

Constructive Alignment

Information on this document has been adapted from: Biggs, J. (2003)
Aligning teaching for constructing learning. Higher Education Academy*



What is Constructive Alignment?

'Constructive alignment' has two aspects. The 'constructive' aspect refers to the idea that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities. That is, meaning is not something imparted or transmitted from teacher to learner, but is something learners have to create for themselves. Teaching is simply a catalyst for learning (Biggs, 2013).

'Alignment' refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes. The key is that the components in the teaching system, especially the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks, are aligned with the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes.

In setting up an aligned system, we specify the desired outcomes of our teaching in terms not only of topic content, but in the level of understanding we want students to achieve. We then set up an environment that maximises the likelihood that students will engage in the activities designed to achieve the intended outcomes. Finally, we choose assessment tasks that will tell us how well individual students have attained these outcomes, in terms of graded levels of acceptability. These levels are the grades we award.

There are thus four major steps:

- 1 Defining the intended learning outcomes (ILOs);
- 2 Choosing teaching/learning activities likely to lead to the ILOs;
- 3 Assessing students' actual learning outcomes to see how well they match what was intended;
- 4 Arriving at a final grade.

Defining the ILOs

When we teach we should have a clear idea of what we want our students to learn. More specifically, on a topic by topic basis, we should be able to stipulate how well each topic needs to be understood. First, we need to distinguish between declarative knowledge and functioning knowledge. Declarative knowledge is knowledge that can be 'declared': we tell people about it, orally or in writing. Declarative knowledge is usually second-hand knowledge; it is about what has been discovered. Knowledge of academic disciplines is declarative, and our students need to understand it selectively. Declarative knowledge is, however, only the first part of the story.

After graduation, all our students, whatever their degree programmes, should see a section of their world differently, and to behave differently towards it, expertly and wisely. Thus, simply telling our students about that part of the world, and getting them to read about it, is not likely to achieve our ILOs with the majority of students.

Good students will turn declarative into functioning knowledge in time, but most will not if they are not required to. Accordingly, we have to state our objectives in terms that require students to demonstrate their understanding, not just simply tell us about it in invigilated exams. The first step in

* https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/id477_aligning_teaching_for_constructing_learning.pdf

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designing the curriculum objectives, then, is to make clear what levels of understanding we want from our students in what topics, and what performances of understanding would give us this knowledge.

It is helpful to think in terms of appropriate verbs. Generic high level verbs include: Reflect, hypothesise, solve unseen complex problems, generate new alternatives.

Low level verbs include: Describe, identify, memorise, and so on. Each discipline and topic will of course have its own appropriate verbs that reflect different levels of understanding, the topic content being the objects the verbs take.

Incorporating verbs in our intended learning outcomes gives us markers throughout the system. The same verbs need to be embedded in the teaching/learning activities, and in the assessment tasks. They keep us on track.

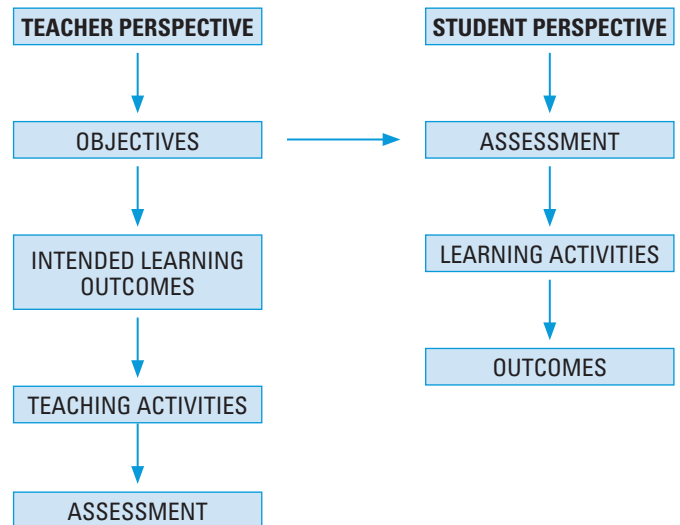
Choosing Teaching/Learning Activities (TLAs)

Teaching and learning activities in many courses are restricted to lecture and tutorial: lecture to expound and package, and tutorial to clarify and extend. However, these contexts do not necessarily elicit high level verbs. Students can get away with passive listening and selectively memorising.

There are many other ways of encouraging appropriate learning activities (Chapter 5, Biggs 2003), even in large classes (Chapter 6, *op. cit.*), while a range of activities can be scheduled outside the classroom, especially but not only using educational technology (Chapter 10, *op. cit.*). In fact, problems of resourcing conventional on-campus teaching, and the changing nature of HE, are coming to be blessings in disguise, forcing learning to take place outside the class, with interactive group work, peer teaching, independent learning and work-based learning, all of which are a rich source of relevant learning activities.

Assessing Students' Learning Outcomes

As Ramsden (1992) puts it, the assessment is the curriculum, as far as the students are concerned. They will learn what they think they will be assessed on, not what is in the curriculum, or even on what has been 'covered' in class. The trick is, then, to make sure the assessment tasks mirror the ILOs (see figure right).



To the teacher, assessment is at the end of the teaching-learning sequence of events, but to the student it is at the beginning. If the curriculum is reflected in the assessment, as indicated by the downward arrow, the teaching activities of the teacher and the learning activities of the learner are both directed towards the same goal. In preparing for the assessments, students will be learning the curriculum.

The ILOs cannot sensibly be stated in terms of marks obtained. Intended outcomes refer to sought-for qualities of performance, and it is these that need to be stated clearly, so that the students' actual learning outcomes can be judged against those qualities. If this is not done, we are not aligning our objectives and our assessments.

Conclusion

Constructive alignment is more than criterion-reference assessment, which aligns assessment to the objectives. CA includes that, but it differs (a) in talking not so much about the assessment matching the objectives, but of first expressing the objectives in terms of intended learning outcomes (ILOs), which then in effect define the assessment task; and (b) in aligning the teaching methods, with the intended outcomes as well as aligning just the assessment tasks.

REFERENCES

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