Does it spark joy? Streamlining units for Block Teaching

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Abstract

COVID-19 directly affected higher education (HE), requiring rapid curriculum redevelopment and adapting delivery in order to accommodate government guidance such as social distancing measures. One such change was a shift from a traditional model (containing units that spanned a 12-week term or full academic year) to the adoption of a block teaching model (containing condensed, 6-week, consecutively delivered units). Inspired by Marie Kondo's concept of 'sparking joy', this work is a practical guide to streamlining units for block teaching. Using a case study from an undergraduate Psychology programme in a north-west university in the United Kingdom (UK), a three-phase process is outlined: Groundwork, Redesign and Landscaping. The vision is to create a pedagogically sound, constructively aligned scheme of work.

Key Words

Constructive alignment; programme design; pedagogy; higher education; curriculum drift; curriculum theory; learning outcomes;

Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 and initial responses of higher education (HE) institutions around the world have already started to be documented and evaluated (e.g. Crawford, 2020; Ahlburg, 2020; Burki, 2020). What was required following social-distancing measures and lack of access to campuses included rapid curriculum redevelopment and 'shifting to online delivery of teaching' (Crawford et al., 2020: 18). An example of this shift is provided here, documenting and operationalising a process undertaken to streamline learning ready for block teaching. To understand the rationale for curriculum redevelopment and content streamlining, it is important to distinguish block teaching from traditional programme delivery models in HE.

Block teaching, also referred to as modular teaching, describes a model of learning whereby students undertake units (also referred to as modules) of study consecutively, completing each unit in turn (or a maximum of two per 'block') throughout the academic year. This contrasts with the more traditional model of learning which sees students study several units concurrently, completing multiple units at the same time. Block teaching splits the academic year into 6-8 week 'blocks', whereas traditional models deliver units in 'terms' (approximately 12 weeks), or across the academic year, spanning autumn, spring and summer terms (approximately 24 weeks). Nerantzi and Chatzidamianos (2020: 483) identify block teaching as 'one of the formats commonly used for curriculum delivery at the institutional level' and provide a detailed account of navigating the move to block teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of higher education in the United Kingdom (UK).

Moving to block teaching requires current unit content to be reviewed and subsequently redesigned and redeveloped in order to be fit for purpose. 'Dumping' 12-24 weeks of unit materials onto a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment, such as Moodle or Blackboard) and attempting to cover all of this in the new 6-8 week blocks seemed unrealistic and inappropriate. The

streamlining process outlined here was an attempt to take a pedagogically-considered, systematic approach to programme redesign. Thus, the vision for this paper is to provide instructions, akin to a 'how-to' guide for staff to streamline traditional, on-campus, 24 week units into block-taught, online, 6 week units.

The inspiration for this was the KonMari Method (Kondo, 2011), specifically Marie Kondo's well-known quest for 'sparking joy'. The idea was to apply this concept to units and teaching materials, encouraging staff to *"Keep only those things that speak to the heart, and discard items that no longer spark joy. Thank them for their service - then let them go"* (Kondo: online). Whilst Marie Kondo's work is in mainstream popular culture, there is a growing body of literature on the use of multi-media and popular culture as an educational tool, (e.g. Clapton, 2015; Yu & Campbell, 2021; Yu et al., 2022), with university staff reporting its use as important to teaching and for enhancing outcomes such as critical thinking (Peacock et al., 2018). Pairing a popular culture reference (Marie Kondo) with a pedagogical concept (constructive alignment) is an attempt to make the content relatable and understandable whilst 'still upholding high intellectual standards' (Peacock et al., 2018: 602). The streamlining process is broken down into three phases:

> Phase 1: Groundwork
>
> Phase 2: Redesign
>
> Phase 3: Landscaping

A case study is presented to demonstrate each phase in turn. The case is a 24-week Coaching Psychology unit from a Psychology programme in a UK university.

In preparation for commencing the streamlining process, staff need to locate the unit specification (concise and detailed description of the unit, including learning outcomes and assessment details) and existing scheme of work (unit

guide which outlines the structure, content and materials; organised into a weekly plan).

Phase 1: Groundwork

The purpose of Phase 1: Groundwork is to review the existing unit and undertake basic tidying. This involves an evaluation and synthesis of current provisions. There are two tasks: Prune and Theme. The tool required for this phase is the existing scheme of work.

1a. Prune

Pruning refers to the initial paring down of lecture weeks. For this task highlight and remove any weeks that are an obvious 'luxury'. For example, assignment weeks and revision weeks. Pruning is shown in the highlighting of four weeks in Table 1 (weeks 6, 12, 18 and 24). This first step reduces the unit from 24 to 20 weeks.

Table 1. Prune (Identification and removal of 'luxury' weeks from the scheme of work)					
Wk	**Lecture/Topic**	**Wk**	**Lecture/Topic**	**Wk**	**Lecture/Topic**
1	Introduction	9	Mental toughness coaching	17	Problem Solving
2	Motivation skills and techniques	10	Mental toughness coaching 2	18	Assignment Week 2
3	Coaching models	11	Psychometrics in coaching	19	Research Evidence
4	Running a coaching session	12	Reflective logs	20	Performing Arts Coaching
5	Issues and challenges in coaching	13	Coaching in sport	21	Real World Coaching 1

6	Assignment Week 1	14	Emotional Intelligence	22	Real world coaching 2
7	Leadership coaching	15	Workplace Coaching	23	Real world coaching 3
8	Coaching in Education	16	Coaching & Neuroscience	24	Revision Week

1b. Theme

Theming (see Figure 1) refers to condensing down of unit content through categorisation. This task requires clustering of common/related topics by highlighting similar weeks. This could be colour-coded by hand or by computer. A tip here is to remove the week numbers, which can be distracting or misleading at this stage. In the case study, the 20 weeks were categorised into three themes: Coaching Skills (How to), Theory/Research (What/Why?), and Coaching Contexts (Who/Where?). The product of phase one is a new theme table.

Before (Pruned Scheme of Work)
Introduction
Motivation skills and techniques
Coaching models
Running a coaching session
Issues/challenges in coaching
Leadership coaching
Coaching in Education
Mental toughness coaching
Mental toughness coaching 2
Psychometrics in coaching
Coaching in sport

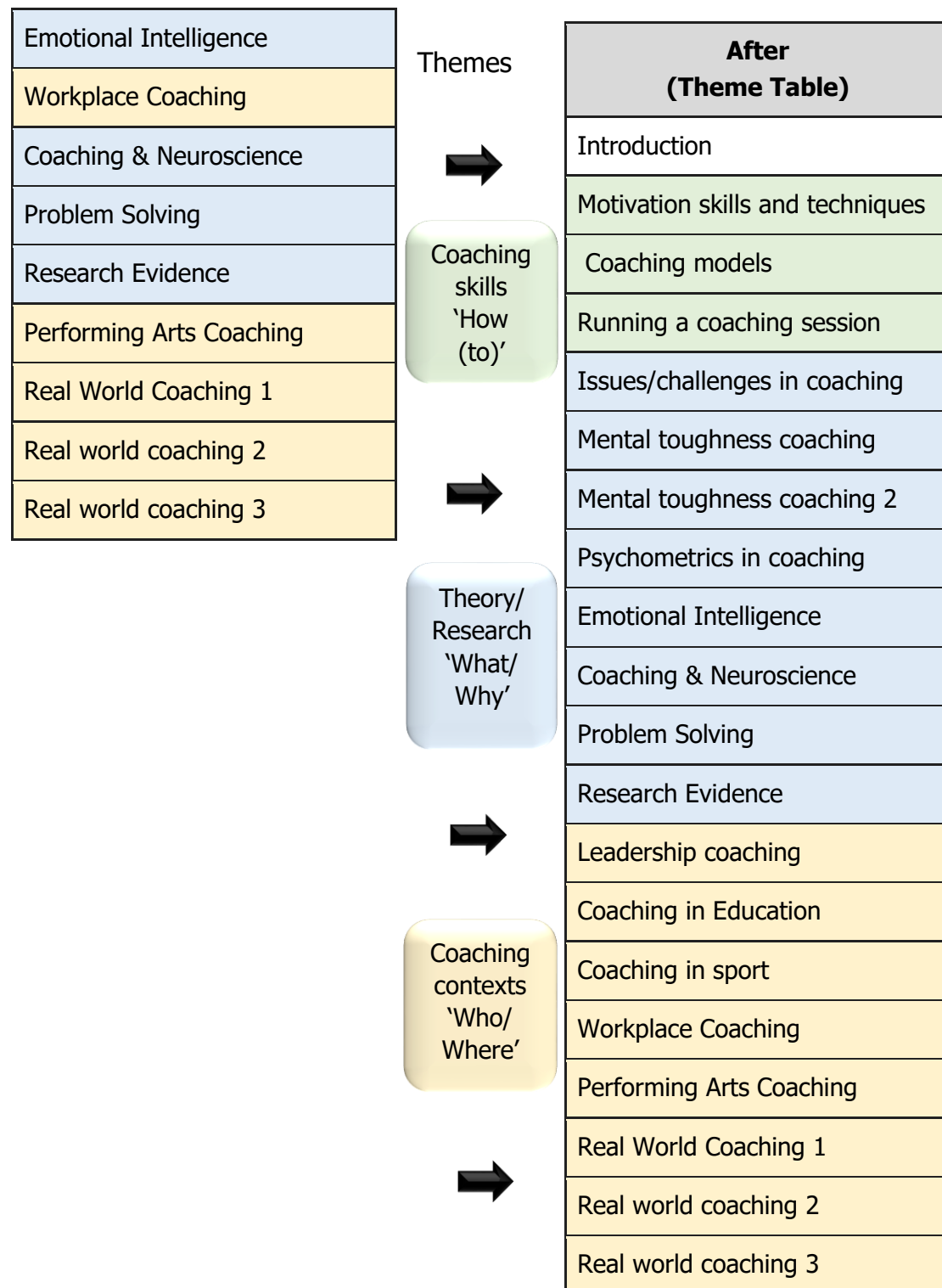| Before	Themes	After (Theme Table)
Emotional Intelligence		**After (Theme Table)**
Workplace Coaching		Introduction
Coaching & Neuroscience	Coaching skills 'How (to)'	Motivation skills and techniques
Problem Solving		Coaching models
Research Evidence		Running a coaching session
Performing Arts Coaching		Issues/challenges in coaching
Real World Coaching 1		Mental toughness coaching
Real world coaching 2		Mental toughness coaching 2
Real world coaching 3		Psychometrics in coaching
	Theory/ Research 'What/ Why'	Emotional Intelligence
		Coaching & Neuroscience
		Problem Solving
		Research Evidence
		Leadership coaching
		Coaching in Education
	Coaching contexts 'Who/ Where'	Coaching in sport
		Workplace Coaching
		Performing Arts Coaching
		Real World Coaching 1
		Real world coaching 2
		Real world coaching 3

Figure 1. Theme (clustering topics to produce a Theme Table)

Phase 2: Redesign

The purpose of Phase 2: Redesign is to dismantle and declutter the unit and establish the fundamental unit requirements. This is achieved through engagement with constructive alignment (CA). Constructive alignment refers

to educators setting an appropriate learning environment that enables students to construct meaning through relevant activities and engagement (Biggs, 1996: 2003). The process involves the systematic alignment of unit assessment(s), delivered learning and materials (Biggs, 1996 termed these 'Teaching/Learning Activities', or TLAs), with Learning Outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The marriage here with 'spark joy' is aligned with Loughlin et al.'s (2020) quest to reclaim CA, and to counteract Nelson's (2018) argument that alone or misapplied CA is destroying imagination and involved in a 'creativity crisis'. Loughlin et al. (2020) describe CA as being adapted and repurposed as a quality assurance tool by policy makers. This is a reductive approach that leads LOs to be used for audit rather than enhancement. Injecting the 'spark joy' ethos into CA encourages educators to be creative and innovative in their design.

There are three tasks in this phase: Re-centre, Reassess, and Revise. The tools required for this phase are the unit specification and the new theme table (created in Phase 1).

2a. Re-centre

Re-centring (see Figure 2) refers to revisiting and re-establishing the unit Learning Outcomes (LOs) and assessment. The rationale for this is to combat 'curriculum drift' which refers to the phenomena of small changes in delivery accumulating over time and taking the unit/module away from an obviously designed object (fully aligned, coherent and cohesive) to a collection of random objects (lacking/significant loss of alignment, coherence, and cohesion) (Johns-Boast, 2014). An example of curriculum drift is a new staff member delivering learning materials (TLAs) based loosely on a unit title and their expertise (applying cognitive psychology to coaching), as opposed to formal curriculum documentation (such as a module specification that would identify LOs and brief indicative content). The process of streamlining units for block teaching risks the threat of curriculum drift if decisions around reduction and synthesis of content (TLAs) are made based on non-

pedagogical criteria such as staff preferences/availability or convenience. Therefore, by using CA to re-centre the LOs and assessment, it allows more coherence and cohesion in selecting the most appropriate and fitting TLAs.

A tip here is to highlight key words in the LOs. Key reflexive questions to aid this process are:

1. *What* do I expect students to do/show/achieve?
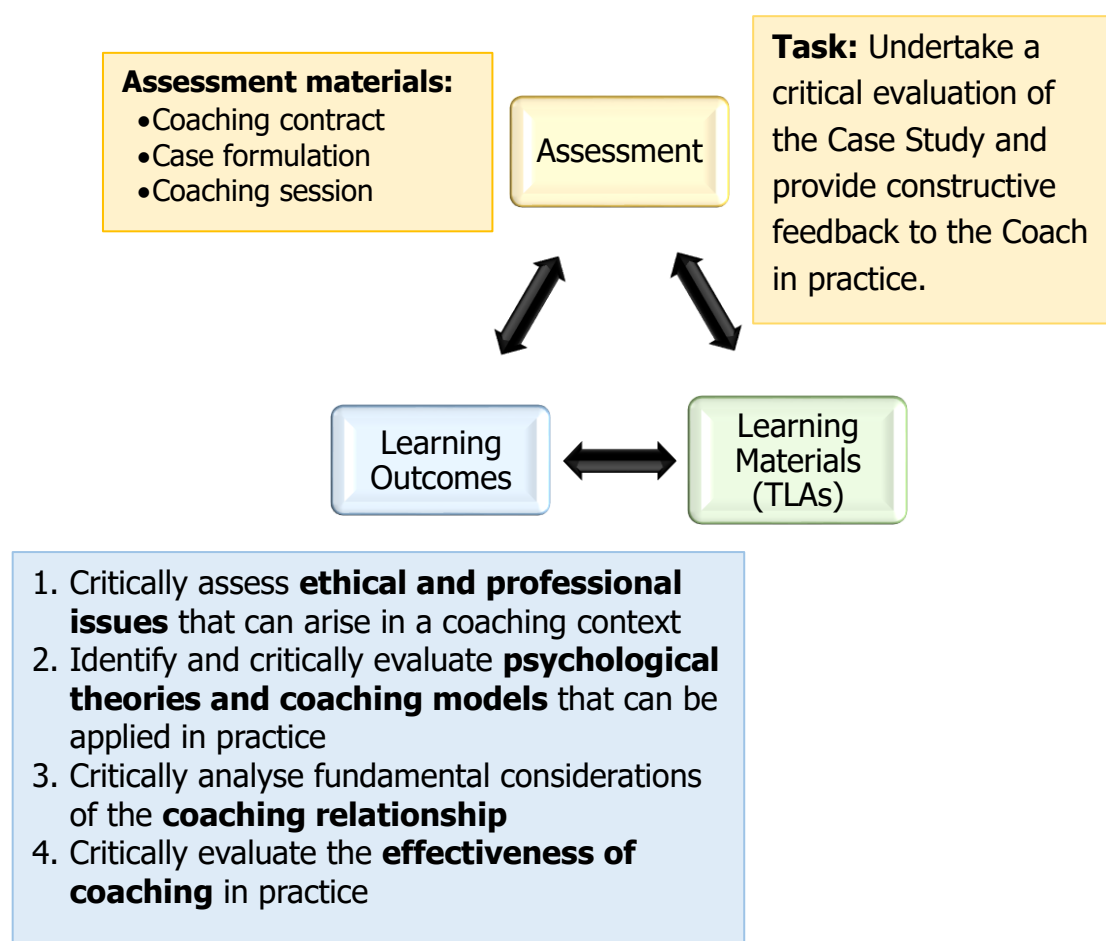2. *How* do I expect students to demonstrate this?

Assessment materials:
- Coaching contract
- Case formulation
- Coaching session

Assessment

Task: Undertake a critical evaluation of the Case Study and provide constructive feedback to the Coach in practice.

Learning Outcomes

Learning Materials (TLAs)

1. Critically assess **ethical and professional issues** that can arise in a coaching context
2. Identify and critically evaluate **psychological theories and coaching models** that can be applied in practice
3. Critically analyse fundamental considerations of the **coaching relationship**
4. Critically evaluate the **effectiveness of coaching** in practice

Figure 2. Re-centring (using Constructive Alignment to evaluate the unit)

2b. Reassess

Reassessment refers to judging the suitability of the current content/materials (TLAs) in relation to the LOs and assessment. Using CA, the judgement here is whether the TLAs will adequately prepare/enable the students to complete the assessment and in turn demonstrate they have met the unit LOs. Thus, the reassessment task is one of alignment. It involves another mapping exercise, taking the new theme table and identifying what LOs are currently covered/addressed each week (see Figure 3). A key reflexive question to ask in the Reassess task: Is there balanced coverage of LOs?

Figure 3 demonstrates that the unit content in the Case Study was not balanced in LO coverage. LO1 = 1 week/session, LO2 = 12 weeks/sessions, LO3 = 1 week/session, LO4 = 9 weeks/sessions. To achieve constructive alignment and rebalance LO coverage amendments are needed, which leads to the final task of Phase 2.

An additional CA consideration to reassess is whether the assessment materials (TLAs) provided for the case study (assessment) are aligned to the LOs. The case study in Figure 2 illustrates how the assessment instructions/task is '*undertake a critical evaluation of the case study and provide constructive feedback to the Coach in practice'*. The assessment materials provided as part of the case study were a coaching contact, a case formulation, and a video-recorded coaching session. The coaching contract provides opportunity to critically assess ethical and professional issues (LO1) and the coaching relationship (LO3); the a case formulation provides opportunity to critically evaluate psychological theories and coaching models (LO2); and the coaching session provides opportunity to critically evaluate the effectiveness of coaching in practice (LO4).
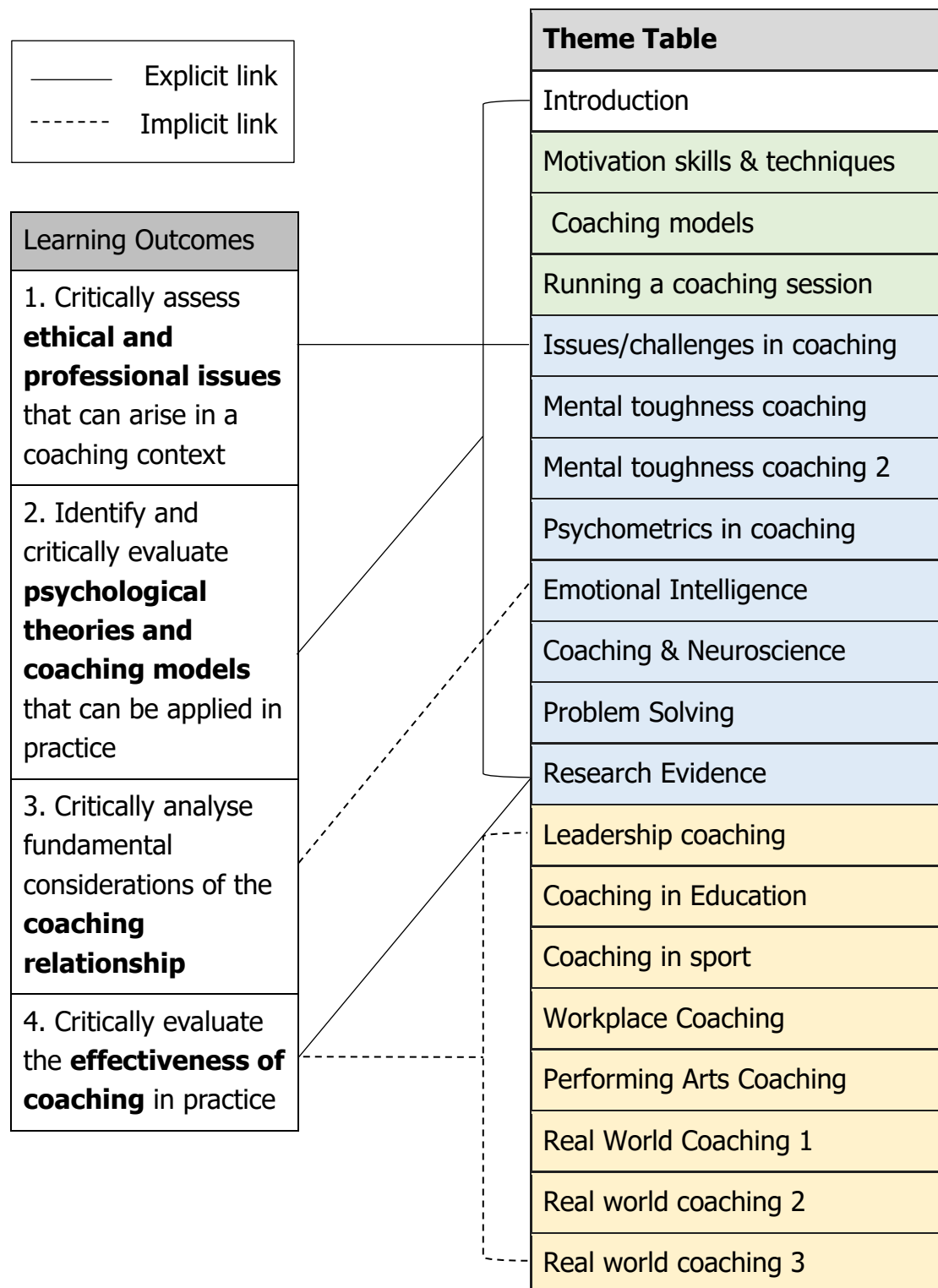
Figure 3. Reassess (Mapping existing content/LTAs to Learning Outcomes)

2c. Revise

Revise refers to amending the unit content to reflect the needs of the LOs and assessment (see Figure 4). The previous task highlighted a misalignment in TLAs, that needs to be realigned to achieve CA. Here, a blank teaching plan is needed, numbered with however many weeks the teaching block will be (e.g. 6). The task involves populating the session plan to ensure balanced and full coverage of all LOs (i.e. striving for CA).

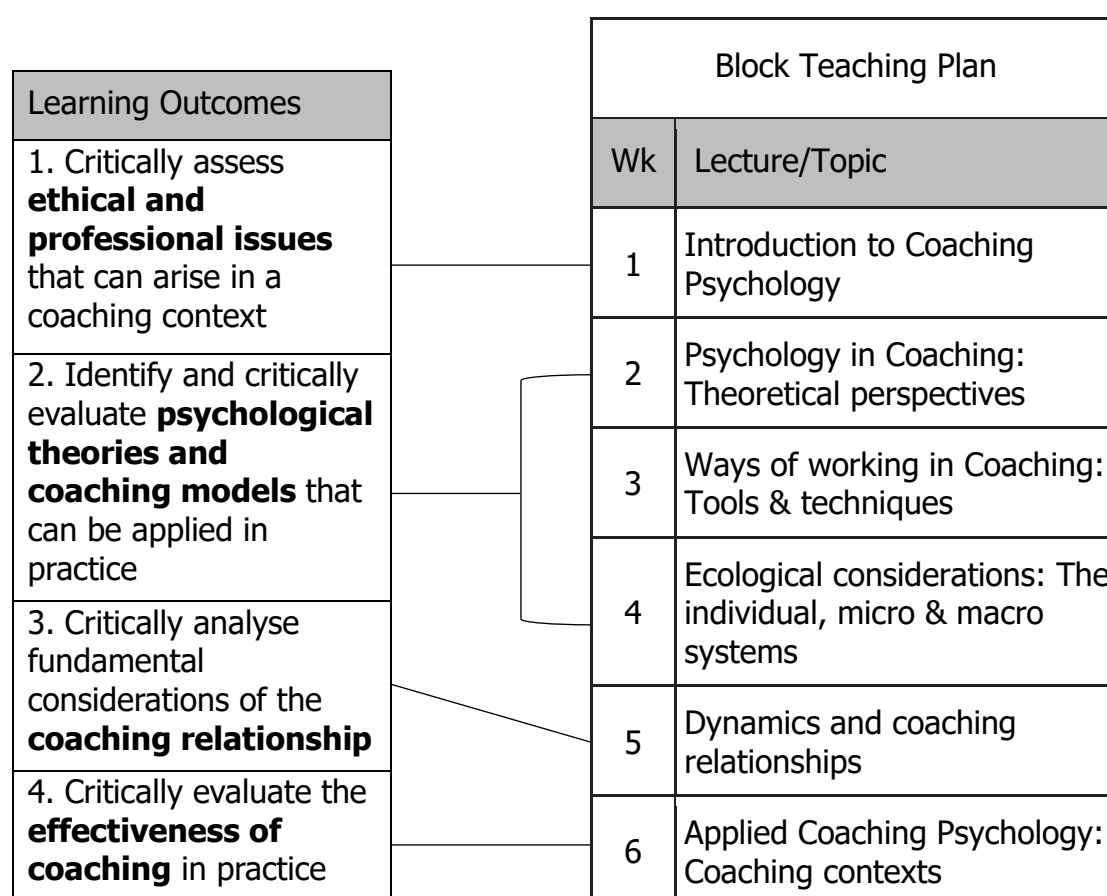| Learning Outcomes	Block Teaching Plan	
	Wk	Lecture/Topic
1. Critically assess **ethical and professional issues** that can arise in a coaching context	1	Introduction to Coaching Psychology
2. Identify and critically evaluate **psychological theories and coaching models** that can be applied in practice	2	Psychology in Coaching: Theoretical perspectives
	3	Ways of working in Coaching: Tools & techniques
	4	Ecological considerations: The individual, micro & macro systems
3. Critically analyse fundamental considerations of the **coaching relationship**	5	Dynamics and coaching relationships
4. Critically evaluate the **effectiveness of coaching** in practice	6	Applied Coaching Psychology: Coaching contexts

Figure 4. Revise (Redesign Block Teaching Plan aligned to LOs)

Figure 4 demonstrates a much more even coverage of LO coverage than before: LO1 = 1 week/session, LO2 = 3 weeks/sessions, LO3 = 1 week/session, LO4 = 1 week/session. Key reflexive questions here are:

1. Are all sessions clearly relevant?
2. Will these sessions link to the LOs and/or assessment?

Once Phase 2 tasks are complete, the final product should represent a new block teaching plan.

Phase 3: Landscaping

The purpose of Phase 3: Landscaping is to reconstruct the unit (and 'spark joy'!). This is achieved by developing a new (constructively aligned) scheme of work. This phase comprised of three tasks: Sort, Filter/process, and Scaffold and (re)build. The tools required for this phase are the Theme Table (constructed in Phase 1), and the new Block Teaching Plan (constructed in Phase 2). This phase is key in considering the delivery format and the processes/decisions involved. For example, moving to online (e.g. as was the case during Covid-19 related lockdowns) will require adapting format, whereby face-to-face sessions are replaced with alternatives (such as live lectures delivered over MS Teams and facilitated group sessions using 'break out rooms').

3a. Sort

Sorting (see Figure 5) requires the mapping of old sessions (from the Theme Table) onto the new Block Teaching Plan. The purpose of this task is to identify what themes/topics are still relevant/needed to achieve CA. For example, stage 2c (Revise) identified that to achieve LO4 (critically evaluate the effectiveness of coaching in practice), in a CA framework this would need to be covered in the block teaching plan (e.g. week 6 'applied Coaching Psychology: Coaching contexts'). By using the theme table, eight existing topics/sessions are identified that could populate this new topic/session (leadership in coaching, coaching in education, coaching in sport, workplace coaching, performing arts coaching, and real would coaching 1, 2, and 3). On a related note, having eight sessions on coaching contexts is an example of curriculum drift that developed as outlined earlier on in the paper, and reinforces the need to engage in CA to restore alignment, coherence, and cohesion.
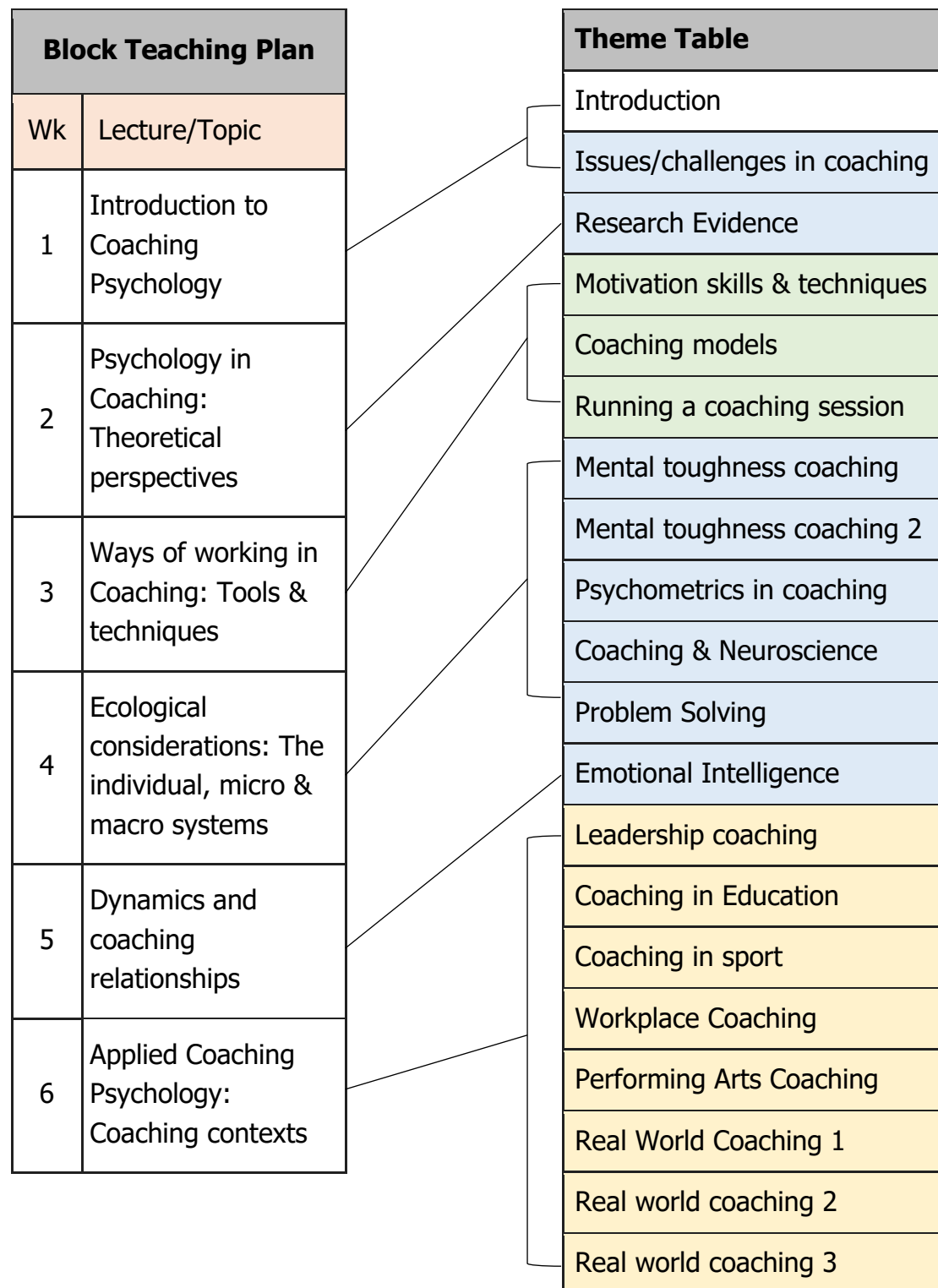
Block Teaching Plan	
Wk	**Lecture/Topic**
1	Introduction to Coaching Psychology
2	Psychology in Coaching: Theoretical perspectives
3	Ways of working in Coaching: Tools & techniques
4	Ecological considerations: The individual, micro & macro systems
5	Dynamics and coaching relationships
6	Applied Coaching Psychology: Coaching contexts

Theme Table
Introduction
Issues/challenges in coaching
Research Evidence
Motivation skills & techniques
Coaching models
Running a coaching session
Mental toughness coaching
Mental toughness coaching 2
Psychometrics in coaching
Coaching & Neuroscience
Problem Solving
Emotional Intelligence
Leadership coaching
Coaching in Education
Coaching in sport
Workplace Coaching
Performing Arts Coaching
Real World Coaching 1
Real world coaching 2
Real world coaching 3

Figure 5. Sort (Mapping original materials onto new Block Teaching Plan)

3b. Filter/process

The filter/process task involves organising the old materials (TLAs) in preparation for a new scheme of work. This requires an evaluation of what will be needed moving forward. If we continue the example from 3a, we can see that the new week 6 topic/session on the block teaching plan (Applied Coaching Psychology: Coaching contexts) has eight existing topics/sessions mapped to it, which will need to be streamlined into one. Once again, CA should be focused to ensure materials kept are clearly relevant to the LOs and/or assessment. For example, any materials not related to the LOs/assessment (misaligned possibly due to curriculum drift) should be removed. Alongside this CA judgement, the key question of 'does it spark joy?' (Marie Kondo) is used to encourage creativity and innovation in deciding whether to 'Keep', 'Recycle/repurpose' or 'Let (it) go'. Sparking joy could be decided using student feedback (e.g. Internal Student Surveys), peer observation, and/or reflexive self-reporting with the unit team for 'successful' sessions (e.g. engagement, informal student feedback, reported development in understanding). An example of the new scheme of work (week 6 of the Case Study) is provided in Figure 6.
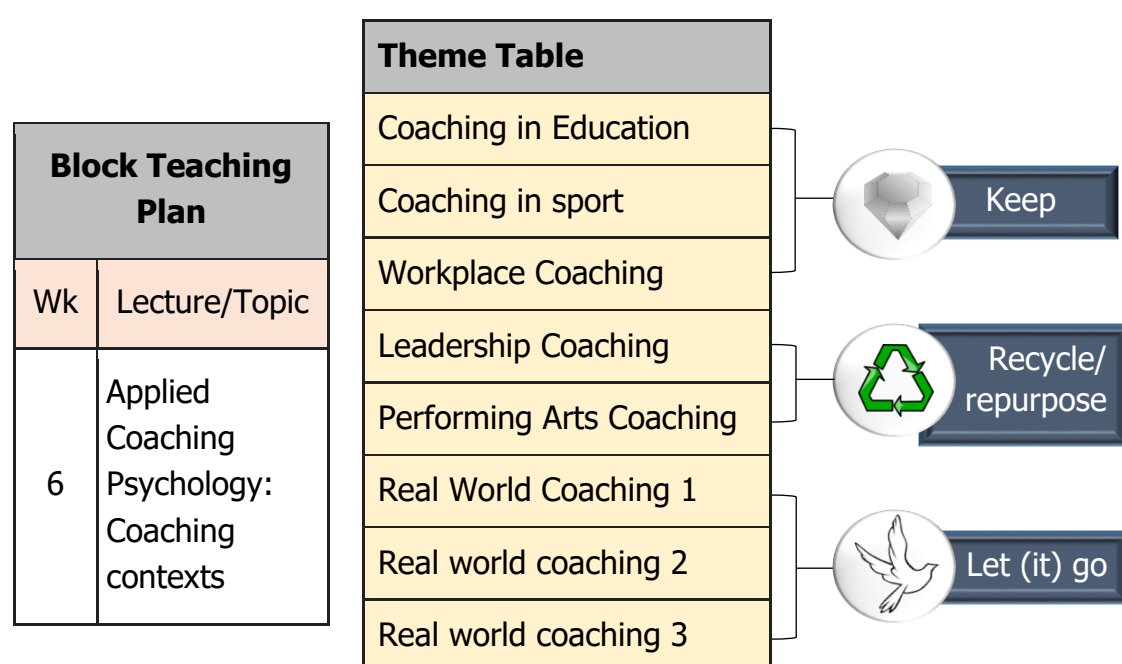

Figure 6. Filter/process (organising original materials in preparation for a new scheme of work)

3c. Scaffold and (re)build

The final task requires taking the materials that 'spark joy' (from the 'keep' and 'recycle/repurpose' piles) and populating a new scheme of work. An example of Scaffold and (re)build on Week 1 of the case study is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. New Scheme of Work					
Wk	Topic	Delivered Learning and materials (TLAs)			
		Mini Lecture	Synchronous Session	Asynchronous task	Reading
1	Introduction to Coaching Psychology	**Content:** a. Ethics, codes and principles b. Contracting c. Dilemmas and decisions	**Workshop:** a. Re-cap of ethics b. Group debate of ethical dilemma	**Pre-workshop** a. Read ethical dilemma Case **Post-workshop** b. Apply ethical decision model to outcome/resolution to the dilemma	BPS (2018) Code of Ethics and Conduct

When rebuilding the unit, CA (e.g. in Figure 2) can help to stay aligned, coherent and cohesive. Because LOs and assessment are a focal point, curriculum drift should not be a threat. Once the format of the delivery is decided (scaffold) then it can be populated (rebuild). In this case study, the format was a pre-recorded mini-lecture, a synchronous session in the form of a staff-facilitated live workshop (on MS Teams), a range of asynchronous tasks (e.g. Moodle quiz, worksheets, vignettes), and a reading list (containing recommended and further reading). Once rebuilt with creative and innovative materials that 'spark joy', Phase 3 is complete. The final product should represent a new, constructively aligned scheme of work.

Limitations and considerations for future practice

Given the immediate urgency to 'flip' to online teaching due to Covid-19 restrictions, the block teaching model was implemented at short notice. This

meant there was no opportunity to engage students in the design process, although this would be good practice in the future. Furthermore, the case study provided was a hypothetical example, and did not run the following year. This meant it was not possible to evaluate outcomes (e.g., grade averages, student satisfaction), or undertake a comparison to previous years of study. Future practice could also take baseline measures and comparisons following implementation to capture outcomes.

Summary

This work combined mainstream popular culture (decluttering and sparking joy) and pedagogy practice (constructive alignment) in programme redesign. The case study provided was used in streamlining for a block teaching model, but the process could be adopted for broader programme evaluations that may be misaligned due to curriculum drift. The marriage of CA to 'spark joy' is a quest for reclaiming CA from an audit tool, and (re)igniting creativity and innovation in the design process. A three-phase process was presented. Through Groundwork (tasks: Prune and Theme), Redesign (tasks: Re-centre, Reassess, Revise) and Landscaping (tasks: Sort, Filter/process, Scaffold & (re)build) educators can develop a pedagogically sound, constructively aligned scheme of work that is fit-for-purpose (in this example, for block teaching). An overview is provided in Figure 7.
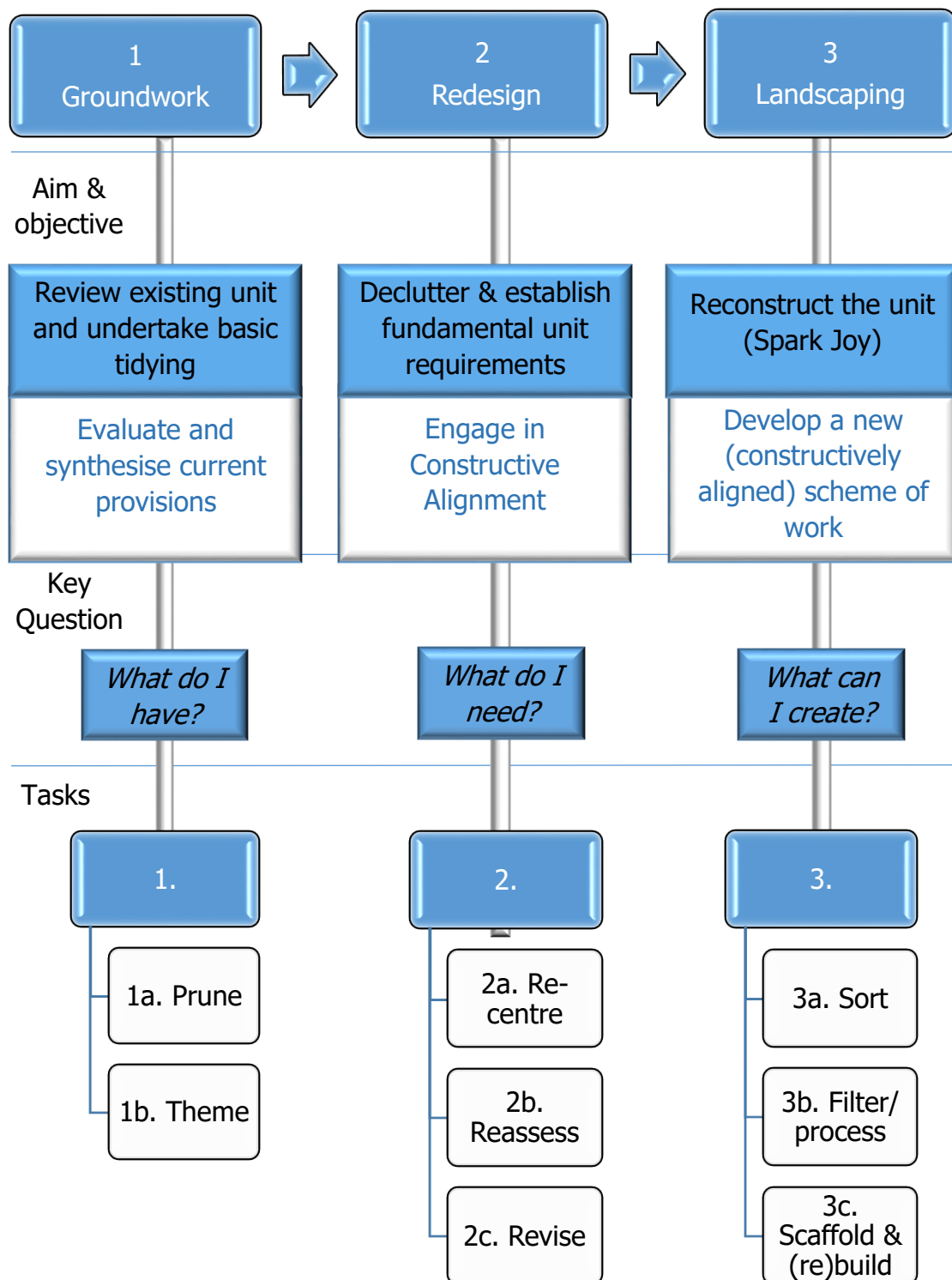
·Phase

Figure 7. Overall process for streamlining units for Block Teaching

Statement of disclosure

All materials included in the article represent the authors' own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. The work has not been previously published nor is it is being considered for publication elsewhere. There are no conflicts of interest that may have influenced the reporting of findings completely and honestly.

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