### Significance of Aims/Content

Specifying **aims and content** goes to the heart of the curriculum - they ARE the curriculum. The exploration of scholarly teaching over the past decade has reinstated curriculum as a primary focus of academic concern and expression of academic expertise. Aims and content together determine, and are in turn determined by, everything else.

“… the curriculum itself - not course, teaching, classes or research - is now a critical element defining academic practice … the visible evidence of how faculty interpret theory, application, and values … the most public expression of the (academic) profession … the distillation of knowledge, an epistemological statement … (and) the medium of interaction between faculty and students. By every measure … the curriculum stands at the heart of academic practice, yet it remains an underdeveloped source of learning” (Toombs & Tierney, 1991).

### Some formal considerations

- **Aims** are educational intentions; informing us, students, and others, what outcome is intended, or hoped for, to be gained from the educational process. Aims are always with reference to (i) certain student(s) and (ii) some particular subject-content. They can be expressed in the form of graduate attributes - the qualities expected of students who satisfactorily complete the course.

- **Content** is a selection from the field of knowledge addressed by the subject. By becoming “aims”, that content is declared to be something *worthwhile knowing* within the field, and worthwhile knowing for **some particular purpose**. Aims set boundaries around what is to be known, declaring its limits and scope; and they will, if complete, also identify the manner in which that content is expected to be “known” - by familiarity/acquaintance, detailed comprehension, deep understanding, appreciation of its...
significance, or whatever. The content will contain that which is to form the basis of the learning experiences used to achieve graduate attributes.

That is to say that aims and content are logically related to the teaching method used to prepare the learning experience, in the same way as ends are related to means. Generally speaking, the clearer (better articulated, more deeply scrutinised, more comprehensively stated) the aims and content, the more confident the decision will be as to how best to try to achieve them.

Assessment is an indicator of a single student’s success in achieving the expected educational outcomes; a measure of the student’s work, their own achievement. Assessment cannot be undertaken with reference to anything but the intended aims of study. It captures, reflects, and is completely taken up with trying to reveal which, or how much, of those aims have been realised.

Evaluation attempts to similarly indicate the success, effectiveness or value of the teacher’s work, all things taken into account. Whatever else it is required to address (and this can vary greatly), evaluation, in the same way as assessment, must refer back to the aims - the educational intentions, what the teaching was supposed to be for. It asks “With aims like these, and under these circumstances, how well has this teaching been carried out?”

Where is the student present in this approach?

Using a student-focused approach, student learning should inform everything else. We argue that in scholarly teaching, aims focus on the student and not only the field of study. They declare that the student exists, with prior experiences, approaches, learning styles, habits of study, and so on that need to be taken into account. What are the implications of that?

1. Through our experience of teaching (this or other subjects) we know much about which methods are related to better quality learning. Drawing on that knowledge, we can try to select aims and content and communicate about them in ways that anticipate the ideally effective engagement between students and subject matter that we want our teaching method to achieve.

2. Through our experience of assessing we all know well how failure to achieve or learn well has often been the outcome of failure to understand what was required or expected. Drawing on that knowledge we will again select and articulate aims and content in ways that will seek to remove or minimise those misunderstandings and failures that emerge at assessment time.

3. Through our experience of evaluating, particularly from student feedback, if it has been done analytically we will know how students resent the lack of clarity, comprehensiveness and honesty that often characterises our course aims statements; how they find that not knowing clearly what is expected tends to frustrate and demoralise their efforts. We will use this knowledge in placing the students and their learning squarely in whatever approach we use to select and state the aims and content of our subjects.

Through these three ways we will feed back student learning information to inform us about how to choose and articulate our aims and content. Then the arrows in the model will all point backwards - as well as forwards.

Philip Jackson claims that the type of know-how most central to a teacher’s work is not teaching method but “how to organize knowledge for teaching purposes”(p.19). That knowledge, we argue, comes primarily from reflecting on the experience of teaching, assessing and evaluating, all from the perspective of student learning, and letting that wisdom guide us in both setting and communicating our aims and content statements.
Read

- **Prosser & Trigwell**: Pages 138-142 (two Physics teachers talk about how they approach the aims and content of their teaching)
- **Ramsden**: Pages 134-5

Aim 2 1-hour

- How do my own views about student learning currently inform my approach to developing the aims and content of subjects I teach?
- How might they be able to inform that approach?

Task

- Consider the way you presently think of student learning: what it comprises, how it takes place, and what helps and hinders it.
- Revisit your earlier thinking (Section B, Student Learning) regarding the view(s) of student learning that currently most inform your teaching.
- Then reflect on what implications that personal stance has for the way you currently go about writing aims/content statements. In what way do your present aims/content statement reflect or otherwise reveal your views on student learning?
- You may need to actually collect a few such aims/content statements in order to scrutinise them. A colleague’s opinion can often throw light onto things one cannot easily see about one’s own writing in these cases.

Aim 3

- How might a student learning approach to articulating aims and content be applied to your own field?

**Topic #3** Elaborating a discipline-based student learning approach to aims and content

**Aims and Content as Context**

Within the “Elaborated 3-P” model introduced earlier, “Course and Departmental Learning Context” included such matters as Course Design, Teaching Methods, and Assessment (Prosser and Trigwell, pages 11 - 20). The model posited that students’ *perceptions of each of these contextual factors* directly informed the Approaches to Learning they adopt.

Within that view of things, how students perceive the aims/content statements of a course would comprise part of what informs their learning approaches. Those statements, as we have argued above, are the centrepiece and foundation of curriculum or course design.

This view - that aims/content statements form an active, influential part of the student learning context - is at variance with the conventional view which merely sees these statements as formal matters *operating within a given context*, and having no impact of their own on the learning outcomes.

The challenge of this student-learning perspective is how the teacher can, in practice, design and use aims/content statements in order to influence student learning in desired, worthwhile ways. That is, to use the statements themselves to deliberately create a context which, in being perceived by the student, will contribute to the desired ends.

Read

- **Ramsden**: Chapter 8 “The goals and structure of a course”
  Particularly study the examples Ramsden gives of curriculum statements in several different disciplines (pages 141-149) - Design Studies, Anatomy, Humanities, Statistics and Engineering
Task
⇒ After studying Ramsden, revisit your own present approach to aims and content.
⇒ Where can you discern among the Aims and Contents statements you currently use, your concern for the quality of student learning and how they should approach their learning?
⇒ Consider which of Ramsden’s case studies is closest to your disciplinary setting; and in what way that case might inform your own approach within your particular discipline.

More
• Prosser & Trigwell: Chapters 3 and 4
• Eisenberg’s chapter on Anatomy in Ramsden’s “New Perspectives” Kogan Page (1987)

Note
Flexible Learning commentary
The very notion of “flexibility”, together with the fact that it often involves (at least at some stages) students choosing to study from home and not face-to-face, raises interesting questions about how one might safeguard the principle being espoused above. That is, the principle that students should be given every opportunity and assistance to perceive and interpret and respond to as accurate as possible a statement of the intentions of a course of study. When in face-to-face settings it can be relatively easier to check on mis-perceptions, correct them, reinforce the desired perception through repetition, and so on. It is no secret that when studying from texts or on-line, generally alone in isolation, students are very prone to misreading and misperceiving what is intended, and highly vulnerable to proceeding through long spans of their studies with wrong perceptions uncorrected (because they were not known about).
The other side of this coin is, of course, that under the need to articulate everything more clearly because it has to appear in print or on a computer screen, academics can be encouraged to make more carefully-considered statements of their aims and content than they would if left to their own devices in face-to-face settings.
What do you think?

Aim 4
• Place what has been studied so far squarely into the context of your own discipline and a particular subject you teach, and follow through the implications for that subject

Task 3-hours
Project on aims & content for a subject taught within your discipline
The subject chosen must be one with which you have some important personal connection and investment (eg one you teach, will teach, have taught, might have to teach, would like to teach, etc.)

1. Choose your subject: ___________________________
2. Locate and examine a key, formal statement of its aims and content*.
   From that statement,
   • in what way is the student, and the student’s future approach to learning this subject, recognised in the statement?
   • does the statement indicate anything whatever about the kinds of learning, or the approach to learning, expected from the student?
   • from this statement, does anything in particular appear to follow regarding how the learning experience will be organised or how the subject will be taught?
   • does anything directly follow from it, regarding precisely what will be assessed?
   • does anything follow regarding how it will be assessed?
   • does it suggest or imply anything to you whatever regarding how you might want to evaluate your teaching after the subject is over?
- how typical would this statement be of the overall approach to stating aims and content used across your department or in the disciplinary field in which you teach?
- what do you feel are its greatest strengths and worst weaknesses, just as it stands, as an expression of what is aimed for in this kind of subject?
- *Put the formal statement aside,* and write out - without reference to it or to any other documents - informally and in your own words what you would be trying to achieve if you were going to teach this subject. Don’t be constrained in any way by the previous formal statement. Use any format, style or structure you wish for your writing - make it suit what is in your mind, your own intentions: "*If teaching this subject, what would I want to have it achieve?*”
- Show your statement to someone else if you can, to see if they think it communicates its message clearly and adequately.
- Examine your written statement and try to develop it further so that - if it needs it - the students and their learning are placed as conspicuously as you can within it. One way to shift the focus is to write a short statement representing a key understanding you want students to develop. Show it to others if you can and get their opinion again.
- What direct implications do you think this statement has for either (i) how you would teach the subject or (ii) how you would assess it?
- Imagine that you had written this statement as the first stage of proposing a new subject, and you had to justify your approach to a committee of colleagues, or maybe someone such as your head of department. Make notes for how you would justify and argue your case, particularly the student learning aspects of your statement.
- If none is available, modify the project using from the beginning a statement you yourself design, and in that case ignore Stage 3 of the instructions.

### Aim 5

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<td><strong>Achieve familiarity with some relevant sources of discipline-based literature on teaching, learning and curriculum, and begin the habit of consulting these.</strong></td>
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### Task 5

#### Locate and examine a published source of literature on teaching, learning or curriculum within - or closely allied to - your own disciplinary area.

- You may already know and even have such literature - if so, use that
- If you do not, study the following list of disciplinary journals (under “More” below) and locate some items in your area or close to it, and use one or other of them.
- Sample a few articles that look interesting and try to identify the stances towards student learning adopted by the authors.
- Read the standard introductory pages to the journals where their intentions are described and the kinds of articles they welcome are mentioned; scan these for evidence of the editors’ stances towards student learning.

### More

**Primary source for this listing is within the “DeLiberations” web-site at:**

http://www.lgu.ac.uk/deliberations/journals/index.cgi

**Economics and Accounting**

- Issues in Accounting Education
- Journal of Accounting Education
- Journal of Economics Education

**Agriculture and Environmental Sciences**

- Journal of Environmental Education
- Journal of Agricultural Education
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Journal Titles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Architecture Building &amp; Planning</td>
<td>NACTA (National Association of College Teachers of Agriculture) Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business &amp; Marketing</td>
<td>Business Education Forum Journal of Marketing Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English, Writing, Communication, Journalism</td>
<td>College English English Education Research in the Teaching of English Journal of Teaching Writing The Journalism Teacher College Composition and Communication Communication Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
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<td>Subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>History and Computing</td>
<td>Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. The History Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Politics, Philosophy</td>
<td>Journal of the Society of Public Teachers of Law. Teaching Philosophy Bowling Green OH, USA: Bowling Green State University, Philosophy Documentation Center. Political Science and Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management &amp; Administration</td>
<td>Management Education and Development Lancaster, UK: Association for Management Education and Development. Journal of Management Education (formerly Organizational Behaviour Teaching Review)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Read

Examples of scholarly writing about teaching, learning and curriculum, from within particular disciplinary contexts.

### Aim 6

Reflect on this module of study

| Reflect 2-hours | Reflecting on Aims and Content in courses we teach |

Pilot trial materials: no unauthorised circulation, citation or review permitted.
The What? and How? Reflection questions

What is it, regarding my aims/content/learning outcomes that I want to know about?
How do I find out about them?

These two questions comprise - in most cases - the first determinant of a student’s perception of a course or subject.
The reflective teacher has plenty of questions to choose from to serve as objects of reflection. Such as …

⇒ How do/will/did students perceive my educational intentions - my aims and content statements in particular?
⇒ What responses will be evoked/were evoked by the perceptions?
⇒ What is the extent of and the variation in those perceptions and responses?
⇒ In what ways will/did the statements influence the approaches students adopted to their studies?
⇒ And how can I find out the answers these questions?

See Prosser and Trigwell, Chapter 4, for an approach to this type of reflection.

Task 6 | Reflection
⇒ Using Chapter 4 from Prosser and Trigwell, select a “what” question and outline how you would answer that question.
⇒ Outline the ways you might use this answer in your teaching.

Note | Comment on Flexible Learning implications:
The use of information technology in teaching has become synonymous in some sectors with flexible learning. In an evaluation of 103 information technology projects designed to improve student learning, Alexander and McKenzie (1998) found that less than half of these projects achieved their aim. A factor that almost all unsuccessful projects had in common was a lack of a suitable design for student learning. The conclusion drawn by the authors was that information technology was, of itself, not enough to support student learning - it needed to be built on a sound learning design. Such a learning design starts with the perceptions of students and is the result of a process of alignment between aims, learning experience and assessment as outlined in this section.