Phenomenography: an approach to qualitative research in higher education

SRHE workshop 20 February 2019

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mike.mimirinis@anglia.ac.uk @srhe @mimirinis #srheevents
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<td>11:00</td>
<td>introductions</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:15</td>
<td>introduction to phenomenography</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>an example of a phenomenographic study</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:30</td>
<td>forming of phenomenographic categories (small groups)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:00</td>
<td>lunch</td>
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<td>1:45</td>
<td>forming of phenomenographic categories (continued)</td>
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<td>3:00</td>
<td>feedback and discussion</td>
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<td>reflections on the day</td>
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@srhe @mimirinis #srheevents
introductions

• who you are
• where you are based
• why you are interested in phenomenography
• what you hope to get out of this session
phenomenography

- a qualitative research *approach*
- seminal study on deep and surface approach to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976)
- the empirical study of the qualitative *variation* in the ways that a group of people experience and understand a phenomenon
- non-dualist (the person and the experience are one and the same)
phenomenography (cont.)

• 2nd order perspective – people’s accounts of the experience
• a phenomenographic study typically produces a limited number (2-6) of internally and logically related, qualitatively different, hierarchical *categories of description* of the variation in the way a phenomenon is experienced (Marton & Booth, 1997)
• not to be confused with phenomenology (Trigwell, 2006; Larsson & Holmström, 2007)
Philosophy

1. dualist
   - e.g. cognitivism
   - quantitative
     - e.g. relational questionnaire research
     - 1st order
     - focus not on variation
     - e.g. case studies; grounded theory
     - internally related
     - e.g. phenomenology; case studies
     - e.g. thematic analysis
   - non-dualist
     - qualitative
     - 2nd order
     - focus on variation

Method

Outcome

Phenomenography

(Trigwell, 2000)
design

• define the phenomenon

• study occurs in a particular context

• purposive sampling: maximise variation of experiences

• semi-structured, dialogic interviews aimed at revealing similarities, differences and intentions
In the interview, academics were first asked about their experience of running tutorials generally, and then asked to describe a particular undergraduate tutorial they had given, from any preparation work they had set students through to the tutorial itself. The interviews were then structured around this description, with particular attention paid to what the tutor saw as the purpose of this particular tutorial and how they understood their role, as well as the role of student(s) within this tutorial.

(Ashwin, 2006: 654)
what needs ‘bracketing’

• importing earlier research findings

• assuming existing theoretical structures or particular interpretations

• imposing the investigator’s personal knowledge and belief.

analysis

• read the whole set of transcripts

• re-read again and mark where the interviewee gives answers to the main interview question, identify ‘meaningful utterances’ revealing the structure of the conception

• in these passages look for what the focus of the attention is; make a preliminary description of predominant ways of understanding of the phenomenon

• group the descriptions into categories, based on similarities and differences: construct pool of meanings, re-read, re-sort.
analysis (cont.)

- look for non-dominant ways of understanding
- structure the outcome space – how and why dimensions of categories of description
- assign a metaphor to each category of description (optional)
example: academics’ conceptions of e-assessment*

What are the qualitatively different ways in which academics understand e-assessment?

category A: efficiently managing and streamlining the assessment process

E-assessment is that students can easily submit it, they don’t have to leave their home, they don’t have to be running to the library or wherever to get it there for the time. It’s trackable, so even if it gets deleted there’s normally some metadata that you can actually track it. And, of course, in terms of marking you can be marking anywhere, so you’re not restricted to one venue or having to carry piles of dissertations and essays around
category B : facilitating dialogue and student engagement

Have a sort of electronic document written to whatever requirements and standard, depending on what the context of the work is and that you can have this sort of exchange, I suppose. The student generates the work and the tutor can look at it and can give initial feedback in an electronic form and the student can work on that piece of work as well. So, it can achieve that you have a more two-way exchange if it’s used in the formative and developmental stage of the work.
category C: enhancing student learning

Often we just use it as the form of submitting and then the e-part doesn’t really have a significant impact on the nature of the assessment but I think with certain types of assessment you can ensure that you can embed learning resources into the assessment. So that the students can use the assessment really as a learning tool and not just as a sort of electronic form of submitting a piece of work. And I think that’s when you really have the power of the e-assessment, when you can make it more embedded so that you have your assessment with links to various learning tools.
There are a number of ways of judging if any kind of assessment is successful and e-assessment is not different. So, from the teacher’s point of view, I think we feel that we want to have as many students as possible achieving well i.e. self-esteem, confidence levels; no doubt, grades are an issue but also for us, because we’re in teacher training, getting a job, so successful application for a career... And then I guess in the wider community, e-assessment, you know it’s been successful if we have a good reputation, our students get jobs, they stay in their jobs, they contribute as citizens... So there are philosophical ways to look at this in terms of a university’s success, engaging with society productively and also having a reputation that other universities and wider culture recognise.

category D : developing (digital) identity and the community
the task: forming phenomenographic categories

- in groups, read the transcripts of interviews with e-assessors and then begin to construct categories of description that illustrate the variation in how doctoral students experience university teaching
- groups will share their categories, indicating the qualitative variation between each category and the evidence for their categories
- you will also discuss your views of phenomenographic analysis
exercise: doctoral students’ conceptions of university teaching *

What are the qualitatively different ways in which doctoral students in Education understand and experience university teaching?

There is someone who transfers knowledge. Doesn’t have to be in a social situation - but maybe good if it is. Little uncertain. There are schools with one-to-one teaching, but most often in larger groups. There must be something to teach about. There must be something in the person who shall be taught as well - must become something. That the person who shall teach has the correct knowledge for their task. The person who shall be taught is prepared, at the right level. [Swedish PhD student]
Because as a teacher I chose the content and I chose the form. I’m choosing, I’m facilitating and guiding. If you have the lens, basically I’m giving the lens and the perspective to look at or sometimes I’m talking about several perspectives – you can look from this angle or this theory offers this perspective and another theory this perspective, so I think I talk a lot about perspectives… when I bring my content to the day’s lecture, this is my way of seeing based on somebody’s research or based on my perspectives so yeah, the teacher brings some perspective [Swedish PhD student]
category C: teaching as a means of communicating, engaging and sharing of experiences

*teaching basically means to me, I would say engaging with the students, working around it. We’re working around what I would call the wicked problems, or hard to define problems, complex problems. Relating to education, I don’t see myself as coming with final solutions, because the complex problems are also problems I deal with within research and my everyday life. It’s more that I present ideas or conceptual tools or theories, and then we work together […]. I think it’s crucial, it’s working with the students, that’s what I’m aiming for, because I’m feeling like I get more out of it myself, also, when we’re together and trying to handle this question in relation to education.*

[Swedish PhD student]
category D: teaching as a means of enabling students to apply knowledge and skills

To be a facilitator. To enable the students to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities that are given in the steering documents. Also wake their motivation and interest so they can go further with this. It depends on where they are in the education, obviously. Wake curiosity and interest. Encourage them to own learning and initiative, so carry their own learning forward. Also within possible framework, give them a lot of breadth and experiences, concerning forms such as seminars and lectures, and even forms of scientific presentations, such as course literature and articles. [Swedish PhD student]
category E: teaching as a means of enabling students to interpret, compare and connect concepts in Education, and make meaning

it’s about helping the students to learn. Things that are meaningful and challenging. And important. And for a teacher it’s about managing the many different challenges of… that exist during teaching in such a way that students are engaged in things that help them learn as much as possible. [Swedish PhD students]
category F: teaching as a means of promoting personal, professional, societal development and change

Well everything. Absolutely. I think a good teacher has the potential to change somebody's life. [...] But I think a lot of the students here, well on my course anyway are very young, don't have those sorts of commitments, so they have an opportunity to really kind of grow and develop in the three years that they are here personally and academically. [English EdD student]

The purpose of teaching is to bring about a desirable change in knowledge or in behaviour. It depends on the perspective/context. There must be a change in understanding. [English EdD student]
outcome space: doctoral students’ conceptions of teaching

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<th>Referential aspects</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transmitting knowledge</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Presenting ideas &amp; theory</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging &amp; sharing</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enabling application of skills</td>
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<td>Enabling meaning-making</td>
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<td>Promoting development &amp; change</td>
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contribution of phenomenography

• context matters - relational nature of phenomena in higher education
• curriculum design
• academic development
• student learning
• disciplinarity
Teacher approach to teaching

Student approach to learning

Teacher conceptions of teaching & learning

Teacher perceptions of the teaching environment

Student conceptions of learning

Student perceptions of the learning environment

Student learning outcomes

after Trigwell & Prosser (1999)
constraints

• describing students as either deep or surface learners isn't helpful; two or three categories is overly simplistic

• a hidden value system; language inherently judgemental, underlying power structure (Webb, 1997)

• projections of academics, norms and desirability (Haggis, 2003)

• methodological weakness (self-report, context important but not accounted for)

• what is being described in the interviews – conceptions or discursive practices (Säljö, 1997)
references


