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Research Article

The Relaxed Tutorial Project: distance learning and anxiety in Classical Studies

Cora Beth Fraser, Naoko Yamagata and Ardle Mac Mahon

Department of Classical Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Abstract

'Relaxed' events are now common across the public Arts and Heritage sectors. Although designed with the needs of autistic children and their families in mind, they suit people with a range of access needs. Our project at The Open University asked: what would a 'relaxed tutorial' look like, and who might benefit from it? Across two years (2021–2023), tutors in the Department of Classical Studies at The Open University trialled a set of autism-friendly accessibility adjustments to live online tutorials for distance learners on a Roman History module. We found that relaxed tutorials were welcomed by students with anxiety disorders, caring responsibilities, chronic conditions and low confidence, as well as by autistic students. Since the project was concluded in 2023, relaxed tutorials have been rolled out across further Classical Studies modules at The Open University. Their principles and structure offer a new way of looking at accessibility adjustments which could be adapted to other teaching contexts and levels.

Keywords: autism, anxiety, Classics, distance learning, accessibility

Introduction

Over recent years we have seen the development of many initiatives in Classics which are centred around speaking. From oracy (Tailor, 2016) and oral storytelling (Walker, 2018) to communicative approaches (Miller, 2018) and Living Latin (Lloyd, 2016), the emphasis is on verbal participation and confidence-building.

These initiatives are exciting, and the benefits they bring to Classics suggest that they may be here to stay (Avitus, 2018). However, building confidence in speaking is not the only way to address anxiety in students (Macfarlane, 2017). In a recent project focusing on online teaching at The Open University, staff in the Department of Classical Studies explored the benefits of reducing participation for neurodivergent (particularly autistic) students and students suffering from debilitating anxiety. We called it the Relaxed Tutorial Project.

Designing the Relaxed Tutorial Project

The objective of the Relaxed Tutorial Project was to see what would happen if common sources of social anxiety were removed from the online teaching environment. What would a 'relaxed' online learning experience look like – and how might students benefit from it?

'Relaxed' events are now common across the public Arts and Heritage sectors. Although designed with the needs of autistic children and their families in mind, they suit people with a range of access needs. The relaxed approach was first trialled in 2012–2013 through the 'Relaxed Performance Project', which was a collaboration between the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts, the Theatre Managers Association and the Society of London Theatres. This project offered a set of general accessibility principles which could be applied in different ways depending on the context, and these quickly became adopted by theatres and cinemas around the UK to provide an autism-friendly option.

Relaxed events are now accepted as a standard accessibility adjustment in many environments, including museums and other heritage attractions. The original relaxed theatre performances were designed 'to make as few changes to the actual show as possible but rather to make adjustments to the organisation of the front of house in order to reduce anxiety and stress' (Kempe, 2015, 60). That focus on simple front-of-house adjustments is applied in other settings too: for instance, supermarket checkout 'relaxed lanes' were designed to allow vulnerable customers to take their time, without affecting the core operation of the business.

The Relaxed Tutorial Project set out to design an accessibility adjustment for Open University distance learning students who might be reluctant, for whatever reason, to attend live online classes (called 'tutorials' at the OU). We started from the same point as the original 'Relaxed Performance Project', by thinking in the first instance about the needs of autistic students with social anxiety (Bellini, 2004; Freeth *et al.*, 2013) and related stress (Zukerman *et al.*, 2021) as well as sensory sensitivities (Beardon, 2021).

Project Team

Our Project Team in the Department of Classical Studies consisted of two Associate Lecturers ('ALs' or 'tutors'), Cora Beth Fraser and

Ardle Mac Mahon; and two Staff Tutors, Trevor Fear and Naoko Yamagata. Between us we had a wide range of experience in EDI work, tuition management and supporting students with complex needs. The Project was supported by funding from FASSTEST, the Faculty Scholarship and Innovation Centre (Fraser, 2023), and received full institutional ethics approval.

What does a Relaxed event look like?

In designing the project, we looked closely at the sorts of adjustments made in other settings which are designated as 'relaxed'.

In Relaxed theatre performances and cinema showings, sensory and social pressures are reduced to accommodate different preferences and sensitivities. Key features include:

- Volume adjustments: in relaxed cinema showings, the volume is turned down slightly, to accommodate sensory needs, while the loud and distracting adverts are removed altogether. Elsewhere, background music is often turned down or off during 'relaxed' hours.
- Moderate lighting: in cinemas and theatres the in-house lights are kept at a low level rather than being fully dark, while in museums and shops the bright lights are often dimmed a little to avoid extremes.
- Limited social activity: during relaxed sessions in museums and galleries, staff allow families to wander without engaging them directly in discussion.
- Casual attendance: the expectation is that people will need to move around or take a break, rather than sitting throughout a performance in the same place without moving.
- Safe, sympathetic environment: the reduction of pressure related to social rules results in a more accepting environment, in which families are not judged for behaviour which might otherwise attract disapproval (e.g. shouting out or changing seats).

What might a Relaxed tutorial look like?

Our next step was to consider how these principles could be applied within the setting of an online Open University tutorial. Most 'relaxed' events take place in physical environments, so extending the idea to an online environment required much discussion. The key features we identified were:

- Reduced sensory input: for an online tutorial, this meant cutting down on multiple distracting windows and modes of communication, and keeping the set-up as simple and consistent as possible.
- Reduced social expectations: for the purposes of this project, this meant the removal of any expectation that the students would speak or type, while also offering them the facility to do so if they wished.
- Casual attendance: our assumption was that students might need to move around and drop in and out of the session, which would have implications for the structure and format of the session.
- Safe, sympathetic environment: we needed to consider how to adjust our assumptions of correct behaviour in a tutorial, so that students would not feel judged for non-participation or for selective attendance.

After considering all of these issues, we drew up the following commitments. We emailed them to all students at the start of the academic year, with a description of the relaxed format.

Commitments

In a Relaxed Tutorial you will:

- *Not be recorded;*
- *Not be expected to use the microphone;*
- *Not be asked to switch on your webcam;*
- *Not be put on the spot, or called upon by name;*
- *Not be put into a break-out room.*

When you participate in the tutorial you can take part in the chat box discussion, or you can simply watch and listen, and you can leave and rejoin whenever you need to. Slides will be sent to you in advance, if you've booked a place, so that you can read through the material.

These commitments were sent to students in advance, before tutorials could be booked, and were also advertised on an introductory slide at the start of each relaxed tutorial session. The module we chose was a Level 3 (third-year equivalent) undergraduate Ancient History module (*A340: The Roman Empire*), which was chosen because it had no complex access requirements or assessment elements. The relaxed tutorial sessions were all optional classes in the distinctive Open University tutorial format (Slater *et al.*, 2015), and ran as one option within a set of tutorials from which students could choose.

Best practice

None of these commitments were new or particularly innovative. All fell within the best-practice guidance already made available to tutors at the Open University, which recommends (among other things) sharing slides in advance, allowing anxious students to opt out of speaking, reassuring students in advance about what to expect, and making webcam use optional.

The novel element of our Relaxed Tutorial Project was in packaging together all of these adjustments as a recognisable format which could be made available to students as an option. The idea behind it was that students could attend any tutorial badged as 'relaxed' and be confident about the format and the types of interaction they would encounter. The 'relaxed' name was crucial to this, connecting as it did to a set of adjustments which might already be familiar to students from different contexts.

Findings of the Project

The project consisted of a set of six relaxed online tutorials in Phase 1, run by one tutor, and 12 tutorials in Phase 2, split between two tutors. At the end of each phase of the project, surveys were sent to all eligible students using *Microsoft Forms*. Survey responses were compiled and analysed by the Project Team, alongside attendance figures, tutor accounts and feedback from observers.

In analysing the data, we were looking particularly at the level of student interest in relaxed tutorials. Did the students find the relaxed approach helpful, and if so, why? Would they like to see more relaxed tutorials on offer?

Student interest

We gauged the level of student interest in relaxed tutorials by several things, including attendance figures, survey responses, and chat box participation rates.

In the first year of the Project, we were surprised by the attendance figures. We would normally expect to see around 10–12

students at a tutorial on this particular module; but at the first relaxed session a startling 57 students (from a cohort of 298 students) showed up. As the module continued, numbers dropped off slightly, but remained well above 30.

In the second year of the Project, with two tutors offering relaxed tutorials to a similar sized cohort of students (336) on the same module, we expected attendance to halve, since interested students would have a choice of two relaxed tutorials for each Learning Event.

This did not happen. Numbers for each relaxed session were comparable to attendance in the first phase, suggesting that while provision of relaxed tutorial sessions had doubled in Phase 2, student interest had increased too. 62 students attended the first session, compared to 57 in the first session of Phase 1. Numbers remained high (between 36 and 78 for each session) for both tutors throughout the module in Phase 2.

Survey responses gave us additional information about student interest in relaxed tutorials. When asked whether they would like to have access to more relaxed tutorials in the future, 90% of students who attended in the first year replied either 'Yes' or 'Maybe' (with some commenting that they only selected 'No' because this was their final degree module), and 80% replied 'Yes' or 'Maybe' in Year 2. Comments also highlighted that what students appreciated most was the option of selecting a relaxed tutorial:

- 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 tutorials and I hope to continue to see the option of both.

Participation rates in the chat box (text chat) gave us another way of measuring student interest and engagement – although we did not set out to measure this! In fact, we initially ruled out any measurements of participation, since the project was specifically designed to reduce expectations of social interaction within tutorials. When we designed the project, we envisaged almost a lecture-style situation with the facility for students to ask questions throughout. However, that was not what we saw. Instead, we saw what appeared to be an increase in chat box interaction between tutors and students – and so we began to take notice.

We did not consistently keep records of chat box interactions, because this was not the main focus of the project. However, when observers were present, we recorded discussion levels in several of the relaxed tutorials, and in those tutorials we counted a participation rate of over 90%, with almost every student using the chat box to make comments, ask questions and give answers.

This was a very surprising figure. The design of the relaxed tutorials was based around the principle that participation was not necessary and students should be able to listen without any pressure to interact. It was interesting to see that the removal of pressure to communicate actually seemed to facilitate communication. A number of students, in their survey comments, wrote positively about the fact that communication was optional:

- Having mental and physical health problems I liked the sound of the structure; the fact that we could come and go as needed, participate or not participate etc.
- The ability to use the chat box allowed interesting discussions to take place without feeling self conscious.

- I think the tutor was very good at keeping engagement without the pressure to participate. Students were still able to participate using the chat box if they wished.
- The tutorials were as they set out to be, very relaxed with the opportunity to participate if a student wanted to. There was no pressure at all and the sessions were always interesting and lively.

Students also pointed out that when the pressure to participate was removed, they felt more able to enjoy themselves:

- The relaxed tutorials enriched my experience by adding a friendly 'human element and relaxed link to others.
- I love that I didn't have to talk and could just use the chat box to communicate.
- Without the stress of active participation, it was simple to attend and participate if you wanted to at any point.
- I loved the relaxed tutorials, they are a fantastic idea.
- I enjoy the style. It actually fosters active participation!

Interestingly, many students used the Comments boxes to note an improvement to the quality of their learning as a result of the relaxed approach, although this was not something we asked about in the survey:

- I was able to concentrate much more without the anxiety of speaking.
- 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.
- You knew there was no expectation to 'perform' during the tutorials so you could simply focus on the content.
- I felt I was able to concentrate more because I could just sit there and focus rather than be worried if I needed to be called on or speak.
- Room to think without being put on the spot.

Finally, we gauged student interest by the enthusiasm of our survey respondents.

- Please keep relaxed tutorials!
- More of them please!
- Please keep them!

It was clear from all of our feedback that relaxed tutorials were very popular with the students who had attended them. However, we also wanted to know more about who those students were and why they found relaxed tutorials suitable for their needs.

Who benefits?

In line with the 'relaxed' principles applied in other settings (theatres, cinemas and museums in particular), our initial target group for the adjustments we made was autistic participants. However, we expected that our adjustments would have wider appeal. So we asked survey respondents to tell us whether the relaxed tutorial format suited any specific needs or preferences that they might have. The answers spanned a wide range of circumstances:

- 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.

- I am just a bit shy and not very confident, to the extent I sometimes feign tech issues so as not to have partake in discussions, so the relaxed tutorials were good from that aspect.
- 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.
- 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.
- I have a daughter with ASD who struggles with anxiety and depression and often needs my input on a daily basis. Because of this I can be too distracted sometimes to participate in regular tutorials which may require my full in-the-moment attention.
- 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.

Responses reflected the diversity of the Open University student body, in which carers, disabled students and students with chronic illness are more highly represented than they are in most other universities. Many respondents drew attention to anxieties around their ability to interact and be fully present throughout a tutorial, anxieties which were shared by students in a range of circumstances, from parents of young children to students working at a full-time job.

The range of benefits experienced by non-autistic students is in line with what is often referred to in Disability Studies as the 'Curb-Cut Effect' (Higbee, 2009; Udo and Fels, 2010). The name refers to the ubiquitous dropped curbs at pavement crossing points, which were originally designed for wheelchair users, but which also came to be very useful to other groups, including people with prams and pushchairs, travellers dragging suitcases, and people riding bikes or skateboards. Another example commonly cited is that of closed captioning or subtitles, which are useful to people in a range of different situations. Relaxed tutorials, similarly, appear to benefit students in many different circumstances and for a variety of reasons.

Suitable for all?

The survey responses indicated that the relaxed tutorial format, while popular with many students for a range of reasons, did not suit everybody. While the sessions were designed with a focus on text-only chat, in line with autistic preferences (Howard and Sedgewick, 2021), students with dyslexia and osteoarthritis, in particular, highlighted the fast pace of the text discussion as a barrier to their involvement.

This is something that was anticipated. It was the reason why the relaxed tutorials were advertised as an additional option and not a replacement for other styles of tutorial – as indeed has been the case for 'relaxed' showings at Arts events ever since the concept was first developed.

Despite evidence of the 'curb-cut effect' in operation and the wide appeal of relaxed tutorials, it is important to bear in mind the limitations, and the fact that (like many neurodiversity adjustments), this is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Relaxed principles could be beneficial in a lot of settings, but only as part of a set of adjustments which take all needs into account.

Summary

Our findings indicate that relaxed online environments have the potential to benefit lots of students, without necessarily reducing participation or class discussion. Furthermore, advertising relaxed environments can attract students who might otherwise avoid live tutorials, making them a useful tool in any push to increase attendance. Most importantly, as an accessibility adjustment they are welcomed by autistic students, students with anxiety, and students living with chronic conditions.

They do, however, need to be offered as an option, not as a replacement for other forms of teaching and interaction. The heavy dependence on text chat means that relaxed tutorials in their current form are not universally accessible, and would be a problem for students using screen readers as well as for dyslexic students and students with some physical disabilities.

Impact

Reed's (2016) list of five different types of impact is useful in assessing the value and reach of the Relaxed Tutorial Project since it concluded in 2023:

a) Instrumental (leading to changes in practice/policy)
b) Conceptual (understanding/awareness raising)
c) Capacity-building (increasing skills of colleagues/others)
d) Attitudinal or cultural (change in attitudes/behaviour)
e) Lead to enduring connectivity (building/establishing partnerships).

The Relaxed Tutorial Project is already seeing 'instrumental' impact, as relaxed tutorial principles become embedded within teaching practices in the Department of Classical Studies at The Open University. In 2024, relaxed tutorials are entering their fourth year at Level 3 on module *A340: The Roman Empire;* and are now entering their second year at Level 2, having been introduced in 2023 on module *A229: Exploring the Classical World*. In addition, they are being rolled out to two further modules, *A350: Greek and Roman Myth: stories and histories*, and the new MA In Classical Studies module. The roll-out of relaxed tutorials seems on track to lead to permanent changes in provision for over 1000 Classical Studies students every year; and the model is being considered by other subject areas within The Open University too.

More than anything else, the Relaxed Tutorial Project aims to make a conceptual impact. Since the conclusion of the project, the team has been giving talks within and outside The Open University, focusing on the 'curb cut effect' and the benefits of autism adjustments to students in many different situations. Our goal is to raise awareness of the fact that when we design for disabilities, we can also make things better for many other people in the process. The Open University has a very diverse student body, and this offers both challenges and opportunities: challenges, because we need to be creative in responding to changes in the needs of students; and opportunities, because we are able to apply our distance learning expertise to create modes of study that serve groups whose needs may have been overlooked by mainstream education in the past.

Capacity-building impact is also part of the Relaxed Tutorial model. This project has been designed and led from the start by Associate Lecturers ('tutors' in a student-facing role), with the needs of their students in mind. The latest stage has involved Associate Lecturers training other Associate Lecturers to apply the principles, with a view to what works best for their own students, incorporating their own style of teaching. Associate Lecturers already have a strong skill-set and great expertise in supporting students, and the relaxed tutorial system taps into that by validating the practices of ALs who already use similar approaches. It also

meets a growing need. The numbers of autistic students are increasing rapidly throughout the HE sector (Cray *et al.*, 2024; Vincent *et al.*, 2022), and at The Open University Associate Lecturers in all subject areas are supporting far more autistic students now than in the past.

Attitudinal or cultural impact may take longer to develop. However, there has been an attitudinal shift recently towards the prioritisation of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion issues within Higher Education, and neurodiversity is becoming part of that agenda. We hope that the Relaxed Tutorial Project can act as a demonstration not only of what can be done to accommodate autistic and neurodivergent students, but also of the cultural and intersectional importance of designing for autism.

'Enduring connectivity' is the final form of impact on Reed's list, and is the final objective of the project team. We are keen to connect with projects tackling similar issues at other universities and in schools. The Open University's student population of adult distance learners gives us unique challenges and opportunities; but student anxiety (whether related to neurodivergence or not) is a sector-wide issue impacting student retention (Van Ameringen *et al.*, 2003), and connectivity will be key to addressing it.

Author biographies

Cora Beth Fraser is an Associate Lecturer and Honorary Associate in Classical Studies at The Open University, and sits on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee of the Council of University Classics Departments. She draws on her personal experience of late-diagnosed autism to develop accessible online environments.

Naoko Yamagata is Professor of Classical Studies at The Open University. She has advocated the importance of Classical education for global citizens since her 1995 article 'Why Classics Today – and Tomorrow?', *Scholia* 12: 34–44.

Ardle Mac Mahon works as an Associate Lecturer in Classical Studies at The Open University. His teaching portfolio includes undergraduate and postgraduate modules in Classics, and he advises on the production of new modules and assessment strategies. He is currently the lead tutor on the Relaxed Tutorial roll-out.

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