

# Student perspectives on how different elements of constructive alignment (including assessment) support active learning

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LIISA POSTAREFF



# Constructive alignment

= a theoretical model of how to support deep, constructive learning

= a practical tool for teachers to design teaching

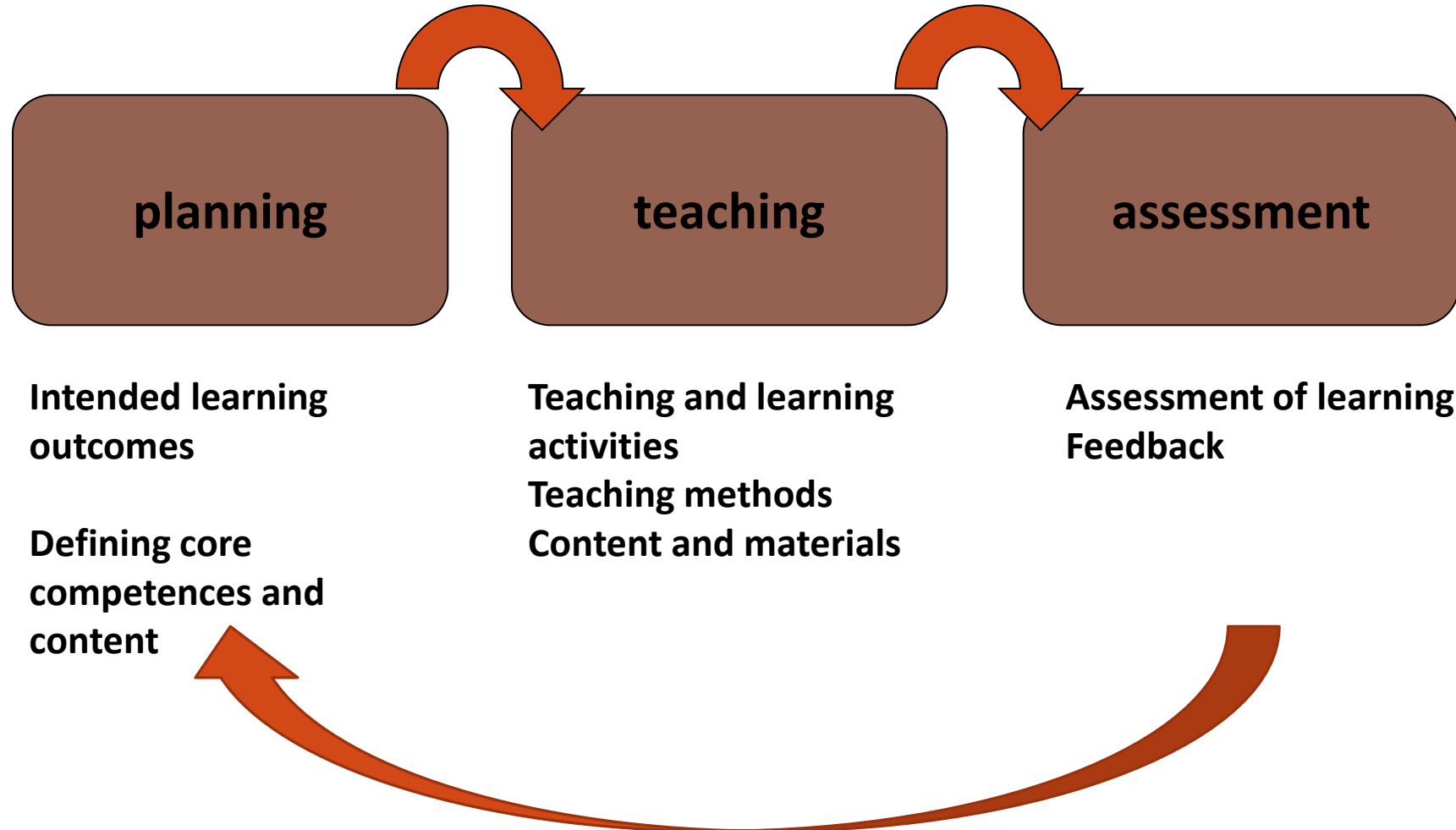
*Constructive* refers to the idea that students *construct meaning* through relevant learning activities → *Deep approach to learning*

*Alignment* refers to a learning environment where teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks, are *aligned* to the intended learning outcomes.

(Biggs, 2003)



# Students' intended learning outcomes are aligned with teaching and assessment



# Background

The principles of constructive alignment have long been promoted as a powerful way to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Biggs, 1996; Biggs and Tang, 2011).

The basic premise of constructive alignment is a student-centred approach to teaching in which the emphasis is on what the student does and the ways to improve students' active engagement and deep approach to learning (e.g. Biggs and Tang, 2011; Prosser and Trigwell, 2014).

Surprisingly, there is little empirical evidence how different elements of the constructive alignment actually influence the students' actions and approaches to learning especially from the students' point of view.

# Approaches to learning

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Deep, reflective approach



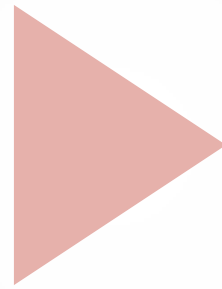
Surface, unreflective approach



Organised studying

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How students describe their experiences of different elements of constructive alignment?



How these are related with the approach to learning they adopt in a specific course.

37 students from three different courses participated

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graph TD; A[37 students from three different courses participated] --> B[They were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the course and their approaches to learning.]; B --> C[The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis.];
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They were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the course and their approaches to learning.

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

# 37 students from three courses

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## COURSE 1

### Biochemistry (19 interviewed students)

- 5 credits, 7 weeks, 100 students
- Lecturing (teachers' presentations, occasional short discussions) + practical sessions
- Written exam (assessed on a scale 0-5)

*...become familiar with...*

## COURSE 2

### Theology (8 interviewed students)

- 5 credits, bachelor-level, 6 weeks, 25 students
- Flipped learning (preparatory reading assignments)
- Drama exam : the students prepared a play about a central theme of the course in small groups.

*...is able to evaluate, is able to collect and analyse information..*

## COURSE 3

### Theology (10 interviewed students)

- 5 credits, 6 weeks, 60 students
- Lectures including some discussions, essay groups
- Written exam

*...is able to interpret compare and specify...*



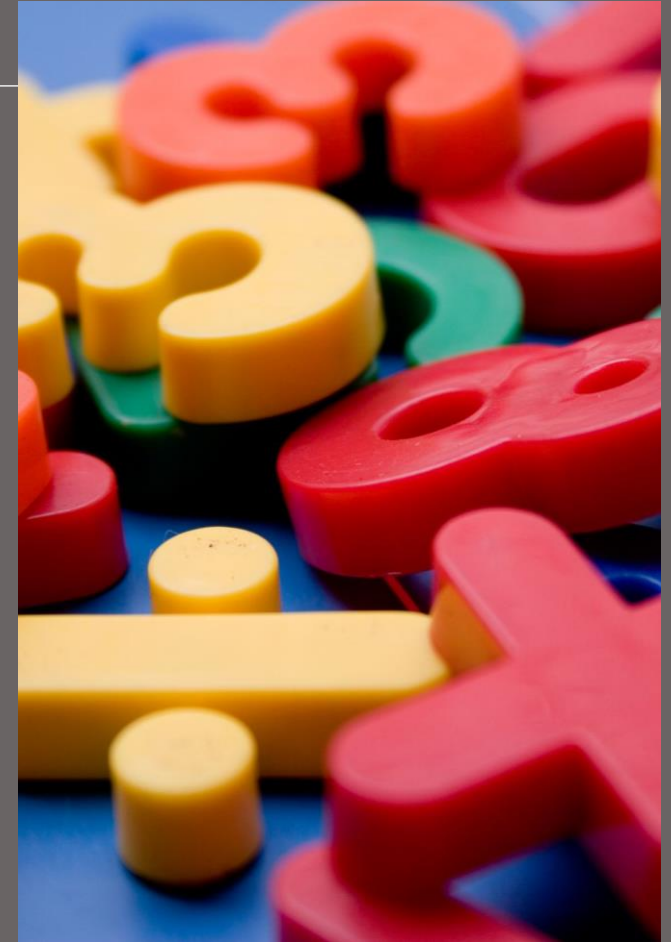
# Results

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The results show that different elements of constructive alignment had a clear role in guiding student learning and studying.

The teaching and assessment related factors appeared to play an especially big role.

On the other hand, the intended learning outcomes did not seem to influence student learning much



INTENDED LEARNING  
OUTCOMES

No influence

TEACHING AND LEARNING  
ACTIVITIES

Little engaging activities

Studying was driven by the  
activities that were obligatory to  
pass the course

many students appreciated the quality of  
teaching, praised the teachers' enthusiasm

COURSE 1  
Lecturing with  
practical  
sessions; written  
exam

Expectations of assessment

ASSESSMENT

Deep  
approach

INTENDED LEARNING  
OUTCOMES

No influence

High quality course materials

TEACHING AND LEARNING  
ACTIVITIES

Required students' active  
involvement throughout the  
course

Emphasized the importance of  
peer group discussions as  
supporting their learning

Peer support

many students appreciated the quality of  
teaching, praised the teachers' enthusiasm



Expectations of assessment

Mutual agreements, small group  
assessmen

ASSESSMENT



INTENDED LEARNING  
OUTCOMES

No influence

Lack of high-quality  
materials

TEACHING AND LEARNING  
ACTIVITIES

Little engaging activities

Studying was driven by the  
activities that were obligatory  
to pass the course

Lack of challenges

Lack of challenges → negative effect on  
learning, little effort into studying:

many students appreciated the quality of  
teaching, praised the teachers' enthusiasm

COURSE 3  
Lecturing, group  
work  
Written exam

Expectations of assessment

ASSESSMENT

Unreflective  
or mixed  
approach

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A small group of students are guided by their own aims

Students didn't always emphasise factors related to course aims, teaching or assessment.

- That was especially true for students adopting the deep approach to learning in the lecture course 1 with final exam.
- Students' own aims and willingness to put effort into studying seemed to be especially valuable in the learning environment in which the teaching method itself did not guide or require learning activities a lot.

# The influence of assessment varies depending on the individual

(Lindblom-Ylänne & Lonka 2001)



Assessment influences the way students study and prepare for the exam



Assessment guides learning especially for students adopting a surface approach to learning

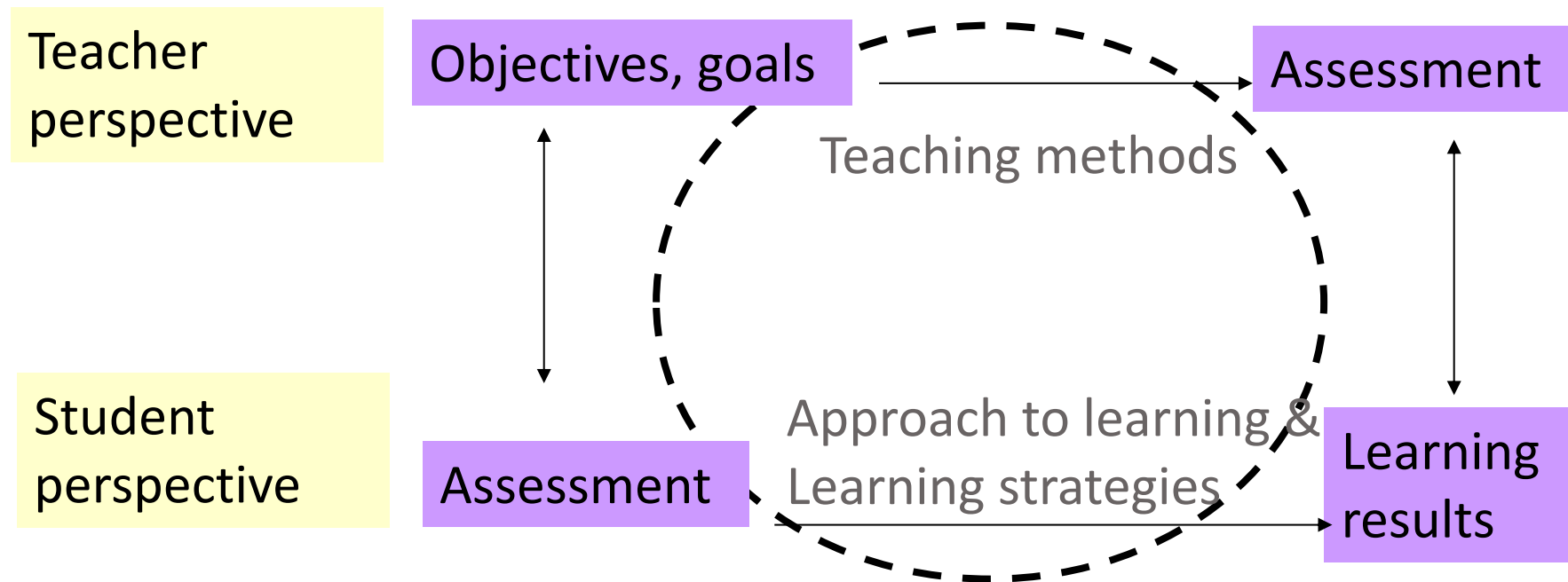
These students study in order to be successful in the exam



Students adopting a deep approach to learning are rather immune to the learning environment

They study in order to *learn* for themselves

# Constructive alignment – Assessment guides students' learning



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## **Student perspectives on how different elements of constructive alignment support active learning**

Telle Hailikari\*, Viivi Virtanen\*, Marjo Vesalainen\*\* & Liisa Postareff\*\*\*