

## Learning & Teaching Update

### Redesigning the SCD Curriculum

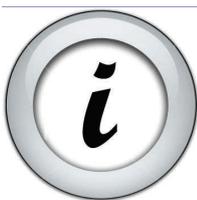
This newsletter addresses some important issues in designing the SCD curriculum. I argue that the current SCD curriculum provides a solid foundation for the development of the new curriculum that will emerge from the curriculum consolidation. We already engage with some positive features of curriculum design and we need to make maximum use of these positive features.



However, I also argue that there is scope for some creative enhancement. I identify five initiatives that have the potential to significantly enhance our curriculum. I hope that this newsletter will, at least, provide an increased understanding of the way the current SCD curriculum has been designed. However, I hope that the newsletter might achieve much more. I hope that the following five initiatives will provoke discussion about the kind of curriculum we seek for the future. I also hope that these initiatives and the principles that lie behind them might inform curriculum design processes of the groups working on curriculum consolidation and curriculum re-design.

My proposed initiatives are:

1. A clear differentiation between 100, 200, and 300 level units where 100-level units are foundational and limited in number, 200-level units are intermediate, and 300-level units are specialised.
2. The development of graduate units that are differentiated over two levels that nevertheless meet the needs and demands of both Arts students and Theology students.
3. Threshold concepts that are clearly identified and positioned within the curriculum at the appropriate levels.
4. The principles embedded in the Orange group matrix [see Table 1] be implemented by all sub-disciplines and that they use one or more of the approaches to design and position units.
5. Widen our definition of values to include values as dispositions to act on certain beliefs and incorporating values as the basis for ethical action.



**Sep 20 All teachers:** Copy of course unit handouts for Semester 2 to be posted on SCD Google Docs site or emailed to Neil Holm

**September 21** Supervising Teachers to submit supervision logs for Associate Teachers

**Oct 1-3** [Biennial Conference](#) in Philosophy, Religion & Culture CIS Creation, Nature & Built Environment

**Oct 5** BTh (Korean Medium) commences at Emmaus College. This is an initiative of the whole SCD and is not attached to any particular MI.

**Oct 6** Wed Moderation of Christian Practice

**Oct 25** Monday 10-4 Booth College: Professional Devel Day – Learning & Teaching—all welcome

## SCD Curriculum: How Many Levels?

Why do we organise our curriculum nine different levels?

- 100 introductory
- 200 & 300 advanced
- 400-500 graduate
- 600-700 masters
- 800-900 doctoral

This is an important question as we consolidate our curriculum and as we move towards reaccreditation.

We are not alone. [Monash University](#), for instance, has six comparable levels:

1. First year level in undergraduate program
2. Second year level in undergraduate program
3. Third year level in undergraduate program
4. Fourth year level in undergraduate program, honours, postgraduate diploma or certificate or Masters
5. Fifth year level in masters degree program (i.e.: Masters degree program requires a specialisation of 24 credit points at 5th year level).
6. Doctoral degree program

Unlike Monash, although we have many levels, we do not refer to 1st year, 2nd year, or 3rd year units. We have two basic categories: [Foundational or Advanced](#).



**Foundational units** are required for further study in a sub-discipline as appropriate to the outcomes of the award and are essential for a major or specialisation. There are only a limited number of foundational units in a sub-discipline. They are numbered as 100 and occasionally 200 level in Bachelor programs and 400 level in postgraduate programs. In some sub-disciplines, the set of foundational units will include a methodology unit.

**Advanced units** develop the study of the sub-discipline beyond the foundational level as appropriate to the outcomes of the award. In undergraduate programs, they are numbered as 200 and 300 level units, or 500, 600 and 700 level units in postgraduate programs. The most advanced units, at 600 and 700 levels, involve specialized research in a sub-discipline.

I make comparisons with Monash simply because it has published relevant information on [unit sequences](#) and it has some interesting differences.

***Should the SCD curriculum make provision for students who have completed Year 12 Studies of Religion or equivalent?***

Like the SCD, Monash units at level one typically comprise **foundation studies** in a limited number of broad areas. However, the foundation units are often taught as a pair of linked units normally required for progression to level-two studies. In other words, there is a planned

sequence of level-one units. Another important difference is that there may be two types of level-one units: those that assume a background in the same area from previous year-12 or other studies; and those that require no previous studies in the area. Students without previous preparation should normally be able to complete a major sequence but it may be necessary to complete additional level-one studies to achieve that objective. This is a significant point of difference for the SCD. We make no provision for previous year-12 studies. To what extent do any of our foundational units offer any extension for students who have

completed Studies of Religion at Year 12?

At Monash, units at level two typically comprise either:

- **introductory specialist studies** in more specialised areas across a broader range. They build upon the foundation studies at level one and typically form a self-contained minor sequence that provides a suitable foundation for progression to more advanced studies; or
- **intermediate foundation studies** across a range of related specialised areas of study.

A level-two unit will often have a prerequisite of at least one level-one unit, and normally most will have a prerequisite of a two unit level-one sequence. Even where a level-two unit does not require an understanding of any specific prerequisite material, the unit normally requires the completion of at least two units at level one.

Monash units at level three typically comprise either:

- **advanced specialist studies** in each specialised area that form part of a major sequence, with each unit building upon the foundations established as part of the minor sequence; or
- **advanced foundation studies** across a range of related specialised areas of study.

As we have wrestled with the SCD [curriculum consolidation](#) process, there seems to have been an unconscious move towards greater differentiation at the 200 level than we've seen previously. In Biblical Studies, the proposed 100-level units are survey or overview studies, the 200-level units deal with clusters of books eg Pentateuch, Pauline Literature, while the proposed 300-level units deal with more specialised studies in individual books eg Genesis, Romans.

In Theology, two types of introductory unit have been proposed. **Type 1 units** are methodological, big picture, nature of theological task, and presuppositions about theology. **Type 2 units** are a survey of major doctrines. At the 200 level, the units become more like the Monash level two introductory specialist units that introduce more specialised studies : God and Revelation; Christ and Salvation; Spirit and Church. Within this structure, some MIs might choose to offer both Type 1 and Type 2 introductory units that then lead into Christ and Salvation and Church and Spirit. Other MIs might choose to use one Type 1 introductory unit which would then be followed by all three 200 level units. The proposed 300 level units are more specialised and more numerous eg The Eucharist; The Trinity; Grace; Christian Anthropology.

The consolidation groups have begun examining the graduate levels we need. Some members hope that our current four levels might be reduced to two like the Monash model.

## SCD Curriculum: A Student Learning Perspective?

So far, we have been thinking mainly about the content of the units rather than student learning. What difference does it make if we approach curriculum design from a student learning perspective?



One interesting idea is [threshold concept](#).

There is a growing body of research which suggests that within every discipline or subject there are some ideas that are key to students getting it. They are different for each discipline. They are not the whole story, but they are necessary. If these ideas have not been understood, the student will never get it.

According to Erik Meyer and Ray Land, the principal researchers in the field, understanding one of these ideas is like opening a door, revealing all kinds of other aspects of the subject that have been hidden, and showing how they slot into place. They call these ideas "threshold concepts".

In **Biblical Studies** the idea that that this discipline goes beyond received knowledge might be an example of a threshold concept. Beginning Biblical Studies students may have a strong attachment to received knowledge: they see Biblical knowledge as stemming from divine or external authority but not as something that they or others might create on their own (cf [Women's Ways of Knowing](#), p. 15). Until students cross this threshold in understanding, they struggle to critically engage with Biblical texts and Biblical theorists. If this is the case, how do we design a Biblical Studies curriculum that helps student cross this threshold? Threshold concepts alter the way in which we think about a subject. Some might be obvious – sometimes too obvious for experienced practitioners to recognise. Some threshold concepts are not so obvious (see [hot tea](#) example). What threshold concepts apply within the BTh curriculum? And how do we use them to design the curriculum?

***What threshold concepts apply within the BTh curriculum? Name some threshold concepts in your teaching area.***

This whole question of levels of units has received little attention in the literature but some of the best work has come from Morgan and his colleagues at the Orange campus of the University of Sydney. In several papers, they grapple with issues related to determining the level of units. In [An Educational Rationale for Determining the Level of Undergraduate Units](#), they develop a useful matrix [**see Table 1**] with six strategies for determining the three levels of an undergraduate degree. One of these strategies applies levels of thinking skills to each of the unit levels:



1. Students are largely accepting of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they encounter.
2. Students begin to challenge the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they previously accepted without query.
3. Students think critically about all they encounter and demonstrate an ability to seek creative responses across disciplines.

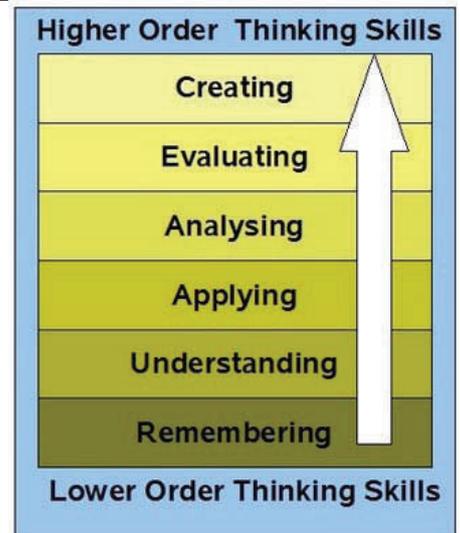
According to this approach, students move through the stage of accepting knowledge in level one and make a smooth transition to level two where they begin to challenge the received knowledge. This curriculum is designed to assist students to acquire the threshold concept during their level two studies.

**Table 1: Matrix for determining the level of units**

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
	<b>Quality of learning experienced increases →</b>		
<b>A. Learning Dependency</b>	Largely reliant on lecturers to tell them what, when and how to successfully complete their studies.	At a transitional stage. Still reliant on occasional assistance from lecturers but increasingly capable of acting on their own initiative.	Students are largely independent/interdependent learners confident in their own abilities to achieve. Lecturer fulfills a facilitator/mentor role.
<b>B. Thinking Skills</b>	Students are largely accepting of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they encounter.	Students begin to challenge the knowledge, skills and attitudes they previously accepted without query.	Students think critically about all they encounter and demonstrate an ability to seek creative responses across disciplines.
<b>C. Marton &amp; Säljö's Surface / Deep Approaches to Learning</b>	Students focus on what has to be done and concentrate only on parts of a problem rather than seeing the problem in its entirety (atomistic).	Students are able to construct more meaning. They have moved past mere facts to see the meaning/ interpretation behind the facts.	Students are able to extract the deeper meaning and purpose of a task and see the 'big picture' (holistic).
<b>D. Stephenson's Capability Levels.</b>	Students are able to handle problems they are familiar with in contexts they are familiar with.	Students are able to handle unfamiliar problems in familiar contexts or familiar problems in unfamiliar contexts.	Students are able to cope with new problems in new contexts.
<b>E. Jonassen et al's Constructivist Approach</b>	Learning situations are well structured. This is a time of initial, introductory knowledge acquisition.	Learning situations are less structured. A time of more advanced knowledge acquisition.	Students demonstrate a level of expertise that enables them to solve complex problems.
<b>F. Bloom et al's Taxonomy</b>	Students are mostly required to comprehend new knowledge and be able to describe and explain it.	Students are capable of analysing a problem into its component parts. They are also able to apply theoretical models to a number of situations.	Students demonstrate an ability to evaluate, synthesise, and design original ways to solve problems.

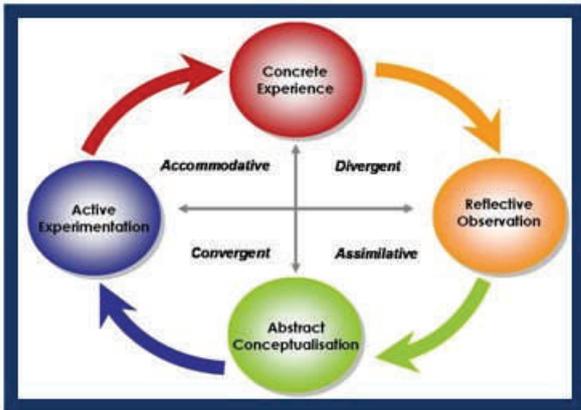
The other strategies outlined in the matrix involve students moving

- from being dependent learners to independent/interdependent learners; moving from surface learning to deep learning (Marton and Säljö);
- from coping with familiar problems in familiar contexts to solving unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar contexts (Stephenson);
- through well structured learning situations to learning in unstructured situations (Jonassen et al);
- from comprehension and description, through analysing and applying, to eventually evaluating, synthesising, and designing original ways to solve problems (Bloom's taxonomy).



### Determining the Position of Units

In their [2004 paper](#), the Orange group address positioning a unit at a particular level within a program. They suggests that curriculum designers determine the level at which they want students to **engage** as learners with a particular **aspect of the discipline**. They must take account of both the discipline and how the learner engages with the knowledge area in order to construct personal meaning (p. 295). They must take account of at least three disciplinary features:



1. the concepts and ideas that form the models or theories that constitute the knowledge that is central to the discipline.
2. the tools used in the discipline to apply and test the models and theories.
3. the contexts in which the concepts, models, theories, and tools are applied and tested.

The current SCD curriculum takes these discipline-related features into account. Each unit is written with **five outcomes**: two Knowledge outcomes, two Skills outcomes,

and one Values outcome. The Knowledge outcomes relate to the first feature, the models and theories central to the discipline. The Skills outcomes relate to the tools discussed in the second feature. The Values outcomes have the potential to relate to the third feature: the contexts in which the other features are applied and tested. However, in their current form the SCD Values outcomes do not fully realise this potential. In the SCD policy they are described in terms of **appreciation** of the knowledge and skills gained in the unit. However, the concept of value has a wider meaning that will allow these outcomes to achieve their potential. Let me take a moment to develop this idea.

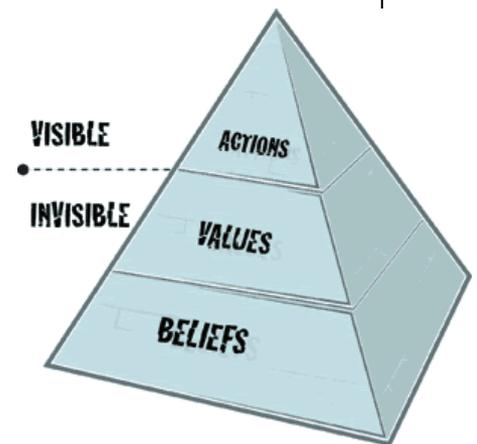
Values may be described as

'dispositions to act on certain beliefs'. They are beliefs that we choose to live by. . . . [They] are the priorities individuals and societies attach to certain beliefs, experiences and objects in deciding how they shall live and what they shall treasure. ([Hill](#), pp. 62, 63)

Values are the basis for ethical action. Personal and societal values are an important part of the context in which models and tools are applied. The Values outcome allows students to consider whether the concepts, models, tools, and skills developed in the unit are consistent with their own beliefs and whether they can justify the beliefs that they hold. To follow through the received

knowledge example in Biblical Studies, the Values outcome would suggest that students would have the opportunity to

- comprehend the theories, models and skills associated with higher criticism
- consider how the knowledge and skills relate to their existing beliefs,
- decide whether these beliefs may be justified or whether they need revision,
- determine the basis on which they will engage in future ethical action, and
- decide how they will negotiate value agreements with other people.



When this ethical dimension is included, we engage with some important principles that relate to the application and testing of models and tools in various contexts. To put it another way, the Values outcome allows us to consider the basis for ethical action in relationship to the knowledge and skills that form part of the unit. This re-orientation of Values outcomes is a significant change but if we can get general agreement then it has the potential to align our curriculum process much more closely with that proposed by the Orange group.

***Do you think it will make an appreciable difference to the way we write our Values outcomes if we adopt this interpretation of values?***

The three discipline-related features cannot be separated from the ways in which the learner engages with the knowledge area in order to construct personal meaning. Taking account of the learner means taking account of how and to what degree the learners are expected to engage with the discipline and construct meaning for themselves. To some extent the current SCD curriculum attempts to take learner engagement into account. As the student moves through the program we seek a deepening and broadening of their knowledge base -- students

who have completed a 300-level unit should display knowledge outcomes of greater depth and/or breadth than those who have completed a 100 level unit. Likewise they should display more critical, precise, decisive, and accurate skills and a concomitant growth in the values domain.

However, the SCD curriculum does not provide any guidance on the manner in which it is possible to assist students to move to greater depth and breadth or to more precise and accurate deployment of skills. **How do we create opportunities for students to engage** in a way that creates meaning for themselves? These nature of these opportunities may need to be different in the various sub-disciplines. It would be an interesting exercise to see if all sub-disciplines could use one or more of the approaches outlined in the Orange group matrix. This might mean that we are all working off the same page while still allowing for flexibility between sub-disciplines.

One more issue relevant to determining the level of units requires examination. According to Morgan et al (2004), there has been a trend towards more **flexible curriculum structures** to enable greater choice for students and this has been achieved by the removal of many prerequisite requirements. This permits students to make unwise choices that may result in them being ill prepared for the intellectual demands imposed by units for which they have not mastered the relevant threshold concepts. While students may still pass these units and acquire a wide range of theological knowledge, skills, and values, they may not end up with the capacity to "think and act like a theologian" and this may mean that the SCD does not realise its mission of equipping people for effective professional and lay ministry in a rapidly changing

***How do we get the right balance between flexibility (choose what you like!) and rigidity imposed by prerequisites? How do we help students to think and act like a theologian?***

environment. The ways in which the 100, 200, and 300 level units are being developed in the curriculum consolidation process seems to have the potential to appropriately sequence the threshold concepts. However, it is worth giving some more thought to the needs of students who enter the program after a solid year twelve or other extensive grounding relevant to theological education. The proposed curriculum in Theology may suggest one way forward. These well-prepared students may benefit by taking the Type 1 methodological 100 level unit rather than the survey unit and then move on to the wider range of 200 level units.

### Some summative questions:

- Have I addressed some important issues in designing the SCD curriculum?
- Has this newsletter provided an increased understanding of the way the current SCD curriculum has been designed?
- Have I gone far enough to provoke discussion about the kind of curriculum we seek for the future?
- Will the initiatives outlined below and the principles that lie behind them inform curriculum design processes of the groups working on curriculum consolidation and curriculum re-design?
- Which of the initiatives do you disagree with? Why?

### The initiatives:

1. A clear differentiation between 100, 200, and 300 level units where 100-level units are foundational and limited in number, 200-level units are intermediate, and 300-level units are specialised.
2. The development of graduate units that are differentiated over two levels that nevertheless meet the needs and demands of both Arts students and Theology students.
3. Threshold concepts that are clearly identified and positioned within the curriculum at the appropriate levels.
4. The principles embedded in the Orange group matrix be implemented by all sub-disciplines and that one or more of the approaches in the matrix be used to design and position units.
5. Widen our definition of values to include values as dispositions to act on certain beliefs and incorporating values as the basis for ethical action.

### Your response:

This newsletter will be posted on the [Coursework Sandpit](#)

At the bottom of that page is a discussion site. I think that everyone involved in the curriculum consolidation would appreciate hearing your ideas on the issues I have raised.

Neil Holm

