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Designing a Unit Assessment Using Constructive Alignment

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ABSTRACT

Constructive alignment is an outcomes-based approach for teaching, in which the learning outcomes that students are intended to achieve are defined before teaching takes place. Teaching and assessment methods are then designed to best achieve those outcomes and to assess the standard at which they have achieved. It provides a framework for adjusting teaching and assessment to address the attainment of those outcomes and standards. Constructive alignment is effective in designing teaching and assessment that enable students to learn, rather than to leave them guessing as to what is involved in the course of study or on what they will be assessed. The paper highlights the importance of using constructive alignment to enhance the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment. It reports on a study that applied the principles of constructive alignment to promote good teaching and deep student learning. It discusses the application of constructive alignment to design assessment criteria and rubric for a curriculum unit.

KEYWORDS

Assessment, Constructive Alignment, Curriculum, Intended Learning Outcomes, Learning, Rubrics, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning take place in a whole-system, which embraces classroom, departmental and institutional levels. A poor system is one in which the components (curriculum, teaching and assessment tasks) are not integrated, and are not tuned to support high-level learning. In such a system, only the 'academic' students use higher-order learning processes. In a good system, all aspects of teaching and assessment are tuned to support high-level learning, so that all students are encouraged to use higher-order learning processes. Biggs (1999) states that the focus of good teaching must be on what students are doing with the knowledge, skills and competencies they are acquiring, because learning doesn't occur through just listening, action is also required (Felder, 1997). Learning takes place in a complex environment and there are many factors interacting within this system such as students` characteristics, teaching methods, curriculum, the learning objectives, and the institutional setting (Shuell, 1986). According to Shuell, if teachers want students to focus on understanding meaning, on developing high-level cognitive skills like analysis and synthesis, then the learning activities that teachers design and assessment tasks must be consistent with those objectives.

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The traditional way of curriculum design defines the content to be taught, describe the ways in which the content should be delivered and the methods of assessing the content. The approach is teacher-centred and focuses on the teacher's input and it lays emphasis on content and coverage (Tam, 2014). However, in recent years there has been a paradigm shift taking place, moving the emphasis from teaching to learning and a more student-centred curriculum. This change has impacted on the curriculum design process with a greater emphasis on the learning in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies within courses and modules. The focus is on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments. The assessment of learning is in terms of how well the students absorb the materials taught, most teachers assess students' needs and strengths by giving their students exams at specific times during the academic year, which generally occurs in one sitting. For example, multiple choice tests, true-false, fill in the blanks are traditionally used in assessing students and these types of assessment require either memorization or rote substitution. This type of exam has traditionally been the predominant instrument used for student assessment. For the most part, students are not allowed to participate in assessing their own progress or accomplishments. However, teachers have realised that 'academic exams' are a limited type of assessment, they do not thoroughly or accurately give a view of the students' academic development, performance and capabilities. These academic exams do not consider students' various learning styles, their personal backgrounds, their interests and their needs. Because of these limitations in traditional assessment, teachers have begun to use other types of assessment that are more responsive to student diversity. Diversity in higher education increases as students migrate all over the world and as more students from different social and economic backgrounds access education. Educational goals have moved beyond simple knowledge acquisition to promoting student engagement and higher order cognitive functions such as problem solving and critical thinking which are the characteristics of deep learning. Teachers, now more than ever before, need to learn more about their students and their students' needs. Assessments that will help in this process and support students in overcoming barriers to learning are a means of helping both teachers and students.

A departure from this traditional paradigm is the student-centred approach where the emphasis is on what the students are expected to be able to do at the end of the learning experience. This approach is also referred to as an outcomes-based approach with statements used to express what knowledge students have acquired, and what abilities they have developed. The outcome-based approach differs from the traditional model, the outcomes not the content to be inputted are initially defined. Subsequently the delivery and assessment methods are developed to enable individual learners to achieve the learning outcomes (Harden, 1999). Outcome-based assessment focuses on application and higher-level learning and it emphasizes on maximizing learning, it is student-centred in that the target is what the learner must achieve and how the learner may best be engaged to achieve it to the required standard. It is an assessment for learning, that generally extends over time. For example, portfolio, demonstrations, field work, case studies, assignment and lab reports are used in assessing students. Alignment of assessment design with learning outcomes can enhance students' learning, and ensure teaching quality and standards. Implicit in the outcome-based approach is the idea that teachers are facilitators of learning, who create and sustain an effective learning environment and experience based on a wide range of best practices in teaching and learning. And the fundamental role of assessment is to monitor, confirm and improve student learning. Such radical shift from teacher delivery to student learning is resonant with the theory of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996, 1999, 2003; Biggs and Tang, 2007, 2011).

As with any other models of educational and curriculum design, there are both advantages for guiding better instruction and curriculum and disadvantages associated with adopting outcomes-based approaches. An understanding of both benefits and limitations will help make the principles and concepts of outcomes-based approach more concrete in the form of application of curriculum and instructional design. At the level of implementation, the outcomes-based approach is considered to offer benefits including clarity. Focusing on outcomes can help communicate clearly between various

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