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# *To Be Creative, Education Must Become Bifocal*

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Good academics follow good syllabus design. They write clear statements of learning outcomes and then deliver learning activities that directly support them. Finally, they build assessment—also in faithful alignment with the learning outcomes—that gives students the opportunity to demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes. Elegant, fair, avoiding mess and confusion, letting students see what they are meant to learn, sharing the responsibility for learning and making it clear: the agreement of all parts of the curriculum (known as constructive alignment) is the golden code of learning and teaching.

I question these articles of faith, suspecting that the doctrine of constructive alignment is wrong-headed and harms creative learning. My argument proposes that constructive alignment is monofocal. The monofocal structure determines a single point to which all the rays converge: here are the learning outcomes; here are the resources that you will need to reach them; and here, on the same page, are the assessments that deal with exactly the same thing and nothing else, enabling you to focus exclusively on the items specified in the learning outcomes, my delivery and the resources provided.

The monofocal works if you never want to triangulate your experience. If you are a plumber—without disrespect to an essential and worthy profession—and you want to know how to belay the pressure before taking a tap off to replace the washer, all you need is a focus on obtaining the one outcome. Monofocality is good for uncreative processes, so-called lower-order thinking, like learning dates in history, where you can easily be tested to see if you remember them. But what if you want to enter a realm that involves wonder, speculation, colour, curiosity, contention, the unexplained, the potential within you to invent, to stimulate your own opinion, to defend your conjecture, to change your opinion and enlarge your own perspective? Faced with any creative learning endeavour, monofocality fails. Students are told the learning outcomes. They know the deal. Sticking to the resources on point, they will not start another narrative but will hone the focus toward the assessment. One focus: one narrative and no confusion!

My idea of the monofocal is different to the "unistructural" of the SOLO taxonomy or its counterparts from Bloom, which now help organize learning outcomes according to the principles of constructive alignment. All such learning and teaching taxonomies are monofocal, irrespective of how unistructural or relational or "extended abstract" a given learning outcome may be. The principle for all of them is monofocal insofar as a given learning outcome musters the other educational elements provided to students, ending with the assessment. Each learning outcome is essentially a statement of focus and, insofar as each is meaningful, it excludes from the focus everything that the student may have been able to invent beyond it.

In education, we love focus. Our aim, from school time to doctoral studies, is to focus the student's attention, focus ourselves and provide focus for the student's independent study. We deplore distractions as a form of intellectual dissipation, a rupture of purpose, a blank among the bullet points, a failure of resolve, a lapse of relevance, an inability to stick to the intended outcome. For that reason, we counsel students to avoid distractions, to remain focused, to stay on-track, with the goal constantly in mind. Distraction is the enemy of education because it waylays the learner on the most efficient trajectory toward a learning outcome.

In our expectation for focus and concentration, our culture is built on an insult to dreaming, with its stigma of procrastination and suspicion over free wonder. In championing focus, we devalue wonder and banish that effortless mental transport where ideas concatenate of their own accord, suggesting one another and leaking propositions to a fertile bed of potential development. We cannot exactly claim that all lateral thinking proceeds from distraction, but we cannot discount the claim either. It seems illogical to suggest that imagination proceeds by being highly focused; otherwise, we would only need to concentrate harder in order to be imaginative. The command not to be distracted is tantamount to an order not to be imaginative.

Focus, in the way that we obsess about it, is a new concept, without historical precedent before the twentieth century. The word *focus* originates in Latin from the place of fire in a house; not fire itself (*ignis*) but the locus or institution of the heat, the place of burning (like *ustrina*), a bit like a cooker or brazier, frying-pan or stove (*foculus*). Our word derives from the hearth (*focus*) as the warm heart of the house, equated somewhat with the Vestal household soul (*lar*). In antiquity, there were no metaphorical extensions to the term. During the later Renaissance, however, this same concept of a concentrated domestic hotspot translated logically in optics to describe the literally hot convergence of rays directed through a lens of a certain focal length or onto a parabolic mirror; and from there the word would enjoy signal relevance in mathematics as the centre of a parabola or dual centre of an ellipse. Though belonging to the Baroque period, these uses are still physical and only become metaphorical via the advent of photography in the nineteenth century, where a lens had to be focused—else the photograph is fuzzy—and also via the development of sophisticated stage lighting, where an actor would be spotlit and become the focus of attention for the audience by virtue of concentrated illumination. The word arrives at the metaphorical through the technical.

Once the word *focus* gained its metaphorical generality and translated to the psychological, it spread like the fateful fire of its origins, skipping the hearth and the camera apparatus and breaking out into the whole community, raging and fanned by social purpose against all forms of divergence. Today, the paradoxical "spread" of focus has infiltrated all business discourse and can be considered ubiquitous. Even if you type into Google a specific phrase like "stay focused," you will achieve 354,000,000 hits. Focus, if we can mix metaphors, has reached epidemic proportions.

In a corporatized world, to have a single focus enjoys universal approval. To be able to focus is to have a purpose, to do well, to achieve something, to maximize the chances of success, to resist distractions. Meanwhile, to get distracted means to lose sight of the purpose, to lack focus; we say "keep focused" because focus is unstable, like the allegorical figure of Fortune standing upon a ball that is apt to shoot from under her and leave her without a perch.

I am extremely suspicious of the sudden ascent of this concept—coinciding with the industrialization of will and spirit in modernity—especially in education, where we used to acknowledge a liberal broadening agenda throughout learning and teaching, a culture that respected the individual imagination

and free curiosity of both the teacher and the student. Judging by our statements of learning outcomes and even publicity for our courses, we only seem to want our students to have a single focus, as if possessed by a mission to which they steadfastly hold: a single point, the exclusive singularity, the one fire, the one hearth. It belongs to an abiding hatred of plurality throughout modernism, with unfortunate linear suppositions already installed in the metaphor, where the randomness of light bouncing chaotically in all quarters is directed into convergent beams upon a single point. Education is now the steward of psychological rigour.

Before the culture of constructive alignment took hold of academies, institutions described the syllabus in terms of teaching objectives. The objectives were relatively liberal statements of what the teacher hoped to achieve by telling a story and responding to analogous interpretations by students in tutorials. This noble old scheme of teaching objectives was bifocal. The teacher had a focus but students were free to develop their own focus in response. It could come from their personal experience, their unique angle, their critique, even their antipathy to the assumptions or contentions in the subject that reflect the lecturer's focus. Up to a point, students were empowered with determining their own learning outcomes; but it was a blessing that the term "learning outcome" was never used, just like "constructive alignment." It is inherently uncreative vocabulary.

Some lecturers today try to get around the problem by installing the word "creativity" in their learning outcomes, which also reflects an adjustment in Bloom's taxonomy from "synthesizing" to "creating" at the apex of the learning triangle. Insinuating creativity in the learning outcomes is meant in good faith and, in a provisional sense, smart academics have figured out a reasonable work-around. But structurally, it is a contradiction, at variance with the very principle of constructive alignment. Constructive alignment demands that nothing should be in the learning outcomes that is not actually taught and subsequently assessed with some rigour. Who can honestly claim that they can teach creativity? And also, do you really want to punish students when they are not creative? I do not. Why demoralize diligent students who are not gifted with imaginative confidence? If creativity is in the learning outcomes, you have to demote all the uncreative students, even though you have not honestly told them how to be creative.

With these compromises, you have got yourself in a right mess; and from a student point of view, it is invidious and a bit disgusting. "On successful completion of this subject, you will become creative. It is just that we will not teach you how to be creative and we cannot tell you what makes your assessed work creatively credible either." Institutions know that creativity is the next thing, that employers are calling for creativity, that creativity embodies the future and we will not prosper without creativity. But all that academies can do is proffer confusing lip-service to imagination, where meanwhile all their academic structures disable it.

I feel that it is time to deconstruct the shibboleth of constructive alignment. In my own work, I propose a way of talking about education that is more philosophically sympathetic to creativity (Nelson, 2018). Instead of the hardy favourites of syllabus design, I favour a larger subjective vocabulary that is more consonant with the theme of imagination. The expanded lexicon includes concepts such as "being nice," flux and narrative. We should begin with the assumption that learning itself is intrinsically imaginative because it means gaining a cognitive sympathy ahead of knowing something. You relate to unknown material because you already see it as belonging to you. This seductive process of tentative thought-ownership gives the cue to restructuring education to be creative from the outset and not tacked on as an embarrassing afterthought.

To serve the student imagination against ingrained structural mechanisms that prevent creativity, it will take more than an enhanced vocabulary among enthusiastic teachers. It requires the deconstruction of focus, a clumsy and restrictive metaphor that puts our heart in the wrong place. To be fair, I do not have a polemic against focus as such. Clearly in studying anything, we need to focus on the text, the scientific theory or the demonstration or the question. Depth and understanding would be compromised if we could not concentrate on one thing at a time, and the metaphor of focus is a powerful rubric to denote the capacity of settling the mind on a topic in a penetrating way. But the more I investigate the concept, the more I find that focus in learning anything with creative content is hard to disentangle from its distractions.

As an example, take a poet like Christina Rossetti who wrote in a rhyming metrical form in the later nineteenth century. Her powers of concentration must have been formidable and this faculty could be described as a high degree of focus. To possess such a keen idea of where the poem is headed while not yet written is a task that could never have been planned with any intricate structure. As she wrote in rhyming pentameter, say, she had to fill the line with ten beats, the final one in alternating lines chiming with the final beat in another line. The ability to concentrate on the thought—which indeed meant focus—involved an equal and opposite ability to scour her enormous vocabulary in search of a rhyme that fitted with the idea. In finding a rhyming word (which initially perhaps seemed unsuitable), she was likely to experience some disparity with the original thought, because language did not deliver such convenient rhymes that matched her original idea. Rossetti plunged herself into an assortment of possibilities, many of which were detours, dead-ends and distractions. Amid these distractions, however, there was a peculiar pathway that she would never have found if left to her original focus. Her focus, if that is the correct term, was constantly shifting according to a torrent of options, not just the few words that would form a rhyme but the sense that might have brought any one of them into a fruitful rapport with whatever she had already written or intended to write.

Up to a point, such advanced ratiocination could be described as creativity rather than learning. But I consider that, throughout the creative process, the creator is learning. Rossetti learned at each moment what a word in a given context could contribute but, above all, she learned what her mind would do. She learned what aptness a further thought could share with the ones that she had already formulated; and, in this seething array of prospects in contention, Rossetti also had to learn to relinquish attachments that did not work so well, that lacked poignancy or colour or heightened semantic agency. She was focused, to be sure, but only on the basis that she was equally open to better ideas that came along and that she still had to learn about.

Thinking of a creative kind is entirely made up of such processes. They are based on both speculation and learning; learning about options and their implication, their aptness and potential. There is no point having focus if it does not subtend these rich and somewhat skewed relations with ideas that do not have a focus, at which point the term *focus* seems decidedly unfocused. The learner must entertain ideas that are only coincidentally relevant.

The ideal educational structure could be described as multifocal rather than bifocal, but I have chosen bifocality to underscore the two core terms of learning and teaching—essentially the learner and the teacher—to acknowledge the plurality without which there is no student imagination and probably no teacher creativity either. Both must handle disparities of intention and arrive at outcomes that are unforeseen. In essence, there are hopes and ambitions on the part of the student and hopes and ambitions on the part of the teacher, and they are never the same. One seeks convergence, of course; but the

moment one collapses the two terms into the inflexible institution of learning outcomes, the scope for creativity is trashed.

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## About the Author

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