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22.02.2026

Title

UDL in Action: designing for inclusive and socially just learning in Postgraduate Education

Abstract

This work-in-progress case study examines how Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was enacted within a UK PGCert Practice Education across two cohorts (2023–24; 2024–25). Design enactment included multiple learning spaces—synchronous face-to-face and online sessions, asynchronous discussion forums and always-open digital escape rooms supporting learner choice, accessibility and self-regulation. Framed by UDL guidelines and literature on inclusive pedagogy, wellbeing and belonging, the study surfaces both gains (engagement, assessment choice, participation across modes) and persistent tensions (workload, assessment parity, digital equity). The session aligns with the symposium's focus on honest dialogue about inclusive practice with brief contributions from PGCert participants. (CAST, 2024; Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014; Thomas, 2012)

Session Outline (15 minutes)

Context and purpose

This session shares practical, evidence-informed UDL enactment within a PGCert Practice Education (two cohorts: 2023–24; 2024–25). We address how UDL operationalises inclusion for diverse adult learners (disciplinary, cultural, linguistic, neurodiversity) and how design choices intersect with wellbeing (workload, flexibility, predictability) and equity (assessment choice, accessibility). The aim is to move from principle to design move and from design move to evidence of benefit or unintended consequence (CAST, 2024; Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014)

Framework and design logic

We anchor decisions in UDL Guidelines (multiple means of engagement, representation, action/expression) and the inclusive curriculum literature on belonging and inclusive assessment. Mapping tasks include:

- *Engagement*: choice of topic pathways and collaborative knowledge-building to foster relatedness and agency (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Thomas, 2012).
- *Representation*: multimodal content (text/audio/visual) with accessibility built in (structure, captions, alt text, reading routes) (CAST, 2024; Seale, 2014).
- *Action/Expression*: assessment choice (e.g., written, audio, poster, e-portfolio) with shared criteria and exemplars (Hockings, 2010; Boud et al., 2018).

Case and methods

Design-based case study with iterative cycles across two cohorts. Evidence sources include:

module analytics; short pulse checks; reflective prompts; assessment artefacts; optional learner interviews; and staff reflexive memos. We analyse patterns of participation, submission modes, and perceived workload/clarity, thematically synthesised to identify “what worked/what didn’t/for whom.” (McKenney and Reeves, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2019)

Findings: What worked (3 minutes)

- **Choice with structure** increased engagement and sense of control; learners valued clear choice-menus and rubric alignment.
- **Multimodal access** (captions, transcripts, templates) reduced cognitive load and supported multilingual and neurodivergent learners.
- **Formative feed-forward** via brief audio notes and exemplars increased confidence and reduced assessment anxiety.
- **Community-building** practices (slow discussion, buddy-pairs) fostered belonging. (Thomas, 2012; Hockings, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; CAST, 2024)

Challenges: What didn’t (and Why)

- **Assessment parity tensions:** ensuring fairness across multiple modalities required rigorous, shared criteria and cross-marker calibration.
- **Workload compression:** increased design time for staff; choice overload for some learners—mitigated by **scaffolded choice** (limited, well-signposted options).
- **Digital equity gaps:** bandwidth and device differences affected media creation; low-tech alternatives remained essential.
- **Policy friction:** aligning flexible UDL assessments with legacy assessment boards needed early, whole-programme dialogue. (Seale, 2014; Tai et al., 2018; Hockings, 2010)

Alignment to Symposium aims and student involvement (2 minutes)

- **Critical reflection:** we present successes and honest missteps, linking each to design principles and learner wellbeing.
 - **Intersectional wellbeing:** flexibility, predictability and choice are examined for both benefits and hidden costs.
 - **Institutional transformation:** we outline programme-level templates—UDL assessment matrix, accessibility-first content checklist and a moderation protocol, scalable beyond the current study groups.
 - **Sustainability and accessibility:** low-tech, reusable designs and open templates support durable practice.
- Student involvement:** two PGCert participants (2023–24; 2024–25) will contribute short recorded reflections on how UDL affected belonging, workload, and assessment confidence; one will co-join live Q&A (availability permitting). (CAST, 2024; Seale, 2014; Thomas, 2012)

Indicative References

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UDL in Action: designing for inclusive and socially just learning in Postgraduate Education

Advance HE Inclusive Pedagogies Symposium 2026
19 May 2026

Barbara Nicolls, Gaff Chiefe, Heather Davis, Lucinda Reeves

INSPIRED.
EMPOWERED.
EMPLOYED.



Study Context and Focus

PGCert Practice Education (UK)

- Blend Learning Programme (synchronous, asynchronous spaces)
- Multiprofessional educators/trainers from diverse settings
- Diverse levels of confidence and experience in applying pedagogic principles
- Varied learning needs

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Why UDL, wellbeing, and belonging matter in PGCert Practice Education

- Complexity of learner context
- Inclusion = design challenge
- UDL vision: developing expert learners (CAST 2026)
- Wellbeing & belonging matter as conditions for learning (Allen et.al 2024):
 - Fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)
 - Linked to engagement & success (Strayhorn, 2018)
 - Enable learning by reducing cognitive load

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UDL Principles, wellbeing, and belonging in inclusive PGCert Practice Education

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UDL as Design logic



Belonging & Wellbeing (identity, safety, voice, agency – lived experience of learning)



Inclusive PgCert PE (Curriculum, pedagogy, PgCertPE Community of Inquiry – UDL enactment)



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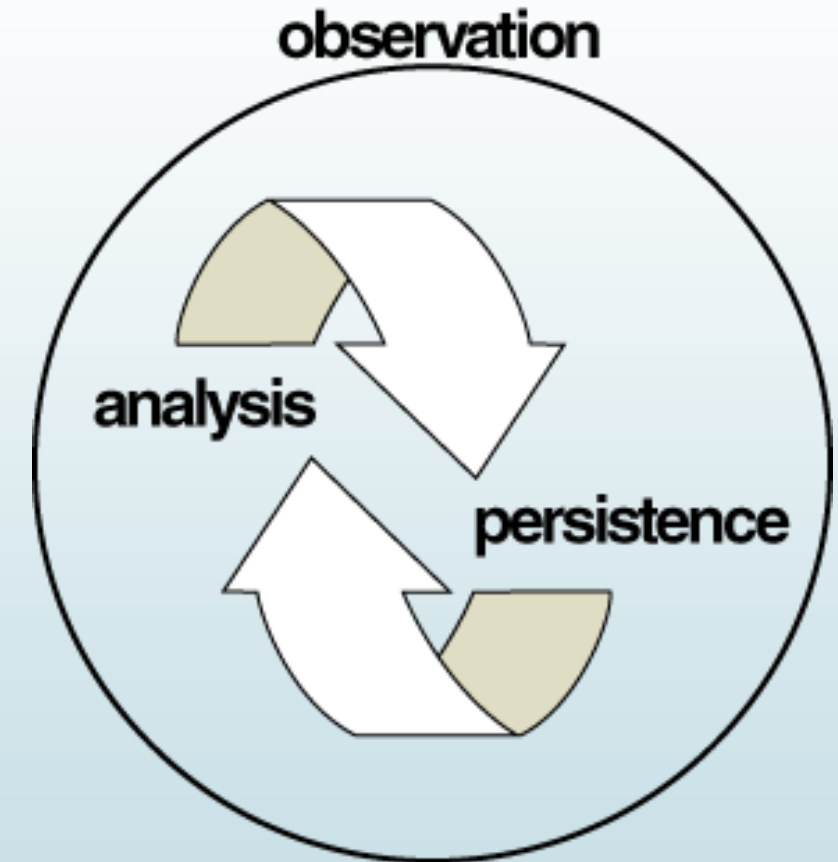
Iterative Design – Learning Over Time

Iterative design (2023–2025)

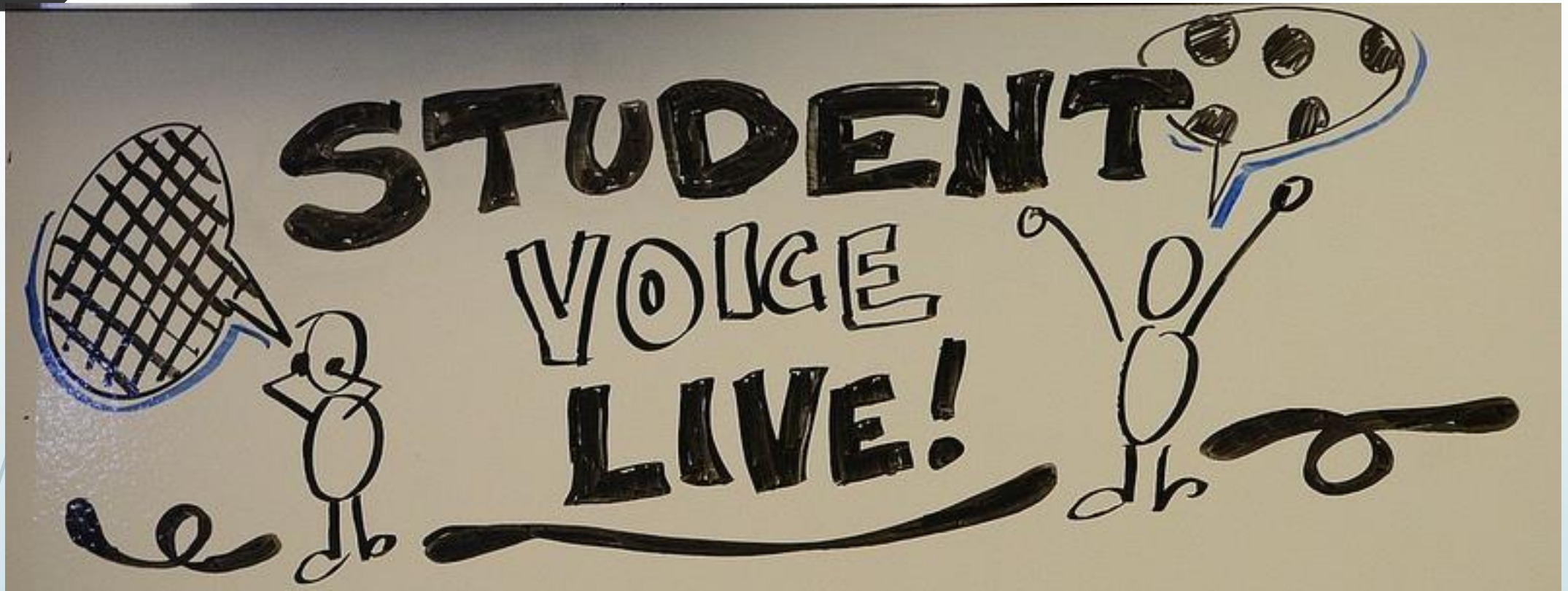
Refined across cohorts

Informed by feedback

Adapted in response to need



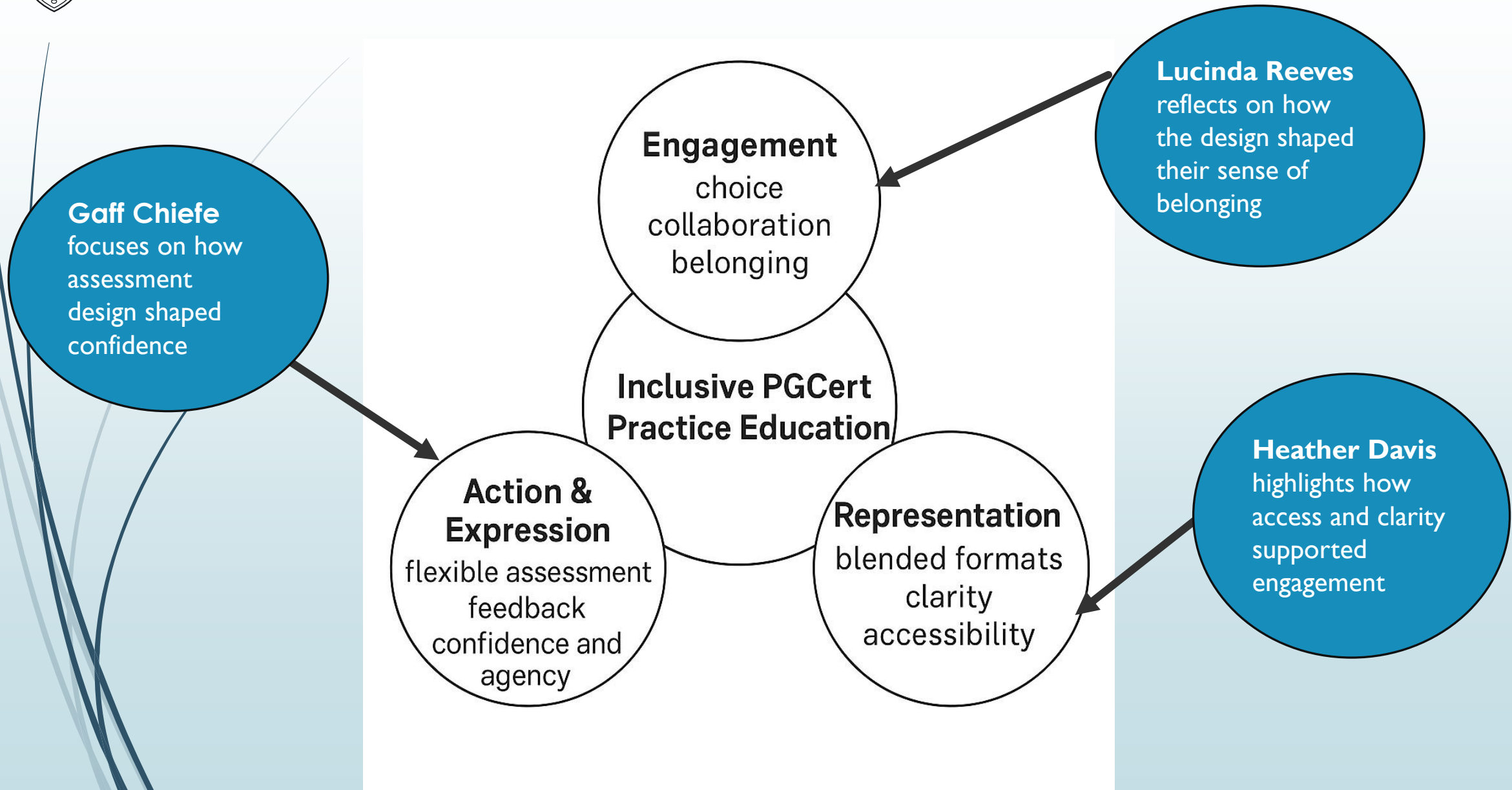
Student voices



Lucinda Reeves, Heather Davis, Gaff Chiefe



Student voices: lived experience of UDL





Reflection: What worked?

Design choices associated with positive learner experiences

What worked

- Structured choice → Agency without cognitive overload
- Multimodal access → Reduced barriers (blended learning design)
- Feed-forward feedback → Confidence building via I:I and group tutorials
- Community-building → Belonging through design of virtual Escape Rooms



Challenges and tensions

- Designer Workload
- Assessment parity
- Digital equity
- Policy constraints

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Why this matters across disciplines

Implications: Tools, templates, and sustainability of UDL practice

- Programme-level design matters
- Shared tools support sustainability
- Low-tech approaches are powerful
- Inclusion is ongoing



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