Course Design

One of the most effective ways to design your course is to use the constructive alignment method (Biggs, 1996). Using this method, you must consider four primary elements when designing your class: Learning Outcomes, Assessments, Teaching & Learning Activities, and Content.

**PURPOSE**
A main idea driving constructive alignment is that you should be able to explain the purpose of everything you do or ask students to do. This helps to make the structure and rationale of the course clear to students and aids transparency.

**ALIGNMENT**
Constructive alignment in course design means your teaching methodologies and assessment strategies should explicitly connect with your learning outcomes. This way, you are not teaching one topic, assessing another, and expecting students to develop skills or knowledge on something else.

**STUDENT NEEDS**
As an instructor, your primary role is to support the learning needs of your students (ensure they are prepared for future courses or careers, learn transferable skills, etc.). For this reason, you should consider who they are and what they require from you to succeed in the course. Consider collecting information via a poll, survey or questionnaire at the start of the course. As you design your course and throughout the term, ask yourself these questions:

- Who are my students?
- Do they know what skills/knowledge they need to learn and how to demonstrate them?
- Am I teaching or giving them the opportunity to learn these skills/knowledge?
- Am I giving them a chance to determine if they have learned these skills/knowledge?
- Am I testing them on what I expect them to learn?

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**
Learning outcomes are statements of what students will be able to do at the end of a course, assessment or class. These statements are student-focused and comprise the most important elements of your class. Traditionally, your course should have 4-6 learning outcomes explicitly stated on the first page of the syllabus.

Questions to ask yourself:

- How will students demonstrate what they have learned?
- What skills or knowledge should they remember 1-4 years from now?
- Put yourself in the position of a student: wouldn’t you want to know what you can expect to leave the course having learned?
ASSESSMENTS

Your assessments should align with your learning outcomes (this will enable you to determine if students have learned the skills/knowledge you intended). Whether these assessments are formative (occurring during the term) or summative (occurring at the end of the course), you should be able to explain to students how their assessments tie into the outcomes.

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TEACHING / LEARNING ACTIVITIES

In addition to aligning your assessments with your learning outcomes, you should also align your teaching and learning activities. Lecturing is one format of conveying content, but it does not help you determine if students have *learned*. It is also primarily a passive way of interacting with content. Consider implementing an activity every 15-20 minutes in order to engage students and assess their learning and understanding. These activities may be 5 minutes, 15 minutes or 30 minutes depending on what your students need and take a variety of forms (see below) and structures (individual work, pairs, trios, small groups).

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CONTENT

It can be very tempting to begin planning your course by focusing on content, but most research suggests that it is best to first consider what you want students to be able to do when they exit the course – which means identifying your learning outcomes before you consider your course content.

Writing clear learning outcomes is a way to identify the most important aspects of your course and hence the most important content. Since there is never enough time to address all of the content you would like, learning outcomes will help you focus on what content must be covered each class.

Partner clear and precise learning outcomes with a variety of teaching & learning activities to ensure your students understand the content and to help prepare them for assessments.