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

- **planning**
  - Intended learning outcomes
  - Defining core competences and content

- **teaching**
  - Teaching and learning activities
  - Teaching methods
  - Content and materials

- **assessment**
  - Assessment of learning
  - Feedback
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

- Deep, reflective approach
- Surface, unreflective approach
- Organised studying
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 in the study. 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

**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)

**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.

**COURSE 3**

Theology (10 interviewed students)

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

...become familiar with....

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

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

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.
COURSE 1
Lecturing with practical sessions; written exam

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES
No influence

Deep approach

ASSESSMENT

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

EXPECTATIONS OF ASSESSMENT

Expectations of assessment

Many students appreciated the quality of teaching, praised the teachers’ enthusiasm
COURSE 2
(Flipped learning, drama exam)

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES
No influence

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

UNREFLECTIVE OR MIXED APPROACH
Mutual agreements, small group assessments

ASSESSMENT
High quality course materials
Expectations of assessment
INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

No influence

COURSE 3
Lecturing, group work
Written exam

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

ASSESSMENT

Expectations of assessment

Unreflective or mixed approach

Lack of high-quality materials
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

Teacher perspective

Objectives, goals

Assessment

Teaching methods

Approach to learning & Learning strategies

Learning results

Student perspective

Assessment

(Biggs 2003, 141)
Student perspectives on how different elements of constructive alignment support active learning

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