Embedding constructive alignment of reading lists in course design

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: Reading list practices are long-standing but cause confusion and misunderstanding between module leaders and students. Constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011), although widely applied in course design across the UK Higher Education sector, has not previously been applied to the practice of reading lists but offers a practical and pedagogically sound method for reinventing reading list practice and bridging the gap of understanding between the intentions of module leaders and the interpretation of students.

OBJECTIVES: To embed the practice of constructive alignment of reading lists in Oxford Brookes University modules.

METHOD: The module leaders of seven modules were offered the support of a project led by Oxford Brookes Library to redesign their modules so that the reading lists were constructively aligned with the learning outcomes of the modules. After an initial run of the redesigned modules the module leaders were asked whether they would embed the practice of constructively aligned reading lists in their modules.

RESULT: five of the modules were redesigned and continued with the redesign past the initial instance, one of the modules exited the project before it was redesigned, and one of the modules returned to the pre-project module design and reading list practice.

CONCLUSION: The project was successful in embedding constructively aligned reading list practice in Oxford Brookes University modules past the first run of the module, but several barriers to effective learning and teaching were identified with the most significant being a lack of student engagement with the redesigned reading lists. The implication for practice is that constructively aligned reading lists should include an element of summative assessment to increase the chances of student engagement and the successful embedding of constructively aligned reading lists in the design of modules.

Keywords

Reading lists, constructive alignment, learning objectives, course design, student engagement, approaches to learning

Introduction

Constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011) is currently a major pedagogic theory used widely in course design across UK Higher Education Institutions where all learning activities and assessments on a module are designed to directly contribute to students achieving a specific set of learning outcomes.

The practice of constructive alignment grew out of the constructivist theory of learning. Dewey, a key forerunner of constructivism, emphasised the significance of direct experience in learning, describing formal education as "a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Dewey, 1966, p.51). Meanwhile Piaget, the pioneer of constructivism, conceived of individuals constructing a mental model of the world from units of knowledge called schemata: a "form of organization of experience" (Piaget, 1931, p.149). In constructivism, learning is when an individual is extending and editing their mental model of the world based on new experiences.

Constructivism is a theory of learning rather than an approach to teaching. Constructive alignment however is a method of course design that aims at managing the processes theorised in constructivism so that the student builds the mental model intended by the teacher. In constructive alignment the intended mental model is expressed as a series of learning outcomes that describe what the student will be able to do if they successfully complete the module. The teacher first decides what learning outcomes the module will deliver and then designs all the learning activities and assessments so that they are aligned with delivering these outcomes to the student. Through active participation (following Dewey) in the learning activities and assessments the student will build those experiences into a mental model (following Piaget) that hopefully corresponds with the mental model and learning outcomes intended by the teacher.

Some researchers have claimed that constructive alignment is successful in encouraging students to adopt a deep - as opposed to surface - approach to learning (Wang *et al*, 2013) but others have criticised it for the potential variability in its application (Trigwell and Prosser, 2014) and for being a managerial approach that neglects the social and emergent aspects of learning (Addison, 2014; Gough, 2013; Mihailova, 2014). Meanwhile some researchers have highlighted the need to consider and address the limitations of learning outcomes when using them in practice and, in particular, to ensure that students are not limited to achieving just the predetermined learning outcomes (Murtonen, Gruber, and Lehtinen, 2017; Scott and Martin, 2012).

For Biggs and Tang (2011) the traditional practice of reading lists does not lend itself to being constructively aligned because the focus is on what the teacher does (create a reading list) rather than what the student does. As a result they describe assigned reading as a *situation*:

> "The situation - be it lecture, tutorial, laboratory, or excursion - simply defines the broad parameters within which learning takes place" (p.135).

This categorisation can be expanded upon by recognising how the conventions of traditional reading list practice actively create reading lists that are *situations*: arranging resources on a reading list in alphabetical order by author surname means students must guess how each resource relates to the rest of the module (e.g. lectures, assessments, other reading list resources, etc.); listing only the bibliographic details of each resource means students must infer for themselves why resources have been chosen; instructing students only to 'read' the resources on the reading list means students must make their own decision on how to engage with the texts (and ignores the range of activities incorporated under the umbrella term of academic 'reading').

In an unstructured *situation* students must create their own interpretation of how they should involve themselves in the particular learning activity and what they are meant to gain from it, which may differ significantly from what was intended by the module leader.

A review of the literature on reading lists over the last decade (Table 1) describes exactly this gap of understanding between the intention of the module leader and the interpretation of the student. It indicates that current reading list practice is - as Biggs and Tang asserted - a *situation*.

Table 1: Confusion in reading list practice

Research	Findings relating to confusion in reading list practice
Garfield, 2008	Students arriving at university were expected and assumed by teaching staff to be capable of 'deep' reading, but the reality was that students were unprepared to be autonomous learners and these skills should be nurtured, encouraged, and enabled, partly through the use of reading lists as a scaffold.
Stokes and Martin, 2008	Tutors expected students to read an extensive number and range of resources where the reading is part of a process or journey of discovery, but the students actual behaviour was instrumental, assessment-driven, and focussed on a minimal number of resources.
Barnett *et al*, 2012b	Students were primarily motivated to read by assessment and reading lists were one of the most important ways students found resources. Students felt use of reading lists by teaching staff to be inconsistent.
Franklin, 2012	Academics felt the purpose of reading lists was to extend students' knowledge of lecture topics and to help guide students reading. But academics believed that students rely on lecture materials rather than use reading lists and, when they are used, use reading lists predominately for assessment purposes. Meanwhile students were critical of inconsistency between modules in the use of reading lists and a lack of annotations from academics.

Piscioneri and Hlavac, 2012	Described the Minimalist Reading Model (MiRM) where reading was summarised and annotated by the lecturer. The approach was appreciated by some students but regarded by other students as 'dumbing down' or encouraging 'lazy' learning behaviours .
Brewerton, 2014	Students regarded reading lists as being more significant in supporting their learning than the lecturers did. However students weren't clear what that support was or how best to utilise it. Other students seemed unaware of the existence of reading lists. Meanwhile, lecturers believed the workload of maintaining reading lists was disproportionate to their value. The student perception was that reading lists were not updated, though this was not supported by the data from the reading lists management system.
Siddall and Rose, 2014	Students and staff agreed that the purpose of a reading list was a starting point to direct them to literature, but whereas students found reading lists overwhelming academic staff expected students to read around and to explore the topic. Students wanted a common standard and layout for reading lists and for academic staff to clarify how they expected students to use reading lists, but few academics gave guidance to their students about how they were expected to use reading lists.
Siddall, 2016	There were varying interpretations of reading list labels (e.g. 'core', 'recommended', 'background', etc) with a range of connotations (positive, neutral, negative) between academics at a single institution.
Vickers *et al*, 2016	Students seemed to be aware of an expectation that they should be reading for more than just assessment purposes, but student behaviour was focussed on achieving optimal results of their immediate learning needs.
McGuinn *et al*, 2017	Reading lists were perceived as more important by students than by lecturers. Students saw reading lists as a starting point for further reading but believed they were were infrequently updated, poorly organised and unhelpfully lengthy.

The overall picture is one of confusions and misunderstanding and the situation now seems much the same as it did a decade ago when Stokes and Martin (2008) made the following observation:

> "The reading list has been present in various forms for many years in higher education settings...it is apparent from the research that a dislocation or misconception of some of the central assumptions and premises on which it is based has occurred, and thus its use in practice is questionable" (p.124)

If reading lists are a *situation* and students are making their own interpretation of how to use reading lists then the time and effort students spend on them may not be helping students to achieve the learning outcomes intended by the academic staff. Equally, the efficiency of the teaching will be impaired if students misunderstand how to use the reading list and a

disproportionate burden will be placed on the other aspects of the module, such as face-to-face teaching and its associated slides and handouts, to deliver the learning outcomes of the module.

Reading list practice is also a significant economic matter for UK Higher Education Institutions as a great deal of academic staff time and library staff time is taken up with the creation, administration, and resourcing of reading lists while a large proportion of library budgets are spent on buying resources that have been put on reading lists. If reading lists are not constructively aligned and students misunderstand how they are meant to use them (and the associated resources) then much of that staff time and resource budget may be wasted.

The literature contains several suggestions on how to improve reading list practices (Garfield, 2008; Franklin, 2012; Piscioneri and Hlavac, 2012; Siddall and Rose, 2014; Siddall, 2016; Vickers *et al*, 2016), but this study proposes that the breakdown in understanding between academic staff and students described in the literature indicates that a fundamental reappraisal of the role of the reading list is required. Constructive alignment, as a method for course design already widely accepted and applied in UK Higher Education Institutions, offers a practically applicable and pedagogically sound theoretical lens through which to re-examine and reinvent traditional reading list practice. If we accept constructive alignment as a pedagogic theory then we can assume that if reading lists are constructively aligned alongside all other learning activities and assessments of a module then the role of the reading list will be as clear to both the module leader and the students as any other element of the module.

Previously the conventions of the traditional reading list (organised alphabetically, contains only bibliographic details, and instructs students only to 'read') were described as actively creating a *situation*. In opposition to these conventions a constructively aligned reading list, at its most basic level, will be organised in meaningful way (i.e. to indicate connections with the other teaching and learning elements of the module), annotated by the teacher to explain why resources have been chosen for the module, and include instruction for the student on how best to engage with the resources to gain the intended information or understanding.

Furthermore, if the best practice of constructive alignment is to be implemented then reading lists should be redesigned so that they are no longer a *situation* and instead become what Biggs and Tang (2011) describe as an *activity*. As the name suggests, in an *activity* the students are actively participating in their learning rather than being passive receivers of information, and the particular activity they are participating in has been carefully chosen in order to give students the best opportunity to gain the learning outcomes that the module leader intends. This type of active approach to reading aligns with the Reading Task idea developed by Barnett *et al* (2012a) as part of the Reading Resilience project.

Below is a literature search strategy that was conducted to establish what research has previously been published on applying constructive alignment to reading list practice. All searches were conducted on 26th February 2018.

Table 2: Literature search strategy

Database	Search	Results
British Education Index	"constructive alignment" AND ("reading list" OR "reading lists")	0
ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)	"constructive alignment" AND ("reading list" OR "reading lists")	0
Google Books Google Scholar	[“constructive alignment" AND ("reading list" OR "reading lists")](#) [“constructive alignment” AND (“reading list” OR “reading lists”)](#)	Both the Google Books search and Google Scholar search found many instances where the phrase 'constructive alignment' was present in the same publication as either the phrase 'reading list' or 'reading lists' (652 and 248 respectively). However the only result that could be found where constructive alignment was being discussed in direct relation to reading list practice was by Emma Coonan's 'good practice account' (Brown, 2014, chapter 6) though Coonan's focus is on the development of information-finding skills through interaction with reading lists.
LISA (Library & Information Science Abstracts)	"constructive alignment" AND ("reading list" OR "reading lists")	0
LISTA (Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts)	"constructive alignment" AND ("reading list" OR "reading lists")	0
Web of Science	All databases: "constructive alignment" AND "reading list"	0

The above literature search indicates that no previous research has investigated the application of constructive alignment to reading lists, and therefore that the current study makes an original contribution to both the research literature of both constructive alignment and reading list practice.

Method

A project group made up of five staff members from Oxford Brookes Library was created to support Oxford Brookes module leaders to redesign their modules so that the reading lists associated with those modules became constructively aligned with the rest of the learning activities and assessments of the module and more like *activities* than *situations*. That is, that the reading lists would directly contribute to students gaining the learning outcomes of the module and that students would be participating in structured activities directly relating to the items on the reading list.

Five modules were included in the study by the module leaders. Either the project team approached the module leaders as they suspected the module leaders might have an interest in the topic of the project or the module leaders became aware of the project and approached the project team.

Table 3: Modules redesigned with project support

Module	Discipline	Level	Semester	Students
A	Built Environment	Postgraduate, level 7	1	19
B	Built Environment	Postgraduate, level 7	1	7
C	Business	Undergraduate, level 4	1 and 2	109
D	Psychology	Undergraduate, level 4	2	124
E	Built Environment	Undergraduate, level 4	1	64

There were also two module leaders who were interested in the ideas of the project but chose to redesign their modules without the support of the project team:

Table 4: Modules redesigned without project support

Module	Discipline	Level	Semester	Students
L	Business	Undergraduate, level 4	1	105
M	Research skills	Undergraduate, level 6	2 or 3	42

The way the modules were redesigned was not coordinated by the project. Instead each module leader decided, sometimes through discussion with members of the project team, how their module and reading list might be best redesigned so that the reading list directly delivered the learning outcomes of the module through students participating in activities that related to the resources on the reading list.

Table 5: How the modules were redesigned

Module	Redesign
A and B	Modules A and B had the same module leader. The modules were re-designed so that sections of the reading list were accompanied with an online discussion forum in the Moodle VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). Students were encouraged to discuss the reading list materials and were set specific questions to consider and discuss when reading the items on the reading list.
C	Weekly reading and teaching outcomes were established and students were asked to reflect on what they had gained from the reading. Activities that related directly to the use of reading materials were included in face-to-face teaching sessions.
D	This module left the project before the redesign of modules began as, due to unforeseen circumstances, the module leader found they did not have the time to redesign their module.
E	Students were asked to read a specified reading list item or items and provide a text or audio summary (approximately 500 words) of what they gained from the reading including direct reference to the modules learning outcomes
L	Weekly reading list sections were accompanied by an online quiz activity in the Moodle VLE. The quiz was designed to give students instant feedback on their understanding of the reading and the automated feedback for each question would guide students who answered incorrectly on which reading list items to revisit. Also, the quiz would gather feedback for the module leader on the level of understanding of the whole cohort and guide areas of knowledge to recapitulate in the next face-to-face teaching session.
M	Face-to-face teaching sessions were explicitly structured according to how reading list items presented corresponding material. Assessments were designed with a companion set of reading list items.

Ideally the study would have directly measured whether the reading list *activities* were more effective at delivering the learning outcomes of the module that the original design. However, filtering out the many confounding factors that influence student learning and sustaining the study for a sufficient period of time to pursue this methodology was beyond the scope of the project. Instead a proxy measure was chosen: whether the module leaders considered the redesigned reading lists to be an effective approach. The success of each redesign was judged by whether the module leader chose to continue with the new design of the module after running an instance of the new approach rather than return to the earlier reading list

practice - i.e. whether constructively aligned reading list practice became embedded in the module.

Results

After the initial run of the redesigned modules each module leader was contacted to determine whether the practice of constructively aligned reading lists had been embedded in their module.

Table 6: Embedding results

Module	Constructively aligned reading list practice embedded?
A and B	The online forums to discuss the reading list materials continued to be a part of the design of the modules VLE page
C	The redesign was embedded past the first year and the module leader reported that the activities in the face-to-face sessions that related to the reading materials were essential to the module
D	Not applicable - the module exited the project before it was redesigned
E	The redesign was embedded past the first year with the intention to make the activities part of the assessment strategy
L	The online quiz was not used after the initial run of the module as the students did not engage sufficiently with it
M	The redesign was embedded past the first year and with the intention of further aligning the reading list with the module's learning outcomes.

Discussion

The experiences of the module leaders from three modules not previously mentioned (modules X, Y, and Z) will be included in the discussion below. These module leaders had, prior to the study, already designed their reading lists in ways that met the Biggs and Tang (2011) definition of an *activity* and embedded that practice in their modules. The project team became aware of the reading list practice of modules X and Y at the start of the project and the experience of those module leaders helped define the project plan. The project team became aware of module Z part-way through the project. All three modules were not involved in the redesign process of the project as the reading list practice already matched what the project sought to achieve.

Table 7: Modules with relevant reading list practice not involved in the project

Module	Discipline	Level	Semester	Students
X	Education	Undergraduate, level 6	2	33
Y	Education	Postgraduate, level 7	3	9
Z	Business	Undergraduate, level 5	1	98

When judged by the terms of the study, the project to embed constructively aligned reading lists was a success: of the seven modules included in the study (A, B, C, D, E, L, M), six were redesigned and in five of the redesigned modules the redesign was embedded beyond the first year. This shows that module leaders consider constructive alignment as a suitable and useful framework through which to reconsider the practice of reading lists.

Despite the success described above, this study identified a significant barrier to the successful implementation of constructively aligned reading lists: a lack of student engagement with reading lists that were redesigned as *activities*.

The most striking example of this is module L where despite investing significant time in the creation of a week-by-week quiz to accompany the reading list the module leader abandoned the use of the quizzes mid-module as they were not being used by the students. However, this lack of engagement was also present in the modules that were successfully redesigned (see Table 8).

Table 8: Student engagement with reading list activities

Module	Student engagement with reading list activities
A and B	The library team and the module leader spoke to the students at multiple points about the online forums that were provided for discussing the reading but throughout both modules no online discussion occurred, despite the library team attempting to start discussions themselves later in the module. The library team investigated this further with the students through discussion and an *ad hoc* survey, which found that over a third of the respondents were not aware of the online discussion forums.
C	The library team suspected similar levels of disinterest in the reading list activities and a different *ad hoc* survey relating to a particular activity found that half the respondents had not read any of the items on the reading list that they had been asked to read prior to the activity.

E	The module reader estimated that 70% of the students did not engage with the activity at the start of the module and that the level of engagement decreased as the module progressed.

Considering this lack of engagement it is perhaps surprising that the module leaders of modules A, B, C, and E continued with the practice of constructively aligned reading lists and embedded it in their modules. However, it is apparent that the module leaders agreed with the principle of designing reading lists to deliver learning outcomes and saw potential in the approach, but considered the lack of student engagement to be caused by a different factor. When describing their experience of the reading list activities the module leader of module L said the following:

> "I think that students may not have engaged with it since it was not marked and it was not a compulsory exercise... I also felt that based on the students' comments on the module evaluation quiz, they wanted more help with assignment and assignment resources so this is what I focused on during the next run of the module"

This link between student engagement and assessment is corroborated by the module leader of module M who, in contrast to the modules A, B, E, and L, reported good student engagement with their redesigned reading list:

> "I think the key is to have core texts early on, when students are fresh and keen, and then any other texts that we want them to read should be directly relevant to assignments"

Meanwhile, in response to the disappointing level of engagement from students in the first instance of the redesigned module, the module leader of module E is considering summatively assessing the reading list *activities* for a small percentage of the module mark in order to stimulate student engagement.

This recognition and acceptance of the student focus on assessment can also be seen in modules X, Y, and Z (table 9). But whereas the module leader of module L responded to the student focus on assessment by moving their efforts from developing the reading list *activities* to directly supporting the existing assessment, the module leaders of modules X, Y, and Z had responded by making their reading list *activities* integral to the assessment (as is also being considered by the module leader of module E).

Table 9: Linking of reading list with assessment in modules not associated with the project

Module	Assessment of reading list *activity*
X	Over the course of the module students write six blog-style responses (with appropriate academic tone and referencing) to the set reading. The first is only formatively assessed and the remaining five are summatively assessed. 100% of the module marks are awarded based on a combination of the final response (which is more substantial than the others) and the highest three marks from the other summatively assessed responses. The students write the blog-style responses before the face-to-face sessions with the teaching staff; the face-to-face sessions are used to discuss the topics that arise out of the responses; then students have the opportunity to amend their responses before they are summatively assessed.
Y	The module has a number of themes and students read two or three papers that present alternative perspectives on that theme and then discuss the reading in an online asynchronous discussion. Student participation in the discussion is assessed and is worth 20% of the marks for the module. The assessment criteria includes the contextual value of student comments (e.g. careful 'listening' to other participants, starting a discussion, acknowledging the contributions of others, developing a theme) while the quality criteria relates to the academic content of the contributions (e.g. understanding of texts, relevance, critical appraisal of the issues being discussed).
Z	Students are asked to read academic papers as part of the weekly reading and are expected to write a set of notes on each article using by a template provided by the module leader The students hand in their notes before the start of each weekly workshop - the notes are not assessed but the students receive their portfolio of notes back in the exam at the end of the module, which is worth 40% of their module mark.

Through the above assessment design (see Table 9) the module leaders of modules X, Y, and Z have achieved sustained engagement with their reading list *activities* through directly assessing the *activities* (modules X and Y) or explicitly linking the *activities* with success in the summative assessment (module Z).

The behaviour of students towards the reading list *activities* can be explained by the approaches to learning theory started by Marton and Säljö (1976; 1984) whose conception of the 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning were complemented by Biggs (1987) and Entwistle and Ramsden (1982) to include 'achieving' and 'strategic' approaches to learning, which are defined by the student's focus on summative assessment. The students from the five redesigned modules in this study seemed to adopt an 'achieving' or 'strategic' approach to the reading list *activities* as, unless they could perceive an explicit connection with the assessment, many of them appeared to invest little or no time in attempting the reading and related activities.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that a reading list can be constructively aligned but that the most successful implementation is to summatively assess the reading *activity* in order to motivate students to gain the intended learning and teaching benefits. The assessment of activities relating to weekly reading has been previously been recommended by the Reading Resilience Toolkit (Barnett *et al.*, 2012a) and requested by students themselves (Lemanski, 2011).

Of course, directly linking summative assessment to weekly reading only encourages students to further adopt a 'strategic' approach to their learning. This is particularly problematic for reading lists as previous studies describe how teaching staff would like students to engage with reading lists for the enjoyment of learning the subject (Stokes and Martin, 2008; Siddall and Rose, 2014) rather than for assessment purposes. However, the literature (Stokes and Martin, 2008; Barnett et al, 2012b; Siddall and Rose, 2014; Vickers et al, 2016) and the experience of this study also shows that actual student behaviour towards reading lists is motivated primarily by assessment.

Accepting the reality of students' assessment-motivated behaviour does not exclude also encouraging the development of an intrinsic interest and enjoyment in learning: teaching staff can utilise students' 'strategic' approach to reading as one part of a wider modular design that overall encourages students to adopt a 'deep' approach to their learning. For example, the assessment strategy of the module can be designed so that a relatively small proportion of the module mark is awarded for participation and engagement with reading list *activities* (module Y and Barnett *et al.*, 2012a), other components of the module (such as the face-to-face teaching sessions) could strongly encourage a 'deep' approach to learning (module X and Lemanski, 2011), or the assessment can be designed so that engaged reading strongly influences success in summative assessment but is not directly assessed (module Z).

Conclusion

This study attempted to embed the practice of constructively aligning reading lists in several modules at Oxford Brookes University. Five of the modules were successfully redesigned in the terms of this study (i.e. the redesign was included in the design of the module past the first year) but for four of those modules there was a distinct lack of student engagement with the reading list *activities*, which meant these must be regarded as a qualified success. Meanwhile, one of the attempts to redesign modules with constructively aligned reading lists failed (i.e. the redesign not included in the design of the module past the first year) due to this same lack of student engagement.

In modules where students engaged with reading list *activities* the common factor appears to be that the reading list *activities* were either directly summatively assessed or explicitly linked with the module's summative assessment. Therefore, the recommendation of this study is that modules that aim to constructively align reading lists should either summatively assess engagement with the reading materials or directly link success in the summative assessment to engagement with the reading materials.

Based on the findings of this study a guide was produced for Oxford Brookes University module leaders on how to redesign their own modules so that the reading lists become constructively aligned *activities* (Croft, 2018 DOI: 10.24384/000531).

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The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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