



Teaching and Learning: A Phenomenological Perspective

Russ Walsh
Duquesne University Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania USA
walshr@duq.edu

ABSTRACT

This article presents the author's reflections on teaching and learning from a phenomenological perspective. Drawing examples from research regarding student learning during study abroad experiences, research exploring therapist and client perspectives on their shared psychotherapy sessions, and the author's experience in teaching an orientation course for undergraduate students, this paper considers the following themes: learning via experience, learning in relationship, and learning by doing. Learning via experience highlights the importance of facilitating new experiences and recognizing that novelty may elicit anxiety for students on the path to transformational learning. Learning in relationship underscores the collaborative and dialogical nature of teaching and learning. This aspect of learning is discussed in terms of Smith's (1998) portrayal of original argument, as well as Bazerman's (1988) critique of academic discourse and its implications for traditional approaches to teaching. Learning by doing emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge, attitude, and application described by Amadeo Giorgi (1975) in his phenomenological study of learning. Martin Heidegger's (1962) distinction between the present-at-hand and ready-to-hand modes of engagement are also shown to be relevant to this feature of learning, with the implication that the application of knowledge should be a central part of teaching. The paper integrates these themes to suggest that teaching phenomenologically entails attending to the lived experience of students and approaching teaching as an engaged - and engaging - activity.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Learning, Experience, Relationship, Learning by doing.

1 TEACHING AND LEARNING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

How can phenomenological psychology inform teaching and learning? If the goal of phenomenology is to understand experience as it is lived, then phenomenological psychology may orient us to students' lived experiences – and in the process ground our efforts as educators to engage with those experiences. In the following paragraphs, I aim to explore this issue, and to do so phenomenologically. In other words, I'll approach this question from the ground up, presenting concrete examples and

drawing from these the ideas and values that comprise my approach to teaching and learning.

Before turning to my examples, there are a few important issues to address. The first of these is that of my position with respect to the question posed. For over 30 years, I have been an academic and clinical psychologist whose research, teaching, and clinical work have been informed by phenomenological psychology, primarily as practiced in the United States. This approach to psychology, initially articulated by Amadeo Giorgi (1970) at Duquesne University, and further developed by Colaizi (1973), Wertz (1984),

Halling and Liefer (1991), Walsh (1995; 2003; 2004), and Churchill (2000; 2021), among others, entails discerning from the reflective accounts of participants common features of their experiences. These common features, initially termed essential structures, are then examined for what they might reveal about the experience, or phenomenon, of interest. While there has been an ongoing debate as to whether this approach to research is primarily descriptive or interpretive, with contrasting positions typically citing Husserl or Heidegger in support of their claims (Walsh, 2012), both approaches can perhaps best be situated within the pragmatic phenomenology articulated by Mark Okrent (1988) and Hubert Dreyfus (1991).

As noted above, phenomenological psychology as a method entails distilling from the particulars of experience common features that are deemed essential to that experience. However, the meaning of essential must be clarified. As proposed by Amadeo Giorgi (1985), drawing from Edmund Husserl (1970) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1963), the essences sought in phenomenological research are those features without which the phenomenon would be otherwise – or, put differently, they are the features that make the phenomenon what it is. Through the process of free imaginative variation, “one describes the essential structure of the concrete lived experience” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 251). However, the question of for whom these features are essential is of crucial concern. As noted by Klein and Wescott (1994), phenomenological psychology has evolved to understand essential structures not as universally true but rather as essential to the examples and experiences given. In this way, its findings are in line with those of a case study, allowing readers to consider the relevance of conclusions to their particular experiences and understandings. My impressions here are offered in a similar spirit. Hence, to emphasize the title of this essay, the reflections that I

offer are a phenomenological perspective rather than the phenomenological perspective. To the extent that my observations may differ with those of the reader, I hope that those differences may be productive.

In the paragraphs that follow, I hope to illustrate what I have come to see as three important constituents of learning: learning via experience, learning in relationship, and learning by doing. The first two of these are drawn from phenomenological research, the first a study of students’ experiences of learning while studying abroad, and the second from research regarding the experience of psychotherapy from the perspectives of the psychotherapist and client engaged in that therapy. The third example is from my own experience as instructor for an undergraduate course at Duquesne University. Although this last example is not drawn from formal phenomenological research, it is offered as a concrete example relevant to the focus of this essay.

2 LEARNING VIA EXPERIENCE

The first of my examples entails phenomenological research regarding students’ perspectives on learning over the course of a study abroad program at Duquesne University (Walsh & Walsh, 2018). While much has been written about educational exchanges and study abroad programs, the value of these programs typically has been framed in terms of broad concepts such as intercultural competence (Salisbury, An & Pascarella, 2013) or global understanding (Smith & Metry, 2008). In contrast, this research asked students to describe in their own words what they learned as a result of their study abroad experiences. This study interviewed 8 students prior to their study abroad semester (to understand their expectations), at the midpoint of that semester (to comprehend their experiences while studying abroad), and upon their return to their home university (to

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appreciate the learning they ‘brought back’ with them).

Prior to their semester abroad, most participants voiced the expectation that they would learn the Italian language during their semester in Rome, and all anticipated some form of personal growth, such as an increase in independence and self-reliance as well as adaptability. Most anticipated learning from experience, looked forward to the experience of traveling, and voiced the expectation that the structure and content of their academic learning would be different. Yet they also expressed fears about the unknown aspects of the semester ahead of them, as well as their capacity to deal with them (e.g., “once I’m there, I’m there and there’s no going back”; “my major concern, which I am worried about, would be homesickness and hoping that I can deal with that”; “I’m going to be there for a whole semester and I just can’t go home – I’ll definitely miss the home life and my family”).

At the time of the mid-semester interview, only half of the participants referenced learning the Italian language, and all but one spoke of this in negative terms. Almost all participants described themselves as learning about and experiencing cultural differences (“it really amazed me how people could be so different”, “I learned a lot... kind of being immersed into a different culture”; “I’ve been exposed to a completely different type of people... and it’s an everyday thing”; “I learned to just be a lot more understanding of the culture here”) and spoke about increased independence (“I’m learning to be more independent, definitely, here”; “I don’t feel as afraid to explore places”; “I’m not the follower anymore... I’m the one figuring things out for myself”) and a sense of confidence, as well as greater openness and acceptance (“I find it easier to be myself and to just feel relaxed in a situation, and not be worried”; “I think I’m learning to be more

accepting... and open-minded”; “being here is such a great experience just to broaden my horizons, just be a little more content with who I am, and my limits and what I’m flexible with, and what I can and cannot do”). A majority expressed surprise and satisfaction regarding the friendships and group cohesion that were developing amidst their cohort. They described these relationships as collaborative and supportive, and referred to the unexpected benefits of interacting closely with peers having different interests, prior experiences, and religious beliefs. Half of the participants reported learning as a result of their decreased use of technology, such as cell phones and social media (in particular, that they could get by without them). Regarding their academic learning, six participants enthusiastically noted the benefits of on-site learning (e.g., a course in art taught via museum visits, and a history course taught via visits to archaeological sites).

Following their return from a semester in Rome, all of the participants reported gaining a strong sense of independence and self-confidence as a result of their study abroad experiences. (e.g., “I can do so much more than I ever thought possible... and learned that I could be independent and not be scared of trying new things and challenging myself”; “I am more independent and like I’m proud of that”). Three participants referred specifically to increased organizational skills as a result of the semester abroad (“I definitely learned time management skills while I was over there”; “I feel like now I’m using my time wisely”), and four described an increased openness (“it definitely opened my mind... and I think I also learned to be less judgmental of people”, “it just kind of opened my mind”; “just getting a different perspective ... certain situations I’ll now look at in two ways instead of one”). The particular experiences that facilitated

students' independence and self-confidence included experiencing and negotiating cultural differences as well as learning specific travel and organizational skills. Appreciating cultural differences was also reported by the vast majority of participants. The experiences that facilitated this included accommodating to social customs as well as perceived attitudes and values of Romans. Some of these differences were characterized as highly positive (such as those pertaining to a more relaxed pace of life), while others were portrayed as negative (such as those regarding inefficiency). With respect to academic learning, a majority of students recalled positively the benefits of on-site classes, but there was no mention whatsoever of the courses taught on campus that semester. Only one student referenced learning the Italian language.

Four of the eight participants reported learning as a result of their decreased use of technology, such as cell phone and social networking ("I thought I always had to be, not like dependent but I like kind of needed technology in my life. But I really don't", "when I came back here I'm not as dependent on technology", "I was also able to break away from technology and that was really nice ... a learning experience"; "I learned how to function without a cell phone"). Regarding their academic learning, six participants enthusiastically recalled the structure of on-site learning and its benefits ("I think seeing the stuff that you're talking about is a lot more beneficial that seeing it in a book or something", "part of the reason I probably learned so much is that you could go and see it instead of... stuff you just read about in a book").

The theme that showed the most significant shift across time was mention of the friendships and group cohesion experienced among the cohort of students. While no one mentioned this as an expectation during the

pre-semester interviews, it later emerged as a highly valued aspect of the students' experiences. For several, this was related to the theme of openness and accommodation, as the experience of living in close proximity to, traveling with, and relying on students different from themselves was described as "learning to be more accepting" regarding differences among students. Another trend over time was a transition from anticipatory fears and concerns to affirmative statements about learning – in other words, prior to their semester abroad students noted fears about what they didn't know, and afterward they spoke only in terms of what they had accomplished. It was also noteworthy that some participants' retrospective accounts (e.g., "I think of myself as a pretty independent person, but now I'm even more so") seemed to contradict initial accounts ("Being away from home that long... that's definitely one of the concerns I have, because I've never really been that far away from home") such that their history was to some degree revised in light of their new perspective. This suggests that learning may transform not just one's current experience, but one's memory of prior experiences.

Learning in Relationship

A second example concerns the learning evidenced in a psychotherapy session, as understood by both the therapist and client engaged in phenomenological research regarding the psychotherapy process (Walsh, 1995b). While psychotherapy is not typically framed in terms of teaching and learning, I include this example for two reasons. First, this study of client and therapist perspectives showed both individuals understanding shared "good moments" as involving learning on the part of client. Secondly, to the extent that teaching is not seen as the typical task of the psychotherapist, this example allows us to consider aspects of teaching and learning less explicit in the context of the classroom.

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This study entailed having a therapist and client who were engaged in long-term psychotherapy view videotaped recordings of their sessions, for the purpose of identifying and describing what each perceived as “good moments”. One noteworthy finding was that there were considerable differences between the specific good moments selected by the therapist and client (with the therapist identifying 9 moments, and the client identifying 20). However, amidst these differences the therapist and client both selected one moment, which was preceded by discussion regarding the client’s upcoming court for his arrest for driving while intoxicated. The client stated that if the judge asked the “wrong question”, he’d lose his temper and respond angrily. When the therapist called into question this statement and urged caution, the client insisted that, if provoked, he’d fight back. The selected moment then unfolded as follows:

Therapist: I’d like to understand that... because it seems really critical in a lot of things we’ve talked about.

Client: Because I’ve always had that feeling... I’ve always had for years, of thinking that... if you do something out of fear, then I always punish myself afterwards. So, if I’m afraid that the judge will do, and I compromise the way I truly feel, I’ll punish myself ... mentally. It will bother me for years.

Therapist: If you do something out of fear... you become what, less of a person in some way?

Client: It just bothers me.

This moment continues with the therapist and client debating, the therapist encouraging moderation and the client arguing at first that he’ll “lose control”, and then that he’ll “probably go with the standard line my lawyer feeds me.” It then proceeds as follows:

Therapist: It... we may... I’d like not to... I’m not talking really specifically about what you’ll do on Tuesday.

Client: Yeah, I know you’re not. And I’m... now you’re getting me to dwell on it, and unfortunately... about my compromises and how I take on fearful situations, or... situations where I should compromise.

Therapist: Where you might compromise. That’s a...

Client: I guess we all compromise. I’m constantly compromising, aren’t I?

Therapist: “Compromise” and “moderate” seem to be similar sorts of words and I’m wondering, in terms of your goals for a more moderate life, if it doesn’t imply compromise sometimes experiencing a little bit of fear, experiencing a little bit of loss of control, perhaps but without it being total.

Client: We all compromise, you know? It’s an unrealistic statement. More than likely, I’ll just compromise when the (court date) comes.

From the therapist’s perspective this moment was good because:

Okay, so I say, “I’m not talking just about Tuesday,” and he says, “I know you’re not” in what feels like a real genuine way. And he says, “you’re talking about how I deal with fear situations... and restates some of the things we’ve been talking about... like he knows we’re not just doing a behavioral analysis of a situation but understanding himself more. And when I summarize something and he says, “uh huh,” that’s kind of nice, but when he summarizes what we’re talking about and it does seem to be critical to the kinds of things we’ve been talking about, this feels more like we’ve been... like we’re getting somewhere or that we’re understanding each other. It’s a moment that feels good to me because he seems to get it, something about

himself that he's understanding in a different way.

From the client's perspective:

At about here, (the therapist) challenges (my) last statement... and the challenges are good. In other words, he doesn't put it as a direct challenge, he goes, "I'd like to understand this." And, of course at the time it seemed to make sense to me – why I felt this way. But I realized that basically it's an unrealistic ideology... It brings out to light to me, but not at the moment, that it was wrong... He says, "hopefully you'll be able to compromise and not lose a part of yourself" – in other words, he gets his point across discretely, without, you know, my seeing it or not. Little statements like that bring it to a head... I'm learning. I'm getting, hopefully, closer to what's healthier thinking.

As shown above, while both participants viewed this segment of therapy as a good moment, they describe it somewhat differently. What the therapist sees as mutual understanding that facilitates insight, the client portrays as being challenged by the therapist in a "discrete" or unprovocative manner. Nonetheless, both see the result as the client learning or understanding something in a novel way.

3 LEARNING BY DOING

A third example of teaching and learning is drawn from my experience in teaching an orientation course for undergraduate students at Duquesne University. Approximately 15 years ago, a course entitled Orientation to the Psychology Major was added to the undergraduate curriculum. This course purported to provide students with the necessary skills to navigate their way through the requirements and expectations for psychology majors. Its content included (a) overview of the major requirements, (b) introduction to the writing conventions of the American Psychological Association (known as APA

style), (c) discussion of the career prospects and options for graduate training following an undergraduate degree, as well as the steps necessary to pursue these trajectories, and (d) instruction regarding the composition of a resume or curriculum vitae.

For the first decade of the course, the orientation topics were addressed the way much instruction occurs in universities: via lecture. Students were taught about major requirements, APA style, career and graduate school options, and the basic structure of a resume or curriculum vitae. However, despite this instruction, portfolio assessments showed that most students continued to approach graduation uncertain and confused regarding curricular requirements and postgraduate options, showing repeated errors with following APA style in their writing, and without having a resume or curriculum vitae prepared for whatever steps they planned to take following attainment of their undergraduate degree. In other words, it didn't seem like they were learning what they were being taught.

When I prepared to start teaching this course several years ago, I redesigned the course so that each of the topics was addressed not via lecture but by guiding students through the process of doing the tasks expected in the application of the content previously presented through lecture. Thus, with the overview of major requirements, students were asked to draw out a plan with a specified timeline and with specific courses for their prospective journey through the psychology major. Regarding the conventions of APA style, students were asked to apply those conventions in a brief writing assignment, with extensive feedback on any errors in this regard. With respect to their options post-graduation, students were required to both meet with one-on-one with a career counselor to work collaboratively on a post-graduation plan, and to conduct specific

internet searches of the various degree programs relevant to their interests and aspirations. Lastly, in accord with their specified plans for post-graduation, students were required to draft either a resume or a curriculum vitae, for which they were given detailed feedback.

The changes to the design and implementation of the orientation course have now been in place for five years. While there are still students uncertain about their futures as they near the attainment of their undergraduate degrees, we now rarely see errors in their scheduling of required courses, or confusion about their options following attainment of their degree. Moreover, students report being aware of the resources they can draw upon to navigate the paths to their future, and willing to seek out and draw upon these resources as needed. With respect to the conventions of APA style, there has been less success: while we have noted some instances of student improvement in this regard, errors are still quite evident in students' writing throughout their undergraduate careers. Perhaps, given that students pursuing an undergraduate degree are likely to be enrolled in some courses with different writing conventions, and that APA style is relevant primarily for those who pursue postgraduate degrees, expecting the application of these standards across all students may be unreasonable. Alternatively, teaching these standards may require more repeated exposure and practice.

4 ESSENTIALS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The examples above suggest three distinct aspects regarding the phenomenology of learning. The first of these, learning via experience, underscores the ways in which learning is more than a cognitive collection of facts. Indeed, it can be argued that transformative learning by its very nature entails accommodation, or an alteration in our

manner of understanding. Here the phenomenological emphasis on experience as lived seems particularly apropos, in that transformative learning is a change in one's engagement with the world. As noted by Giorgi in his phenomenological research (1975), "learning is ultimately defined as an attitude", or what one learner described as a "new way of looking" (p. 97). This new way of looking is linked with knowledge and its application.

The implications for teaching phenomenologically are this: we foster transformative learning by facilitating new experiences. However, new experiences often provoke anxiety (Fischer, 1970), in that they challenge habitual ways of navigating one's way in the world. It is for this reason that many students procrastinate, as doing so avoids – at least for the moment – the threat of uncertainty that new learning entails. The students studying abroad moved through their anticipatory anxiety and gained a strong sense of independence and self-confidence as a result of their experiences. This movement through anxiety was facilitated by the fact that there was no turning back once the students arrived in their novel environment. In classroom learning the choice to avoid moving through anxiety is more readily available, particularly because the technological devices on which so many of us rely provide a multitude of stimuli to turn toward, and hence away from the learning task or challenge. It is noteworthy that a number of students in the study abroad research reported learning as a direct result of their decreased use of cell phones and social media.

While study abroad by its very nature invites novel experiences, classroom instruction poses more significant challenges. The study abroad students contrasted knowing a collection of facts about a particular culture, archaeological site, or work of art with being present to those phenomena. Similarly, their

appreciation for cultural differences came more from the experience of being together with different others than from theoretical understandings of such differences. Hence openness to experience entailed stepping away from insular forms of technology and towards engagement with novel situations and others. As teaching via technology becomes a dominant feature of education, we must consider ways to use technology in the service of facilitating new experiences and engagement with others.

It should also be noted that students' expectations of what would be learned differed from their experiences of what they learned, to the degree that their recollections were changed by the experience of learning. In other words, as a result of their learning experiences students revised their perspectives and even their memories of what they thought prior to those experiences. Their experiences changed not just their sense of who they are, but also their memory of who they were. Hence students' memories of fears and insecurities were overwritten by memories of courage and determination, such that their stories of who they were and now were changed. And one of their goals – learning the Italian language – for most students vanished from their retrospective accounts. This again underscores the transformative nature of learning.

The changes over time in students' accounts of learning has implications for the assessment of learning. First, it suggests that assessments should begin with baseline information so that learning outcomes can be interpreted in relation to students' starting points. More significantly, to the extent that learning entails changes in the language and recollection of baseline knowledge, qualitative assessment may offer the kinds of thick description (Ryle, 2009) that allow us to understand the cognitive changes as students acquire new knowledge.

The second set of examples from psychotherapy research highlight the

collaborative and dialogical nature of teaching and learning. In academic settings, the character of original argument (Smith, 1998) – openness to dialogue – is often neglected in favor of eloquence and certainty (Walsh, 2012). This follows the evolution of academic discourse from one of dialectic and discussion to the rhetorical assertion of truth (Bazerman, 1988; Smith, 1998), which in teaching has been mirrored by a shift away from Socratic learning to structured presentations of facts. Recognizing the importance of learning via conversation requires attending to “the clear interpersonal context of learning” (Giorgi, 1975, p.98).

In the psychotherapy excerpt cited above, what starts out as a rather oppositional interaction becomes collaborative when the participants acknowledge their different positions alongside their commitment to find a solution together. This is possible because the learning takes place within the context of a relationship, one which strives for mutual understanding. Nonetheless, amidst this relationship remain profound differences in perspective. There was little consistency in what the therapist and client considered to be “good moments”, and the moment on which they did agree was understood in quite different terms. Prior phenomenological research comparing the experiences of client and therapist in psychotherapy (Fessler, 1983) similarly showed that their perspectives are often quite distinct from one another. In one particularly glaring instance, about an interaction that the therapist experienced as mutual understanding, the client said he “didn't know what he was talking about” (p.43). As educators, how often might our impressions of a good lecture be met with a similar response by our students? Fessler noted that in retrospect that the psychotherapy client “described very little of the content of what had been said and remembered primarily a global experience of being either understood or misunderstood”

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(p. 41). Perhaps also in the context of the classroom, students recall from teachers not the transmission of specific facts, but an attitude of respect for and interest in the student's worlds that engages them in the process of learning.

Our challenge as teachers is to remain cognizant of the gap between our experience and that of our students, and to affirm that "learning is a radically inter-human phenomenon (Giorgi, 1975, p. 98). We should assume misunderstanding as a likelihood among divergent histories and experiences, and work to navigate these gaps through careful listening and discussion. Here as in psychotherapy, more important than getting it right may be communicating the desire to understand one another's' perspectives.

Learning via relationship again highlights the importance of gleaning student perspectives in the assessment of learning. While this may seem obvious, what are often viewed as student perspectives are in fact student responses to teacher perspectives. By their very nature, surveys and objective instruments filter students' points of view through the sieve of instructor or assessor discourse. This points to the promise of phenomenology with respect to the assessment of learning: by listening to students in their own words, we may better comprehend their learning experiences.

The third set of examples, addressing learning by doing, highlight the practical aspects of learning. Too often in academic settings we privilege forms of knowledge that are abstract and divorced from their practical application – knowing that rather than knowing how. But as Giorgi points out, learning, is "the relationship between one's knowledge, attitude, and behavioral application that constitutes the content of learning" (1975, p. 97). Thus, a phenomenology of learning must consider all of its dimensions. The example cited above,

introducing students to the practical steps involved in navigating one's way through a particular program and curriculum, is admittedly quite amenable to learning by doing. Nonetheless, to the extent that any learning involves its application, we must recognize application not simply as an outcome for the assessment of learning, but as a crucial constituent of learning itself.

Martin Heidegger's (1962) distinction between the present-at-hand and ready-to-hand modes of engagement are relevant to this feature of learning. The present-at-hand mode (*Vorhandenheit*) relates to a world of objects and principles by which we conceptualize those objects. Much of academic knowledge is organized and presented in this way. However, for Heidegger the ready-to-hand mode (*Zuhandenheit*)— our practical engagement with the world – precedes abstract, theoretical knowing. Our challenge as educators is to ground our teaching in students' worlds, so that its relevance to lived experience is apparent. For some topics this is easier said than done, but regardless of content I try to begin plans for instruction with the question, how is this relevant to the lived experience of my students? This may entail starting with an experiential exercise or drawing from popular culture and real-world examples. In each instance I am trying to enter the present-at-hand mode of theoretical understanding through the ready-to-hand mode of practical knowledge.

The one area that showed little change as a result of my pedagogical shift was students' learning of APA style. As noted above, this may be in part because for most students this format holds little relevance, as it not a common expectation across all of their courses, and its utility is only evident for those students anticipating an advanced degree. It is, in other words, a topic that holds little practical relevance for students: it is not part of their lived experience, and for most it never will be.

Perhaps learning by doing is only successful to the degree that the doing is made relevant to students' lives.

It is also worth noting that the motivation for the pedagogical changes described above came from the learning outcomes assessment, via two avenues. The first of these was portfolio assessment, in which students' capstone projects summarized their achievements as well as their remaining questions and concerns as they readied themselves for graduation. The second was the informal gathering of feedback via conversations with students during their final semesters at the university. Each of these practices was informed by the desire to assess students' learning in their own words.

Concluding Thoughts

In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to sketch out some key features of teaching and learning from my phenomenological perspective. Through specific examples I have explored the features of learning via experience, learning in relationship, and learning by doing. These features underscore the importance of education that embraces the lived experience of students and approaches teaching as an engaged - and engaging - activity. Teaching can be transformational to the extent that it aims to meet students where they are and remains mindful of the likelihood of misunderstanding on the way towards mutual understanding. Transformational learning may begin with anticipatory anxiety and expectations that will not be realized. Teaching therefore may require an ongoing invitation for students to tolerate anxiety, frustration, and even disappointment on the path to discovering something new. On the other side of the threshold of learning lies the potential for a new perspective that can overwrite anxiety and naïve expectations with a sense of competence and self-confidence.

The assessment of student learning, when undertaken qualitatively and relationally, can allow for thick description and phenomenological understanding of students' worlds in students' words.

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