CONCEPTIONS OF RESEARCH IN STUDENT LEARNING

FERENCE MARTON and LENNART SVENSSON

Institute of Education, University of Göteborg, Mölndal, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Differences in approaches to research into student learning are analyzed in terms of differences in the conception of six aspects of the research process. It is argued that underlying various research strategies there is a variation in perspective (experiential or observational), description (qualitative or quantitative), conceptualization (contextual or generalized), relations of categories (internal or external), comprehension (understanding or explaining) and application of findings (technical or emancipatory). The recent quantitative increase in research on student learning is seen as being paralleled by a tendency towards a paradigmatic shift in approach.

During recent years there has been a considerable increase in the number of studies concerning student learning, i.e. of studies aiming at the analysis and the description of learning as it occurs in the context of higher education. This quantitative change has been paralleled by qualitative changes in research in this area. Our intention here is to characterize some aspects of the differences between the various approaches. One of these approaches, in fact the approach which we ourselves are following, is focussed on characterizing the conceptions in terms of which the learner interprets the world around him, notably the content and context of learning as well as the act of learning itself. The analysis which yields a description of the learner's conceptions (or more correctly a description of qualitatively different conceptions found in a group of learners) is as a rule based on fairly extensive interview data.

Our concern in the present paper is to characterize in a similar way differences we have observed between various approaches to learning research itself. Instead of characterizing how, for instance, learners perceive what they are dealing with in the process of learning, we wish to characterize how researchers perceive what they are dealing with in the process of research. Instead of using data from interviews, we base our analysis on what is stated or
appears to be implicitly assumed in various research investigations of the area. In so doing, we are aware of the change this implies and since one of the approaches and therefore one of the conceptions of research which we are examining is also our own, this presentation is avowedly one-sided. From the perspective of one particular conception, which we ourselves hold, the larger set of conceptions of which it is a part will be illuminated.

We have framed our discussion, oversimplified as it is, in terms of six distinctive aspects in which, in our view, the various approaches to student learning differ from one another. We identify variations in the perspective adopted (experiential vs. observational), in the kinds of descriptions aimed at (qualitative vs. quantitative), in the conceptualization of data (contextualized vs. generalized), in the character of the relations between the categories identified (internal vs. external), in the orientation of research findings (understanding vs. explaining) and in conceptions of the application of research (emancipatory vs. technical).

The Perspective Adopted

The traditional perspective in research into student learning focusses attention on the learner in an attempt to find out or to test hypotheses about how he can be characterized, what he does and how he functions. The learner is the object of our study and we (the researchers) observe him and his behaviour or functioning. We are interested in describing not only the learner but also certain aspects of his world i.e. his institutional as well as extra-institutional environment. We thus observe the learner and describe him as we see him and we observe the learner's world and describe it as we see it. We frequently relate our description of the student to our description of his world and generally do this within an explanatory framework.

There is, however, an alternative perspective we can take: the learner's own. In this perspective the world as experienced by him becomes visible. His experience of the world is a relation between him and his world. Instead of two independent descriptions (of the student on one hand and of his world on the other) and an assumed relationship between the two, we have one description which is of a relational character [1].

There are thus two distinctively different perspectives which we can adopt in relation to research on student learning. One is observational, "from-the-outside" and noumenal, and the other is experiential, "from-the-inside" and phenomenal (Marton, 1978). These two perspectives are complementary in the sense that neither is derivable from, nor contradicts the other. While the former has been dominant the latter is gaining increasing interest not only in relation to the study of student learning, but more generally in research in the behavioural (human) sciences.