Spirals Of Inclusive Curriculum Design: Diversity of Leadership, Thinking and Voice

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of an inclusive, employability-informed Level 5 common curriculum within the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Lancaster University. Drawing on Hui's (2023) articulation of the need for spiralling processes of unlearning, redoing, and relearning, we describe how this project sought to reimagine curriculum design as an inclusive and recursive practice. We examine how intentional spaces were created to enable collaboration between academics, professional services staff, and students, challenging traditional hierarchies of expertise and authority. Through reflection on leadership, design processes, and student engagement, we offer insights into the messiness and opportunities with inclusive curriculum development. Our findings suggest that inclusion requires more than just content reform, it demands structural and methodological shifts that centre diverse voices and foster ongoing dialogue.

Introduction

As Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015, p355-6) argue: "Education is not simply a process of forming individuals. It is a process of forming societies, communities and other collectivities". For these authors, this process of formation and change happens through ongoing practice and iterations in the cultural, material, and discursive architectures that support and shape how we perform activities such as staff meetings, student feedback sessions, engagement with professionals and curriculum design (Kemmis et al. 2013, Mahon et al. 2016, Kemmis 2019). As their research highlights, transforming education depends upon shifting many details of regular practice, thereby creating new opportunities for how learning and teaching can be sustainably supported.

We build upon this conceptualisation of educational change amidst ongoing calls to reconsider our practices in the context of equality, diversity and inclusion. Whether in conversations about inclusive curriculum design, institutional EDI charters and monitoring, or the place of EDI within employability agendas, achieving significant change within a complex set of educational practices remains challenging. Many educational institutions remain constrained by what Ndhlovu (2021) identifies as "methodological stasis", the continued dominance of Western knowledges, research practices, and epistemological frameworks. Yet an iterative understanding of decolonial 'undoing and redoing' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 120) resonates with Wilkinson and Kemmis' conceptualisation of changing how we work within educational communities, and underpins the importance of aligning situated changes in practice with aims for broader systemic transformation.

This paper responds to the challenge of transformational educational change through an account of a curriculum design project undertaken within the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, where the authors collaborated on the creation of a Level 5 employability-focused common curriculum.

Our approach was informed by the recognition that inclusion is not simply a matter of adjusting content but of transforming the very practices and structures through which curriculum is conceived, developed, and delivered. It is in this spirit that we conceptualised curriculum design as a spiral: a process of cyclical reflection and experimentation, in which inclusive practices are continually unlearned, reimagined, and redone in collaboration with diverse contributors. This fits alongside Kemmis and Wilkinson's understanding of the continual making and remaking of the practice architectures that support educational practices (Kemmis et al. 2013).

Project Context and Aims

The initiative emerged from a faculty priority to develop a common curriculum where the modules at Level 5 would be designed to enhance students' employability and encourage interdisciplinarity. Whilst there were a range of existing employability modules in specific disciplines, these did not cover all subjects in the Faculty, and many had capped enrolment, which left some students without opportunities for in-curricular employability content. With limited depth of expertise in specific Departments, but an engaged group across the Faculty, developing more sustainable and accessible provision sat well as a collaborative Faculty project. Crucially, the modules were intended for students across the humanities, arts and social sciences, many of whom come from underrepresented backgrounds and are looking forward to non-traditional career pathways.

This project has formed part of the Faculty Discovery Curriculum development as part of the wider Lancaster University Curriculum Transformation Programme. The Discovery Curriculum has sought to embed, at a faculty level, reflective, student-led engagement with globally significant themes. It aims to establish a shared baseline for all our students in relation to the graduate attributes and to encourage more interdisciplinary and inclusive understandings of our students' journeys.

It also shared a broader institutional priority: aligning curriculum development with decolonial and inclusive pedagogies. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model, we built a process that recognised diverse disciplinary contexts, while still embedding shared values of collaboration, access, and reflection.

One could approach these issues of employability, institutional graduate attributes, and inclusivity as separate topics. However, our engagement with Kemmis and Wilkinson's work encouraged us to explore how they can be interconnected in educational change – with our curriculum design project sitting at an intersection of multiple educational practices and practice architectures within our institution.

Approach and Methodology

The project was shaped by several key bodies of work. In addition to drawing upon their wider writings noted above, Wilkinson and Kemmis's (2015) theory of educational leadership framed our understanding of leadership not as a top-down function, but as a distributed process of enabling, supporting, and aligning diverse contributions. Hui's (2023) critique of methodological stasis served as a provocation to challenge structures and consider

curriculum design as an opportunity for practice-based unlearning. Finally, the Higher Education Academy (Morgan & Hughton, 2011) framework for inclusive curriculum design underscored the importance of embedding inclusivity throughout the academic cycle, from learning outcomes to delivery and assessment.

These conceptual resources informed our spiral approach, which involved continuous learning, collective reflection, and openness to disruption. The work of Kemmis, Wilkinson and Hui is grounded in shared ontological and epistemological understandings of practice which, as Hui notes, have resonances with wider discussions of decolonisation and inclusion. Our aim was not to apply these conceptual resources in any particular manner, but to use them instead as a source of critical curiosity. As these and wider practice theoretical approaches foreground the importance of situated enactments and ongoing iterations of practice, they supported an understanding of the HEA framework as a material to be worked with, explored and re-formed in dialogue with varied practitioners and the specific sites of our institution. We anticipated that this would be a messy and uncertain process and embraced that as a necessary feature of inclusive co-creation.

Process and Practice

The first step in our process involved creating a space outside of existing curriculum design structures. Recognising the limitations of existing formal collaborative structures, which prioritised siloed Departmental discussions or a for-information 'reporting' style of cross-faculty conversations, a specific Employability task and finish group was set up to foster clear places for future collaboration. Existing Faculty Employability sub-committee members were invited to join the group, under the leadership of the Associate Dean for Education (Hui) and Faculty Employability Coach (Beauchamp), and we ended up with a group of ten colleagues (4 professional and 6 academic/teaching [including Eseonu]). By having such senior buy-in at the initiation stage, the process was given legitimacy and momentum, creating the conditions for colleagues from across roles and disciplines to work together on equal terms. Rather than defaulting to established templates or frameworks, the authors assessed what forms of content and delivery were needed to meet the goals of the project. This included critically assessing existing modules, learning objectives, and disciplinary norms. We asked: What is most valuable in employability education? What is the purpose of the L5 Common Curriculum? What structures will engage the diverse needs of our students?

We then moved into the intentional creation of the design spaces. These were deliberately established to be non-hierarchical, bringing together individuals from different roles and disciplines: academic colleagues, professional services staff, senior leaders, and researchers.

Participants were encouraged to bring research, evidence, and lived experience to the table. Colleagues were invited to five in-person meetings across a term and provided with a virtual space to collaborate outside of the scheduled meetings. The virtual space was vital for those who were on sabbatical, unable to attend due to other commitments, or temporarily working away from campus.

We deliberately chose not to begin with a blank slate. Instead, we introduced a diverse selection of sample modules from other institutions and disciplines (collated by Beauchamp), alongside existing frameworks for employability (shared by multiple members), to act as provocations and starting points. By exposing the group to a variety of models we normalised diverse experiences from the outset and created a space for critical reflection, comparison, and the emergence of new ideas. Participants were free to think beyond their immediate contexts, to imagine alternative possibilities and create a new curriculum that was both innovative and relevant to our context.

A central principle of our work was the recognition of diverse expertise. Professional services staff were not treated as implementers of academic visions, but as co-creators with specific insights into student engagement, alternative assessment, and employability.

Another cornerstone of the project was our commitment to meaningful student engagement, not only as recipients of the curriculum but as active contributors to its design. Recognising that inclusive curriculum development must centre the voices of those it seeks to include, we used a peer research model to facilitate authentic, student-led input into the process. Rather than relying on traditional staff-led consultations, we recruited, trained, and paid a group of students to act as peer researchers. These students were supported to facilitate focus groups with their peers, gathering insights on students' experiences of employability within the curriculum and their perceptions of what a new employability-focused common curriculum might look like. This approach was grounded in the belief that peer-to-peer dialogue would foster more open and honest reflections than could be achieved in staff-led settings. Students, we recognised, would be more willing to share critical and honest perspectives when speaking to someone who shares their position in the institution and may have similar lived experience.

Reflections and Findings

As the project unfolded, several key themes emerged. First, leadership buy-in proved essential. Without formal endorsement and support, the time-intensive nature of inclusive co-design would have been difficult to sustain.

Second, the structure of the space mattered. By designing environments that intentionally flattened hierarchies and welcomed multiple forms of knowledge, we created conditions for genuine collaboration and interdisciplinary exchange. These spaces were often messy and unpredictable, but this messiness was productive as it allowed us to surface tensions, challenge assumptions, and arrive at more thoughtful curriculum decisions.

Academic staff not only contributed disciplinary knowledge but were keen to create an interdisciplinary curriculum space. While each brought distinctive perspectives rooted in their subject area, it became clear that one of the strengths of the process was the opportunity to move beyond disciplinary silos. The design space became an environment where colleagues engaged in open, reflective conversations and found unexpected points of connection between disciplines often perceived as vastly different. These conversations highlighted shared pedagogical challenges and values, such as how to develop students' critical thinking, how to assess reflective practice meaningfully, or how to scaffold skills for real-world application. This learning was central to the curriculum's development as it enabled the design of modules that were both relevant across subject areas and sensitive to disciplinary contexts.

Third, student engagement transformed the process. Students challenged us to think differently about accessibility, relevance, and assessment in employability education. Their contributions did not merely inform the curriculum; they genuinely shaped its direction.

Finally, flexibility proved critical. Working inclusively required constant adaptation. Timelines shifted, plans were revised, deadlines were missed, and outcomes were reinterpreted. Yet, we must recognise that this flexibility was not a sign of failure or mismanagement, rather, it was a sign of responsiveness, and a commitment to remaining open to what inclusive design needed in context.

In reflecting on the outcomes, we were struck by how varied they were, and the final four modules developed were significantly more enriched than what any one of us could have developed alone. The process not only produced modules that were more inclusive and interdisciplinary, but also surfaced unexpected ideas that challenged our assumptions and

reshaped the direction of the work. The surprise was not only in the content of the outcomes, but in how intuitive the process felt.

Implications for Future Practice

This project offers several implications for those seeking to engage in inclusive curriculum design within higher education. First and foremost, our experience with this project highlights the importance of designing inclusively from the outset, not as a retrospective fix, but as a core principle embedded in the process itself. Inclusion must be reflected in who is involved, how decisions are made, and what forms of knowledge are valued. This demands a structural commitment and institutional endorsements that are essential to make such collaborative work possible.

Second, our work affirms the value of curriculum design as a spiral rather than a linear trajectory. For example, in student focus groups, participants stressed that they wanted the modules to produce tangible outputs that they could use in graduate job applications. This point had come up earlier in task and finish group discussions, and informed initial discussions of how to balance critical and practical content within modules. But its reiteration through student feedback prompted us to rethink assessment design across the set of modules, to further balance academic expectations with employability needs. The inclusive practices we developed did not emerge from following a fixed sequence of steps, but through cycles of dialogue, experimentation, and reflection. This process allowed us to respond to emerging insights and to adapt to the complexity of the task at hand.

Crucially, the strength of our approach lay in its responsiveness and its openness to disruption, not in the specific steps we followed. If institutions are to genuinely commit to inclusion, they must resist the urge to code a single “inclusive design model” and instead embrace the more difficult, ongoing work of unbuilding and rebuilding. What is required is not a blueprint to replicate, but an iterative approach that values continuous critique and redesign.

The challenge is not to scale the process as it was, but to scale the principles that underpinned it: critical curiosity, intentional collaboration, openness to difference, willingness to be unsettled, and commitment to creating something new. Without this, even well-intentioned inclusive practices risk becoming static, institutionalised, and ultimately exclusive in their own ways.

Curriculum design is, of course, only one step in a sequence of practices. Valuable conversations through the curriculum approvals process have identified new opportunities

for iterative spirals of educational practice. Going forward, they will inform the development of shared assessment criteria and discussions about how these modules fit within a journey of student reflection across Levels 4, 5 and 6. Most importantly, we are excited to learn from and with students as they take these modules and work with us to form communities around them.

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