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## Deconstructive Misalignment: Archives, Events, and Humanities Approaches in Academic Development

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# Deconstructive Misalignment: Archives, Events, and Humanities Approaches in Academic Development

## **Abstract**

Using poetry, role play, readers' theatre, and creative manipulations of space through yarn and paper weaving, a workshop in 2008 challenged one of educational development's more pervasive and least questioned notions ("constructive alignment" associated most often with the work of John Biggs). This paper describes the reasoning behind using humanities approaches specifically in this case and more generally in the Challenging Academic Development Collective's work, as well as problematising the notions of "experiment" and "results" by unarchiving and re-archiving such a nonce-event. The critical stakes in using an anti-empirical method are broached, and readers are encouraged to experience their own version of the emergent truths of such approaches by drawing their own conclusions.

En 2008, par le biais de la poésie, du jeu de rôles, du théâtre lu et de manipulations créatrices de l'espace avec de la laine et des tissages en papier, un atelier a mis au défi une des notions les plus généralisées et les moins remises en question du développement éducatif, l'alignement constructif, le plus souvent associé aux travaux de John Biggs. Cet article décrit le raisonnement qui se cache sous l'utilisation des approches des humanités tout spécialement dans ce cas et de manière plus générale dans les travaux du Collectif sur le développement académique stimulant. L'article traite également de la problématique sur les notions d'« expérience » et de « résultats » en désarchivant et en réarchivant une telle circonstance. Les enjeux principaux de l'utilisation de cette méthode anti-empirique sont abordés et les lecteurs sont encouragés à faire l'expérience de leur propre version des vérités qui émergent de telles approches en tirant leurs propres conclusions.

## **Keywords**

arts, arts-based inquiry, humanities methods, reflection on practice

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors would like to thank the Challenging Academic Development Collective for opening up a trading zone of ideas, as well as the International Consortium for Educational Development for encouraging a diversity of approaches to our field.

## Prologue: A Collaborative Weaving

*Collective workshop poem (2008)*

*Interesting idea that you assess,  
documenting failure  
one for each learner  
multiple helixes  
The teacher sets the starting point  
and width*

*A spider web  
But the spider moves  
all over the place  
she doesn't stay  
in the middle (and she doesn't eat  
the students) [picture]  
[sunshine and crescent picture]  
[bald head and stars picture]*

*Make a fire [picture]  
Bring some fireworks  
invite students to bring some too  
and see what happens*

*something will happen [picture]*

*Banyan—more roots than top*

*Pottery – making something out of  
formless mass  
An Italian Fresco, some structure,  
layering, colour,  
public; of value  
Deleuzian metaphor= rhizome  
Curriculum design as rollercoaster*

*design  
[picture]  
I love roller coasters  
I also love teaching  
Roller coasters are fun  
learning should be fun*

*Roller coasters combine pace,  
thrills, lulls, repeated elements, u-  
turns, high points, low points,  
loops, inversions – so should  
learning*

*Spider's web – creates a structure,  
but if done intelligently (!)  
leaves plenty of spaces to catch  
new ideas  
[spiral picture]*

*Organic growth  
intertwining ideas  
vines growing  
[sparks/stars picture]*

*Curriculum development is open-  
ended, never finished,  
is only a snapshot in time*



Figure 1. Original paper chain poem

## Part One: Introduction

In “The Longitudinal Archive,” Sword (2008) argues that humanities-trained scholars who find ourselves in academic development roles, unaccustomed to what she terms the “social science mode” (p. 88) of data-gathering and interpretation, may be best suited to an enriching of our work’s archive. She suggests that arts-based scholars, comfortable with (and indeed thriving in) ambiguity and tension, can apply the research paradigms in which we were steeped, such as “gathering, reframing, evaluating, theorising and narrating complex constellations of meaning” (p. 89), to a longer-term approach without knowing precisely who will use the knowledge thus conserved, or what questions the future may ask of it.

The fundamental importance of thinking about how we generate, conserve, and transform knowledge structures in the still-emergent discipline of academic development<sup>1</sup> is the larger question at work in both this paper and the ongoing conference-based projects of which the single event it describes is one example. Generation, conservation, and transformation are the three main jobs, according to Golde (2006) writing about the doctoral degree, of stewardship in any given field. It strikes us that all these elements of stewardship within academic development, as well as the authority we take or ask to be granted any time we decide to archive a story, event, or research product, need interrogation. The poem that begins this exercise in archiving an intentionally humanities-based teaching workshop at a conference in 2008 is in itself just such a research product (albeit a spontaneously-developed and accidentally-structured one), and does not stand on its own. Similarly, the workshop in which it was unintentionally generated cannot merely be presented as a script or a plan, or even a description, as presentation and narration are never neutral. Under the weight, then, of Derrida's (1995) *Archive Fever*, in which the poststructural philosopher traces the authoritative "domiciliation" (p. 2) and "consignation" (p. 3) whenever a primarily interior and private memory is exteriorised and made public, subjected to the rules of both sequence and law by the archivists, we offer our account of a workshop that resisted closure, in a paper that attempts to make meaning for unasked future questions.

What follows is a gloss on an experiment the authors attempted at a conference some years ago. It was an experiment with its own intellectual and practical history at two prior conferences, part of a longer set of symposia, workshops and papers worked on since then by a loose collective of academic developers (many from humanities backgrounds). Describing and commenting on the experiment here, though, is about the evolving field of academic development (and the politics of that evolution) as much as it is about the experiment's original topic (challenging "constructive alignment" as a theory and set of practices).

We have for some time suspected that research in higher education has become shorthand for a particular form of social science, empirically-based and experimentally designed. Neither quantitative nor qualitative, our humanities backgrounds in literature and cultural theory occasionally make it difficult for us to feel at "home" in academic development, even though we are both mid-career developers (see Manathunga, 2007). Our original presentation and now our representation of a workshop that was meant to trouble precisely this paradigmatic problem is itself, too, meant to trouble what we see as a dominant discourse in our adopted field of academic development. We make the dual move of remembering a workshop that deliberately, oppositionally took humanities approaches (performance-based, theatrical, aesthetic, poetic, philosophical) *and* we comment on it as though we are its authoritative archivists. In doing so, we realize that we are enacting a false dichotomy between creation as research and evidentiary empiricism as research; this is not our intent, but it is always a risk in seeming oppositional. Furthermore, it is only our voices that are guiding the remembering, in part – and the irony is not lost on us – because of our own unwillingness to have made a research project out of it that would have included the voices of the participants (whose responses did flow in later, but cannot be used here, now, because they were never part of a social science ethics review). To this end, we use an alternate form for the core of the paper: the script is presented as planned, with italicised glosses about what actually occurred (from our perspective at the time) to its right, and our current commentary following.

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada, readers may be more familiar with the term "educational development" which might be termed "faculty development" or "teaching development" in the U.S. and "academic development" in many other parts of the world. In general, this is the domain and profession of those who support higher education faculty members and teaching assistants in developing their teaching, and sometimes research, skills.

Our prologue, the poem, is actually the only immediate outcome extant. For most people, we suspect, the poem may seem a jumble. Perhaps for the two dozen or so participants, seeing it again would evoke a memory of some of the thinking and interacting that occurred. Our experiment has no measurable results other than further experimentation, and in some sense we desire no results, although we cannot help but gesture toward some meaningfulness that emerged more or less accidentally.

With the workshop script below, this paper becomes both archive and provocation. We offer a cultural study of the workshop-as-object and as-experience, but also as object-of-knowledge. Culture is a kind of sense-making, and the culture(s) of educational development will of course be bounded by generic expectations and rhetorical norms, even by specified rules of what counts as appropriate presentation mode or material. Bringing forward an old workshop is a means both of testing humanistic methods and testifying about their use. At the same time it reconstitutes an archive, elsewhere, other than the “here” of our personal computers and an ancient (in internet terms) conference site. The archive itself, as a concept and a thing, structures the kind of provocation we can offer: a provocation to the empirical paradigm in which both of us participate actively, and yet both of us find troubling.

Our small intervention in the wider Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement is worth remembering, repeating, reterritorialising, because, we fear a little bit at least, SoTL risks becoming stultified and constrained by a scientism that gives false hope about the tractability of certain kinds of questions in teaching and learning (especially an improvement-oriented, measurability narrative guaranteed by such conventions as data-gathering, control-group studies, and measurement of immediate learning gains). By way of background, we need to go back to 2004, to the formation of a group of academic developers who named ourselves the “Challenging Academic Development Collective” (CAD) (see Peseta, Hicks, Holmes, Manathunga, Sutherland & Wilcox 2005 for a full account).

Using such unscientific approaches as theatre, poetry creation, metaphor, conversation, drawing, movement, humour, emotional response, and silence, CAD collective members sought to bring difference into the conferences we attended and papers we wrote. This group is still active biennially at the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED) Conference, and indeed between conferences in research journals, at other conferences, and on our international email discussion list. Not all our work is stubbornly outcome-avoidant, but the idea of alternate approaches to social science is well described by philosopher Dea, writing with Holmes about humanistic dialogue as method. They suggest that the

transcript is an archive of mutual surprises, readjustments and fruitful wanderings. This approach introduces error, and no surprise there, because the Latin root of error is *errare*, to wander; our dialogues and yours are never a straight path, and it is exactly by wandering over terrain that we discover new geographies of place and identity. (Holmes & Dea, 2012, p. 259).

Such is the spirit that animates our work. As each ICED conference is planned, various CAD Collective members work together or separately on pieces of scholarship that may work at the boundaries of academic development’s tacit and explicit norms, or even beyond. Thus, for ICED 2008, two of us found ourselves proposing a workshop that would approach a canonical text in a novel way. Somewhat perversely, where a proper experiment in scientific terms seeks replicability, we hoped to create something more akin to rhizomatic replication. A rhizome can grow a stem at any point along its system of running roots. In this it is unlike the rooted tree-like structures on which our cultural logics are founded (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Create an event, a “happening” or a singular site that can never be repeated

exactly, in order to foreground the creative process of question-posing and site-specific meaningfulness. Improvisation and play are the methods more suited to this kind of anti-arborescent practice.

We set out not knowing or wanting to know what would come of the workshop, nor wanting to prescribe outcomes or match our activities and assessments to those outcomes. In short, we wished to avoid “doing” constructive alignment in a workshop meant to ask questions about that very idea. Anecdotally, however – and we are in favour of the anecdote as evidence – enough *did* come out of it that we have been encouraged to write about the workshop, how it came about, and what we thought we were doing. In the reproduction, below, of our workshop “script,” we aim to conserve, to archive the experience, to present it and the words it contains as something generative and potentially transformative, a reminder that questioning our most precious models and ideas may open up to us new ways of thinking, teaching, learning, and conferencing. At the same time, we recognise the workshop itself as a “nonce-event,” not repeatable, replicable, or able to be captured in its entirety, and a moment that itself can, and should be, questioned, analysed, and challenged. The non-italicised sections are our planning notes, and the italicised sections are an account of actual events and/or interpretations of what transpired. The “paper” referred to below and read aloud during the session is surrounded by, immersed in, and woven through with skits and workshop activities. It is titled, “Weaving Beyond Constructive Alignment,” while we called the workshop “Creativity Unbound” (full title is below).

## **Part Two: The Workshop**

### **Creativity Unbound? Rethinking “Constructive Alignment” as Paradigm and Method**

*Pre-workshop. Trevor Holmes (TH) and Kathryn Sutherland (KS) laid out slips of coloured paper on the tables, set up streamers for the first skit, constructed a constructive alignment (CA) triangle diagram on the board and covered it up.*

#### ***Beginning:***

*KS asked who was there because they knew about constructive alignment, who because they didn't know about CA, and who because they knew the presenters. The opening activity, below, was designed both to get participants involved early in the workshop and to identify what they knew, or did not know, about CA, so that we did not begin with false assumptions of shared understanding.*

**Brainstorm (TH): what participants understand of “constructive alignment” (4 mins)**

*Responses on flip chart paper:*

- goals and assessment
- = teaching and learning activities
- boring
- joined-up thinking re: program [design?]
- John Biggs
- constructivism
- constructing
- whoooaah
- more jargon
- ideological
- not really...
- common sense
- schools...

*TH uncovered the CA diagram that he had earlier written on the board and explained the three features of intended learning outcomes, teaching & learning activities, and assessment. KS then asked people to be an observant audience, rather than typical academic development conference participants inclined to raise questions and make comments. She encouraged people that if they felt a question brewing or if an idea was sparked or a challenge raised, they could write these on the pink pieces of paper on their tables.*

**SKIT: delivered silently – Teacher focus versus student focus in CA, with yarn (4 mins including 1 min reaction)**

Teacher weaves three strands around fourth strand ever so carefully; with hesitation and reluctance, teacher hands over one end to the student, who proceeds to tangle and untangle, add new threads, do unintended things with the precious strands, all the while acting in a tug-of-war with the teacher over the threads... We turn to the audience to ask what they see, and what we should do next!?

*At the end of the skit, as invited, the audience gave several suggestions for untangling the scene, both metaphorically and physically, and some commented on the teacher and student roles, drawing on the aforementioned ideas about constructive alignment*

*Before reading the extract below, TH explained in more (but not explicit) detail how the slips of paper might be used. He had written on the board earlier that the pink slips were “frustration, reaction, unfamiliar term or question” and green was for “ideas and reflections.” The blue was not meant to be used until people generated their metaphors later, but we ran out of pink so had to use blue and green interchangeably. Later in the workshop, some participants asked what the slips of paper were actually for, what they were meant to do with them, what the colours meant, and what was expected of them. They demonstrated a strong desire to be told/given clarity around our expectations, rules, etc. Others used the slips to write ideas, questions, challenges – as we had hoped they might – but very few followed the colour pattern we had suggested.*

### TH reads (3 mins):

Few educational developers and/or scholars of tertiary teaching and learning would dispute the utility of Biggs's (1996) notion of "constructive alignment" for improving university teaching and learning. It is one of those compelling terms that, more than a decade after it is coined, marks our field. Many educational developers recognise the term immediately [*but, as we discovered during the workshop and in the writing of this paper, many don't, especially US instructional designers and faculty developers, to whom, however, the idea of aligning intended learning outcomes, teaching/learning activities, and assessments is not at all inimical to other design paradigms, such as "Backward Design" (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998)*]. The constructive alignment model provides practical guidance to colleagues seeking a coherent approach to the organisation of their curricula, courses, and teaching; and it can act as a mechanism that informs institutional quality assurance processes. It is also a term that has been taken up in a range of both disciplinary and curriculum contexts. In many cases, the principle of constructive alignment structures the conceptual architecture of teaching and learning development programs so that the ideal or proper curriculum is one where the learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment are all in line. When all those elements of a system sustain each other, students have the best chance of learning in active and collaborative ways.

Notwithstanding the concept's adoption within our own practice as educational developers, at least in the presenters' Commonwealth contexts, constructive alignment remains a concept that troubles us deeply. In this session, we share and explore the nature of that dissonance. In the tradition of cultural studies scholarship, we undertake a number of interventions that support us as we think through and sometimes against constructive alignment. We offer metaphorical thinking, political or philosophical critiques, and dramatisations. Working in this way reminds us that we also have a responsibility as developers to tease out aspects of the teaching and learning encounter that constructive alignment works to conceal. These interventions are in the main, theoretical ones, but we are interested in how they have implications for our daily experiences with individual professors and academic departments. We draw on contemporary theorising of risk, recent articles critical of alignment or of curricular improvement more generally, and an interactive approach to presenting these ideas.

By the end of the session, we are wondering if you will want to propose a new metaphor or provisional concept to incorporate into your own practices at your home institutions. What is really interesting about doing this work at ICED is that we were asked to be very clear about session objectives or outcomes, as well as the teaching and learning activities that we have planned to help get you there. I find all that so very condescending toward you. So while there were outcomes written for this session, our hope is that any learning that happens will be learning that we could not predict, learning that is significant because it is yours, or better still, the group's.

*Ironically, as one of our reviewers has pointed out, it may actually have been condescending to our audience to assume that we could determine what was condescending to them and presume to switch things around on them so deceptively. Ultimately, we probably meant that the Intended Learning Outcomes would still be met, but that the unintended, yet still valued, outcomes that Biggs himself talks about would be deliberately seeded. We did deliver the activities we promised, even though that promise was not known to attendees (see the final section of this paper).*

We begin with a paper whose warp was begun by KS and whose weft came together collaboratively... the epigraph explains...

## Weaving Beyond Constructive Alignment

### KS reads: (1 min)

“One of the participants, a weaver named Betty, gave me the answer. She explained that the underlying structure of a woven artefact is called a “warp.” In the warp, the threads have to be in the exact order, they cannot cross each other, and they have to have exactly the same tension. The warp must be in place before adding the creativity of colourful patterns at the top of the weaving called the “weft”. The final creation, said Betty, is a marriage of rigid structure and playful color. What the weaving metaphor illuminates is the delicate coexistence between two forms of inquiry – the exactness of science and the creativity of the spirit” (Rendón, 2000, 9).

### Introduction

**TH reads (2 mins)** This paper arose in part because of the popularity, and pervasiveness of “constructive alignment” in curriculum design and academic development (AD) practice, at least in Commonwealth countries. We are interested in how Biggs’s notion may or may not have become the reigning paradigm for curriculum and course planning (explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or by accident), and why we tend not to question it. Even if we question it, why does it become our “default category” – as TH has experienced in his own practice at his university (whenever he is in a pinch, he turns first to Biggs for answers to curricular questions).

The occasion of the third edition of *Teaching for Quality Learning* is as good an occasion as any to return to Biggs, offering friendly critique and alternate metaphors. What follows is a weaving of several threads of dissent, questioning, deconstruction and reconstruction – a weaving that attempts to use the metaphor it is advocating (woven practice). Consequently, participants in this session may find themselves confused and without direction at times; as an attempt to escape the rigidity of intended learning outcomes, we ourselves are trusting that some learning will spill out or exceed anything we may intend by our design. Think of this as a bit of a “happening” rather than a training session

*Some such confusion was already evident on the faces of attendees, just minutes into the workshop, relating, it seemed, to the differing understandings of constructive alignment; to the strangeness, for some, of mime as a workshop activity; and to the frustration, for others, of being “read to” at a conference where participation was expected.*

**TH reads (2 min):** Constructive alignment is propagated/encouraged by academic developers. We use it to build the curricula and practices of our own Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education, our own course design academies or institutes, and by doing that, and by assigning Biggs as compulsory reading, we propagate it as the accepted theory behind

curriculum design. As Parker (2005) suggests, “curriculum design has become dominated by ... simple or simplistic ideas of progression and learning outcomes that reduce the educational encounter to a two-dimensional exchange of goods and services” (p. 154).

Constructive alignment, or the notion that students construct knowledge based on what they do and the role of the teacher is to align activities and assessments directly to intended learning outcomes, permeates our practice and a good deal of our research. While it has obvious benefits, not least the way in which it merges constructivism on the one hand and instructional design on the other, at issue is what kinds of learning (and teaching) might be missed in the individualist, progressive teleology of the theory.

*The next skit used words, and, unlike the earlier mimed skit, generated some laughter as well as some note-taking from participants.*

### **SKIT: Guarding against risk: an exchange at a research seminar (3 mins)**

Q& A with an audience member and the presenter

Audience: Interesting seminar. Some good outcomes. But I’m worried. Don’t you have any hesitations about constructive alignment?

Presenter: Like what?

Audience: Well, for one, it’s a container. It contains learning. Good learning’s meant to spill out right?

Presenter: But Biggs writes about the distinction between intended and unintended learning outcomes too.

Audience: “Unintended learning outcomes”...are still defined against what the teacher intends. I just think CA is one of those ideas that’s meant to save us from teaching and learning being too risky and too dangerous. You can have some risk – but not too much. Have too much and you risk incompetence. Have too little and you’re not innovative enough.

Presenter: Don’t you think CA has been good for the teacher and the students?

Audience: Yes and no... we need to put it in its proper place.

Presenter: What place is that?

Audience: Understanding what it fails to do.

### **TH reads (2 mins)**

There is unease about the dominance of CA as the dominant model or key metaphor for curriculum design. Hounsell & Hounsell (2005) call for congruence as an alternative model. Knight (2001) argues for a more coherent approach to developing complex learning, based on the processes of learning, rather than the systemic approach identified as “rational curriculum planning” or RCP (Knight, 2001, p. 372). Land (2004) argues that it “is possible to view the increasing curricular gravitation in higher education during the 1990s towards the use of outcomes, programme specifications and competence statements as predicated on a

sense of closure that emanates from instrumental reason” (p. 10). Parker (2005) challenges the univocality and teleology (as opposed to commentary nature) of learning outcomes and calls for spaces in the university for student learning to be spontaneous, multivocal, clashing, dialogical, and unpredictable. And Frielick (2004) proposes his own solution to the problems of CA by thinking about ecological zones of “enactive coherence” instead.

**Problems with CA (TH to ask for audience ideas first here – 3 mins):** *TH called for “problems” from the participants, which we wrote on the whiteboard:*

- *Deliberately inflexible*
- *Conservative – takes momentum to change*
- *Teacher-centred*
- *Align = good?*
- *Encourages convergent rather than divergent thinking*
- *Recipe knowledge*
- *Need to ask permission to change*
- *Encourages compliance*
- *Assumes outcome better than spontaneous outcome*
- *Relief*
- *Formulate outcomes in a broader way. More flexible?*
- *Mechanistic philosophy still there*
- *Single, mono-disciplinary, what about interdisciplinary?*
- *Stuck with outcomes*
- *What’s really assessed?*
- *Tool of neo-liberal managerialist...*

*The following were what we had identified beforehand. We touched on a few of these in discussion and related them to the general ideas in the list above.*

- it is linear, mechanistic, and uni-dimensional (possibly also a strength)
- implies progression, rather than happenstance or serendipity, and leaves little room for diversion or route changes
- confined to one direction (the lecturer’s or curriculum planner’s) and allows little space for student input into the mapping of that direction in the moment
- ignores the personal, contested, conflicting, malleable nature of the learning spaces and what students bring to the classrooms/computers/libraries and study halls
- fabricated and packaged; carefully managed with clear end goals in mind – wrapped up in confining packaging, ready to be opened by next cohort?
- managed and manipulated in controlling ways – ends-oriented, rather than process-driven
- about the performance, not the audience response or engagement

*During this discussion a few people jotted down notes, but most simply listened, a few making comments or raising questions. We did not linger on the problems identified, but moved into the next skit, designed to provide attendees with a different lens through which to ponder at least one of the issues identified.*

- the teacher determines the method, assessment, activities and objectives – decides what is appropriate – so at what point does the student construct his/her learning?
- Biggs talks about a “blueprint for the design of our teaching” – blueprint is technologically oriented, architectural, construction, building, scaffolding. Weaving is more organic than that. Is pattern a more appropriate word? A better fit?
- CA makes us more risk-averse in an already risk-averse audit culture (McWilliam) with increasingly juridical course outlines listing commodified outcomes

**SKIT: The Judgment (Precision-avoidance as a means of skirting the juridico-commodotised contract problem) (4 mins including reactions)**

Judge (bangs gavel): Next case! What have we here, sir?

Lawyer: Your honour, we have before us a university professor who is being sued in a class action consisting, in an unprecedented case, of both students and the provincial ministry of education, and the professor’s own university.

Judge: The facts of the case?

Lawyer: Well your honour, it seems that the professor named in the case attended a workshop on course design using the accepted standard – constructive alignment – however, in the end his students claim not to have learnt the intended learning outcomes, and therefore the system and the student are suing for damages, given the contractual obligation entered into by the professor, who claimed right here on the course outline that at the end of the course, students would have achieved specific outcomes.

Judge: The professor’s defense?

Lawyer: The professor claims to have done exactly what was explained at the workshop on design and has made an assessment for every specified outcome (not to mention a good deal of effort spent qualifying the outcomes along the lines suggested by the educational developers themselves). Yet 10% of the students in the newly revised unit failed; a further 60% had B or below.

Judge: Clearly unacceptable! Guilty as charged; fine and fire the professor. (Bangs gavel).

*Participants clapped. Many laughed.*

**KS ad-libs (1 min):** While questioning constructive alignment, today’s session also argues for an alternative way of viewing the work of curriculum design. I suggest that framing the work of curriculum design as craft through the metaphor of weaving might not only enhance the notion of constructive alignment, but could actually ameliorate or overcome its limitations. TH’s metaphor for spontaneous and unpredictable coherence is the rhizome. *As KS was talking, TH began weaving the crepe paper streamers around the room, through tables and chairs, around and over participants, creating a web, an incoherent pattern, an entrapment, a piece of art, an uncomfortable,*

Through vignettes and further propositions in our paper, we hope that you'll be inspired to make use of these or your own metaphors to think a bit further about constructive alignment in course and curriculum design.

*inexplicable happening. For KS (and for participants) it was disconcerting and distracting. TH was enacting, performing KS's words.*

### **KS ad-libs (6 mins):**

We seek these alternatives because we are interested in the collective, the organic, the dialogic, a way of expressing the interdependencies of postmodernity that is beautiful, that is about affirmation and creating and gifting, rather than about the product, the commodity, the exchange value of a competency or outcome. We take seriously Barnett's (2005) call for us to think more metaphorically and imaginatively about the future of the university, perhaps through spatial metaphors that will enhance that imagining – for example Bourdieu's notion of "field" and Bernstein's idea of "region."

Metaphors are powerful ways of rethinking. Robertson and Bond (2005) describe various metaphors they unearthed when interviewing academics about the research-teaching relationship, for example, journey, birth, puzzle solving, staircasing, bridge, artist/conductor. Various thinkers propose love as a structuring principle in the universities (Elton, 2000; Phipps, 2001; Rowland, 2005), while Parker (2005) reclaims "performance" as theatrical rather than economic. When we multiply such metaphors, or enact such reframings, we are risk-takers in a risk-averse world of accountability and managerialist audit culture (Rowland, 2005).

Here is how a modern weaver from New Zealand describes the value, process and sacredness of weaving within the Maori culture:

It is important to me as a weaver that I respect the mauri (life force) of what I am working with. Once I have taken it from where it belongs, I must give another dimension to its life force so that it is still a thing of beauty (Patterson, 1990).

### **The Potential for Weaving – Standing Back from the Crafting to see the Beauty**

The English name of the unit in which I work is the University Teaching Development Centre, but a number of years ago, the unit (as with all departments and service units across the University) was given a Maori name, Te Kōtuinga Mātauranga, to reflect the work that we do. Literally translated the meaning of these words is "the weaving together of knowledge(s)." In an increasingly fragmented academic environment, this metaphorical interpretation of the academic development role offers an exciting and challenging lens through which to view the work that we do.

**Mauri** – quite simply, the character of the people we work with must be respected. We need to work in and create an atmosphere of mutuality, of reciprocity, of respect.

**Beauty** – we should all be, some might suggest we are already, striving to create something of beauty whether that is a better student learning experience, a promotion for the individual academic we are working with, a more cohesive and collective approach to institutional policy, a performance of astounding joy.

Can this apply to curriculum design also? Both the academic(s) and the academic developer(s) (or in the case of CA, the academic and the students) are bringing their *mauri*, their life force to the experience, both creating the product, whatever that “product” or “thing of beauty” might be.

**KS invites (1 min): Think of a metaphor of your own that preserves or critiques constructive alignment? Write it on one of your slips of paper.**

**TH invites (10 mins):** take your slips of paper and do something with them, anything. You can work alone or in groups. You could form a chain with at least two others in the room, if not the whole group... weave your own pattern around the fixities of time and place (perhaps the desks are the warp to your creative weft) – spend the next 10 minutes creating and we’ll see what we come up with.

**TH reads (3 mins): Another metaphor for curriculum and course design**

Deconstructive Alignment? A Rhizo-curricular Line of Flight  
What if...

the recognizable pieces of CA (intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, authentic assessments) are actually clustered bits of root stem that only look like separate plants? What if Biggs’ alignment and even Frielick’s enactive coherence (the more ecologically-oriented approach) are merely attempts to make what is already inseparable, separable and realigned? When in fact the alignment already runs unpredictably across surfaces (of students, desks, textbooks, institutional discursive practices, etc.) and pops up as arborescence once in a while (like banana trees, irises, etc.). To suggest this is to accept the experimentalism of French theorists Deleuze and Guattari, who tell us that every instance of a tree-like hierarchy is actually a rhizomaticity that got sedimented into place (but if you follow its lines of flight, you will see that societal structures and structures of the self are actually quite fluid). In this case, we have to stop thinking of intending teachers and intending students, we have to stop thinking about human subjects as fully self-present and autonomous – what if we were to see root-stem networks when we opened classroom doors and course outlines? What if we learnt in packs and clusters?

We would be left with a thousand micro-warps and millions of weft patterns in an atemporal zone, but it would look like we knew what

**Feedback (5 min)**

*Afterwards, three obvious groups emerged – the bridge/sculpture builders, the DNA helix group, and the chain group. Each group shared a bit about what they had done and why, starting with the bridge, sculpture group, then moving to the back of the room where there were a couple of loners/pairs, then to the DNA helix group, and finally to the chain group. KS requested that someone from the group read the chain aloud. No-one volunteered, so KS took the chain and read the individual-but-joined slips of paper aloud, as if they were a poem. One person cried. Many clapped. The workshop ended.*

*As TH read, KS watched participants remove the flimsy paper from their hair, their chairs, their notebooks, and some began to play with and weave the paper together, or to shred it. Others ignored it and simply listened. In the next activity, several participants used the paper to weave colour into their metaphorical representations.*

we were doing (that is to say, the postmodern university is where we are, right here, right now).

### **Part Three: Framing and Reflection**

To be clear: we are not denying the power of constructive alignment as a means of designing learning experiences. At no point did we wish to be completely negative about it. In fact, in some ways we were celebrating its possibilities. It has, however, become enough of a driving force to be a reigning paradigm in (some of) our work. By bringing humanities-oriented theory-practice to bear on a nonce-event, we attempted a creative intervention that would afford critiques other than those authorised by data-gathering and empirical investigative techniques.

To do this, we used mimed theatre, role play, theatre, poetry reading, building paper chains, many of which are used regularly by our colleagues. As readers, it is likely that you know how to do similar things, and when, and why. Our sense is that our work, additionally, included a good deal of meta-work about exactly that how, when and why.

What was the provenance of this approach? A door was opened for us at the Readers' Theatre symposium at ICED 2004 in Ottawa. We were both encouraged to make different use of conference time after this event (well-described in Peseta et al., 2005). Arts approaches to academic development and to academic conferences are not highly developed in the literature yet. Since our workshop, however, we have noted some clearly related work such as Peseta's (2007) and indeed more recent conferences and sessions devoted to such difference in the field.

This was not our first attempt as developers at more interactive, role-play or game-oriented workshops. Both of us had tried many such approaches or techniques in the past. However, this was the first time we devoted an entire workshop to the creative enactment of critique. Could we be constructive and constructivist while cutting to the heart of problems many of us identified with a reigning paradigm, or would the workshop quickly become a place of negative venting?

We evinced no particular desire for understanding; rather, we staged an event for people to experience and come up with their own collective or individual responses, remaining open to undesirable unintended outcomes as much as to desirable ones. The tension between desiring closure, deeper learning, applicable takeaways versus simply experiencing something in the moment – this was palpable immediately afterward and also a day later.

### **Conference-Going as Intellectual Activity**

Academic development as a field is to some extent experimental, and its practitioners expected to be innovative, knowledgeable about the "latest" theories and techniques but, it feels to us, we are not always doing this in risk-taking ways. Frustrated by some of our own practices at conferences, we set out to *enact* questions we had about our sense that our field needs to grow, evolve, to challenge itself. Weaving rhizomatic possibilities instead of entrapping participants in a web of intended (or unintended desirable) outcomes, the learners in small groups came together by the end with legitimate poetic probes. Not posing questions to find an answer, not expecting an answer or answers – rather enacting, performing, doing the questions were the only requirements. We take it as given that questioning itself is a necessary part of growth in an emergent field of practice and scholarship.

As a writing collective and a presenting collective, the members of the Challenging Academic Development collective attempt to take risks with norms of conferences, norms of

scholarship, conventions of our own professional development. Neither the stilted, dead form of the read paper (not without its brilliant and inspiring examples, of course, but by and large unengaging for our colleagues), nor the sedimented rituals of group activity that become proxy for learning. By interrupting or drawing attention to the staging of the read paper and its apparent alternative – the hands-on active-learning workshop – we hoped to change the terms of the conversation itself. However, in order to do so we were subject to the same normative demands as the social science-oriented researchers, as evidenced by the ICED 2008 selection process that privileged interaction and participant involvement. We followed those instructions, but resisted constructing a session that was tied to outcomes. We promised participants the experience of “attending to an argument presented in traditional lecture format but interspersed with polyvocal, staged scenes from everyday educational development practice; engaging in paired or small group discussion about the differences between the theory and the practice staged by the presenters; and developing a new metaphor or concept to bring back to their own home institutions.” Ironically, the workshop objectives, required of us by the conference organisers, were listed in the workshop description submitted for peer review, but did not ultimately appear in the conference programme, rendering them moot to potential attendees, in any case.

#### **Part Four: Conclusion**

From the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) News:

Our biggest risk was in constructing a session about Biggs’ alignment that was deliberately without certain pieces (explicit objectives tied to some kind of assessment, for example). Effectively, we made a happening and the audience became the weavers of meaning. After first asking the workshop participants to adopt a stance as “audience” rather than as “learners,” we presented three short skits to set the scene. From there, the workshop developed its own dance, far beyond any steps that we could have choreographed as facilitators. The workshop participants physically wove together the paper streamers strewn around the room with the slips of paper upon which they’d written their challenging questions and nascent metaphors, and they symbolically wove together their ideas, our ideas, and Biggs’s ideas. Arguably, these woven patterns and woven words became a form of assessment, but enough people appeared to miss that point that we’re not sure it was as successful for them as it felt for us as facilitators. The next day, however, some criticisms of the session left us feeling that, in the end, some folk had talked their way into “getting it” – whatever it was that they needed to get out of it. Ironically, this became a form of assessment for both of us (something we had vowed, perversely, not to seek in this particular setting, for the simple reason that we were trying to exceed rather than fit the imperative to align everything).” (CAD Collective, 2008, p. 23)

We undertook to mount a friendly critique of a concept that had become perhaps too familiar to us, using creative methods meant to “enact” the questions being posed in and by the workshop. We can still assert that creative and critical approaches to academic development work constituted then (and continue to constitute) challenges to the hegemony of social scientific educational research, and yet also affirmations of some of the tensions that arise as the field continues to evolve. Grandiose as it may seem, we are offering the description and the theoretical matter as an archive of generation, conservation, and transformation (Golde, 2006) in the ongoing dialogue that is academic development: in short,

we are setting ourselves up as stewards of what might be a more capacious understanding of academic development as a truly interdisciplinary field. We invite others to be stewards from their own perspectives as well.

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