Talk to any academic about the texts they’ve found helpful in expanding the focus of their university teaching practice to include student learning, and this John Biggs text is bound to rear its head. The reasons are obvious enough. In the preface to this third edition (written with Catherine Tang), Biggs himself writes: “google ‘constructive alignment’ and you now get over 24,000 references” (p.xvii). In my own experience of working with and teaching academics in the university, ‘constructive alignment’ is one of a handful of conceptual resources which is the cause of those rare eureka moments. That it has grown beyond the subject/unit and the curriculum towards a framework for institutional quality assurance is testament to its ubiquity and popularity. And given the world-wide focus on university teaching and learning, Biggs’s work continues to provide a common language for academics to engage in critical debate and discussion about the student learning experience. This is precisely what good books should do.

On one level, the text (along with Ramsden, and Prosser & Trigwell) could be conceived as part of the emerging canon of higher education teaching and learning – what Roger Lindsay1 has called ‘educational developmentology’. Yet on another level, the attraction of the Biggs text is in the way it invites dialogue of the teaching and learning encounter – at a range of different and very powerful levels. There is something for everyone invested in the enterprise of teaching and learning quality: the practitioner looking for a quick solution; the teacher-scholar searching for research and evidence to underpin innovative practice; the educational developer wondering how to engage staff in a discussion about curriculum renewal; and the senior manager looking to convince the university community of a focus on teaching and learning at all. Alongside all this, the text continues to speak to veterinary scientists and physicists, as much as it does those in literary theory, musicology or engineering – all those who seek to be challenged by the question of how to improve students’ learning.

This new third edition doesn’t see the authors straying far from the ideas that made the first two editions of the book so compelling and successful. The opening chapter acknowledges the changing higher education scene. Biggs and Tang are cognizant of the encroachment of managerialist agendas and the confusion surrounding outcomes-based learning, yet like most involved in university teaching, they plough on ahead. In chapter 5, learning outcomes have transmogrified into intended learning outcomes and there is the new framework of graduate attributes for our curricula to contend with. Assessment gets the thorough treatment it deserves in chapters 9-11 and the later chapters consider alignment at the institutional level and the challenges of implementation. Some useful resources and practical examples are also provided – and they litter the text as opportunities for reflection.

Biggs and Tang’s appeal is confident and urgent – and in the main, the agenda for improving the quality of university teaching and learning makes a good deal of sense. Student learning ought to feature heavily in our understandings of our practices as teachers – even as we continue to disagree, dispute and question how history has remade their very engagement with university learning.

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Notes