

What is constructive alignment?

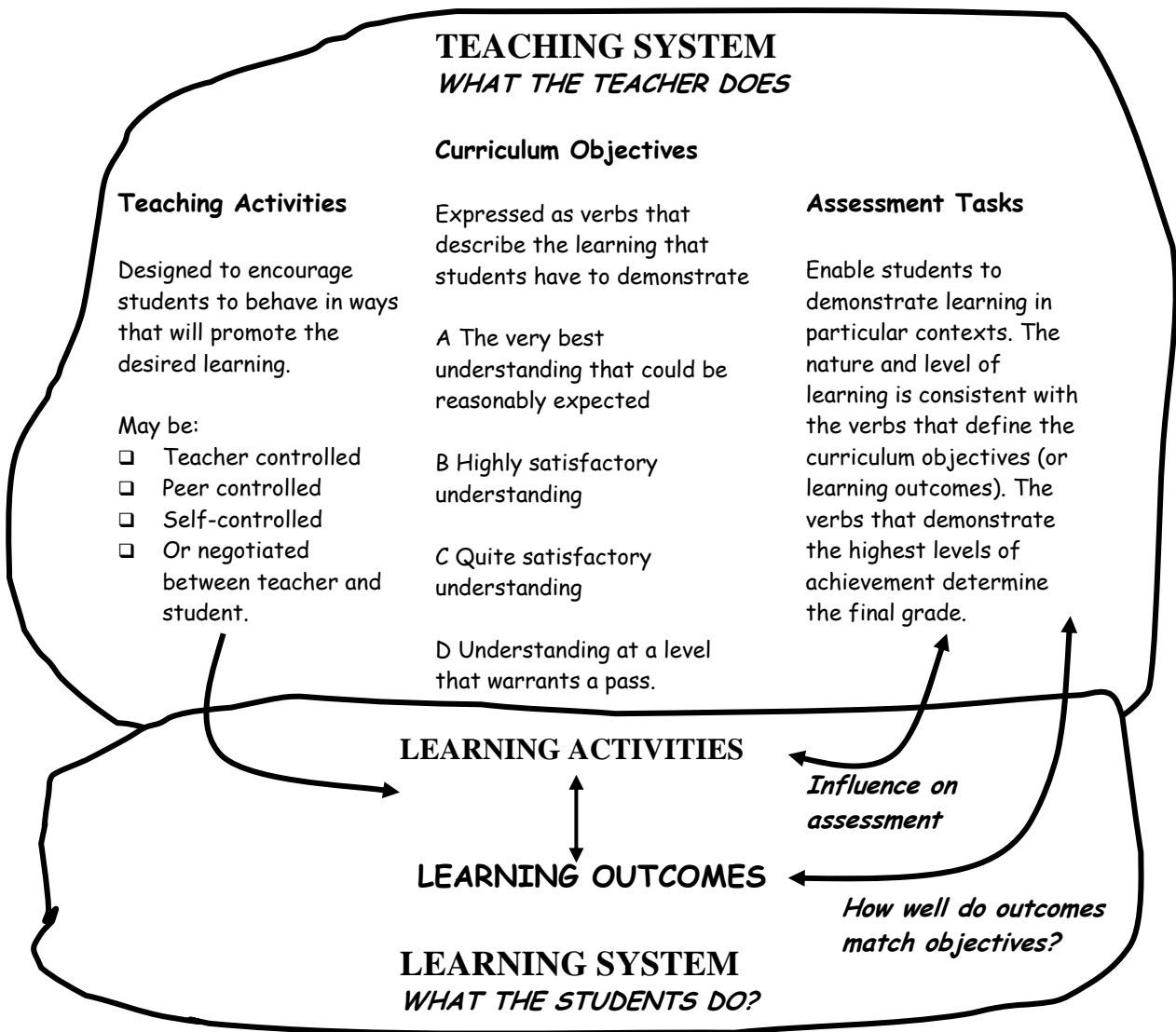
The sensible idea of aligning learning intentions with the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment processes and resources to support learning has been developed by Professor John Biggs. The idea of alignment is a fundamental principle underlying a learning outcomes approach to teaching, curriculum design and assessment. This approach to curriculum design begins with the question '*what do we want students to be able to do as a result of learning*'. The intended learning outcomes for students then become the objectives for designing a curriculum that will enable these outcomes to be achieved and an assessment process that enables students' achievements to be evaluated. The design process involves aligning the content and process of learning, and the assessment of learning to these objectives. A process called constructive alignment.

The idea of constructive alignment is implicit in the QAA programme specifications and subject benchmarking which encourage curriculum designers to make these sorts of connections. The idea of constructive alignment within the educational process cannot be separated from the wider resourcing and cultural environment within academics operate.

How does it work?

Constructive alignment starts with the notion that the learner *constructs* his or her own learning through relevant learning activities. The teacher's job is to create a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes. The key is that all components in the teaching system - the curriculum and its intended outcomes, the teaching methods used, the assessment tasks - are *aligned* to each other. All are tuned to learning activities addressed in the intended outcomes and the learner finds it difficult to escape without learning!

There are two systems involved: the *teaching system*, which is created by the teacher, and the *learning system*, which is to be activated by the teaching system (Figure 1). Central to the teaching system are the intended outcomes, called here the Curriculum Objectives. We know all students will not meet our objectives as perfectly as we would want (to those that do we award an 'A'), a few will only meet minimally acceptable standards (call that 'D'), others will fall in between at 'B' and 'C'. It helps to define those levels of performance by *verbs*. These verbs are associated with objects e.g. the content being taught. We can now go beyond merely 'covering' the topics in the curriculum, and specify the levels of understanding we want students to achieve. The categories are defined by a particular *quality* of learning and understanding, not by the accumulation of marks or percentages. The teaching/learning activities (left hand column) and the assessment tasks (right hand column) then address those verbs. The real action, however, takes place in the learning system, when the teaching activities elicit the learning activities that produce the outcomes. The assessment question is how well the learning outcomes match the desired outcomes.



Alignment process

The main steps in the alignment process are:

1. Defining the intended outcomes (the curriculum objectives)
2. Choosing teaching/learning activities likely to lead to help and encourage students to attain these objectives
3. Engaging students in these learning activities through the teaching process.
4. Assessing students' learning outcomes using methods that enable students to demonstrate the intended learning and evaluating how well they match what was intended
5. Arriving at a final grade, and perhaps in the case of formative assessment, giving feedback to help students improve their learning.

References

- Biggs, J.B. (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Buckingham: Society for Research in Higher Education & Open University Press. (new edition in 2003).
- Biggs J B (2002) Aligning teaching and assessment to curriculum objectives. LTSN Imaginative Curriculum web site www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre.