

Constructive Alignment in the Learning and Teaching of Economics at a Comprehensive University

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Abstract: There are challenges in the process of aligning teaching and learning with assessment methods available, especially in the transformation phase of South African universities. It is believed that there is either an improper implementation of the process of constructive alignment in the Economics modules or improper module design in aligning teaching with assessment. This paper intends to investigate if the lecturers complied with the principles of constructive alignment (CA) as a case study in Economics education at a comprehensive university in South Africa. A qualitative investigation of 13 out of 19 Economics lecturers from four campuses of the comprehensive university participated in three focus group discussions. To these focus groups discussions, an interview guide was designed based on the study. The instructional materials and assessment tasks designed by these lecturers were also analysed by means of a checklist containing important elements of CA. The major findings of the investigation included the following: In most of the Economics modules, objectives were still used; lecturers were not consciously working towards aligning the ILOs/objectives, TLAs and ATs but mostly relied on intuition and rather focused on prescribed content, textbooks and conventional TLAs as a basis for planning their teaching and assessment. Some of lecturers interviewed clearly did not think it was necessary to educate the students in terms of the relevant ILOs or objectives and did not use assessment criteria and rubrics for assessment, indicating a lack of transparency in the assessment process. The university also still uses a quantitative approach in assessing the knowledge and skills of students. It is advisable that Economics Lectures plan together and use common guides, teaching, and learning material for effective constructive alignment of the Economics subject.

Keywords: Constructive alignment, Teaching and learning activities, Assessment tasks, Quantitative approach, Instructional materials, Intended learning outcomes

1. Introduction

University lecturers finding it difficult to design teaching/learning activities (TLAs) that are constructively aligned as a requirement for the implementation of constructive alignment. Many lecturers focus on the use of textbook when planning their teaching and assessment tasks (ATs). Outcomes based approach (OBE) advocates that there must be a strong relationship between teaching/learning activities and assessment tasks with intended learning outcomes. This alignment should take the centre stage as lecturers plan and design activities that would ensure that students achieve these outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2015). Biggs and Tang (2011) put more emphasis on the fact that there must be adherence with the principles of constructive alignment.

Chipere (2017) argued that outcomes base approach has limitations in terms of providing guidance regarding better instruction and curriculum; hence the emphasis is on a student-centred approach that

ensures that there is an alignment of constructive elements. Biggs and Tangs (2011) indicated that what the teacher does in class is less important that what the learner does. When lecturers design the curriculum, they must shift away from the old methods of curriculum design and focus on student-centred approach. The above information suggests the significance of the characteristics of constructively aligned curriculum. Stevler (2012) also alluded on the fact that faculty programmes should focus on the alignment between the content, assessment, and instructional activities to engage the students in a scholarly teaching.

Wang, Cheung, Wong and Kwong (2013) revealed that students are likely to achieve deep learning in a highly constructively aligned curriculum as compared to students in a low constructive alignment (CA) unit. The above information implies that the emphasis should be based on the student engagement activities which put the students at the centre of e education. This means that students

should construct their own knowledge and the process should be responsible for their own learning (Macht & Ball, 2016). This implies that the nature of economics tasks must be designed such that students must learn to discover new information on their own so that they can be responsible for their own learning. According to Bilgin, Karakuyu and Ay (2015), one of the benefits of constructively aligned curriculum includes related skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, management, and collaboration. According to Mor (2015), these skills are critical in the study of economics because Economics deals with the analysis of socio-economic issues. This implies that students should use their critical thinking skills to deal with socio economic issues such as economic growth, unemployment, and inflation.

2. Literature Review

The literature review section comprises of theoretical literature and empirical literature debates chosen to form the bases of the study.

2.1 Theoretical Literature

This study employed constructivist theory of learning where students should be engaged, and the previous experience of the students is taken into consideration (Biggs & Tang, 2007). This implies that the lecturers must decide what kind of knowledge the students should acquire in the lecture halls.

Sanchez and Martin (2016) emphasised that when the lecturers design a module, the prior knowledge of the students should be considered. It is critical that students should be equipped with the knowledge and the skill that they will be applied in different situations (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This implies students should be able to apply knowledge and the skills acquired in lecture halls to solve their own community problems.

2.2 Empirical Literature

It is critical that the debates around the university curriculum should support the high-quality learning that will enable the university students to receive the relevant education. (Larkin & Richardson, 2013). Therefore, the university teaching should focus more on student engagement to achieve the deep learning. This implies that in the teaching of Economics students should be involved in the

learning process. The involvement of students will create the kind of students that are able to solve problems faced by their own communities using the knowledge and skills acquired in university lecture halls (Entwistle, 2018). This kind of an engagement will enable the students to attain high knowledge (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Curriculum alignment put more emphasis on student's active engagement as powerful way to achieve deep learning in the teaching of Economics (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Trigwell & Prosser, 2014). According to Hansen (2015) course projects can be vital to achieve deep learning in Economics education. Hansen (2015) further states that, the meeting of entry requirements in Economics by the students should not make them able to apply their knowledge beyond the lecture halls, it is only their engagement in the curriculum that will enable them to achieve the deep learning in the teaching of Economics. This implies that, for students to achieve deep learning in Economics education, they must be exposed to real life situations, for example students must be able to analyse economic journals, economic periodicals, and economics sections in the newspapers.

Alignment of the curriculum advocates the engagement of the students in the learning content whereby the students construct their own knowledge constructs their own knowledge (Nguyen, 2011). The engagement of students should lead in terms of how they should be assessed should lead to deep learning. This is the reason why is important that when the lecturers design assessment tasks in Economics education should make sure that it addresses the stated learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Akib and Martuty, in Abdul & Binti (2018), emphasised that assessment must be an integral part of teaching and learning. The idea of constructive alignment should be introduced by the top management of university and this should be guided by the strategic plan of the university (Deakin, 2017). It is also recommended that during the programme review there must be subject expertise to monitor the process of alignment so that the challenges regarding the implementation of constructive alignment can be identified. (Tokede & Tivendale, 2017).

The top-down approach should be employed so that there should be accountability around the issue of implementation (Fransson & Friberg, 2015). This approach is very critical if the university is committed to excellence of teaching and learning (McCoy &

Byrne, 2017). The University of Canberra was cited as evidence of successful implementation of constructive alignment, it was initiated at the top of the management and reflected in the strategic plan of the university (Canberra, 2013). The actual implementation is done at the faculty level. A small group of disciplined educators was selected by the faculty and this small group is one that is responsible for the implementation of constructive alignment to each discipline. This group is supported by the faculty management actual in terms of resources (Ruge & McCormack, 2017a). There were also some incentives that were provided so that the student could be given some opportunities by the industries to apply their knowledge and skills (Trigwell & Prosser, 2014).

One of the challenges highlighted with regard to implementation of CA includes the lack of support of the faculty and the co-coordinators of discipline as well as attitude of both internal and external stakeholders (Diseth, Pallesen, Brunborg & Larsen, 2010; Jackson, 2012a; Thota & Whitfield, 2010). The continued support and active engagement of these key stakeholders is critical for feedback and for the development of CA priority areas in terms of skills focus and improved alignment of unit learning context and assessment learning. There was also a unit that was established which was responsible for the approval of the programme and report directly to the faculty board meetings. It was also the same unit that was responsible for building the relationship between the university and the world of work so that students should be given some opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge in the world of work (Boud, 2010; Hughes & Barrie, 2010). There are several problems in implementing constructive alignment. For instance, one of the issues mentioned is the issue of finance and staff workloads. Despite criticisms such as these reported regarding the implementation of CA, the researcher has nevertheless become convinced that CA will assist in improving Economics education at a Comprehensive University. Without CA, students will continue to be engaged in surface learning. The researcher therefore firmly believes that emphasis on constructive alignment may be a good starting point for improving curriculum design.

3. Methodology

This section discusses the adopted methodology to achieve the set aim, which is to investigate the extent to which lecturers manage to implement constructive alignment in a comprehensive university.

3.1 Research Approach

The study will follow use qualitative research methods since the study is qualitative in nature. In qualitative research, the approach to the subject matter is interpretative, naturalistic, and multimethod (Seal, 2015). Researchers should focus on their own environments for the interpretation of the meanings that people give to them. Therefore, through using this approach the researcher will be able to understand different ways used by the lecturers to implement constructive alignment in the teaching of Economics. This was achieved through using focus group interviews as a qualitative data collection method.

3.2 Design of Methodology

A case study was used as a methodological design for this study. Therefore, a researcher focuses on his own environment to make full observation of what is happening. Therefore, the intervention will be informed by what is happening on the ground (Fick, 2014). Focus group interviews and document analysis was used as tools to investigate the proper implementation of constructive alignment. The experiences of the lecturers were served as powerful tools that the researcher relied on.

3.3 Sampling

Sample is defined as the subgroup of the total population (Shukla, 2020). In choosing and selecting the study sample purposive sampling will be used. For this paper, four delivery sites were selected.

3.4 Research Instruments

The researcher used focus group interviews and document analysis was used. The researcher had gathered documents such as study guides, projects, class tests, question papers, policies (Seal, 2015). Document analysis can help lecturers to improve the way they plan their teaching and learning because reading the material can help the lecturer to relate to some aspects of education.

3.5 Data Treatment and Analysis

The data that is collected needs to be analysed to make sense. Responses of everyone were compared with a view to identifying trends, responses, and possible explanations. This provided a common

structure to compare the data (Boland, 2010). In analysing the instructional material, a checklist of requirements for proper CA implementation was compiled (Fick, 2014).

4. Results and Discussions

This investigation was done with the purpose of understanding the motive behind the introduction of constructive alignment and as well as the ways that can be used to enhance constructive alignment in the teaching of Economics. Arguments and comments were based on several sources such as document analysis of Economics lecturers' instructional material, followed by focus group discussions with Economics lecturers from each of the four campuses of the comprehensive university. The instructional material that was used to determine evidence of constructive alignment included study guides and assessment documents, tests and examinations over the past three years. In total, three focus group discussions were conducted, namely one on each of campus sites A and B, while sites C and D were combined because of their proximity. The discussions with lecturers were conducted at a time and a place convenient for them, i.e. during their lunch time, followed by one period after lunch. This provided a maximum time slot of two hours per focus group discussion. Thirteen lecturers ultimately take part in the discussions.

All the people participated in this study were assured of confidentiality and this study was purely for academic purposes. Participants were assured of the fact that their participation would remain confidential. All the discussions were audio taped in order to assist the researcher with the transcription. The interview guide was designed so that it can assist the flow of discussions. The interview guide consists of eleven questions. Lecturers were also encouraged to make up follow questions. A document analysis of Economics lecturers' instructional material was performed, followed by focus group discussions with Economics lecturers from each of the four campuses of the comprehensive university. The instructional material that was used to determine evidence of constructive alignment, included study guides and assessment documents, including tests and examinations over the past three years. In total, three focus group discussions were conducted, namely one on each of campus sites A and B, while sites C and D were combined because of their proximity.

4.1 Discussions from Documents

The factors that were considered to analyse the documents for evidence of constructive alignment were presented in checklist, which served as the research instrument.

4.1.1 Intended Learning Outcomes/Objectives

The university still uses objectives and not learning outcomes in some modules, e.g. in Macroeconomics, Microeconomics and Development-Economics. In only one module offered in the third year, learning outcomes were used, e.g. Curriculum Studies in Economics. However, learning outcomes are often viewed as synonymous with objectives. Furthermore, there were neither objectives nor learning outcomes in some of the modules, e.g., Mathematical Economics and Introduction to Economics. In these two modules only the topics to be covered and so-called "assessment criteria" were listed. The "assessment criteria" included the following:

- 2 tests.
- 2 oral presentations.
- 1 assignment.
- A research project or case study.

The above-mentioned information clearly indicates that the lecturers did not understand the concept "assessment criteria". Therefore, the design of learning outcomes should formulate a number of assessment criteria (sometimes also referred to as assessment standards) which should serve as indicators of the achievement of the particular learning outcome and not merely the types and instruments of assessment to be used. The researcher also noted that the objectives in the learning materials were not stated clearly by making use of action verbs. In addition, the verbs included in the objectives were not always focused on appropriate levels of understanding. I also noted that the objectives in the learning materials were not stated clearly by making use of action verbs. In addition, the verbs included in the objectives were not always focused on appropriate levels of understanding. For example:

- In Macroeconomics, there is only one objective that says: "The students will able to reason accurately and objectively about Economic issues".
- In Development Economics, one of the objectives mentioned is to "offer a broad understanding" of the theoretical and practical issues attached

in development thinking, especially pertaining to developing countries.

In the latter objective the phrase "offer a broad understanding" is very vague and does not indicate an observable action. It is therefore very difficult to know exactly what the students would be required to do to demonstrate "a broad understanding". An outcomes-based programme should be built around clearly defined learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

4.1.2 Teaching/Learning Activities (TLAs)

Constructive alignment is described as a design for teaching and learning that is aimed at bringing about meaningful involvement of student participation. This is done by making sure students do comply with all the characteristics of constructively aligned curriculum. Students must be engaged such that they can construct their own knowledge through relevant TLAs by being actively engaged in constructing knowledge. Relevant TLAs should therefore be planned to address the action verbs in the ILOs. In doing so, a learning environment that is student-centred and likely to support the attainment of the learning outcomes will most probably be created. In analysing the documents, I found that it was not clear whether the TLAs used in Economics modules were appropriate for and addressed the stated learning outcomes or objectives because the TLAs were not reflected in the study material for any of the Economics modules. In addition, it is important to incorporate active and collaborative learning and dialogue with the lecturer into our modules. This should also be reflected in the study material. The dialogue between the students and lecturers will create the kind of students will be to discover new information on their own. This will encourage the students to acquire more information that will enable them to deal with all the challenges faced by their own communities. In the case of Economics education, students should be able to deal with socio economic issues such as inequality, poverty, and unemployment

4.1.3 Assessment Tasks

Assessment tasks should ideally contain the same action verbs as stated in the exit level of a module. The assessment tasks should also be aligned with the assessment criteria stated in the exit level of a module. Without this relationship, students are likely to achieve surface learning. The documents analysed indicated that some action verbs which did not appear in the relevant intended learning outcomes or

objectives were introduced for the first time in tests or examinations. Some "new" action verbs that were introduced were also not necessarily related to those used in the intended learning outcomes or objectives.

4.1.4 Grading

In an outcome or objectives-based system, criterion referenced assessment is preferred above a norm referenced system. This involves a qualitative way of assessing students (comparing student achievement with the achievement of assessment criteria at a particular level), as opposed to a norm-referenced method which is quantitative in nature because it depends on using marks as an indication of achievement. In a qualitative, criterion referenced assessment system, the grading of student achievement by means of rubrics containing relevant assessment criteria assists with determining how well the intended learning outcome or objective has been achieved by the student. Rubrics may also assist to maintain the consistency, reliability and validity of assessments made by lecturers regarding student' performances. On the other hand, conventional marking of assessment tasks by means of awarding marks for correct responses is typical of a quantitative system and is aimed at comparing student performance with a norm as established by the performance of a group of students.

The documents analysed indicated that the assessment of student performance in the different Economics modules was mainly done quantitatively by using marks and percentages. No rubrics were used at all. The document analysis revealed the lack of implementation of the principles of constructive. University uses a quantitative approach to assessment (i.e. a quantitative approach to arrive at the final grades of the students' performance).

4.2 Results of the Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussion provided significant information regarding the implementation of constructive alignment. Various challenges and problems were highlighted during the discussions. Different sites brought different strategies that can be employed to overcome the problems and challenges around the implementation of constructive alignment were discussed.

4.2.1 Site 1

Lecturers cited some negatives like staff workloads, shortage of teaching facilities, poor infrastructure,

and a shortage of tools, such as computers. Some cited shortage of offices, sometimes had to prepare lessons in their cars and that this had a negative impact in their performance as lecturers.

4.2.2 Site 2

The discussion was held during difficulty time where lecturers were busy with catch up plan because of the loss of teaching time by student unrest. They indicated that they struggled with large classes and the resultant existence of so many different academic abilities in one class. However, they coped with situations by using group work and peer assessment.

4.2.3 Site 3 and 4

Lecturers showed their commitments to provide whatever information was required. Participant C3 indicated, "Lecturers know in their heads what the end product must be and they teach to that". Participant D2 expressed frustration about the fact that "students are not interested in learning" and that the large classes made everything difficult. After conducting all focus group discussions, it was therefore finally becoming clear to me that the alignment of TLAs and ATs with ILOs is not at the predominant in the lecturers' minds and that the circumstances surrounding their teaching (such as large classes, staff teaching workloads, poorly equipped lecturer rooms) influenced them negatively. It can thus be concluded that lecturers were not always successful in aligning TLAs, ATs with ILOs. Lecturers were aware that TLAs and ATs should be aligned with ILOs, but this alignment occurs intuitively in teaching and is not necessarily deliberately planned.

Lecturers who participated in this research project did not all use strategies to align TLAs and ATs with ILOs. Their planning did not start with the formulation of ILOs and their teaching lacked clarity of focus; consequently, the ILOs were not the focus of the lecturers. In their planning of TLAs, lecturers should identify ILOs and from there plan backwards what TLAs will be and how learning will be assessed. Assessments were also not necessarily formative as the tasks were completed to comply with the requirements of examinations and not with the alignment of TLAs, ATs and ILOs

Although the participants generally agreed that it was their responsibility to align ILOs, content, TLAs and ATs, the researcher was not yet convinced that they understood the subject under investigation clearly. For example, the results from the

documents analysis indicated that the ILOs were not stated clearly by means of action verbs and did not clearly feature in the relevant TLAs and ATs.

Not all lecturers are consciously working towards the implementation of constructive alignment. Although all lecturers generally agreed that this is what should be done but they failed to elaborate on how they did this. This has serious implications for teaching and learning, pass rates and throughput rates. There was also no mention of teaching methodology as a vehicle for assisting students to achieve the ILOs, which, to me, is a telling indication that the approach to TLAs is in many instances not really CA compliant.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper aimed to investigate to what extent is constructive alignment implemented by the Department of Economics at the chosen institution and how can the implementation thereof be enhanced. The study adopted a case study qualitative methodology. The study found that the successful implementation of constructive alignment depends on the engagement of the students by the lecturers. The nature of the activities given to the students must allow the students to discover new information on their own. The implementation of constructive alignment encourages deep learning, and this can only be achieved if students are involved in the learning process. Additionally, it was evident from the documents analysed that the introduction of constructive alignment can play a vital role in overcoming all the challenges experienced by the lecturers regarding teaching and learning. It was recommended that the successful implementation of constructive alignment, lecturers should be kept abreast of all the new developments regarding the new methods of teaching. Benchmarking with other universities was also indicated as an important step for the implementation of constructive alignment. Some people had made mention of workshop as another intervention strategy. Staff should also be encouraged to register higher education studies so that they can be well equipped in terms of curriculum alignment. The establishment of a committee within the faculty was also recommended, and this committee should include students to conduct research on all aspects of teaching and learning. Dialogue between the students and lecturers was also encouraged so that there can be common understanding in terms of implementation of constructive alignment.

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