sense of belonging, and to ensure that students who are worried about something can ask questions in an informal setting. This works particularly well for ADHD students, who tend to appreciate short, regular contact opportunities.

Discussing appropriate and inclusive disability terminology to be used in student writing and in class, referring to the invaluable [Guide by Alexandra Morris and Debby Sneed](#). Discipline-specific terminology guides are helpful in challenging inappropriate or outdated wording in class discussion on the basis of academic rigour rather than political correctness or tone policing.

Engaging with the initiatives of **groups which represent class** within the subject area (in Classics, this includes the Working Classicists group and the Network for Working-Class Classicists), with a focus on their awareness of intersectionality (e.g. in the recent Working Classicists book, 49% of the 117 contributors identified as neurodivergent).

The EDI Elephant

In my subject area - and in many others too - socio-economic status is the elephant in the room. It is underestimated as a problem, and rarely spoken of; but its presence is deeply felt among groups who face a compounding disadvantage from disability or non-disabling neurodivergence. Importantly, we should not rely on EDI initiatives and policies to tackle the issue for us; because so far they have not. In 2024 the Network for Working-Class Classicists released their hard-hitting 'Class in Classics Report', based on more than a thousand survey responses. Their conclusion specifically addressed what they present as the comprehensive failure of EDI initiatives to help the people who most need them:

'...the problem of class intersects with other axes of exclusion such as gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and disability. These issues intersect and often overlap with class to such an extent that it is (or should be) impossible to talk of equality, diversity and inclusion without talking about class. EDI policies that ignore class are thus doomed to fail. And yet EDI policies have consistently neglected class. In doing so, they have not only let down working-class classicists; they have let down all but the privileged few among the very groups they aim to help.' (Canevaro et al 2024 p.74)

Ultimately, the responsibility rests with each of us, as individuals, to create an environment where everybody feels welcome, and where differences are understood, accepted and celebrated.

For more detailed guidance,
examples, activities, and
case studies, see the full
[NESTL toolkit.](#)

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