Investigating the background – taking a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological approach to Networked Learning

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Abstract

This paper is a theoretical paper on phenomenological methodology. My point of departure is Merleau-Ponty's concept of figure-background in perception and his view of the role which the body has in establishing figure-background in each specific situation. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's approach differs from other phenomenological approaches because of this focus: his highlighting of the background as essential for understanding what appears as figure to consciousness (the object of experience). His focus on the background has methodological implications for how to investigate a phenomenon (perform phenomenological analyses). A key Merleau-Pontian methodological strategy is to focus on breakdown situations, that is, situations where ordinary practical activity breaks down, because the breakdowns can provide indications about that which is taken for granted in the usual well-performed practical activity. I illustrate what Merleau-Pontian phenomenological analysis within Networked Learning could be with two examples. One is from synchronous online learning situations: the figure of *eye contact via a webcam*. The other one concerns contemporary renderings of the networked learners in the figure of *hybrid networked learning situations of students today*. For both examples, I tease out what relevant backgrounds are and how a focus on those backgrounds highlights other aspects in networked learning than the ones other phenomenological analyses focus on.

Keywords

Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, networked learning, body, figure-background.

Introduction

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) defines phenomenology as "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view." (Smith, 2018). It proceeds to highlight that "The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something… An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning …together with appropriate enabling conditions." This characterization invites focusing on the conscious experience of the object, that is, on the dual aspects of a) what one might term 'the figure' of experience (the object, i.e., the phenomenon itself) and b) the 'what it is like' to direct one's intentionality towards the phenomenon. Importantly, the dual aspects are intertwined and co-constitutive, as the meaning of the phenomenon is the meaning-it-has-for-the-person-directing-their-intentionality-towards-it. This understanding of phenomenology is very much in line with the original articulation of the approach by Husserl (1928). It also accords well with the stances taken by some of the other papers in this symposium that analyse phenomena as they appear to us in conscious experience. The general method to allow phenomena to stand out was determined by Husserl as *epoche*. His point was that in order to allow the phenomenon to appear to intentionality as it is (as phenomenon), it is necessary to 'bracket' our preunderstandings of it. Husserl called the performance of bracketing *epoche* and the phenomenon as it is – that is, as experienced by first-person consciousness – the *noema*. Taking this approach within networked learning, one would focus on learners' conscious experience of synchronous or asynchronous collaborations with other learners. For instance, in synchronous online conversations, the phenomenon of *experienced eye contact via webcams* would be relevant to analyse (bracketing amongst others the knowledge that persons are not really looking at you when they appear to be because they then are looking directly into the webcam and thus are *not* able to see your picture on their screen, and conversely, when they *are* looking in your eyes, they appear not to be). Similarly, in asynchronous discussions, an interesting phenomenon for analysis would be the experience of *presence* (Fontaine & Chun, 2010) together with others (bracketing amongst others the knowledge that this presence is not one of actual simultaneousness, as one's communicating partners are logged off and will be doing something else, therefore not experiencing presence now, but at a later time where one will then oneself be logged off).

The entry in SEP notes that some phenomenologists will find the provided definition of phenomenology debatable and mention Heideggerians. This is reasonable, as the phenomenology of Heidegger concerns not the first-person experience but the fundamental ontology of being, that is, the way we are in the world. Heidegger argues that we are always already in an active engagement with our world in our everyday practical activities and that this provides a background understanding upon which phenomena-as-experienced stand out. Thus, his phenomenology is taken up with that which enables the first-person experience to be as it is, rather than the first-person experience itself. Or better: his interest in the first-person experience primarily concerns what this experience can show about the fundamentals of living (being-in-the-world) as that which conditions or determines the experience, ontologically speaking (as opposed to for instance psychologically speaking).

Merleau-Ponty picks up on the Heideggerian analyses, returning to the question of 'structures of consciousness' with the Heideggerian focus on what it is that enables conscious experience to be as it is. Thus, he focuses on how our concrete being-in-the-world allows the world to present itself to us as meaningful – in different ways, depending on the actual practical activities we engage in, but building on a basic meaningfulness founded in our bodily being. The new insights he brings to phenomenology include the role of the body in perception and the development of the figure-background structure of perception, building on this role. Perception is here to be taken in both its literal and its metaphorical senses. Other phenomenologists before Merleau-Ponty have discussed the figure-background structure of perception (e.g., Husserl targets this structure with his notion of the inner and outer horizons of a phenomenon, Husserl, 1980). They do not, however, have Merleau-Ponty's explicit focus on the body as the unperceived centre of our world – a centre, which is fundamental in establishing the figure-background structure.

Interestingly, the entry in SEP ends in the following way:
"Importantly, the content of a conscious experience typically carries a horizon of background meaning, meaning that is largely implicit rather than explicit in experience. But then a wide range of content carried by an experience would not have a consciously felt phenomenal character. So it may well be argued. Here is a line of phenomenological theory for another day." (Smith, 2018).

In this theoretical paper on phenomenological methodology, I shall argue that this last remark overlooks the significance of Merleau-Ponty's contributions as his phenomenological analysis of the figure-background structure – and the methodological implications it has – precisely allows him to target this "wide range of content … [without] a consciously felt phenomenal character". I present this argument in the first part of the paper. In the second part, I bring the Merleau-Pontian approach to Networked Learning, explicating how phenomenological analyses following his insights differ from those of other phenomenologists, including the other papers in this symposium. I shall look at two phenomena from networked learning and tease out what relevant backgrounds are and how a focus on those backgrounds highlights other aspects than the ones which other phenomenological analyses focus on. In a previous article, I discussed how the Gibsonian term affordances can be conceptualised on a Merleau-Pontian view (Dohn, 2009). The present paper builds on the points made in that article about the role of the body and perception's figure-background structure but broadens the argument beyond affordances to experience of the world more generally. Equally importantly, the present paper takes on the methodological discussion of how to do phenomenology within Networked Learning according to Merleau-Ponty; a discussion not elaborated on in the previous paper.

The role of the body in perception's figure-background structure

Merleau-Ponty follows Heidegger in emphasizing pre-reflective non-thematised practical activity as our primary way of being-in-the-world. Practical activity takes place in a world that is always already meaningful for us, before thematization, and as a precondition of thematising specific aspects as of this or that significance. Or better put: Practical activity *has* its world of meaningfulness, upon which specific aspects appear with the significance they have for us in our practical activity. Merleau-Ponty's decisive move beyond Heidegger is to articulate in full the significance of our bodily being for this pre-thematic meaningfulness. Obviously, but surprisingly often neglected, we undertake practical activity as bodily beings, not as perceiving, bodiless minds. Our bodily being enables, preconditions and constrains the movements possible – we perform movements that are 'within bodily reach', as one might say. This is to be understood spatially, where, importantly, bodily space does not coincide with physical space (e.g., there are points on one's back that are adjacent in physical space but require totally different bodily moves to reach with one's hand). It is also to be understood metaphorically, in terms of habituated action possibilities. Situations call upon us to move in certain ways, from the viewpoint that our location in a specific place provides. The body literally is the origo of the experienced world – in Merleau-Ponty's words "the unperceived term in the centre of the world, towards which all objects turn their face"

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 82). The primacy of practical activity is underscored by Merleau-Ponty in statements such as the following:

> "Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object, with a 'praktognosia', which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary. My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my 'symbolic' or 'objectifying function'" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 140).

Importantly, this experience of movement is not a thematised, reflective experience, instead we know our body and bodily movement through the activity we are undertaking:

> "[M]y body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task… [When smoking a pipe,] I know indubitably where my pipe is, and thereby I know where my hand and my body are… [My body] is polarised by its tasks… [has] *existence towards* them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 100f)

This "existence towards" our tasks is what provides the figure-background to perception. What is in figure for the task stands out on the background of our understanding of the task and more generally of our understanding of the world. And this understanding, as Merleau-Ponty says in the first block quote, is not one of symbolic (i.e., representational and/or articulated), reflective awareness. Instead, it is an understanding incorporated in our body as 'praktognosia', that is as bodily ways of going about the world, as habituated agency. Bourdieu, who in this respect can be viewed as drawing sociological implications of Merleau-Ponty's epistemology (Ostrow, 1990), calls it our habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). With a simple example, when students enter a lecture hall ahead of a physical lecture, the figure of their task is finding a seat in the audience corresponding to the degree of proximity they want with the teacher (or, conversely perhaps, corresponding to the chance they want of hiding behind others). This figure stands out on the unthematized background of their practical knowledge of classroom layouts and roles for teachers and students respectively. It further stands out on their more general practical knowledge of the world of schooling with its organisation of learning practices, power asymmetries, social relationships, material resources for learning etc. In addition to practical knowledge of cultural practices, not specific to school, of for example sitting on seats inside rooms when dealing with other people. All this practical knowledge unites to highlight the audience seats as the ones to orient themselves towards. The lectern, contrariwise, not only does not stand out as figure for the task – it is an 'unthinkable' and 'unengageable' place for the students. At most, it will have the role of an obstacle to be passed on the way to the audience seats.

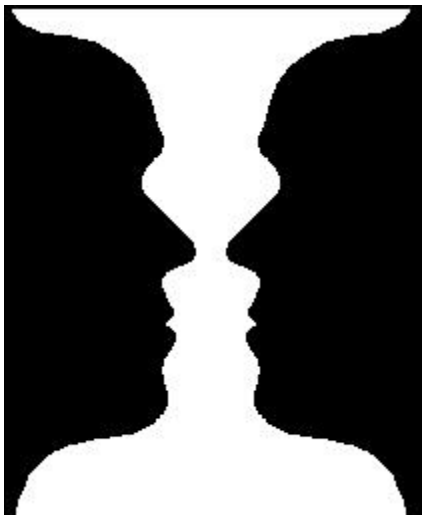

Figure 1. Rubin's Peter-Paul goblet. Source: Wikicommons, picture released into the public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Facevase.JPG

Often the figure-background structure of perception is illustrated with gestalt-switch pictures such as Rubin's Peter-Paul goblet, Figure 1, which allows a gestalt switch between seeing two black faces and seeing a white vase. The Peter-Paul goblet is illustrative in showing how the background is as important in determining the figure as the figure itself – without the background there would be no figure. Just as for a person without the practical knowledge of the world of schooling, of classroom layouts, sitting practices etc., the array of things in

the lecture hall would not have the meaning of seats to be chosen for attending the lecture. Nor would the lecture hall be a lecture hall for that person.

The goblet is, however, misleading in the sense that it invites the belief that figure and background are interchangeable and that it will always be possible to switch focus from the figure to the background, that is, make the background the new figure. Yet, in general, this will not be possible – gestalt switch pictures are very special in this regard. They are noticeable, special and fun, precisely on the background of our extensive practical knowledge of dealing with pictures that are not like that.

Further, the goblet is misleading in the way that every picture is misleading: It invites regarding perception as a series of still pictures rather than dynamically unfolding as an integral part of agency in the world. This is in direct contradiction to Merleau-Ponty's view of perception as inherently bound up with movement and practical activity. Further, it holds the mistaken promise of inspection: you can scrutinise a still picture for as long as you want, potentially allowing full analysis of what the background is and how it contributes to the figure. This is in general not possible in the dynamic unfolding of practical activity where focus is on the figure of the task.

Instead, in the vast majority of cases, the figure will stand out from the background, with meaning provided by the background, through our engaged bodily "polarisation" towards it, without us being able to switch and foreground the background – and often without us being aware that there is a background. The row of seats in the lecture hall are the obvious figures, not the air between the seats. But this is not because the air is "nothing". It is because the seats are what we engage with as figures in our practical activities of sitting down, listening, talking, reading, solving problems, etc. The air is just the in-between – not even experienced as a background – that we traverse to engage with the figure. If, however, there was to be a hole in one of the seats, then this hole could potentially become a figure on the background of the seat – depending on the size of the hole, where it was placed, and how disruptive it was for our practical activity of sitting in the seat. It is thus not the case that air – as 'nothing' – cannot be a figure. What is figure and what background will depend, first, on the practical activity we are currently engaged in (to the degree that – anecdotally – one as a teacher can fail to notice that one is standing in 10 cm of water resulting from a leak, because one is fully taken up with the activity of teaching), and, second and more generally, on what matters to us as human, bodily beings with habituated action possibilities. The "polarisation towards our tasks" has this more general aspect of habituated action possibilities to it, too. This provides a structure of meaning to our surroundings, letting some aspects reside always in the background, whilst others can take on the role of figure depending on our current tasks.

Implications for phenomenological methodology

The points made in the preceding section were formulated primarily for perception. Still, as our primary way of being in the world according to Merleau-Ponty is practical activity, which incorporates a non-thematised, pre-reflective understanding of this world, the points are a valid characterization of our epistemological predicament in general. We meet the world as bodily beings that always already know this world, where the world is meaningfully structured by our "polarisation towards our tasks", and this polarisation lets situations appear with figures of meaning, on the background of our non-thematised, pre-reflective understanding.

This is where the methodological worry of SEP, mentioned in the introduction, comes in: Our consciousness is directed towards the figure of our tasks, and the background upon which the figure stands out stays unnoticed – in principle, because that is how it functions as background. Therefore, "a wide range of content carried by an experience" (as the SEP entry puts it) is not available for directed intentionality. That is, it is not available for the kind of phenomenological analysis that Husserl would have us perform. Performing *epoche* on the figure to get at the phenomenon itself (as it is for us) will, to the extent it is possible at all, only make matters worse, as this will bracket off the preunderstanding upon which the figure becomes what it is. However, since the background is non-thematised, in actual fact it will not be possible to consciously bracket it off. Aspects of it might perhaps be bracketed off, though, as part of bracketing off some presuppositions of which we *are* aware. Be that as it may, what is important to note is that directing intentionality at the figure and analysing the phenomenal experience of it does not give us access to the full phenomenon. In this sense, concentrating on the figure of experience and performing *epoche* is deceptive. This point goes wider than Husserl's recognition that every phenomenon carries an outer horizon of meaning. Firstly, because Husserl understood the relationship here as a continuum between what is at the margin and what at the centre of consciousness, rather than a figure-background structure. And second, because Husserl believed it to be possible through contemplation on that which presents itself to directed intentionality (the figure) to perform a logical reconstruction to the full phenomenon.

Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, acknowledged the basic limitations of directing intentionality to the figure and logically reconstructing – rather than experiencing – the full phenomenon. Put differently, he recognised the limitations to thematising the non-thematised practical activity, because thematization fundamentally changes the phenomenon under investigation. Simple examples are riding a bike or touch typing: When performing them well, you do not focus on the movements themselves. Instead, analogously to Merleau-Ponty's remark about knowing where his arm is through smoking, you know your movements through focusing, for the bike, on where you are going and what is ahead of you, and for the typing, on the claims you are trying to formulate. If you thematise keeping your balance or the placement of the letters, respectively, whilst performing the activities, this will affect the performance to the degree that you may lose balance/need to look for the letters on the keyboard. Thematising after well-performed activity – as in Husserl's logical reconstruction – is speculative at best, as it will postulate 'marginally felt phenomenal aspects' or 'aspects of marginal consciousness' for which there will typically be no independent evidence. Instead, arguments will build on for instance the phenomenal experience one has when one does thematise (with detrimental effects) keeping one's balance/finding the letters. This experience will then be conjoined with the claim that because the experience is there when you thematise activity, it has to be there in the margins in non-thematised activity. Paraphrasing Dreyfus similar argument regarding skills as allegedly necessarily rule-governed, this corresponds to saying that because you have learned to ride the bicycle using training wheels, once you can ride it without the training wheels, they must nonetheless still be there, now only in invisible form (Dreyfus, 1979, p. xiii).

In a nutshell, the methodological problem is that non-thematised practical activity supplies the background understanding upon which thematised figures stand out, and that attempts at thematising the practical activity fundamentally changes the phenomenon by making it a figure. Merleau-Ponty's methodological solution to this problem is remarkable: He attended to what one following Dreyfus may call situations of 'breakdown' (Dreyfus & Spinosa, 1999), that is, situations where practical activity breaks down. The reason for attending to breakdown situations is that they can provide indications about that which is taken for granted in the usual well-performed practical activity. Merleau-Ponty's focus was the phenomenological analysis of bodily agency in the world. Therefore, relevant breakdown situations for him were ones where persons had lost their former action possibilities and/or were without the perceptual opportunities of most humans. He found such relevant breakdown situations within experimental psychology, and, in particular, within the investigation of the experience of living with amputated limbs and with certain brain disorders. Both formed a significant part of his argument for what he termed the "body schema", that is, the way we as bodily beings "have our world", and attune to it in well-performed practical activity. His analyses showed how our body schema allows us to take the layout and surroundings into account in our actions – immediately, non-reflectively and non-thematised. Others have followed up on these investigations, adding further details to the role of the body in understanding the world (Gallagher, 2005; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). In the next section, I shall provide two examples of what breakdown situations in Networked Learning show about ordinary practical activities of teaching and learning – online and in face-to-face situations.

Investigating backgrounds of figures within Networked Learning

In this section, I shall illustrate how to perform Merleau-Pontian Networked Learning analyses and how they differ from other forms of phenomenological investigations.

The figure of eye contact via a webcam

My first example is one mentioned in the introduction: the figure of *eye contact via webcam*. I should emphasise that I have chosen this example because it allows me to highlight the contrasts between Merleau-Pontian and other phenomenological analyses, as regards methodology and as regards analysis results. My choice thus does not reflect a premise that Networked Learning will always take place synchronously, with webcams. Nor does it stipulate that all online learning situations with webcams will be Networked Learning situations. It does take for granted, though, that some Networked Learning will take place with webcams – and will include synchronous lectures and discussions – and that it therefore makes sense to investigate the experience of eye contact (or not) phenomenologically.

A Husserlian inspired phenomenological analysis of this figure of *eye contact via webcam* would focus on the eye contact phenomenon as *noema*, in the form of *experienced eye contact* (bracketing the known fact that actually there is no eye contact) or, alternatively, in the form of *experienced lack of eye contact* (cf. Healey-Benson et al., 2022, this symposium). A Merleau-Pontian phenomenological analysis instead focuses on the *lack of eye contact as a breakdown situation* – or rather, a set of breakdown situations – that jointly point to

important taken-for-granted aspects of ordinary practical teaching and learning activities. One type of breakdown situation is the one where the web-cam picture of your communication partner is activated but is not conveying the person as engaged in communicating with you, although they are, and you know them to be. This is the case for instance when that person is consistently turned away from the webcam to look at another screen (where your webcam picture may be placed so that they are in fact looking at you), or when the laptop with webcam is tilted in a way so that you can only see the upper part of the person's head. Even after having experienced it innumerable times before, an immediate response in the latter case is to try to adjust your own laptop to get the person into full view. In the former case, the communication partner appears as intentionally distancing themselves and therefore as somewhat rude and unengaged. Another type of breakdown situation is the one where you consciously take the knowledge of the first type of breakdown situations into account and deliberately work the technological set-up to make it appear to your communication partner that you are looking at them when you are in fact looking at something else. One (mostly benign) instance of this is, when working with multiple screens, to choose the screen with the webcam as presentation screen so that it will appear to your students that you are talking directly to them, though in fact you do not see them at all. Another (not so benign) instance is when you do other things onscreen whilst someone else is talking but purposefully hide this by placing the window you are working on close to the webcam so it will look as if you are looking at the person talking. A third type of breakdown situation is the one where most or all students have their webcams turned off, so you see a black square for each student rather than the communication partners themselves – and do not even know whether they are there at all. This affords an experience of talking into a materially felt emptiness which is very different to the 'absence-of-seeing-the-students' resulting from the second type of breakdown situation. The two situations differ because in the former, the black squares are not just an absence of the student but rather a visible non-presence. This non-presence appears as a purposeful act of distancing on the part of the students (whatever their actual reasons for shutting off the webcam are).

These breakdown situations jointly hint at – or even make visible in their failing – our ordinary, physically co-located practices of dynamically and reciprocally attuning ourselves bodily to our communication partner in teaching and learning. This reciprocal attuning works as the background upon which the figure of communication – its content, the communication partners' respective emotions, their sentiments towards each other etc. – stands out. Thus, the response of adjusting one's own laptop screen to get the other person into full view is a specific (failing) instance of the everyday background practice of adjusting one's own body posture to see and hear the communication partner better. Now, a reasonable question here is whether the ordinary practice of bodily adjusting is really an inherent part of the phenomenon of communication or whether it is not just a physical making communication possible. That is, whether it is actually just a necessary causal prerequisite of communication, but not integral to determining the figure of communication (and thus not background in the Merleau-Pontian sense, cf. above). One of the other breakdown cases provides clear indication of the answer to this question: The appearance of distancing afforded by one's communication partner's turned-away body and the resulting appearance of rudeness and lack of engagement are significant in determining the figure of communication. In the webcam situation it is unrightly so – that is why it is a breakdown situation. But the case signifies that in ordinary practical activities of co-located communication, bodily posture and the way one adjusts it in the flow of communication are indeed an inherent part of the phenomenon of communication, as the background co-determining the figure. In light of these considerations, the workarounds of the second type of breakdown situation can be seen as conscious attempts to restore for one's communication partner the possibility of engaging in the figure of communication on a background of unthematized reciprocal bodily attunement (though falsely so).

The phenomenon of visible non-presence in the breakdown situation of students with turned-off webcams is illuminating, in particular if compared to the ordinary practical activity of talking to others on a traditional phone (i.e., without the possibility of seeing each other). In the latter case, communication may be impeded somewhat by the lack of gestures and facial expressions, but usually one does not have the experience of 'materially felt emptiness' and of deliberate distancing on the part of one's communication partners. In part, the difference may be ascribed to the fact that in most phone calls, one has only one communication partner and the conversation will follow turn-taking patterns (Sacks et al., 1974) with continuous phatic reconfirmations (Jakobson, 1960) of the connection established between the partners. Whereas in teaching online, there are usually many students, so communication does not follow conversation turn-taking patterns and, in particular, continuous auditory phatic reconfirmation is not provided by the students. It would be disruptive to the teacher (or student) talking if it were. This explanation does not suffice on its own, but it does help in pinpointing important background practices shown up by the breakdown situation. Firstly, phatic reconfirmation and turn-taking could to some extent be provided by students if their webcam was on, in the form of nods, facial expressions, note-taking etc. This would correspond to what happens in physically co-located teaching and

learning activities – which again highlights the significance in such activities of teachers' and students' dynamic bodily attuning to each other as background for the figure of communication. Secondly, and more importantly, a crucial difference between the telephone and the shut-off webcam cases is that the latter holds the potential for seeing each other whereas the former does not. This potential, and the students' intentional disregard of it, seemingly thrusts itself upon you as teacher in the form of the black squares, affording the bodily feeling of talking into a sensuous emptiness. On the one hand, this feeling can be interpreted as the consequence of the body being the "unperceived term in the centre of the world, towards which all objects turn their face" (cf. above): As the face turned upon you here is the negated one of visible non-presence (even: of a set of no-faces), the experience is not nothingness but sensuous, dense emptiness (akin to the feeling one has when walking into a pitch-black room with eyes wide open). On the other hand, this breakdown case serves to indicate that in ordinary practical activities, we take it for granted that potentialities of visibility to each other will in fact be actualized by us as communication partners. The breakdown case further indicates that, when such potentialities are not present, we make use of substituting means of communicating presence such as the continuous phatic reconfirmations provided in telephone conversations.

Of course, sometimes considerations of for example bandwidth or stability of connection may lead us to decide to turn off our webcams. However, these are instances where the potentialities of visibility show up as not actually present, though we thought they were. In other words, in such situations the lack of potentiality for visibility appears as figure in the breakdown situation of the online connection's faltering. This contrasts with the telephone call where the lack of potentiality for visibility is a background aspect, leading communication partners to figure their conversation with extensive use of phatic turn-taking.

These considerations allow me to add some further detail to my discussion of webcam use in Dohn (2009). There, I focused on the affordances of a webcam and on our background bodily attuning to these affordances. In particular, I pointed out how the introduction of a webcam changed the figure of the IT-based communication to one in which participants 'can-be-seen', and that participants would bodily attune to this situation and accommodate their behaviour accordingly (e.g., not get up to fetch coffee without apologizing in advance). I noted that participants would often not be representationally aware of their bodily attunement, as they would often claim not to take heed of the webcam in their communication with one another – and that their eye movements supported their claim. This latter statement stands in apparent contradiction to the significance which I have accorded to the webcam picture here, both in terms of the importance of (apparent) eye contact and as regards having the webcam turned on.

There are a couple of things to note about this apparent contradiction. Firstly, I have concentrated here on situations where one *is* focused on the webcam – either because there is no other shared focus (in the form of e.g., a shared document one is working on and/or a shared presentation screen) or because one as teacher is trying to facilitate communication with one's students. In my 2009 article, I do not explicitly mention which kinds of communication situations participants refer to for their experiences. Remedying that, I can now say that they were referring to situations where focus was indeed on a shared screen or working document (potentially accessed by each participant individually), with the webcam as a small extra window on the screen. They were not referring to for example a Skype videoconference with their teacher or group members (where they *would* be looking at the other participants in the videoconference). Secondly, our ordinary practical activities have changed quite a bit since pre-2009. The differences in experiences between participants then and the breakdown situations considered here may well be due in part to different unthematized expectations stemming from these changed background activities. Thus, one might speculate that the background practical activities upon which online synchronous communication stood out in the years before 2009 were still to some extent traditional telephone calls (without picture), and that this would have influenced participants' engagement in situations *with* webcams, leading them to forget to look at it, even if they still attuned to its affordances of being-seen. Third, technological possibilities were not as advanced – bandwidth connections were not nearly as good then, so the turning off of the webcam would often have been a necessity (with the corresponding lack of potentiality of visibility appearing, as discussed above, as figure in the breakdown situation of the online connection's faltering). Likewise, the practice of working with several screens was not very widespread then. Because of the fewer technological possibilities at the time, some of the breakdown situations described here did not occur very often if at all.

The figure of *hybrid networked learning situations of students today*

A recurrent figure in descriptions of present-day networked learners is their negotiation of complex, hybrid spaces, where they conjoin, mix, and remediate physical and digital learning resources. Descriptions range from the optimistic (hyped) characterizations of "networked individualism", put forward by for instance Rainie and

Wellman (2014), to nuanced accounts of the socio-material entanglement of learning practices today, which emphasise students' continuous work of reciprocally adapting learning to fit the situation at hand and adapting the situation at hand to fit learning (Gourlay & Oliver, 2014; Oliver & Gourlay, 2016). A few examples will suffice to illustrate the figure (as well as differences in articulations of it):

> "The hallmark of networked individualism is that people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members. For example, household members now act at times more like individuals in networks and less like members of a family. Their homes are no longer their castles but bases for networking with the outside world, with each family member keeping a separate personal computer, address book, calendar, and mobile phone." (Rainie & Wellman, 2014, p. 12)

> "Among other things, people now expect to find information on almost every subject quickly. They expect that they are more findable and reachable at many more times and places than in the past – and they assume others are equally as likely to be accessible. They have reallocated the way they use their time and attention. They pack more information and communication exchanges into their days and they are interruptible in their activities more often. Their sense of place, distance, and presence with others is transformed as they participate in more encounters that feature "absent presence" or "present absence." Their sense of self transforms from a hard unitary shell to a reconfigurable amoeba with situationally changing pseudopods… This is an operating system that confers social and economic advantages on those who behave effectively as networked individuals, blending significant personal encounters and new media as they solve problems and build social support." (Rainie & Wellman, 2014, p. 256)

> "The pervasiveness of internet access (in some parts of the world) and the dramatic increase in ownership of mobile technologies (laptops, tablets and smartphones) are changing the places of where and how networked learning is happening. From virtual learning environments being mainly used by 'distance education' to becoming a standard component for all higher education students. From ICT and learning being an esoteric activity in labs to becoming a pervasive part of campus and lecture hall activities (whether consciously or not on behalf of the teacher). From working primarily from home to people being on the move and engaging in online activities while being on the train or in cafes, and students alternating between distributed work and meeting on campus. Mobile field activities, informal learning communities are other examples." (Ryberg & Sinclair, 2016, p. 13f)

> "Rather than being bound within educational institutions, studying spills out across many public and private spaces, moored as part of a consistent practice of education by the consistent uses of print and digital technologies. Within this, institutionally provided spaces remain important, not least because they allow connections to other people, times, and places that carry connotations of studiousness and academic-ness. Such spaces cannot "bind", because of the way learners, technologies, and practices move into, through, and out of them…" (Oliver & Gourlay, 2016, p. 84f)

> "What we want to highlight with this category ["orchestrations of multiple technologies"] is the fluid boundaries between the "digital" and "physical"—a fluidity that (increasingly) seems to render the very distinction superfluous. The digital spaces are always present in the physical spaces, and we see from the data how various technologies are transposed from digital representations, to a blackboard and post-its and then re-digitised… Thus, the digital and physical are heavily interwoven and difficult to separate. …[S]tudents' nomadic collaborative learning is a complex dance that involves not only which technologies to use, but also in what spaces particular entanglements of technologies and activities are meaningful—often dependent on the processual aspects (are they in an early explorative phase or in a production phase where work can be distributed) …We are only beginning to understand … the extent they [student practices] involve mixtures of digital and physical spaces, activities, social cohesion and technologies." (Ryberg et al., 2018)

Despite divergences in perspective, these different quotes combine to articulate a figure of contemporary (pre-pandemic) Networked Learning which contrasts with early Networked Learning literature that mainly focused on online courses and participants' experience hereof (cf. reviews on Networked Learning in Carvalho &

Goodyear, 2014; McConnell et al., 2012). In the quotes above Networked Learning appears as a thematized accomplishment of the learner who intentionally manages, utilizes, and negotiates hybrid complexes of physical and digital resources and environments in correspondence with what is needed for the task at hand. The last quote formulates this accomplishment as a "dance", inherently involving collaboration with other learners. In contrast, the other quotes more or less explicitly thematize it as the individual student's choosing of where, when, how, with whom and with what to connect. That it takes work and effort to make the hybrid situations of networked learning function is clear in most of the quotes. Still, this work appears to be thematized, situated in the (hybrid) here and now, centring on the conscious objective of the networked learner.

The Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 in effect constituted a massive breakdown situation for ordinary learning activities, both hybrid and non-hybrid. In consequence, they allow an investigation of the background, taken-for-granted aspects, upon which this figure of *hybrid networked learning situations of students today* stands out. The initial experiences of students, teachers and researchers have already been quite extensively investigated (e.g., Special Section of British Journal of Educational Technology, 2021; Special Issue of Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 2021, Fayed & Cummings, 2021). Common traits are experiences of loneliness; feeling distanced to others; problems in accessing relevant learning materials; closing off of field studies; deterioration of academic engagement. Complementarily, there are reports of students finding more focused time for study; with fewer disturbances and less time wasted on travel; of study situations being less stressful for students who find the ordinary close social encounters in education challenging; and of students finding that family members and home resources can support their learning much better than they had previously realized. Broadening the scope beyond the purely academic, students (like so many of us forced to work from home) have found it very difficult, oftentimes disruptive, to manage to find space, time, bandwidth, concentration, silence, motivation, and family acceptance for focused study in the intermingling of personal and professional life that lockdowns meant. Studies had to be undertaken in the midst of caretaking of youngsters and pets, homeschooling, consideration towards family members' similar needs for bandwidth, silence, space etc. – with interruptions of meetings and classes by children and pets becoming more the rule than the exception. Emotionally, many have experienced inadequacy, failure, guilt, and despair on all counts and towards children, partners, education, and part time jobs alike. On the other hand, there are many examples of creative transformations of what used to be physically co-located activities into online formats, ranging from Zoom-mediated preparation and eating of the same meal in different physical locations, over geographically distributed playing of physical board games and choir singing, to innovating student shows by reinventing them in online formats.

Collectively, these experiences combine to problematize some of the articulated aspects of the figure of *hybrid networked learning situations of students today*. More generally, they show that this figure stands out on the background of an extensively structured everyday, not only as regards engaging with the task at hand itself (which is clear in the studies reported by Oliver & Gourlay and by Ryberg et al.), but more significantly as regards enabling such engagement at all. Thus, the lockdown arguably forced us to try to live as Rainie and Wellman claim we do – with household members each having their individualised base for their networked life, professional and private, with persons outside of the household. The repeated breakdowns of interference by family members' legitimate claims on our attention and time, as well as the continuous negotiations of resources enabling *their* networked life, show how much work goes into enabling even for a short time the figure that Rainie and Wellman delineate. It also shows how vulnerable the figure is and that it stands out also in non-lockdown times on a background of a highly intermingled and interactional family life – a background that Rainie and Wellman completely neglect. Further, the breakdown situations of the lockdown show how much the hybrid networked learning situations (as described for example by Oliver & Gourlay and by Ryberg et al.) depend on a background of being able to flexibly move across geographical locations and engage with new people and learning resources in settings not planned for. And they show how crucially these learning situations depend on continually working to structure the practical activities of this background to allow the figure of focused management of hybrid resources and environments directly involved in the task at hand. On the other hand, the examples of creative use of home resources (family members as well as things) during lockdown also widened the span of acceptable means considerably. This raises the question whether the figure of students' engagement with hybrid resources and environments up till now has in fact been too restricted, building upon a too narrow background understanding of what counts as resources.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper has been to articulate theoretically how a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological methodology could be undertaken within Networked Learning. To this end, I have presented Merleau-Ponty's concepts of figure-background in perception and the role of the body in establishing figure-background in each

specific situation. I have argued that a key Merleau-Pontian methodological strategy is to focus on breakdown situations, that is, situations where ordinary practical activity breaks down, because the breakdowns can provide indications about that which is taken for granted in the usual well-performed practical activity. I have further argued that this strategy allows one to target the "wide range of content … [without] a consciously felt phenomenal character" which the SEP entry poses as a problem for phenomenology. I have illustrated what Merleau-Pontian phenomenological analysis within Networked Learning could be with two examples: the figure of *eye contact via a webcam* and the figure of *hybrid networked learning situations of students today*. For both examples, I have highlighted what breakdown situations show about the background upon which the figure stands out and how understanding this background can change our understanding of the figure.

As a final comment, I wish to explicitly address a potential objection, namely that I, too, focus on explicating a figure, in that I discuss how the *breakdown* is experienced. That is, I discuss the *figure of the breakdown*. How, one might ask, is this different than thematizing for instance bicycling? The difference is that I use the figure of the breakdown situation to focus on the *background* of the well-performed practical activity. Whereas thematizing bicycling and claiming that the reported experience is also there in the well-performed unthematized bicycling activity is an attempt to describe the *figure* of well-performed bicycling. Still, a reasonable further question is how the Merleau-Pontian breakdown analyses of taken-for-granted aspects can then be evaluated for their truth or adequateness, if we do not have conscious access to these aspects and cannot thematize them in action. This question warrants a detailed discussion for which there is not room here. The short answer is that in lived bodily experience we can recognize the taken-for-granted aspects as familiar in much the same way as we know where our hand is through the actions we are undertaking with it (Merleau-Ponty's pipe example). Notably, when you understand this example from Merleau-Ponty and recognize it as an adequate description of knowing your body in action – you are precisely performing this type of evaluation by familiarity in lived bodily experience.

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