

Reflections on phenomenographic process: Interview, transcription and analysis



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***Abstract:** The processes of conducting and reading interviews are important in phenomenographic research, as well as other qualitative research orientations making significant contributions in higher education research and development. This paper aims to contribute to an ongoing conversation about the quality of research in higher education by exploring the interview, transcription and analysis processes through the experiences of the writer in a phenomenographic study conducted at Macquarie University last year. Transcription is explored as a transformative process, a bridge between interview and analysis across which the data, as well as the interviewer-researcher, are re-orientated towards the process of analytical reading. The critical aspects of interviews as living conversations are identified, namely that they are productive interactions in which the data is constituted, that the interviewee and interviewer negotiate on several levels to produce a shared meaning, and that meaning production in interviews is achieved through language. Finally, the interpretive reading of the artefacts of living conversations is considered, and some difficulties are identified.*

***Keywords:** interviews, phenomenography, hermeneutics*

Introduction

Through my own experiences of research in higher education, I explore the relationship between the methodologically guided processes of phenomenographic interview and analysis (Gonzalez, 2001). Phenomenographic research aims to identify and describe qualitative variation in people's experience of phenomena. Much phenomenographic research has sought to contribute to knowledge about learning and teaching by making evident the different ways that learners apprehend their learning (Marton & Booth, 1997). Such studies have achieved the explication of subjective-meaning structures of the participants in education and their relation to the more readily observable learning activities and outcomes (Ramsden, 1992). Increasingly, phenomenographic data are collected through a series of deep and open-ended interviews, which are then analysed through iterative readings to produce an outcome space (Reid, 1997). I became fascinated with the process of phenomenographic research through my involvement last year in research about Law students' conceptions of learning and working in law, a journey of a research assistant and her data from a series of conversations to phenomenographic "categories of description", an intersection of theory, method and practice. As Ashworth and Lucas recently observed, the process of phenomenographic research has seldom been discussed and warrants greater exploration, as "*the process by which the research is conducted is of key importance in terms of determining whether the outcomes are ontologically defensible and epistemologically valid*" (Ashworth and Lucas 2000, p. 296).

The Experience of Interviewing

Last year I conducted interviews with thirty-four volunteers studying Law for a research project designed by Dr Anna Reid at Macquarie University. Key questions asked the respondents to make an account of their ideas about learning and working in law- *What do you think law is about? What do you aim to achieve when you are learning in law? What do you think it will be like to be a legal professional? How do you think your expectations of working may affect what you learn?* I transcribed the recorded interviews, and as part of the research team devoted a week to analysis of the transcripts, developing a phenomenographic outcome space.

The project was my first contact with phenomenography. I was previously preoccupied with the question of whether anything can be known of the experience of a group of women who died a millennium and a half ago through their few surviving writings (Dortins, 2000). I was newly struck by the complexities of conducting research about the experience of the living, in particular the nature of a pool of data so intertwined with social interactions and ethical concerns, and comprised of utterances made by participants in conversation with myself. I was intrigued by the application of a hermeneutic reading method to interviews that I had experienced as conversation. Where had conversation become text (Ikuenobe, 2001)? Here I explore transcription as a process re-constitutive of data and the researcher. Subsequently, I inquire further into the nature of the interview space and its products, and, lastly, into our process of analysis.

As I transcribed the interviews, I came to understand transcription as a process through which I was transforming myself -distancing myself from the interview situations and participants, or, as I thought at the time, editing myself out of the interviews. I edited out my feelings about each conversation, regrets at failing to pursue something that might have been significant, the awkwardness or fun of each exchange. This 'editing' was purely internal, achieved whilst typing word for word the audio-recordings of the interviews. Increasingly, I was able to conceptualise myself as someone who would read the transcripts in the light of a particular analytical framework, alongside colleagues who had not participated in my conversations with the students. Not only a self-transformation was in train, but also a transformation of the data as it was re-coded for the analysis event. Through transcription and my own re-orientation towards the data, I was reconstituting the socially and temporally situated interviews into something much more familiar to me: a group of texts, or even one large text, that could be read with or without reference to the original conversations, or to the speakers.

Kvale considers transcription a translation, both from spoken to written language, and from living and personal conversation to a "frozen" text which is to be read analytically (Kvale 1996, p. 165). For myself as conversationalist, transcriber and analyst, the changes of meaning involved in the translation were palpable. Kvale (p. 166) identifies the transcriber-translator with a traitor, and as I immortalised the interview conversations, that is how I felt. I was both severing the participants' words from their intentions to mean, and rendering their sincere and sophisticated thoughts in singularly inelegant language. One interviewee, renamed Allan (all names in this paper are pseudonyms), asked whether he might have a copy of the interview transcript when it was prepared; he thought it might make "the start of a nice thesis". I told him of course he might, but hoped he would never collect it. I doubted that he would be delighted with a document that relentlessly recorded his repetitions and hesitations, the changes in direction he had made, and the inconsistencies of his account of himself. While the reflective re-phrasings and personal meanings Allan had accumulated through our conversation are accepted features of spoken language, transcribed they appeared inarticulate

juxtaposed with usual standards of written language, particularly the sort of academic language that would characterise the thesis in his imagination (Kvale, 1996; Vincent & Warren, 2001).

The verbal data are re-contextualised when transcribed, their conversational context is de-emphasized, and context in the text (both the individual transcript and group of transcripts) emphasised. Jokes and other transactions with mostly social meaning were shared before, after and during the interviews. These exchanges built and maintained rapport, which facilitated 'serious' communication; I was able to pursue sensitive avenues, such as the personal growth alluded to by many respondents, because of the comfortable social space we negotiated. Many social exchanges appear in the transcripts, but distanced from their original context can be interpreted quite differently. For example, Jason entered the interview room with a bit of a swagger, I had the sense that we were 'sizing each other up'. Although we talked about the project 'seriously' for some minutes before I pressed 'record' and asked him the first question, his response was a bit of a challenge -he wasn't going to be one of those sucker respondents who came across all genuine. My response showed that I didn't believe this was all he had to offer. His next response complied with the role he thought he should really fill in the interview, giving a considered opinion in a clear form. Much of the context I perceived during this exchange was provided by body language.

I: What do you think law is about?

Jason: Um, doing five years at uni and then getting a nice big salary at the end of it, hopefully.

I: Yeah?

Jason: Seriously um, I think it has two sides to it, a technical side which you're learning the elements of certain things...

Transcription de-emphasised the social context of the exchange and emphasised the content of Jason's responses. In the analysis, we read his first utterance as a neat summation of a conception of law (a qualification with extrinsic rewards) that was articulated at greater length later in the transcript.

Interview as Data

I have already characterised the interview as a particular sort of conversation: here I explicate more methodically the critical aspects of the interview space, in my experience, and the kind of data produced there. Broadly, I experienced the interviews as creative conversations, in which the object of study was brought into being; as collaborative endeavours in which meaning was produced through negotiation between the respondent and myself; and as communications in which language and meaning were inseparable.

Marton characterises the phenomenographic interview as a productive interaction, "the experiences and understandings, are jointly constituted by interviewer and interviewee..." (Marton, 1996). Our question, "what do you aim to achieve when you are learning in law?" asked the participants not only what they considered "learning in law" to be, but also to reflect on the relation in which they placed themselves to "learning in law". The participants frequently found it easier to provide an account of "learning in law" than to reflect on their orientation towards it, I asked again and again what it was that the respondent aimed to achieve through the practice or process that she or he had described. In most cases the participants had not explicitly thought or talked about either of these phenomena before, and indeed had not previously constituted them as phenomena. The transcripts are peppered with comments such as "Um I guess ooh, I never thought of that... Wow, that's a good question!"

Several participants commented on the interview itself as a new experience, which was changing their view of the phenomena we asked them to talk about, learning and working in law. One participant returned several times to say she was feeling more confident in her learning as a result of what she had found out about herself during the interview. The interviewees' apprehension of what it was to learn and work in law was changing as they spoke. One described a dialectical process of knowledge construction that she experienced in the interview,

Tereza: ...like just sitting here for an hour and having spoken about this it just, you know makes me think about, "what do I aim to achieve?", "Why am I doing law"... You think about something but that's not enough, you need to say it, because what's in your head I guess ninety percent of the time is different than what comes out of your mouth, and when it comes out of your mouth and goes back into your head it makes a whole lot of other stuff in your brain and makes other things come out...

Phenomenographers are anxious to let the interviewee define his/her own terms of reference, as our aim is to document subjective meaning structures, yet we do wish to talk with the interviewee about a particular phenomenon, in our case learning and working in law, which must be nominated somehow. Ashworth and Lucas' caution (2000, p. 299) is expressive of the resulting delicacy of the interview task; *"the research interviews have to be introduced to the interviewee as being 'about' something... The researcher and researched must begin with some kind of (superficially) shared topic, verbalised in terms which they both recognise as meaningful."* Initially, Reid designed the set of carefully open-ended key questions related above. Subsequent to my asking each respondent a key question, there followed a more or less extended negotiation of a shared meaning (Kvale 1996, p 50). My role was to assist the participants in exploring and elucidating their ideas as they endeavoured to express them to me. While the respondent was the authority on his/her own ideas, I was accorded authority on the matter of what the interview was about and what was relevant to it. Thus the interview conversations consisted of a continuous process of negotiation about the meaning of the question, the meaning of the respondent's response, the meaning of that response in relation to the question, and the overall meaning of the interview. One interviewee, Rodney, was able to articulate the quality of the shared meaning we were negotiating about.

Rodney: I'm sort of struggling with this question a little bit, I'm not sure what you mean, like where exactly you are sort of aiming it, what you want me to say. I know what you want me to say should be what I want to say, but I'm not sure what area you are focussing on.

When we began, Rodney seemed to find my question as confusing as I found his responses oblique, but we persisted. I asked modified versions of the key question and tried to articulate his ideas back to him, asking whether I had understood. Rodney re-considered the focus of what I had asked and attempted to explain in different ways. I was left with a different understanding of what that key question could mean, Rodney appeared to have developed a new strength in his conviction about working to help people and a new way of articulating how he wanted to go about it. Not all negotiations were so fruitful or so overt; for example my exchange with Jason above could be considered a negotiation of what the interview was to be about.

Interviews are about talk. The shared meanings of the interviews could not have been constituted but through language. Various languages were in currency through the interview conversations. The open-ended key and prompt questions of the interviewer, a language new

to me, embodied my role as interviewer. Participants employed a wide variety of ways of speaking, related to their cultural situations and perception of the interview space, from a trusting and informal stream of consciousness, to the rhetoric of the ‘man of the world’ sharing his experience with a younger person. Both Kvale and Säljö consider each interview conversation as part of larger conversations, as the talk through which we express meaning within the interview is inextricable from the talk through which we have learned to constitute meaning (Kvale, 1996; Säljö, 1997). The participants in our study had learned about law as well as about learning law through language. For many of the respondents, much of the thinking and talking they had done about what law is about was in relation to their first year course, Jurisprudence. Our first key question “what do you think law is about?” was intending to be open to a subjective response, perhaps a jurisprudential response, instead several respondents interpreted the question as a Jurisprudential question, the sort of question a law student might be asked to write an essay on. The subtle, but significant, difference between the two questions is played out in the following exchange,

I: What do you think law is about?

Ellam: Um, I hate that question.

I: [laugh]

Ellam: Um I don’t know, I think its about regulating um people’s behaviour, um regulating relationships between people I suppose like what you can and can’t do, that’s the best I can come up with. I don’t think that question is answerable.

I: Can I ask you once more, what do you think law is about?

Ellam: Um, I just think its about regulating behaviour basically, yeah.

I: Okay, do you, you said it might not be answerable.

Ellam: Because I think everyone has a different idea about law, isn’t that what Jurisprudence was about? There were a lot of opinions that’s just, you have, they have holes, there’s holes in every answer to that question I think, yeah that’s just it.

Ellam’s own answer to the question; “regulating...people’s behaviour”, was different to the status quo he identified in his Jurisprudence course; there is no answer, which was not a personal exploration of what law was about in his case. It is not so easy to identify the effects of the intermingling of the language of the law discipline, or any other languages, with the language of the interview questions and responses in other cases. A number of students seemed to identify the interview questions, or the formal aspects of the interview itself, with a psychological study, one respondent called herself my “lab-rat”, volunteered that she was “anally-retentive” and invoked the results of a personality test.

Analysing the Transcripts

The transcripts I brought to the research team for analysis reflect the complex processes of the interviews in their great heterogeneity: multivarious utterances and exchanges are encoded, embedded with social and cultural meanings, linguistic and semantic meanings, as well as the meanings about learning and working in law. The team applied a broadly hermeneutic reading method as we worked towards an understanding of the students’ conceptions of learning and working in law represented in the transcripts. In turn we collegially re-articulated the respondents’ accounts of their ideas and made qualitative distinctions between them. Our reading was productive: an outcome space was constituted to the satisfaction of all three researchers. However, the reading involved, for myself, a reorientation away from those defining characteristics of the interview process that I identified above. The conversational nature of the interviews was absent from consideration in our analysis, the social and language topography ‘flattened’ in our search for a particular kind of meaning within our text

(Webb, 1996 p. 2). Säljö and Marton have debated the ontological and epistemological implications of such a shift from talk to conception (Säljö, 1997; Marton, 1995). Rather than enter the fray, there remains space only to ask whether such a reorientation did only serve, or perhaps stand in the way of our research aims.

The crucial question here is whether our inattention to the conversational origins of the interview artefact caused us to misinterpret the data in any sense in the terms of our own research aims, perhaps in a few subtle ways it did. For example, Hazel *et al* (1997) note the absence of affective elements from the phenomenographic outcome space. Our reading, I think, was inconsistent in its treatment of affective elements. Our descriptions of the more expansive conceptions of learning and working in law did include an affective element, because here ideas about learning and working in law converged with a highly self-conscious sense of self-nourishment and of being a feeling person in the world of law. However, where affective elements of conceptions were more obscurely present in the transcripts, as in Ellam's conflicted account of law above, we were not able to account for them in terms of our hermeneutic reading and phenomenographic re-articulation.

Finally, a hermeneutic cycle explicates the meaning of a text through an increasing understanding of the whole from the parts of the text, the parts from the whole, and so on (see Kvale 1996; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). However, the parts and the whole of impromptu interview conversations, in the process of unfolding meaning and replete with inconsistencies cannot always be assumed to exist in meaningful relation (Hutton-Jarvis, 1999). In our analysis there were two kinds of 'whole', each transcript was a whole and the group of transcripts another. Where we considered the group of transcripts our whole the consistencies of meaning constituted the cohesion of respondents' accounts into a limited number of qualitatively different conceptions, and the inconsistencies constituted those qualitative differences. When we considered individual transcripts as 'wholes', however, some slippage occurred. Compatibility between the utterances increased our understanding of the respondents' conception and, later in the process, contributed to our understanding of the category of description represented there. But inconsistencies within transcripts did not need to be made sense of because, after all, it was not the individual's profile under construction but profiles of conceptions. Individuals are understood to be able to articulate a range of conceptions less expansive or deep than their own most inclusive or deep conception (Reid, 1997) So, in some cases the whole of the individual transcript was used to elucidate its parts, while in others that whole was not considered to illuminate the parts, rather they could be understood in relation to the group of transcripts. Säljö (1997) identifies this inconsistency, arguing that it is epistemologically compromising. Marton has more recently focussed on analysis of the variation within individual accounts (Marton & Trigwell, 2000).

Conclusion

In several senses our method served our aims well and faithfully. Our phenomenographic orientation led us to require a long interview of an open-ended nature, encouraging reflective articulation of experiences, ideas and conceptions about learning and working in law. Thus a rather extensive, if situated, exploration of the learners' ideas was documented. Our conviction that this process of reflection would enhance the quality of the research participants' educational experience was supported by the thanks given us by participants who felt they had gained new perspectives on their learning. The process of analysis, our hermeneutic readings and the development of phenomenographic categories of description, yielded new knowledge. We identified a distinction between a warm response to legal theory as an entertaining and informative companion to the rules and regulations, and a truly

contextual understanding of law. However, the method we adopted and my research practice in carrying it out existed in complicated relation to our research aims. There were many ideas, utterances, exchanges and allusions that could not be apprehended or expressed within the paradigm of phenomenography, attention to these occasionally distracted or disrupted our analysis. Conversely, our inattention to the nature of the interview process perhaps detracted from our analysis or its epistemological claims (Sandberg, 1997). In my view, the introduction of conversations about the process of research to the research process itself would enhance the quality of educational research similar to ours. Of particular importance in qualitative, interview-based research are conversations about processes of talking and reading, their constitution and re-constitutions of the data and positioning of the researchers themselves.

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