

Phenomenography

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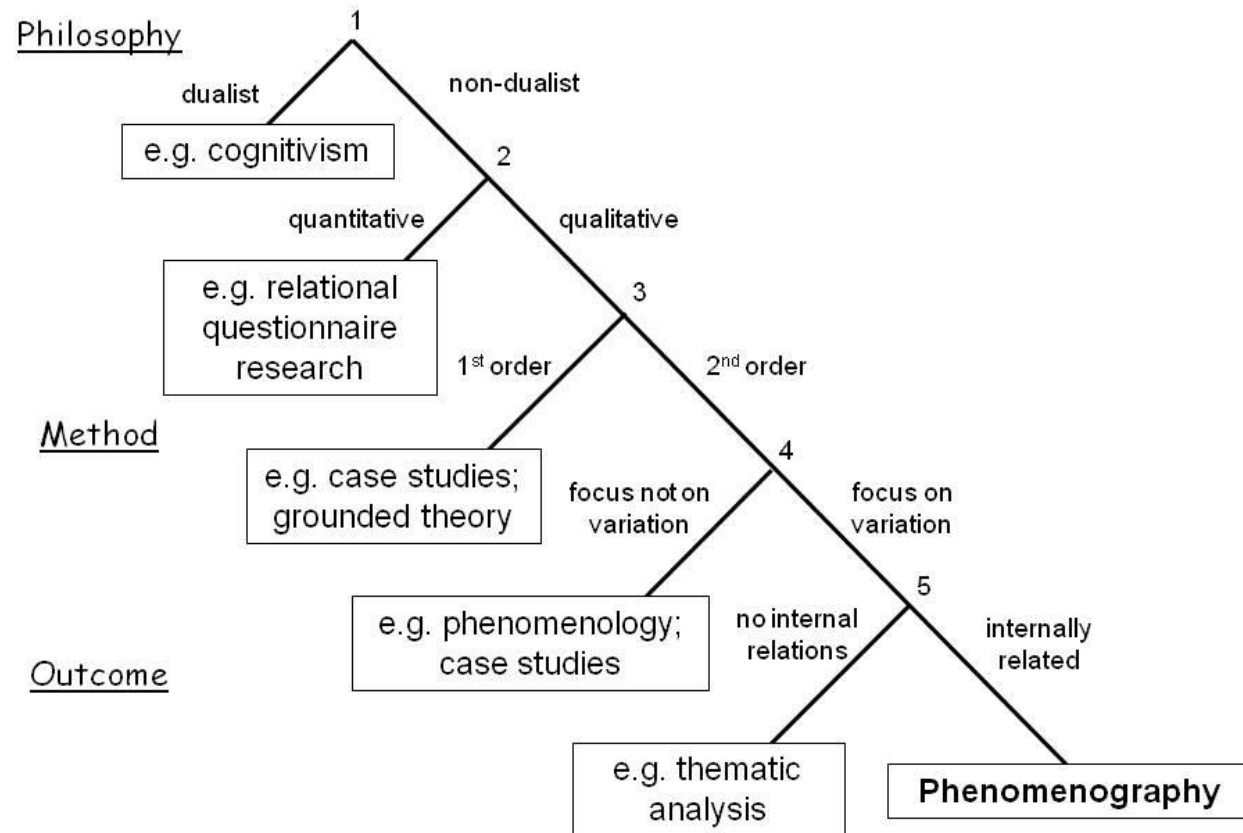
What is it?

- “... the empirical study of the qualitatively different ways in which aspects of the world are experienced”.
 - Variations
 - Subjects’ experience
 - Relationships
- “A phenomenographic research project reveals the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon can be experienced, understood or perceived by a student cohort”.
 - E.g. surface/deep/strategic learning
 - E.g. students’ understanding of concepts such as “plagiarism”

Bowden (1990)

- “In a sense phenomenographic research mirrors what good teachers do. It tries to understand what the students are doing in their learning. It attempts to discover what different approaches students are taking and to understand these in terms of outcomes of their learning activities. Good teachers do that as a preliminary to further action to help their students come to understand the concept concerned and, of course, many do it instinctively.”

Trigwell (2006)



How do you do it?

- (Usually) Semi-structured or unstructured interviews, possibly with a task attached
- Transcription and analysis
- Identify the limited number of variations
- Identify the relationships between them
- Use a hierarchically ordered set of categories = outcome space
- Use the outcome space to compare the categories with each other

Tan and Prosser (2004): academics' understandings of grade descriptors

- **Conception 1. Grade descriptors as generic descriptors**

Generic descriptors do not depict actual achievement levels. Grade descriptors are used to determine if students should progress to the next level of study. Academics who share this view of grade descriptors utilize the grade descriptors for credentialing purposes only.

- **Conception 2. Grade descriptors as grade distributors**

Grade distributors are tentative but inadequate depictions of actual achievement levels. Grade descriptors are used to moderate the final assessment results to achieve a norm-referenced distribution of results. This view of grade descriptors emphasizes point (e) of the formal policy to 'use norm-referenced statistics to moderate the results of standards-based assessment'.

- **Conception 3. Grade descriptors as grade indicators**

Grade indicators are primary but incomplete depictions of actual achievement levels. Grade descriptors serve as indicative benchmarks of different achievement levels which may require refinement. This view of grade descriptors emphasizes point (d) of the formal policy to 'grade assessments against the benchmarks and to discuss the outcomes to refine the standards'.

- **Conception 4. Grade descriptors as grade interpreters**

Grade interpreters are primary and comprehensive depictions of actual achievement levels. Grade interpreters represent the definitive interpretation of different levels of achievement to academic staff and to their students. Such grade descriptors serve as a shared basis for academic staff and students to hold a common understanding of different levels or standards of achievement. Academic staff are able to utilize these descriptors to convey their expectations of students' work and utilize the same descriptors to subsequently assess and evaluate students' work.

Ashwin (2005, 2006): the Oxford tutorial

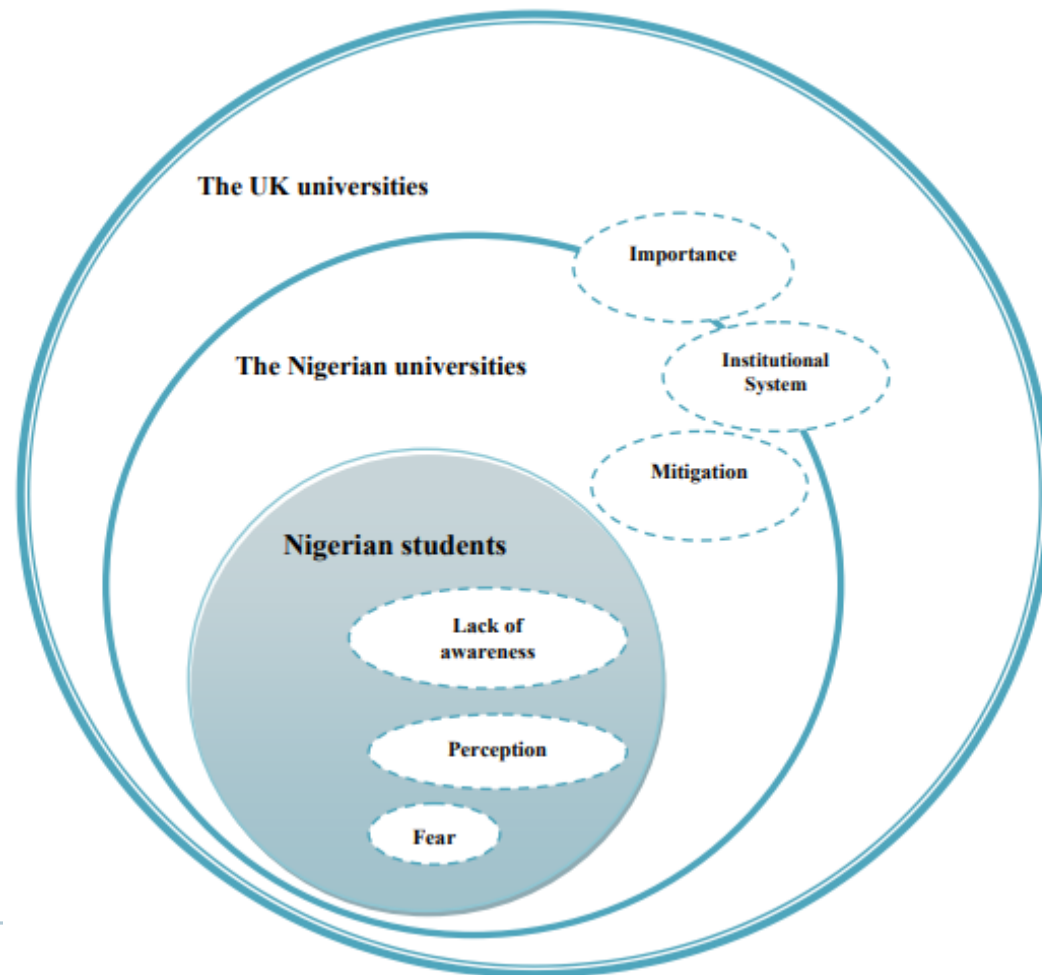
Students

1. Tutor explains what student does not understand
2. Tutor shows student how to see subject as tutor does
3. Tutor brings things into relation to each other to help student develop new perspective
4. Tutor and student exchange views and both come to a new understanding

Tutors

1. Tutor helps students to develop an understanding of concepts
2. Students see how to approach their discipline
3. Evidence is critically discussed
4. New positions on the topic are developed and refined

Orim et al (2013): Exploring Nigerian postgraduate students' experience of plagiarism



Mimirinis (2019): Academics' concepts of e-assessment

“Four categories of description were identified from the analysis of the data. Thereby, e-assessment can be seen as a means of:

- efficiently managing and streamlining the assessment process;
- facilitating dialogue and student engagement;
- enhancing student learning;
- developing (digital) identity and the community.”

Dimensions of variation:

- The benefit of e-assessment
 - The role of the assessing teacher
 - The role of the assessed student
 - The role of the medium
 - The purpose, quality and level of collaboration
 - The relationship to teaching and learning
-

Ashworth and Lucas (2000:200)

- “...the issue is this: it is the *student’s* experienced world that phenomenographic research bases itself on, and therefore steps must be taken – at the beginning and throughout the research – to bracket anything that would lead us from the student’s experience”.

In favour

- Allows teachers and students to identify and interrogate where their understandings differ
- Can be used in teaching
- Doesn't pass judgment on the hierarchy
- "The more we can make things which are unthematized and implicit into objects of reflection, and hence thematized and explicit, the more fully do we explore awareness." (Marton)
- "Phenomenography takes the position that experience is relational, not purely objective, independent of people, nor purely subjective, independent of the world." (Mann)
- Unless you have a point of reference and a variation from it, you can't understand it fully (this is the link to variation theory).

Webb (1997:200/201)

- “ ...[i]n practice, phenomenographic studies usually concern students being asked to describe their understanding of a concept, a text or a situation, with the researcher then sorting the descriptions into a ‘handful’ (very often five!) categories ... Invariably one of the categories displays ‘correct meaning, correct knowledge or correct understanding’ whilst the others are recapitulations of earlier, now supposedly discredited accounts.”

Against

- Qualitative and subjective
- Too positivist (I didn't say the criticisms were consistent)
- Description – concepts or discursive practices
- Categories, hierarchies and relations determined by the researcher
- Categorisation narrow and conservative
- Involves value judgments (eg surface learning bad) = does pass judgment on the hierarchy
- Ignores context (eg why student took a surface approach) and purposes of education
- Ignores causation – how do structural issues impact on the variations?

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