

Phenomenography for researching aspects of networked learning: beyond the match of underlying values and beliefs

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Abstract

Networked learning as a pedagogical approach aims to advance technology mediated learning through relations with resources, tutors and students. Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach concerned with revealing patterns of variation in the relations between human beings and aspects of the world around them. Phenomenography and networked learning attend to different functions in different fields of operation – the former on doing research about learning and the latter on begetting students' learning, but both advance a relational view of learning.

This short paper is the outcome of a reflective enquiry when personally engaged doing phenomenographic research exploring variation in the student's lived experience of networked learning. With it I seek to draw attention to a perceived set of values and beliefs shared by, and underpinning both approaches. I claim to underline the advantage of a foundational ground shared by phenomenography and networked learning, also suggesting philosophical coherence and continuity when the human actor operating in the networked learning field shifts to the phenomenographic field. However, the advantage of phenomenography to research the networked learning field is perceived to go beyond shared philosophical ground and related methodological accord. In its capacity to explicitly reveal open patterns of variation in person-world relationships phenomenography is envisaged to potentially be an empowering means of learning and for learning. Perhaps, an in-depth study looking into the points of convergence and divergence when using phenomenography to investigate aspects of networked learning may help clarify conjectures at the abstract level and beyond this, on a more practical note, it may help to better highlight capabilities, limitations, facilitations and pitfalls, thus illuminating prospects for those who contemplate phenomenography to understand and promote networked learning.

Structurally, the paper is subdivided into three sections. The first section highlights networked learning as a relational approach distinct from other similar technology-mediated learning strategies such as connectivism and computer supported collaborative learning. The second section briefly outlines the main paradigmatic features of phenomenography characterised by the person-phenomenon relationship advancing learning as expanding consciousness. The third section calls attention to three issues whereupon the phenomenographic stance appears to match the networked learning approach, these being that, both steer clear of dualisms, contemplate learning at the nexus of relations, and emphasise the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively.

Keywords

Networked learning, phenomenography, research methods, learning, relations

Introduction

Networked learning (NL) as a pedagogical approach aims to advance technology mediated learning through relations with resources, tutors and students. Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach concerned with revealing patterns of variation in the relations between human beings and aspects of the world around them. By this short paper I seek to draw attention to a perceived set of values and beliefs shared by, and underpinning both approaches. I claim to underline the advantage of a foundational ground shared by phenomenography and NL. However, the significance of phenomenography to understand NL is perceived to go beyond shared philosophical ground and related methodological accord.

Proceedings of the 9th International Conference
on Networked Learning 2014, Edited by:
Bayne S, Jones C, de Laat M, Ryberg T &
Sinclair C.

ISBN 978-1-86220-304-4

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Networked Learning as a relational approach

NL is a form of e-learning based on humanistic educational ideals (McConnell, Hodgson, & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2012) and advanced as

“learning in which information and communication technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources” (McConnell et al., 2012, p.6).

Jones (2004) maintains that NL incorporates ‘a relational view’ to learning, and Hodgson & Watland (2004) acknowledge it as a “social constructionist” type of learning approach where “learning emerges from relational dialogue with and/or through others in learning communities” (p.100). NL is set apart from other technology mediated learning approaches which emphasize dialogue. Ryberg, Buus & Georgrsen (2012) note that although connectivism (Siemens, 2004) comes very close to the notion of NL still it is removed from it because the emphasis is on connections rather than on collaborations. Hodgson, McConnell & Dirckinck-Holmfeld (2012) add that in connectivism “learning remains ultimately an individual, cognitive pursuit” (p.293). They also delineate NL from computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) stating that in NL the focus is more on learning than on the technology affordance for learning as in the case of CSCL. Ryberg et al. (2012) elucidate that in its ideal NL seeks to foster e-quality, inclusion, critical reflexivity and relational dialogue.

Established within the formal learning setting, NL is distinguished by the communal attitude aspired in nurturing and maintaining connections within a learning group supported by communication technologies. Beaty, Cousin & Hodgson (2010) suggest that an updated definition of NL is called for to emphasise the aspired type of relations for learning the NL approach proposes. This proposition comes at a time when ‘connectedness’, ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusivity’ are buzzwords and networked individualism is the order of the day. At large, the distinctiveness of NL as a technology mediated learning approach disrupting traditional methods of teaching and learning emanates from its relational stance wherein learning is assumed to occur in and by way of relations *including* human relations, and relations for learning are sought in concern of others’ learning as well as personal learning.

Phenomenography as a relational approach

Within the qualitative research realm, phenomenography seeks to reveal variation in person-world relationships. As an interpretative approach phenomenography is advanced as non-dualist. Marton & Booth (1997) maintain that “The world we deal with is the world as experienced by people, by learners – neither individual constructions nor independent realities; the people, the learners, we deal with are people experiencing aspects of that world – neither bearers of mental structures nor behaviourist actors” (p.13). As Marton (1986) declares, “The point of departure in phenomenography is always relational” (p.33). Phenomenography is also advanced as a second order approach in the sense that the research object is contemplated from what is disclosed by participants. Marton (1986) upholds that the researcher seeks “to describe relations between the individual and the various aspects of the world around them, regardless of whether those relationships are manifested in the form of immediate experience, conceptual thought or physical behaviour” (p. 41). Phenomenography contrasts objectivist and first-order qualitative methods wherein the researcher is assumed to engage in research as a ‘tabula rasa’ devoid of bias or the researcher unproblematically takes to his/her interpretation of research data. However, in acknowledgement of researcher’s influence inadvertently impacting on the research outcome nonetheless the researcher strives to bracket pre-suppositions in doing phenomenography.

The aim of phenomenography is to describe patterns of variation in experiencing, conceptualizing, understanding or perceiving a phenomenon of concern. The interest does not lie with correctness of what is said by the participants. No judgment is placed on participants’ disclosures. Some ways of experiencing, conceptualizing, understanding or perceiving are contemplated as more powerful than others (Marton & Booth, 1997). This comparison is removed from any one specific research participant as are removed the qualitatively different ways of experiencing which in practice are mapped out from across the data set generated as part of the research exercise. Booth (2008) eloquently explicates “The categories are constituted from the fragments contributed by all the students, and are thus research constructs rather than individual styles of understanding. This is what is meant by producing results at the collective – rather than the individual – level” (p.453).

This variation is seen emerging as a matter of different degrees of awareness of the concerned phenomenon which inextricably gives meaning to the relation. Åkerlind (2005) refers to the broadening discernment as comprised of 'themes of expanding awareness' in consideration of the relationship between person and concerned phenomenon. This notion of broadening discernment points to the partiality of experience and understanding calling to mind an open and dynamic relational view of *learning* in experience.

In doing phenomenography, the qualitatively different ways of experiencing, conceptualizing or perceiving a study phenomenon - which on the ground are referred to as the 'categories of description' and which the researcher maps out from the generated data - are not considered to form a complete model even if in being brought together to form a hierarchy of increasingly more powerful ways of experiencing they are considered to form a complete picture. Marton & Booth (1997) observe that "the researcher is describing the phenomenon ... no more than partially, from the reports or inferences of the subjects" (p.124). Referred to as the "outcome space" the inclusive hierarchical structure provides "a way of looking at collective human experience of phenomena holistically despite the fact that the same phenomena may be perceived differently by different people and under different circumstances" (Åkerlind, 2005, p.323). Thus at a practical level phenomenography continues to be highlighted as concerned with relations by way of relations, and a study relation is sought to be described by an open set of learning variation.

Shared values and beliefs

In their distinctive fields of operation advancing a relational view of learning, both NL and phenomenography steer clear of philosophical dualisms. Hodgson et al. (2012) point out that NL "attempts to transcend the dualism between abstract mind and concrete material social practice" (p.292). The authors agree that their shared view of NL is rooted in an ontological position that "assumes an understanding of the world and view of the world, including learning and teaching, is social-culturally influenced and constructed" (p.292). Correspondingly, from the phenomenographic field Marton & Booth (1997) remark that "The world we deal with is the world as experienced by people, by learners – neither individual constructions nor independent realities; the people, the learners, we deal with are people experiencing aspects of that world – neither bearers of mental structures nor behaviourist actors" (p.13). To this Booth (2008) adds that "The phenomenographic stance is more readily related to the socio-cultural views of knowledge as relational" (p.451). This shared philosophical base suggests a sense of coherence and continuity for a researcher when the human actor operating in the NL field shifts to the phenomenographic field. More significant, learning is not contemplated inside or outside the learner but is contemplated in constitution and meaning making in relations, a variable view of variation.

NL and phenomenography both advance learning at the nexus of relations. In the case of NL learning is projected as situated in relations and connections steering away from networked individualism as well as excessive focus on the community (Jones, Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008). Ryberg et al. (2012) observe that the very definition of NL "stresses the connections *between* people and *between* people and resources" and also that it "points to a certain level of social organisation between learners, tutors and resources" [italics included] ([p. 45). Correspondingly, Marton & Booth (1997) reason that learning is "a mediated experience ... To an increasing degree we see the world in terms of patterns of a shared culture through a shared language. Our world becomes increasingly the world of others as well, and the latter world, the world as already experienced, is a constitutive force in learning just as the individual's constitutive acts are" (p. 139). They signal this viewpoint as distinct from individual constructivism and social constructivism alike. Thus is situated a view of learning lying in intermediation, anew a variable view of variation.

Both NL and phenomenography emphasise the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively. The NL ideal encompasses "democratic processes, diversity, inclusion and equality ... and social constructionist notions of relational dialogue" (Ryberg et al., 2012, p.46). This idyllic pursuit in NL participation is matched by the effort recommended in doing phenomenography. That is, to move away from presuppositions towards a non-judgmental attitude achieved through critical reflexivity. The phenomenographer is invited to accept such propensities as diversity and inclusion, just as from an opposite direction in NL designers and conveners are alerted of the 'dark side' begetting oppression and suppression and what Ferreday & Hodgson (2010) refer to as the tyrannical experience of participation in NL. Both strategies, in their respective operative fields suggest a directed effort to inspire the complement of participants to target a "heterotopian view [which] acknowledges that it may well and often does test customary notions of ourselves and of participation but at the same time offer space to imagine

and desire differently, not in a utopian, normative or comfortable sense but in a heterotopian, often disturbing and disruptive sense” (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010, p.11), anew a variable view of variation.

Concluding remarks

These few observations matching the phenomenographic approach to the NL attitude at different levels of abstraction bode well the use of phenomenography to understand NL. Beyond the match of values and beliefs, of particular significance is the notion of learning at the nexus of relations, the inherent potential of the phenomenographic research approach for focusing on learning relations such as in NL, and the possibility of phenomenography to bring to light the variable view of variation in learning relations. Indeed, Bowden (2000) proposes the term “phenomenographic pedagogy” to refer to the strategy of using phenomenography to inform (teaching and) learning practice generally. Focusing on relations for learning including inter-human relations as advanced in NL, phenomenography may thus serve to inform the unremitting progression of the use of communicative technologies in learning that may (teaching and) learning mediated by technologies in practice truly turns out to be empowering means of learning and *for* learning. Perhaps, an in-depth study looking into the points of convergence and divergence when using phenomenography to investigate aspects of NL may help clarify conjectures at the abstract level and beyond this, on a more practical note, it may help to better highlight capabilities, limitations, facilitations and pitfalls, thus illuminating prospects for those who contemplate phenomenography to understand and promote NL.

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