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Research as a Learning Experience: A Phenomenological Explication

by
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Abstract

A phenomenological method was employed to explore the learning experiences of seven honours psychology learners who have completed research projects. The research event was experienced as a learning adventure, a period of personal growth, and also lead to a strong appreciation of the differences between doing research in practice and research as described in texts. They regarded time management and problem solving skills as important prerequisites to successful research. Findings provide guidelines for academics involved in the research training of learners and are a useful source of information, to provide insight into and alert learners to the challenges of research.

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Importance of Research Training in Higher Education

The old saying: "Give me a fish and I eat today. Teach me how to fish and I will eat for a lifetime", can be applied to research training in tertiary education. According to Barrows (cited in Ryan, [1993](#)), higher education is dedicated to giving students large quantities of fish, but little or no skill in fishing. This implies that the transmission of knowledge does not automatically mean that the learner will actually be able to do research. The lecture method, for example, promotes passive learning and it may be less effective than practical work for promoting deep understanding and for increasing learners' confidence and motivation for participating actively in learning (Reynolds, [1997](#)). In addition to acquiring theoretical research knowledge, research application skills also need to be developed. The question is, how can lecturers create learning opportunities that encourage learners to become personally involved in their learning? Personal engagement to some extent implies an initial degree of learner motivation and involvement. This does not exclude struggle, frustration, and hard work, but it does mean that learners engage in inquiry because they want to and because they are personally motivated (Child & Williams, [1996](#)). Many learners have a long-standing aversion to research. It is difficult to engage their interest in the subject because they typically study this subject not primarily out of deep personal interest but because it is a compulsory component of a degree course (Winn, [1995](#)). They may experience feelings of being unable to make research decisions. This may influence their motivation and commitment negatively, especially if they have unrealistic expectations at the beginning of their research projects, of what will be demanded of them in doing research. They

also tend to prefer conventional, as opposed to andragogical learning situations, because it provides them with a greater sense of certainty and security (Palmer, [1983](#)).

Research as a Learning and Problem-solving Event

What novice researchers need are learning experiences composed of a knowledge component (the representation of the facts, concepts, principles, procedures and/or theories in a certain subject, characterised by learning, remembering and/or reproducing) and a task performance or skills development component (Kirschner & Van Vliessen, [1997](#)). There is consensus in the literature that competence in conducting research can only be gained through experiencing the research process as a problem-solving event. This implies that some form of practical exposure is essential to the learning of research methods, and that the experience should be as real as possible (Burgess, [1990](#)). While classroom-based teaching equips learners with knowledge about research skills, it cannot substitute for practical experience. Research entails more than a mechanistic use of a given set of principles and techniques in a particular context (Burgess, [1981](#)). If learners are to become competent researchers they need to gain an understanding of how the various stages of research fit together in the research process. Learners need to start their research careers by conducting research that involves all the research stages. They need to progress through the entire event and receive feedback on it. Only after demonstrating competence, can they successfully conduct more complex forms of research.

The experiential learning approach is widely accepted as a means of enabling learners to blend theoretical frameworks with real-life experiences. This learning - by- doing approach has emerged as the preferred methodology winning higher education (Tynjala, [1998](#)). The theories and work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget, as well as the critical theory of Habermans and Freire form the foundation of Kolb's theory of experiential learning. According to Kolb ([1984](#)), learning is an unbroken, cyclical process grounded in experience. He describes the process of experiential learning as a four-stage cycle involving "concrete experience", "reflective observation", "abstract conceptualization", and "active experimentation". He believes that people learn from their experiences and that learning is enhanced through having realistic experiences.

The paradigm underlying this approach is that of discovery learning. It assumes that students in a novel situation will have their curiosity aroused, will have an increased motivation to learn, and will be able to translate that which they have experienced into meaningful insights into the subject matter. Rudestam and Newton ([1992](#)), as well as Woolnough and Allsop ([1985](#)) emphasise the messy and confusing nature of reality. Experiential learning is the ideal way of learning within unfamiliar and changing situations that do not behave in a stylised, predictable, fashion, such as research.

Project-based learning is one of the more effective methods within the experiential learning approach (Tynjala, [1998](#)), as experiential learning activities usually take the form of complex projects that consist of generally structured and guided experiential activities. These activities share the following characteristics: learners are faced with relatively unstructured, ambiguous situations; a great deal of learning may take place outside of the classroom and away from the lecturer; learners must apply theoretical knowledge during the learning event; and they

themselves have control over what they learn from their experiences and the process through which they learn (Hamer, [2000](#)). Increased importance is being given to project work in research training within which learners have the opportunity to investigate a particular topic area for themselves in order to develop the skills of independent inquiry.

It should be noted that undergraduate research is not a new phenomenon. It has been traditional within many disciplines for learners to complete some final year research project. Research projects executed by learners in the course of their training has also traditionally been an important aspect of training in psychology. Initiating, designing and completing an individual research project is one of the capstone, integrative courses in psychology. Such projects could be viewed as a first opportunity for learners to gain initial research experience. Projects of this nature could also provide a basis on which postgraduate work could be grounded (Conway, [1988](#)).

Project work also create opportunities for, what Eisner ([1979](#)) terms personalized learning. Personalized learning both includes and transcends subject-specific objectives (Allan, [1996](#)). This implies that the term also includes that which the learner has learned, which has not been directly taught, or what a learner has learned beyond a given subject area. This learning occurs independent of direct lecturer-learner interaction. As such, personalised learning is not totally predictable. It is, to an extent, individualised and dependent upon the extent to which the learner engages in the learning experience and takes responsibility for his/her own learning (Allan, [1996](#)). Thus, project work provides learners not only with the opportunity to apply prior knowledge of theory and principles. It also gives them a chance to develop commitment to the learning event and for experiencing a real sense of personal accomplishment or failure for the results obtained (Walters & Marks, [1981](#)).

Instructors who have made use of experiential learning in their courses have reported a number of benefits, including increased learner enthusiasm (Dabbour, [1997](#)) and self-reported learner enjoyment (Lawson, [1995](#)), as well as self-reported learner increases in the perceived value of the learning experience (Graeff, [1997](#)).

According to Booth ([1997](#)) the importance of understanding students conceptions of learning in order to develop teaching strategies and academic environments conducive to effective learning, cannot be emphasised enough. Teaching, therefore, requires a sensitivity to the learner's perspective. This statement is supported by Ballantyne, Bain and Packer ([1999](#)). They studied the insights of academics actively engaged in effective teaching practices. The study articulated the understanding of these academics of what constitutes effective teaching and learning. The results of the study highlight two themes. The first theme is the idea that good teaching stems from valuing students and their perspectives and experiences. Another theme indicates the importance of creating a learning environment in which learners feel that they can learn, take responsibility for their learning, and that they can be successful, in other words, an environment that provides experiential learning activities. The current emphasis in higher education is on encouraging students to take more responsibility and to become autonomous, independent learners; on learning to learn; and on reflective practice (Brew, [1999](#)). Reflection is one of the key ideas and features of all aspects of learning from experience (Boud & Walker, [1998](#)). Different aspects of reflection include reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection by instructors and

learners can take place before, during and after a learning event. Schön (1987), as well as Russell and Munby (1991), characterise reflection-on-action as an ordered, systematically structured, deliberative, logical analysis of events and situation. It is typically undertaken after an event, such as a research project, has occurred.

According to Barnett (1994) studying learners in higher education is a matter of discourse and reflection. Learners are in unique positions to report on their learning experiences and to provide, in a personalized way, an insider view on the research event. They could provide insight into how these experiences appear to them and on their own personal understanding and enjoyment (McDowell, 1991). Reports of this nature could contribute to psychology's shared experiential culture.

However, the subjective, personalized processes which have gone into the research event, as well as the learning and growing which researchers have experienced in order to produce research have largely been ignored. This means that one of the most important components of the research event has been neglected (Jones, 1985) and that there is very little research which tracks the changes that are taking place when researchers engage in research activities (Brew, 1999). This is so; despite the fact that many researchers are well aware that engaging in research includes elements that do not show up in publications (Danzinger, 1990; Martin, 1981; Sperry, 1988).

According to Edwards (1982) psychology's greatest gift is to teach us more about ourselves. When research is viewed as a human activity, the need to understand the experiences of those engaged in it, becomes very important. Students should also become aware of their own experiential learning process (November, 1997). Cuthbert (1995) propose that learners be required to write a retrospective account of their successes and achievements but also of the problems faced, as they worked on their projects. This could help learners and teachers to gain deeper understanding from the subjective research experiences of others. By focussing explicitly on the experience of research means that researchers are able to identify with their students through the personal learning in which they engage. The products of research in terms of publications may in the future provide ideas, material for reflection and interpretation in order to make sense of a phenomenon. Learning, therefore, has as its primary purpose the generation of personally useful knowledge.

It should be noted that there is a uniqueness in each learning event that needs to be respected and that personally useful reflection can occur even when circumstances are less than ideal, as some form of personalized learning can occur in every situation.

The Relevance of the Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenological-existential psychology emphasises the subjective processes of the learner (Brew, 1999). The aim of this approach is to determine what an experience means for those who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. Exponents of the approach are interested in the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon is experienced, rather than in the nature of the phenomenon. The tradition provides answers to research questions such as: How did students' conceptions of learning develop during a learning event? (Tyajala, 1998, p. 176).

The authors of papers documenting examples of research method courses in which learners have been involved as fully as possible in a research project, have provided examples that the "learning by doing" approach to teaching research methods does address the issues learners' research expectation at the onset of their research projects, of increasing learners' understanding of the realities of the research event, for example time management, workload and the relationship between research in practice and research as described in textbooks, and increasing their interest in, their enthusiasm for and their commitment to research (Cutler, [1987](#); Nyden, [1991](#); Takata & Leiting, [1987](#)).

However, all the abovementioned studies were conducted among sociology learners. A comprehensive literature search showed that no phenomenological-existential study has so far been executed to explicate the meaning of the experience of psychology learners who were involved in their first relatively independent research project and who are able to reflect in a pre-scientific, unbiased, manner on their experiences.

This article, in particular, addresses the learning experiences of honours-level "Research Methods" learners in psychology and the implications of their experiences for future teaching of the subject. For this purpose all aspects of the research event as a learning experience were explored in some depth. Honours-level students are, arguably, the group who have the most problems with doing research.

Method

Participants

Psychology learners who have completed their honours research projects at the end of a specific year of study were contacted, the purpose of the study was explained to them, and they were invited to participate and to share their experiences of their research. The honours curriculum included a course in "Research Methodology" in which students are exposed to quantitative and qualitative research methods, as well as a practical research project. One important requirement for their research projects was that they had to plan and execute the projects more or less on their own.

The department prefers that honors students do quantitative research. The reasons for this preference are the department's traditionally strong quantitative research focus, and also the fact that students on this level are "novice" researchers. The "art" of qualitative researcher is reserved for more experienced researchers.

Four male and three female, white, English speaking learners, in their early twenties, volunteered to participate. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, purposive sampling was chosen.

When lecturers study their own learners, there are always a couple of issues that surface. One, lecturers can have some biases about their learners and what is being taught. Their insider status can blind them to certain observations. Two, students can be in a vulnerable position and may not feel they can be totally open about their experiences. The pre-existing educational

relationship between themselves and the lecturer-researcher can lead to some self-editing if they fear that sharing negative feelings and opinions could lead to a poor evaluation in class. Lecturers may also be susceptible to such temptations if the results *do* come out negative.

In the present case these concerns were not problematic. Learners were, deliberately, asked to participate in the study after completion of their research projects and after they have received their final grades. The students also had different research supervisors.

The following examples from the research protocols demonstrate their openness in sharing negative experiences:

"The personnel in the library provided little help and their searches were superficial".

"One of the biggest frustrations of the whole process was that I had to wait for approximately four weeks for the departmental research committee to approve my research proposal. This meant that I was forced to waste a lot of time".

" Shortly after my research proposal was approved a study leader was appointed. Here something went wrong. He gave the impression that I should conduct the study all by myself and hand in the completed research report....A last the research report was ready....What a disillusionment when my study leader told me that I should have consulted with him on a continuing basis".

"Getting to see my supervisor was difficult at times because he was so busy".

Procedure

The research event was investigated using an existential-phenomenological approach and the phenomenological research method in particular. This unique method is employed to locate underlying themes or patterns for the observed event in a search for structure and meaning (Beshai, [1971](#)). It is based on a grounded, inductive approach and focuses on what a person experiences in a personal, first-order language that is as close to the lived experience as possible (Brockelman, [1980](#); Giorgi, [1970](#); Kruger, [1988](#); Polkinghorne, [1982](#)). The general format of the phenomenological method may be summarized as (1) gathering a full set of naive descriptions from persons who had the particular research experience; (2) analysing the descriptions in order to grasp common elements that make the experience what it is; and (3) describing or giving a clear, accurate and articulate account of the phenomenon so that it can be understood by others (Polkinghorne, [1989](#)).

The respondents were individually asked to relate the story of their research experiences in as much detail as possible, in their own home languages. They were requested to record their stories on paper instead of in a face-to-face interview, because this gave them the opportunity to take their time and to reflect on their experiences and to reconstruct the event in more detail on their own, without interference. Another reason for the use of written descriptions is the fact that it is a legitimate alternative to interviewing in the phenomenological tradition (Taylor & Bogdan, [1984](#)). Also, according to Clandinin and Connelly ([1994](#)), the current methodological preference is towards studying texts rather than using interviews. It is assumed that meaning is contained in narrative texts and the study of texts is therefore primary focus of educational studies.

The respondents were instructed to: "Think back and write down the story of your research in the honours course - from the beginning to the end - and describe your subjective experience of the event in as much detail as possible." They were assured of the confidentiality of the information.

The respondents all delivered their written stories over a period of three weeks. The written descriptions were then typed for purposes of analysis.

One possible pitfall that can occur during data collection and transcription is transcription errors - inaccurate punctuation; mistyped words that change the entire meaning of what was actually said, or missing or misinterpreted words (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, [2000](#)). I avoided this pitfall by personally transcribing and checking and rechecking the protocols for accuracy, prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

As phenomenological studies are not driven by preconceived theoretical constructs and research hypotheses, but a desire to explicate a given phenomenon (and reveal the essences appertaining), the researcher can expect to be deeply immersed in data which may seem obtuse. This initial obfuscation can (and should) be met with an attitude of openness and a willingness on the part of the researcher to allow the phenomena to present itself. Again, rigorous attention to method is important here, and the phenomenological epoché (bracketing) was employed so that the revealed experiences are uncontaminated by prior learning and bias (Davey, [1999](#)).

The purpose of the investigation was to empirically determine what the meaning of the event was for learners, instead of accepting that a predetermined answer to the question is known. Thus, the study has been approached with no preceding ideas as to the possible meaning of the research event for learners in psychology. I bracketed out any preconceived ideas and allowed the data to speak for itself (so to speak).

In order to enhance the credibility of the data, the responses of the respondents to the question asked were closely examined to determine whether they were sharing *experience* rather than pre-digested theoretical knowledge. The protocols (descriptions) were read and reread independently of each other in order to obtain an intuitive, holistic grasp of the protocol and to make sure that each natural meaning unit would be interpreted in context. A natural meaning unit or "nmu" is "...a statement made by an individual which is self-defining and self-delimitating in the expression of a single, recognizable aspect of the individual's experience..." (Stones, [1988](#), p.153).

After reading and rereading the protocols, each nmu was listed and numbered. The nmu's were stated in the exact same words used by the respondents. The nmu's were then collapsed into emergent themes. I typed a draft description of each theme. Students were sent a copy of their descriptions to check for errors and to answer the question: " Does this reflect your experience?" This was done to enhance the credibility of the study by verifying the transcripts of data that was obtained from participants and incorporating changes in a revised document. A brief summary of each theme was then compiled. These summaries are in fact reductions and linguistic transformations of the natural meaning units and are used to reveal the meaning of the event in a

condensed form, whilst staying as close as possible to the essence of each description. Repetitive material was discarded.

The final step in a phenomenological analysis is either to derive individual situated structures, and/or a general account of the structure of an event. The objective of this investigation was to derive a general structure. The themes identified for each respondent were clustered into a number of general themes that appeared to be common to all the respondents' descriptions. An essential general structure which reflected the collective experiences of the learners was formulated.

In order to ensure that my own understanding of the general themes reflect the understanding of the respondents, the participants were asked to comment on the general themes identified.

Results

Four general themes emerged from the analysis. They are "time constraints"; "problem solving"; "personal growth"; and "capacity for understanding".

Time Constraints

The respondents were constantly apprehensive about, and frustrated by, their efforts to structure and use time effectively. They waged a constant battle to find the time and energy needed for the amount of work that they had to do, as most of the tasks were time consuming. They felt that they needed to learn how to use their time effectively. Target dates and deadlines made them anxious and they felt that they were forced to neglect their research in favour of other demands on their time. The limited time available in which to complete a research project also made it difficult to work alone, and drained their energy. However, by working alone, they were in control and involved in every aspect of their projects.

Problem Solving

The respondents experienced the research event as a succession of problems that they had to solve. These problems include identifying and delineating a researchable phenomenon; compiling a research framework; gaining access to respondents; writing a research proposal; waiting for the proposal to be approved; gathering information; analysing their data; writing a research report; preparing the report for submission; and handling expenses. Each problem was experienced as a stressful. The event was experienced as frustrating, demanding, and daunting. They became irritated, frustrated, disillusioned and pessimistic, especially when they felt that there was no satisfactory progress in their work. However, once they had solved a specific problem, they were more motivated, and positive about continuing, and more relaxed. Initially they had seen research as something they just had to 'get over and done with', and they had therefore been apprehensive and afraid of making mistakes. However, as they became more involved and interested, and as they solved their problems, they also became positive.

Personal Growth

The group initially harboured unrealistic expectations of what this novel event entailed. They were either over-confident and optimistic, because they perceived the event as relatively simple and straightforward, and believed that they knew what was expected of them, or they felt unsure, unable, and unwilling to become involved and doubted their ability to shoulder the responsibilities of a research project on their own. They felt that they needed support from their supervisors and from university support personnel. They were disillusioned when the help that they expected did not materialize, but very grateful when they did receive help. However, their perceptions changed as the research event progressed. When they were forced to make their own decisions and to use their own initiative, they experienced it as a personal revelation. They discovered hidden qualities in themselves and strengths in themselves, and they experienced personal growth. In the end they felt stronger and surer of themselves. The event demanded hard work from them, but in the end they were proud of their final products and derived great pleasure and satisfaction from their accomplishments. They felt that they were rewarded for their hard work. They realized that research demands tenacity, determination and commitment. As they discovered these characteristics in themselves they felt more confident in handling the challenges of research.

Capacity for Understanding

The event was experienced as a learning adventure. They came to realize that research- in-practice and research-as- described- in- texts differed notably, and they came to appreciate the differences. They also came to realize that research is no easy task and that it can be confusing. Although research guidelines helped them a lot, they realized that the research process does not necessarily progress in a specific, rigid sequence. They had to consider quite a number of tasks and decisions simultaneously. They also realized that research is not just a rational process, but that serendipitous flashes of insight may be of great value. In all, they broadened their insight into and their comprehension of the nature of the event as they experienced practical research personally. In the end they felt that they were more informed about their respective topics, and better prepared for future research.

Discussion

In order to increase the dependability of the study, this article is written in a way to ensure that other researchers will be able to follow the investigative process, and could reach similar conclusions given my data, perspective and situation. Use was also made of two experts (my doctoral supervisor and the head of our department) to critically examining my analysis.

On order to do an audit and to increase the confirmability of the study (the degree to which the findings are the product of the focus of the inquiry and not the biases of the researcher), I looked at four of the areas identified by Halpern's (cited in Davey, [1999](#)) and thus, reviewed my raw data, the data reduction and analysis products (summaries), the data construction and synthesis products (themes, that where developed, findings, and conclusions, final report), and my process notes.

The purpose of this investigation was to describe ways in which psychology learners subjectively and personally "lived" the experiential component of their research training, a phenomenon

which has not yet been investigated extensively. From the results of the investigation it is evident that the phenomenon under investigation has a shared general structure, but also that each of the respondents experienced the importance of the identified themes differently, which confirm their uniqueness as human beings. It is also evident from the results that the subjective experiences of these psychology learners mirror those of sociology students, as discussed earlier. Both groups of learners struggle with issues such as time management and changing research expectations. They experience the research process as a worthwhile experiential learning experience and a chance for personal growth. Personalized learning and learning outcomes other than those specified by their subject area, indeed took place. Learners experienced the research events in unique ways, despite its shared general structure.

Accounts of this nature can definitely benefit other learners and instructors, as these explicit accounts could serve as important sources of information to prepare learners for the challenges and demands of research practice. They also enhance instructors' understanding of the issues and problems faced by learners involved in experiential learning. It is evident that instructors should take note of the specific problems that research students involved in experiential learning encounter. For example, their frustration while waiting for their research proposals to be approved and their stress and frustration when library personnel are unable to help them with in-depth, comprehensive literature surveys. Also difficult and frustrating is to find willing respondents for their research. Instructors should also take note of and review the amount of work included in their programmes, because learners apparently experience great difficulty in doing all that is demanded of them. They should also make sure that they balance their responsibility for guiding research learners and the experiential learning opportunities of independence and creativity that they provide for their learners.

The investigation confirms the usefulness of applying a phenomenological method to the human side of research and to contribute to the so-called "studies-of-studies" literature, and to the growing shared experiential culture in psychology. It could help lessen the hold of the positivistic paradigm in the discipline and to find a central place for the human side of research, instead of hiding or ignoring this important facet of research.

Finally, this study was exploratory in nature and the results may be limited to the group of respondents who participated in the investigation, only. Thus, only general suggestions for future research can be offered. One possibility is to explore the experiences of learners who have not received didactic instruction in research methodology, but who have to execute research projects. Another possibility is to describe the experiences of learners who failed to complete their projects successfully.

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