Theory of Phenomenography
Margaret Thayer (Ed Tech 504-4173)

Overview. The theory of phenomenography seeks to understand learning by examining the variation in learners’ qualitative experiences of learning. Ference Marton of the University of Gothenburg in Sweden coined the term “phenomenography” in 1981 based on earlier Swedish research studies (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006). Phenomenography was influenced primarily by the philosophy of empiricism, with contributions from the qualitative research approach that emerged in the 1970s, especially grounded theory (Richardson, 1999). Researchers have different views of constructivism’s influence on phenomenography. Alsop and Tompsett (2006) state that phenomenography is “strictly empirical and non-constructivist,” while Richardson (1999) reports that Marton himself acknowledged an “affinity” between phenomenography and constructivist approaches—yet Marton still rejected constructivism itself.

Principles and Practice. Phenomenography is based on the premise that individuals experience qualitative variations of the same phenomenon. Phenomenographic researchers interview learners about their experience with a particular phenomenon, then assign “categories of description” to the learners’ own conceptions of their learning experiences; the connections made between these categories constitute the “outcome space” (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Richardson, 1999). According to Ashworth and Lucas (2000), phenomenography’s influence is largely as a research approach in higher education, where it has successfully demonstrated that the variations in learners’ approaches to learning can be linked to certain types of learning outcomes. Richardson (1999) states that phenomenography has gained the most traction in Sweden, Australia, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and suggests that phenomenography has not garnered much attention in North America because of its qualitative rather than quantitative analysis approach.

Phenomenography versus Phenomenology. Phenomenography can be confused with the philosophy of phenomenology. The two share many characteristics, but phenomenology seeks to understand the distinction between an individual’s subjective perception of the “essence” of an experience and the experience itself, while phenomenography does not separate the learner’s conception of an experience from the experience itself (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006). In addition, phenomenology is concerned with “immediate experience” and the “prereflective level of consciousness,” while phenomenography is concerned with “both the conceptual and the experiential” (Alsop & Tompsett, 2006; Richardson, 1999).

Application. Any literature search will reveal that phenomenographic analysis has been used for studies of learning in many subject areas. One possible example would be to conduct a phenomenographic analysis of BSU’s Educational Technology students to examine their experiences using Moodle. Since one person’s experience as a distance education student provides only one perspective on the unique opportunities and challenges of online learning, a phenomenographic analysis of many Moodle users could offer some insights into others’ experiences with an online course management tool. These insights could prove valuable when designing online instructional materials for other adult learners.
References

