Beyond Constructive Alignment: A debate

Craig Bellamy
Charles Sturt University,
Australia

Constructive Alignment has been with us for quite some time. From its origins in education theory in the 1990s, partly as a means to address some of the pedagogical challenges of scale in mass, higher-education, it has now become the dominant pedagogy in Australian higher education. Originally intended as a means to consistently and holistically design syllabi around learning outcomes and delivery and assessment methods (Biggs, 2003), it is now—as claimed in a recent book on the subject—an overly mechanistic, industrial process that may stifle innovation and creativity, some of the key skills of a 21st Century workplace and society (Nelson, 2018). This is because of its slavish, uncritical application and lack of imagination regarding refreshing and building upon its significant legacy. Is there a Post-Constructive future and what may this future look like? And what does this mean for digital education, in its various guises, one of the more transformative areas of higher education? In this debate we will survey the various applications of Constructive Alignment and perhaps imagine a Post-Constructivist future!

Keywords: Constructive Alignment, eLearning, digital education, Post Constructive Alignment

Same same, but different

Significant efforts have been made to integrate constructive alignment principles in all aspects of the learning process. From writing the subject outline, the inclusion of subject content to align with the learning outcomes, the methods used to engage with the students and communicate the subject content, and the methods used to assess students through rubrics and fine-grained quantification. As a means to explicitly delineate the architecture of learning, it is, at times, a useful solution; however, problems arise when this architecture becomes too rigid, reductive and pragmatic, as it engenders conformity, passivity, and a strategic, instrumentalist approach to education that undermines the independence, judgement, curiosity and creativity of both educator and student (Nelson, 2018).

Digital mediated education, one of liveliest area of innovation in higher education, has a lot to lose from the uncritical embrace of Constructive alignment as computer technology can easily be co-opted for instrumentalist, industrial processes. It is rigid architectures that we must resist in designing our education as it was flexibility, creativity, risk, and imagination that brought us computing technology in the first place.

Is it possible to imagine a Post-Constructivist future, one with fewer rubrics, fewer criteria; with fewer pre-packaged learning outcomes and with more independent learning and creativity? Is there a limit to the extent of 'constructive alignment' that a topic may bare; the more fine-grained the rubric, it seems, the more it privileges the actual creator of the rubric, rather than the creators of knowledge that it seeks to quantify. Can we imagine something beyond Constrictive Alignment; a scaffolding of the learning process in a less mechanistic, less prescriptive, and less reductive manner? Constructive Alignment may become the uncritical and unimaginative deference for an emergent generation of followers rather than leading creatives and innovators.
Can we revitalise Constructive Alignment or can we imagine a Post-Constructivist future?

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