

**Variation and change in university  
teachers' ways of experiencing teaching**

**Jo A McKenzie**

**Doctor of Philosophy, University of Technology, Sydney**

**2003**

# Certificate of Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

I certify that I have received ethics clearance from the UTS Ethics committee in accordance with UTS policies on human and animal research.

Signature of Candidate

---

# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisors, Keith Trigwell and Mark Tennant for their advice and support at different times during the development of this thesis. Keith introduced me to classical phenomenographic research approaches and the phenomenographic community and provided a critical sounding board for my ideas. Mark shared the benefits of his experience in advising students on conceptualising chapter writing and seeing the work through to completion. I would particularly like to express my appreciation of the many research coffee discussions that I shared with Keith and my fellow doctoral students Jane Davey and Anna Reid. These were vital occasions for exchanging and developing ideas, gaining feedback, sharing excitement and providing mutual support and encouragement. I would also like to thank my academic development colleague and fellow doctoral student Gerlese Åkerlind for a series of mutually supportive discussions, including exchanging transcripts and feedback during one of the phases of my analysis. I also acknowledge the interest, questions and encouragement that I received from many colleagues when I presented parts of this work at conferences or seminars.

I would particularly like to express my appreciation of the teachers who gave up some of their valuable academic time to participate in the interviews for this study. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible. I am also grateful for the comments, questions and feedback from the many university teachers who have been students in my courses and have discussed, learned from and given me new insights into interpreting aspects of the findings presented in this work. I would also like to express my appreciation for the ongoing interest and encouragement that I have received from my colleagues in IML, in particular Shirley Alexander, Simon Housego and Tanja Golja. I would also like to thank my partner, Geoff Royce, for his ongoing support and patience during the research and writing of this thesis.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the value to me of the doctoral completion scheme for staff at UTS, without which this thesis would not be completed.

# Table of Contents

## Chapter 1

<b>Introduction and rationale for the study .....</b>	<b>1</b>
External pressures for change in university teaching.....	2
Research on university teaching and student learning.....	5
A personal context for the study .....	7
Current understandings of how university teachers change their way of experiencing: an overview .....	8
The focuses of this study and outline of the thesis .....	10

## Chapter 2

<b>University teachers' ways of experiencing teaching: perspectives from the literature.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Research related to teachers' ways of experiencing teaching .....	17
An overview of conceptions of teaching, orientations towards teaching and related studies.....	18
Teacher-focused/teacher-centred categories.....	22
Student-focused categories .....	24
Categories in the middle – transitional, provisional or unclear? .....	25
Issues in identifying and interpreting change in ways of experiencing.....	26
Are categories sufficiently well described and distinctive?.....	27
The meaning of change between categories: expanding patterns of awareness or different sets of beliefs? .....	30
Relations between conceptions and approaches, or beliefs and practices, and the effect of teaching contexts.....	32
Awareness and the experience of teaching .....	34
A framework for analysing the experience of teaching.....	37
The direct object of teaching.....	39

The act and indirect object of teaching .....	40
Chapter summary .....	42

### **Chapter 3**

#### **How do university teachers’ ways of experiencing teaching**

#### **change: perspectives from the literature ..... 44**

Change as learning to experience teaching differently .....	45
Literature on teacher learning and change in higher education .....	50
Teacher learning as acquiring and applying teaching strategies.....	50
Teacher learning as developing and learning from experience .....	54
Differences in individual teachers’ development.....	56
Teachers’ conceptions of developing teaching or change in teaching.....	57
Summarising developmental perspectives .....	58
Teacher learning as conceptual change.....	59
Conceptual change models and university teachers' learning.....	61
Teacher learning through critical reflection.....	64
Transforming teaching through reflection and action: participatory action research and teaching communities.....	66
A framework for describing the experience of change in teaching .....	67
Chapter summary .....	71

### **Chapter 4**

#### **Methodologies for researching variation and change in ways of**

#### **experiencing ..... 74**

From “classical” to “new” phenomenography – a tradition of research into variation and experience .....	74
Reasons for choosing phenomenography as a research approach for this study .....	79
Issues in phenomenographic research: data, interpretations and outcomes.....	81
The nature of interview data .....	82
The outcomes of phenomenographic research: categories of description and relations with individual experience .....	86

Questions of validity, reliability and generalisability .....	89
Approaches to this study .....	93
Selection of teachers to participate in the study.....	94
The pilot group.....	96
The second group .....	97
The overall group .....	97
Constituting the data: Interviews and transcription .....	98
Interviewing .....	99
Transcription .....	105
Analysis of transcripts in relation to the different components of the study ...	106
Initial analyses of pilot data .....	106
Focuses for subsequent analyses.....	108
Constituting categories of description related to teachers' ways of experiencing teaching .....	111
Constituting categories of description related to teachers' ways of experiencing change in teaching .....	114
Constituting themes in the critical experiences and orientations related to change in ways of experiencing .....	115
Interpreting change in individuals' ways of experiencing from a phenomenographic perspective.....	118
Creating individual vignettes .....	120
Chapter summary .....	122

## **Chapter 5**

### **Variation in ways of experiencing teaching..... 123**

Categories of description .....	124
Category A: Teaching as transmitting information so that it is passed on to students.....	124
Category B: teaching as organising, explaining and demonstrating information so that students acquire disciplinary concepts and methods....	127



Category C: Teaching as teacher-focused interaction with students and student activity to help students to become capable of using the concepts and methods of the discipline or profession.....	130
Category D: Teaching as a facilitative process of relating teaching to learning to help students to develop their own disciplinary or professional understanding. ....	138
Category E: Teaching as guiding students to explore and develop professionally and personally and become independent as learners.....	146
Category F: Teaching as challenging and enabling students to change the relation between themselves and the world. ....	150
Relations between categories .....	154
The structure of the outcome space: logical relations in structure and meaning.....	155
Relations discerned in teachers' descriptions .....	158
Critical aspects and dimensions of variation .....	161
Chapter summary .....	169

## **Chapter 6**

### **Change in teachers' ways of experiencing teaching..... 171**

Individual teachers' ways of experiencing teaching: change and stability over time.....	172
Relations with perceptions of the teaching situation .....	178
What change is like and how it comes about: individual teachers' experiences.....	183
Vignette 6.1: Neil.....	183
Interview 1 .....	183
Interview 2 .....	186
Vignette 6.2: Ellen .....	189
Interview 1 .....	189
Interview 2 .....	193
Aspects of how change comes about: patterns of critical teacher experiences and orientations .....	197

Critical experiences and situations which afford them .....	198
Experiencing teaching from the students' perspectives .....	198
Experiencing different perspectives from different students .....	200
Bringing about change in one aspect of teaching and discerning variation in other aspects.....	201
Being a learner/observer .....	205
Being oriented towards experiencing situations in ways which afford change in ways of experiencing teaching .....	207
Awareness of dissonance, dissatisfaction and/or a desire for improvement .....	208
Putting teaching into focus.....	210
Reflective thinking informed by formal learning .....	211
Patterns of variation and the process of change.....	217
Chapter summary .....	221

## **Chapter 7**

### **Ways of experiencing change in teaching ..... 223**

Variation in teachers' ways of experiencing change in teaching.....	224
Category cA: Experiencing change as changing the content which is taught ..	227
Category cA1: Changing the selection of content included or excluded.....	227
Category cA2: Changing the way the content is organised for and represented in teaching.....	230
Category cB: Experiencing change in teaching as changing teaching strategies.....	234
Category cC: Experiencing change in teaching as relating teaching more closely to learning .....	240
Category cD: Change in teaching as coming to experience teaching in a more student-focused way through improving understanding of teaching and students' learning.....	247
Relations between categories: Dimensions of variation and relevance structures related to ways of experiencing change in teaching.....	252
Chapter summary .....	255

## Chapter 8

### **Patterns relating teachers' ways of experiencing change in teaching to their ways of experiencing teaching over time ..... 256**

Pattern 1: A teacher-focused way of experiencing teaching with teaching-focused ways of experiencing change in teaching .....	261
Vignette 8.1: Andy – change within teacher-focused ways of experiencing...	265
Interview 1 .....	265
Interview 2 .....	267
Interview 3 .....	270
Pattern 2: A teacher-focused interaction/student activity way of experiencing teaching with aspects of a student-learning focused way of experiencing change in teaching.....	273
Pattern 3: A student-focused way of experiencing teaching with a student-learning focused way of experiencing change in teaching .....	277
Pattern 4: A student-focused way of experiencing teaching with a student-learning and teacher-understanding focused way of experiencing change in teaching .....	279
Vignette 8.2: Tim - changing from teacher-focused to student-focused ways of experiencing teaching.....	280
Interview 1 .....	280
Interview 2 .....	284
Interview 3 .....	288
Summary and interpretation: Change from teacher-focused to student-focused ways of experiencing. How does it come about? .....	292

## Chapter 9

### **Variation and change in teachers' ways of experiencing teaching and the space of variation for university teachers' learning..... 298**

Patterns of variation and change in teachers' ways of experiencing teaching.....	301
--	-----

Critical experiences of variation related to student-focused ways of experiencing teaching .....	302
Experienced relevance structures.....	306
Revisiting and extending the literature on teacher reflection and change .....	310
Informing conceptual change perspectives .....	310
Revisiting reflection.....	312
Relating patterns of variation and change to the literature on teacher development and to teachers' conceptions of developing and changing as teachers .....	314
Teacher-focused patterns of change and development .....	315
Student-focused patterns of change and development.....	317
What does this say about teacher development and change over time? .....	319
Further contributions of this study .....	321
Implications for academic development: Creating a space of variation for university teachers' learning.....	324
Summary and conclusion .....	328
<b>References .....</b>	<b>275</b>

## List of figures

Figure 2.1	The experience of teaching: an analytic framework.....	39
Figure 3.1	A framework for analysing teachers' experience of change in teaching.....	70
Figure 4.1	Interview schedules.....	101

## List of tables

Table 2.1	Summary of key studies on conceptions of and orientations towards teaching .....	21
Table 5.1:	Relations between categories of description for ways of experiencing university teaching .....	156
Table 5.2	Critical aspects of ways of experiencing in relation to the direct object, indirect object and act of teaching .....	163
Table 6.1	Ways of experiencing teaching described by individual teachers across their interviews .....	174
Table 7.1	Outcome space for teachers' ways of experiencing change in teaching.....	226
Table 7.2	Variation and relevance structures related to different ways of experiencing change in teaching.....	253
Table 8.1	Relation between individual teachers' most complex ways of experiencing teaching and ways of experiencing change in teaching, in the interview in which they described the most complex way of experiencing change.....	258
Table 8.2	Patterns of connection between change in ways of experiencing teaching and ways of experiencing change in teaching.....	260
Table 8.3	Patterns of relations between ways of experiencing change in teaching, teaching and learning in relation to teaching .....	293



# Abstract

This thesis explores how university teachers' ways of experiencing teaching change from teacher focused to student focused and why some teachers experience this change while others do not. The exploration adopts the theoretical perspective of variation, learning and awareness (Marton and Booth, 1997) and is based on a two-year longitudinal interview study of 27 university teachers. Classical and new phenomenographies were used to constitute teachers' ways of experiencing teaching and teachers' ways of experiencing change in teaching. Changes in individual teachers' ways of experiencing were described and interpreted through focusing on teachers' awareness of critical aspects and related dimensions of variation, creating individual vignettes, and constituting themes in the critical experiences and orientations related to change.

The outcomes included six ways of experiencing teaching and their complementary patterns of critical aspects, a set of themes related to change in ways of experiencing and five ways of experiencing change in teaching. Combining these outcomes resulted in four patterns which illuminated why some teachers' ways of experiencing teaching became student focused while others remained teacher focused.

Teachers who became capable of experiencing teaching in student-focused ways focused on understanding teaching in relation to students' learning. They experienced change in teaching as becoming more student-focused or as relating teaching to development or change in student understandings, and were oriented towards putting teaching into focus and reflecting in ways informed by formal learning. These teachers experienced relevance structures which brought the critical aspects of student-focused ways of experiencing teaching to the foreground of their awareness so that they experienced corresponding dimensions of variation. Their

awareness of teaching expanded and this corresponded to a shift in the focus and meaning of teaching.



Teachers who remained teacher focused also sought to change their teaching, but focused on their own interest, comfort, efficiency or innovative practices and their students' reactions. These focuses related to experiencing change in teaching as changing content or strategies. Teachers who took these focuses experienced different relevance structures in situations for learning about teaching, such that they did not discern and focus on the critical aspects of student-focused ways of experiencing teaching. A few teachers who remained teacher focused perceived themselves to be relating teaching to learning, but saw learning as acquiring and applying external knowledge. They experienced simultaneous variation in aspects of teaching and aspects of student participation or motivation, but not in ways of experiencing learning or teaching.