

The CIRCLE Framework: Co-creating Inclusive Digital Learning with Students at the Heart



SHIFT 2026 – Students at the Heart of Learning & Teaching

School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences, University of Greenwich, London

Ayodeji Olusegun IBITOYE PhD, MBA, FHEA

INTRODUCTION

If students are at the heart of learning,
how often are they at the heart of design?

Who decides the structure?

Who sets the norms?

Who defines “inclusive”?



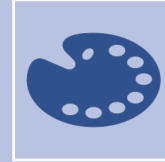
“Everything was technically accessible, the videos, the captions, the resources, but I still didn’t feel like I belonged in the course” ----

Student

Most students experience digital learning as accessible, but not always as inclusive.

“Digital learning has solved some problems, but it has revealed others.”

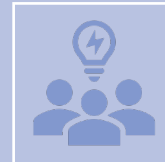
THE CHALLENGE: FROM ACCESS TO AGENCY



Digital Learning has increased access but inclusion remains uneven



Accessibility is often compliance-focused, not co-creative



Students' voices rarely shape design, delivery or assessment.

If inclusion is designed for learners and not with them, it will always fall short.

WHAT DOES INCLUSIVE DIGITAL LEARNING MEAN?



CIRCLE: INCLUSIVE DESIGN THROUGH CO-CREATION



C: CO-CREATE

Inclusion begins *before* teaching starts; it's design decisions made *with* students.

Who is involved in shaping this learning experience, and who is missing?

If students are not part of the design, inclusion is always partial.

Co-Create: Partner with Students from the Start



Example

Students collaborate with staff to redesign assessment formats, resulting in higher engagement and reduced assessment anxiety.

I: INCLUDE

Design for Diversity, Identity and Wellbeing



Diversity



Identity



Wellbeing



Inclusion is **proactive** design, not **reactive** adjustment.

What barriers might students encounter, academically, culturally, and emotionally, before they even appear?

Design for diversity from the outset, not for the 'average' learner

Example

Course materials (text, audio, visual), with flexible deadlines and culturally diverse examples embedded by default rather than on request.

REFLECT

Reflect: Question Assumptions, Power and Design Ethics



Inclusive practice requires **continuous** ethical and pedagogical self-questioning.

What assumptions, power dynamics, or norms are shaping this learning environment?

Inclusion is sustained through reflection, not good intentions

Example

Mid-semester student–staff reflection checkpoints reveal that students were not too interested in the technical details rather in more applications.

CONNECT

Belonging is designed; it does not emerge automatically online.

Do students feel seen, safe, and connected to others in this space?

Without belonging, access does not lead to engagement.

Example

Structured peer learning circles and low-stakes dialogue activities build trust and reduce isolation in online or hybrid modules.



Learn: Iterate Responsively through Feedback



Inclusive digital learning is **iterative** and **adaptive**, not fixed.

How are we learning from students' experiences and adjusting in response?

Inclusive design is a living process, not a finished product.

Example

Learning analytics and student feedback indicate cognitive overload in Week 4, prompting the resequencing of content and the reduction of unnecessary tasks.

E- EMPOWER

The true measure of inclusion is **learner agency** and confidence.

Do students feel able to influence, question, and shape their learning?

Inclusion succeeds when students feel a sense of ownership, not just compliance.

Example

Students co-facilitate discussions, reporting increased confidence, participation, and sense of belonging.

Empower: Enable Agency, Confidence and Ownership



Agency



Confidence



Ownership

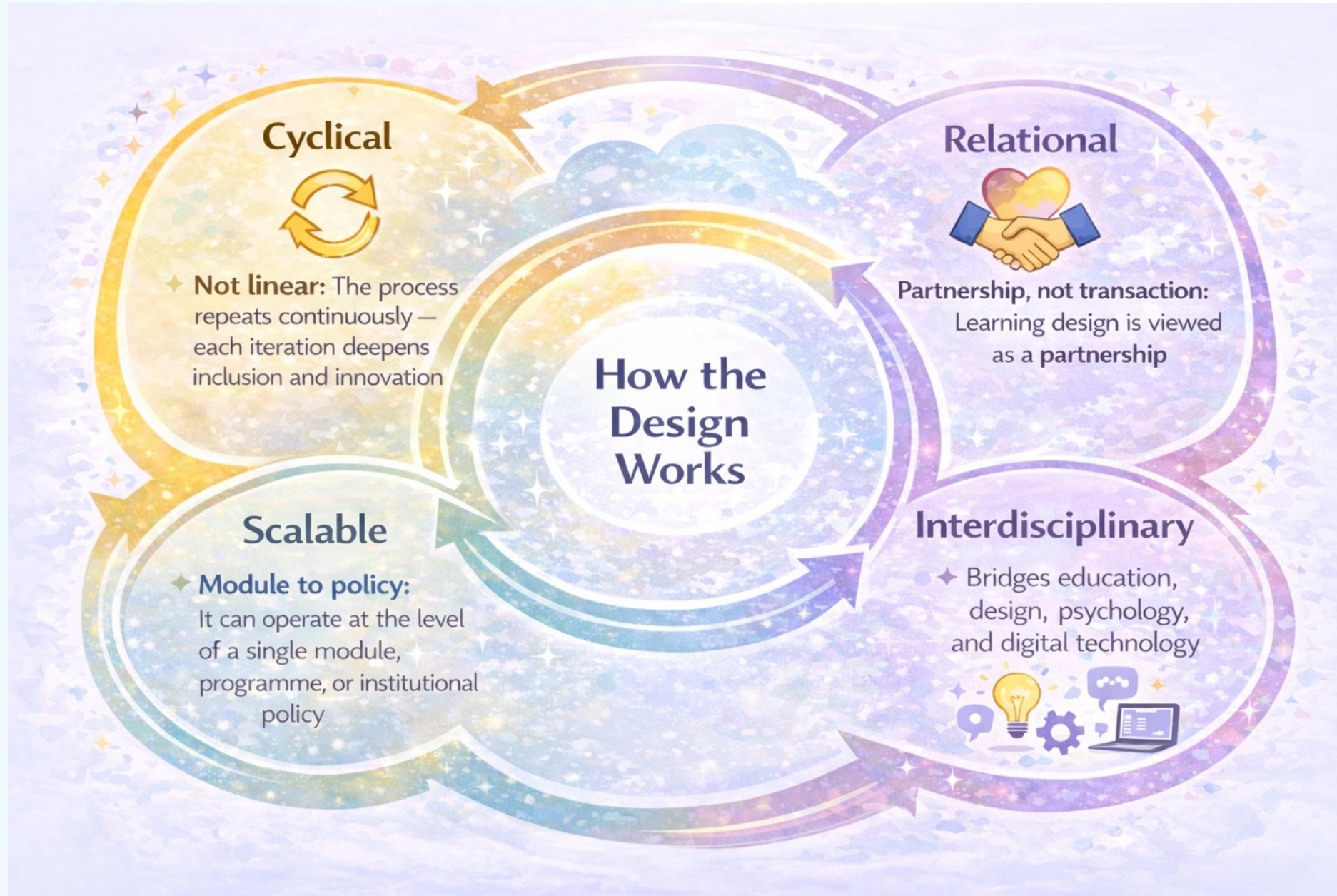


CIRCLE – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework



CYCLE DESIGN WORKFLOW



CIRCLE ACTIVITY



Step 1 — Form small groups

2–3 people per table or cluster

Step 2 — Choose ONE CIRCLE element

Co-create | Include | Reflect | Connect | Learn | Empower

Step 3 — Apply it to practice

Discuss this question:

“How could this CIRCLE element make one of your current teaching challenges more inclusive, in action?”

Need a prompt? Try one of these...

Co-create: *Where could students be involved earlier in design decisions?*

Reflect: *What assumptions or norms might be unintentionally excluding learners?*

Connect: *Where might students feel isolated or invisible in your course?*

Learn: *What feedback could you act on more quickly or visibly?*

Empower: *How do students know they have agency or voice in your course?*

CONCLUSION

Access ≠ Belonging

Accessibility ≠ Agency



Students are at the heart of learning and teaching when their lived experiences, voices, and agency actively shape the design, delivery, and evaluation of learning, not merely its consumption

SAMPLE REFERENCES



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Thank you.