Constructive alignment is a term coined by John Biggs (1999); it refers to the idea that learning activities, desired learning outcomes, and assessment activities can all be “aligned,” or oriented so that they are complementary, rather than conflicting. It is similar in philosophy to Backwards Design (see the FAB Backwards Design Tipsheet). The idea behind constructive alignment is that students should be assessed on the learning outcomes and skills that they have developed during a course. In addition, in a constructively aligned course, the learner is shepherded into learning the desired outcomes and skills, so they have the best chance of success when they are assessed. This alignment also reduces the amount of time students spend doing peripheral or irrelevant work that will not be assessed.

The ‘constructive’ aspect refers to what the learner does, which is to construct meaning through relevant learning activities. The ‘alignment’ aspect 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 to the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes. The learner is ‘trapped,’ and cannot escape without learning what is intended. (Biggs, 2003, p.27)

The key elements of a constructive alignment in the design process are:

- Intended learning outcomes (also known as “learning outcomes” or sometimes “learning objectives”).
- Activities (what you want the learner to be able to do and achieve to meet the learning outcomes).
- Assessment matched to the learning outcomes and the learning activities to evidence that the learning outcomes have been attained.

The alignment of these three elements will ensure the course of study flows well and that the student experience will be one of cohesion between what they are expected to learn, the learning activities they undertake, and the assessment used to determine their progress.

Ensuring alignment means that students assume a deeper approach to their learning when they are trapped in a “web of consistency” [Biggs (1999)]. For example, if a learning outcome aims for students to develop communication skills, you will need to align it with activities to practice those skills, and assessment tasks to demonstrate they have met the intended outcome. This could be through oral presentations, video assignments, or group work where the skills to be assessed are explicitly taught, rather than assumed.

Shuell (1986) also emphasises the importance of focusing on what the learner does:

Without taking away from the important role played by the teacher, it is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does. (p.429)
HOW DO I USE IT?

Learning outcomes can drive your design of the learning experiences for your students, but some educators prefer to begin with assessment. Ultimately, it does not matter where the design point starts, as long as there is a logical connection between the elements.

While constructive alignment should be applied to any mode of teaching, it is particularly important when designing blended and flipped environments to ensure the online and face-to-face components complement one another and make sense to the learner (Boud and Prosser, 2002).

There are several planning and design templates available that are based on, or concur with, the principles of constructive alignment. These are available on the How Do I Get Started section of the UQ Flipped Classroom web site.

WHAT IF I WANT MORE?


WHAT IF I NEED SUPPORT?

For further support contact ITaLI UTEACH

RESOURCES

- Aligning Teaching for Constructing Learning (Biggs, 2003)
- For more information on writing learning outcomes, see the ITaLI Teaching Toolkit Series FAB Learning Outcomes Tip Sheet on the Flipped Classroom website.
- Assessment Principles (aligning with learning outcomes) Education Innovation, University of Sydney
- Planning and Designing a Blended or Online Course (UNSW)