



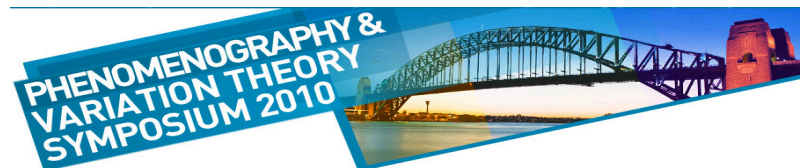
Assignments and Learning: Variation in Highly Achieving Students' Experiences

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Overview

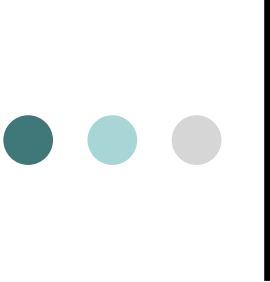
- Introduce the project
- My 'implementation' of phenomenographic method
- Briefly outline three broad sets of findings
- Lay out some 'outcomes' that could be published?
- Discussion & feedback about what seems most useful?
 - **My question: *What should be focus of writing?***



Introduction

○ Aims of the project:

- Examine experiences of postgraduate coursework students (postgraduates) 'doing' an assignment
- Assessment well recognised as a driving force in students' learning
- Many faculties make extensive use of essay or report-style assignments
- Negotiating these can be crucial to their learning, academic success and progress - especially for postgraduates



Context of the project

- Drew on theoretical foundations in:
 - Information behaviour
 - Student learning
- Subject for aspiring Information and Knowledge Management professionals
- I was tutoring – two cohorts
- Found considerable variation in aspects of ‘doing an assignment - preparing an assessed report.



Research Questions

At the outset the research questions were:

- How do postgraduates experience information and learning processes in the context of preparing and completing an assignment?
- How do postgraduates experience Enough (and not Enough) in the context of preparing and completing an assignment?
- Do changes occur in postgraduates' experiences of information, learning and Enough over the timeframe of an assignment?

In the course of the research the importance of Affect became apparent and a further research question emerged:

- What are the affective dimensions of the experiences of postgraduates over the timeframe of an assignment?



Phenomenographic Approach

- 'Phenomenographically-based' study
- Small scale
 - Six volunteer postgraduates
 - Series of 3 conversational interviews before, during & after **one** research-based assignment
 - Two students chosen for case studies
 - provide in-depth perspective of individual experiences
 - map their experiences over the timeframe of the assignment.
- Interview analysis prioritised intensive use of audio recordings - supplemented by verbatim transcripts.



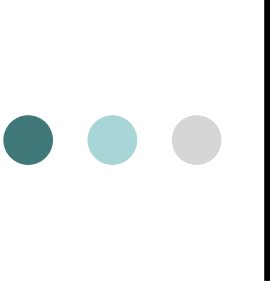
Sets of Findings: Variation

1. Processes experienced by the postgraduates (AIP)
 - Six qualitatively different categories that are hierarchically related
 - Range from:
 - shaping the task towards completion
 - to radically changing their views about part of the world
2. Experiences of 'enough' that these postgraduates balanced when completing an assignment
 - Five qualitatively different categories (maintaining control to generating a creative process).
 - 'Enough' far richer than simply a decision to stop.
 - Types: Enough for what?



Process of 'doing' an Assignment

1. Shaping the Task Towards Completion:
 - Assignment information processes are experienced as completing a substantial but straightforward assessment task by using personal strategies to shape and manage the task.
2. Finding Out More About the Profession:
 - Assignment information processes are experienced as a means of finding out more about something of current interest about their chosen professional field.
3. Discovery and Engagement with the Research Process:
 - Assignment information processes are experienced as an engaging journey to discover and understand interesting things, by hunting down leads and having the opportunity to focus and reflect on what they find.
4. Professional and Personal Perception and Understanding:
 - Assignment information processes are experienced as a process of growing awareness, learning and understanding about different facets of the profession and oneself through activity and thought.
5. Growing and Changing:
 - Assignment information processes are experienced as personal growth and change by expanding ideas and skills through communication and reflection while investigating a topic and completing the task.
6. Changing Views About Information in the World:
 - Assignment information processes are experienced as radically changing one's way of seeing a familiar part of the world and personal values as the result of an extended engagement with information about a topic.



‘Enough’

- Control and Getting Done:
 - Enough is experienced as the right amount of essential elements of acceptable standard in place, in order to keep (or regain) control, get the task done and avoid disaster.
- Optimal Production:
 - Enough is experienced as what enables optimal physical production in order get it right and create a high quality report.
- Understanding and Engagement:
 - Enough is experienced as what allows engagement and enjoyment of a process of discovery and ‘working out’ in order to understand and successfully produce.
- Completion and Satisfaction:
 - Enough is experienced as an internalised qualitative sense of completeness and coverage in order to satisfy curiosity and make sense to oneself of the topic and the assignment.
- Generation and Creation:
 - Enough is experienced as a generative driver of the content vision and development process of risk taking in order to engage in discovery and create a unique, ideal product of value in its own right.



Sets of Findings: Case studies

- Two in-depth case studies
 - Trajectories – process descriptions
 - Relationship AIP & ‘enough’
 - Vignettes
- Triangulation - individual as well as pooled experiences
- Fleshed out ‘stripped’ categories where
 - *“the specific flavours, the scents, and the colors of the worlds of the individuals have been abandoned”* (Marton & Booth 1997, p. 114)
- How different categories of AIP and ‘enough’ experienced by individuals
- Patterns of change over the timeframe of an assignment
- Vividly demonstrated affective aspects of student experiences (neglected).



Enough for What?

- **A. Assignment Task**
 - The assignment itself as a complete object or 'thing' including the written outline and assessment criteria, structure, format (words and pages). This is connected to Control and Getting Done, and Optimal Production.
- **B. Project Management**
 - What is required for getting the assignment done which is strongly focused on time but includes energy, organisation, personal resources and generic information literacy skills. This is connected to Control and Getting Done, and Optimal Production.
- **C. Academic Expectations**
 - The implicit expectations of rigour and criteria of the tutor, lecturer, course level and institution as well as the more general and intangible expectations of peers, family and friends. This is connected to Control and Getting Done, Optimal Production, and Completion and Satisfaction.
- **D. Professional Portfolio**
 - Proof of technical and conceptual professional competencies for employers, professional associations, accreditation and oneself. This is connected to Understanding and Engagement, and Completion and Satisfaction.
- **E. Evolving Content**
 - The evolving requirements of the content as they 'follow the thread', answer questions or make an argument. This includes the subject as a whole and the discipline or area (refer to Table 8.2 for more details on how the topic evolves). The main point for these postgraduates was grappling with the ideas during AIP. This is connected to Understanding and Engagement, and Completion and Satisfaction.
- **F. Personal Resonance**
 - The very personal criteria that are fundamental to the reason for doing the postgraduate course and how the students prioritise, judge and shape all aspects of the task. Incorporates elements of identity, meaning and expectations of oneself. This is connected to Completion and Satisfaction, and Generation and Creation.



Questions at this point?

- Questions?

- Observations?

- My questions next...



Some interesting 'outcomes'?

- Considerable variation can exist even amongst apparently similar students.
- Students' highly dynamic individual experiences are not only situational, but also 'micro contextual'.
- Postgraduates' experiences were often at levels associated with a 'surface approach' to learning
- Balancing their approaches in meaningful and effective ways seemed to be key (strategic?).



1: Diversity and variation in variation

- Diversity of experiences found in one standard ‘traditional’ assessment task
- Diversity in a quite homogenous group
 - Female postgraduates (twenties – forties)
 - High achievers
 - IKM professional focus, etc
- Variation in the variation of experiences found in doing an assignment and ‘enough’.



2: Micro-context?

- Students' highly dynamic (individual) experiences are not only 'situational'
- Also 'micro contextual' - moment to moment?



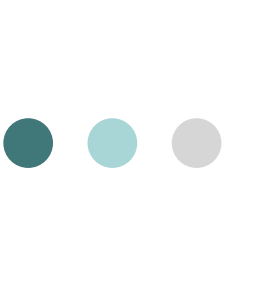
3: Balancing & Change

- Balancing more AND less complex ways of experiencing learning
 - Crucial to:
 - Engagement?
 - Progression?
 - Success?
- Dynamics of change (eg learning)
- Role of risk – links to affect?



In Conclusion

- Traditional research report style assessment can have a valuable role
 - Complex, dynamic & enriching learning experiences
 - Personal investment and feelings, uncertainty, 'risk' for postgraduate high achievers
 - Impact of affective aspects of assignments - to be further considered to improve the holistic learning experiences of diverse students.
- **My question & discussion:**
 - **What should be my focus for writing & publication?**
 - Feedback please...!
- **Thank you!**



Excerpt from reviewer's reflection...

“There were several challenges for me in reviewing this fully blended learning environment:

- It was hard to know what to pay attention to - given that there was not enough scope to pay lots of attention to everything! Should I focus on the documentation or the online environments equally?
- I also had a dilemma about what to print out, because I have difficulty thinking things through in depth and in a sustained way when they are onscreen.”