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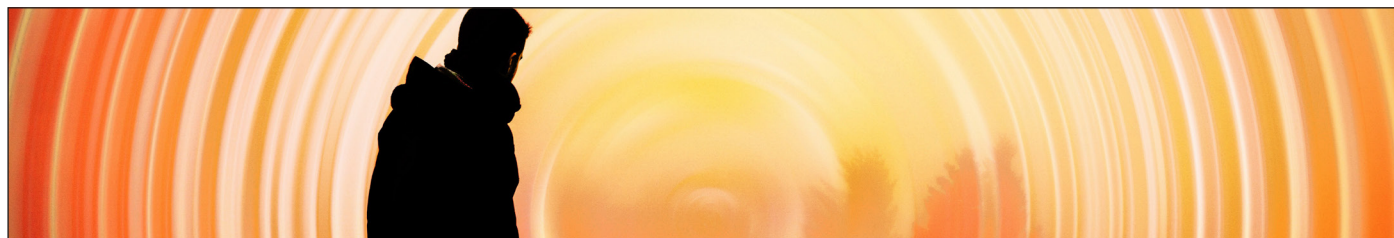
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## Phenomenography and the representation of conceptual uncertainty: A comment on Moffitt

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Earlier on I accepted the invitation by the journal editors of Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning (STEL) to review Philip Moffitt’s paper “Engineering academics and technology enhanced learning; A phenomenographic approach to establish conceptions of scholarly interactions with theory”. My interest in this paper is multi-faceted. Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) in Higher Education (HE) is an area of specialisation I have long been interested in, and now increasingly so because of my new work remit in that direction. Further to this, I am attracted to phenomenography as a research approach. In this commentary, I would like to make a few comments about representation of concepts, dealing with uncertainty, and the relevance of those topics for academic development.

I came across phenomenography when enrolled in the innovative semi-structured “TEL & e-Research” doctoral programme<sup>1</sup> at Lancaster University a decade ago. I went on to use phenomenographic methods for taking forward the doctoral thesis exploring aspects of the student experience of using networked technologies for learning (Cutajar, 2014). Past the doctorate, I did another phenomenographic study investigating the academic’s experience of networked technologies for teaching (Cutajar, 2018). What I find really useful about phenomenography is the neat ‘representation’ phenomenographic methods permit us for understanding perceptions, conceptualisations, approaches and experiencing of a phenomenon as a spectrum of variance. One such example would be Table 2 in Moffitt’s (2020) paper neatly

representing variation in academics' conceptualisation of scholarly interactions with theory in TEL, inclusive of the structural and referential aspects of this variation. Besides, phenomenography and its focus on the person-world relation (Bowden, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997) gave me a way to work around ontological questions I find impossible to answer. For example: Is there an objective truth? Is there a reality out there, or it all a creation in my own mind? In consideration of the recursive nature of social phenomena, I found it a means for giving some logical sense to the chaos of person-phenomenon relationships I observe within me and without.

Phenomenographic representation is, as Moffitt (2020) says, "an instantiation" of the picture of variation generated from the disclosures of research participants as a collective, and theoretically can only be claimed as "one of many potential outcome spaces". And yet, repeated studies of the same person-phenomenon relationship ascertain a high degree of consistency and equivalence (Marton & Booth, 1997). So, although phenomenographic results are not generalisable as Moffitt (2020) cautiously points out, yet they are no less authentic and trustworthy qualitative research findings. Ultimately, phenomenographic research outcomes are an open, partial picture of the truth sought as is also the case for other research methods. Together with the non-developmental nature of the inclusive hierarchical structuring of the resultant outcome space, by which I mean that adopting an elaborate conceptualisation of a phenomenon in one situation does not preclude me from assuming a less elaborate conceptualisation of the same phenomenon in another, the phenomenographic approach to research makes visible the fluidity and situatedness of human world relationships in time, place and space.

Moffitt (2020)'s research study maps out variation in academics' conceptualisation of "scholarly interactions with theory in TEL". Thoughtfully Moffitt unpacks the study phenomenon, highlighting 3 significant constituent component issues: scholarship, theory and TEL. This mindfulness to different interpretation of terms, reminded me of another problem I ran into well before the doctorate and the pursuit of a career in academia. As a computing teacher venturing into the realm of technology enhanced and mediated learning many years ago, I felt ill at ease with multiple definitions of the evolving term "e-learning". Different sources led me to different interpretations. I found comfort in Ó Súilleabháin (2003)'s complaint that "confusion abounds as to what it is that is being referred to". Several pages of reflective

writing later, considering different sources each advancing a different interpretation and tendering different emphasis, I concluded that the term e-learning was more or less an umbrella term. Notably, this incident led me to increasingly see the issue of interpretation as an omnipresent inescapable concern. Later, as a postgraduate student, I started to feel the need to explicitly set forth my interpretation of terms in my writing. Concurrently I was increasingly becoming aware of this in the academic literature. I became more discerning of and on this, even in my teaching practice. Looking back, I would say that the 'e-learning incident' was a turning point in my thinking.

When starting out on my doctoral studies, McNiff (2002)'s account on the uncertainty of knowledge helped me to build my confidence getting comfortable with uncertainty (wherein different interpretations of the same term are a special case). I came across Jean McNiff's account while considering an action research route to expand my knowledge on the use of technologies for learning in teaching about technology. When subsequently, during that first year as a doctoral student, I came across phenomenography, for me it was another timely scaffold to my thinking development. I was inspired by the relational reasoning underpinning this quasi-experimental approach to research, the elegant explanation of differences and commonalities in understanding, conceptualising and experiencing the same aspect of the world around us and within us. I appreciated the neatness of the whole-part representation of understanding and experience. Here again, phenomenography was for me a means to find order in chaos. Fast forward to the present, I am nowadays unperturbed by different understandings of the same object of concern. This is not to say that the issue of difference in understanding is to be shrugged off as inevitable. On the contrary, this is an important matter to be explicitly addressed and appraised.

Back to Moffitt (2020), I note his attention to the diversity of literature definitions of the three terms of concern – scholarship, theory and TEL; and their intersection as a core issue of concern. I particularly appreciated Moffitt's attention to this in going about generating research data. Moffitt refers to the interview sequence leading the participants to communicate their thinking about scholarship, theory and TEL as individual concepts before prompting them to disclose their thinking about the intersection 'scholarship of theory in TEL with regards to their HE lectureship. In trying to home in on the participants' thinking about scholarly interactions with theory in TEL, he paves the way to this by first prompting them to consider their experiencing of each of these constituent issues. In my opinion this interviewing strategy for bringing the participants to specifically focus on

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/study/phd/phd-in-e-research-and-technology-enhanced-learning/>

the target intersection of scholarly interactions with theory in TEL is more than a significant detail. It is a core strength of the research study. The thought complexity the researcher was after is quite substantial. An alternative interviewing strategy would have carried a substantial risk that participants could go on a tangent reflecting on a different person-phenomenon relationship other than that intended.

A possible research pursuit extending this research work, if not already accomplished, would be to explore the variance in understanding of each of these three important perspectives of HE teaching and learning - scholarship, theory (on and for practice), and TEL. The fact that the participants were first encouraged to reflect on their understanding of each of the three term separately before being prompted to comment on their thinking about the notion of scholarly interactions with theory in TEL, indicates an existent rich dataset which can lend itself useful also for the suggested research pursuit. This extended research would in turn make possible the exploration of impact patterns on scholarly interactions with theory in TEL in the sense of shedding some light about patterns of variation in conceptualisations of the constituent perspectives. Such an enterprise may help to shed some more light on the other intersections between scholarship, theory and TEL as graphically represented by the Venn diagram provided by Moffitt (2020). In this way, more details will be added to the emerging picture of academics' scholarly interactions with theory in TEL. All this potentially will provide more discerning clues as to where and how we need to put our efforts to improve and enrich TEL practices.

The research findings reported by Moffitt (2020) represent a worthy contribution to knowledge for the field of TEL in HE. More than this, they are a useful resource for supporting academics' professional development in contemporary HE teaching. Several frontline researchers and educational thinkers these last years have been alerting us of the emergent digital university (Gourlay & Oliver, 2018; Johnston, Macniell, & Smyth, 2018; Siemens, Gašević, & Dawson, 2015) and the evolving postdigital nature of contemporary HE teaching and learning (Jandrić et al., 2018). The recent public health crisis triggering the abrupt move of most HE campus-based teaching to the online space and what Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) signal as "emergency remote teaching" intensified the pressure and demand for academics' professional development in online teaching competence. The phenomenographic outcomes of Moffitt (2020)'s research study potentially help to inspire a deepened discernment of scholarly interactions with theory in TEL complementing efforts to support development of TEL practices. Besides, the phenomenographic outcomes

may also serve to inform learning designs for academic development implementing variation theory principles (Marton, 2014) by creating opportunities for contrast, generalisation, separation and fusion (Marton, Runesson, & Tsui, 2004). In this way, the research findings reported by Moffitt (2020) in this STEL issue may help expand and refine the academic development support enterprise.

It needs to be acknowledged that suggestions for extended research endeavour and opportunities employing the research findings are all intended to carry forward the research work presented by Moffitt (2020). In the meantime, this STEL journal article and the research work it conveys need to be celebrated as a researcher's one huge step forward putting a spotlight on a new area of study and a comprehensive map for whoever chooses to dig further into this HE field of scholarly interactions with theory in TEL.

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## About the author



Maria Cutajar is a senior lecturer in the Department of Arts, Open Communities and Adult Education of the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. Her research interests broadly focus on learning and teaching using networked technologies in higher and professional formal learning settings. In learning, teaching and research enterprise she is concerned with the experiencing and sense-making of contemporary networked technologies in situated learning and teaching practices. Through research practice, she also developed an interest in the theory and practice of phenomenography, qualitative research methods and research processes generally. Maria Cutajar is an Alumni Member of the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning at Lancaster University.

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