Curriculum Design and Alignment

In the first part of this formative you are asked, depending on your level, to either:


Or

**1.** In your own words show your understanding and evaluation of Biggs’ (2003) theory of constructive curriculum alignment as discussed at: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id477_aligning_teaching_for_constructing_learning.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id477_aligning_teaching_for_constructing_learning.pdf) (100 words Undergraduate)

This support document has been created to help you with this evaluative task, by showing some exemplars of participant responses. Please read through some of the passages and see how the writers have given their critical view of his theory. This first writer does not agree with it!

**Biggs’ theory (2003) of constructive alignment provides a framework which allows educators to consider activities which will ensure learning outcomes can be achieved to the required depth. Learners should therefore be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to pass formal assessments.**

**Biggs’ theory (2003) is simplistic. Learning is a social activity, it is not mechanical. Biggs assumes at some level that all learners are the same or can be made to be the same, ignoring differing learning needs, learning styles, abilities and varying expectations. Also teaching styles and abilities differ from tutor to tutor. All these differences can occur in one class, e.g. the differing age groups and educational backgrounds in my ‘Education Support Assistant’ class. Consequently I disagree with his theory.**

(Undergraduate)

The second writer agrees with the theory in principle but can see some problems implementing it fully, whereas the third writer does agree with it.

**Biggs’ (2003) theory of curricular alignment is excellent and would hold up well in the perfect world and as a theory makes perfect sense. However, in my opinion, in the current economic and political climate it is becoming difficult to achieve this due to continual changes in the education system. Politically, too much emphasis is placed on the final outcome rather than the whole process as expounded by Biggs. Budget cuts limit opportunities for the curriculum to be updated (Huddleston et al, 2007) and redesigned, with the need to reduce staffing costs and the amount of money required to create the resources.**

(Undergraduate)

**I believe that Biggs’ theory of constructive curriculum alignment is an effective method for structuring teaching, assessment and learning activities. I agree with Biggs (1999), in that we need to create a positive environment, both physically and emotionally, which will set the conditions for encouraging learners to construct their learning through active involvement. This should allow learning to happen in a naturally occurring way, as a**
result of performing planned activities. This will allow the learners to deeply engage in the process of successfully achieving intended learning outcomes (ILOs). This learner-centred approach is where I believe Biggs’ theory has most value within my teaching environment. (Undergraduate)

The next writer sometimes agrees with Biggs’ ideas, but reflects upon how in practice it is not always easy to do all he suggests.

In any field of academic endeavour, it is essential to remain equally focussed on both what should be learned and how this learning occurs. The ‘what’ can be ascertained by consulting the syllabus but ‘how’ this occurs is much more contentious and complex. Biggs (2003) theorises that all stages and levels of the learning process should be carefully planned, compelling learners to engage fully and encourage optimal achievement. The major strength of Biggs’ theory is that it recognises not only the influence of pedagogic approaches but also the impact of educational policy and the physical learning environment. These factors play a key role in (re)designing any course curricula (Bokhorst-Heng et al, 2006).

I feel that the merit of matching of learning activities to anticipated outcomes is difficult to dispute. That said, I have experienced problems putting this into practice. To effectively align curricula in the way Biggs suggests, I need to carefully consider the ability range, motivation and metacognitive skills (Flavell, 1979) of learners. In addition, the prescriptive nature of required evidence, particularly for criterion referenced assessments make it very challenging to creatively design and align some curricula (Borich, 2007). Difficulties aside, this idealistic theory provides me with an excellent, process-driven starting point for thoughtful and innovative curriculum design. (Postgraduate)

The next writer thinks that Biggs’ theory does not work so well in the context of the college sector and makes the point that Biggs’ use of the term ‘acceptable’ is too subjective.

Whilst I believe the overall theory of curriculum alignment to be positive and beneficial, and likely possible to apply in higher education as Biggs envisaged where prior knowledge is of a certain level for course entry, I think that Biggs’ (2003) theory is flawed when applied to the college sector and in particular to my teaching of students of varied prior knowledge and ability. Biggs’ ‘graded levels of acceptability’ is an undefined term, so how do I quantify what level is acceptable? It may be different for different learners, and can also have quite a negative impact on individual learners’ progress.

This is backed up by Corder (2008) who states that stipulating success levels can have negative connotations and inhibit learning in some individuals. The psychology of learners is also important for successful learning, examined by Weare and Gray (2003), such as confidence and self-esteem, but these are not quantifiable, so are not considered in Biggs’ theory of curriculum alignment but can have a huge impact on learning. (Postgraduate)

Think about what Biggs says in his writing at the link we give you. Is his theory workable for you as the lecturer? Are you able to set up the best environment or choose your assessments? You may share some of the views above or disagree with them.

What is important is that you evaluate Biggs’ theory for yourself!