

An overview of vignette impacts on teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper approaches vignette understanding from the phenomenology perspective. It reviews definitions of vignettes, their characteristics, and how to appreciate vignettes. The potential impacts of vignette application on teaching and learning as well as on the institutions are also addressed.

1. Introduction

Vignettes have been applied in many disciplines over the past 50 years. In the early 1950s, vignettes were used in anthropology and psychology, and they secured their place in other fields, such as sociology, nursing, and education, etc. (Erfanian, Latifnejad, Heydari, & Noghani, 2020). However, vignettes are not very popular in Vietnam as a teaching and learning technique. This paper endeavors to present commonly accepted insights into vignette in the literature. The paper presents vignette understanding from the phenomenology perspective and confines its review within the possible impacts on teaching and learning.

2. Understanding vignettes

Vignettes are defined as short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, and the interviewee is invited to respond to those situations (Finch, 1987). Following a more updated definition, a vignette is a condensed, concise description of a selected scene of experience (Schratz, Schratz, & Westfall-Greiter, 2013). Vignettes describe what we have perceived, seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted as far as possible without interpreting or explaining. Vignettes borrow from the phenomenological method of exemplary description, trying to capture the meaningful moments of experience of everyday life and social spaces, and condense them into a concise scene. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, i.e., the appearances of things, things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things. Phenomenology, therefore, seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019; Smith, 2018).

In the mainstream of phenomenology, Meyer-Drawe (2008) advocates learning as experience by focusing on the lived experiences of learners in the classroom when attending to the (learning) experience of others. Knowledge is believed not being able to be fully instructed. Learning might occur everywhere in life, and the most poignant learning experiences might occur outside of school without the presence of a teacher (Schratz et al., 2013). The classroom is seen as a space where pedagogical moments occur rather than a place where teaching measures are

implemented. Teaching, as a sequence, appears in the shadow of a learning moment without being abstracted or separated from learning (Kraus, 2019).

With such characteristics, vignettes can capture moments of experience in school or the world and thus provide the experience of learning (Meyer-Drawe, 2020) as Dewey (2009) insists that learning requires reflection on the experience. A connection can be made with the conditions that necessitated or forced such an experience. With vignettes, the relational, responsive, and embodied experience is discussed, and students are encouraged to exchange various understandings of social interactions. These moments of experimentation serve as fruitful objects for analysis, the starting points for learning (Ammann, 2018).

Vignettes, therefore, can be used as examples and help students generate meaning from a specific situation. Vignettes can be used to prompt discussions of implications for practice and theory (Schratz et al., 2013). The co-experienced moments of students will be used to get new understandings and perspectives of social interactions. However, vignettes have their limitations as we cannot draw generalization or representative conclusions from vignettes. Therefore they cannot be used for objective or universally valid theories (Ammann, 2018).

Regarding the content, vignettes can be real-life stories or news stories (Gray, Delany, & Durrheim, 2005), geographic data (Gray & Manning, 2013), or extracts from public campaigns, art or literature. Apart from the written form, the media of vignettes include videotape, computer-based data, film, photography, and music (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, & Herber, 2014; Hughes, 1998). In reference to the format, vignettes can either follow a staged model, where the story is presented and developed across several stages, with each stage being preceded by a series of questions (Fischer, Jenkins, Bloor, Neale, & Berney, 2007; Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010), or they can be presented as a single complete story followed by one set of questions. Stories can be written using a first-or third-person perspective. Students will be required to answer as if they were the character or from their perspective. Students can be asked how they or a particular character in the story should ideally act or how they or the character would realistically act, focusing attention respectively on either more ideal dimensions of situations or the more pragmatic (Finch, 1987).

3. Reading vignettes

The process of interpreting vignettes is called reading (Schratz et al., 2013), in which the multitude and richness of a wide range of sensations are encouraged rather than analysis stemming from a set-theoretical frame (Finlay, 2009).

In reading a vignette, we are to be attentive to what is described in the text, how it is described, what images it evokes, and what associations arise from it. What experiences are revealed in the vignette? What irritates us? What is familiar to us? We put ourselves in the situation by reading and sense, if necessary, acting out the scene, feeling how the description feels, and exploring possibilities. In this way, working together with vignettes opens up multiple ways of reading the experiences we have experienced through seeing, hearing, and feeling (Peterlini, 2020).

We are also encouraged to reflexively interpret the pre-reflexively grasped meaning and refrain from interpretation. In other words, we need to hold back from categorizing and explaining to uncover, peel off, and add layers of understanding (Agostini & Peterlini, 2022).

A successful vignette is one which opens to multiple readers and various readings, allowing the context to emerge rather than restricting the reader's experience to a particular theoretical

framework. As a result, any one final interpretation or conclusion is hardly found. We picture experiences or get access to the experiences of others. We translate experiences into written texts and especially feelings, bodily expressions, and atmosphere (Meyer-Drawe, 2020).

4. Potentials for teaching and learning

Vignette technique application might bring about three potentials for teaching and learning as the following:

- *Potential of perception*

Our perceptions have a sensual basis and are, at the same time, influenced by our previous experiences through economic, social, and cultural practices. Vignettes open the door to new possibilities of perception. We can use vignettes as one of the participatory teaching techniques for perceptions. Vignettes lead us to question habitual ways of seeing. By distancing oneself from the familiar and the supposedly secure, or/and by opening the gaze beyond preconceived patterns of perception, or/and by engaging with experiences of ambivalence, ambiguity, and diversity, we can perceive situations of learning and teaching in a new and different way. We can break perceptual conventions and start searching for alternative possibilities of perception (Peterlini, 2020).

- *Potential of co-experience*

Co-experience is our human gift, as we will be able to experience others as experiencers (Thompson, 2015). Since we can observe behavior but not experiences, vignettes can provide opportunities for us to co-experience. Without co-experience, we would remain blind to each other since we would never know whether the observed behavior is an experience or the like (Peterlini, 2020).

- *Potential of openness*

Openness means encountering those entrusted to our pedagogical care in an unbiased manner as far as possible and also dealing with our assumptions as openly as possible. Writing vignettes requires and promotes this attitude in a similar measure: Looking, listening, and empathizing with what is revealed trains sensual perception. The joint discursive reading and reflexion of the vignettes open up new perspectives and possibilities for action.

5. Potentials for institutions

Vignette application might bring about three potentials for instructional organizations (Peterlini, 2020):

- *Potential of the context*

Institutions form the context within which teachers are active. This context of culture, attitudes, structures, and much more can be more or less conducive to teacher work. Therefore, the context must develop and adapt to the questions and challenges that arise.

- *Potential for cooperation*

Cooperation between professionals can take different forms. In order for such collaboration to be as conducive to learning as possible, close cooperation based on trust is necessary, which not only regulates institutional issues in a friendly manner but also allows for controversial discussions on pedagogical issues. If a productive dialogue with vignettes succeeds, an exchange of visions and attitudes will emerge from it, even with different interpretations. Learning of the group and the institution therefore will be stimulated and developed.

• *Potential of organizational learning*

Institution learning and group learning are carried out based on requirements and questions from pedagogical practice. This requires a culture of exchange, debate, and shared responsibility within the respective institutions and groups. Practicing talking together about one's pedagogical work helps find answers to pedagogical challenges. Working with vignettes that are read and interpreted differently can help reduce fears of failure in favor of shared responsibility.

In conclusion, vignettes vary tremendously in form. They are employed in different ways and for different purposes. The vignette technique is considered a teaching method that can elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations. Working with the vignette technique opens up many opportunities and applications. Breaking the tradition of learning in the classroom is only with teachers; vignettes develop the potential of fresh or out-of-routine perception, co-experience, and openness for new perspectives and possibilities for action in individuals. Vignettes can induce to the institutional active working atmosphere, cooperation among colleagues, and institutional development.

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