

Marton F & Säljö R. On qualitative differences in learning: 1. Outcome and process. *Brit. J. Educ. Psychol.* 46:4-11, 1976; and, On qualitative differences in learning: 2. Outcome as a function of learners' conception of task. *Brit. J. Educ. Psychol.* 46:115-27, 1976.
[Göteborgs Universitet, Institutionen för pedagogik, Göteborg, Sweden]

The first thesis advocated and illustrated in these two papers is that the most important outcomes of academic learning are the qualitatively different ways in which the learners understand that which they are supposed to learn about. The second thesis dealt with is that the qualitative differences in the outcome can best be made sense of in terms of the qualitatively different ways in which the learners experience the learning situation itself. [The *SSCI*® and the *SCI*® indicate that these papers have been cited in more than 120 and 75 publications, respectively, with the former being the most-cited paper published in this journal.]

The Experiential Turn

Ference Marton
Department of Education and
Educational Research
University of Göteborg
Box 1010
S-411 36 Mölndal
Sweden

In Sweden, you have to defend your doctoral thesis in public. There is an opponent (a kind of external examiner) appointed by the faculty to which you belong, and there is a committee that decides on the grade the thesis is awarded. In addition, the defense is open to the public. In exceptional cases, there may be as many as several hundred in the audience, though more typically 50 to 60. When I presented my thesis¹ in 1970, we still had a grading system with more than five grades, the difference between which could have a decisive impact on your academic career (or the lack of it). My opponent, Jan Smedslund from Oslo, was probably the most widely known Scandinavian psychologist at that time. He started his review of my thesis with the words: "I cannot find any flaws in this work, whatsoever." This I found extremely heartening to hear as, in actual fact, my secret plan for the research had been to produce

the best thesis ever in educational psychology. But Smedslund went on to question in what way I had increased our understanding of what it takes to learn in our everyday reality—in schools, universities, and workplaces. Smedslund was questioning the experimental paradigm (so-called free recall learning) and the instrumental nature of that which was to be learned (in my case a list of names of famous people).

Smedslund did not ruin my academic career; he changed it. The relevance of knowledge—as compared to its precision and lack of ambiguity—has become the most important aspect of research for me. My next project was about academic learning, the kind of learning millions of people engage in every day around the world. We used texts and problems from textbooks with which the participants dealt under comparatively natural conditions. And above all, we explored learning from the learners' own perspectives. How did they understand the text they were dealing with or the problem they were trying to solve? And, how did they experience the various aspects of the learning situation itself?

There were four of us—Lars Owe Dahlgren, Lennart Svensson, Roger Säljö, and myself—working closely together for four years, basically doing nothing else but trying to unravel the questions asked. It was a wonderful team, and those were wonderful years. The conditions were ideal for increasing our knowledge about what it takes to learn in our everyday reality. And, I dare to claim that we have done so, exemplified by the papers featured here and by subsequent publications²⁻⁴ originating from the research approach (phenomenography⁵). This grew out of our interest in the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, understand, perceive, and conceptualize not only specific learning situations with their particular objects of learning, but the world around them.

1 Marton F. *Structural dynamics of learning*. Göteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1970.

2 Marton F, Hounsell D & Entwistle N, eds. *The experience of learning*. Edinburgh: Scotland.

Scottish Academic Press, 1984. 248 p.

3 Ramsden P, ed. *Improving learning*. London: Kegan Paul, 1988.

4 Marton F & Booth S. *Learning to experience*. Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press (In press).

5 Marton F. Phenomenography—describing conceptions of the world around us. *Instr. Sci.* 10:177-200, 1981 (Cited 35 times)