Ference Marton

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Ference Marton has studied and worked, and is still working, at the University of Gothenburg since 1960 in various capacities in Education and in Psychology; since 1977 as a Professor, and since 2006 as a Professor Emeritus. During 1998-2001 he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Hong Kong. Ference Marton’s professional passion has throughout been learning as seen from a pedagogical perspective. He has-with his colleagues in Sweden, the UK, Australia and other countries- developed Phenomenography, a research specialization focusing on the qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena appear to people, and Variation Theory, aimed at explaining the origin of the different ways of seeing the world around us. Both Phenomenography and Variation Theory are made use of in the Learning Study, an arrangement for teachers to develop the scientific foundation of their own profession.

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What is to be learned?

by Ference Marton and Ulla Runesson

Learning in school is supposed to be intentional. Teachers are expected to have reasonably clear ideas about what they hope that their students will learn. What they do in the classroom is a function of what they are trying to help their students to achieve. The goals are captured in terms of educational objectives, learning outcomes, learning targets and so on. These are statements about what the students are supposed to learn. But are they really? Do they tell the students, the teachers or anybody else, for that matter, what is to be learned? We do not think so.

What such statements tell us is what the students are supposed to become capable to do. Every goal is one and the same for all students taught together. But can we imagine that in order to get there, they have to learn the same things? If we believe that the target capability has different components and that some students have mastered some of them, while others have mastered others, we are bound to conclude that in order to develop the same capability, different student have to appropriate, in part, different things.

Component parts of the capability aimed at, that are missing, are critical features of that capability and it is these critical features that the students have to discern, notice, attend, well, learn. Furthermore, there are specific necessary conditions for this to happen. By creating such necessary conditions that learning is made possible.

In Hong Kong and in Sweden we have been very much impressed by the systematic and shared pedagogy of the Japanese lesson study and the Chinese teachers’ research group. We have followed these models, but we found that we needed a more powerful answer to the question “What is to be learned?” This is actually the main question that we address in every Learning study that we engage in. We will illustrate this point with examples.