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For the love of experience: changing the experience economy discourse

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CHAPTER 6

A genuine homage to someone,
means looking at our world
through his eyes,
rather than looking at his world
through our eyes.

AFTER ALAIN DE BOTTON,
HOW PROUST CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE,
1997, P.196

Research design

6.1 Introduction

In the former chapters I used theories to show the bias that I see in the current experience economy discourse and to offset this bias. In the choice of theories I have tried to take the individual's perspective into account as much as possible. If I would finish my exploration for a new theoretical foundation for the experience economy here though, a very important aspect would be missing: the voice of the individual. As I explained in chapter 2, the bias in current literature has mainly to do with too much focus on the organizational perspective and too little recognition for the importance of the individual's perspective. I therefore want to incorporate the voice of the individual literally in my theoretical foundation, by studying what they, as the experts on their own experience, have to say about their lived experience.

The reason why I have decided to present my research design for the empirical part of the study in this chapter and not in for example chapter 2 is that I want to create a clear distinction between the theoretical part and the empirical part, between what scholars say about experience and what individuals say about their experience. As I will explain in this chapter, for phenomenological research it is important to put between 'brackets' one's prior knowledge. I have therefore explicitly separated the prior theoretical knowledge that was dealt with in chapters 2 through 5 from the interview results in chapter 7, so that the individual's voice can be heard without interference from the models, theories and concepts that were presented in those chapters. In my conclusion in chapter 8 I will connect the insights from chapters 2 through 5 with the insights from chapter 7.

The choices researchers make regarding the strategies and methods to be used in their studies are important ones, since the intention should be to arrive at the most accurate and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Mumford, 1991). Making these choices out of habit, tradition or personal preference causes a risk that the methodology functions as an irrational ritual or fetish, and that one might confuse

the means and ends within the research (Sandström, 1991; Wastell, 1996). Not all authors seem to acknowledge the fact that their chosen method is in fact a choice, and present it as if it were the only possible, or the preferred method for doing research (Cavaye, 1996). In the same way, adherents of a particular approach all too often argue for its, according to Galliers highly unlikely, universal applicability (1991). Researchers should therefore reflect on their choices, guided by the research theme and objective, and give a persuasive argumentation for the chosen strategies and methods (Galliers, 1991; Mumford, 1991; De Vries & Roest, 1999; Easton, 1995; Trauth & O'Connor, 1991).

In this chapter I will present the choices I have made regarding the research strategy and methodology, including the arguments for making these specific choices. First I will discuss my epistemological orientation, interpretivism. Although, as I have just discussed, it is always important for researchers to present the line of reasoning of their study, this is even truer for interpretivistic researchers. Within this line of research, the central interest is not in presenting the reader with objective facts, but rather in meaning-perspectives and their interpretation, elucidation and exposition by the researcher (Erickson, 1986). Based on the presented line of reasoning the reader should be able to understand how the researcher has arrived at his or her interpretation. I will then discuss phenomenology as an appropriate research strategy based on the themes and objectives of this study. I will also indicate why I decided to dismiss my former research strategy choices. In paragraph 6.4 I will present the research method and the data collection and analysis techniques that I have used for conducting the interviews and the analysis of the interview results. Finally I will discuss several ways of evaluating interpretive research.

6.2 Epistemological orientation: Interpretivism

Epistemology refers to beliefs about the way in which knowledge is construed. Interpretivism and positivism rely on quite different assumptions about the nature of reality and the way in which knowledge about this reality can be obtained. Different approaches to research are therefore required (Cavaye, 1996). The traditional and dominant approach in many fields of research has been the positivist approach (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, Hunt, 1991, Burr, 1995) and this could be a reason why

many researchers do not state their positivist epistemological stance explicitly within their publications. However, there is a relative increase in the use of interpretive research (Walsham, 1995). The differences between the interpretivistic perspective and the positivist perspective cause a need for different criteria for conducting and evaluating research, depending on the chosen orientation of the researcher (Klein & Myers, 1999; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). What makes research interpretive is not so much a specific procedure in data collection or analysis, but it is rather a matter of focus and intent of the researcher, who is more interested in the specific structure of occurrences rather than their general character and overall distribution and who wants to understand the meaning perspectives of the individuals involved in the events (Erickson, 1986). Researchers should therefore reflect on their own philosophical stance and state their position explicitly in their work (Walsham, 1995).

The orientation of this study is interpretivist. The goal of interpretivist research is not to generate 'the' truth, but to understand the complexities of a phenomenon in reality and make interpretations available to render them intelligible to others. The results are not objective facts, which in positivism are considered as the only scientific knowledge, but an understanding of the actions and meaning-perspectives of the actors involved.

According to Erickson (1986) the specifics of actions and the meaning-perspectives of actors are often overlooked in other approaches to research. One reason for this is that the individuals whose meaning-perspectives the interpretive researcher is interested in are often themselves overlooked. In fact, one of the reasons why I argued that the orientation of business and marketing scholars in the field of the experience economy is biased is because they tend to overlook the individual that has the experience. They seem to be heavily focused on the organization's perspective and the goal of this study is in fact to solve the problems related to this biased orientation on experience by bringing back the individual's perspective in the understanding of experiences.

Contrary to positivists, who believe that the world conforms to laws of causation that can be objectively tested, and whose research approach is hypothetico-deductive and confirmatory, interpretivists believe that multiple realities exist as subjective

constructions of the mind (Walsham, 1993; Robey & Sahay, 1996; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). When reality is assumed to be subjectively or socially constructed, there cannot be 'one' universal and objective truth, instead there are multiple versions or constructions of truth. These constructions are in fact "our own constructions of other people's constructions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 9), ways of making sense of the world, and shared meanings are a form of intersubjectivity rather than objectivity. Interpretivism is thus an epistemological position, concerned with approaches to the understanding of reality and asserting that all such knowledge is necessarily a social construction and thus intersubjective.

Researchers within the interpretive stance aim to understand phenomena from the point of view of participants directly involved with the phenomenon under study. They do not enter a social setting with a priori defined constructs, instead they allow constructs to emerge while they learn about and try to understand the phenomenon in its interaction with the contexts and individuals involved. Interpretive research focuses on the ways in which human beings make sense of emergent situations and phenomena (Klein & Myers, 1999). Lee (1991) speaks of first and second level understanding. First level understanding refers to the understanding of reality as individuals perceive it in their natural environment. In other words, first level understanding refers to primary experience, or "the information (…) that all human beings acquire from their environment by looking, listening, feeling, sniffing, and tasting - the information, in other words, that allows us to *experience things for ourselves*" (Reed, 1996, pp. 1-2). Second level understanding on the other hand, refers to the researcher's interpretation of the first level understanding.

The study of interpretations and meanings of individuals regarding their experiences can help give an explanation for situations in which the experience of similar or identical artefacts in comparable settings results in different effects (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Erickson, 1986). By not defining a priori which particular observable variables will be analyzed and by remaining open to emergent phenomena, the understanding of the dynamics within a complex social reality can grow. An interpretive study of experiences can for example reveal why one individual is transformed after having experienced a specific event while the same event has not had any effect on another demographically identical individual. An interpretive study might also reveal why a seemingly 'modest' experience setting might result in

significant changes and meaning for individuals. It is not just the experience setting, the artefact, itself and its material properties that have to be studied, but also the social context and the interpretations and subjective meanings of individuals dealing with it (Walsham, 1993; Robey & Sahay, 1996; Robey & Azevedo, 1994). In fact, the different assumptions about the nature of cause may be the most basic difference between interpretive and other more positivist approaches to research (Erickson, 1986). Human beings are not merely subject to the laws of nature but their actions are grounded in a process of sense making and interpretation and thus are always open to the possibility of reinterpretation. If situations are reinterpreted and the individual makes a different choice based on the reinterpretation, he may also act differently, in a situation that seen from the outside may look identical. Prediction and control in the tradition of the natural sciences become impossible in this type of situation. Not the surface similarities of situations determine the actions of human beings but the differences in their meaning perspectives. This is why the interpretive researcher has an interest for these meaning perspectives and less for the 'objective' features of occurrences. The restricted orientation that business and marketing scholars in the field of the experience economy suffer from as I argued indeed contains elements of the focus on objective features instead of meaning perspectives of the individuals involved. Interpretive research can therefore be valuable in constructing a sound and integrative theoretical foundation for the experience economy by incorporating the individual's perspective.

Critics of interpretive research tend to focus on the non-representativeness and lack of statistical generalizability of this type of research. From a positivist perspective statistical generalizability is important. However, from an interpretivist position, the validity of an extrapolation from individual cases depends not on the representativeness of such cases in a statistical sense, but on the plausibility and cogency of the logical reasoning used in describing the results from the cases, and in drawing conclusions from them. Here, one deals with a different type of generalization, an induction from the concrete situation to the social totality beyond the individual case (Burawoy, 1998; Baroudi & Orlikowski, 1989). Interpretive analysis is concerned with discovering and interpreting complex social patterns (Gummesson, 1991) and the search is not for abstract universals by making statistical

generalizations from samples to populations, but for concrete universals, which result from comparing specific cases that have been studied in detail.

6.3 Research strategy: From Case research to Grounded Theory to Phenomenology

Every research strategy throws light on the same phenomenon in a different way (Lee, 1991; Klein & Myers, 1999). Based on my research problem, I had originally chosen to apply case research in this study. Case research is a preferred research strategy to answer 'how' and 'why' questions (Walsham, 1995), and it is most suited for studies that deal with contemporary events in their natural real-life setting over which the researcher has little or no control, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon of interest and its context are not clear (Yin, 2003). It is useful for studying situations in which the context and dynamics of a situation are important (Darke, Shanks & Broadbent, 1998). As was explained in the former chapters, experiences are dynamic interactive processes of meaning making between an individual and his or her environment. Many contexts influence this process and it is difficult to isolate these. Furthermore, because of the impact of the different contexts and the fact that experiences consist of interactive processes in which an individual and his or her environment are involved, experiences should be studied in their natural real life setting. Since individuals construct their own meaning in the experience, the control a researcher can exert on this process is very limited. In this respect case research is suited for the study of the value of experiences in this research.

A further argument for the usefulness of case research is that the study concerns phenomena in newer less-developed areas where existing knowledge is limited and for which a strong theoretical base is lacking (Benbasat, Goldstein & Mead, 1987; Darke, Shanks & Broadbent, 1998). The lack of a strong theoretical base and the fact that existing knowledge about experiences is limited is one of the main motives for doing this study as was explained in chapter 2. Clear definitions are missing, theoretical constructs are lacking and existing knowledge is very one sided in the sense that there is a strong bias towards the organizational perspective; only the viewpoint of the organization is taken and the focus is mainly on the commercial value of experiences. The attention for experiences within an organizational context is very recent and

research into this phenomenon is at a very early stage. Also in this respect case research is highly suited for the study of experiences.

However suitable case research is for my study, a problem that I discovered during the interviews was that it was very difficult to find other data that could be used for the goal of triangulation. Only a few respondents could show me some of the assignments they had done during the experience and the theses that were in most cases available did not contain information on how the individual experienced the education. This forced me to rethink my choice for case studies as a research strategy and to focus on grounded theory.

Grounded theory, as the name implies, is focused on constructing theory that is grounded in empirical data. Glaser and Strauss developed this approach in 1967, with the aim of explicating and codifying the procedures used by qualitative researchers. The theory was meant as a reaction to the fact that most studies in sociology, were logico-deductive, using empirical data to verify existing theories, and not creating new theories for unexplored areas. Because of its emphasis on new discoveries, the grounded theory approach is "usually used to generate theory in areas where little is already known, or to provide a fresh slant on existing knowledge about a particular social phenomenon" (Goulding, 1999, p.6).

Based on the research question data are collected which are subsequently coded, to eventually find general categories and concepts that are related in the theory to be constructed. During the research process itself, the theory evolves through a continuous interplay between collecting, analysing and comparing data. In fact, a main feature of grounded theory is the application of what is called continuous comparison. Chunks of data are continuously compared with other chunks of data to find emerging similarities and differences and to look for emerging themes, patterns and categories. In this process of continuous comparison Glaser and Strauss (1967) distinguish three types of coding: open, axial and selective. Open coding means that the researcher describes and labels what happens in the data, by giving descriptions or categorisations of phenomena in the data. Axial coding moves the researcher to a higher level of abstraction. Here the relations between the coded texts that resulted

from the open coding process are sought for. Selective coding means that core categories or constructs are found, around which one can group other concepts. The themes that emerge from the analysis of the interview transcripts should be focused more on the process than on the individuals who have been interviewed (Goulding, 2002). I should therefore present the materials "paying more attention to the process being studied than to the persons whose lives are embedded in those processes"(Denzin, 1989, p.39).

The practical problem I had to confront after the first round of interviews was that I was hired by one of the educational programs from which I had interviewed alumni. Because of this work, the alumni got to know me and my work better and it became problematic to interview them again. However, within grounded theory, as I explained, the process revolves around a reiteration of collecting, analysing and comparing data. This way a theory is grounded in reality. However, without being able to go back to the respondents and speak with them in the same open way as I did before, I was afraid I would end up with biased results.

Phenomenology became my final research strategy, but again, not without problems. Creswell (2007) advises investigators to first determine whether phenomenology is an appropriate choice for my research problem. When the research problem is to understand the common experiences of a phenomenon of several individuals, a phenomenological study is an appropriate choice. The phenomenon in my case is free choice learning experiences. The aim of a phenomenological study is to understand the universal essence of the phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 1990). "The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon" (van Manen, 1990, p.10). By interviewing individuals who have lived through free choice learning experiences, I want to find the essence of their experiences, not to find a fixed set of procedures, techniques and concepts, but to truly understand the essence of these experiences, what makes something a free choice learning experience.

I wanted to show in this paragraph that although there are many lists of guidelines and steps and procedures to make choices in the context of the research design, one should be very careful with these choices and stay alert when situations change. It

may very well be that a choice that was appropriate before has become inappropriate or impossible, like in my case.

Since the usual method of inquiry in this approach is the phenomenological interview I will now turn to a discussion of my data collection and analysis.

6.4 Data collection and analysis

The researcher's choice for which method to use for data collection and analysis, should be made based on the theme and objective of the study. "We refuse the art in our science when we forget that rules of method serve us, but only to a certain point, after which they may enslave us" (Sandelowski, 1994, p. 56). Methods are only a means to an end. The end product is "greater understanding of the question we are trying to answer or the problem we are trying to solve through the research... Methods are important but always only as a means to an end - the development of knowledge and insight and the communication of these to other groups" (Mumford, 1991, p. 22-26). The main objective of the interviews in chapter 7 is to gain a thorough understanding of the nature of free choice learning experiences. Based on the theme and objective of this study, I argue that existential-phenomenological interviewing is an appropriate method for my purposes. Although data collection and analysis are simultaneous activities in qualitative research (Merriam, 1988, p. 119), I will first focus on the process of data collection and then on the analysis of the data.

6.4.1 Data collection

Pollio et al (1997) see the phenomenological interview "as an almost inevitable procedure for attaining a rigorous and significant description of the world of everyday human experience as it is lived and described by individuals in specific circumstances" (p. 28). The phenomenological interview is an unstructured open-ended qualitative interview, an emergent dialogue. For the phenomenologist experiences are 'intentional', meaning that an experience is always "*of something* (…) it is impossible to divide one's experience from what it is that is experienced" (Cope, 2003, p. 4). There is no distinction between an 'objective reality' and a 'subjective appearance', these

belong together and constitute each other. To arrive at a proper understanding of the essence of the lived experience of the individual, it is necessary to have the individual, who is the expert of his own experience, speak freely about it (Packer & Addison, 1989; Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1988b). The dialogue is set by the participant rather than guided by pre-specified questions because the researcher's conceptual categories are secondary to the participants' experiential ones within the phenomenological approach (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). Experience as it is lived by the individual may not always honour the standard categorical and conceptual boundaries of the researcher and it must be understood in relation to its context (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990; Carbone, 1999; Zaltman, 1997; Levy, 1981; Adcox & Wittenstein, 2003; Millet & Millet, 2002; Holbrook, 1981), causing a need for the researcher to be non-directive during the interviewing process (McCracken, 1988b; Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997). The interview is not a question and answer session between an interviewer and a respondent (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989), but rather a dialogue, or as Kvale (1996) describes it, a proper 'inter view' between two people in a relatively equal relationship. The goal of the interview after all is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience as interpreted by the individual, rather than the confirmation or disconfirmation of existing theories that the researcher has in mind (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997).

However, also the interview itself is intentional, it is about something. Although the researcher should be non-directive and the interview should be an emergent and open dialogue between two equals, often there would not have been a dialogue without the initiative of the researcher. The researcher, in his role of researcher, already directs the attention towards certain aspects of the individual's life, and not to others. Thompson et al's (1989) figure/ground metaphor refers to the fact that in an experience certain events stand out (are figural) from other experiences and the context, which function as the background. Of course, the researcher's subject of interest will hopefully be figural in the interview for it to be relevant in the context of the research questions and there will be other topics that are left in the background. However, as the existential-phenomenologists argue, the figure is dependent on its background, so the interview should function as a way of trying to understand the figure (experience) firmly located in its background (context). A balance has to be found between having the participant tell his own story in his own words and

simultaneously keeping in mind the interest of the researcher, or as Erickson (1986, p.121) calls it: "induction and deduction are in constant dialogue". McCracken (1988b) acknowledges this need for balance in his discussion of the long Interview, and describes various types of 'prompts' for directing the interview in a very subtle way. Under no circumstance should 'why'-questions be asked since these "often shift the dialogue away from describing an experience to a more abstract, theoretical discussion" (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997, p. 30). The researcher should neither make use of 'active listening strategies', since these "are obtrusive in precisely the manner that this research wishes to avoid, and they are likely to be almost completely destructive of good data" (McCracken, 1988b, p. 21).

Within phenomenology, sampling is not based on statistical considerations, but rather on informational considerations. Various authors distinguish between conventional sampling and the type of sampling commonly used in qualitative research (Tesch, 1990), whether it is called purposive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), theoretical (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), or judgmental sampling (Fetterman, 1998). Contrary to conventional sampling, the purpose is not to facilitate statistical generalization, but capture the complexity of the phenomenon of interest (McCracken, 1988b). Furthermore the criteria for sampling are not determined a priori, but may depend on the information that the study provides. The size of the sample is determined based on the criterion of informational redundancy, not statistical confidence. As was already mentioned above, interpretivists consider reality to be socially constructed and believe there are multiple realities. Sampling is based on the research question, which in interpretive research should be directed at gaining a thorough understanding of these multiple realities.

Initially individuals were chosen based on a variety of factors including their having experienced a free-choice learning experience. The choice for investigating their interpretation of free-choice learning experiences involves three different aspects of the investigated experiences. As was argued in chapters 3 to 5, current literature on experiences is very biased toward certain specific concepts of experience, effects and invested values, involving a high degree of immediacy. To gain a thorough understanding of what having an experience may mean to individuals, I have chosen to focus specifically on the less immediate learning experiences that seem to have been relatively neglected in contemporary literature on experiences. The choice for

investigating free-choice learning experiences is based on the research of Falk and Dierking (2000) who propose a model of free-choice learning as a solution to what they see as the faulty models and flawed assumptions of learning that have guided research by educators and psychologists. "Free-choice learning tends to be nonlinear, is personally motivated, and involves considerable choice on the part of the learner as to what to learn, as well as where and when to participate in learning" (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 13). As was shown in the discussion of positive effects of experiences and the construction of meaning in chapter 4, personal motivation and autonomy are very important for the active construction of meaning, which is why I have decided to focus on free-choice learning experiences in particular.

Gaining a thorough understanding of the individual's interpretation of his experience means that the free-choice learning experience has to have taken place in the past. To be able to grasp the meaning an experience has had for an individual, subsequent experiences have to be taken into account (Falk & Dierking, 2000) and time to reflect on the experience is needed since learning and the construction of meaning are not isolated processes that take place in a vacuum, but instead are processes that take place in time. Other factors for selecting participants for the interview were derived from McCracken (1988b, p. 37) who states that the participants should be unknown to the researcher and should have no special knowledge or ignorance of the topic under study. The recommended number of participants varies from one author to the next (e.g. McCracken, 1988b; Thompson, 1997; Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995; Groenewald, 2004; Patton, 1990), but according to Boyd (2001) and Creswell (2007) ten participants are sufficient for reaching saturation, which means that additional participants introduce no new perspectives on the topic (Gummesson, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Groenewald, 2004; Creswell, 2007). Based on the degree of saturation and based on insights and information derived from the study, the sample may be refined to be able to focus more specifically on those research objects that seem most relevant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fifteen interviews were held with respondents who had participated in a free choice learning experience in the past. Due to ease of access three free choice learning experiences were selected, namely the Advanced Change Methodologies (ACM) Master of the SIOO, the Executive Master

in Information Management (EMIM) of the University of Amsterdam Business School and the Kaos Pilot School (recently renamed Knowmads)[17].

Although the final structure of the interviews emerged during the interviews themselves, each interview began with an explication of my motives and the general purpose of the interview, following the guidelines of Taylor and Bogdan (1984), without asking the leading research question (Groenewald, 2004). Honesty about the motives and the purpose of the interview, combined with confidentiality reduces suspicion and promotes honest and sincere responses (Groenewald, 2004) and because of the often personal nature of what the participants disclosed during the interviews, confidentiality is considered to be very important (Merriam, 1988; McCracken, 1988b; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). For this reason every participant received an explanation of the way in which I would protect their confidentiality and privacy, based on the 'informed consent agreement' developed by Groenewald (2004), stating that participants are participating in research, the purpose of the research, the procedures of the interview, the possible risks and benefits of participation, the voluntary nature of participation, the procedures used to protect confidentiality (for example the use of pseudonyms and modification of personal details that might be traced back to the participant), and the option to receive the results of the final analysis.

When agreement was reached on confidentiality and privacy the interview started. The flow of the interviews was left open but certain themes were probed in every interview (see Appendix B). Afterwards the participants were debriefed. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

6.4.2 Data analysis

Besides the intentionality of experiences that has been discussed above, there is another principle of phenomenology that has consequences for the interviewing process and the role of the researcher in this process: bracketing. Eisenhardt (1989) and Cope (2003) discuss the fact that it is impossible for the researcher to interpret the

17 See Appendix A for details.

interview data with a "clean theoretical slate" (Cope, 2003, p. 19), as the principles of modern phenomenology, as described by Husserl (1859-1938), demand. This principle is called 'bracketing,' and it is often characterized as a suspension of one's biases, everyday understandings, (theoretical) beliefs, habitual modes of thought, judgments, preconceptions, presuppositions, and so on (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; Groenewald, 2004; Pettit, 1969; Moran, 2000; Cope, 2003). Various authors who consider complete bracketing, also called 'reduction', as impossible, have argued for a more positive description of bracketing, as a way of seeing (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992). A potential positive description of bracketing is that bracketing is "an attempt to identify and correct interpretations in which the phenomenological perspective has been coopted by incompatible suppositions" (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997, p. 48). Procedures that have been suggested for avoiding biased results based on these suppositions (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989; 1990), and that I have used while conducting my research, were for example explicitly considering my own reasons and motives for doing the research, rendering the interpretations in terms used by the participants rather than in a more abstract academic language, and conducting a part of the interpretation of the data in a group setting.

In the discussion of the collection of data it was already mentioned that the researcher's conceptual categories are secondary to the participants' experiential ones within the phenomenological approach (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). Also in the analysis of the results this principle is important. Phenomenologists focus on presenting themes that emerge from the data. Although I have constructed a theoretical model in chapters 3 to 5, I have 'bracketed' this model when analysing the data, to discover the emergent themes within the transcribed interview data. The emergent themes will be confronted with the theoretical insights in chapter 8, to see whether the insights should be modified to be able to use them for understanding experiences from the individual's perspective.

I am aware of the fact that the extensive literature review that precedes the collection and analysis of interview-data, may have posed a risk in the sense that because of this foreknowledge certain preconceptions and expectations may arise. However, I agree with McCracken that a "good literature review has many obvious virtues" (1988b, p.

30). Being well versed in the literature may for example mean that the researcher has certain expectations that the data may defy, which according to Kuhn may form the origin of intellectual innovation (McCracken, 1988b; Packer & Addison, 1989; Kuhn, 1962).

The analysis of interview data is the least examined aspect of qualitative research and the process of analysis can never be fully specified (McCracken, 1988b, p. 41). Based on the many writings on the analysis process however, some guidelines can be distilled. The phenomenological analysis of interview data is a hermeneutic endeavour, meaning that parts of the transcribed interviews are related to the whole and to each other in an interactive back and forth process (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997). Each utterance in the interview transcript is first considered in its own terms, then in relation to the rest of the interview transcript and finally in relation to the other interviews (McCracken, 1988b). The interpretations on these three levels are continually revised based on the enhanced understanding of the researcher. The themes that emerge from this interpretive process, have however to be supported by participants' descriptions and rendered in 'emic' terms (terms that the participants themselves have used) and should be subject to critical evaluation by an interpretive group (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990).

6.5 Evaluation

The question of whether research is reliable and valid deserves special attention. One of the reasons for this special attention is the fact that qualitative research not often includes a discussion of these topics (Kvale, 1989). Another reason is that often the quality of research is criticized based on faulty criteria that cannot be applied to qualitative and interpretive research (Kvale, 1989; Salner, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Gummesson, 1991; Polkinghorne, 2007; Altheide & Johnson, 1998). The fact that there are no precise and exact prescriptions for how to engage in qualitative research, in contrast with quantitative research in which "the investigator is the deliberately dispassionate operator of a piece of finely calibrated methodological machinery" (McCracken, 1988b, p. 49), has consequences for the way in which qualitative research can be evaluated. For long there have been debates about the validity,

generalizability, and accurateness of qualitative research, often caused by a tendency to apply quantitative standards to qualitative research (McCracken, 1988b; Goulding, 1999; Kvale, 1989). Positivist and quantitative research, for which the traditional criteria of quality were originally formulated (Altheide & Johnson, 1998), are based on different assumptions than their interpretivist and qualitative counterparts. The purposes of these types of research differ and this implies that the evaluation of whether the goals of the research have been achieved in an appropriate way should also differ (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). When the purpose of research is not the discovery and isolation of laws of causality and the testing of hypotheses, but rather an understanding and description of the world as those in it interpret the world, the traditional criteria for establishing validity and other aspects of quality have to be adapted (Kvale, 1989; Salner, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Gummesson, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Altheide & Johnson, 1998). Denzin (1997) speaks of the 'legitimation crisis' in this context, meaning that criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research are problematized and that traditional terms like validity, generalizability, and reliability have to be seriously rethought. In a discussion of the problematization of criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that because of the different purposes of quantitative and qualitative research, there should also be different criteria for evaluation, although the underlying rationales of the criteria should be the same. In table 6.1 the four rationales for the criteria, the four questions that every researcher should ask himself according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), are presented together with their concomitant criteria within the quantitative and qualitative paradigms.

Underlying rationale	**Quantitative criteria**	**Qualitative criteria**
Truth value	Internal Validity	Credibility
Applicability	External Validity	Transferability
Consistency	Reliability	Dependability
Neutrality	Objectivity	Confirmability

Table 6.1 – Evaluation criteria for quantitative and qualitative research (based on Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

Internal validity refers to whether one's findings match reality (Merriam, 1988). However, when one assumes that there is not one reality but that there are only multiple constructions of reality, truth-value becomes a question of whether one's findings match people's constructions (Denzin, 1997; Pollio, Henley & Thompson,

1997; Altheide & Johnson, 1998). An often-used term for this is the 'phenomenological nod', when people nod in recognition of the descriptions of experiences, that resonate with them as they have had or could imagine having those experiences. The reconstructions that the researcher presents should adequately represent the constructions of the studied individuals and should be "credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Strategies that have been proposed for ensuring the credibility of research are for example presenting the documentary evidence and arguments that support the conclusions, using terms and categories of the participants (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; Merriam, 1988; Gummesson, 1991), providing referential adequacy by recording the raw data while at the same time making sure that the confidentiality and anonymity are preserved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), continually checking, questioning and interpreting the findings (Kvale, 1989), and making use of member checks, meaning that findings are fed back to the participants (Merriam, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Erickson (1984) credibility is in fact the basic validity criterion, in the sense that the presented information should reflect "the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actor's point of view" (p. 119).

External validity refers to the extent to which findings from one study can be generalized to and across other situations, persons, settings or times (Merriam, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, according to many, this generalizability is an inappropriate goal for interpretive and qualitative research (Merriam, 1988; Gummesson, 1991; Erickson, 1986). Interpretive research is focused on contextual information rather than on context-free generalizations (Patton, 1990; Merriam, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A possibility though, is to see whether the findings are transferable from one context to a different context. Based on the similarity between the context in which the findings were discovered, also called the 'sending context', and the 'receiving context' one can make judgments on the degree of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, one then needs knowledge of both the sending and the receiving contexts, which based on all the possible receiving contexts is impossible. A solution for this problem is to leave "the extent to which a study's findings apply to other situations up to the people in those situations" (Merriam, 1988, p. 177). To support the person in the receiving context with making the judgment of the

transferability as much as possible about how the findings were obtained should be specified, for example by use of thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal is that readers who adopt the same viewpoint as specified by the researcher, are able to understand how he arrived at the interpretation (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; Giorgi, 1975; Erickson, 1986).

The specification of how the interpretations were produced, also helps to establish the dependability of the research. The positivistic criterion of reliability refers to the extent to which one's findings can be replicated. However, when the unit of analysis is not a static object, reliability in this sense becomes problematic (Merriam, 1988). Interpretive researchers "see, as do experienced teachers, that yesterday's reading group was not quite the same as today's, and that this moment in the reading group is not the same as the next moment" (Erickson, 1986, p. 129). The interpretivist counterpart of reliability is dependability, meaning that one does not demand that other researchers who use the same instruments for the same units of analysis will yield the same results, but rather that other researchers concur that based on the data collected, the results are consistent and dependable (Merriam, 1988). However, there is no credibility without dependability, so a demonstration of credibility as discussed above amounts to a simultaneous demonstration of dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, confirmability can be established by conducting a 'confirmability audit' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By keeping records of documents referring to the raw data, data reduction and analysis, data reconstruction and synthesis, process notes, intentions and disposition, and instrument development, other researchers can evaluate whether the findings are confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 319-320;382-384). Keeping records of this audit trail also helps the researcher in the process of collecting and analysing the usually vast amount of data resulting from existential-phenomenological interviews.

One last remark has to be made to manage the expectations of the reader. I found that although phenomenology is an appropriate research strategy and the existential-phenomenological interview is an appropriate method for studying the phenomenon of free choice learning experiences, there seemed to be a problem related to my focus in this research. I wanted to get to the essence of free choice learning experiences,

based on the notion that these, given the descriptions given by the organizations that offered the programs, were examples of Erfahrungen. By understanding the essence of these Erfahrungen I would be able to set this understanding off against the current dominant understanding of experiences which is more focused on Erlebnissen, to offset the bias in the discourse. However, my interest in the essence of the lived Erfahrung os individuals stood in contrast with some of the guidelines and suggestions that scholars have provided for phenomenological interviews. For example Van Manen (1990) suggests that in the collected descriptions of the experiences under study, there should be a focus on sensory impressions like bodily feelings, sights, sounds and smells, and affective reactions like feelings, moods and emotions the individual has. One should also focus on a particular example or incident of the object of experience, specific events, an adventure, a happening, a particular experience, examples of experiences that stand out from the rest in terms of vividness, or uniqueness as if it were the first time. All of these suggestions indicate a strong focus on the study of Erlebnissen. My intention on the other hand was to get to the essence of Erfahrungen which as I have shown are a quite different type of experience. Nevertheless I thought it worthwhile to use existential-phenomenological interviews with the aim of understanding the Erfahrungen that respondents had lived, by focusing mostly on concrete experiences in an effort to find out the structure that governs the development of Erfahrungen.