



Collaborating for Inclusive Practice: From Support to Partnership

Dr Faye Tucker, Lancaster Medical School, Lancaster University

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Abstract

This short paper explores how collaboration can enable inclusive and effective learning opportunities. Academic staff, learning developers, and librarians share responsibility for student success. However, they frequently work in parallel rather than in partnership, and opportunities to embed inclusive practice meaningfully within the curriculum are missed. I draw on my experience leading the Special Study Module programme within the MBChB, a curriculum co-created by academic, learning development, library, and learning technologist staff. This moves beyond a model of 'learning' + 'learning support' towards a collaborative and inclusive approach to curriculum design.

Research highlights the limitations of 'bolting on' study skills to teaching and learning. Librarians and learning developers may be viewed as supplementary, and perhaps even only for 'struggling' students. However, there is value in embedding support within the curriculum and collaborating for curriculum design and delivery, rather than siloing librarians, learning developers, and learning technologists off as 'external' service providers. Collaborating to co-create curriculums that include skills development and academic support is consistent with inclusive curriculum design, leads to more effective practice, and enhances the student experience.

I present examples from our co-created practice within the Special Study Modules (SSM) Programme, including: collaboratively designed formative assessments; contextualised skills development and training; and some of the principles that have underpinned our shared approach to student learning. Student feedback and engagement reflect the value of contextualised, embedded support. There are additional benefits for the collaborators including skills sharing, peer-support, and increased confidence and creativity.



Introduction

Advance HE describe inclusive practice as “the intentional development of approaches that support all our students to thrive”, the “foundation for quality teaching in general” and frame it in terms of a “mindset”, rather than an end goal (Advance HE, 2025).

Inclusive practice requires a range of skills and must be a consideration in the design and delivery of learning opportunities at every level. It is too complex to be the responsibility of one role. Academics, learning developers, learning technologists, and librarians should be responsible for inclusive practice. We all care about it, but too often we are siloed and work in parallel, not partnership.

Within the traditional model of ‘learning + learning support’, a service or team provides additional support external to the mainstream learning experience. On this model, students who are struggling or identified as ‘at risk’ are referred, self-refer, or seek out learning support. But does this model equal success?

There are several reasons that the ‘learning + learning support’ model may fail to meet student needs and fall short of effective inclusive practice. First, academic skills only make sense within the content and the process of learning particular to a discipline. A ‘Bolt-on’ approach is therefore limited in its resonance and application (Wingate, 2006). Second, although historically it was thought that students from non-traditional educational backgrounds were those most in need of support, it is in fact the case that *most* students from the traditional A-level route lack the skills needed for independent learning in higher education (Wingate, 2006). Third, there is an engagement paradox: learning support is often accessed by higher achieving students to further improve their performance, rather than the students who need the support most (Wingate, 2006; Durkin and Main, 2002). And finally, students experience barriers to getting support such as stigma, lack of awareness of what support is available, and being unsure if support is ‘for them’ (Hitches et. al. 2024).

Though challenging to deliver, a more effective approach is an “...embedded approach with a long-term developmental perspective” where academic skills development is integral to study programmes, and where academic skills are assessed (Wingate, 2006).

Our team is co-creating a curriculum within the context of medical education. Study skills might be considered “part of a broader process of personal, academic and professional development” (Cottrell, 2001, p46) and this aligns with the General Medical Council’s (GMC) aspirations for doctors to develop the skills and disposition to become lifelong learners (GMC, 2026). Study skills, including understanding research, synthesising information, and



communicating research to a range of audiences, are captured in the GMC Outcomes for Graduates (GMC, 2026), and at an institutional level within Lancaster University Graduate Attributes (Lancaster University, 2026). Overall, the context in which we are working encourages the integration of skills development into curriculum design and therefore opens the door to more inclusive practice.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) frameworks provide conceptual framing for our aspirations as co-creators of an inclusive curriculum.

UDL (CAST, 2026) offers principles for designing an inclusive learning environment. The core goal of UDL is learner agency, which is fostered through optimised autonomy, value, and support. Learner goals should be meaningful and clear, and new learning connected to prior knowledge to maximise transfer and generalisation. The framework challenges exclusionary practices by anticipating and planning for challenges and fostering collective learning and belonging in the learning environment.

The IPAA framework (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2010) moves beyond design principles to consider how inclusion is created through teaching and learning relationships. The core goal of IPAA is to challenge traditional views of ability. Within this framework, student differences are considered both natural and essential, and not a “problem to fix”. In response, educators must work together to foster supportive learning environments where all students have equal access to learning experiences, rather than differentiated tasks. Inclusion therefore moves beyond compliance and becomes a marker of educational quality.

Against this backdrop, we are co-creating an embedded approach to inclusive practice. Although routes into our academic “support services” remain, the aim on our programme is not to refer students into these. Rather, we work together, as academic, faculty librarian, learning developer, and learning technologist, on shared design and delivery of the learning experience. We work closely and without hierarchy to design and implement a curriculum where inclusive practice is realised when it is co-created, not delegated.

What co-creation *actually* looks like

I came into the role of module director in 2023, though the module was well established at this point. There were existing relationships between academic, learning development and library teams, and the programme had integrated all members in the design and delivery of the module. However, significant increase in the cohort size from around 50-60 students to around 140 students, and revisions to curriculum requirements from the GMC, the Statutory



Regulatory Body that accredits our degree programme, meant that there was scope to redesign the curriculum to make it more effective and inclusive. Changes to the staffing team brought new ideas and fresh perspectives, and involving our learning technologist at the design stage meant we could trial new and innovative learning opportunities with digital tools and technologies. The new relationships forged around this process have supported robust co-creation, and equal participation in curriculum development.

When co-designing assessments, we ask ourselves, 'What do our students need to meet the learning outcomes?' Framing teaching and learning in these terms actively supports learner agency in line with the goals of UDL. From there, we work together to design learning activities and assessments that help students develop skills and *demonstrate* that they have developed them. Our faculty librarian and learning developer have embedded information literacy into assessments, and shaped scaffolded tasks to develop skills. Our learning technologist has developed a digital learning environment for inclusive learning.

Invaluable input from our learning technologist has meant that digital tools have been used across all learning environments, in person and online, and for synchronous and asynchronous learning. Digital tools help accommodate diverse needs, including those captured by Individual Learner Support Plans, and undisclosed, hidden or undiagnosed needs. Digital tools have facilitated learning and assessment and enabled multiple methods of engagement with material and multiple ways for students to express the learning outcomes, enabling learner agency and challenging traditional views of ability.

We have designed a curriculum that fully integrates support for all students. Skills workshops are *built into* modules and are not optional extras for students to refer into. Workshops draw on all our expertise, to co-create (and *co-deliver*) learning opportunities that scaffold students to meet the learning objectives through formative assessment, including demonstrations, interactive walk-throughs, and peer-review.

We work towards using language that is meaningful across the programme, between our pedagogical contexts, and between educators and learners. This aligns how 'academic skills', 'research', and 'success' are framed and understood. We have drawn on the language used in GMC Outcomes for Graduates, explicitly including these in our teaching material, to build clarity around aims and purpose in module and programme outcomes. We have had additional input from the Medical School Careers Consultant to help develop messaging about skills development that is meaningful to students beyond their degree, and we are working together to include guidance on how students can present the skills learned on the programme in their CV and in as part of their career planning.



Our key principles for co-creation have been early collaboration, equal recognition of expertise, ongoing dialogue, and a responsive approach. We meet throughout the year to plan and reflect on our programme, building in student feedback at every stage of the programme, not just at the end, to make iterative improvements each cycle. Our meetings are usually in person, and we all bring ideas, questions and concerns for discussion. One of the challenges we have found is with each team's capacity to contribute in practice, even when there is genuine motivation and passion to do so, particularly as the large cohort size demands split timetabling, and multiple sessions. We have found creative ways to address this, for example improving our online and asynchronous learning materials, and ensuring that planning and oversight of the year ahead happens early. Although we do not have a formal agenda, each meeting will have a particular purpose, depending on the time in the academic year. For example, our summer term meeting tends towards oversight of the following academic year (e.g. timetabling, staffing) and anticipates challenges that need to be addressed. This is too late to be considering new additions to the curriculum, or iterative change. Rather, our regular meetings throughout the year (at least once a term) tend to be when we reflect on sessions, student feedback, and consider how to improve what we do in the following cycle.

And the value...?

Broadly, the value of collaborating in this way leads to more effective and more inclusive practice.

Student feedback and Moodle logs demonstrate improvements in student engagement, student confidence and self-reported skill/success. Student feedback highlights the value of integrated skills development workshops, the value of diverse expertise within the teaching team, and clarity around learning objectives and expectations (see Appendix 1). This demonstrates that co-created approaches to curriculum design foster contextualised learning that is relevant to students.

Importantly, this model moves beyond 'fixing students' by providing scaffolded skills development for all students. It engenders inclusive practice by designing out barriers by improving assessment clarity, enhancing access to resources and by being transparent about what the required skills are and how to improve them.

Working in partnership and building in expertise in this way also has benefits for collaborators. These benefits are wide ranging, but key benefits include peer support, increased confidence, creativity and more impactful and enjoyable practice (see Appendix 2).



Spreading the joy

The programme is influencing practice elsewhere in the institution and is shared as an example of good practice, through wider institutional collaborations and networks. The model has been showcased and shared extensively within the library and learning development team. It has been the catalyst for the re-developed Information and 'Academic Literacies Toolkit',¹ which was disseminated by the library to support the embedding of academic skills during the Curriculum Transformation Programme. The development of the *Discovery* programme in Lancaster University Management School was heavily influenced by the programme via the library and learning development teams. Our peer assessment has been put forward as a case study for the working group developing new, university-wide Inclusive Education Practice Policy. Finally, our Moodle spaces and the peer assessment activity are regularly used by learning development as example of good practice when discussing options with other staff across the Faculty of Health and Medicine.

Conclusion

Inclusive practice does not belong to one role. Inclusion is everybody's responsibility, and inclusive practice is built *between* us. Co-creating inclusive practice means designing with, not for, and can result in influencing practice beyond your own classroom. True collaboration between academics and academic support means embedding support in curriculum design, not bolting it on, and integrating expertise across roles, recognising that none of us are experts in everything. Our next step is to try to bring students into the co-creation of this curriculum, as design partners. We currently have departmental representatives for each year group who can act as consultants, and student feedback from the whole cohort. However, as a further step towards inclusion, we would like to engage students more robustly in the co-creation of content.

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¹ Introduction - Information and Academic Literacies Toolkit - LibGuides at Lancaster University: https://lancaster.libguides.com/toolkit_IAL/introduction



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Appendices

Appendix 1: Examples of student feedback 2025-26

"Workshops/sessions were all useful, with each preparing us well for the overall poster task"

"All the teaching staff were so thorough in explaining I did not even struggle at all when completing the assigned tasks. It was easy to follow and I am looking forward to the next SSM. I am confident in using my searching ability when finding good and relevant articles. Thank you!"

"The workshop that involved going through the database (step by step) together was amazing. This then not only clarified the task immensely but increased my confidence and ability to complete this SSM week to the best of my ability."



"I found the training session 'Finding Information' extremely useful and informative, which allowed me to complete my work more easily. I understood exactly how to use the different platforms and what was expected of me when I submitted my work."

Appendix 2: Feedback from collaborators

"Collaboration helps to ensure library teaching is targeted, relevant, and in context. It helps students see the relationship between the information skills we teach, and how they relate directly to achieving their module assessment objectives. Collaborative working also helps with library engagement more widely, as students make the connections between the library and their subject departments- when academics and librarians are on the same page it clearly demonstrates to students that library resources and teaching are relevant to them, and that engaging with the library will improve their outcomes."

"A key aim of Learning Technologists within FHM is to help design inclusive and engaging learning experiences. Through collaboration we have;

- Increased student engagement with Moodle, the online teaching space and the activities therein
- Increased student engagement within workshops by providing high quality and reusable resources for students to access
- Increased compliance with legislation for sharing teaching resources online
- Provided examples of good practice that have been used in a higher education environment so that colleagues can generate ideas and implement changes in their own teaching. I can then use these as a Learning Technologist to support conversations with academics who wish to develop new resources or assessments."

"It has been really beneficial to collaborate on the design and delivery of the SSM programme as we all bring different experience and expertise to the collaboration. We have supported each other to deliver an ambitious programme of activities, involving using more innovative live technology during in -person lecture sessions with large groups of students than I would have been brave enough to try on my own. The tech has (so far!) always gone smoothly, which would not have been possible without Liz's expertise and hard work behind the scenes. Gem brings boundless enthusiasm and a wealth of experience in inspiring students to connect with libraries, and I have been particularly inspired by Faye's creative and courageous approach to teaching and learning."



“For me, the biggest benefit of working across this wonderful pool of expertise is having the confidence and breadth of skill to be innovative and creative when designing our learning opportunities. We’ve made great resources and planned exciting sessions that wouldn’t have been possible alone and I’ve learned loads of new skills. It’s also true that we can use time with students more efficiently, which is a real bonus as our curriculum becomes more demanding to deliver with less time and resources. Finally, and on a personal level, I have the pleasure of working with lovely people and it’s fun and joyful to work together!”