

## Assessment workshop series - No 3

### Constructive alignment of learning outcomes to assessment methods

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## Constructive alignment of learning outcomes to assessment methods - An overview

**Professor Mike Osborne, Institute of Education, University of Stirling and Workshop Director**

The importance of aligning teaching methods and assessment tasks is stressed in many publications pertaining to curriculum development in higher education. In essence the notion of constructive alignment derives from **constructivist** theory, which suggests that learners actively construct their own knowledge and understanding. Within the constructivist paradigm considerable stress is given to meaning, reflection and context, and teaching is about the provision of a context that allows the facilitation of desirable learning outcomes.

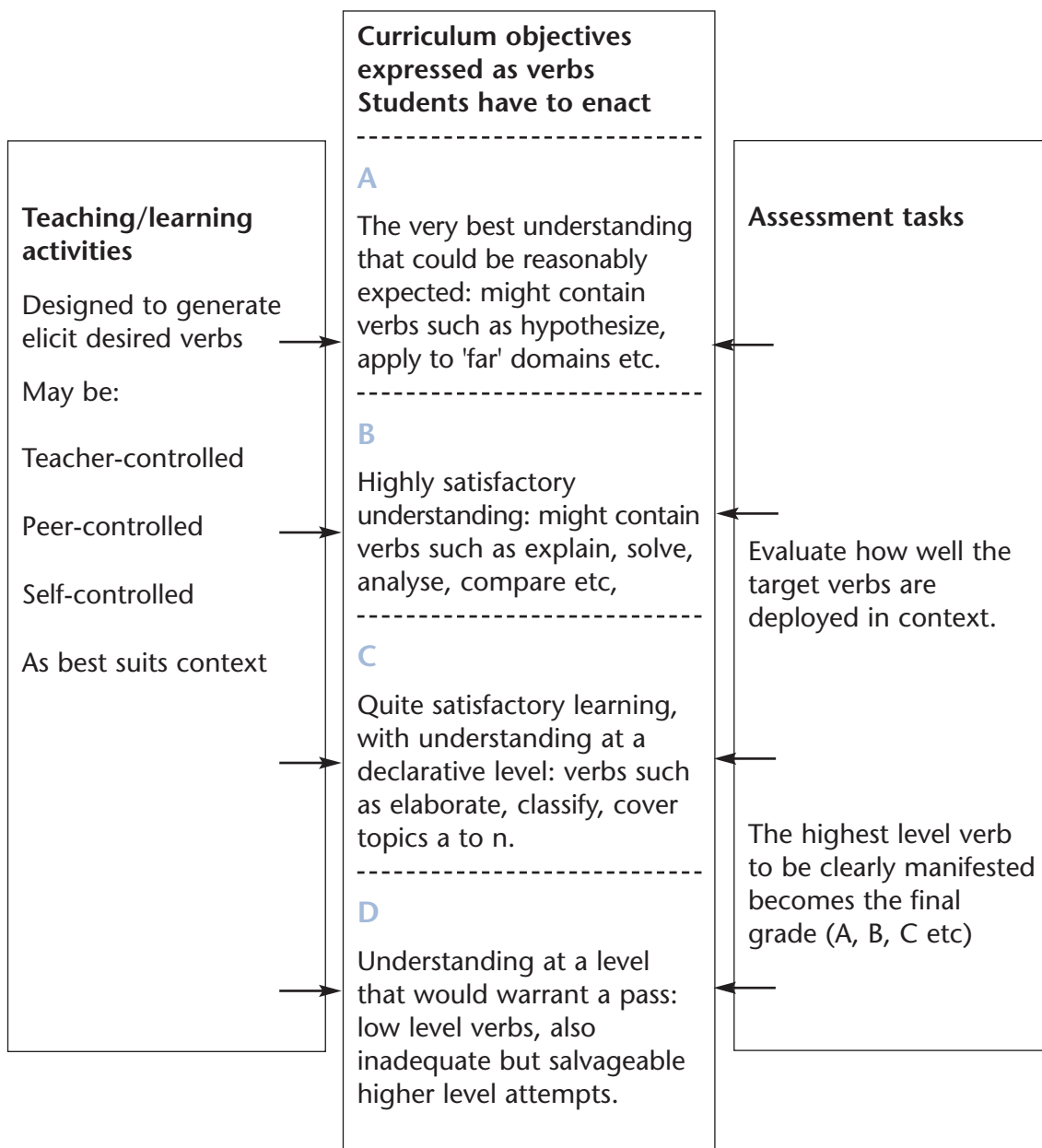
For Biggs (1995, 1996), in a constructively aligned teaching environment all stages of the process of teaching are closely linked. Thereby as Dart and Boulton-Lewis (1998) suggest 'course objectives, the teaching context, and the assessment tasks should all address the same student learning-related cognitive activities'.

A summary of much of Biggs' thinking in relation to constructive alignment is readily available through online sources, for example at the Higher Education Academy's website where a paper 'Aligning the Curriculum to promote good learning' can be found (Biggs, 2002). Here he speaks of there being four major steps in curriculum design and the delivery of programmes: 'defining the intended outcomes (the objectives); choosing teaching/learning activities likely to lead to attaining the objectives; assessing students' learning outcomes to see how well they match what was intended; and arriving at a final grade'.

Within his structure great importance is given to choice of verbs that become 'markers' in the system and which guide teaching/learning activities and assessment. A hierarchy of verbs on four levels that represent increasingly deeper levels of understanding aligns teaching/learning activities and assessment to objectives (Biggs, 2003). For those familiar with Bloom's (1965) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*<sup>1</sup>, Biggs SOLO taxonomy will not be a surprise. Thus at the lowest unistructural level, we find verbs such as 'identify'. We move through multi-structural (eg 'enumerate') to relational (eg 'explain') to extended abstract (eg 'theorise'), and in the aligned system, the teaching and learning activities 'help activate the required verbs'.

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<sup>1</sup> Those less familiar with Bloom's taxonomy will find references to his work in a multiplicity of texts on educational assessment (see for example Curzon, 1985, Chapter 9). His work attempts to determine the content validity of tests of achievement, and relates educational goals to measurement.



**Figure 1 Aligning teaching/learning activities and assessment tasks to the curriculum (Biggs, 2002)**

Biggs here is speaking of constructive alignment in the context of the development of a particular unit of study. David Boud takes the issue forward into the period beyond university. In his presentation at the workshop he began with the question: how can we connect higher education courses with the learning in which students need to engage after graduation throughout their lives? In a summary of the domain, which he covered in his introductory notes he remarked:

A vital role is to prepare students for a future that is unknown to us and to them. The unknown future creates great problems for learning and assessment now and will place demands on students for new knowledge and skills beyond anything they learn in their courses.

What can we do to equip students for this? The challenges are substantial. Among many things, we will need to shift our focus to consider the ways in which current assessment practices either assist or inhibit students in developing skills for lifelong learning. We need to align assessment not only with short-term learning outcomes, but also with longer-term aspirations. Unfortunately, many traditional assessment practices inadvertently de-skill students in various ways. They focus attention on the immediate task of passing examinations or completing tasks and distract students from the more vital task of learning how to assess themselves.

Lifelong learning requires students to be lifelong assessors and to develop assessment skills they can deploy in the very many situations they face after leaving university. The presentation will explore what might be involved in promoting this. It will introduce the idea of establishing sustainable assessment as a central feature of all courses. Sustainable assessment practices are those that meet immediate assessment needs without compromising the ability of students to meet future learning needs. Key characteristics of sustainable assessment practice will be examined and issues to be faced in implementation will be discussed.

The context for these issues is familiar to many within higher education, and that is the relationship between learning at university and the skills demands of employers. As Barnett (1994) has suggested: 'Employers want expertise, but the expertise they are crucially after is not the expertise of propositional knowledge. It is forms of knowing how'. Thus the traditional concept of a qualified graduate has not been accepted by those increasingly dominant players in the educational debate, the employers and that argument can be traced back to the early 1980s and before, with this quote from the Confederation of British Industry being illustrative:

The complaint which we frequently hear from companies is that ... the people who come out of technological disciplines are all too often less lively as people than those who have done less relevant subjects like the arts.... We would like to see somewhat greater weight attached to the personal qualities, such as motivation, ability for original thought and ability to get at and solve problems. This does not necessarily come out in some applicants (Confederation of British Industry Select Committee on Education, Science and the Arts, 1980).

We have seen over two decades of education and training initiatives in schools, further education colleges and universities that have sought to establish a stronger link between the formal sector and the workplace (see Dockrell et al, 1997). The Employment Department (ED) within the UK took the lead in the early 1990s by encouraging a greater responsiveness to the needs of individuals and the labour market by funding a number of initiatives in higher education (ED, 1993). This included the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative whereby over 80 projects in higher education institutions were supported, each aiming to provide as Hale (1994) states "'models of good practice" for the introduction of activities that enabled students to enhance their transferable skills<sup>2</sup> as a preparation for their life long learning in the world of work'. As higher education has expanded and diversified through the 1990s into the new century there have been continuing attempts to

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<sup>2</sup> Educationalists make the distinction between specific disciplinary skills, often referred to as vocational skills, and general skills, frequently referred to as transferable skills. Traditionally, however, the emphasis has been on the acquisition of discipline knowledge; the development of the other intellectual and social abilities is seen as 'a bonus within the curriculum' (Hare and Powrie, 1992).

increase its accountability to society (eg Scott, 1995; Barnett, 1994; Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Brennan and Shah, 2000) and a greater attention has been afforded to the employability of graduates (eg HEFCE, 2001), with a more public concern with the nature of 'graduateness' (HEQC, 1995).

In tandem in the UK we have seen the emergence of 'learning outcomes'<sup>3</sup>. Within an influential paper by Otter (1992) the perceived deficiency of the undergraduate curriculum is captured in the statement that 'a degree is currently described in terms of the process - three years full-time study - rather than achievement, and, that as a result, notions of quality are based on the processes rather than the outcome'. In HE perhaps the most important policy development deriving from the debates about quality has been the publication of subject benchmark statements by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2000). Benchmark statements represent explicit formulations of the academic community's tacit knowledge about what is learned in higher education. They define learning outcomes intended to reflect the 'academic' and to guide students as well as wider stakeholders (Jary, 2002).

Thus in order to assess and to accredit learning, including that achieved in a multiple range of environments, the re-configuration of programmes to include explicit learning outcomes has become common place. As is evident in Biggs' model, such a re-configuration is a pre-requisite of his alignment model. That being said, many would suggest that the advantages of alignment have a downside. As with the related notion of 'competence', (see Ashworth and Saxton, 1990) namely 'the ability to perform activities within a given occupation or function to the standards expected in employment' and itself an outcome, it has been argued that learning outcomes ignore process and are mechanist and reductionist. Furthermore, systems in which outcomes are rigorously defined can become a straightjacket for assessors in certain circumstances, and in many situations students demonstrate unintended learning outcomes that are as legitimate as those envisaged in our planning. If teachers and learners are influenced by context in learning outcomes and processes then as Boud (1999) suggests 'context impacts on...learning outcomes...in what teachers and learners accept as legitimate goals and what outcomes are valued over others'. Any learning outcomes model might reasonably be expected to accommodate such contingencies.

Sue Drew, in the second of the presentations, focused on the particular strategies at an institutional level that Sheffield Hallam University had developed in the area of alignment over the last 10 years. In her own words she described her presentation as follows:

These consist of a number of complementary strategies to encourage and support the alignment in courses of the aims, learning outcomes, assessment tasks and assessment criteria, and learning and teaching methods. The Academic Board has required the use of learning outcomes in course validation documents since 1994-95 and the inclusion of pass descriptors (assessment criteria) since 2001. Course planning and validation templates have been amended and refined over the years on an iterative basis, to encourage course teams to develop

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<sup>3</sup> For concrete examples of Scottish curricula constructed around a learning outcomes mode, the following may be instructive: the *Professional Competence Course* of the Law Society of Scotland ([www.lawscot.org.uk/pdfs/PCCguidelinesfor\\_applicants\\_March2002.pdf](http://www.lawscot.org.uk/pdfs/PCCguidelinesfor_applicants_March2002.pdf)); the Scottish Deans' Medical Curriculum Group (SDMCG) work on *Learning Outcomes for the Medical Undergraduate in Scotland: A foundation for competent and reflective practitioners* ([www.scottishdoctor.org](http://www.scottishdoctor.org)).

courses where there is alignment. Policies, frameworks and exemplars have been developed, informed by practice. There is a validation process involving peers, which reviews course planning against University requirements, provides feedback to planning teams, and encourages dialogue and debate.

The University's Learning and Teaching Institute (LTI) works with University schools and departments (particularly the Registry) in developing policy, strategy and documentation. It also supports course teams in their course planning. The work of the presenter, an LTI member, has been informed by her research into student perceptions of their learning outcomes and what helps their achievement.

Her presentation will briefly outline the findings from her research into student perceptions relating to their learning outcomes, will indicate the University's main current requirements in course planning, will describe the aspects of the University's infrastructure which support the course planning process, and will go on to explore the main issues in supporting staff in their development of 'joined up' courses.

In the final presentation, Iddo Oberski presented a case study of a particular professional training programme offered at the University of Stirling in which alignment issues take the form of the ways in which different forms and traditions of assessment practice can be accommodated in one programme. He summarised his presentation as follows:

The Teaching Qualification (Further Education) (TQFE) programme at the University of Stirling is now in its fifth year of delivery and highly rated by its students and by the FE sector in Scotland. The core programme was initially designed for part-time students employed in the sector as lecturers, but has more recently also been developed as a route into FE lecturing, similar to initial teacher education programmes for schools, with student placements in FE colleges. To accomplish the TQFE, students must successfully complete six core units, each of which addresses a key area of FE practice, such as 'The FE context', 'Curriculum Design', 'Assessment' and so on. The programme is offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, in full or part-time mode and in face-to-face and distant delivery mode. Once completed, students may enrol on a Research & Enquiry unit and, depending on their prior entry qualifications, this unit allows them to graduate with a degree or a postgraduate diploma with the TQFE.

The programme is modular so that each unit is assessed at the end of a semester. The assessment of each unit consists of two main parts, a university-based assessment and a college-based assessment. The latter is competence based and requires the student to meet the occupational standards published by the Scottish Executive in 1997 (currently under review). Teacher Fellows, who are themselves working in the FE sector and who are employed by the University assess the students' performance in their place of work or at their placement. The university-based assessment is not competence based. Instead it focuses on theoretical perspectives, covering the areas specified as 'underpinning knowledge' in the occupational standards as a minimum, but in more depth and breadth, through academic essay assignments. So assessment on the TQFE seems basically divided in line with the traditional theory-practice theories of professional knowledge and it could be argued that this reflects a model of professionalism aligned to the novice-expert model developed by the Dreyfus brothers (Eraut, 1994).

Formal and informal evaluations with students and staff on the programme have regularly involved discussion around this strong division between the two types of assessment. So, for example, students have expressed wonder at having to write essays, because they may not see how the skill of essay writing is relevant to their role as FE lecturer in their particular subject. Students have also expressed the view that much of the theory coming from educational research seems far removed from the realities of practice. Of course these arguments and views are not new, with similar ideas having emerged from the areas of initial teacher education and nursing education for example. Although it is quite possible to put up a strong argument in defence of using essays, staff on the programme have recently experimented with the nature of the university-based assessment in an attempt to overcome this perceived gap between theory and practice. In this short presentation I will attempt an initial comparison between student work on the university-based assessment for the unit on 'Professional Development'. I will explain how and why the assignment was changed and illustrate the old and new assignments with some quotes from student's work. I will conclude by speculating to what extent constructive alignment has been achieved.

In subsequent papers, further details are provided by each of the three speakers. There follows a summary of the main issues that arose in subsequent workshop discussions.

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### Other resources on assessment and related matters

[www.davidboud.com](http://www.davidboud.com)

Publications of David Boud with some available for downloading

<http://ahe.cqu.edu.au/>

An Australian site about student assessment in higher education

[www.ied.edu.hk/loap/index.html](http://www.ied.edu.hk/loap/index.html)

A Hong Kong site about student assessment in higher education

[www.keele.ac.uk/depts/aa/landt/links/assessment.htm](http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/aa/landt/links/assessment.htm)

A useful site about assessment at the University of Keele

[www.shu.ac.uk/services/lti/](http://www.shu.ac.uk/services/lti/)

Learning and Teaching Institute, Sheffield Hallam University

[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)

Higher Education Academy

## Ensuring alignment in the curriculum: aligning policies, processes and practice

Sue Drew, Learning and Teaching Institute, Sheffield Hallam University

### Introduction

This paper is based on current practice at Sheffield Hallam University, a post-1992 university with approximately 28,000 students. It focuses on one process that aims to encourage constructive alignment in the curriculum, that of course planning. There are other supportive processes, for example, those relating to quality review and to the ongoing iterative development of practice, but the focus here is on course planning.

### What is constructive alignment and why does it matter?

According to Biggs (2003), constructivism has as its focus learners constructing their own knowledge, rather than being passive recipients of the knowledge created by others. For Biggs, '...education is about conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information' (Biggs, 2003).

Biggs considers that: 'They (different views of constructivism) have in common the idea that what the learner has to do to create knowledge is the important thing' (Biggs, 2003).

It follows, therefore, that what students are asked to **do** within the curriculum must align with what those designing the curriculum intend them to learn. This may sound obvious, but it might be seen as in opposition to more traditional approaches, where what students are **told** aligns with what they are intended to learn. It also requires some hard thinking. Biggs sees the curriculum as a system composed of elements which need to be in balance, if the intended outcomes are to be achieved.

My own research supports this view (Drew 1998, 2001). I carried out structured group sessions with students from a wide range of courses (14 course groups with a total of 263 students) and at different levels in Sheffield Hallam University. The structured group session format was originally developed for the UDACE Project on learning outcomes and was described as a 'robust tool' (Otter, 1992). The session is a very different evaluative tool from traditional questionnaires about course provision, which assume the aspects of delivery which are important to students and then ask for ratings of those aspects (eg teacher performance, resources etc). In the structured group session, students were asked to discuss in sub groups three questions.

- What are the most important learning outcomes from your course?
- What helped you in achieving them?
- What hindered you in achieving them?

The sessions generated a considerable amount of data (flip charts from sub groups, individual summaries). An analysis suggested that, a mix of factors within the students

interacted with a mix of contextual factors, and that these factors did, indeed, need to be in balance. The main factors were as follows.

#### **Student factors**

Self management  
Motivational needs  
Understanding  
Support needs

#### **Contextual factors**

Course organisation/resources/facilities  
Assessment  
Learning activities and teaching

For example, students' abilities to manage their work depended on course organisation/resources/facilities (the timetable; access to resources; clarity and stability in assessment schedules), and on assessment (the assessment load and its distribution). Whether or not students felt supported related again to organisation/resources/facilities (clear course aims; the course being well organised), assessment (useful and timely feedback on assessed work) and on learning activities and teaching (peer support being seen as vital, so that activities encouraging peer interaction were important).

### **How can alignment be encouraged?**

#### **University level processes**

The above suggests that these are complex interactions that need careful consideration and planning. Sheffield Hallam University has, over a number of years, developed approaches and structures which, in turn, have allowed it to develop strategies to support coherent planning. The Learning and Teaching Institute (LTI) has been a key player here.

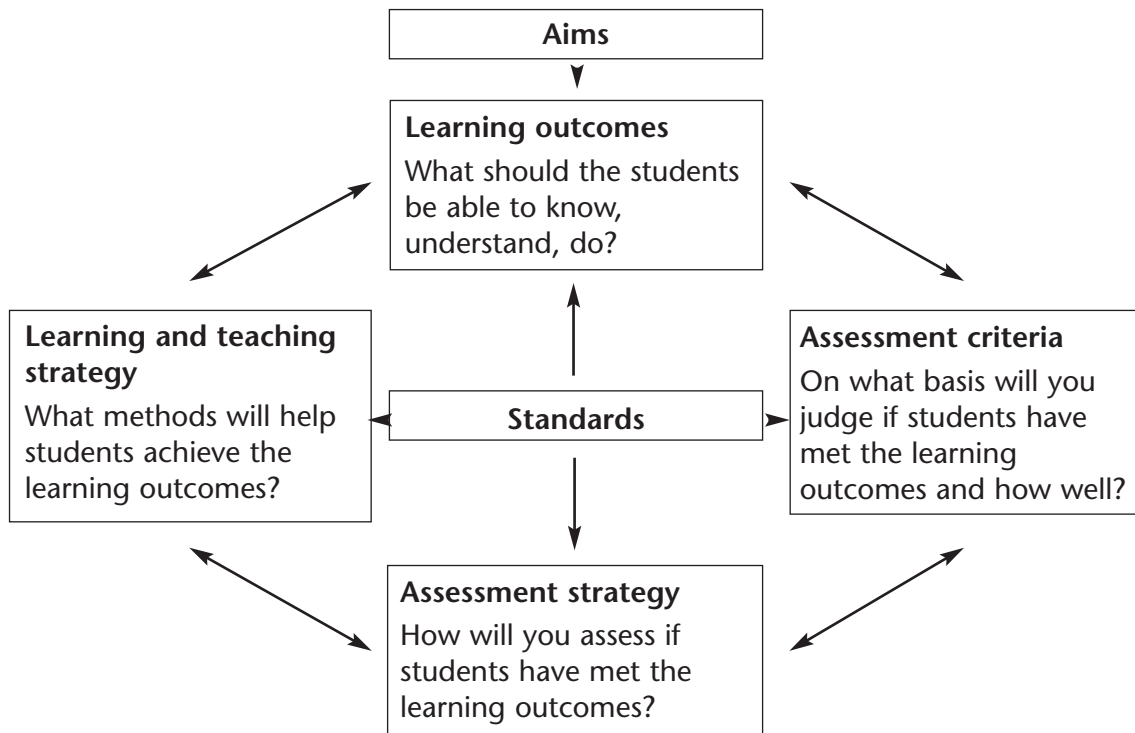
The LTI is an educational development unit that is part of the Learning Centre and incorporates educational developers, researchers, staff supporting the implementation of the University's virtual learning environment and courseware developers. The LTI works closely with Registry to ensure that course planning and validation processes comply with Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education requirements, promote good practice in learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) and are helpful to staff. The LTI has also led on the development of the University's LTA strategy, developed in conjunction with University schools, and is responsible for supporting its implementation. The LTI has encouraged the establishment of LTA coordinators in the University schools. These coordinators lead school LTA committees, support the implementation of the LTA strategy and meet together in an LTA coordinator forum facilitated by the LTI. From September 2004, the University's 10 schools will be reformed into four faculties and the LTA structures will be more formalised, with each faculty having a head of LTA. Each faculty will also have a head of quality whose role includes responsibility for course planning and validation processes.

The University, therefore, has LTA working relationships and structures which allow for the development and implementation of good LTA practice.

#### **A clear vision**

For the infrastructure described above to lead to the development of coherent, aligned courses it needs to be underpinned by shared visions, aims and views of good practice.

One aspect of the shared views of good practice is the following model of course planning (Bingham, 2001), which is clearly articulated at the start of the University's module description template.



The above is a basis for developing aligned courses. Learning outcomes should reflect the aims (of a course or a module), the assessment methods should assess those learning outcomes with assessment criteria linked to the outcomes, and learning and teaching methods should support the development of the learning outcomes and the achievement of the assessment tasks. It is by specifying course and module requirements in this way that standards can be articulated.

The model provides those involved in planning (the course team; the LTI; validation panels) with questions to ask or points to look out for. For example, in reviewing a module description you might ask: why are the learning outcomes all knowledge based if the aim is to develop professional skills; if there is a learning outcome about reflection, why is there no support for developing reflective abilities in the learning and teaching methods and why is it not assessed?

### Enabling strategies

A number of strategies have been developed (and are still developing) to encourage use of this model.

Registry, supported by the LTI, provide templates, examples and guidance for course planning teams. These templates are designed to encourage aligned course design. They reflect the above model and draw on the aims of the LTA strategy and on University policies and frameworks, which in turn allow for external requirements, for example the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

(QAA, 2004). The policies include, for example, one on integrating key skills through the curriculum and policies on assessment and on learning from work that articulate good practice.

Course teams have access to LTI support for their course planning, for example, LTI staff join course planning teams or run workshops for them on specific topics (such as the development of assessment criteria) and the LTI also produces guidance booklets.

Validation panels of peers review course teams' plans, again in relation to University policies and requirements. The Registry and LTI support validation panels with the aim of encouraging consistent practice across the University. Quality processes review practice against the documentation approved at validation.

It sounds like a very joined up, cut and dried approach. The reality is a bit more 'messy'. The LTI does not reach all courses and validation panels sometimes approve documentation that does not reflect policies or fully follow through on all the elements of the model outlined above. The approach may not always lead to perfect results, but it does enable the achievement of good and often very good results.

## Shifts in practice

### Learning outcomes

Our initial challenge was the shift towards defining courses in terms of learning outcomes rather than content. Using learning outcomes enables course planners to be more explicit about desirable processes, skills, attitudes and values, and facilitates the development of aligned courses. If a course is described in terms of content (eg 'behaviourist theories') it is more difficult to identify how far learning, teaching and assessment methods are aligned than if it is described in terms of learning outcomes, for example, 'students will describe the principles of behaviourism'. Framing the learning desired in this way makes it more obvious if the learning and teaching and assessment methods are appropriate (will the learning and teaching methods enable students to understand the principles and will the assessment task identify how well they can describe those principles?).

At Sheffield Hallam University we have faced a number of challenges: encouraging staff to see courses in terms of learning outcomes; writing the learning outcomes in an appropriate way for the level; and writing learning outcomes which are assessable. These challenges have largely been met. The critical aspect of a learning outcomes is the verb used, since it shows what the students should do and to what level. Biggs (2003) sees verbs as critical in writing learning outcomes. Will the student describe, explain, explore, critique or synthesise? Some verbs present difficulties because they indicate neither what the student needs to do nor to what level (eg 'know', 'understand', 'be aware of').

Support for staff in writing learning outcomes has been in the form of an LTI booklet (a much appreciated aspect is a list of verbs!), workshops with course teams and feedback on drafts from the LTI, quality chairs and validation panels. The University has been requiring courses to be described in terms of learning outcomes for over 10 years.

A major supportive strategy was the development of a set of generic learning outcomes by level for the University. Staff can use these as a starting point, to help them see how they might frame their learning outcomes. Course teams adapt them for their context. They were developed in 2001 when the new academic framework for the University was approved and were based on *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QAA, 2004). The generic learning outcomes include knowledge and understanding, intellectual skills, subject skills, professional skills and key skills and relate to the sections in the University's programme specification template. An example of the learning outcome which refers to 'argument' is given below. The University levels are: level 3, access; level 4, undergraduate first level; level 5, undergraduate, second level; level 6, undergraduate, third level; level 7, master's; level 8, doctorate.

Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Present aspects of the subject in an order which enables understanding, using given procedures/formats.	Sort and order aspects of the subject into a logical line of argument.	Produce a line of argument supported by relevant evidence.	Devise and sustain an argument, supported by valid/significant evidence.	Devise and sustain an argument, supported by valid/significant, evaluated evidence. Include some elements which are new/original/unusual and may offer new insights or hypotheses.	Meet the standards set by peers in the discipline, in terms of devising and sustaining a new or, original argument.

(Sheffield Hallam University, 2001)

### Assessment criteria

Since 2000, there has been an increasing focus in the University on assessment criteria as being crucial in clarifying standards. Module descriptions must now give pass descriptors linked to learning outcomes.

Staff find writing these descriptors difficult and time consuming, and the University is possibly at a similar stage to the one it was at a few years ago with the use of learning outcomes. Work on assessment criteria does, however, create another huge shift. The very difficulty of writing them has meant that course teams have worked together to support each other, and this leads to valuable conversations about what is really required; what students really need to do to pass; how important is x as opposed to y; and must all criteria be met and should they be weighted. It forces a rethinking of what assessment is about and what it is for. It has proved important to write learning outcomes and assessment criteria together. Often, when staff write criteria they realise that the learning outcome is imprecise or difficult to assess and must be reworded.

Support for staff in this area has included, again, an LTI booklet on writing criteria, workshops and feedback to staff from the LTI and staff involved in 'quality'. Although staff are required to give only pass descriptors on the module description template, they are encouraged to provide grids of descriptors against each outcome in grading bands. This both helps clarify to students what is needed and enables the giving of feedback. We have developed exemplars of pass descriptors against the generic learning outcomes. Again, these are intended to be a starting point for staff, to be contextualised by them. The intention is not for them to use them as they stand.

The following are the exemplars for the level 4 and 5 learning outcomes which refer to argument.

Learning outcome	Exemplar pass descriptor
Level 4 Sort and order aspects of the subject into a logical line of argument.	Elements with some commonality are grouped together and are placed in an order which makes sense for the topic and which leads to and provides some reasons for a claim.
Level 5 Produce a line of argument supported by relevant evidence.	Claims made are applicable to the topic. Main reasons and information to support the claims are given, in an order which has some logic. Some relevant, current and valid evidence is given for key reasons and claims.

(Sheffield Hallam University, 2003)

### **Focussing on students**

A third major shift is the result of a change in focus. In 2002 the template for module descriptions was amended to be aimed at students. Wording the headings or 'lead-in' statements so that what follows is student orientated has been a simple technique which has led to a great improvement in the way the module descriptions are written. Guidelines to help in their completion are within the template and are simply deleted when the document is produced.

Previous template headings	Current template headings
Rationale Aims Anticipated learning outcomes Indicative content Teaching and learning strategy and methods Assessment strategy Assessment criteria Indicative reading	These are the aims of this module... The reason for having this module and for having it at this level or point in the course is... By the end of the module you will be able to... These are the main ways of learning and teaching which will help you to achieve the learning outcomes... This is how the learning outcomes will be assessed... This is how and at point(s) you will be given feedback on your performance... To achieve a pass... These are examples of the content of the module... These are examples of the main learning resources you will use...

(Sheffield Hallam University, 2004)

We are currently in the process of redesigning the template for the programme specification so that it will also be directed at students and so that it will encourage good practice in course design.

### Changes in practice

Section 4 above indicates three major vehicles which, with support, have encouraged shifts in staff practice towards courses being more aligned. There seem to be some key, complementary elements:

- a shared understanding that the elements of courses should be aligned (ie learning outcomes related to aims, assessment criteria related to the outcomes, outcomes supported by learning and teaching methods and appropriate resources and validly assessed)
- central requirements (course planners must adhere to these if their courses are to be validated)
- ongoing liaison between Registry staff, who articulate the requirements, and the LTI, which supports good practice in LTA
- strong faculty LTA and quality structures to support and encourage staff in good practice
- central support for course planners (not only from the LTI but from the Learning Centre, Students Services and our computing infrastructure).

Have there actually been changes in practice - or do we just have a set of very well-crafted course planning and validation documents?

Where course teams engage actively with the process encouraged by the templates, it clearly leads to changes in practice. Merely being part of a discussion on writing assessment criteria shifts perceptions and challenges assumptions. Where teams regard the process as a hurdle to be overcome, a 'cutting and pasting' exercise, then impact is less. Course planning is a pressurised time and it does not always allow staff to have opportunities to really engage with changes to practice. We (the LTI) are looking at other points where we might engage with staff to encourage aligned, balanced curricula, for example quality reviews.

Balancing elements of the system which is the curriculum is complex. New perceptions, realisations, or developments (such as e-learning) shift the balance, so that there is a constant need to review practice and the most effective ways of encouraging and enabling staff to do so.

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## **Constructive alignment in the Teaching Qualification (Further Education) at the University of Stirling**

**Dr Iddo Oberski and Dr Kathy Nicoll, Institute of Education, University of Stirling**

### **Introduction**

The Teaching Qualification (Further Education) (TQFE) programme at the University of Stirling is now in its fifth year of delivery and highly rated by its students and by the further education (FE) sector in Scotland. The core programme was initially designed for students already employed in the sector as lecturers, but has more recently also been developed as a pre-service route into lecturing (ie an initial teacher education programme) with student practice placement in FE colleges. To accomplish the TQFE, students must successfully complete six core units, each of which addresses a key area of practice, such as 'The FE context', 'Curriculum Design', 'Assessment', and so on. The programme is offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, in full or part-time mode and in face-to-face and distant delivery mode. Once completed, students may enrol on a Research & Enquiry unit, and depending on their prior entry qualifications, this unit allows them to graduate with a degree or a postgraduate diploma with the TQFE.

The programme is modular, and learning for each unit is assessed summatively, at the end of a semester. The assessment consists of two parts: a college and a university-based assessment. The former requires the student to meet the occupational standards, published by the Scottish Executive (SOEID, 1997) (currently under review), for the unit. Teacher Fellows working in the sector are employed by the University to assess the students' performance in their place of work, or at their placement. The latter, the university-based assessment, focuses on theoretical perspectives and contemporary debate, covering the areas specified as 'underpinning knowledge' in the occupational standards, but in depth and breadth, and requiring critical engagement over the various perspectives and rationales that are available. This component is assessed through the writing of an academic essay. So assessment on the TQFE could be argued to reflect a theory-practice binary between professional knowledge and practice, and a model of professionalism aligned to the novice-expert model developed by the Dreyfus brothers (in Eraut, 1994).

Formal and informal evaluations with students and staff on the programme have regularly involved discussion around this strong division between the two types of assessment. For example, students have expressed wonder at having to write essays, because the skills of essay writing do not appear immediately relevant to their role as FE lecturer. Students have also expressed the view that much of the theory coming from educational research seems far removed from the realities of practice. Of course, these arguments and views are not new, with similar ideas having emerged, for example, from the areas of initial teacher education and nursing education. While we concur that a theory-practice perspective is possible, and it might appear that alignment of the essay component with practice is not strong, we would like to explore this view critically by looking at the work that is done through it. Staff on the programme have recently experimented with the nature of the university-based assessment by replacing some essays with variant forms, and it is therefore important to look in some detail at what these alternatives make possible. In this short paper we explore examples of student work on the university-based essay assessment for the

unit 'Professional Development'. We explain how and why the assignment was changed, and illustrate the old and new assignments with some extracts from two students' work. We will present an initial rhetorical analysis of these pieces of work, and conclude by speculating to what extent constructive alignment may, or may not, be indicated by them. Of course, a detailed and systematic piece of research would be necessary to come to any conclusions. What is presented here is preparatory to a more formal 'case study' exploration, it can be indicative only of practices promoted through particular assessment formulations and questions of alignment that might arise from them.

### **Constructive alignment: rationale for changing the assessment description**

Constructive alignment is about more than validity, it is about ensuring that provisions engage practitioners, or practitioners to be, in the activities that they require for professional practice. It is about supporting practitioner/students in active engagement (Biggs, 2002). 'Constructive', then, does not mean that the alignment is simply beneficial. Rather, that learners construct 'functioning knowledge' (Biggs, 2002) - in this context meanings of practice - through their assignment activity, instead of allowing the potential that they might learn knowledge which remains unusable. 'Alignment' ensures that programme outcomes are clearly specified, curriculum content is clearly matched with intended outcomes, learning is actively oriented, and assessments are valid in the sense that they assess specifically whether or not the student has achieved the outcomes.

The 'Professional Development' early version of the unit aimed to enable students to meet the mandatory Units 5.1, 6.1, and 7.1 & 7.2 in the Occupational Standards (SOEID, 1997). These prescribe that the lecturer must be able to 'Evaluate the Teaching and Learning Experience', 'Support Continuous Quality', 'Develop Effective Working Relationships' and 'Manage Self' respectively, with the latter two units under the heading of 'Continue to Develop Professionally'. In further development of the unit we decided to align the content and assessment directly with a reflective practice model of professionalism and with the specific practices of reflection denoted by this model. Practices of reflection are synonymous with those of construction within constructive alignment, in that they require a process of the construction of meaning within practice. Thus, the college-based assessment, requiring a reflective account (written and oral) of work towards these outcomes, remained essentially unchanged. However, the university-based assessment was rewritten to require students to do reflective practice, and demonstrate this through their written work. While the Occupational Standards under the heading of 'Teaching and learning approaches' state that the TQFE programmes should promote 'the concept of the reflective practitioner' (SOEID, 1997), none of the actual performance criteria listed in Annex B explicitly require reflection as practice. Only section 7 on Professional Development states that 'The units in this section constitute the first steps towards addressing the areas of personal and career-long development which the lecturer requires as a reflective professional' (ibid, p63).

There are two alignment issues here. First, reflection can be viewed as a process of thought rather than written word. To require a student to demonstrate success in reflection through a written text may, through one interpretation, be a barrier to those who do not write as well as they reflect. Thus we introduced the option of an oral account supporting a written one within our college-based assessments. However, if the intention is that the competent practitioner must also be literate in reflective writing as well as in reflective practice, then to require a written assignment is still an alignment.

In the early version of the assessment for the unit, there was a range of essay topics available to the student. Each of these required critical engagement with issues of practice. The pertinent aspects of the 'old' and 'new' assignment description are given in Figure 1.

<p><b>OLD</b></p> <p><b>Essay topic</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a Critically discuss the models of professionalism and professional development that dominate within the FE context with reference to alternatives.</li><li>b Critically evaluate a 'case study' course or programme evaluation.</li><li>c Identify and critically discuss contributions that a lecturer can make to support continuous quality improvement within the FE context.</li><li>d Negotiate a title with your tutor.</li></ul> <p>(Student Handbook, Unit: Professional Development and Evaluation, Spring 2003:4)</p>
<p><b>NEW</b></p> <p><b>Assignment - critical incident analysis</b></p> <p>If you have not yet had experience working in a lecturing role in an FE college, you are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1 interview an FE lecturer to identify a critical incident that you can explore and gain their analysis of the incident</li><li>2 analyse the incident on your own using the guidelines offered by Tripp (1993) to help you</li><li>3 inquire into the incident by finding literature that will help inform your analysis</li><li>4 work with University based colleagues to analyse the incident further and with reference to the literature</li><li>5 develop practical knowledge regarding the critical incident</li><li>6 write a description of the incident using the above headings as a guide.</li></ul> <p>For this assignment, you will need to explore what others might have already written about the type of critical incident identified.</p> <p>(Student Handbook, Unit: Professional Development, Autumn 2003:4)</p>

**Figure 1 Old and new assignment descriptions on the unit Professional Development**

The essay topic 'c' within the old description relates to a critical engagement with the 'additional knowledge' component, as indicated in Figure 2. The performance aspects of it are, as previously outlined, assessed through the demonstration of competent performance within the college environment.

Outcome 6.1.4 Contribute to effective quality assurance and quality improvement

**Performance criteria**

- a The outline of quality assurance policies and initiatives is accurate.
- b The explanation of the role of the lecturer in quality assurance is correct.
- c The action taken to implement quality assurance procedures in own work area is in accordance with college procedures and practices.

**Range statement critical terms**

QA Initiatives: SQMS; IIP; ISO90000; Chartermark; SCOTVEC quality criteria; HMI quality elements

**Evidence requirements**

**Practical evidence** that the candidate has implemented quality assurance procedures and has effected improvement in his or her area of work as specified in performance criteria c.

Written or oral evidence of the identification of quality assurance policies and the explanation of the role of the lecturer within that as specified in performance criteria a and b.

**Additional knowledge evidence of:** Concept of continuous quality improvement; quality assurance and initiatives; College quality procedures.

**Figure 2 Occupational standard from the National Guidelines (SOEID 1997: 57)**

Our old assessment (Figure 1, Essay topic a) required a critical analysis of the concept of the reflective practitioner. It is for closer alignment with reflective practice itself, rather than with the concept of it, that we devised our new assignment.

**Evidence of alignment? Initial rhetorical analysis of student work**

For the purpose of this paper, we will present an initial rhetorical analysis (Nicoll and Harrison, 2003) of the work that the students produced in response to these very different assignment descriptions. A more detailed analysis will be published elsewhere. We extracted one piece of student work from the archives for each of the old and new assignment. (The piece of work submitted for the new assignment happened to be by a pre-service student and thus the pre-service assignment description is given in the Figure 1 above. The in-service assignment was similar, except that students were asked to draw more on their own experience of teaching in FE). We then analysed these pieces of writing in relation to the work required by the assignment topics. Figure 3 illustrates two extracts from a student's work in response to the old assignment (Essay topic, c). Figure 4 illustrates two extracts from a student's work in response to the new assignment.

'I agree with Salis (1996) 'argues (sic) that quality is a dynamic idea and that too much definitions may kill it' I also agree with the multi-layered approach suggested and this is where we as a college fall down. The simplest tasks are not achieved and frustration sets in, for example we ask for something to be typed and it comes back with spelling and grammar mistakes, this shows that it has not been spell checked or proof read. The lecturer then adopts the attitude that we would be quicker to do this task ourselves which leads to an increased work load which means less time for other functions which leads on to stress and eventually time is take of (sic) work. In reality we should sent the document back with feedback about the document, however, it is college policy that the word processor type what they are given and they do not need to proof read or spell check the document. This would suggest that policy and procedures have to be adapted which allows personnel to reduce the amount of mistakes that are being made.'

'As a lecturer I look at quality after the event, this is to (sic) late, and West-Burnham (1994, P167) argues that "Evaluation is a classic exemplification of a reactive culture at the micro level however significant it may be at the macro level" I have to agree with this statement. As a lecturer I have to become proactive and I believe TQM would allow me to do this. I could do this if I was allowed to carry out management by process. It is achieved by realising that results come from process. In other words rather than focussing on the Performance Indicator Data we focus on the process, which has caused the result...Using the model of TQM and by managing by process as a lecturer I would still be working towards quality improvement through self-evaluation but I would be being proactive rather than reactive.'

**Figure 3 Two extracts from one student's work on the old assignment**

'Interpretation of the incident within the immediate context...

In examining the incident in the immediate context the student teacher felt that the incident had indeed been a typical event in that she was not overly surprised that the incident had occurred. In many ways she expected some students to be disruptive in class and did not feel that this was particularly unusual behaviour. By examining the incident in the immediate context two main initial interpretations were drawn:

- 1 The lesson was boring and did not meet the learning needs of the group
- 2 The two students were trouble makers, de-motivated and did not want to learn.'

**Figure 4 Extract from one student's work on the new assignment**

Rhetorical analysis can reveal detail in the way in which particular kinds of descriptions of the world are required and built up within and through assessments. Assignment descriptions and their associated criteria for assessment require the learner to construct knowledge in ways that are persuasive in terms of these, and analysis may show the means whereby this is done. Assessments are thus mechanisms whereby power is exercised in the production of knowledge - of the objects to be known, the subject who knows, and specific modalities of knowledge (Foucault, 1972): 'The learner is "trapped", and cannot escape without learning what is intended' (Biggs, 2002), and this is both productive and constraining.

We can thus draw on some resources from the work of Michel Foucault (1972) and rhetorical analysis (Solomon et al, 2004) for an analysis, to examine in some small detail the work of the two assessments; to see what can be said of their rhetorical accomplishment. As descriptions, they stand in differing relationships with the government frameworks of occupational standards, and academic knowledge, as already indicated. Through both assessments, specific objects of knowledge, forms of knowledge, and a knowing subject, are constituted and reinforced.

In the old assessment description (Figures 1 and 3), knowledge is framed as knowledge of 'the contributions...to support continuous quality improvement'. This is positioned through our assessment criteria, as that which can be identified and critiqued 'with reference to appropriate literature'. The objects constituted, then, are those of 'contributions', 'continuous quality improvement' 'the lecturer's role in support' and 'appropriate literature'. The subject is thus one who knows the contributions to support continuous quality improvement, and can refer to the appropriate literature to identify and critically discuss this knowledge.

It can be seen that this essay topic constructs demonstration of the achievement in terms of the occupational standard and in a specific way. 'Constructive alignment' here takes on a new meaning. Meaning cannot be constructed freely by learner activity, but is constrained by the assignment description. By requiring **identification** of knowledge of individual contribution to continuous quality improvement within the essay, the object of knowledge that is constituted within the occupational standard is reinforced. Within the range statement, quality assurance and improvement is that which is already determined through 'college procedures and practices', and wider policies and initiatives, as identified within the 'Range statement critical terms'. Demonstration of achievement of the standard is to be made by effecting improvement to practices, and by providing written or oral evidence of knowledge of the role of the lecturer in these terms. The subject is one who knows their predetermined role and activities within a whole network of such roles and activities. This position and knowledge is made possible by the knowledge objects 'continuous quality improvement', 'quality assurance and initiatives', and 'College quality procedures' which are made secure through the range statement critical terms.

It is by requiring **critical discussion** of the object of the occupational standard that the essay topic does quite different rhetorical work in the constitution of knowledge and subject positioning. This is made possible by through a further object, in what might be identified as a 'tactic' or 'manoeuvre' (Foucault 1979) in the exercise of power, which is the 'appropriate literature'. This intersection and relationship, both allows the constitution of a **critique** of the predetermined roles and activities of the lecturer, and binds him or her in a focus on the further education context.

The student (Figure 3) demonstrated that they have interrogated knowledge derived from the literature, and has drawn on it to build up a description of potential institutional and personal development. This is a specific rhetorical style and process of dynamic interrogation. The student positions themselves in agreement with object representations and knowledge put forward by the authors Salis and West-Burnham. These are represented within the student text, as modified and alternative to those implicit within their own context. To warrant the narrative and acceptance of these

representations and objects, the student presents an argument of their capacity to offer solutions to problems of institutional practice. The notions of 'quality is a dynamic idea', 'the multi-layered approach' and of evaluation as 'a reactive approach at the micro-level', are these solutions. They emerge through a comparison of the objects of quality that are implicit with a specific institutional context with those described within 'appropriate literature'. Coherence of argument, and a problem-solving future-oriented correspondence of knowledge with reality, is the rhetorical devices drawn upon here.

Explicit within this description is also a *logos* of agreement/disagreement - 'I agree with Salis...I also agree with...I have to agree with this statement'. The authors of the literature are positioned as those producing the knowledge. But at the same time the knowledge is represented as that which is to be accepted or rejected, agreed or disagreed with, in terms of its capacity to offer solutions to practical problems. The self-identity constructed through this description is one valorising a critical cognitive process whereby knowledge produced elsewhere is accepted where it affords such potential solutions.

In the new description (Figure 1), students were assessed through an assignment that attempted to reverse an emphasis on theory within a theory/practice binary, through a focus on practice. Here, pedagogical discourses of reflective practice point to the appropriateness of cognitive processes which identify practical knowledge, and work to make this more explicit and to develop it critically by drawing on the knowledge of others, including theoretical knowledge. Here the knowledge produced is emphasised as practical.

Implicit within this assessment description are the same two forms of knowledge that were found within the essay topic - practical and theoretical. Although theory is implicit, in that 'the literature' is to be drawn upon to help critically analyse the incident, this latter is oriented, through Tripp's (1993) process, towards the 'root cause' of the incident. The student is required in this to identify the literature that is appropriate to the incident, rather than it being identified as literature related to the unit material. Pedagogy is thus not positioned as the transmission of knowledge, at least directly through its selection by the academic. Rather, the student must actively search out knowledge, and construct their own meaning with reference to this and their own prior assumptions. The cognitive capacity is the ability to 'develop practical knowledge' through a process that requires that the student come to their own decisions about the persuasiveness of knowledge from differing sources, albeit through a predetermined process of inquiry and analysis that reifies certain sources and forms of knowledge.

The assignment was not aligned with any description of occupational standard in this case. The incidents that emerge to be analysed do not therefore arise as 'objects', from those already determined through the assignment or occupational description. Rather, they emerge from the descriptions that the individual can 'imagine' through those discourses that they are already subject to, within the further education or wider context.

This student (Figure 4) drew on literature that explicated the processes of incident analysis to inform her assignment work. She wrote about this: '... through the analysis process, the interpretations of the incident began to change as the analysis progressed through the various stages.' By recording a self-evaluation of her lesson and examining this document, she came to the conclusion that '... she had incorporated a variety of learning and teaching strategies to make the lesson as interesting as possible to meet a diverse range of learning needs'. 'Vicarious analysis', based on the experience of colleagues, led the student to consider various possibilities of seating arrangement and group work as a way of countering what colleagues considered as the bad behaviour of known 'troublemakers'. The student then explored alternative interpretations '... based on a more general meaning... This usually involves adopting a wider perspective, perhaps social view of the situation (Tripp, 1993)'. Various interpretations arose through this process, leading the student to consider that she may have '... labelled and stereotyped the two students as trouble makers due to her own personal values and previous experiences as a teacher/learner' or that '... the students had no autonomy over their learning and were therefore de-motivated. This was contextualised by the classroom institution and in turn contextualised by the college curriculum which was contextualised by the Scottish Qualifications Authority unit descriptor'. The student went on to consider each of three interpretations in detail by exploring literature that she took as relevant. She concluded by identifying 'The practical knowledge that has emerged from the analysis process and its implications on future practice'. This knowledge was informed by the literature upon which she had drawn. A further extract from this student's work is offered in Figure 5.

'Despite a diversity of teaching approaches the student teacher has come to realise that it is not necessary a failing of her own teaching when all of the learner needs are not met all of the time. In this respect the practical knowledge that has emerged is that she has learned not to be too overly critical of her own abilities, realise her own limitations and accept that she cannot take on the responsibility for every learner's motivational levels... This was felt to be a very important implication for future practice because as a pre service student, it is often easier to apportion blame on to one's inadequacies and inexperience as a teacher as opposed to other complex motivational factors.

From reviewing current literature and obtaining the vicarious experiences and practical solutions from fellow colleagues, it was felt that the seating arrangements within the classroom are extremely important in the success/failure of lessons. Another important theory to practice link which has emerges is that whilst it is commendable and learner centred to encourage students to be independent in their choice of seating arrangements and groups, it is nevertheless sometimes necessary as a teacher to control or direct these arrangements to accommodate the needs of the lesson and the learners. In this respect, the student teacher is hoping to take more control of the physical environment in which she teachers by arranging the classroom to encourage group work and participation among (sic) all members of the group...

Perhaps the most important aspect of practical knowledge which has emerged in respect of the student teacher's personal experience is that in her future practice she will try to engage in critical reflection with other peers, who are perhaps not of a traditional FE background. It was felt that this was an important aspect of future

practice as without wishing to appear overly critical of colleagues, sometimes their own stereotyping is often exacerbated by cynical views and de-motivated attitudes towards their institution/profession... [this]... can and does significantly effect (sic) how we label our students and for this reason she would like to involve other members such as fellow pre-service student (sic) within her future evaluations. It is hoped that this will help to provide a wider perspective on future issues of practice.'

**Figure 5 Further extract of student work in response to the new assessment description**

Figure 5 suggests that a quite different form of knowledge, identity and performance is made possible through an assignment description requiring reflective practice. The student identifies her practical knowledge, and embarks on a process for the critical scrutiny and development of this. The warranting devices drawn upon are those of a situated consensus and corroboration, first in terms of the descriptive interpretations of experienced colleagues. This constructs the potential for a community of practitioners with shared norms, values, and knowledge. Second, however, by testing knowledge further, and this time in relation to codified knowledge, the knowledge of this community and prior personal knowledge is found wanting, the student clearly begins to define professional values and norms around specific **processes** of critical interrogation.

The authors of the literature and, potentially, experienced professionals are positioned as experts within this description. The participant is positioned as a novice who will achieve expertise through a continuation of such processes of reflective practice as a defining engagement within practice. The binary between theory and practice is upheld, with the differing roles that are allocated through this. Theoretical knowledge is again valorised. However, warranting of the descriptions of practical knowledge is achieved through its concurrence with relevant theoretical knowledge, and in the testing of peer knowledge against individual practical knowledge and that found within the literature. This is a quite distinctly different style and process of dynamic interrogation from the previous one. The object domain, and narrative of the description is not confined through a relationship with a competence statement. What is to count as an 'incident' was not prescribed in the same way as in the previous assignment, which had required the narrative to address 'continuous quality improvement', and where the alignment of this object was pre-determined.

**Conclusion: constructive alignment?**

From the previous analysis it might be thought that alignment between the assessment and the Occupational Standards has improved (has been constructive) with the redesign of the assessment description in the Professional Development unit on our TQFE programme. However, it must be remembered that our analysis draws on the work of only one student in each case and it is likely that a greater range of rhetoric strategies would be evident in if we had been able to examine a larger sample of students' work on the different assignments. Furthermore, seeing an improvement in alignment assumes that the kind of reflective practice in the second piece of work accords to a higher degree than the first with the requirements for reflective practice as specified in the Occupational Standards. However, it should be

clear from our analysis that the very notion of reflective practice itself, as actually exhibited through student work, requires much deliberation. In making the shift from notions of the competent and technical expert to the reflective practitioner as a framing for assessment descriptions, certain potentials of professional identity and comportment are reinforced and others elided. In this, a realist and very specific view of the world and practice is reinforced. In other words, notions of competence, expertise and reflection are rhetorical achievements, which have significant rhetorical effects within and through pedagogy, and elsewhere, which are important to explore. Pedagogical descriptions can thus be explored for their work in rhetorically building up the most 'appropriate' or 'effective' work and comportment of the teacher, and in undermining alternative discourses. It implies - as does expertise and competence - an empiricist and realist view of the world. While persuasive and in tune with many common sense views of the world, this is a rhetorical achievement that fails to reflexively articulate the rhetoric of its own invention.

Finally, a similar conclusion can be reached about the notion of constructive alignment, which is itself a rhetorical device belying an empiricist and technical-rational perspective on pedagogical practices. In conjunction with learning outcomes, performance criteria and range statements, it oversimplifies the complexity of learning situations by offering cause and effect solutions that do no longer require professional autonomy. Perhaps what is needed is a more detailed breakdown of the process of reflective practice into performance criteria, in order to further improve constructive alignment!

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## **Constructive alignment of learning outcomes to assessment methods - Post-workshop report**

**Professor Mike Osborne, Institute of Education, University of Stirling and Workshop Director**

In the first breakout session, four parallel groups were asked to explore issues pertinent to constructive alignment of learning outcomes to assessment methods in general terms, based upon their individual and collective expertise and experience, using questions 1 and 2 below as a starting point.

- 1 What are learning outcomes?
- 2 What currently happens in your institution to support and encourage the alignment in courses of the aims, learning outcomes, assessment tasks and assessment criteria, and learning and teaching methods?

In the second session, groups were asked to identify one major problem/issue pertinent to the workshop theme then go on to develop ways in which this may be addressed and overcome by developing new ideas and learning practices that can be recommended for adoption by institutions. Questions 3 and 4 below were the stimuli for these discussions.

- 3 What else/more could happen in your institution to modify our current assessment practices to equip students to be more effective learners?
- 4 What institutional barriers need to be removed to ensure that assessment contributes actively to learning rather than merely certifying performance?

Each group was asked to write, on a flipchart (provided), the problem(s) they have identified and a summary of ways in which this may be resolved with a focus on enhancing future learning and teaching standards and the student learning experience.

The flipcharts will all be posted up in the final plenary session where a rapporteur (also the note-taker in the session) from each group summarised the group's findings very briefly. There followed general discussion from the floor.

The three speakers acted as 'floating ears' throughout both workshop sessions and moved between the breakout groups listening to the discussions and providing some expert input, as required.

Based upon the group's discussions the facilitator and note-taker produced a series of bullet points that set out their identified problem(s) and the proposed model(s) of tackling these. These notes are incorporated into the account below.

### **What are learning outcomes?**

The summaries of discussions produced by the workshop rapporteurs raised a number of issues pertaining to the applicability and suitability of learning outcomes (LOs).

At a fundamental level questions were raised as to whether LOs were a new concept and whether they were they different from learning objectives. This, in turn, in one group, led to some discussion about differences between aims and objectives. In the same group, the question of whether LOs for a programme and course were different was also discussed.

The following were common issues raised by more than one group.

**Learning outcomes tend to be prescriptive and focus on the particular.** How could practitioners value and measure unintended LOs, including outcomes that students had identified, but which were not recognised and not assessed? Similarly how can that learning that is unassessed (eg tutorials) be linked to LOs?

**Are LOs helpful for practitioners?** There was some agreement that at a micro-level LOs could be helpful. For example, one participant commented that for laboratory work such micro-level LOs had focused students in each practical. However, others comment that a set of LOs don't necessarily aggregate into the graduate 'product' at end of a programme of study. Related matters included the implication that LOs could be used to assess low-level outcomes and routine factual information, but could not capture the more sophisticated learning processes and outputs. Here differences in disciplines become important. For example, another participant commented that art students are often encouraged to surprise their instructors and explore new areas; therefore specific LOs stated at the beginning of the course are sometimes difficult to formulate. Furthermore, there was some feeling that LOs stressed a surface-level of learning and that depth of knowledge would be compromised. By contrast LOs' ability to capture generic outcomes of higher education accorded for some with the modern mission of a mass system.

**Are outcomes useful to students?** The disaggregation of learning into multiple LOs, and the implication of certain models that all LOs should be demonstrated, was felt to be unhelpful and problematic for students. However, the explicitness of LOs did have possible advantages. For example, it was suggested that it be beneficial to map the whole curriculum in LO terms to show explicit relationships between sub-components and how these develop at a programme level. The idea of the list of graduate skills which was mentioned by Boud in the first presentation found support from some students and it was commented these were outcomes that could certainly be useful for fourth year students thinking of applying for jobs and even first year students in terms of what to expect and look out for throughout their time at university. The sheer explicitness of LOs was also perceived by some as a means of democratising higher education. They allowed the production of a 'shared space' where students understand what and how they are to be taught and see an alignment between that and the learning that they are expected to achieve and what they will be assessed upon.

**Are LOs useful for employers?** In contrast to the aforementioned comments the utility of LOs to employers was questioned. For example, an individual from an engineering background pointed out that in his field outcomes were generic across the range of engineering subjects that meant that they had become almost meaningless. As a result difficulties were experienced not only by academics attempting to construct programmes based on guidelines informed by LOs, but also by employers in their interpretation of the value of qualifications derived from such generic outcomes.

**Can the attainment of all LOs be meaningfully graded on a scale?** There was discussion about the implications of LOs in relation to grading students since there is potential a mismatch between the principles underpinning achievement of LOs and

the level of that achievement. For instance, as one group reported what would a mark of 40 per cent signify in terms of LOs achieved? Furthermore, how might we distinguish between **levels** of LOs?

**What currently happens in your institution to support and encouragement the alignment in courses of the aims, learning outcomes, assessment tasks and assessment criteria and learning and teaching methods?**

Questions raised in a number of workshops related to the issue of **modularisation**.

Key questions posed included the following.

- Is the rigidity of a modular structure a hindrance? It may be too big an administrative hurdle to change assessment part way through if things are not going as planned.
- Within a modular structure, there may be different rules of engagement between modules and coordinators. How do we ensure consistency and alignment in the greater sense?
- How can progression be measured in a modular system and are we losing a sense of progression by atomising learning?

This later question also related to the difficulties of incorporating **formative assessment** within a modular structure. Possible ways suggested of approaching such difficulties included introducing mid-way assessments and breaking down assessments into specific tasks that can be built on. One group discussed the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning and the benefits of peer assessment. While the difficulties of peer assessment were also acknowledged, there was general agreement that it was a useful formative tool. Another possibility discussed was the delivery of assessments during contact time, ie presentations that had the same criteria as assignments. Furthermore, interrogating students about criteria and performance was seen as a way to enable students and staff to have confidence in the students' judgement.

Some workshop participants suggested that the **structure of modules** themselves was an issue. For example, long thin modules over the whole year rather than short fat modules over one semester could aid alignment between teaching, learning and assessment.

Other comments related to the **nature of assessment**. For example, while in certain course outcomes are written in terms of the demonstration of specific skills, the necessary adaptation of assessment, namely the use of process-based criteria, rarely occurs.

On a positive note examples were cited of **problem-based learning** within medicine scheme in which students were directed towards metacognitive approaches (learning how to learning) in tandem with developing an appropriate knowledge base. The success of the scheme however depended upon introducing the approach early enough in the degree course in order for the students to find their feet and get the right approach.

Alignment seemed quite clearly depends on the type of programme. In one group it was suggested that alignment is best achieved in those courses if driven by a

professional body/vocational courses, especially where courses are more prescriptive, the same staff teach across the course and where staff are tuned in to accreditation needs.

A number of groups made remarks about **student attitudes and responsibilities** and issues pertaining to the **increasing diversity** of the student cohort. Some comments expressed the view that certain students are more conservative than staff, and took a mechanist and strategic view of study. They want to be told what to do and what they need to know. Others expressed these concerns in questions such as:

- how do you counteract students' apathy and resistance to changes in assessment approaches, which make new and unfamiliar demands on them?
- how do you use constructive alignment to promote deep learning?

It was suggested that in those courses where reflective activities of students mapped against content are seen as key (eg physiotherapy) students are able to actively critique assessment criteria, although they may need training. Personal development plans could also be used to encourage students to question assessment rationale and alignment.

Others commented that it was difficult to engage students in the learning process given the diverse needs and experience of students and constraints on resources. Nonetheless, there was a common feeling that although students find it difficult to pinpoint their achievements, strategies that overtly aim to align learning outcomes and assessment might help.

A number of suggestions were made in relation to institutional change. Overall the sheer choice of possible routes, namely the flexibility of many higher education institutions, sat uncomfortable with ensuring consistency across institutions in relation to constructive alignment. There was a general call for explicitness in processes to demonstrate to students, what, how and when something happens. In this context it was pointed out in one group that it wasn't simply a question as to whether students know, but also as to whether staff knew as well.

### What else/more could happen in your institution to modify our current assessment practices to equip students to be more effective learners?

In relation to this question, a number of issues arose and a brief summary of points follows.

- Action at an institutional level needs to address conflicting value systems/agendas.
- Learning and teaching should be a priority, but this requires time, resources and support services eg professional help in educational development.
- The language of assessment needs to change, for example, by making expectations transparent.

- Sharing ideas of what is expected at each level is a necessity. In some institutions this is clearly delineated eg by matching the grade achievable in a particular unit and level against criteria. There are advantages (eg transparency) but also disadvantages (limits to what can be assessed).
- There are of course differences in learning, teaching and assessment across disciplines, but we can still have good institutional policy which is then reflected in each subject area.
- There might be a quality enhancement day at department, schools or faculty level each year so that quality is not just seen as a paper trail: communication within the institution is crucial.
- Ways should be created so that educational development units can support busy academics who do not think they need/want support.
- Rewarding academics for excellence in learning and teaching would help. Most get promoted for research, not teaching. Could we encourage staff to research in the pedagogy of their subject? View scholarship as not just subject scholarship.

### What institutional barriers need to be removed to ensure that assessment contributes actively to learning rather than merely certifying performance?

One particular group commented extensively on this question and their points are summarised here.

- One of the ironies of alignment is that assessment often stops learning that the student might be motivated to do; assessment does not often measure development of an individual.
- It was felt that in relation to Drew's presentation on level descriptors there might be disciplinary differences in the verbs used: perhaps there was also more emphasis than necessary on the 'pass descriptors'.
- One suggestion was that perhaps we shouldn't tell students what the criteria were as figuring them out was part of the development of understanding of what a degree is - LOs may promote too mechanistic a response to the subject.
- In the interests of effectively assessing the 'processes' as well as the knowledge we should move away from written exams and move towards oral examinations as you can mark understanding more readily. It was noted however that at least one Scottish higher education institution had recently completely abandoned the practice of oral examinations even for borderline candidates.
- It was perhaps easier to assess students 30 years ago when there were fewer of them because of this perhaps they are more dependent upon what they are told, there was a feeling among some academic that students were less likely to bring something unexpected to their contact hours.
- There was a feeling that the only way to get students to undertake assessment that would have been formative in previous years was to make it summative. It was noted, however, that all forms of assessment, even summative elements, were formative. There was general agreement that there should be feedback on summative examinations although it was recognised that it would be problematic there was no reason for not doing it. It was pointed out that

students could benefit from formative assessment with a link to summative assessment by giving them feedback to an assessment, for example, an essay and then allowing them to re-submit it amended or not as a summative assessment.

- It was possible to give feedback to the entire course rather than individuals, or even get the previous year group to give advice.
- It was suggested that feedback should be returned to students in a typed format, as nearly all assessment was expected to be submitted in typed format.
- It was argued that self-assessment promoted a dialogue with the tutor as students could identify their strengths and weaknesses and then the tutors could comment upon students' perceptions of their work.
- Was it dismissive of students to say they are only interested in the mark? Some courses had only pass/fail marking with feedback but no mark.
- One participant pointed to the example of Reed College in the United States where students were told none of the grades on any piece of work unless they were in imminent danger of failing.
- It was commented that at one institution in the United States, the criteria given at the beginning of course and then each semester and at the end of the semester/year, students 'bid' with tutors to demonstrate with any relevant evidence that they had acquired the outcomes. The aim was to promote a reflective learner (which is what several courses are aiming to do, ie teacher training). It was commented that at Maastricht the medical examination is based upon the same each year through using a huge exam bank and then taking a sample of questions from the bank.
- Staff time was extremely imbalanced between assessment and teaching - sometimes getting up to a 50:50 ratio. It was commented that often institutions do not give its staff enough time to make proper assessment in formative manner in the time allowed.
- Certainty and competency of marking are major problems; criteria might go along way to change that and create a fairer and more consistent assessment of students' work.
- Issues were emerging regarding e-learning and online assessment: it should be noted that these approaches require much up-front time and effort.