

NEURODIVERSITY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

Amy Talbot and Rosie Loftus

Cifa's policy statement on equal opportunities in archaeology states that *'equal opportunities are integral to every aspect of archaeological work. It is essential that all people are treated equally and not disadvantaged by prejudices or bias'*. More recently, alongside the work of the Equality and Diversity group, Cifa has launched a dedicated web page to highlight the many different aspects of equality and diversity in archaeology and to provide access to useful resources.

Spotlight on invisible disabilities

As the Cifa policy statement highlights, all people should be treated equally and that encompasses both visible and invisible disabilities. One example of an invisible disability includes neurodiversity. Estimated to affect 15 per cent of the population, neurodivergent individuals process and interpret information in different ways with attention deficit disorders, autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia identified as specific examples. How can workplaces better support people with alternative thinking styles?

In this article Amy Talbot and Rosie Loftus share their experiences of how dyslexia and dyspraxia have impacted their working lives. Their stories illustrate the importance of encouraging individuals to make employers aware of their conditions, to educate line managers so that they can raise awareness and provide support, and to encourage change to working practices that would be of benefit to all staff.

Amy Talbot

I was diagnosed through the University of Bradford in October 2019. Having a name for my feeling of 'I understand this, why can't I prove I can in a way that everyone else understands' has been incredible.

Despite being a fluent reader, my dyslexia diagnosis came from the assessor realising I cannot sequence concepts, words, letters or numbers, and that I rely on memory for how something should look, feel or sound when writing.

One aspect of receiving a dyslexia diagnosis has been reviewing how to use Microsoft Word. I could never 'see' words in italics, and now I know this is a dyslexic trait I feel much more capable to undertake desk-based work.

On complicated archaeological features it took me a long time to verbally explain what was occurring, even though in my head 'I understood'. This would often lead to



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assumptions that I was incompetent or inexperienced and so I would be treated as such. Points on a compass and directions on section points are still a nightmare! I am very reliant on writing down everything and had to ask when on site for pro-forma sheets to be created so that I knew what information I needed to record. This was because there are differences between units, and often there was no recording manual on site, since it was expected that everyone already knew how to fill out context and drawing sheets. I struggled during my time in fieldwork as I frequently felt stupid and overwhelmed. This had a detrimental effect on my mental health.

Being undiagnosed during my time in fieldwork meant there was no support. During a brief period where I worked with my husband, he was able to create pro-forma sheets for me, or at least give me a list of what information I needed to include, including the terminology and why it was important. Standardised industry pro-forma sheets across all Cifa Registered Organisations, including prompts, drawing conventions and a terminology glossary would be useful! Like Rosie I also have dyspraxic elements as my body cannot sequence how to do basic motor functions, so I struggle with carrying tools and have visual stress.

Rosie Loftus

Unlike Amy I was diagnosed with dyslexia in primary school and when I was a child it felt like a bit of a monster following me round. It meant that I went to special classes in school time, so I missed the more fun classes;

I have very poor hand-eye coordination so I was no good at football or rounders. If there was a muddy puddle, I would fall in it! Good training for my future in archaeology really.

I struggled to learn how to read and write and even as an adult I still struggle with spelling. However, because I must take the long way around to get to the same results as a non-dyslexic person, I have become a fantastic problem solver. I am very patient, and I am very determined.

I found when I got my first job, I struggled with drawing plans and sections. It took a project officer on a site to realise that my brain was not registering the blue squares on Permatrace. He made me a red board; problem solved... almost. On a bad day it still feels like 'Baby Shark' is playing on one side of my brain as someone plays the cymbals on the other. When it is safe, I put on my headphones and listen to an audio book; this switches off the part of my brain that is angry and noisy and allows me to do my job effectively.

One of the biggest issues I deal with on site now is health and safety enforcing goggles. I am not the only staff member on site who has dizzy spells because of visual stress. This has nothing to do with my eyesight and is instead a visual processing issue. It has been suggested that I use a visor instead, which solves the issues but singles me out as having a disability.

Being dyslexic is a fundamental part of who I am. It makes me empathetic, creative and I have an incredible long-term memory. The monster who walked behind me now walks beside me and has very much become my best friend, although we still fall out sometimes.



Rosie Loftus

Useful links

Cifa policy statements: <https://www.archaeologists.net/codes/cifa>

Cifa equality and diversity in archaeology web page: www.archaeologists.net/practices/equality_and_diversity_in_archaeology

British Dyslexia Association: <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexia>

NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dyslexia/living-with/>

Child Mind Institute: <https://childmind.org/article/understanding-dyslexia/>