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CONTRADICTIONS OF CONCERN TO BENCHMARKING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK DEGREE[1]

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BACKGROUND TO BENCHMARKING THE BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK

An extensive process in benchmarking the qualification for the South African Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) in accordance with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) was undertaken from 2001 to 2003 by a standards-generating body (SGB) for social work (Lombard, Grobbelaar & Pruis, 2003). The BSW was registered with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in 2003. By 2007 all social work educational institutions were required to implement the BSW. An essential part of the scrutiny is that Social Work departments at the universities as the training institutions offering the BSW play an active role in applying and monitoring its criteria on a continuous basis. The SA Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) initiated quality-assurance benchmarks for the BSW at the training institutions in 2011. The quality-assurance process is intended to be an interactive one, with the SACSSP dependent on the experience of educators and learners in monitoring criteria. In the light of the fact that the BSW is to be revised in 2012, it is important that a rich dialogue be generated at this stage to guide its formation.

The quality-assurance process for the BSW is based on documents completed in 2009 by the 17 universities offering the Social Work programme in South Africa, where the curriculum was evaluated in a self-assessment template according to 27 exit-level outcomes (ELOs). There are also associated categories which, together with the ELOs, form the criteria for the BSW. The self-assessment template separates learner and teacher-centred activities in an outcomes-based format consistent with the requirements of the NQF for the whole of education in South Africa (SAQA, 2001; SAQA, 2005). In a research project on teaching and learning in first-year Social Work commissioned by the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) in 2010, the self-assessment sections for first-year learning outcomes and the modules reflected by them were scrutinised in a documentary analysis as one part of the broader research project (Collins, 2011). The documentary analysis relates to teaching and learning relevant to a benchmarking process for the BSW.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY

The challenge of providing the best teaching and learning rests with the educators in students' first year, especially as there are indications that this is the most susceptible time for changes in learning style (Boughey, 2010; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). The first year at university typically show the highest rates of attrition (Council on Higher Education South Africa, 2009; Harvey *et al.*, 2006; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007; Scott, 2008). In South Africa, where an often inadequate schooling background is acknowledged (Bloch, 2009; Jansen, 2009; Taylor, 2003), particular attention has been paid to the first-year experience to the extent that a Southern African forum to address the subject was established in 2008 (1st Southern African Conference on the First-year Experience, 2008). Subsequent to the decisions taken at the forum, continued research, discussion and implementation for teaching and learning in the first year have taken

[1] The article is based on a research project commissioned by the Association of South African Social Work Educational Institutions (ASASWEI).

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place and have led to the establishment of standardised tests for university entrance which indicate areas for improvement (Council on Higher Education South Africa, 2009).

The review of the literature on teaching and learning paints an ideal picture. In this picture it is possible to engage students at the level of their own experience, whatever that level may be, and educators are empowered by a variety of methods to create situations of deep learning[2] in classrooms. A focus on transformation of teaching practice to align it with learning approaches in a learner-centred focus has been applied since the early 1990s (Sims, 2006; Skillen, Merten, Trivett & Percy, 1999; Wee, 2010) with congruence between what teachers intend and how they teach and assess (Biggs, 2003; Frankland, 2007). We know how influential assessment procedures are for learning (Entwistle, 2000; Frankland, 2007). Changes in our knowledge of teaching from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred focus, with the identification of deep and surface learning, have taken place since Freire's introduction as early as 1970 of the notion of conscientisation, which described how internalised oppression restricted the learning experience (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2007).

We have moved further along the road of teaching for diversity in justice – at an international level (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007) and at home in South Africa, where we are so conscious of our unjust past under apartheid education (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010; Bozalek & Smith, 2010; Hemson, 2007; Jansen, 2009; Leibowitz, Bozalek, Rohleder, Carolissen & Swartz, 2010). The blended format for teaching and learning is becoming more popular (Castle & McGuire, 2010; Vaughan & Garrison, 2007). A plethora of resources with information on teaching methods, assessments, scaffolding knowledge and critical reflection on teaching and learning is easily accessible to the modern academic. Sources go so far as to provide a hands-on guide to teaching and learning, with models for literacy training (Skillen *et al*., 1999), depth of learning (Smith & Colby, 2007), assessment (Frankland, 2007), teaching positions (Carnell, 2007), conceptual change (Brüssow, 2007), writing support (Murray, 2002) and for personal epistemological beliefs (Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley & Pearce, 2009). Gordon and Debus (2002) show in action research how to improve deep learning without major curriculum change. The body of knowledge on the topic extends even to a "scholarship of teaching and learning," as labelled by Ernest Boyer in 1990. Given the modern emphasis on the attainment of learning outcomes which we struggle to meet, questions arise on the small amount of evidence for teaching and learning wisdom in operation in classrooms. What has happened to all the new ideas? Put more baldly: Why are all these new ideas not working?

The literature explains the gap between theory and practice of teaching and learning in many ways, considering both contextual and individual perspectives on the issue. Unexpectedly perhaps, resistance to change theory is not proffered as an explanation. Unsurprisingly but nonetheless unhelpfully, a survey of 750 publications plus 200 institutional grey items concluded that no teaching model fits all situations (Harvey *et al.*, 2006). A dominant view is the expectation of outcome. Teacher effectiveness is inhibited by the culture of

[2] "Deep learning" is defined as making sense of ideas. It seeks constructivist integration between components of ideas as well as between tasks and new concepts. Knowledge can be related to one's own position in deep learning whereas "surface learning" involves only reproduction of the work of others. Surface learning creates boredom with and avoidance of the subject while deep learning leads to involvement and new ideas. The concept of deep learning is incorporated in other terms commonly in use in the discourse on education: androgogical, critical, experiential, holistic, reflective and transformational.

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"performativity", where outcome is set to standard and preferred ways of operating are not encouraged (Carnell, 2007). The inhibitions of a culture of performativity, or indeed of any prescriptive constraints, can be related to the premise that creativity requires a suspension of critical judgment allowing a sense of freedom to think differently, with sources as old as De Bono (1967).

The ELOs as an example of the culture of performativity for South African social work education, while not discounting their advantages, can also be argued as being restrictive to imaginative growth (Bozalek, 2009; Simpson, 2010). Another view on the shortcomings of teaching and learning theory refers to lack of institutional support. A survey of 29 higher education institutions found that quality teaching is not valued as much as research outputs; teaching evaluation is accepted in principle but not implemented; and that nothing can be achieved outside of the institutional culture (Hénard, 2010). Moreover, after institutional initiatives, the head of department must promote action in order for them to take place. Usually a plan is devised, technicians set it up but evaluation is not pursued (Hénard, 2010). A heavy teaching load for academics, accompanied by their studying for a higher degree, conducting research and writing for publication, as well as participating in courses on teaching and learning in higher education, is considered a most testing expectation by the institution for the academic (Council on Higher Education, 2010; Murray, 2002).

At the level of understanding the learning process, we recognise that teaching and learning styles are linked and that deep learning requires different kinds of assessment, yet we stabilise at the level of convenience with large classes hindering a complexity of teaching and learning approaches (Christensen Hughes & Mighty, 2010). Students themselves are not aware of their own learning processes and do not become so without input dedicated to this purpose (McGuire, 2006). In order to interrogate student knowledge, educators need to interrogate their own knowledge as a basis for interaction between teachers and learners, and this capacity is unlikely to be present without assistance, such as pedagogical experience (Jansen, 2009; Kjellgren, Hendry, Plos, Rydmark, Tobin & Saljo, 2008). Smith and Colby (2007) found that deep learning can take place, but mostly does not because teachers have to rethink their teaching in order to promote it. Reality indicates that coincidence rather than intention are at work.

The extent to which South African Social Work departments are complying with teaching and learning principles and the creativity which they can stimulate to enhance them, particularly in accordance with the BSW criteria, has yet to be researched. I attempted to do so in a research project which was commissioned by ASASWEI in recognition of the particular challenge of the first-year experience.

RESEARCH PROJECT ON FIRST-YEAR SOCIAL WORK TEACHING AND LEARNING[3]

The aim of the research was to identify the ways in which social work educators are developing deep learning in first-year students. The proposition set for the research supports a learner-centred approach, consistent with outcomes-based education.

The study adopted a collective case study approach (Creswell, 2009) for qualitative research involving multiple sites to explore and describe the practices and challenges related to teaching

[3] I wish to acknowledge colleagues who participated in the formulation of the original research proposal for the project: Dr Blanche Pretorius, Dr Patrick Smith and Prof Adrian van Breda.

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and learning in first-year Social Work modules. The "case" of the case study was thus the first-year Social Work modules taught at selected universities during the first semester. Patton (2002) confirms that the interest in case-study research is in a single case, but more than one unit of analysis can be included – in this research, five universities. Each case can be regarded as "layered" and "nested" within the overall primary case. Although the research was mainly qualitative, quantitative data were collected from policy documents and in describing university and departmental structures. The focus group (Babbie & Mouton, 2007; Collins, 1999; Greeff, 2002) was used as the tool for data collection from separated groups of lecturers and students. From a population of 17 universities in South Africa offering first-year Social Work courses, a purposive sample (Babbie & Mouton, 2007; Collins, 1999; Strydom & Delport, 2002) of five was selected to ensure a racially diverse group of students and geographical distribution of city size, rural and urban, and coastal and inland localities. The universities were: Western Cape, Nelson Mandela Metropole, KwaZulu-Natal, Witwatersrand and North-West (Mafikeng). Documentary analysis, thematic analysis and a complementary strategy of narrative construction (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) were applied for data presentation. Two data analysts worked independently to lend trustworthiness to the data-coding process (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). Cross-case analysis was carried out to identify the central issues of the cases (Babbie & Mouton, 2007). Standard university ethical considerations were applied, with the proviso in this research that, although participants were anonymous, universities were identified. For the documentary analysis, content analysis (Babbie & Mouton, 2007; Ezzy, 2002) was applied to the self-assessments for the BSW's first-year level which had been carried out by the universities for the SACSSP in 2009, including the related module outlines for 2010. The documentary analysis is presented below.

DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS OF SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORTS ON FIRST YEAR SOCIAL WORK

Given the template provided to all the educational institutions for the framework of their reports, it is not surprising that the same terminology and phrases arise repetitively in the documents. Graduate attributes are also developed with great similitude. As the SACSSP required institutions to link outcomes to purpose in "constructive alignment", there is a lot of reference to alignment of objectives, activities, assessments, outcomes and attributes. The structures under the template were assiduously completed.

According to their self-assessment reports submitted to, scrutinised and commented on by the SACSSP in 2009, all the universities are achieving the ELOs in the construction of their modules and, where they are not – for example, in knowledge and skills of management and supervision as a typical gap – this is the result of the absence of a relevant module. An "improvement plan" intends to redress the omission and provide such a module. Should the reports perform what they purport to do – in other words, if their contents are operationalized – universities can be considered very successful in the teaching and learning of social work. There is no section for the evaluation of implementation in the report, however. Therefore at this stage it remains a foundational teaching plan, but nonetheless one in which many academics invested time and thought to form a solid curriculum for social work.

Course/module outlines. Course outlines are presented to students as official university documents in the institutional domain, unlike the self-assessments, which remain the private

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property of their departments. Their compilers can be held institutionally accountable for their contents. The outlines thus make for a reasonably reliable source of what is taught to students.[4]

Contents include in various order: learning outcomes reflecting the compulsory criteria for the first year of the BSW; timetable with teaching and learning titles; prescribed reading from textual and electronic sources; methods of assessment; instructions for attendance in class and assignment submission; and accessibility of lecturer. Details of assignment content are often promised for a later date, but are alternatively included in the course outlines, in some cases with point-by-point references.

In **format** one university introduces the outline with the module descriptor including time allocations, and another gives time schedules for each section of work, but otherwise time management is not referred to in the outlines. Three universities present a table similar to the ones in the reports to the SACSSP, namely with columns related to each ELO for AAC, assessment method, teaching and learning activity and graduate attributes or cross-field outcomes. An ELO can have as many as five columns and a full page of rows. When a cross-field outcome only of a graduate attribute is presented, the last column reads as follows:

> *Students learn to become aware, to be sensitive and respectful, of diversity through the discussions in class and the exercises exploring their knowledge and understanding of people, cultures and values (their own and others').*

When a purpose in addition to the cross-field outcome of a graduate attribute is presented, the last column reads as follows:

> *Recognise the rights of all to participate in their own development and decision-making, and to be accountable for their own lives; Strive for social justice and work together to achieve the common goal of "a better life for all."*

Although both statements sound idealistic as decontextualised concepts, the first one anchors the student in an activity. The second format includes the activity under a previous column. Listing the AACs means that there can be up to 11 items in one section that the student is required to know. One university structures contextualised outcomes for every section of the course, whether lectures, self-study, activity or assessment, in disregard of the conventional ELOs. Another, written in great detail, uses different words for ELOs. The level of **language** of the outlines differs greatly between universities, between course outlines at the same university and within a course outline. Compare the elevated level of:

> *Assessment is a complex, ongoing, mutual process between client system and helper and is intertwined with the exploration phase. Exploration always produces data about client systems, their environments and the interaction between the two. Data need to be put together in some logical and coherent order to discover the true nature of the problem or concern facing the client system.*

with the related assignment task to:

> *Name four feelings that clients could experience during termination and explain why they would feel this way.*

[4] The reliability of course outlines was explored in the focus groups, but the issue is not included in this article.

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Action verbs for the "demonstration" of knowledge, skills and values required by the BSW qualification and outcomes-based education are used inconsistently in the outlines, with "Understanding" appearing frequently instead of the suggested "Define," "Identify," "Explain," and "Describe." Only one university gives a definition of terms including action verbs. Titles of the modules differ between the universities, as does content, whether listed as AACs or as objectives.

Learning activities include reading, discussion (in pairs and bigger groups), buzzing, debates, summarising, observing audio-visual material, role playing, reflexive exercises, games and presentations including PowerPoint. Instructions vary from reference to a generic resource to word-for-word pointers with page numbers of material as references.

There is typically one formative (labelled a test) and one summative (labelled an examination) **assessment** per term/semester, in the different methods of individual oral presentation, group oral and poster presentation, class quiz, reflexive exercise, multiple choice, short and long essay, also some written self-assessments for students. The standard and range required for the assessments differ between universities. An example of a formative assessment at one university is:

> *Drawing on the emancipatory theories of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and Antonio Gramsci write an essay of no more than 750 words on the importance of beginning with the self when pursuing a human service profession. Pay particular attention to how your "race", class, gender, sexual orientation [disability if appropriate] might have been sources of oppression and/or privilege in your own life. How have these social criteria served to facilitate or block access to status and resources in your life?*

At another university a formative assignment under the same ELO and for the same number of credits is:

> *Read through the case study several times.*
>
> *Explain the context of the case study (What is it about).*
>
> *How prevalent do you think this issue is within the SA context?*
>
> *What do you think society thinks about the situation? Define and explain the values of X in the case study. Explain the elements of diversity that you think is applicable. What do you think are the values and principles underlying those who may be against X's feelings and sentiments? (cont.)*

The topic for the formative assessment is often a case study. Most commonly used for formative assessment are group presentations and multiple-choice assignments, and also self- and peer assessments not marked by the lecturer, which clearly reflect attempts to manage large class numbers. One university requires four self-study assignments to be submitted for a "duly performed" mark only. Most commonly used for summative assessments are essays. Mark distribution for the assessments differs widely between universities, with formative assessment counting from 10-50%. At some universities the module "Introduction to professional communication," is taught to an interdisciplinary student population, making for even larger class numbers than the already over-quota numbers. Most universities use a mark schedule in the form of a rubric for the written assignments. One university uses a checklist for assessing knowledge and skills in the oral presentations. Feedback on assessments is presented as a separate topic by one university. The amount of teaching material contained in the course outlines in preparation for assessment varies greatly and in some cases the outline is more

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correctly called "a study guide." Length varies from 8 pages to 44 (this one includes the full first-year course). Field instruction requirements range from direct work with individuals in the community through simulated role-played situations down to observation.

All the outlines contain a central message like the following:

> *It is expected of students to take responsibility for their own learning. Self-study and independent reading are an essential part of your training and development as a future professional. You are also expected to check the notice board for any changes in timetabling. Any departure from rules for class attendance and submission of work must be accompanied by a medical certificate.*

And even:

> *If the venue is full the doors will be closed. All other students to attend the duplicate lecture (in the evening).*

Only one university includes a section on "How to study."

Based on the documentary analysis, the complementary data analysis strategy of narrative construction, as described by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), follows. I have used a complementary strategy for data analysis in a representation of a story which is told by a combination of the five sets of documents This goes beyond thematic analysis of categorising data to provide a narrative consisting of my own account of the message given by the documents. The complementary strategy of the narrative involves choice in my interpretation of data. I am hereby openly reflexive, consciously using my empathy and self-awareness.

Narrative construction: *On reading the course outlines and identifying with students, I shall know what is expected of me and will feel interested in the topics listed, given that I have registered for social work as my course of choice. I will also be encouraged by the amount of detail provided and warmed by the expression of support that is conveyed in the outline. The graduate attributes feel rather remote but I will assume that the lecturers have realistic objectives for the profession and that they will get me there in the end. If my preferred learning style is an individual one, I shall feel frustrated by all the group work that confronts me, especially with mark allocation for the group and by the group. As an academic, I find the scope of work very ambitious simply in terms of its amount. The abstract nature of graduate attributes puzzles me. How can the lecturers even get through to the end let alone speak to these outcomes? I ask. It is difficult to equate the grand language of the ELOs with the basic nature of activities and assignments. I assume that lecturers feel compelled to satisfy SACSSP criteria while doubting student ability to do so. My reservation with the many assessments of group work presentations and multiple choice assignments,* ***notwithstanding student numbers prohibiting individual marking****, and the extensive assignment and exam preparation by lecturers,* ***notwithstanding the pressure of throughput****, is that one is neither assessing nor promoting cognitive independence in students by these means. I conclude that lecturers are faced with taxing dilemmas between classroom demands and ELO requirements.*

EVALUATION OF THE DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

Turning to the research question: *In which ways are educators of social work developing deep learning in first-year students?*, I shall answer with reference to each of the indicators of deep learning identified by Biggs (2003).

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Provision of a motivational context where students select and plan activities. *Yes, in field work settings of problems (simulated or real) where alternative responses are required, in allocation of duties for group work, in presentations of work to the class.*

Learner activity – learning by doing, building on learning and making connections. *Yes to activity, in role plays, presentation of work, case studies build on learning; no evidence of making connections theoretically.*

Interaction with others – discussions, testing own views and hearing others. *Yes, with pairs, small groups and full class discussion, debates, observation of role plays, but conditional on sincere and full student participation.*

A well-structured knowledge base – building on existing knowledge and experience. *Potentially yes with case studies, student examples, discussions and presentations of work, provided that the knowledge base is identified*.

Self-monitoring through reflection. *Yes, in reflexive activities, role plays, case studies, discussions and questions in written assignments.*

Development of meta-cognitive skills. *No evidence of this.*

Variety of experiences. *Yes, with theory and practice exercises and many different kinds of activities and assessments.*

Feasible workload. *Yes, conditional on appropriate time management by students.*

Application of feedback. *With the exception of one university (with an extremely detailed course outline), there is no reference to application of feedback in the documents and formative assignments are not structured to promote this sequentially.*

The analysis shows us that the indicators for deep learning are attended to in the course requirements as documented in the course outlines. Course outlines are structured to oblige students to think about their learning material, identify values, become self-aware, draw comparisons, choose options and come to conclusions about values in ways synonymous with deep learning. However, a second stage of monitoring is required to ascertain that these steps have been performed to a level where students feel involved and develop new ideas in order for us to state that deep learning has been achieved (Bryan & Clegg, 2006; Butcher, Davies & Highton, 2006; Frankland, 2007; Fry *et al.*; Wee, 2010). Lecturer intervention takes place at this stage and only lecturers themselves and possibly external examiners will be able to observe it. Where we can see shortcoming in the course outlines is in relating observations to theory and in connecting concepts, and there is also no evidence of a transferral of knowledge from one situation to another, an essential component for evidence of learning.

In the theoretical evaluation of the application of teaching and learning approaches, the assessments with their related activities incorporate all three main approaches – social constructivist[5] in class discussions, debates and group work, cognitive[6] in multiple choice and

[5] Characterised by teacher-centred instructive information, knowledge constructed in the context of the environment in which it is encountered and is socially mediated; typical authors are Vygotsky (1978) and Wenger (1998).
[6] Knowledge is definable and universal reflected by inner mental state. typical authors are Kolb (1984) and Bloom (1956).

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essay questions, and behaviourist[7] in the activities of role plays and class presentations, also in written assessments, provided that feedback is given from which students can learn. There is no attempt to relate to the individual learning style of the student; because the emphasis is on group participation in the classroom, there is no choice of assignment and marks are frequently allocated to group work. A cognitive-constructivist teaching and learning approach,[8] which promotes an individual focus with opportunities for reflection and ownership of the task, is thus absent.

THE WAY FORWARD WITH BSW MONITORING

We (ASASWEI) have to acknowledge, and many social work academics have said as much, that the value of the self-assessment reports for the BSW can only be ascertained in the implementation of what they claim to achieve. Quality-assurance audits by the SACSSP, starting in 2011, are to carry out this formidable task. Lecturers themselves can indeed be expected to implement and monitor the implementation of their own carefully laid intentions in the normal course of teaching and learning, and to adapt them to more suitable options in a continuous way. But they must be formally required to carry out this monitoring, otherwise workload will prevent devoting attention to yet another task. For the qualification with its multifaceted criteria and learning environments of both academia and field to be successfully implemented, the role players will have to be receptive to modifying ideas from all quarters – the SACSSP, academics, the field and students.

As reflected by the course outlines, structure, content and standard fly in the face of benchmarked criteria as prescribed for the BSW. Even at our present advanced stage of departmental self-assessment with one template for all and active monitoring and auditing by the SACSSP, it seems that uniformity is not playing its anticipated role in the teaching and learning of social work. If the courses are as incommensurate as they appear, not only will the carefully scrutinised graduate attributes differ between universities, but also in the process of undergraduate study students cannot transfer smoothly from one South African university to another. This is certainly not the appropriate situation for a criterion-referenced qualification.

Discussions around the BSW will have to take its unequal foundations into account. It is timeous to do so, not only with the SACSSP's current audit of individual Social Work departments, but also because we are faced with a revision of the BSW in 2012. Lecturers themselves are concerned about accountability to its criteria, especially the high number of 27 ELOs, not counting the associated criteria. Universities, both inter- and intra-departmentally, differ in their commitment to outcomes-based strategies, while remaining statutorily beholden to SACSSP frameworks. The Minister of Social Development, Bathobele Dlamini, has openly demanded changes to the profession in practice by initiating community outreach, post creation and veteran engagement. Qualifications in community development as an emerging profession pose arguments about terrains of responsibility and authority for social work as the established profession, both programmes having the same aims of social upliftment and often the same clients. As supervisors and as recipients of the newly qualified social worker, practitioners in the field question the relevance of university training to the realities of the social world. All these influences set the stage for tensions in curriculum development. Tensions are just what we need as motivators for our thinking about, and for our inputs into, a revised qualification.

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[7] Learning takes place with activity and knowledge is observable behaviour. typical authors are Skinner (1948) and Thorndike (1978).

[8] Typified by Piaget, who wrote of assimilation and accommodation in learning.

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