

ALIGNMENT: THEORY



As a course instructor, ensuring that your (1) course curriculum, (2) assessments, and (3) instruction fit together well can make a significant difference in the quality of education that you provide to your students. This idea of all the parts of your course fitting together into a coherent, cohesive whole is called alignment. And, aligning one's course does not happen by accident. It is a careful and deliberative process instructors undertake during the course design process.



What does the literature have to say (briefly!) about alignment?

In terms of education, alignment is a critical concept for instructors, as it involves ensuring that all components of education, including **curriculum, assessments, standards, instruction, and resources**, are working together effectively towards common goals and objectives. This Fast-Track Tutorial mainly focuses on alignment as it applies to the courses level, but as a concept, it can be applied to **programs, schools or colleges**, and even the **institution as a whole**.



Alignment is essential in ensuring that what is taught and assessed in classrooms is in line with the larger goals and expectations of the program and institution a course belongs to, and that students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for success in further education, work, and life.

One crucial tool for achieving alignment is curriculum mapping. **Curriculum mapping** is a process that allows instructors to align curriculum, instruction, and assessments by identifying the scope and sequence of the content, skills, and assessments in a given subject or course. This process enables instructors to identify gaps, redundancies, and misalignments in the curriculum and make adjustments to ensure that all components are aligned with the intended learning outcomes. As Biggs and Tang (2011) noted, designing a clear and coherent curriculum that is aligned with learning outcomes is essential for promoting student learning and enhancing the quality of education.

ALIGNMENT: THEORY



How is alignment different from scaffolding?

Alignment is the process of ensuring that all components of education, including curriculum, assessments, standards, instruction, and resources, are working together effectively towards common goals and objectives. The focus of alignment is on ensuring that what is taught and assessed in classrooms is in line with the goals and expectations of the educational system and that students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for success in education, work, and life.

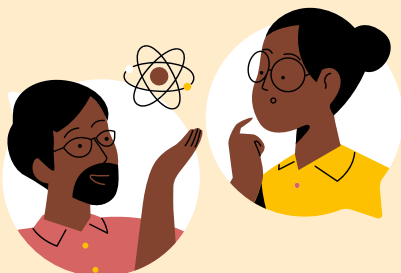
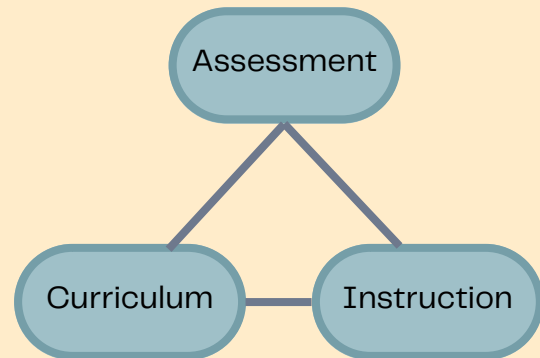


On the other hand, scaffolding is a teaching approach that involves providing support to students as they learn new concepts or skills. Scaffolding involves breaking down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable steps, providing students with guidance and feedback, and gradually reducing the level of support as students become more proficient. The focus is on providing students with the support they need to master new skills and concepts, rather than on aligning instruction with standards or objectives.

SCAFFOLDING



ALIGNMENT



So, alignment is focused on ensuring that instruction and assessment are aligned with standards and outcomes, while scaffolding is focused on supporting students as they learn new concepts or skills. Both strategies can be used together to create effective learning experiences.

ALIGNMENT: THEORY



What are the benefits to using learning outcomes?

Clarity and consistency

Alignment helps to ensure that all components of education, including curriculum, instruction, and assessments, are consistent and clear. This makes it easier for students to understand what is expected of them and to see how different concepts and skills fit together.

Improved learning outcomes

Alignment can lead to improved learning outcomes by ensuring that instruction and assessments are aligned with standards and learning outcomes, making it more likely that students can achieve the intended learning outcomes with better results.



More effective use of resources

Alignment can help instructors to use their resources more effectively by focusing on the most critical areas of instruction and assessment, allowing them to target the areas that are most likely to have the greatest impact on student learning.

Increased student engagement

Alignment can increase student engagement by making learning more relevant and meaningful. When instruction and assessments are aligned with students' learning needs, students are more likely to be motivated and engaged in the learning process.

Better communication

Alignment promotes better communication among instructors, students, and other stakeholders in education. When everyone is working towards transparent goals and outcomes, it is easier to communicate about the progress and needs of students, identify areas of strength and weakness in the curriculum, and make informed decisions about instruction and assessment.

References

- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). Teaching for quality learning at university. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Black, P., & William, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5–31.
- Popham, W. J. (2020). *Classroom assessment: What teachers need to know* (9th ed.). Pearson.

ALIGNMENT: ACTION



Okay, so you've been tasked to develop a course and you want to consider the alignment of your work. Good news! You're thinking about it at the outset, which is very helpful. This means you can be proactive with your planning, and you won't (hopefully!) have to go back to make any major adjustments to your work because you are seeking to make the different parts of the course fit together intentionally from the start.

So, where do you start? One place to begin with is this Fast-Track Tutorial! Let's read more.



So what goes into creating course alignment?

There are a lot of moving parts when it comes to designing a course – and, when you are designing a course, it's important that you wear a 'designer's' hat, so to speak. In this capacity, you are much more than an expert in your subject area. As course designer, your task is to look beyond just the discipline-specific content you'd like to touch upon. You are literally creating the learning experience for your students, and content and its delivery is just one aspect of that experience.

The key elements of a course that you'll want to consider to ensure good overall alignment in your design include:

Learning Outcomes: Clear, specific, and measurable learning outcomes that are aligned with the course goals and objectives. These outcomes should describe what students will be able to do or know as a result of completing the course. If you need help with crafting your learning outcomes, you might want to consult our Learning Outcomes Fast-Track Tutorial.

Assessments: Assessment tasks and criteria that are aligned with the learning outcomes and provide meaningful feedback to students. This can include a mix of formative and summative assessments. If you need help with designing your assessments, you might want to consult our

Summative and Formative Assessment Fast-Track Tutorial.

Instructional Activities and Materials: Instructional activities and materials that are aligned with the learning outcomes and assessments. These activities should engage students and provide opportunities for them to practice and apply what they are learning.

Course Content: Course content that is aligned with the learning outcomes and instructional activities. This can include readings, videos, and other resources that support student learning and help them achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Instructional Strategies: Instructional strategies that are aligned with the learning outcomes, assessments, and course content. These strategies should be varied and responsive to student needs and preferences. The graphic in the next section demonstrates how this type of alignment can be achieved.

Feedback and Reflection: Opportunities for students to receive feedback on their progress and reflect on their learning. This can include peer review, self-assessment, and other reflective activities that help students integrate their learning and deepen their understanding of the course material.

ALIGNMENT: ACTION



Can we look at some examples of alignment in action?

Sure. Let's look at an example of alignment in terms of some of the main components of a course noted in the section above. This example walks you through how alignment might function in a Media Studies or Communications course.

Learning Outcomes

Let's say one of the overall goals of the course is to help students understand the principles of effective communication.

One of the learning outcomes for the course could be: "Students will be able to develop and deliver an effective oral presentation."

Assessments

To align with the above learning outcome, the assessment could be a presentation that students create and deliver in class.

The presentation rubric should be aligned with the learning outcome, evaluating students on their ability to develop and deliver an effective presentation.

Instructional Activities

To support the above learning outcome, instructional activities could include watching videos of effective presenters, analyzing what makes them effective, and practicing presentation skills in small groups.

Course Content

The course content could include readings on effective communication, such as articles on body language, tone, and message organization.

Students could also analyze examples of successful and unsuccessful presentations.

Instructional Strategies

Instructional strategies could include role-playing exercises, peer review, and feedback on presentation drafts to help students develop and refine their presentation skills

Feedback & Reflection

Feedback and reflection activities could include peer review of presentation, a self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and reflective writing prompts that ask students to think about how they can apply what they have learned to real-world situations.

From this example we can see the pivotal role that learning outcomes play in creating alignment. The process began with a learning outcome and we used that outcome to drive all our decisions about the other course elements.



ALIGNMENT: EXAMPLES

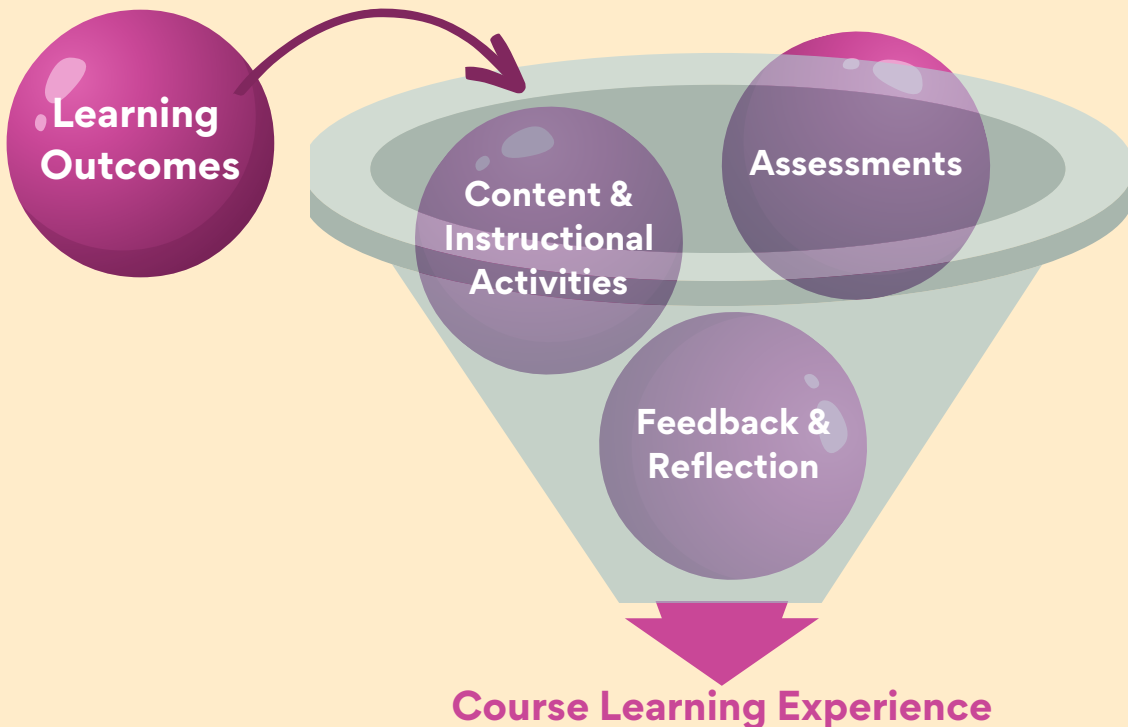


You've read some of the theory, and you've learned about some of the elements that contribute to creating solid course alignment. In this section of the Fast-Track Tutorial we'll look at some ways to get started with alignment and then workshop some challenges you might encounter and brainstorm some possible solutions.



How can I start?

As we've seen in the Alignment – Action section of this Fast Track Tutorial, learning outcomes play an important role in establishing the overall alignment of a course. So, it makes sense to start with your learning outcomes.



As you can see in the diagram above, you don't necessarily have to follow a prescribed order. What matters is that you funnel those course components through the learning outcomes. Rather than working more linearly from start to finish, some people might be more comfortable starting with their end goal in mind and working back from that. There's a strategy based around that idea – it's called backwards design! It also begins with your learning outcomes, but you then move on to planning your assessments and, once those are done, move on to the other course elements. There is no one perfect way. What matters is that you make deliberate, conscious choices about your course design – and all those choices stem from your learning outcomes.

ALIGNMENT: EXAMPLES



Can you show me some common challenges with achieving good course alignment?

Sure, but more than that, let's also look at some solutions too.

Challenge: Lack of clarity in learning outcomes.

Solution: Refine course learning outcomes so that they are measurable, specific, and align with program goals and program learning outcomes. Use program outcomes as a guide to ensure course learning outcomes align with overall program goals. Invest the upfront time to craft solid learning outcomes. If they are weak to begin with, it will negatively impact the rest of your design.



Challenge: Difficulty in aligning assessments with learning outcomes.

Solution: Revisit your learning outcomes to identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students should be able to demonstrate by the end of the course. Next, consider a method of assessment that most naturally lends itself to exploring that outcome. Then, group your outcomes based on possible assessment methods and ensure that different types of learning are measured.

Generally, course learning outcomes can be measured more than once by multiple assessments. However, you should ensure that every learning outcome is assessed at least once.

Now that you've got the 'what' and 'how' taken care of, you can begin to drill down on the specifics for each of the 'hows' (i.e. specific instructions for each assessment).

ALIGNMENT: EXAMPLES



Can you show me some common challenges with achieving good course alignment?

Sure, but more than that, let's also look at some solutions too.

Challenge: Lack of student engagement and motivation.

Solution: There are a number of interrelated strategies you can deploy here. This type of challenge is usually revealed through data such as student end-of-course surveys. Here, you are using data to inform your decision-making to help further align your course. Some common examples impacting engagement and motivation can include:

- **Learning Strategies:** Look at your current learning strategies. Re-evaluate them to see if they are more focused on simply delivering content or if they actively engage students in the learning process, such as group work, problem-solving, and peer teaching.
- **Students staying on track/keeping up:** provide more frequent opportunities for formative assessment and feedback to keep students on track and motivated.
- **Content relevance:** Re-evaluate your content to identify opportunities to incorporate real-world applications and examples to help students see the relevance and importance of course content.



Challenge: Limited instructional time for covering all course content.

Solution: Prioritize and focus on key course concepts and skills that align with learning outcomes. Take advantage of the fact that courses are not only internally aligned, so too are programs! This means that concepts and content may be covered elsewhere in your program. Be sure you really need to cover certain material (as opposed to really wanting to cover it).

