

The Learner's Experience of a Networked Learning Knowledge Community Design

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study that will be reported in this paper is to investigate the learning experiences in a Masters degree program whose design is based on a 'knowledge community' pedagogical perspective. The MA is supported by a network learning environment that includes several different areas and discussion forums intended to encourage 'dialogical learning'. The study aims to compare and contrast the learners' experiences with the pedagogical intentions of the program design.

The context for the study is a Lancaster University's MA in Management Learning and Leadership (MAMLL) programme. This is a two-year programme directed towards people in, or entering, leadership and/or management development roles. The programme attracts a diverse range of participants from public, private and voluntary organisations. A principle concept of the program is that learners help create the learning environment, a knowledge community, by building their own representations of management learning using the capabilities of on-line technologies to enable dialogical learning (Hodgson and Zenios, 2003).

In the study, it is the learner's experience of the MAMLL networked learning environment that is of interest.

METHODOLOGY

The study is informed by a phenomenographic approach, based on the ideas of Ference Marton, and investigates the different ways in which learners experience phenomena. Marton (1981) suggests that there are two approaches to questions about phenomenon. We can either study a given phenomenon, or study how people experience a given phenomenon. Phenomenography is the latter with the aim of describing and understanding the qualitatively different ways of experiencing phenomena, in this context, the learners' experience of a knowledge community in a networked learning environment. The aim of the study is to illuminate the variations in ways learners experience this phenomenon.

DATA COLLECTION

Learners who are beginning, in their second year and/or are close to recently completing the MAMLL program will be interviewed.

The interviews will focus on the learners' experience of the knowledge community and their use of the networked learning environment designed to support it. In the interviews learners will be asked to describe their experiences of working in the network learning environment. Using stimulated recall techniques learners will be asked to identify areas of the Network Learning MAMLL environment they have used recently (within the last one or two months) and prioritise these areas in terms of frequency. They will then be asked to access the areas of the environment that they have visited and requested to recall their experience of when they were in that part of the environment in terms of their feelings and thoughts.

DATA ANALYSIS

Phenomenographers Booth, amongst others, claim that a limited number of categories are possible for each phenomenon under study and that these categories can be discovered by immersion in the data, which, in this case, are transcriptions of the interviews (Booth, 1997). Thus, the interviews will be examined for variations in the experiences of the learners and emergent qualitatively distinct categories identified which reflect variations between these categories and the possibility of a limited number of types of variations.

The analytic process will follow the phenomenographic iterative approach where, with these initial categories in mind, the interview transcripts will be re-examined to determine if the categories are sufficiently descriptive and

indicative of the data. This process of modification and data review will be continued until the modified categories seem to be consistent with the interview data.

Thus consideration will be not only on specific categories of description, but also how the individual categories relate to each other and how learner's conceptions compare across different topics. Following the approach outlined we expect to be able to describe the variation in learners' experience of the 'MAMLL knowledge community'.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper will conclude with a discussion about how the variation that we find in learners' experiences relate to the original programme design and pedagogical intentions

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