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# Problematizing constructive alignment in higher education in gulf cooperation council countries

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## ABSTRACT

Constructive alignment (CA) has developed into one of the most significant concepts in higher education since its establishment in the late 1990s. CA is a powerful instrument for curriculum design that aligns learning outcomes with teaching and learning activities and assessments to enhance the quality of students' learning. In this conceptual study, Foucault's concept of problematization is used as the theoretical framework to explain how and why CA has become a powerful approach for curriculum design dominantly used in higher education worldwide. The discussion focuses on three main blind spots of the CA: pedagogical hegemony, implementation fidelity, and policy enactment. The study closes by offering concluding thoughts and identifying new agendas for research.

## ملخص البحث

تطور مفهوم التناسق البنائي (Constructive Alignment) منذ ظهوره في تسعينات القرن المنصرم، ليصبح واحداً من أهم المفاهيم التربوية في التعليم العالي. اليوم، يُعد مفهوم التناسق البنائي أداة تربوية رائجة لتصميم المناهج التعليمية التي تسعى إلى موازنة مخرجات التعلم مع أنشطة التدريس والتقويم وذلك بدعوى تجويد تعلم الطالب. تستخدم هذه الدراسة المفاهيمية، رؤى ميشال فوكو (Foucault) وبالخصوص مفهوم كإطار نظري لنقد ذبوع مفهوم (problematization) 'الإشكالية' التناسق البنائي في التعليم العالي في جميع أنحاء العالم بشكل عام، وفي دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي بشكل خاص. يركز النقاش على ثلاث جوانب مظلمة لمفهوم التناسق البنائي وهي الهوية؛ ومستوى تطبيق مفهوم التناسق البنائي على النحو المنشود؛ والطرق التي يتم من خلالها تنفسير مفهوم التناسق البنائي وترجمته من قبل صانعي السياسات أو الجهات الفاعلة في سياقات مختلفة.

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## Introduction

In the age of supercomplexity in global higher education (Barnett 2000), the life of faculty (where faculty refers to teaching staff throughout this article) is a relentless balancing act in which teaching and research responsibilities must be juggled in a hyper-competitive culture. Besides feeling the strain of the 'publish or perish' culture, faculty must

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exhibit ‘excellence’ in designing and implementing a wealth of teaching activities. Fundamentally, faculty must meet the needs of diverse students in diverse contexts, although many have no training in teaching and do not consider themselves teachers per se. This situation has driven universities to work towards enhancing the teaching skills of their faculty. Still, the relatively recent emphasis on faculty’s pedagogical skills cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it should be seen as going hand in hand with important trends such as the massification, marketization, and learnification of higher education. Such movements have pressured universities to increase their production levels cost-efficiently and to fulfill the role of fixing social, economic, and political ‘problems.’ Such trends have also been accompanied by supranational policy initiatives that promote enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching, such as the Bologna Process. In concrete terms, ‘the current hegemonic formulations of what teaching in higher education can be, is primarily informed by overarching policies about the role of higher education and subsequently by a narrow selection of models that escalate the production role of the university’ (Magnússon and Rytzler 2022, 1).

Within this context, teaching in higher education has turned into a procedure or technology whose aim is to enhance students’ learning to increase the production of graduates and which faculty can learn to follow. Such training involves issues related to planning, carrying out, and evaluating their teaching and is usually referred to as ‘university pedagogy’ – a term that ‘positively emphasizes the importance of the educational role of faculty, but misleadingly indicates that there can be a common pedagogy for the entirety of the university’s educational activities’ (Magnússon and Rytzler 2022, 1). Under these conditions, and without consistent approaches to curriculum development, teaching, and assessment in higher education, universities have emerged as a fertile ground for constructive alignment (CA). CA is ‘one of the most influential ideas in higher education’ (Houghton 2004, 27) that promised to guide better instruction and curriculum design, ensuring the quality of educational programs (Loughlin et al. 2021; Trigwell and Prosser 2014). More importantly, CA is considered applicable to any course and all teaching, securing a hegemonic-like effect over how university pedagogy is defined as a field and practice (Wickström 2015).

This conceptual study applies Foucault’s concept of problematization to critique CA in higher education institutions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (i.e. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates). Our overall aim is to create a space for reflection on the choices faculty make within their teaching, arguing that this space can be informed by abundant educational theory concerning teaching in higher education.

We first introduce Foucault’s conception of problematization as a theoretical framework. Next, we present and define CA against the backdrop of the existing literature. Then, we develop a genealogy of CA as a pedagogical genre that focuses on transparency and measurable learning objectives before we attempt to problematize the pedagogical model in the GCC higher education context. Finally, we provide concluding remarks.

## **Problematization**

As mentioned earlier, this study employs Foucault’s problematization concept to criticize CA in GCC higher education institutions. Problematization is a form of critical inquiry that involves revisiting a given practice or established concept/theory to develop a deeper

understanding. This process consists of considering the historical roots of the problem or solution in question to determine the conditions and contexts in which it was produced and practiced (Foucault 1990). Foucault believed that problematization was a valuable tool for understanding how ideas and practices come into existence.

Problematization involves both nominal and verbal forms of critical inquiry. In its nominal form, problematization is ‘a purposive act of strategic rupture, akin to a process of framing in which problems are defined in ways that enroll various partners and shape subsequent pathways of action, decision, inquiry and intervention’ (Barnett 2015, 1). In its verbal form, problematization involves analyzing a given practice or an established concept/theory to call into question ‘taken-for-granted assumptions and identities and settlements’ (Barnett 2015, 1). In concrete terms, the chief targets of problematization in its verbal form are ‘the apparently self-evident assumptions of a given form of life and the supposedly natural or inevitable and unchangeable character of given identities’ (Barnett 2015, 2).

Adopting Foucault’s ‘dual-dimensionality’ notion of problematization necessitates moving beyond forms of critical inquiry that aim to reveal settled conditions of reality or expose naturalized relations of power. Instead, problematization offers social science researchers a platform to question the social life that is habitually governed by orderings, stable patterns, and naturalizations. In short, problematization ‘invite(s) us to give more credence to how aspects of people’s subjectivity matter so strongly to them, and in turn to ask what price would have to be paid in the pursuit of transformation’ (Barnett 2015, 3).

Although nowhere has Foucault provided a systemic approach for conducting a problematization analysis, several scholars have attempted to determine the essential features of such analysis. Borch (2016), for instance, explained that a problematization analysis should involve four essential elements. The first involves investigating how a given practice or an established concept/theory is problematic in a particular historical context. Such an investigation focuses on stabilizing relationships and justificatory practices that govern these practices or concepts. The second feature necessitates raising questions concerning power and knowledge, which can be addressed using moral reflection, scientific knowledge and political analysis. The third dimension requires conducting a historical analysis, that is, developing a genealogy of a given practice or an established concept/theory to scrutinize how it has become problematic in a specific historical context. The final feature of conducting a problematization analysis requires suitable responses to be proposed to the perceived problems.

## Constructive alignment

John Biggs introduced CA as a pedagogical model of teaching in higher education (Biggs 1996). As an ‘outcome-based teaching learning’ (Biggs and Tang 2011, 3), the model rests on three theoretical assumptions, cognitive psychology, constructivism, and phenomenographic pedagogy, with the goal that the outcomes of learning, the teaching/learning activities, and the assessment are all consciously designed to connect (Wickström 2015). The underlying concern for CA is that knowledge is uncertain, and this pedagogical teaching model can provide that certainty.

Unpacking the underlying theories of CA, Jia (2010) argues that cognitive psychology focuses on students’ intellectual development, leading to various constructivist theories

that see the learning process as the activity of constructing knowledge. In this view, students are the main drivers of learning activity, and they construct knowledge on their own initiative. In CA, teachers devise ways for students to build knowledge by designing curricula, learning activities, and assessments that foster this learning. However, CA creates some certainty in knowledge by establishing learning outcomes and aligned assessments. With the demand for teachers to be aware of how students construct knowledge, teachers must engage in Phenomenographic pedagogy, which is the process that aids teachers in creating an awareness of their pedagogical thought processes and practices. This is done by having teachers reflect on their teaching approaches while considering different methods and weighing them against alternate approaches, all essential for CA (Trigwell et al. 2005). This suggests that other learning methods can produce varying levels of understanding and retention, with a deeper understanding of a concept being preferable to simply learning isolated facts or skills. In turn, these influence students' learning.

For example, Biggs (1999) introduced 'academic Susan' and 'non-academic Robert' to advance his CA model. Susan is committed, bright, punctual, and has clear academic and career plans. She engages with her professors, contributing to her 'in-depth learning.' Robert is less committed than Susan. He lacks the driving curiosity or the ambition to excel in a particular profession. He is not enrolled in a program of his choice but, instead, must obtain a qualification for a job. In the classroom, Robert is unprepared and compiles facts provided by his teachers, hoping to 'remember them on cue' in the exam, which results in 'surface learning' (Biggs 1999, 58). Biggs posits that students like Robert are the majority in higher education. To educate such a majority, Biggs offers CA as a self-sustaining and encompassing system in which LOs are used to make the educational process transparent for students like Robert and engage them more actively in the TLAs activities and assessment.

Against this pedagogical backdrop, teachers and students are seen as a system within which quality can be measured in terms of in-depth learning (Biggs 1999). For Biggs (1999), viewing teachers and students as a system avoids the deficit perspectives on teaching and learning. That is, a lack of in-depth learning is neither a result of 'who the student is' nor 'what the teacher thinks or does.' Thus, learning is a result of neither individual differences between students (i.e. who the student is) nor appropriate teaching (i.e. what the faculty thinks or does). Instead, 'learning is the result of students' learning-focused activities which are engaged in by students. As a result, their perceptions and inputs and the total teaching context' (Biggs 1999, 61). Consequently, teaching is not just about delivering and covering facts, concepts, and principles. Rather, teaching should focus on what it means to understand given concepts and principles in the way teachers want them to be understood and what kind of TLAs are required for students to reach those kinds of understandings.

The essence of CA is that LOs, TLAs, and assessments must be carefully aligned to reinforce one another. Because of this apparent simplicity, Biggs (2014) argues that the constructivist side of the equation makes CA a distinctive approach to curriculum renewal. Thus, once it becomes clear what students should learn (i.e. LOs), it also becomes clear what kinds of assessment tasks and TLAs they should experience to optimize their chances of achieving outcomes (Biggs 2014). Kickert et al. (2022) provide perspectives on curricular fit worth adding. The authors indicate that when assessments are

misaligned with LOs or TLAs, students' motivation and learning can be undermined. For instance, if an outcome designates learning how to apply analytical skills, but the assessment is constructed to measure factual recall, students are frustrated that the exam does not measure what they had studied and understood (Houghton 2004).

CA has received significant international attention and is often of central importance at continuous professional development centers of universities (Fransson and Friberg 2015). In the European context, Jackson (2002) raised the concern that not only are the ideas of student-centered learning championed by the European Quality Assurance Agency, but the agency has also been a 'champion of constructive alignment' granting the pedagogical model political legitimacy. The emergence and dominance of such a pedagogical genre, which focuses on transparency and measurable LOs is not new in higher education. In the coming section, we develop a genealogy of this pedagogical genre to scrutinize how it has become problematic in a GCC higher education context.

## The evolution of constructive alignment

As previously mentioned, problematizing CA necessitates situating the pedagogical model in its historical context, which is the purpose of this section. The roots of CA can be traced back to the efficiency movement launched in the USA, UK, and other industrial nations in the early twentieth century, which sought to develop and implement best practices in economic, industrial, and societal arenas.

In the educational sphere, the efficiency movement was launched by John Bobbitt (1876–1956), who pioneered the establishment of curriculum as a field of specialization. In 1918, Bobbitt wrote his book, *The Curriculum*, in which he argued against the ambiguous and inexact purposes that depicted the work of teachers and proclaimed that education science required precision. By doing so, Bobbitt launched a movement that encouraged teachers 'to write out their objectives in clear, non-technical language that both pupils and their parents could understand' (Kelly 2009, 68). In his second book, *How to Make a Curriculum* (1924), Bobbitt expanded his plea and called for writing objectives for the overall curriculum (i.e. ultimate objectives), as well as for classes and age groups (i.e. progressive objectives; Kelly 2009). The discipline of management influenced Bobbitt's scholarly work. In particular, Bobbitt was inspired by the ideas of Frederick Taylor (1856–1915), an American mechanical engineer seeking to improve American industrial efficiency.

At that point, the era of educational efficiency began. Werrett Charters (1875–1952) proposed his activity-analysis approach to curriculum construction in 1923. In its managerial sense, activity analysis involves the examination of a process to establish issues such as which steps of the process are being achieved, which personnel is involved with a given step, the amount of time and resources needed to complete a given step, and the value produced by each step. For curriculum construction, activity analysis involved developing learning objectives based on students' social needs and analyzing the application of these objectives in the classroom to assess their effectiveness. Traditionalists denounced Charters' approach for its overly mechanistic tendencies (Kelly 2009).

Bobbitt's and Charters' curriculum theories had a scientific, technician, behavioral, and job-analysis flavor (Kelly 2009). The 'general purpose was to introduce into educational

practice the kind of precise, scientific methods that had begun to yield dividends in other spheres of human activity, especially in the industry' (Kelly 2009, 68). Such trends continued and yielded *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, a book by Ralph Tyler in 1949. Tyler introduced a curriculum development and planning model that involved four processes based on a scientific approach to creating a curriculum. These included (1) the identification of a school's purpose, (2) the selection of experiences used to fulfill the school's purpose, (3) the organization of the experiences, and (4) the development of evaluative tools used to determine whether the experiences fulfilled the school's express purposes (Tyler and Hlebowitsh 2013, vii–viii). Put differently, Tyler's curriculum model involved 'four dimensions: objectives, content or subject matter, methods or procedures, and evaluation' (Kelly 2009, 20).

It took time for Tyler's work to have a significant impact. However, by the 1960s, Tyler's principles of curriculum and instruction were being felt in the US and UK, and curriculum planning with clear objectives became the norm by then (Kelly 2009). It is essential to mention that the 1960s witnessed the Space Race, the Civil Rights Movement, and several social revolutions in different parts of the world that sought to transform societies, policies, economies, cultures, and philosophies along with the educational systems. Hence, a gradual disrespect for traditional educational methods began to crystallize. Concepts such as the *master teachers* of the 1950s and the *programed learning* of the 1960s were fading. In 1969, McKeachie introduced his book *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, through which he called for the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education. He further strengthened the trinity of educational objectives, goals, and outcomes. McKeachie claimed: 'What counts in education is not so much what the teacher does as what goes on in the students' minds' (1969, xx).

During the 1970s, the number of school and college students increased dramatically worldwide. Efforts were made to increase educational opportunities and improve the performance of previously disadvantaged minorities, such as women, immigrants, disabled and special needs students. The idea of a university as an elite institution that existed to cultivate elites was vanishing and being replaced by policies of massification. With higher education massification came the concern of 'assuring quality,' as universities and other educational institutions were required to provide 'evidence' of quality. However, at that time, claims were made that the achievement of educational systems globally was in crisis, falling short of expectations and aspirations. To illustrate, UNESCO presented a synoptic view of the world educational scene through its 1970: *Education at the Crossroads* report, claiming that the main problems with educational systems around the world related to issues of democratization, efficiency, and relevance to life (UNESCO 1970). UNESCO announced that the aim of education should be re-examined to discover the source of the lack of effectiveness. UNESCO concluded, 'In order to implement the right to education, quantitative expansion is called for' (1970, 6). For UNESCO, the main focus of such expansion should be on understanding how 'the instructional process [can] be improved' (7).

Subsequently, since the 1980s, many countries have launched large-scale reforms<sup>1</sup> of their public higher educational systems, initially proposed and informed by international organizations. These reforms painted a relatively new portrayal of the ideal student and the ideal teacher in universities and demanded enhancing the faculty's pedagogical

competence to achieve teaching excellence at the organizational, national, and international levels (Wilcox 2021). Consequently, Magnússon and Rytzler (2022) suggest these reforms required specific ways of thinking about learning (primarily) and teaching (secondarily) in higher education, emphasizing the importance of student-centered learning approaches in overcoming the problems inherent in traditional forms of education.

Some pedagogical models responded to such requirements better than others. Chief among these is CA. Not only did CA correspond to the pedagogies' demands for global educational reforms, but it also claimed to offer structural changes for organizing higher education to fulfill its objectives.

Over the last two decades, CA's popularity has increased, and given its applicability to curriculum design, it has begun to shift from an educational tool to a form of quality assurance. CA's outcome-based approach falls under university quality assurance and enhancement activities (Loughlin et al. 2021). Higher education institutions began to pay attention to the assessment of student learning driven by concerns about accountability and compliance from various agencies, such as the OECD. Sridharan et al. (2015) reported that higher education institutions were required to provide empirical evidence to quality assurance agencies and looked to CA to demonstrate learning outcomes through assessment rubrics paired with CA. They believe that the two main reasons for CA's movement to quality assurance are the acquisition of external accreditations and the implementation of program enhancements linked to strategic planning. Wang et al. (2013) suggested that quality assurance agencies follow a systematic approach to principles and seek to use them as a framework for higher education program evaluation in different countries and regions. For example, CA as a quality assurance measure/method is evident in Australia (Treleaven and Voola 2008), the USA (Borrego and Cutler 2010), the UK (Rust 2002), and Vietnam (Tran et al. 2011). As Gough (2013) contends, the idea that education should be an evidence-based practice is now a widespread and uncritical assumption in many countries.

Along the same lines and considering this study, Middle Eastern and North African governments have been compelled by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to embrace neoliberal policies, leading to denationalization and the preparation of their youth populations for participation in the global economy (Nasrallah 2014). International and institutional pressures lead to different strategic responses regarding reforming higher education systems supported by global economic competitiveness, quality assurance, and internationalization (Buckner 2011). Under these conditions, CA has been adopted as a part of quality assurance. Yet, it has been accompanied by ambiguity such that educators in the Arab countries neither fully understand nor properly formulate learning outcomes (UNDP/RBAS 2006).

In the context of Middle Eastern and North African regions, CA can be seen as another 'best practice' borrowed to produce desired results more efficiently and effectively (Lampert 2010). That is, CA evolved in the Global North, influenced by Bobbitt's call to establish learning objectives and Charters' approach to activity analysis, informed by McKeachie's *Teaching Tips*, and legitimized by supranational policies concerning the role of higher education. In the Global South, however, educational policymakers imported CA as an alleged successful practice, assuming that practices known to improve education in one context can be effectively used in another to achieve similar



results. Accordingly, CA appeals to many educational policymakers in the Global South since they are interested in applying ‘what has worked’ with the ‘advanced other.’ Nevertheless, CA theory and practice affect professional behavior in everyday life (Fransson and Friberg 2015). This uncritical acceptance necessitates a problematizing analysis.

## Problematizing constructive alignment in the GCC higher education context

CA is a prominent model in GCC higher education, influencing teaching, learning, and other institutional structures. The Islamic Azad University (IAU) in UAE, for instance, argues that ‘the design/redesign of [its] courses are defined by ... the framework of constructive alignment’ (IAU–UAE website). CA is also often embraced by educational research in higher education (e.g. Kabouha and Elyas 2015; Grande et al. 2022). CA is even inexplicably linked to achieving sustainable development (e.g. Al-Kuwari et al. 2021) and realizing strategic goals. Regarding the latter point, in its Program Enhancement Plan form, Qatar University answers the question of why constructively aligning an educational program’s goals to the university’s strategic plan is crucial by maintaining that doing so will ‘prepare competent graduates, life-long learners, well rounded, ethically and socially responsible and entrepreneurial. Such attributes and values will maximize their impact on their lives, society, and beyond’ (Qatar University n.d., 4). In the GCC context, CA carries with it a hegemonic normative claim not only for achieving micro goals (i.e. the design of teaching and programs) but also for attaining macro national goals (e.g. achieving sustainable development and maximizing citizens’ societal impact).

Drawing on educational theory, we problematize such taken-for-granted claims in the coming sections and focus on three main blind spots of CA. Table 1 presents these blind spots and summarizes the driving rationales behind them and the educational consequences.

### Pedagogic hegemony

Embracing CA orthodoxies within GCC higher education can be seen as a form of pedagogic hegemony, which is ‘the imposition of one’s preferred method of instruction on all teachers in all subjects who teach all populations of students’ (Ackerman 2019, 1). Pedagogic hegemony is an invisible power that works as soft educational governance (Brøgger 2019). Gramsci et al. (1971) maintained that, in its general sense, hegemony is ‘the exercise of ‘direction,’ how something or someone is moved in a particular direction’ (cited in Brøgger 2019, 160). Perhaps more troubling, not only does pedagogic

**Table 1.** Blind spots of constructive alignment.

Blind spot	Rationale	Consequences
Pedagogic Hegemony	False Universalism	Undermining Cultural Scripts in Education
Implementation Fidelity	Educational Transfer	Distortion of CA
Policy Enactment	Emphasis on Outcomes, Evidence and Performance	Illusion of Student-Centredness

hegemony privilege an idea or a combination of ideas prevalent in an educational system, but it also acts as a mechanism for excluding those who do not go with the flow (Byrd 2019).

The rationale driving pedagogic hegemony is false universalism. Falk (1997) describes false universalism as ‘depicting the particular and partial as if it were synonymous with the general, not only concerning substantive results but more crucially in relation to the processes by which these results are reached’ (8). In theory, such rationale assumes that CA will work in any educational context, producing results in one environment comparable to outcomes in another. In transferring educational policies and practices to the GCC context, a false universalism decontextualizes the many dimensions of these policies or practices, dismissing the fact that they were initially rooted in different educational and cultural values and omitting any concern about distinct social and cultural dimensions (Rose 1991; Steiner-Khamsi 2004). In the GCC context, false universalism prevents any questioning of CA’s universal generalisability and application and fails to consider the inherent cultural biases entrenched in the pedagogical model.

As a ‘best practice’ transferred to GCC higher education, CA encounters contextual challenges and cross-cultural differences that undermine its implementation (O’Donnell 2008). CA negates the GCC’s cultural scripts, which normally explain the cultural influences that shape individual behaviors and understandings of the world (Tan 2015). Cultural scripts in education are the presumed attitudes, values, beliefs, and expectations about how learning takes place and what works best in teaching and learning (Jin and Cortazzi 2006). The GCC’s cultural scripts in education suggest that classrooms are teacher-centered and traditional methods are used, such that teachers lecture and students pay attention (Romanowski 2022; Romanowski et al. 2018). The result is that teachers simply pass down knowledge (Saleh 2009), with students developing an overdependence and overreliance on the teacher to solve problems and provide ready answers (Hamdan 2014). However, constructively aligned teaching ‘almost always means something other than talking for an hour while the learner takes notes’ (Biggs 2014, 7).

Furthermore, constructively aligned teaching requires that students monitor their learning to self-regulate it (Zimmerman 2008). Lansari et al. (2010) state that, in the GCC region, students ‘have learned to completely depend on their teachers for acquiring knowledge’ (74). Sulimma (2009) reported that students in the UAE found comfort in structured learning, were concerned about correct answers and expected teachers to have those answers. They further blamed results on external conditions rather than their self-control of learning.

To a certain extent, cultural scripts in education in the GCC region have roots in religion. That is, while learning in CA is neither a result of ‘who the student is’ nor what the ‘teacher thinks or does,’ Islamic pedagogy proclaims the opposite. Islamic pedagogy refers to ‘the educational values, concepts, and perspectives rooted in the Islamic tradition that inspire and inform renewed thinking within Islamic schools and educational settings’ (Centre for Islamic Thought and Education, n.d.). Islamic pedagogy has been challenging the increased technicizing of teachers, drawing on the work of Muslim scholars who produced educational theories which had a worldwide influence. Imam al-Ghazali, for instance, theorized extensively on learning and teaching. In his book *Ihya’ Ulumuddin*, Imam al-Ghazali argued that learning happens when the student exhibits

specific characteristics, arguing '[a student should not] behave haughtily before knowledge, nor command his teacher. Instead, he should place himself under his teacher's control (Imam al-Ghazali Institute n.d., 2).

Similarly, Khaldun (2001) believed that the teacher is responsible for transferring knowledge to the student, who willingly and passionately seeks it. Perhaps more importantly for Khaldun (2001), for learning to take place, teachers should possess certain personality traits, such as being tolerant, organized, and skillful. In this case, implementing CA necessities undermines these cultural scripts.

An important point worth identifying centers on the concern of practices transferred into the GCC and their role in shaping teaching and learning. Although cultural scripts are subject to change, the more significant questions are, should GCC cultural scripts be changed and shaped like those in the global North? Should the role of higher education be that of imposing Western forms of teaching and learning, forcing culture to fit into Western systems, and undermining cultural scripts? These issues are essential but left for another venue.

### Implementation fidelity

Bauer and Kenton (2005) defined implementation fidelity as how an innovative education practice is implemented compared to the original practices' purpose and design. The goal of transferred practices is to reduce distortions during the implementation process. Differences or discrepancies between the original practice and its implementation may arise depending on the context. They may play a critical role in the fidelity of the implementation. If practices, when transferred to a country with different cultural makeup, are not reliably transferred, they may not reach their full potential. They could be counter-productive contributing little to intended improvement. In addition, depending on the context, there can be significant differences between the original works and how they are adapted, affecting the adaptation's fidelity. O'Donnell (2008) emphasized this dichotomy between implementation fidelity and reinvention and adaptation of transferred educational processes. Although these contradictions are evident in CA in all contexts, GCC faculty face additional struggles.

There is difficulty embedded in using CA and concerns about implementation fidelity. When CA is applied in a new setting, the procedures and practices will be subject to differing interpretations by educators. Scholars have argued that there are inherent philosophical contradictions in CA where the constructivist elements are incompatible with behaviorist outcome-based education (e.g. Garraway 2021; Jervis and Jervis 2005; Poole 2013), and this could influence implementation fidelity. Any modifications could threaten CA's theoretical basis and possibly result in adverse outcomes. For example, although there is a host of detailed constructivist theories, constructivists are mind-independent and do not share with behaviorists the belief that knowledge can be 'mapped' to learners (Ertmer and Newby 2013). Providing students with opportunities to develop creative, unpredictable, and complex outcomes is difficult when CA is set on establishing an evidence-based education and seeks 'causal and quantifiable links between specified educational inputs (policy, curriculum, pedagogy) and learning outcomes' (Gough 2013, 1224–1225). The creative aspect of learning with the constructivist approach could disagree with CA's emphasis on outcomes.

As explained previously, common in the GCC region is the way Arab students have developed an overreliance on teachers for direct instruction and behaviorist-inclined pedagogies (Mohamed and El-Habbal 2013). University teachers have also preferred these methods, leading to an ideal situation in which teachers' and students' teaching and learning preferences are compatible (Romanowski 2022). In some cases, this has resulted in teachers resisting change in their practices and students lacking the capacity to build their skills and challenge their knowledge. Faraj (2013) suggests that a 'challenge' in Arab nations regarding education is that 'classes are dominated by lectures, which offer students limited opportunities to engage in open discussion, express their opinions freely, or participate in activities' (23). This type of 'Pavlovian pedagogy' (Benrabah 1999) conflicts with constructivism; therefore, constructivism could disappear from CA, as conceptualized by Biggs. The different parts of alignment, outcomes, and active learning can be considered a mix-and-match, where the combination and composition are unimportant. In contrast, the original aim of CA was to understand the learning process.

Based on the above, there is a problem with using CA theory and practice in the GCC context. One could infer that because some educators in the region face the binary trap of behaviorism and constructivism, they will apply their knowledge of teaching and learning based on their implicit assumptions about teaching and learning (Poole 2016; Tan 2015), impacting implementation fidelity. Loughlin et al. (2021) suggested that failure to emphasize the origin of constructivism and explain its omissions does not enable practitioners and policymakers to develop understandings that are useful in any application of constructivist theory. If lecturing is dominant and convenient, does constructivism disappear from theory as practiced? Loughlin et al. (2021) argue that constructivist approaches do not 'prohibit lectures, the student-centredness of an active learning approach would probably make that difficult to justify' (126).

There are also concerns about how faculty outside a Western context lack knowledge about CA and how this may influence implementation fidelity. To illustrate, Nasrallah (2014), examining CA in a Lebanese context, reported that the alignment of learning outcomes with teaching methods, institutional plans, and accreditation, among others, added to the misinterpretations by faculty. There were other misunderstandings among faculty implementing CA. These included misconceptions about assigning meaning to the learning outcomes, equating learning outcomes with objectives, and unfamiliarity with the importance of learning outcomes. There were very few faculty members who understood learning outcomes, and most were unaware of the idea that learning outcomes could be student-centered. Hannon (2008) suggested that there is an inevitable challenge in importing innovations and adapting them to particular contexts and situations. She also questions how fidelity can and should be maintained in the original model when different circumstances arise.

## Policy enactment

Loughlin and Lindberg-Sand (2023) documented the journey of CA from educational theory to higher education policy. This journey, the authors contend, has 'created an illusion of systemic academic integrity at odds with reality' (Loughlin and Lindberg-Sand 2023, 1). Accordingly, they maintained that CA operates at two levels in the higher education context. The first adopts the view of CA as a qualitative heuristic used by

individual faculty members to enhance the coherence of their educational offerings and support student learning processes. As discussed throughout this study, the primary purpose of CA has been to improve students' learning effectiveness in different courses. The second situates CA as an externally mandated, product-oriented means of quality assurance. Bovill and Woolmer (2019) suggested that the popularity of the Biggs model in higher education institutions worldwide may be related to this growing focus on quality assurance systems.

Problems often occur when these two levels overlap or co-exist in higher education contexts. Once transported from the realm of practice to the 'uncertain, contingent, chaotic, complex, and indeterminate' policy space (Webb 2014, 366), the meaning of CA diverges materially, with 'one concerned primarily with the process of learning and teaching, and the other with only its product' (Loughlin and Lindberg-Sand 2023, 2). Its meaning also expands exponentially from the simple trilogy of learning outcomes, teaching, and learning activities, and assessment at the course level to alignment between course modules, programs, graduate attributes, and excellence themes, which becomes quite an abstract endeavor for which evidence may be elusive (Loughlin and Lindberg-Sand 2023).

In this case, Ball's (1994) notion of *enactment* begins to override concerns of fidelity of implementation (Buxton et al. 2015), with an emphasis on 'the recontextualization – through reading, writing, and talking – of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualized practices' (Braun et al. 2010, 586). The creative processes of interpretation and translation allude to the complexity of policy processes more generally in educational fields (Webb 2014). Linear views of policy processes are commonly rejected because they depict, in the case of this essay, faculty as agentic actors and instrumental decision-makers capable of implementing policy into daily practices while ignoring the multifaceted ways in which educational policies are interpreted, translated, and contextualized in educational spaces by diverse policy actors (Braun et al. 2010). According to Webb (2014), it is in the 'subsequent function of policy – its so-called 'implementation' – that problematization operates' (367).

Biggs (2014) warns against transporting his theory into the complex realm of policy, indicating that CA is 'concerned only with improving teaching and learning' and 'as a form of quality enhancement, subsumes forms of quality assurance that can often be counter-productive' (Biggs 2014, 5). He further laments that CA has been used in this way 'across institutions to serve a managerial agenda' (Biggs 2014, 5). Accordingly, CA as a quality assurance policy 'creates an illusionary appearance of student-centered approaches to learning and teaching, often misrepresenting the reality of practice' (Loughlin and Lindberg-Sand 2023).

This reality can be seen clearly through several characteristics of higher education in GCC contexts. For example, large class sizes, rigid physical classroom layouts, and the proliferation of lectures communicate that the most valued teaching and learning approaches at these institutions are transmission-based, constituting an overreliance on teacher talk, simply because the student-centeredness of an active learning approach would be 'physically' difficult, if not impossible. Holec and Marynowski (2020) warn against divorcing learning environments from our teaching and learning practices, claiming that 'active learning pedagogies thrive in suitable active learning classrooms' (1). According to Ellis and Goodyear (2016), physical spaces are not neutral and can

dictate ‘how knowledge is discovered, distilled, and disseminated’ in subtle and powerful ways (165).

A second equally critical point concerns the assessment culture in most GCC higher education institutions. If CA works as intended in these contexts, then an overemphasis on selected-response-type assessments would seem counterintuitive to CA’s theoretical underpinnings. Kickert et al. (2022) put it this way: ‘these multiple-choice assessments cannot assess whether the student can make innovative, integrative connections or form an own substantiated opinion’ (732), as advocated by constructivist approaches. However, institutional requirements driven by the need for quality assurance prescribe such assessment procedures and require faculty to implement them uncritically; whether these align with their intended learning outcomes is unquestioned (Nasrallah 2014).

A final reflection concerns the ‘check-box’ culture, which has emerged as a response to policy documentation demands. Faculty have become adept at creating this ‘illusionary appearance of student-centered approaches’ by constructively aligning their course syllabi without necessarily putting them into practice. For the reasons discussed earlier, in addition to an apparent deficit in professional learning opportunities for faculty, Loughlin and Lindberg-Sand (2023) contend that a reduced sense of individual responsibility among faculty is on the rise due to the increased emphasis on alignment for audit purposes, and ‘as long as the paperwork is complete,’ faculty feel they have fulfilled institutional requirements as prescribed (9).

## Revisiting the forgotten connections

In this section, we would like to introduce ‘local Mariam,’ a student at one of GCC’s universities. Mariam is a passionate and engaged learner with a compelling desire to acquire knowledge. She is studying Biomedical Science and aspires to become a laboratory scientist in four years. To obtain this status, Mariam must study and pass major courses, such as human anatomy, microbiology, and histopathology, along with other biological and chemistry classes. Mariam is a member of a high-power-distance culture (as opposed to a low-power-distance culture; Hofstede 1980). In Mariam’s culture, individuals respect people in authority and those with seniority. Accordingly, ‘they expect the teacher to know the correct answers and would not argue or express contrary opinions as this would show a lack of respect’ (Carder et al. 2018, 12).

While teaching in a low-power-distance culture can be informal, and alternative views are freely expressed and discussed, Mariam finds such an atmosphere, including the tone of discussions, perplexing. She expects her learning to be driven and controlled by her professors; self-directed independent learning is a new and daunting concept for her. Mariam expects her professors to provide all the information she needs to be a successful laboratory scientist, and she will be confused if other students challenge her professors. Equally important is that Mariam comes from a collectivist society rather than an individualist society (Hofstede 1980). The Japanese expression ‘The nail that stands alone will be hammered down’ applies to Mariam. As a member of a collectivist society, Mariam is unwilling to express personal opinions, speak in front of the class or do anything that might disrupt the collective’s norms. She studies unequivocal human structures and functions and is not subject to debate, evaluation, or judgment. Equally importantly,

Mariam's professors are scientists who are respected by society for their profound knowledge. In the classroom, Mariam attempts to maintain the prevailing gender norms of her society. Because her professors are most likely males, she unconsciously limits classroom participation. Mariam should also be seen through Hofstede's (1980) concept of *uncertainty avoidance*. Mariam requires clear guidelines in the classroom and for the subject matter to be explained thoroughly. Here, although 'who Mariam is' is more important than 'what she does,' she is a distinguished student engaged in many curricular and extracurricular activities both inside and outside the university and will most likely graduate to become a good laboratory scientist. In short, Mariam is learning.

We introduced 'local Mariam' to argue that CA shows scant regard for the content of education, that is, for the diverse subject matter that has roots in various scientific fields, complying with differing traditions. Magnússon and Rytzler (2022) point out that concretely, content and context matter since content cannot be separated from the pedagogical approaches or the context in which it is taught. Rather, pedagogical approaches depend on the specific domains of knowledge they are connected to and are difficult to construe as – or transform into – general educational principles. Social factors and identities are equally important. CA de-emphasizes 'who the student is,' arguing that 'what he/she does' is more crucial (Biggs 1999). This is a miscalculation of the impacts of religion, gender, ethnicity, class, age, and other factors that influence students' educational experiences. By neutralizing students' social factors and identities, CA fails to address essential power relations that affect students' learning (Magnússon and Rytzler 2022).

Higher education students in GCC and elsewhere are not merely neutral categories but personified, gendered, and classed social agents with experiences that cannot be capsulized by the dichotomy of 'academic-Susan' and 'non-academic-Robert' or even by 'local Mariam.' The same argument applies to faculty, which are presented through CA principles as incorporeal and neutral figures who are likely to 'perform' or 'reproduce' rather than develop pedagogical approaches that suit their disciplines and students.

Following Magnússon and Rytzler (2022), we argue that universities' pedagogical approaches must respond to the question of 'what we wish to achieve by educating the younger generation' in a way that goes beyond current hegemonic thinking that is influenced by policy aspirations. Although this may sound utopian, especially in our day, we subscribe to its creative ontology (Masschelein and Simons 2018). We also argue that university pedagogy cannot exist without faculty assuming responsibility for it and enhancing and promoting it. Faculty should be responsible for their students' well-being, subject matter, and the pedagogical practices they decide to use. We argue that a university pedagogy must be theorized and analyzed 'educationally,' using pedagogical principles, inquiries, and ways of thinking. Perhaps more importantly, such a theory, influenced by the context of the Global North, should draw on indigenous knowledge and cultural scripts in education.

## Concluding remarks

This study applied Foucault's concept of problematization to critique CA in GCC higher education. To conclude, we argue that the efforts to enforce CA's orthodoxies in GCC countries tend to overlook critical pedagogical aspects, constraining faculty intellectually

through stipulating a pedagogy informed by narrow ideas about the role of universities. Kelly (2012) argues that considering CA as a means of strengthening teaching and learning renders ‘invisible other aspects of curriculum, syllabus, and assessment’ (89). Specifically, the hegemony of CA does not account for the indigenous, ‘that is the local, messy, risky, folkloric, accumulation of individual and collective experiences that teaching academics draw upon to construct their narratives of professionalism’ (89).

With that in mind, this work provides insight into issues such as globalization and quality assurance related to CA and its implementation in higher education in the GCC. More specifically, these include false universalism, implementation fidelity, and problems with policy enactment that plagues many borrowed educational theories and practices in the GCC. Based on this problematization of CA, we would argue that using CA as an instrument for curriculum design should be discarded in the context. We know outside forces, such as Western accreditation agencies, may force universities to look to CA to develop and achieve learning outcomes. However, there is a need to adapt better to include local GCC culture and context into the process if this is possible. Therefore, these issues should guide further investigations that could provide empirical evidence of the influences of CA on the local culture, epistemologies, and pedagogies.

## Note

1. Following Levin and Young (1997), we use the term ‘reform’ in this study to mirror the language of policy documents and governmental reports rather than to assert a judgment concerning the desirability of the educational changes.

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