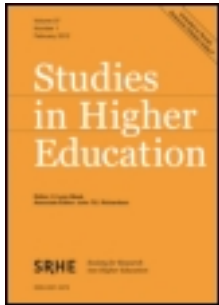


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### The phenomenology of 'approach to studying': the idiographic turn

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## The phenomenology of ‘approach to studying’: the idiographic turn

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‘Approach to studying’ research focuses on the *manner* (deep, surface, etc.) in which studying is grasped. This is the Husserlian ‘noesis’, the mental orientation, to studying. In this article, it is argued that attention must also be given to the subjective meaning of studying and of what is studied – the Husserlian ‘noema’. However, the noema/noesis distinction, though it draws attention to the poverty of characterising approaches to studying simply as mental orientation, has certain flaws, which are discussed. It is most appropriate to develop the noema so as to bring out the human situation of studying within the *lifeworld* of the student. Idiographic sensibility – an awareness of the individuality of the lifeworld – is needed for anything close to a full understanding of a person’s approach to studying.

### Introduction

There are two major traditions of research into students’ approaches to studying. One is the qualitative research of the Gothenburg phenomenographers (e.g. Marton 1975; Marton and Säljö 1976a, b; Säljö 1975; Svensson 1977). This work established the distinction between *deep* and *surface* approaches to studying. The other major tradition is psychometric. Entwistle (2001) acknowledged the influence of both the Gothenburg phenomenographers and Pask (1976) on the Approaches to Study Inventory (ASI), which he developed in collaboration with Ramsden (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983). This is a questionnaire measure which, through a number of quite major reconstructions, has always treated deep and surface approaches to studying as of central importance. A questionnaire with similarities to the ASI, including dimensions parallel to deep and surface approaches to learning, was developed independently by Biggs (1979, 1983).

### *The phenomenography of approaches to studying*

Säljö (1979) reported the outcome of qualitative research interviews with university students. They were asked, ‘What do you actually mean by learning?’ Säljö found five different conceptions of learning:

- Learning is simply the increase of knowledge.
- Learning is memorising.
- Learning is the acquisition of facts, procedures etc., which can be retained and/or utilised in practice.

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- Learning is abstraction of meaning. The learning material is the starting point for a construction on the part of the learner.
- Learning is an interpretive process aimed at understanding (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty [1993] refer to this as *learning as seeing something in a different way*).

Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty added to Säljö's five conceptions of learning, a sixth: learning as entailing a change in the learner themselves.

In the same research programme (e.g. Marton 1975; Marton and Säljö 1976a, b) it was argued that student conceptions of learning, as elucidated by Säljö (1979), would relate more or less exactly to the *approach* students took to the activity of learning. The first three conceptions of learning in the list above are taken to focus on learning as primarily reproducing. This would lead to a surface approach to learning and studying. The second three conceptions of learning are said to embody deep processing and to stress the attainment of meaning and understanding. When adopting this approach, students tend to grasp the learning material holistically (Svensson 1977). Despite important later elaborations on the basic pair of approaches to learning (see Marton and Booth 1997), the structure remains fundamentally as we have described it. Studying is approached superficially, with a reproducing orientation, or it is approached with more profundity, the aim being to grasp meaning and attain understanding. The research on approaches to learning by the Gothenburg group constitutes an early example of the research technique which has come to be known as phenomenography (e.g. Marton 1994).

It has been shown (Greasley and Ashworth 2007) that the Gothenburg research on approaches to studying focuses primarily on the mental orientation with which learning material is approached. The meaning for the student of the learning material itself (including such things as its difficulty or interest, or the fatefulness or otherwise of success or failure in learning it) is not sought. This is despite the emphatic statement of Marton and Booth that approach to learning, like other ways of experiencing something, is relational: 'a way of experiencing something ... is an internal relationship between the experiencer and the experienced' (1997, 113).

We shall see that this neglect of the meaning for the student of the material to be studied (within the broad system of relevances of his or her life generally) is a fundamental criticism of the phenomenography of approaches to learning.

### *Approaches to studying investigated psychometrically*

In the variants of the ASI (most recently, the Revised Approaches to Studying Inventory: Entwistle, Tait, and McCune 2000) the deep and surface approaches to learning have been retained, and these do seem to be quite robust factors. A strategic factor, in which the student aims at high grades, has also emerged. We need to notice, however, that the ASI is no less focused on the 'mental orientation' with which studying is approached than is the work of Marton's group.

Marton and Booth (1997, 84) noted appreciatively that Entwistle had stated, 'The verb to learn takes the accusative' (he meant, we believe, that one cannot simply say, 'she is learning': for full intelligibility one has to say *what it is* she is learning). So both the psychometric and phenomenographic methodologies claim to take very seriously the *relational* nature of learning. The way they put it is that learning entails two aspects: the activity of the student in learning ('how'), and the nature of the thing to be learned ('what'). So learning is a relation between the learner and the material

to be learnt. They further characterise the ‘how’, the activity of learning, as involving two discriminable aspects, the aim or orientation of the student in approaching learning, and the actual mental act of learning (Marton and Booth 1997, 84–85). We shall see that this is a crude account of a complex matter, in that experience in learning can include such things as fear of failure in the context of parental expectations.

The criticism that phenomenography – whatever is claimed about its relational nature – fails to adequately take into account ‘life activities’ was made very early on in the history of debate on phenomenography by Engeström (1986). Whether phenomenographers and the psychometricians building on their work characterise the relational nature of learning well or not, however, we have already noted that the Gothenburg researchers really focus only on the student’s mental orientation (e.g. ‘deep’) in approaching learning; and in practice the psychometric research, derived initially from the Gothenburg work, also emphasises this aspect of the experience of approaching learning. The specific meaning for the student of such things as *this* material, *this* learning situation, and possibly the meaning of studying and being a student generally for them, is discounted.

So what is being done in this article is to show a flaw in the model of awareness which underlies both the original qualitative work and the derivative psychometric work. The way in which this is done is by returning to the qualitative origin of both traditions, and considering again the individual student experience of studying. When this is done it becomes apparent that the phenomenologists and psychometricians have failed to capture the phenomenon ‘approach to study’; moreover, a more appropriate understanding has significant implications.

### A phenomenological perspective

It will be plain from the foregoing that, in our judgement, the phenomenographers and psychometricians have failed to bring out the richness of student approaches to learning. In this section of the article we rehearse the findings of Husserlian phenomenology concerning the structure of awareness, and in this way make plain what the earlier approaches to studying work has lacked.

Phenomenologically-based empirical work takes as its focus *the person’s experience as such*. Whether the person is right or wrong, in tune with the actual evidence of reality or not, the aim is to describe the experience, just as it is experienced, ‘in its appearing’. What is distinctive about the phenomenological approach, then, is the strictness with which all reference to objective reality is set aside. This is the so-called epochē or ‘bracketing’. It is a fundamental concept for any phenomenologically-based work, because it points to the locus of all relevant research. Reality is bracketed and, in the selfsame move, attention is turned to experience alone. In other words, all phenomenological investigation is exclusively concerned with the subjectivity of the individual.

A considerable methodological self-discipline is required of the investigator, in which they set aside ‘reality’ and pay exclusive attention to the experience per se. And, in fact, this methodological move of bracketing has been the subject of considerable debate (for discussions see Ashworth [1996] and Finlay [2008]). The question is whether it is possible for a researcher to set aside presuppositions, such as those about the ‘objective situation’, and enter into the pure experience of the research participant. Of course, it is often part of the professional practice of teachers and others to make the attempt to understand the point of view of their students and clients. In this article

we are assuming that at least a move in that direction is possible – sufficient to be able to note aspects of the individuality of the experience of the student.

Turning from ‘objective reality’ to experience as such, then, we discover *intentionality*: ‘All consciousness is consciousness of something’. Husserl (1913/1983) worked scrupulously to clarify the idea of intentionality. He believed it could be misunderstood as picturing the world as divided into the ‘outer’ reality and its ‘inner’ correlate, and it is our view that Marton does indeed make the mistake of regarding intentionality as separating the inner world and the external world, despite his use of the term ‘intrinsic’ when describing the relationship between experiencer and the things experienced (Marton and Booth 1997). As Husserl writes:

nothing is accomplished by saying and discerning that every objectivating [i.e. the process of taking something as an object of awareness] relates to something objectivated [i.e. that which we are aware of], etc. ... For without having seized upon the peculiar ownness of the transcendental attitude [i.e. focused on the personal experience of something] and having actually appropriated the pure phenomenological basis [i.e. turned attention exclusively to that experience], one may of course use the word, phenomenology; but one does not have the matter itself. (Husserl 1913/1983, 211, §87, our clarifications in square brackets)

In that admittedly tough quote, Husserl is saying that both the ‘mode of consciousness’ and the ‘object of this consciousness’ are ‘*within*’ personal experience or awareness. So full attention is given both to the *conscious mode* in which the phenomenon appears – in our case, the mental orientation to learning – and to the ‘*thing*’ that *appears* – for us, the whole meaning of the thing to be learned by the student. This is a very rigorous account of the field of experience and – in line with the epoché – it is entirely about the meaning of the experience (without, therefore, presupposing that the experience is of something ‘real’ or ‘external’).

The technical distinction between the act of consciousness and the object of that act is made explicit by Husserl by labelling the one *noesis* and the other *noema*. Thus, the mental orientation to learning would be the noesis, and the thing to be studied, and towards which the orientation is directed, would be the noema. And we can tie this in with our criticism of both the phenomenographic and psychometric ways of investigating approaches to studying, for there is no doubt that, in Husserl’s terminology, both pay exclusive attention to the noesis. They leave out of consideration the student’s awareness of the actual material to be learned, with all its connotations for them personally. And the connotations may, in principle, be very extensive indeed, speaking of the student’s past experiences and future anticipations, and relate to their identity and relationships. Phenomenography neglects that the meaning of the phenomenon lies in its embeddedness within the broad experience of the student, a criticism which is a specific instance of the general complaint that phenomenography detaches the person from their world (Ashworth and Lucas 1998, 2000).

The relationship between the noema and noesis is unbreakable, for neither can exist without the other; where there is a noema there is also a noesis and vice versa. But it is possible to make the noema/noesis distinction analytically.

### **Student approaches to studying and the noema**

Research reported in more detail elsewhere (Greasley 2003; Greasley and Ashworth 2007) takes the debate further by showing the enormous significance of the noema in

describing individual students' approaches to studying. This empirical work, using qualitative interviewing, sought to answer the phenomenological question, 'what is an approach to learning *in its appearing?*' During the interview process the research participant was encouraged to describe 'studying experiences'. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The participants were business studies students, and there were six of them. All the participants were interviewed three times over the course of the academic year.

The ultimate stage of the interview analysis was intended to provide a profile of the meaning of approaches to learning for each student. These would describe both the noetic and noematic aspects of experience. We have warrant from Husserl (1913/1983) for considering both aspects as microscopically as this suggests. Husserl gives examples of noetic features such as: 'producing, pertaining to explicating, relating, comprising, multiple position-takings of believings, deemings likely, valuings; and so forth' (Husserl 1913/1983, 214, §88).

We would therefore feel it appropriate, if it arose, to find that a student who found studying *fearful* could be described as having, as the noema of the experience, a *fear-some task* (which would then have to be described in detail from the student's viewpoint), and, correlatively, as having as the noesis of the experience, a *fearful attitude*. So the structure of consciousness in Husserl is being used as a heuristic device to discover as thoroughly as possible the meaning of each student's approach(es) to learning.

As an example of part of the analysis of one student's approach to learning, considered in terms both of noema and noesis, consider Figure 1 (Gary, like all the student names here, is a pseudonym).

Here we have an extremely summarised version of just one aspect of the way in which this student approached learning. On the noetic side we have a mental orientation which Gary adopted to learning – which entailed a very negative attitude to text amounting to avoidance of the written word, procrastination, seeking distractions, and so on. On the side of the intentional object – the noema – we have the text as enemy. Text distant from himself, alien. In so far as textual material is important to learning, it means low self-esteem to Gary. It adds up to learning as a slow grind.

Such an analysis is enough to show the importance of attending not only to the noesis but also to the noema. The personal meaning of the thing to be learned, neglected in the approaches to studying traditions, both phenomenographic and psychometric, is hugely important.

In what follows, we do not report the *distinction* between noema and noesis further. The slogan 'no noesis without a noema' means that paying attention to the broad meaning for the student of the thing to be learned (noema) necessarily brings with it an awareness of the manner of orientation (noesis) that they will have to that thing. We do not need to go through the process of teasing apart the two aspects, though the distinction is an invaluable analytic heuristic.

As an example, we continue with the summary of the analysis of just this one student's interview data here (for more examples, see Greasley 2003; Greasley and Ashworth 2007). It must be said that the account is exceedingly condensed, and conveys just enough to indicate the kind of approach(es) the student employed. In Figure 2, then, further aspects of the meaning of learning for Gary are shown.

Gary's view of text as the enemy relates to his marginalising of text, and his emphasis on the belief that learning occurs practically and actively in the real world. In addition, we see that identity and sociality are important aspects of the meaning of

**Gary: *Text as an enemy*** (an aspect of the intentional object of learning – *noema*)  
**and *Text avoidance*** (an aspect of the mental orientation to text – *noesis*)

Learning for Gary *unfortunately entails* text as a necessity. He views the academic process as being closely tied with *difficult* reading. As a dyslexic learner he finds his relationship with text an acrimonious one and sees text as the enemy, something completely unrelated and distant from himself. Learning is time-consuming, because reading is a slow grind. There is great resentment of text as somehow inhibiting the learning process.

Gary adopts an avoidance strategy, which helps him deal with enemy which is text. By limiting the amount of reading required and seeking out other methods of information gathering, e.g. through conversations, he is able to limit contact with text.

Procrastination is built into his orientation to the learning situation. It is a technique employed to avoid text, finding distractions, seeking out other people and places where he is *not a student* as a useful excuse for not engaging with text (the enemy).

His alienation from the matter to be learned carries with it low self-esteem. Learning holds out the regularly-realised threat of academic performance, which he finds disappointing. This unfruitful relationship with learning frustrates his project, which requires academic success.

Figure 1. An attempt to describe an aspect of one student's approach to studying in terms of *noesis* and *noema*.

the learning material or the learning situation, rendering learning an opportunity for self-affirmation, establishing a presence and a voice in the midst of other students. A central orientation is learning as a means to a sense of achievement, which is more rewarding when seen and valued by others.

This example shows the importance of the *noema*. The superficial attractiveness of the deep/surface typology of approaches to learning masks its lack of sensitivity to the actual meaning of learning, and of the thing to be learned, to the student. Both the

- The learning situation is one which holds out the possibility of *affirmation* for Gary.
- *Collaborative* learning situations may provide affirmation; he notices ways which might lead to favourable comparison with others (for example, *interpersonal* meanings underlie his activities in teaching others and trying to gain higher grades).
- A hazard in learning is the necessity of the *text*. Dyslexia renders text an enemy, and a consumer of valuable time (see Figure 1 for a detailed outline).
- For Gary learning is the application of knowledge in 'real' world situations. Through the application of learning in practical scenarios text may be avoided.
- Learning is a structured process that needs to be closely managed. This activity requires singular focus, taking one step at a time on a metaphorical ladder.

Figure 2. Gary – some themes of his approach to studying.

qualitative and quantitative traditions of research on approaches to learning assert that approaches to learning are *relational*, but neither pay attention to the student's meaning-construction of the thing-to-be-learned. Instead they exclusively describe the student's mental orientation. As a result, approaches to studying, in their full meaning within the student lifeworld, are much richer than can be encapsulated by noetic descriptions of 'depth' or 'superficiality', even when greatly elaborated, as in Entwistle's later writings (e.g. 2000, 2001), or in the developments of the phenomenography of approaches to learning in Marton and Booth (1997). In sum, the meaning of studying for Gary illustrates the thinness of the approaches to learning traditions, which would not have brought out, in particular, the emotionality of the meanings which studying holds for this student.

### **The centrality, but problematic status, of the noema**

The distinction between the concepts of noema and noesis is undoubtedly valuable as a heuristic device. The distinction allows the researcher to analyse the interview data by asking the questions, '*What is the meaning of this event of learning for this person? How then do they approach it, in terms of mental orientation?*' However, the concept of noema turns out to be somewhat problematical. An investigation is required. In so far as our preceding argument and the interpretation of the empirical findings relied on Husserl's noema/noesis distinction, it all may need revision.

### ***Noema: subjective appearance rather than objective reality***

William James (1890/1950, vol. 1, 196–8) prefigured the distinction between the noema and the 'real' object. He regarded it as a cardinal error to try to relate the noema (which is the phenomenon *as it appears* to awareness) to the observer's opinion as to the nature of the 'real' object:

It is of great methodological importance that these two standpoints never be confounded. It is this confusion that James stigmatises as 'the psychologist's fallacy *par excellence*'. The 'object of thought' studied must be taken at face value, exactly such as it presents itself. The psychological, physiological, physical and common-sense knowledge that the psychologist has as a psychologist must not be foisted into the thought studies. (Gurwitsch 1992, 14, 15)

The authors of the collection of articles on the noema (Drummond and Embree 1992: see particularly the contributions of Hart, Marbach, Drummond and Mohanty) all make points very similar to James's. Willard (1992) tells us that it is imperative to distinguish between the 'object as it is intended' and 'the object which is intended'. The former is *appearance*, the latter *reality*.

A standard research design for work concerned with approaches to learning makes precisely this error. In a typical research design, some *objective* circumstance of the learning situation is related to the *subjective* experience of the student. The objective circumstance may be, for example, the kind of assessment used (Prosser and Millar 1989; Gibbs 1993; Willis 1993), or the teaching styles being adopted (Sharma 1997). And, as we have seen, the attempt may be made to assess subjective experience using a questionnaire measure, such as the Approaches to Learning Inventory. But plainly there is an incoherence here – the sort of incoherence of which James warned. The design needs to be adjusted. One way of doing this is to realise



that, if the student's orientation – their approach to learning – is understood as subjective, then the *personal meaning* of the situation must be assessed; it must not be taken for granted that the circumstance has the meaning for the student that the researcher imputes (or that it has the same meaning for all students). So both the approach to learning and the meaning of the situation require qualitative, 'first-person' analysis. Were this to be done, however, we would no longer have a design in which one variable (a feature of the learning situation) is hypothesised to affect another variable (experience) causally. Rather, we have a description of a student's subjective way of understanding the meaning (for him or her) of the thing to be learnt within its multi-faceted context.

The second way in which the design is adjusted reflects coherently a positive, external, 'objective' view of the situation. Here 'experience' is no longer subjective, but becomes an objective measure unrelated to the meaning of the situation for the person undergoing the experience (we believe that this is what normally is implicitly done, though the researchers persist in presenting the findings as having a bearing on student experience).

### ***Heidegger's radicalisation of intentionality: dissolution of noema and noesis distinction***

We have seen that, when the move is made to set aside 'the objective' and to turn attention to the phenomenological realm, the immediate discovery is of intentionality. But there is a history of debate concerning how intentionality is to be characterised, and, as we shall see, this question is of central interest to the clarification of the noema. According to Brentano:

Every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hatred hated, in desire desired and so on. (1874/1995, 88)

Husserl (1913/1983) refined Brentano's statement of intentionality, for Husserl believed it could be understood as picturing the world as divided into the 'outer' reality and its 'inner' correlate:

it should be well heeded that *here we are not speaking of a relation between some psychological occurrence – called a mental process – and another real factual existence – called an object – nor of a psychological connection taking place in Objective actuality between one and the other. Rather we are speaking of mental process purely.* (73, §36)

The outcome of this line of argument is precisely what has been laid out in the previous paragraphs of this section: noema and noesis are discovered in the epochē as analytically-separable elements of the phenomenon.

Heidegger (1927/1988) developed an exceedingly important elaboration of Husserl's version of intentionality, which is of great consequence. Firstly, he goes further than the authors we considered earlier in this section, since he not only emphasises that noema and noesis can only be considered within the phenomenological realm, but he also *dismisses the distinction between them*. Though noema and noesis are analytically separable, they are never actually apart in experience. He re-emphasises the finding that the meaning of the noema is not simple but embedded in the full lived context. More than this, it is not only conscious experience which has an intentional character, our every action ('comportment') is built on a set of assumptions

about our world: ‘the Dasein’s [i.e. beings of the human kind] comportments have an *intentional character* and ... on the basis of this intentionality the subject already stands in relation to things that it itself is not’ (Heidegger 1927/1988, 155, §15).

If we are to say that ‘all comportment is within and towards a world’, as a new Heideggerian expression of intentionality founded on being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1927/1988, 161, §15c), then another aspect of intentionality comes into view. This is critical. It is the inevitable *subjectivity* of the world – my world, unique to me and my life: ‘The surrounding world is different in a certain way for each of us, and notwithstanding that we move in a common world’ (164, §15c).

Heidegger then develops the phenomenology of intentionality by utilising an old distinction in the theory of the self: (a) the ‘anonymous’ self which is the subject of consciousness, and (b) the self as an object of reflective awareness, the self as characterised. For Heidegger (as with Husserl) there is a primary, pre-reflective ‘understanding’ of self – in the sense of subjectness, and this is without ‘personal characteristics’. But self-characterisation is made possible by reflection on comportment and world:

[Being of the human kind] never finds itself otherwise than in the things themselves, and in fact in those things that daily surround it. It finds *itself* primarily and constantly *in things* because, tending them, distressed by them, it always somehow rests in things. Each of us is what he pursues and cares for. In everyday terms, we understand ourselves and our existence by way of the activities we pursue and the things we take care of. (159, §15)

It seems that Heidegger wants to say that to exist in the human way is to already find oneself as within the structure of meaning designated by ‘world’. In intentionality, therefore, we find *our selves* in the subjective world to which our comportment is directed. Any phenomenological research will expect to see subjectivity in an experience of a particular phenomenon.

### ***Summary: the world of our experience is a subjective world***

This section of the article has argued that:

- The phenomenological world (the world of experience exactly as it appears for the person) should not be brought together with an assessment of the ‘reality of the situation’ in a research design – intending to relate the circumstances (as the researcher views them) to subjective response. This ‘psychologists’ fallacy’ (James) nevertheless appears in standard research on approaches to learning.
- With Heidegger, we remain in the phenomenological realm and find that the world is through and through a subjective one. The noesis must not be interpreted as ‘on the side of the person’ and the noema as ‘on the side of the world’. We are already within the world – which is our subjective lifeworld. Our whole comportment relates to this world.

We have moved very far from the picture of approaches to studying found in the qualitative researches of the phenomenographers or in the psychometric work of those developing and using such instruments as the Approaches to Studying Inventory. Firstly, we have seen that both methodologies focus exclusively on the noesis – the mental orientation of the student. Maybe, like Husserl in his wish to describe essences of a universal kind, the effort to find solid *kinds* of approach to studying seems to have led to a neglect of the meaning of the material to be studied within the broad context

of the meaning of studying for the student – for it is precisely this noema which makes the individuality of learning inescapable. We have also seen the error of a mixed research design which attempts to combine the objective conditions and the individual experience (either the experience of the meaning of learning is distorted by being shoehorned into a category of variable – maybe deep or surface – or the researcher forgets that the student has their own subjective experience of the conditions).

With Heidegger, we find that the noema/noesis distinction is dropped in favour of an awareness that the student is immersed in a world of subjective experience. His or her personal interests and orientations are the ‘parameters’ of this world, in which his or her own interests and orientations are part of the world, a set of structuring principles, if you will. This means that the world is, for example, *interesting* in ways which are precisely *my interests*. Intentionality now has a radicalised meaning: ‘All consciousness is consciousness of something’ becomes also ‘All things of which I am conscious are structured in forms which reflect – or *are* – my orientations and concerns’.

Now, we need to see that approaches to learning – which we have continually emphasised must not neglect the ‘noematic side’ – have to be considered as bound up with the student lifeworld. Heidegger does not use the term ‘lifeworld’, but just uses the word ‘world’. The words are synonymous. The world *is* my lifeworld, the world is subjective and seen from my perspective, or maybe better, *is* my perspective.

### The primacy of the lifeworld

The lifeworld (Ashworth 2003, 2006, 2007) has certain parameters or ‘fragments’ that can be expected to show themselves (‘fragments’ because these are not independent categories, but are mutually entailed, with interpenetrating meanings). Because the lifeworld is (of course) universally present, and because these fragments are inevitable structures of the lifeworld – part of its essence, if you will – their recognition within the research does not introduce arbitrary presuppositions. It is important to indicate the source of these ‘fragments’. Regrettably the classic phenomenological and existentialist authors do not provide a detailed account of the phenomenology of the lifeworld, though we do have good pointers to the essential features of the lifeworld in their work. Many writers on phenomenological psychology (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström 2008; Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997; Spinelli 1989; Valle and Halling 1989; van den Berg 1972) mention many of the features of the lifeworld, and the person whom came nearest to enumerating a complete set akin to these is Medard Boss (1979) – translating Heidegger from the philosophical realm to that of psychological and medical science.

The point we are making is that *any* study of the lifeworld can be enriched by analysis in terms of these fractions. In the discussion below, we draw particularly on the work of Merleau-Ponty (see Ashworth 2007). The wonder of Merleau-Ponty’s writing – and this is especially true of the *Phenomenology of perception* (1945/1962) – is that it makes no sense unless the reader is in the phenomenological attitude themselves. It is not so much that he tells us directly how to see phenomenologically, but he leads us into the attitude by the places to which he guides our attention. So in the following exposition we allow quotations from *Phenomenology of perception* to sketch some of the meanings and issues surrounding the fractions of the lifeworld.

It is appropriate at this point to enumerate the fragments of the lifeworld – which are aspects of the noema (in the radicalised new sense):

**Selfhood**

What does the situation of learning mean for social identity; the person's sense of agency, and their feeling of their own presence and voice in the situation (for example, powerlessness might be a feature of the psychological situation for the individual)? It will surely be the case that the meaning of learning is part of the meaning of *me* for the learner. Identity is undeniably part of sociality – our identity links us to others and is provided by interaction with others. But there is, with social selfhood, that awareness which poses ourselves as a *problem* co-extensive with the question of the meaning of the lifeworld, and the approach to learning entails such issues intrinsically.

**Sociality**

How does the situation affect relations with others? There is no doubting that the intrinsic relatedness of one and the other, and the meaning of learning something (having to learn something? wanting to learn something?) will have as a background intimate relationships, or brute facts of power, submissiveness, alienation, and so on.

**Embodiment**

How does the situation relate to feelings about their own body, including gender, 'disabilities' and emotions? That approach to learning may be affected by fatigue is only the most trivial of the ways in which embodiment is relevant.

The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects, and to be continually committed to them. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962, 82)

**Temporality**

How is the sense of time, duration, biography entailed in approaches to learning?

[E]ach present reasserts the presence of the whole past which it supplants, and anticipates that of all that is to come, and by definition the present is not shut up within itself, but transcends itself towards a future and a past. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962, 420)

**Spatiality**

How is the student's picture of the geography of the places they need to go to and act within affected by the situation (frustrations? possibilities?)? The question could be asked, 'When and where are you a *student*?' and, 'When and where do you regard yourself as learning?'

**Project**

How does the situation relate to the student's ability to carry out the activities they are committed to and which they regard as central to their life (regrets? pride?)? It is commitments of this kind which give significance to our, otherwise amorphous, circumstances. This includes the meaning of learning and the meaning of *this* material for *this* learner. An approach to learning may be expected to reflect the wider priorities and concerns of the learner, and ultimately their most fundamental project.

### Discourse

What sort of terms— educational, social, commercial, ethical, etc. — are employed to describe — and thence to live — the situation? Phenomenology does not presuppose a Foucauldian world of exclusive discursive constitution, but this does not gainsay that we live our lives, and largely construe our circumstances, in terms which are socially available in language and linguistic practices.

Since Wittgenstein's 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world' (Wittgenstein 1921/1961, 115), and his argument against the possibility of a private language (Wittgenstein 1953), and since Heidegger's (1947/1978, 262) remarks about 'language as the house of being', and since Derrida's (1967/1973) critique of Husserl as a so-called 'philosophy of presence' — phenomenology is sometimes regarded as having been submerged in a move to discourse. But this is not the case. Phenomenological psychology retains emphatically the place of the conscious agent, and this agent is *intentionally* related to the world of experience, rather than a world of constructed discourse.

### Conclusion: the idiographic turn

In this article we have shown that the two traditions of the approaches to studying literature are inadequate in the same way. They both focus on mental orientation (noesis) and neglect the person's view of the material to be learned (noema). Further, we have emphasised that the 'material to be learned' is not easily described, but intrinsically relates to the lifeworld of the student — for material may be frightening to the student due to its meaning for such things as 'success in the eyes of their parents'. Thus, a student's approach to studying may be noetically, not just 'deep', or 'surface' but, for example, *frightened and superficial*. We have also seen that it makes no sense to attempt to correlate approach to learning with some factual state of affairs (such as type of assessment) — both are to be understood subjectively, as part of experience.

Further, Heidegger (1927/1988) argued that the analysis which distinguishes mental orientation from the subject-matter of experience is problematical phenomenologically, in that it does not strictly concord with actual experience in its appearing for us. Noemata and noeses do not *appear* but are secondary interpretations. Whatever the heuristic value Husserl's distinction had (and we have seen that it is exceedingly helpful in showing a blind spot in earlier accounts of student experience of studying), we need to notice that approaches to studying are part of the lifeworld. So we have seen that we need to revise our understanding of the noema/noesis distinction somewhat — emphasising their inseparability, and regarding their use as heuristic — allowing us (in this case) to see the fundamental flaw in the approaches to studying research. The student's comportment in the lifeworld needs to be our focus.

We wish finally to propose that an idiographic sensibility (i.e. realisation of the inescapability of the personal lifeworld) in educational research — and in education generally — is necessary. This does not impose an essentialism of the self, but stresses the perspectival nature of the lifeworld.

Perhaps the most prominent social scientist identified with the idiographic approach was Gordon Willard Allport:

I object strongly ... to a point of view that is current in psychology. Eysenck states it as follows: *To the scientist, the unique individual is simply the point of intersection of a number of quantitative variables*. What does this statement mean? It means that the scientist

is not interested in the mutual interdependence of part-systems within the whole system of personality ... [and] is not interested in the manner in which your introversion interacts with your other traits, with your values, and with your life plans. The scientist, according to this view, then, isn't interested in the personality system at all, but only in the common dimensions. The person is left as mere 'point of intersection' with no internal structure, coherence or animation. I cannot agree with this view. (1961, 8, original emphasis)

In this statement, the holism of Allport's approach is plain, and his interest in the idiographic approach to research logically follows. His argument could be applied exactly to the 'approaches to studying' tradition. The idiographic approach focuses on the interplay of factors which may be quite specific to the individual. It may be that the factors take their specific form only in this person; certainly, they are uniquely patterned in a given person's life (Allport 1962). This point of view is the starting point of most discussions of idiography. We wish to affirm it, while dissenting from one or two of Allport's lines of orientation.

Allport was less interested in how the *person* made sense of their situation (he was not primarily phenomenological or existential in approach) but in how the *researcher* could try to understand the individual (Allport 1961, 401–14; 1965). This is *not* our position. The student lifeworld should be viewed as *theirs*. If it is a methodological challenge to specify how the researcher can access this personal world, it is not one that should be ducked by moving to a positive view of human science and education as unconcerned with (or distorting of) experience. So the idiographic approach in education is concerned with individual experience, the personal lifeworld.

Secondly, Allport was a thinker with a focus on the person's 'inner life' rather than on the lifeworld. But, as Heidegger most plainly indicated, the world we act in, the world of our comportment, *is* the subjective lifeworld, no other. There is no call to 'look inside' for the idiographic. Introspection is not the methodology of phenomenology; description of lived experience is.

Finally, the idiographic stance can be misunderstood as *essentialist* in the sense that the individual is taken to be a definable *kind* of person. This is by no means our position. We have a non-essentialist account of selfhood here. This is certainly the position of Sartre (1943/1958), but Husserl himself was clear that the self-as-subject has no characteristics, there is no essentialism of self (e.g. Husserl 1913/1983, 190, §80).

Despite this, Sartre argued that, in an attempt to allay the anxiety of freedom, we do identify ourselves as 'having' defined characteristics and *unnecessarily* limited choice (even give the limitations of the situation). Gary, whose lifeworld had dyslexia as a feature, had a range of ways in which that situation could be lived. We have seen (Figures 1 and 2) some of the ways in which it has implications for his approach to learning. And it is in this sense that Heidegger is right in saying that the world of our experience echoes to us our selfhood.

The specification of the noetic approach to learning of Gary – deep or surface – does not provide any access for the educator to the actual meaning of studying for this student (or any other student). We assert, on the basis of the argument of this article, that the individuality of the meaning of the student experience is omitted by the approaches to study traditions. A student's approach to learning is not simple (as the approaches traditions would suggest), but is idiographic and entails the meaning of the particular instance of learning within the lifeworld of that individual.

Awareness of the richness *and individuality* of student approaches, then, is beneficial in warning that the simple model of the earlier traditions is a misreading of students' experience of studying, and it also indicates that student diversity in

studying cannot be ‘factored in’ to pedagogy easily – an idiographic sensibility is required. This is so despite the undoubted inconvenience of such a pedagogy within the current mass higher education structures.

Although work which extends the argument of this article is needed to make the following claim solid, the direction of the debate would be that, pedagogically, there is no escape from addressing idiosyncrasy in facilitating learning. If so, the implications within mass higher education would be very great. We speculate that something like the existentialist approach of Barnett’s (2007) most recent writings would need to be adopted.

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