What’s he talking about? The communicative alignment between a teacher’s intentions and students’ understandings

Bernadette Knewstubb a & Carol Bond b

a La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia
b University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Available online: 11 Mar 2009

To cite this article: Bernadette Knewstubb & Carol Bond (2009): What’s he talking about? The communicative alignment between a teacher’s intentions and students’ understandings, Higher Education Research & Development, 28:2, 179-193

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360902725058

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
What’s he talking about? The communicative alignment between a teacher’s intentions and students’ understandings

Bernadette Knewstubba* and Carol Bondb

aLa Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia; bUniversity of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

(Received 28 July 2007; final version received 15 September 2008)

Despite considerable research on teaching and learning in higher education, the relationship between university teachers’ and students’ understandings of the same teaching-learning events has not been a focus. This exploratory qualitative study used individual interviews to investigate the role of conceptions of teaching, learning and knowledge in a lecturer’s and three first-year students’ understandings of a lecture on Hamlet and to compare the meaning intended by the lecturer with that perceived by his students. A video-taped lecture was used as a focus for discussion in interviews and individual case studies were developed. Case studies were compared to explore whether lecturer and student conceptions could explain their relative lecture descriptions. The concept of ‘communicative alignment’ was adopted to describe this teaching-learning relationship.

Keywords: communicative alignment; conceptions; learning; lectures; teaching

Introduction

Research on learning and teaching in higher education is a divided field. For instance, in phenomenography there is a strong similarity in the development, methods and outcomes of studies on students’ conceptions/experiences of learning (e.g. Marton, Dall’Alba, & Beaty, 1993; Säljö, 1979) and their approaches to learning (e.g. Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton & Säljö, 1976) and on teachers’ conceptions of and approaches to teaching (e.g. Kember, 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). Yet, generally researchers address either teaching or learning in their research, despite the observed parallels (Entwistle & Walker, 2000).

Generally, these first-generation phenomenographic studies found that students who focus on understanding and developing personal conceptual frameworks learn more effectively than those who focus on memorising content. Similarly, most studies on teaching suggest that ‘student-centred’ and ‘learning-oriented’ teaching (Kember, 1997, p. 264) is more effective than that which is concerned solely with presenting content. One outcome of this research is the wide acceptance that university teachers’ conceptions influence their teaching approaches and, in turn, their students’ approaches to learning (e.g. Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). In an extension of this field, Marton and Booth (1997) argued that what a student focuses upon – the focus of awareness – during a particular learning episode is strongly related to her/his conception of learning,
approach to learning and resulting learning outcomes (Marton & Booth, 1997; Rodriguez & Cano, 2006). Related research shows that teachers manipulate students’ foci of awareness, varying some aspects of the object of learning (i.e. what is to be learned), while keeping others invariant. Even the teaching of the same material provides different objects of learning for students depending on what teachers choose to highlight in their variation of the different aspects (Marton, Runesson, & Tsui, 2004; Runesson, 1999). Thus, teaching and learning are integrally related one to the other at several levels.

Yet few studies have investigated the possible relations between teaching and learning by comparing teachers’ and students’ approaches to teaching and learning. Those that have (e.g. Gow & Kember, 1993; Kember, 1998; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999) describe the correlation of teachers’ approaches to teaching and students’ approaches to learning, but not resulting learning outcomes. The teaching/learning relationship has also been described using explanatory models developed from the two bodies of research (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) and implications for one field have been derived from research in the other. Despite these divisions, this literature has played a significant role globally in informing academic and curriculum development in higher education.

Teaching and learning as a conversation

Conceptually, teaching and learning in higher education has been linked through the notion of ‘conversation’. For example, Ramsden (2003, p. 160) explains: ‘teaching is a sort of conversation … [in which] listening and talking are equally important’. Teaching involves gaining students’ understandings in order to further their understandings. Similarly, Laurillard’s (1999) Conversational Framework for effective learning, which aligns the teacher’s and student’s meanings, the teacher’s constructed environment and the student’s actions, emphasises the importance of an ongoing and iterative description and redescription. In the field of teacher-effectiveness research, Wulff (2005) combines instructional and communication strategies in an ‘alignment model’. In this case, learning is made more effective by aligning the content, students and teacher through strategies that include structure, engagement, building rapport and interaction.

However, while these models emphasise the importance of conversation for teaching and learning, they do not explain the ways in which it may improve mutual understanding. For example, Laurillard’s Framework assumes that by aligning conceptions the teacher will understand the student’s response, simply because the student makes it (and vice versa). While allowance is made for possible misunderstanding in the stages of re-description, how a teacher becomes aware of the need to re-describe something is unclear. Similarly, Wulff’s model does not make clear how strategies such as ‘building rapport’ or ‘interaction’ work to align teacher-student understandings. In addition, Wulff does not directly address the effect that different epistemologies might have on the alignment process.

Unquestionably, interaction between participants improves communicative effectiveness. The question is whether we can assume that interaction will automatically lead to a shared understanding of the lecturer’s intention between lecturer and student? According to theorists in linguistic pragmatics (e.g. Grice, 1989), we cannot. These theorists argue that in communication between a speaker/writer and an addressee there is no guarantee that the addressee will understand the speaker’s
intended meaning. In fact from a pragmatics perspective, it is not that we fail to communicate that is (logically) unusual, but rather, that we understand one another at all. Cowan (1998, p. 61) illustrates this, describing a situation in which a tutor and student worked together in a one-to-one interaction, but afterwards described very different perceptions of what had happened during the session. It is the communicative aspects of this and other teaching-learning situations that has motivated this study.

**Conversation, communication and communicative alignment**

To make clear the focus of this study, we distinguish ‘conversation’, with its emphasis on interaction and feedback, from ‘communication’, which describes the attempt by a speaker/writer and a listener to come to a shared understanding of the speaker/writer’s meaning, in either transactional or interactional discourse. We use the term ‘communicative alignment’ to describe similarities and differences between what a lecturer intends to say, the effect she intends to have on her students, the students’ understandings and how they perceive the lecturer’s intention.

Communicative alignment describes, not qualities of the lecturer or student as separate entities (although such qualities are important), but the relationship between them in terms of the participants’ focus of awareness during a particular communicative event, such as a lecture, tutorial or one-to-one conversation. The phrase was inspired by Biggs’ (1996) notion of ‘constructive alignment’, which describes the coherence between parts of a taught curriculum: the objectives, teaching methods and assessment tasks. However, constructive alignment is located with course teachers and designers. As Sambell and McDowell (1998) demonstrated, whether a student perceives a course to be aligned will also depend on the relationship between what the lecturer believes is being communicated and what the student hears and understands when engaging with that curriculum.

Conceptually, communicative alignment is informed by characteristics from recent phenomenographic research: awareness, intention, discernment, variation and outcome space (Marton & Booth, 1997; Runesson, 1999; Runesson & Marton, 2002). However, it differs in that it attempts to describe the relative understandings amongst all actors engaged in a communicative event: the focus, intention, motivation and actions as designed/expressed by the teacher and as perceived by the learner. On one side, communicative alignment describes what the lecturer wants students to hear, understand and react to. On the other, it is about what different students perceive the lecturer’s intention, motivation and expectations to be. Thus, the phrase provides access to the two worlds (student and lecturer), mediated through the lecture ‘text’. Importantly for teaching and learning development, it focuses attention on the relation between the two worlds.

Communicative alignment differs from Wulff’s alignment model in two ways. Firstly, while Wulff’s model emerges from work with higher education teachers (albeit expert), communicative alignment reflects both students’ and lecturers’ experiences. Secondly while Wulff’s model is used to guide teaching practice, communicative alignment is concerned with describing the teaching-learning relationship.

In this study we treat teaching and learning as an internally related communicative act and explore the alignment between a lecturer’s experience of teaching particular material and his students’ experiences of learning (or ‘hearing’) that material in the context of a lecture.
Lectures as a focus for a communicative study

Given the importance of interaction for communication, lectures may seem an odd focus for a communication-based study. Often considered the least effective form of teaching, researchers have questioned its role in higher education (Bligh, 2000; Hogan, 2006; Laurillard, 2002). Lectures constitute a strange communicative context because there is generally one speaker, many listeners, a shared intention that something is to be taught/learned, but with little or no interaction to ensure shared understanding. In addition, students must listen for long periods without interaction.

However, lectures remain possibly the most common mode of face-to-face communication in higher education and, despite their drawbacks, lectures share important properties with interactive communication – students/listeners strive to understand the speaker’s intended meaning and the lecturer, as speaker, tries to explain herself in such a way that students will come to understand the meaning she intended. Thus, for our purposes, the lecture proves a useful tool to begin exploring the alignment between teaching and learning as communication. It provides a simpler frame of reference than group interactions but provides more diversity of relations than one-to-one situations. A lecture provides a single text, as might be found in a textbook. However the author (lecturer) is active in the teaching-learning event and available to describe his intention to the researcher, who can then make direct comparisons with students’ understandings of the lecture text. The presence of both lecturer and students allow us to move from an intra-group study (of students or lecturers) towards an exploration of inter-group understandings: the relationship between what a lecturer intends to teach at a particular time and what a student understands as a result of a particular teaching episode. These relationships are explored using a qualitative case study.

Methods

Sample

Lecturers at a large New Zealand university, teaching a first-year elective English literature course with 100+ students were approached about the study and a senior lecturer agreed to take part. His first-year class was briefed on the project and students who had attended a series of three lectures on Hamlet were invited to participate. A convenience sample of three students was selected to represent the widest range of educational experiences and motivations and therefore, possibly, variation in interpretation of the lecture content.

The lecturer, Jonathan, has taught at the University for thirty years. Specialising in Shakespearean literature, he has considerable experience teaching all year-levels from first-year to postgraduate students. The three students included Mary, a mature-age student studying for interest after retirement; and two first-year, second-semester students with different discipline combinations. David (Arts-Science) and Sara (Arts-Law) both expressed aspirations to enter competitive second-year courses, but in different discipline areas.

Procedures

The last of three Hamlet lectures was videotaped for the study and the lecturer was asked to select three scenes as a focus for interviews. Individual semi-structured
interviews of 45–60 minutes were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Questions focused on participants’ conceptions of knowledge, teaching and learning generally and, more specifically, their understandings of the intention, method and message of the lecture series, the final lecture and particular episodes within that lecture. Each interview was largely identical, although the focus on teaching and learning differed depending on whether the participant was the lecturer or a student. So in the first part of the interview the lecturer was asked questions relating to his conceptions of knowledge, teaching, learning and students. In the second part he was asked to describe his intention and actions during the lecture and each of the three excerpts and his beliefs about students’ actions and learning outcomes for each scene. The students were asked identical questions concerning their experiences of knowledge, learning, teaching and lectures. After this they were shown the video excerpts selected by the lecturer and asked to describe their perceptions of the lecturer’s intention, method, how they (the students) had (re)acted at the time and what they felt they had learned.

Analysis and reporting
Transcripts were analysed using a hermeneutic framework after Gadamer (1989) who emphasised understanding as a linguistic phenomenon. So transcripts were read iteratively, with parts of the transcript informing the whole interpretation and, in turn, the reading of the whole transcript being used to help interpret its parts. This focus on the relations between parts and whole is based on the notion that an individual’s experience is an internally related experiential field (Bond, 2000; Marton & Booth, 1997). Adherence to the participant’s experience also resembled Marton and Booth’s (1997) second order perspective in which the ‘other’s’ experience is prioritised. Analysis involved two foci: firstly, the participant’s conceptions of teaching, learning and knowledge as an experiential field and, secondly, the participant’s experiences of the lecture and lecture excerpts. When analysing descriptions of the lecture excerpts, the importance of what content (parts) each participant discerned from the learning object (excerpt/lecture-as-a-whole) was highlighted. The foci provided a picture of the extent to which similarities/differences in the participants’ experiential fields could effectively explain similarities/differences in the communicative alignment of the lecturer and students in relation to what was intended and understood in the lecture.

For each transcript, excerpts were sorted under specific categories: knowledge, teaching and learning (experiential field); and focus (what the lecture/excerpt was about), lecturer’s intention (what), lecturer’s motivation (why), lecturer’s action (how) and student (re)action (communicative understanding). Emerging patterns for each participant were abstracted into themes with illustrative quotations (presented in Table 1 – Experiential Field, and Table 2 – Perceptions of the Lecture Event). Analysis of each transcript was situated in the context of the video-clip descriptions and the four transcripts as a whole.

A case study was constructed for each participant, assuming that all aspects of the experience would be internally related for that participant. Finally, each student’s case study was compared with that of the lecturer to identify aspects of similarity and difference in experiential fields and communicative experiences. Possible relationships were identified between student-lecturer experiential fields and the alignment of their communicative understandings. Results are reported as three mini-cases that include the student’s experiences of knowledge, teaching and learning in relation to
Table 1. Summary of participants’ experiential fields.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Knowledge is:</th>
<th>Learning is:</th>
<th>Teaching is:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>Inter-related parts and whole – can be manipulated to make meaning:</td>
<td>Increasing understanding – expanding knowledge:</td>
<td>Sharing a loved subject, imparting enthusiasm; motivating students. Familiarising/defamiliarising texts and preventing misunderstandings:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘… things done with the language English, and knowing something about the concerns of it which interact: the style and meaning.’</td>
<td>‘Learning is about adding to what I already know, because the more you know about a thing, the more you see you don’t know.’</td>
<td>‘I’m really trying to communicate something of my own knowledge and feeling for [the subject].’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>A product of learning. Structured parts making up a whole. Insight:</td>
<td>Purposeful, goal-driven. Structured parts into whole picture. Reflective:</td>
<td>Enthusiing students. Imparting information:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘It’s sort of getting insight and my reaction is that I want to go and do some more.’</td>
<td>‘I felt I got a lot out of [the lecture series]. I haven’t sorted it all out in my mind … I’ve got to go away and work it out.’</td>
<td>‘They’re trying to get across a certain amount of basic information about their subject. But I’m sure they are trying to enthuse students to do more than just sort of basics.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Remembered facts and skills. Authority-based:</td>
<td>Memorising, reproducing. Being able to apply in a different context:</td>
<td>Providing overviews, information, skeletal structures. Differences between Arts and Sciences:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘It sticks in my head. So it’s like I know I’m going to remember the information.’</td>
<td>‘You can recall it all at the end basically. And you know it. And you can use it whenever you need to in your life.’</td>
<td>‘[In Arts is] giving us some ideas, which we can evaluate and think if we agree with the lecturer or not … you learn how to think, not what to know.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Right and wrong answers. Authority-based. Stored as ‘key points’. Pieces of information related to context:</td>
<td>Compressing information into key points. Relating pieces of information to context. Responsibility of the student:</td>
<td>Enthusiing, motivating students. Providing basic outline of material to be learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘You sort of understand … the context. What it fits into, what it has to do with it. Like why you should even know it.’</td>
<td>‘You can sort of go to that file in your head … those are the most important bits. … Once you’re finished with them, you can look at other things that come into it.’</td>
<td>‘I think [lecturers] should be inspirational. They should … make you want to read outside and go and get some other books.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Summary of participants’ perceptions of the lecture event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Jonathan</th>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Sara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Tragedy: as theme; in <em>Hamlet</em>; in <em>Hamlet</em> c.f. <em>Richard III</em>; in Shakespeare c.f. others (e.g. Seneca): as special in the context of Elizabethan/Roman/Shakespeare tragedy and Shakespeare.</td>
<td>Universal themes: big picture; specifically NOT plot</td>
<td><em>Hamlet</em> as play: content; historical context; as moral theme; as tragedy.</td>
<td>Lecture as narrative: what happened, what the lecturer said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer’s intention</td>
<td>To relate <em>Hamlet</em> to other Shakespeare revenge plays – to outline theme of revenge; show complexity of theme in <em>Hamlet</em>; encourage students to read the play for themselves.</td>
<td>To discuss ‘universal themes’ in <em>Hamlet</em> and to link general ideas about <em>Hamlet</em> to specific examples.</td>
<td>To show why <em>Hamlet</em> is a tragedy; to go into more detail concerning moral and social implication; to relate <em>Hamlet</em> to other tragedies.</td>
<td>To define <em>Hamlet</em> as a revenge tragedy; to show why <em>Hamlet</em> was a popular play; to compare <em>Hamlet</em> with <em>Richard III</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer’s motivation</td>
<td>To link <em>Hamlet</em> to earlier plays; to emphasise <em>Hamlet</em> as revenge tragedy; to defamiliarise the play for those who have studied it before; to show ‘the astonishing originality of Shakespeare’.</td>
<td>To show the links between scenes; to discuss themes more generally.</td>
<td>To show why revenge is important; to present specific ideas.</td>
<td>Just ‘one of his seven points for the day’; to contextualise the play; to explain ‘why <em>Hamlet</em> is so famous’; to provide an outline for students to study for themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer’s action</td>
<td>Talking about revenge ‘the pros and cons of it – what it’s like as a dramatic subject’; emphasising key passages; moving from general description of tragedy to other Shakespeare plays to ‘<em>Hamlet</em> issues’; repetition in different ways.</td>
<td>Moved from general to specific to comparison; linked references to specific concepts and contexts.</td>
<td>Went into ‘more detail’; took time to emphasise points; used voice and repetition to emphasise points; gave specific examples repetition.</td>
<td>Used bullet points; talked about the ‘moral question of revenge’; compared <em>Hamlet</em> with <em>Richard III</em>; emphasised ‘crucial’ points; repetition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s action</td>
<td>Wanted students to: take key points and relate things together; use lecture points as a framework to explore text for themselves; relate <em>Hamlet</em> to other tragedies.</td>
<td>Enjoyed the global view; trying to record the thematic information.</td>
<td>Tried to pick out the key points; tried to reduce to note form and ‘excavate’ important ideas and information; didn’t write much, listened for ideas.</td>
<td>Tried to pick out key points and summarise information; started to lose focus then worried that ‘missed something important’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that of the lecturer and, subsequently, the student’s understandings of the lecturer’s intentions in relation to the video-clips of the *Hamlet* lecture.

**Results**

*Jonathan: the lecturer’s context*

Jonathan loves his job: ‘I would love to be doing this, paid or not’ and, ‘… I’m really interested in [the] stuff myself. And I want to bring people to that state of mind – where it stops being like work and becomes a worthy pursuit’. For Jonathan, teaching is ‘guiding’; facilitating student-text relationships, with a focus on structure and motivation. He wants to inspire students to make the subject their own, to take what he tells them and to run with it in a new direction (see Table 1). Teaching literature involves:

> …get[ting] people to share what you know and, more important than what you know, just to get self-motivated about it, and to be able to tackle a new specimen of the same thing for themselves. … I feel a sort of duty to the text, and I feel a sort of duty to Shakespeare if you like. I don’t want to miss this chance of showing them that he’s amazing and wonderful and so forth …

Jonathan acknowledges the variety of experience in his class and tries to address it in his lectures:

> The truth is that very often I’m talking to a group whose main motive is to get a degree, people who’ve come back and are highly motivated, and all the stages in between. So I have to go and teach at about three paces at once, technically speaking, and I do not find this at all easy.

*Mary/Jonathan: alignment of understandings*

Mary is a mature-age student studying English for interest, an interest reflected in her watching three versions of *Hamlet* before the lectures. Superficially, her conceptions about knowledge, learning and teaching appear to align with those of Jonathan. For both, knowledge is made up of parts (individual facts, ideas etc.) and wholes (understandings of a larger picture). However, Jonathan flexibly relates part-to-whole-to-part when explaining his views whereas Mary’s view is more uni-directional: she talks of parts creating a whole but shows no indication of the reverse relation (see Table 1). For both, learning appears to be goal-driven and, whether from interest or necessity, each begins their learning by identifying a need for something, in everyday life and/or in research:

> *Jonathan*: Learning for me is about adding to what I already know, and … the more you know about a thing, the more you see you don’t know. … In research you have to identify a need for something. Because you’ve got a sense of where you’re going and what you want from it.

> *Mary*: About eight years ago, I decided that I would learn German, because of a journey [to Germany] … and I said, next time I come back I’m going to be able to speak some German. So I made a note of it and I learned German.

Jonathan’s descriptions of teaching are understandably more complex than are Mary’s. However, both believe enthusiasm is important for motivating student learning, as is selecting information that helps students become familiar with the subject.
Jonathan describes teaching in terms of getting people to ‘share what you know’, ‘get self-motivated about it’ and ‘be able to tackle a new specimen of the same thing for themselves’, while Mary sees lecturers as: ‘… trying to get across a certain amount of basic information about their subject’ while ‘trying to enthuse students to do more than the basics … to get a deeper enjoyment than just sort of the minimum you need to pass the exams’.

Although their experiential fields show commonalities, there is one important difference in their views of teaching. For while Jonathan describes a dimension of helping students to avoid misunderstanding, ‘explaining away some things’, ‘trying to unlearn or dislearn some things’ that he feels will prevent students learning, Mary only focuses on teaching as building understanding.

Describing the lecture, Mary displays some alignment with Jonathan. In one of the video-clips Jonathan uses *Hamlet* to illustrate the complexity of revenge as a theme: ‘the ethics of it, the pros and cons, what it’s like as a dramatic subject’ (Jonathan). Mary focuses on the play’s overall structure and so is able to see the bigger picture – the holistic meaning of the play – and understand revenge as a ‘universal theme’. She also identifies the links between ‘specific’ examples and the themes more clearly than David or Sara (see Table 2). Mary’s reaction to the lecture series as a whole reflects Jonathan’s intention and motivation. Being inspired to undertake further Shakespeare study and to use the lecturer’s ideas for reflection on her own reading is directly in line with Jonathan’s intended outcome:

Jonathan: I want to bring people to that state of mind, where it stops being like work and is a worthy pursuit.

Mary: And this links again with what I said to you at the beginning about feeling I want to read more Shakespeare and study more Shakespeare.

However, Mary focuses on ‘universal themes’, without any specific reference to revenge or other points the lecturer makes. She demonstrates that she sees knowledge construction as a one-way process: she builds an understanding – the whole, but does not recognise the use of *Hamlet* as an example – the part. Instead she focuses specifically on what is *not* mentioned: the theme of Ophelia *her* own stated interest: ‘I just love the Ophelia bits … they’re so beautiful …. And he didn’t actually talk about that’. This reflects her view of learning as goal-driven. Her only reference to the content of the scene is a comment about Jonathan’s reference to the Bible (used to point out that revenge for the Tudors was a sin):

Mary: He was making the comparison between concepts, as I say universal themes – Bringing the Bible in … you’ve got to bring the Bible in.

Interestingly, the context in which Mary studies English is one that Jonathan directly comments upon in his discussion of teaching:

Jonathan: Many people who come back as mature students, actually know their Shakespeare … in some way or another and they can’t get enough of the thing.

Yet Mary’s previous experience appears to interfere with Jonathan’s focus on the revenge theme. Mary seems unaware of the importance of the detail (or parts) to the ‘universal themes’ she describes. Her awareness of the themes is vague and seen as
separate from the careful scene-by-scene analysis that Jonathan has used to build up to the overarching view, which she claims she ‘did not need’. So Mary seemingly perceives as irrelevant details, aspects which Jonathan believes are integral to the part-whole relationship of the lecture.

David/Jonathan: alignment of understandings

David, a first-year student studying both Arts and Science subjects, sees knowledge and learning as being fundamentally different in the two disciplines:

[In sciences] there’s quite a lot of information to learn. … This is a muscle, this is what it does, this is where it attaches, and those kinds of things. … [In arts, knowledge is] all more abstract. And we’re developing critical skills. … It’s more in thinking.

Unlike Mary and Jonathan, David views knowledge as individual pieces (parts) given by authorities as a starting point (‘some ideas’) for him to evaluate and use as a resource for his learning (see Table 1). David sees teaching as a necessary precursor for learning: lecturers provide information, which students then go away and learn. Teaching is transmissive and teaching and learning are seen as separate steps in his education process:

David: … we’ve only got three hours a week … for like twelve weeks. So they can’t – don’t have time to make sure we’ve got it. … They basically make us aware of what … they want us to know. … And also with the lecture notes, which may go into slightly more detail than what they can in the lecture. And also textual references, textbook and other – like websites, so we can learn ourselves.

David and Jonathan appear to share few beliefs about teaching, learning or knowledge. In particular, while Jonathan describes a strong affective component in his teaching and learning, David does not refer to any affective elements relating to his experiential field. However, they share the idea that learning is enhanced by reinforcing what is learned in different ways:

Jonathan: I think repetition and saying the same thing in more than one way should make sure that people are getting my main point at the first, second or fourth go. I don’t think repetition is at all an undesirable thing. … I think it helps people really latch hold of something.

David: So I did that (reading) and had some tute questions. I went and answered them, and went to the tute and we discussed the questions. And then again in lectures went through the whole thing again. So basically that was three times I’d gone over it.

This mutual belief that repetition is important may account for particular communicative alignment/misalignment between David and Jonathan in the lecture itself. David describes teaching in lectures as transferring the information students need before they begin learning. Lecturers emphasize important points with voice and repetition. As a result, David focuses on the link between theme and text at the plot level. He registers the lecturer’s repetition and emphatic voice as stressing the importance of the revenge theme. He then relates the discussion of revenge to the context of the Shakespearean period. Reviewing the three Hamlet lectures, David also points to the relevance of the revenge theme in today’s world, ‘we may be having the same sorts of issues now’.
Thus, David is able to extrapolate, albeit in a limited way, from the lecture towards a worldview. However, he stays focused on the social and moral implications of revenge at the expense of the complexity of the theme, which is Jonathan’s emphasis. What is one of a range of points for Jonathan (that revenge is a moral and social evil in Elizabethan times) becomes the focus of the scene for David and affects his overall view (see Table 2). In fact, each describes the theme’s relevance from opposite historical positions. David describes the theme as informing the present generation and Jonathan describes it as building on an ancient Roman tradition.

David does, however, perceive Jonathan’s intended point that Shakespeare’s treatment of the revenge theme illustrates the playwright’s special place in English literature:

David: These are examples of how this is a non-typical tragedy and why it’s so good.

**Sara/Jonathan: alignment of understandings**

Of the three students, Sara, a first-year student in Law and English, demonstrates the least sophisticated experiential field. She worries about producing ‘right answers’, and finds learning at university extremely daunting:

Sara: At university, you actually have to think for yourself, which I found kind of hard getting used to at first. And you have to kind of be a bit more brave and think that your ideas might be right. They only tell you a little bit in lectures and I think that should be enough to get me going. But sometimes I don’t feel it.

In contrast with Jonathan, Sara sees knowledge as pieces of right and wrong information stored and put together as needed (see Table 1). Similarly, while Jonathan sees learning as expanding knowledge, Sara describes learning in terms of reducing information into manageable (recall) units:

Sara: [it’s] compressing the information down until it’s really summarised. … Because you can’t remember all these long sentences and all that sort of stuff.

Moreover, Sara’s view of lectures is pragmatic:

Sara: … they’re there to get you going and to get you wanting to do it. I guess to give you a basic outline of the book, or whatever text you’re doing – which I think they usually do. And then just chuck some ideas around to get you sort of thinking that way.

However Sara and Jonathan both believe in the affective impact of teaching on student motivation and the idea that lectures provide a framework around which students construct their learning:

Sara: I think [lecturers] should be inspirational. … They should make you enthusiastic for their course or their lectures; make you want to read outside and go and get some other books.

Jonathan: I see myself taking [students] through a text … and trying to fire them up a bit.
Sara focuses on parts of the lecture where Jonathan displays particular enthusiasm. Sara describes the lecture-as-text rather than *Hamlet* as a play or as an illustration of a larger theme. In so doing, she indicates little awareness of Jonathan’s communicative intention, especially in relation to his motivation for discussing revenge as a theme. Superficially, Sara seems to have heard what Jonathan has said and is able to summarize key points. However, she shows no attempt to relate these points in a way that indicates she understands Jonathan’s overall communicative intention.

Sara shows no sense of a relationship between general and specific ideas, references or comparisons. All are given equal and discrete weighting; revenge is described as being simply ‘one of his seven points for the day’. While Jonathan sees *Hamlet* as special within the context of Elizabethan and Shakespearian drama, Sara appears only to recognise that she is studying Shakespeare (the author rather than the play). Her description of the lecturer’s motivation shows no awareness of the importance of the play’s inclusion in the course. For Sara, *Hamlet* is taught as a random example of a Shakespearian play and Shakespeare is taught because ‘they have to teach some Shakespeare plays because Shakespeare’s like the godfather of all – pretty much English lit.’ This shows a complete lack of alignment with Jonathan’s expressed motivation, which is ‘to give the impression that this is no ordinary play, even by Shakespeare’s standards.’

**Discussion and conclusions**

**Alignment of cases**

Here we compare experiential fields of the participants to determine whether they sufficiently explain the communicative alignment in each student-teacher case. Table 1 shows that each participant’s experiential field of knowledge, teaching and learning is internally related, although there is variation between individuals. Table 2 indicates significant inter-individual variation in participants’ understandings of the communicative episode. This is unsurprising given what we know from previous research in which such variation is linked to differences in participants’ conceptions. Mary’s conceptions are most similar to those of Jonathan. Her focus on the whole picture suggests a conception of learning as understanding (Marton, Dall’Alba & Beaty, 1993). David and Sara describe a more reproductive view of learning. David and Jonathan see learning, teaching and knowledge differently, with two exceptions, firstly that teaching in the Arts is about having ideas to evaluate and, secondly, that repetition is important for successful teaching and learning. Thus, Jonathan’s view that particular concepts should be taught in a variety of ways allows David partial access to his intended content. Sara and Jonathan seem to have the least similar experiential fields, which is mirrored in their understandings of the lecture event.

These descriptions of the inter-relation reinforce the separate literatures on learning and teaching cited previously. Jonathan’s conceptions and approaches influence his teaching, while the students’ conceptions and approaches influence how they interpret the lecturer. But the results tell us something more. Jonathan is a lecturer with a sophisticated set of conceptions, a structured view of knowledge, a well-developed awareness of the diversity of his student body, and he uses knowledge in highly complex ways to bring his students into relation with it. By a number of well-accepted criteria he could be considered a good teacher (Bond,
Madill, & Ross, 2006). Yet, his intended meanings are only partially inferred by these students.

**Focus of awareness**

These case studies suggest that differences in conceptions may not completely explain the variation in 'communicative alignment'. If this were so, David, like Sara, would be more likely to demonstrate poor alignment. Rather, the variation in alignment may be due to differences in conceptions plus more specific contextual differences that influence each participant’s focus of awareness (the aspects of the subject they believe are important). Furthermore, each participant’s focus of awareness appears to affect their interpretation of the other dimensions, such as the lecturer’s intention, motivation and actions and their own (re)actions. Mary and David appear to focus on aspects that are more in line with the lecturer’s intention than Sara, who is looking for ‘right and wrong answers’. However, they also come to different understandings from one another and the lecturer. For example, Mary’s focus on generic themes rather than the theme of revenge, together with her interest in Ophelia, reduces her awareness of Jonathan’s intention. David’s focus on the use of repetition provides him with access to Jonathan’s intention, but of some points at the expense of others; those emphasized in two or three different ways (something David discerns). David unduly centralises these aspects, as his description of social morality is not apparent in Jonathan’s description of his own intention.

So what is the role of the experiential field in a communicative event? All three cases provide a good illustration of how an individual’s focus of awareness grows out of their experience; beliefs about teaching, learning and knowledge provide the ground – the explanatory context, rather than a fore-grounded outcome as is argued in some research. Conceptions of knowledge, teaching and learning affect what is heard and communication can be more difficult between lecturers and students whose experience derives from differing ‘epistemological cultures’. But, depending on the particular aspects that are discerned in the content, different understandings may emerge, not only between students, but in a student-lecturer relationship.

**Future research**

This research indicates that while conceptions are a vital aspect of communicative alignment, other aspects also affect shared lecturer-student understanding. Indeed, students (and/or their lecturers) may hold similar conceptions and yet come to very different understandings. Access to the communicative relationship is not possible within teacher-only or student-only research frameworks. This study implies that students select the information around which they will build their 'picture' of what the lecturer is saying. So what influences their selection and can this be influenced by lecturers? Future research of the communicative alignment between students and lecturers may be facilitated by an inter-disciplinary approach. Duff (2003) suggested that communication theories from linguistics and psychology could inform research in higher education. One possible way to explore the teaching/learning relationship would be to explore higher education approaches from a socio-linguistics or pragmatics perspective. If beliefs about knowledge, teaching, learning and the subject were treated as part of the interpretive context of teaching-learning communication, it might
be possible to develop models that integrate the conceptual and communicative elements vital to higher education.

References


