

Constructive alignment (CA) is an approach to teaching where desired student learning outcomes are defined before teaching takes place. Teaching and assessment methods are then designed to best support those outcomes and to assess the standard at which they have been achieved.

(Biggs, 2014, pp. 5-6)

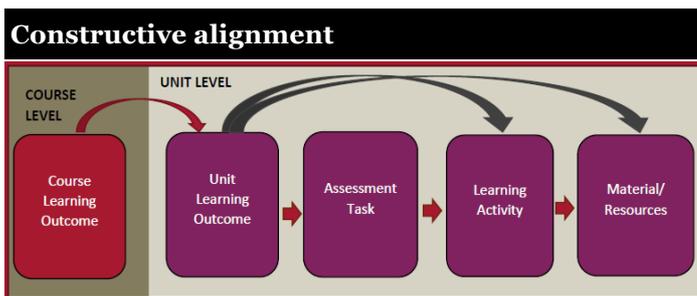
Biggs argues that students construct meaning by undertaking learning activities, including assessment tasks, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge and skills. Constructive alignment is not about "What do I want to teach?", but rather "What do I want students to learn?"

ALIGNED CURRICULUM COMPONENTS

Constructively aligned curriculum is achieved by coordinating three elements:

1. Learning Outcomes (at the unit, major/specialisation and course levels).
2. Assessment Tasks.
3. Teaching and Learning Activities.

The links between these elements is shown below.



Constructive Alignment at Macquarie University

The elements of the curriculum are purposefully designed to be mutually reinforcing. The teaching effort is focused on learning activities and resources that are designed to help students achieve the learning outcomes.

Assessment provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the intended outcomes. Judgements about performance therefore references defined criteria and standards required to meet the learning outcomes.

CLARITY OF PURPOSE

Students are frequently driven by what is required in summative assessment with a tendency to ignore non-assessed activity (Ramsden, 1992). As such it is important to clearly articulate to students the links between learning outcomes, activities/resources and assessment tasks. It is vital for student engagement that the curriculum is seen by students to be coherent and purposefully aligned.

Explore this topic further ...

D'Addiego-Kettle, M. (2021) Constructive Alignment. MQ CMS Wiki, https://wiki.mq.edu.au/x/AYF_Fg
 Rytmeister, C. (2019) Writing Learning Outcomes, MQ CMS Wiki, <https://wiki.mq.edu.au/x/sICqEg>
 Quick Guides: 'Learning Outcomes' (including Bloom's cognitive domain) and more <https://goto.mq/qg-lt>

A good practice example of constructive alignment

Alignment of a CLO and ULO with matching assessment tasks and learning activities.

Course Learning Outcome	Critically assess the roles of HE practitioners with institution-wide responsibilities.
Unit Learning Outcome	Use <i>critical consideration</i> of, and <i>problem-solving</i> in relation to the roles, responsibilities, strategies and practices of higher education leaders and managers.
Assessment tasks	1. Critical review of journal article, reflecting on the connection between theory and practice [<i>critical consideration</i>]; 2. Major assessment task in two parts: Part A. Identify, discuss and analyse the impact of a contextual factor that affects your chosen area of activity at the meso (institutional) and micro (organisational unit) levels [<i>critical consideration</i>]; Part B. Integrate your analysis across the two levels to provide an Executive briefing paper outlining the strategic activities that will enable the institution to meet the challenges posed by the contextual factor, in your area of activity [<i>problem-solving</i>].
Learning activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading [materials = reading list]. • Online discussion on topics related to higher education organisation, governance and management. [materials = readings, policies, strategy docs, iLearn forum]

BEYOND FORMAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

Constructive alignment does not exclude learning and practising skills in addition the formal learning outcomes. For example, an activity where students collaborate to reflect on reasons for taking a unit might not prepare for a specific assessment task, but it might engage students, create a sense of belonging and motivate learning.

REFERENCES

Biggs, J. (2014) Constructive alignment in university teaching, HERDSA Review of Higher Education, 1, 5-22
<http://taw.fi/HRHE1-5-22>
 Ramsden, P. (1992). Learning to teach in higher education. London: Routledge.

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