A learning experience on constructive alignment

Leonor Prieto Navarro
Department of Education
Faculty of Social and Human Sciences
Universidad Pontificia Comillas (Madrid, SPAIN)

The study of teachers' beliefs represents one of the most relevant areas of educational research because of their influence on the instructive practices teachers develop when they teach, on the different teaching methods they use, on the processes they follow when planning a lesson, on the way they assess their students and, in consequence, on students' cognitive and affective learning outcomes. *Constructive alignment* becomes the best example of real congruence between what we think and preach and what we do, with emphasis in the way students approach their learning.

Deciding on *constructive alignment* as the underlying basis of teaching implies a personal commitment to focusing on students' learning outcomes as the essential aim of the teaching and learning process. Sharing this idea with students may be essential so as to involve them in their own experience of learning. In this sense, if students know *what* learning outcomes they are expected to get and also at *what level* they should get them it is more likely that they feel motivated and interested in the subject content and, as a result, in the teaching and learning activities designed by the teacher to facilitate their learning. In this context, my personal experience as a teacher but especially as a constant learner may confirm the preceding premises.

THE PROCESS OF *CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT*

Next I will try to outline the common process I follow when designing the curriculum for students in a specific unit of the syllabus of a course on "teacher education".

1. Deciding on students' learning outcomes

Following Biggs' SOLO taxonomy, I establish the different levels of understanding I want to develop in my students. I explain these to students and we make ourselves aware of the different kinds of understanding required to get the final results we all look for. In this particular unit called *"Models of Teaching"* the learning goals are:

- **To understand** and **to analyse** the importance of linking teaching to specific theories of teaching and learning.
- **To know** different models of teaching as well as their theoretical principles and components.

- **To approach** current conceptions of teaching with emphasis on students, the experience of learning and the way teachers can contribute to quality of teaching and learning.

- **To develop** a personal conception of teaching through an individual reflection derived from the theoretical aspects gained through the lesson.

2. Deciding on contents

Concept, taxonomies and components of teaching models.
Analysis and educational implications of different models of teaching *(Bloom's Mastery Learning, Slavin's QAIT model, Carroll's model, Skinner's programmed*
New models of teaching: learner-centred teaching.
J.B. Biggs' constructive *alignment* model.

3. Deciding on teaching and learning activities

- Models of teaching: detecting the main components in a specific context of teaching and learning.

- Should we adopt *Mastery Learning* as the best strategy?

- *Thinking about time in education*: Carroll's model application

- Reflecting on personal models of teaching.

- Our personal experience of *aligned teaching*: thinking about the learning process.

Developing different teaching methods capable of eliciting from students those learning activities that are likely to achieve learning objectives is one of the main goals in an aligned system whereas assessment confirms that the students are in fact learning what objectives say they should learn. With this purpose, the learning activities described above elicit different levels of understanding as expressed in the learning goals. Both teacher and students take part in this process of constructing knowledge. The teacher creates the best conditions in which learning may occur while students become the real players of this performance called *learning*.

4. Deciding on assessment

Traditionally, teachers tend to think about assessment once the learning process is over, making an unconscious gap between students' learning and achievement in a specific assessment task. There is no place for this when we teach in an aligned way *so that the objectives, appropriately high level, are clear; that our teaching methods elicit from students*

those learning activities that are likely to achieve those objectives; and our assessment confirms that the students are in fact learning what our objectives say they should learn (Biggs, 1995, p. 11).

Assessment, in consequence, is embedded in the learning activities, all of them directed towards the different level of understanding expressed as students' learning outcomes. This implies that students develop the kind of learning that assessment requires of them fostering, definitively, a deep approach to learning.

The learning activities described on the previous paragraph are assessed in many different ways depending on the capacities expressed in the learning goals. Students receive a systematic qualitative feedback about their learning process and their achievement in specific tasks.

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN THE *CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT* PROCESS

In this framework the main pretension I pursue has to do with students' personal experience on constructive alignment in two different dimensions:

The first refers to the knowledge of constructive alignment as a teaching model from a theoretical perspective. In this sense, students are expected to demonstrate their learning related to the foundation, components and advantages of this new conception of teaching and learning, through the various actions expressed as verbs in the learning goals.

- The second, provided the nature of this subject, is related to the knowledge gained from experience on this particular way of teaching and learning. In order to make students reflect on the process followed through their own learning, they are asked to write down some perceptions and opinions about the *constructive alignment* process as well as to evaluate their own learning results. An informal talk about all these aspects may also be helpful both for teacher and students in order to understand the authentic meaning of *constructive alignment*.

GUIDELINES FOR REFLECTION ON *CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT*
(Look at the lesson outline, think over your learning experience and answer the following questions) • *What learning results did you achieve? To what extent?* • *Did you perceive the necessary relation between learning activities and learning goals? Try to find out what learning activities match each of the curriculum objectives*. • *Are you aware of the use of differential learning actions in order to achieve the pretended results? (e.g. to analyse, to contrast with, to relate to…).* • *Did you perceive that different levels of understanding were assessed through the*

learning activities? Were they assessed in different ways?

- *What advantages are derived from your personal involvement in the constructive alignment process?*