

Teaching and Learning

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Assessment objectives: are they really at the heart of GCSE Business Studies

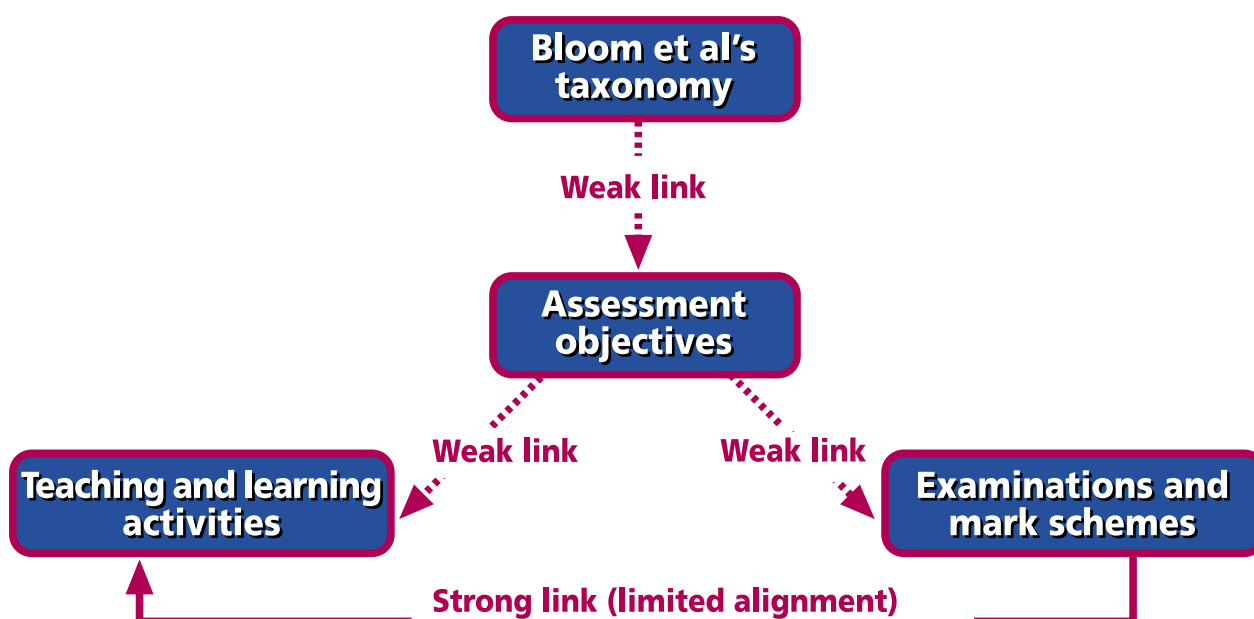
If you ask business studies teachers what they are doing, many might answer that they are developing their students' understanding of business. This article will argue that there is actually a degree of confusion and uncertainty about what "developing understanding" actually means. This creates a number of negative consequences for teachers and students. The idea of constructive alignment (developed by John Biggs in the early 1990s) will be used to explore some of the issues.

Constructive alignment is about designing courses which show consistency between learning objectives, teaching and learning activities, and assessment. Objectives are given in the form of different levels of understanding and teaching techniques are chosen that develop those different levels. Assessment then focuses on the objectives to see if what the objectives say the students should have learnt is what they have actually learnt. Teachers teach what they assess and assess what they teach (Cohen 1987, p12).

Box 1: Assessment objectives for OCR Business Studies A (1951)

- 3.1 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the specified subject content.
- 3.2 Apply knowledge and understanding using appropriate terms, concepts, theories and methods effectively to address problems and issues.
- 3.3 Select, organise, interpret and use information from various sources to analyse problems and issues.
- 3.4 Evaluate evidence, make reasoned judgements and present conclusions accurately and appropriately.

Figure 1: The current alignment in GCSE Business Studies



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Is GCSE Business Studies aligned in this way? On the surface the answer is clearly yes. There are assessment objectives, they describe different orders of understanding (see Box 1 for an example), and they do figure in examinations and mark schemes. However, look below the surface and some significant problems emerge. *Figure 1* summarises the key relationships that need to be explored.

Assessment objectives and alignment

The assessment objectives in GCSE Business Studies are based on Bloom et al's taxonomy. This is a hierarchy of learning outcomes/skills developed in the US in the 1950s. It runs up from knowledge (the most straightforward type of understanding) through comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis to evaluation (the most difficult skill). Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a precise shared understanding of what the taxonomy means for business studies (hence the dotted line in *Figure 1*). In Box 2, an excerpt from a recent GCSE exam illustrates the point.

Box 2: Extracts from OCR GCSE Business Studies 1951/2 (2006) question paper and mark scheme

Question 1

Peter chose to locate the trailer at Site A on the map rather than either Site B or Site C. Using the information in Fig. 1, discuss whether or not Peter chose the best site.

Mark scheme

Target: Ability to use data available to evaluate the best location for a business.

Level 2 (4–6 marks)

Develops an explanation of or qualifies the analysis.

Level 1 (1–3 marks)

Makes a basic analysis of a feature of each site

The question in Box 2 invites students to evaluate. Unfortunately, there is no reference to evaluation in the level 2 descriptor, instead it talks about "explanation". The use of the term "qualifies" may be more like evaluation in Bloom's sense, with its implication that students might recognise the limitations of their arguments, but it is strange to give

this equivalence to "explain" in the mark scheme. If in fact "explanation" is the same as "qualifi(cation)", then why are both mentioned?

Assessment objectives and assessment

So are there other signs of misalignment in GCSE Business Studies? This is clearly not the place for a full survey but a few more examples could be indicative.

An indication perhaps of the significance given to assessment objectives could be the amount of space they get in business studies specifications. In the OCR GCSE Business Studies specification (1951), a total of 51 words is given to assessment objectives and they are not mentioned until page 12. It is as if they are taken to be self-explanatory – a straightforward part of the administration of the qualification. One isolated sentence on page 23 states that "the content should be taught in the context of the assessment objectives" (although ironically the subject matter is one of the assessment objectives). Command words are used in the guidance provided by OCR but there is no attempt to link these to the assessment objectives. These are important facts because if assessment objectives are so central to learning about business studies, it is puzzling that they are so under emphasised. Why do they not appear throughout all aspects of the specification?

In terms of mark schemes and examinations, AQA appears to stress assessment objectives in the use of assessment grids but misalignment is not far away. Take one question in the AQA June 2006 Higher paper. Question (3b) is a "describe" question and includes the following level 2 descriptor for AO2 (application): "Both reasons adequately explained or one reason well explained." There are a number of issues here.

- AQA appears to have moved from using "explain" questions in 2005 to be assessed against AO1 and AO2 to "describe" questions in 2006 to assess the same skills.
- The idea of "explanation" is not mentioned in the assessment grids for other "describe" questions in this paper but "application" is mentioned. Is "explaining" really the same as "applying"?
- It is not clear what the difference is between "adequately explained" and "well explained". The suggested answers do not really help make this distinction clearer.



teaching your discipline over and above knowledge of the discipline itself" (2003). Teachers have to be concerned with what they teach rather than simply how they are going to teach it. If teachers tend to see themselves in terms of transmitting subject content, then they will view assessment objectives as peripheral to the

- Is explaining one reason well the equivalent of explaining two reasons in an adequate way?

Although the assessment objectives are consistent across examination boards, there is no consistency in their use. Unlike AQA, Edexcel bases questions around different combinations of assessment objectives, including short answer, low-mark questions that just cover AO4 (evaluation). Why is there this discrepancy between the boards? If there is something special about AQA's or Edexcel's approach, where is this stated? What are the benefits of it?

Aligning assessment

If the relationship between assessment objectives and the exams and mark schemes is relatively weak, then for understandable reasons, many teachers will teach to the tests rather than the assessment objectives. Of course, this would be fine if the exams themselves were effectively aligned but, as has been argued, this is only partially the case. The dotted lines in *Figure 1* indicate weak links caused by the lack of alignment and the solid line represents actual teacher practice.

This reaction by teachers is likely to be reinforced if assessment objectives are not given sufficient prominence by awarding bodies or the subject community. In addition, assessment objectives are more likely to be sidelined if they do not figure largely in the way in which teachers see themselves. As Biggs said: "...[alignment] requires a theory of

process of "getting through the material" or at best as just a description of how to mark.

Only if teachers see themselves as being involved in moving their students to higher levels of understanding are they likely to embrace assessment objectives as a way of understanding "understanding" that provides a key aspect of the subject's identity (perhaps the key aspect). More effectively aligning courses could exert significant leverage over the way in which learning is structured, encouraging teachers to focus their lessons on the crucial issue of developing student understanding.

Conclusions

The argument here is that GCSE Business Studies appears to be only relatively weakly aligned to its assessment objectives and that those assessment objectives have moved some way from Bloom's taxonomy. As a result, there is a lack of shared clarity about the nature of the subject that is making life harder for teachers and students than it needs to be. There is a real sense of time lost spent working out what the rules of the game are rather than energy spent productively, playing the game more effectively.

One unfortunate outcome of this is that it can be hard to present students with a coherent framework about how to do well in business studies – particularly for beginning teachers. Advice about improvement can become piecemeal and disjointed if

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the messages from examinations and mark schemes are inconsistent. The chance to give the subject a firmer, over-arching identity is missed and this is frustrating given that assessment objectives could provide such a framework.

If assessment objectives could function as the defining prism through which business studies is to be seen, they need to be put at the heart of things, rather than risk appearing as a rather inconvenient bolt on, an administrative hurdle to jump through, as just a way of marking. In Box 3 are suggestions as to crucial questions that might be asked.

Box 3: A constructive alignment check list

For the specification:

- Is there an unambiguous relationship between educational theory and the assessment objectives?
- Are the assessment objectives given sufficient prominence in mark schemes and specifications?
- Are efforts made to clearly exemplify and communicate the nature of the assessment objectives?
- Are the assessment objectives clearly and consistently flagged up in the command/trigger words used in question papers?
- Are the assessment objectives used in a consistent way in mark schemes and question papers?

For the teacher:

- Do I have a clear understanding of the differences between the assessment objectives?
- Are the assessment objectives at the heart of my lesson design?
- Do my GCSE students understand what the assessment objectives are?
- Can my GCSE students understand the difference between the assessment objectives?

Alignment could provide a secure framework for teachers and students. It puts understanding at the heart of the learning process, which is surely where it belongs. It moves the debate away from how teachers teach the content to how they can teach something

more substantial and long lasting about business studies. This will surely be a much more rewarding and enriching process for everyone.

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Bibliography and suggested further reading

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