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Reimagining a postgraduate module: Injecting Problem-Based Learning and normalising the use of GenAI for learning

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Reimagining a postgraduate module: Injecting Problem-Based Learning and normalising the use of GenAI for learning

Επανασχεδίαση μεταπτυχιακού μαθήματος: Μάθηση μέσω επίλυσης προβλημάτων και κανονικοποίηση της χρήση της Γενετικής Τεχνητής Νοημοσύνης

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Abstract

This paper reports on the reimagining and redesigning of the postgraduate learning module Education in a Digital Society in collaboration with students as consultants. The new curriculum design is based on Problem-Based Learning (PBL), open pedagogies and practices while the use of generative AI forms part of the learning ecosystem that fosters in a normalised way to provide opportunities for critical and creative thinking, questioning, exploration and experimentation. This contribution illustrates how this will be achieved through pedagogical design. The reimaged module was launched in 2025/26.

Keywords

Open Pressbook, Problem-Based Learning, postgraduate education module, normalising GenAI use, students as consultants

Context

This paper reports on the reimagining and redesigning of the online distant learning module Education in a Digital Society which is part of the MA in Digital Education. This programme has been running over 15 years within the School of Education at the University of Leeds and has attracted student educators, developers and learning

technologists from across the United Kingdom and internationally. The programme has evolved over the years and has been reimagined to explore what is possible within an approved module. The module featured in this paper has also been available as an optional online module to students who enroll in the MA in Education. During the transition phase, the re-designed module remains available to those students as a campus-based module option until the re-design of the new MA programme has been completed and successfully approved.

The redesign process of the module offers a timely opportunity to rethink learning design within the context of postgraduate studies and to explore how innovative pedagogies such as student partnership, the integration of generative AI and critical digital education can be embedded meaningfully within institutional frameworks. The re-imagining work has been carried out within the constraints of an approved module.

The module

The module has been redesigned during the academic year 2024/2025 by the module leader and in collaboration with students as consultants. It will launch as a campus-based module in 2025/2026. The approved module specifications were used to explore what is pedagogically possible within the current format of the module to satisfy quality assurance standards while at the same time using this opportunity to further enhance the quality and stretch what is possible within the constraints of an approved module.

In this module, students examine discourses and debates surrounding technology and its role in society, education and development. The module is dynamic and flexible and wraps around students' professional and personal context. Students are encouraged to bring their lived experiences and context into the learning space to enrich both their individual and collective learning experience through working and learning with their peers throughout the module and so get the maximum out of it and the varied experiences students bring.

The module runs over 11 weeks in a semester. Each week includes a two-hour seminar and additional support sessions focused on academic practice. Up to now, the module was offered fully online, and the flipped learning approach was used with weekly

thematic units that invited students to prepare in advance for the seminars so that they could more fully participate in these in a discursive way.

The module aims to be a space for exploration, critical thinking, creativity as well as responsible experimentation, also with digital tools and technologies including GenAI, a space for critical and creative engagement and connection.

The module provides a vehicle to make valuable connections with a range of practices, literature, connection with peers and wider communities outside the module who have an interest in what is discussed and can stretch students' thinking, deepen their understanding and enhance their professional practice. Curiosity and questioning, together with critical and creative thinking on own and with others is what will lead to meaningful learning.

Pedagogic design

"A tendency among academic teachers is to stuff their curriculum with content, burdening themselves with the task of transmitting vast amounts of knowledge bulk and their students of absorbing and reproducing this bulk. In contrast, a focus on threshold concepts enables teachers to make refined decisions about what is fundamental to a grasp of the subject they are teaching. It is a 'less is more' approach to curriculum design." (Cousin, 2006, 4)

The critique of content-focused and content-heavy curricula aligns with wider concerns in higher education context about surface-level level engagement and cognitive overload (Evans et al., 2018; Thornby et al., 2023). Postgraduate students often encounter challenges when engaging in expansive learning materials without sufficient opportunity for reflection, collaboration or meaningful application (Lin et al., 2023; Shaheen, 2016). In response to this, the pedagogic design of this module adopts a more deliberate and inquiry-led approach depth over breath. Specifically, it shifts the emphasis away from content transmission to critical engagement, individual and collaborative inquiry and conceptual understanding through active and participatory learning.

The module aims to "responsibilise thinking" (Costa and Murphy, 2025) recognising the need for students to meaningfully engage in active questioning and considering

diverse perspectives to avoid bypassing learning. To enact this shift, the module integrates a set of fundamentals in the process of redesigning as explained below:

Creating learning spaces that breath: The redesign process begins with an effort to de-cram the module from stuff that students can learn on their own or with others. Kleiman (2009) makes a case for less is more when designing the curriculum as he claims that a convincing story can be told for anything to be included. By removing what is unnecessary and moving away from a content-based approach, the design resists the pressure to cover content superficially and instead promotes opportunities for reflection, sense-making and application.

A threshold concepts approach seeded into the scenarios: The learning scaffold is based on threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2023) that are fundamental in digital education and education more widely. These are often concepts that are challenging for students to grasp and therefore focusing on these will help act as disciplinary stepping stones to further progress students' foundational knowledge and development as educators. A similar curriculum design proposition has been made by OECD (2025) in the context of science education in schools and while they don't refer to "threshold concepts" OECD talks about the importance of concepts, big ideas, and questioning as important characteristics of how the curriculum is lived and experienced.

PBL for collaborative inquiry: The main part of the module consists of two-week long units. Each unit has been designed using PBL and presents an opportunity for collaborative inquiry into specific educational scenarios that enable students to learn together about key concepts, theories and debates linked to the module through engaging with the scenarios very much rooted in experience. Seeded into the scenarios are threshold concepts that aid collaborative inquiry-based learning and provide foci of interest to deeply and meaningfully engage with and make sense of these. The PBL model FISh (Nerantzi and Uhlin, 2012) is used to help students in PBL groups to navigate through the collaborative learning process. The PBL model encourages agency, peer learning and knowledge co-construction which makes the learning process both participatory and situated in students' own professional realities.

GenAI surgeries: Beyond the seminars in the form of PBL group work, GenAI surgeries are introduced as dedicated exploratory spaces. These informal sessions allow students to critically and creatively engage with gen AI tools. Through this, rather than treating gen AI as a productivity aid, the module also positions AI as a topic of discussion and ethical reflection. Students use gen AI to explore possibilities, test ideas and reflect on how these tools may reshape professional learning and practice.

Reading group: This will be led by a postgraduate researcher to enable focused engagement with the literature beyond the seminars. It will be an opportunity to discuss in more depth some of the concepts explored in the module and consider these in the PBL work and independently.

Alignment to critical pedagogies: The curriculum design is aligned to critical pedagogies (Freire, 2011; hooks, 1994) which places emphasis on thinking, dialogue, collaboration, responsive experimentation and co-creation. Students are positioned not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active co-constructors. This orientation recognises the realities of working within a VUCA world where volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity dominate the landscape (Taskan et al., 2022). Thus, the module foregrounds authentic challenges in our world, the messiness of our individual and collective experiences, collaborative meaning-making and reflectivity by inviting students to engage with uncertainty not as barriers to learning, but as generative sources to question, connect and gain new insights that will be useful for them going forward.

Activating creativity: Curiosity, imagination, possibility and experimentation are activated collaboratively during this module. The principles of the 5A framework of creativity for instructional design (West et al., 2025, 23-24, based on Glăveanu, 2013) have been adopted.

- **Actors:** Students are driving their learning. They have a choice to work on open-ended challenges.
- **Actions:** Students focus on the learning process. They experiment and reflect critically. Messiness of learning is acknowledged that leads to breakthroughs.
- **Artifacts:** Students create artifacts and experience learning through making.
- **Audience:** Students are invited to have an open mind, are immersed in diverse perspectives and have the opportunity to make novel connections.

- **Affordances:** Students develop capacity to use digital tools and technologies to maximise on the affordances they bring. Constraints are acknowledged.

Students will experience authentic and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) tailored to their professional context (Barrows and Tamblyn, 1980) to work collaboratively with other students. Authentic challenges, scenarios and problems will be driving collaborative inquiry-based learning. This is in contrast to the risk-averse and overly structured learning environments shaped by GenAI systems which Hillman and Couldry (2025) argue can limit the learner's agency by reducing complexity into predictable and data-driven pathways. Such systems may suppress meaningful engagement by removing opportunities for learners to confront uncertainty and navigate social realities which are the key elements in human development. According to Freire (2011, 83-83) "problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation." Hillman and Couldry (2025) also wrote about the dangers of GenAI for children as it creates a closed, individualistic and standardised as well as removed from reality space that is in danger of not helping them learn first-hand about the messiness of human experiences and learning, the relational nature and hinders them from immersing themselves in authentic challenges and risks. Could the same be said about adult learners and higher education students in our case?

Possibility thinking (Craft 2008; Craft et al., 2008) is also build-into this module as students will be invited to consider "What if" questions to foster curiosity, imagination and creativity, linked to their professional context as educators. This will enable them to become curious with their peers and imagine alternative realities and future educational scenarios in their professional contexts that could be transformative.

Facilitation

The facilitation team includes the module leader, a further tutor and doctoral student. Additional support for academic writing and use of GenAI is provided by two colleagues with specialism in these areas. This collaborative structure ensures a diverse range of facilitation styles and knowledge domains are present to guide and improve students' learning across the module.

How learning happens

All learning in this module is grounded in experiential and collaborative inquiry. The PBL scenarios are used for learning in facilitated groups of 5 to 6 students using characteristics of PBL. There are four distinct PBL units with distinct which are, however, interconnected. PBL scenarios have been created using insights from practice, the literature and student input for school and university settings. The PBL Focus – Investigate – Share (FISh) model (Nerantzi and Uhlin, 2012) is used to scaffold collaboration and inquiry among the students, enabling small groups to engage critically and systematically with the scenarios.

Integrating GenAI in scenario design

GenAI played a key role in the development of learning scenarios. The strategy of developing learning scenarios for PBL with the help of GenAI was previously piloted transparently in another module and anecdotal evidence and tutor's reflections suggest that it was effective in engaging students in PBL inquiry using this approach. Ramos and Condotta (2024) report on their successful implementation of using GenAI in a chemical engineering class for PBL activity that enabled students to work collaboratively on open-ended scenarios that led to enhanced participation and improved students' outcomes.

In this module, scenarios have been developed using parameters for school and university settings that led to detailed and rich prompts which were then entered into Microsoft Copilot to generate scenarios based on these. For transparency and further re-use, the prompts for the generation of the scenarios have been made available to students in Part 2 of the Module Companion. This not only ensures ethical clarity but also supports student agency. This will also aid PBL groups who wish to further tailor the scenarios they will be using in their inquiry and keep the process flexible, transparent and dynamic to further diversify these in years to come, without needing to make extensive changes to the module itself. Therefore, modelling is a more sustainable way to design, implement and review a module to keep it fresh and relevant.

This model echoes recent calls to move away from surveillance-driven responses to GenAI use and instead embrace student-staff co-creation to rebuild trust and openly integrate GenAI into curriculum design, Karadeniz and de Candia (2025) show how students valued being guided to critically evaluate GenAI outputs against marking criteria, reflect on their use and disclose their interactions with the tools. Adopting a similar approach here contributes to a more sustainable model of innovation where both staff and students share responsibility and agency in shaping ethical GenAI practices.

Warm-up activities and assignment Integration

Before engaging with each scenario in small groups, students are invited to work through a set of warm-up activities individually and then discuss. The warm-up activities are intended to introduce students to each of the four (4) PBL units and also help them make important connections to their professional context. Critically, these activities are not standalone; however, they serve as scaffolded preparation and intend to trigger critical reflection and help students to work towards the assignment for this module. This module uses an assessment as learning approach that enables students to complete it progressively fully integrated into the learning process (Yan and Yang, 2022) while also having a life after the completion of the module. As such, the assessment therefore can be considered as renewable (Wiley, 2016; Lazzara et al., 2024) where the outcomes can be both personally meaningful and professionally applicable.

Unconference: The last seminar has been turned into an unconference which connects the module with the wider learning community within the School of Education and beyond. This student-led event creates an opportunity for students to practice peer collaboration and academic leadership while demonstrating their assessment work-in-progress. It also serves as a platform for receiving formative feedback from other peers and facilitators which will support students as they finalise their submissions. The unconference design showcases participatory and democratic learning spaces and positions the student not only as learners but also contributors to wider academic conversations (Conderman et al., 2000).

Assessment

Assessment as learning (Yan and Yang, 2022) fully integrated into the learning process will enable students to progressively work on their assignment. It is a vehicle for students to reflect critically on their own practice, the literature, practices of others also in the context of the PBL work they will engage with their peers, create a story about the future of education in their specific context using a range of media. The assessment is highly contextualised and personalised. It invites students to explore their own educational landscape and ecosystem and consider how they might contribute to shape it.

At the institution, a traffic light system is used to show students if and how GenAI can be used in their assignment. Red – no use of GenAI allowed orange – allowed to use GenAI as defined by the module team, green – must use GenAI. This assignment falls into the category orange which means students may choose to engage with GenAI in any way that meaningfully supports their learning. The module team has intentionally not placed the assignment in the green category to respect individual student comfort and preferences and thus means the use of GenAI remains optional.

Despite this flexibility, we know there is a lot of anxiety among students who are fearful to share that they are using or have used GenAI as they are often wrongfully accused of cheating which has negative implications on learning relationships between educators and students (Gorichanaz, 2023; Luo, 2024).

The assignment itself blends academic and creative writing, where students are invited to reflect on their own past, present and imagined future as educators within their professional context. This dual mode of expression encourages self-exploration while also meeting academic standards.

While students will be engaging in learning and work on an assessment to evidence how they meet the module learning outcomes, this module will also enable them to present their work-in-progress at module's open unconference. The event will be organised by volunteering students. This presents an opportunity to share ideas with peers and wider audience and also to gather formative feedback ahead of submission. After submission and ratification of marks by the exam board, students are invited on a voluntary basis to publish a short post-assessment version of their assignment in Part 3 "Imagining educational futures" of the openly licensed living Module

Companion Pressbook. Therefore, the assessment takes the form of a renewable assignment that has a life and purpose beyond the module for the student (Wiley, 2016; Lazzara et al., 2024). Their submission will not count as student publications, but as exemplars for future students taking the module at the same time, helping to sustain a reflective and student-led knowledge community.

Learning space and resources: Modules at the institution have a space in the Blackboard VLE through which all learning materials are shared and assessment is submitted. There, usually module teams design their module and students registered can access it to enable blended learning also for campus-based provision. Often a complementary Teams space is set-up which is often used for asynchronous communication and collaboration throughout the semester. Students can also use this space to arrange remote meetings with their peers.

This module utilises a simplified VLE space in combination with an openly licensed Pressbook as a module companion, a resource in which information, the design, ways of working and assessing, together with learning tools and further resources such as videos are shared while also providing the opportunity for students to contribute after completion of their module if they wish (see assessment section).

The use of an open Pressbook signalises a shift and demonstrates an alternative way of managing a module in a more open and sustainable way following a circular economy model that enables re-use and re-appropriation (Potting et al. 2017) also very much aligned to the ethos and practices of open education (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO, 2025) Not only will updating the module be smoother for future cohorts, include media-rich materials but the open book also provides a flavour of the module for those students considering it in advance of registering as it will also act as a window into a module in greater detail than the information provided in the module catalogue. Sharing it openly as an Open Educational Resource (OER) means that it could create opportunities for other learners externally and in the future also enabling repurposing as a whole or part of it for open taster courses that could be linked to the module and enrich the students' learning experiences while also helping us to promote what we do in the School of Education, how and share the achievements of our students. Therefore, this innovation presents a sustainable way of designing curricula aligned to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) utilising OER together with critical and

creative pedagogies and practices to maximise student engagement, transformative learning and action. According to UNESCO (2017, 7) "What ESD requires is a shift from teaching to learning. It asks for an action-oriented, transformative pedagogy, which supports self-directed learning, participation and collaboration, problem-orientation, inter- and transdisciplinarity, linking of formal and informal learning." This is the vision for the re-imagined module.

A series of short Food for thought videos, a concept developed by Nerantzi (2013) have been created supported by a learning technologist and made available under an open licence by co-authors and students as consultants involved in the redesign to provide bite-size input to support students working in their PBL groups linked to the specific scenarios, trigger reflection and create an appetite for further exploration. The series has been used for a number of years, successfully in academic development context, formally integrated in postgraduate certificate in academic practice programmes and for informal professional development (Nerantzi, 2013). Furthermore, these video resources could be used by other modules and learning opportunities internally and externally and also promote the School and our students.

Reimagining in collaboration with students as consultants

While the pedagogical scaffold of the module was designed by the module leader and first author of this paper, postgraduate students who completed the previous iteration of the module, before the re-design, were invited as consultants to provide feedback and help further shape and finalise the module design before its implementation. Furthermore, a postgraduate researcher in digital education was also invited to participate in the design process and the same individual will also be co-facilitating the module with the module leader.

Turner et al. (2024) found that involving students as consultants in academic CPD including curriculum design interventions, can be mutually beneficial for educators and students. While there are of course challenges such as power dynamics, using student voice strategically to preserve the status-quo, not fully understanding how such activities may be of value for educators and students, educators, considering genuine students' voices when designing curricula and the willingness of students to engage in this way with educators can demonstrate to them that their ideas mattered

and feel empowered. Actively listening to students' voices and considering these, can make such collaborations meaningful and transformative (McLeod, 2011) as well as mutually beneficial (Cook-Sather, 2009) if conducted in an ethical and embracing way as these enable educators and students better understand each other and the design and learning process, but also strengthen learning relationships and present a way of working that is less hierarchical that recognising what students bring and the willingness from educators to acknowledge change and act to create more stimulating learning experiences for their students through curriculum enhancement and innovation. This is also vital in a time when higher education faces political, technological and economic pressures. Kane et al. (2025) position student-staff partnerships as not only pedagogical practices but also as democratic acts. This means that these partnerships are seen as counterforces to exclusion and disengagement to promote shared responsibility, social justice and educated hope. When co-creation is approached as a reciprocal process, it contributes to dismantling hierarchical relationships that fosters trust and builds resilience in both students and staff. In such spaces, students are not just consulted, but they become co-creators of knowledge, policy and learning environments.

The students who acted as consultants and worked in partnership with the module leader are also co-authors of this article and share their personal reflections and observations on the new design and the collaborative consultative process and what they got out of it. This section concludes with the related module leader observations.

Author 2: Redesigning this module was a valuable and meaningful experience for me. It was my first time co-designing a postgraduate module. I contributed suggestions on the structure, content, scenarios and assessment. This role was different from my usual support in teaching, so it allowed me to think more deeply about curriculum, material design and pedagogy. One key learning point was understanding how scenarios support critical thinking. The use of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) helped me see how students can learn by solving real issues in their professional context. I learned that PBL supports collaboration and deeper engagement with ideas. It also builds skills that are important for educators. I also explored the concept of assessment as learning. I saw how it encourages students to reflect and make

decisions about their own work. This approach helped me to understand the value of feedback not just from lecturers but also from peers and wider communities.

Being treated as a partner in the process was empowering as I felt my voice was heard and respected. This experience helped me to grow as a doctoral student and as a teacher. It changed how I think about curriculum design. I now believe more strongly in the power of co-creation between students and teachers and finally I am excited to assist the teaching of this module.

Author 3: I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to contribute towards the redesign of the module Education in a Digital Society. Reimagining this module was a rewarding experience since it made me feel highly valued not only as a student but as an individual. Being a student-consultant allowed me to think about my own practice and to realise how our routine tasks can make a valuable contribution to society. Having given my impressions on various aspects such as the role of learning theories and accessibility in the digital age made me feel empowered.

A takeaway point from this experience was that in curriculum design “less is more” and that learning is more meaningful when students can apply their knowledge into real-life situations. Students construct their knowledge by exploring, experimenting and doing things with their peers. At some point in our lives, we face challenges; and this is where collaboration plays a key role in finding solutions to those problems. When students are given opportunities to develop their creativity and show their full potential, they can then achieve key milestones in their lives.

Author 4: The process of redesigning this module was a unique and invaluable opportunity for me to contribute to an important HE project related to my programme of postgraduate studies. Thus, I participated in a fruitful dialogue with my tutor and peer students on the module redesign and I drew links between my own experience with the module as a student back in 2023-2024 and the new form of it. I got the opportunity to delve into the process of the instructional design of a Master’s module and would be intrigued to take the module again, if possible.

One key learning takeaway point from this experience was the importance of personalisation and adaptability when redesigning a module or course. Offering students the opportunity to apply their knowledge and experiences to their learning journey will motivate them to engage more actively and substantially. I acknowledge

that this element is a prerequisite for module redesign, especially considering GenAI's constant development and its challenges for HE education, although I realised the effort this required. For instance, the new assignment enables students to leave their footprint on it and, thanks to its personalisation elements, might lead to critically and ethically interacting with GenAI tools, when preparing for it.

Module leader:

Collaborating with students brings me great joy and fulfilment. I have been creating such opportunities for some years now in the form of a range of pedagogical projects. As co-creators and co-designers such as the e-pizza game (Nerantzi, et al., 2023) co-facilitators such as the global culture jam (Nerantzi, Javaid et al., 2023) and the social justice jam (Nerantzi, et al., 2025), co-presenters at events and co-authors (Bew et al., 2023). I see such activities as enriching for my practice, scholarship and research while also mentoring my students and helping them build new competencies and strengthen their self-belief. This curriculum project to re-imagine an approved postgraduate module I am currently leading has been no different. It has been a joy to work with students as consultants and co-authors and enable them to share their honest thoughts and ideas and can shape together the re-imagined module. I could feel their excitement to contribute, and I think they knew that they could be their real selves and that I was not looking for anybody to agree with me because of my position. I am pleased I seem to have created a space for honest exchanges and disagreement to be a source for questioning that leads to critical engagement.

Lessons learnt

Re-imagining an approved postgraduate module as an educator and student partnership has been a valuable and fascinating experience. It showed that involving students in reimagining curriculum brings fresh ideas and helps make the learning becomes more relevant and meaningful. It also enabled a multi-directional dialogue and critical and creative input from students that will make a real difference to how this module will be offered. Students' feedback of being involved in this process is encouraging about curriculum co-creation and indicates that it can empower students and strengthen educator and student relationships. Starting from practice and building theory using PBL as collective inquiry and relational pedagogy to authentic

challenges that will be co-created with peers to maximise relevance while also creating space for individual thinking and exploration about real-life challenges together. It helped students think deeply about their professional contexts consisting of past, present and future, and learn from each other. The invitation to experiment responsibly with digital technologies including GenAI as part of the fabric of learning on own and with peers will be valuable to evaluate after implementation. Instead of just using AI to get answers, students were encouraged to think about how they use it and what it means for their work as educators. We look forward to seeing how students respond to the design in practice when this new design will be implemented.

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