

Phenomenology and Networked Learning: mobilage glimpsed from the inside through an online focus group

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Abstract

This paper arises from doctoral studies which adopted a multi-methods design which aimed to disclose being healthcare students using a mobile phone for academic work: the student and mobile phone, i.e. mobilage, was the unit of analysis. This paper picks up on a long-term but sparse conversation about the use of phenomenology to investigate networked learning. Reasons for the paucity of work in this area are explored, including the nature of questions that phenomenology seeks to engage: to unveil and convey pre-reflective human consciousness. I seek to supplement this gap, as I see it, in the literature by contrasting two arms of my thesis project: one relied on ten in-person encounters with informants and another an online focus group designed to gather information from within the informant's lifeworld. These two methods frame a discussion of the merits, weaknesses and fidelity of my approach to gathering data pursuant to hermeneutic phenomenology, i.e. considering the difference between methods where the researcher is or is not in the informant's immediate co-presence.

Gadamer's horizon fusion metaphor is arguably easier to conceive of with informant and researcher co-located, where the setting and conversation is informal, perhaps typical of everyday mobile phone use. Ten such encounters were undertaken and analysed through repeated listening to audio recordings and phenomenological writing. In contrast, the online focus group lasted for three months with seven informants who never met physically. Informed by experience sampling methods, weekly trigger messages were posted for the group to respond to, ideally in situ.

Acknowledging that all data is mediated in need of interpretation, the paper reflects on the possible effects of data gathering at varying levels of temporal and interpretive proximity, or 'hermeneutic shades', between the researcher and the phenomena carried within data gathered, helping to condition what weight to afford information from different media. Van Manen's analytical method and goal of writing vocative anecdotes to convey aspects of the essence of a lived experience is considered against examples of direct accounts from the online focus group, one of which, it is argued, fulfils his criteria for phenomenological anecdotes. It is proposed that this demonstrates the potential worth of an online medium to not only supply data for phenomenological writing but arguably even represent phenomena without passing through the hermeneutic/analytical writing process.

Keywords

M-learning, phenomenology, online focus group, methodology, networked learning, experience sampling method

Introduction

Oberg and Bell (2012) outlined three types of phenomenology, empirical, existential and hermeneutic, and offer a reflection upon them in use within their own doctoral research. I will defer to their overview of phenomenology. Oberg and Bell aimed to stimulate and engage the networked learning community in a discussion. Phenomenology features sporadically in the wider online learning literature. But, as Chris Jones (2016) has noted, very few have taken phenomenology up within the distinctive context of networked learning, especially at the conference. There are other valid meaning and theory-making approaches, but this paper is concerned with phenomenology because it offers a philosophical pedigree, values, aims and outputs which offer something different to the preponderant research approaches in learning technology.

In September 2019, a search of the ERIC educational research database combining 'networked learning' AND phenomenology revealed 4 hits. None of these drew upon networked learning theory or really embraced phenomenology as explicated by protagonists such as van Manen or Moustakas. The same search terms run through Google Scholar returned 1330 items, many of which only make passing reference to both concepts (for example, Goodyear et al., 2014). Others (such as, Dukes, 2018; Paskevicius & Irvine, 2019) claim to enact a

phenomenological approach, but fall short of this in important ways: neglecting any kind of phenomenological reduction, or, in analysis, they aim to merely identify emergent themes, with little or no attempt to fulminate or present findings through phenomenological writing. Van Manen (2017) and Giorgi (Giorgi, 1999, 2011) have defended phenomenology from a kind of miss-selling which threatens to erode its distinctive contribution. This is not to say that methodological innovation is ruled out. However, according to the basic principles of scholarship it may develop by sensitively accounting for previous work of significant pedigree. I strove to achieve this during my doctoral studies but freely admit that I have much more to learn. In some way, this paper is a vehicle for that ongoing exploration.

There are many reasonable causes for networked learning researchers to eschew phenomenology, concerned as it generally is with unveiling that which appears to consciousness in 'order to clarify its logic or structure.' (Giorgi, 1999, p. 69). These are not the most obvious matters of concern for learning technologists. As with many fields, broadly speaking, questions of learner experiences or intervention effectiveness serve a more obviously practical outlook. Or phenomenology may be off-putting because writers need, as Oberg and Bell assert, to engage properly with phenomenology before deploying it. Arguably, any methodology should be explored before attempting to adopt it, but even a cursory glance reveals a dense, branching, contested family of ideas. Many research approaches are complex, but the situation with phenomenology is complicated by leading names, such as Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, leaving their followers to work out how to apply their work in the conduct of phenomenological studies (Giorgi, 1999). Horrigan-Kelly et al. (2016) state that Heideggerian phenomenology is challenging to access and apply in research.

Phenomenography (Marton, 1981) and empirical phenomenology (Giorgi, 1999) have claimed success in investigating learning in 'order to clarify its logic or structure.' (Giorgi, 1999, p. 69). While Oberg and Bell state, 'Our everyday living takes place without us having to think about it or translate it into disciplinary discourses' (2012, p. 204), academic work requires exactly that, and more, including monitoring and evaluating personal effectiveness, as in metacognition. Thus, exploring elements of academic work phenomenologically sets up a paradox - how to investigate and represent pre-reflective reflection? Fields of work with similar names, such as phenomenography and interpretive phenomenological analysis, circumvent this difficulty by taking aim at a second-order perspective, or 'the lived experience.' Experiences of networked learning, or any other experiences for that matter, may be interesting and useful objects of study, but Heidegger's project is ontological, rather than ontic. He sought to reveal primordial structures of human being, whereas an ontical focus examines *ways of being in given settings*. The distinction is logically clear, but existence and experience may be harder to isolate in practice. The attempt requires at least gaining 'enough' of a grasp of phenomenology's development, nuanced core concepts and proffered methods, not just a matter of following the correct steps, learning a technique, or even deep scholarship: Adams and van Manen (2017, p. 781) require extended immersion towards an 'attitudinal disposition... internalising sensitivity to life meaning'.

With trepidation then, for my doctoral thesis I came to phenomenology after realising ethnography was incompatible with my research questions. I felt affinity with ethnography from a general commitment to participant observation in order to fairly portray life-world complexity through narrative. However, my research question was less concerned with tracing cultural patterns and more about experiences, of being a healthcare student using and learning to use a smartphone for academic work. I admired Gourlay and Oliver's work that highlighted a practice focus on digital literacy (2013, 2018). Like them, I was influenced by Assemblage and Actor Network Theory (ANT) with its claims to avoid dualism in regard to informants and determinism with respect to their technology - thus I conceived of the unit of analysis as *mobilage* (Johnson, 2017). Mobilage was sensitising theory (Trowler, 2012) which helped me to frame the learner and their mobile phone in a synergistic epistemic relationship on the move. As such, mobilage was a moving target and challenging to encounter considering how sporadically academic work may be undertaken with or even just in the presence of a mobile phone.

Direct Observation

I wanted to gather optimal data for the study, which led to a commitment to first person direct observation stemming from Atkinson's values for ethnography (2015), but I found this also chimed with Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons (1992). Both encourage the researcher to get as close as possible to the phenomena of concern rather than hold interviews about it. Inspired by Gadamer's horizon fusion metaphor, I cast interviews as 'encounters', aiming to level off hegemonies, adopting a conversational style around the topic within naturalistic settings, sharing and learning from each other, phones to hand. Atkinson (2015) argues that analysis does necessarily occur at a defined stage in a research project, but begins with the project's initial conception, reflecting his emphasis on the researcher being the 'research instrument par excellence' (Hammersley &

Atkinson, 2007, p. 17). Similarly, for van Manen, a phenomenological attitude is implicit in 'every turn of the inquiry process' (2014, p. 228). Such views challenge novice researchers to develop their own reflexivity rather than rely on a given procedure. I considered transcribing past events would amount to a reification; transcribed text is different to the encounter past. I found that the audio recording was more suitable for *representing* (van Loon, 2007), retaining actual voices and contextualising background noise as I undertook deliberative analysis, eventually through writing and re-writing phenomenological vignettes (after van Manen, 2014).

Listing phenomenology alongside other interpretive methodologies becomes more difficult when it is understood that assembling and presenting empirical findings about lived experiences, especially for wider generalisation, is not the goal of existential or hermeneutic phenomenology. Rather the aim is to gather 'examples of possible human experiences in order to reflect on the meanings that may inhere in them' (van Manen, 2014, p. 313). This makes van Manen seem ambivalent about direct observation of someone else undergoing a particular experience. Indeed, the obligation to directly observe phenomena does not come from a need to personally witness something, as if it were possible to read another's mind or impossible to trust an informant's account of the experience recalled from the past. It is more to do with assumptions about the immense subtlety of human experience and the difficulty of apprehending it without the researcher and informant being co-present. Enriquez-Gibson (2011) argues that the question of 'place' in research has become blurred from a mobilities perspective. However, the contrast between the experience of physical and virtual co-located activity was well illustrated by Jacobs' (2019) account of the first date after connecting online, and serves as a caution for anyone willing to blur or diminish this difference.

In order to capitalise on physical co-location, I recruited ten students for mobilage 'encounters' within naturalistic settings of our mutual choice (e.g. a commute, a café, etc.). However, knowing my own academic practice, it was safe to assume that knowledge work with a smartphone may be attempted sporadically at any moment and setting. Gourlay and Oliver (2013) and Jones and Healing (2010), interpretive rather than phenomenological studies, enlisted students to gather data for them, which led to accounts drawn from quite intimate moments of students' life-worlds (e.g. bathing while reading academic texts on a tablet PC enclosed in a plastic bag). Some Experience Sampling Method (ESM) advocates claim that enlisting participants in data collection boosts the immanence and integrity of the data since it is unmediated and memory recall distortion is reduced (Riddle & Arnold, 2007). From a phenomenological perspective, data is always mediated and interpreted. Indeed, Giorgi (2006) holds that involving informants in this kind of role is 'wholly indefensible theoretically' (p311), since experiences will tend to be described from the natural attitude, rather than phenomenological *wonder* (van Manen, 2014). This reveals something of an epistemological difference between ESM and Van Manen's method: the latter is less concerned to report data 'as is', rather data is raw material for phenomenological anecdotes that a writer is relatively free to reflexively fabricate. In the case of phenomenological writing, rigid faithfulness to the data, as in the literal words used by informants, is less important than faithfulness to the phenomenon, its analysis and conveyance. This does not make it superfluous to aim for maximal rigor in the attempt to gather data that may unveil what appears to pre-reflective consciousness, and ESM offered a 'least worst' solution for gathering accounts of moments in informants' life-worlds which were impossible to personally observe or share in co-location.

The online focus group

I adapted Jones and Healing's version of experience sampling into an 'online focus group' (OFG) with 7 recruits over 3 months. Microsoft's enterprise social network platform Yammer™ hosted the OFG, allowing a geographically disparate group of informants to respond to each other as well as to the triggers I posted weekly. Elements of studying are unavoidably solitary and yet, for many, social networking is an ordinary everyday facet of mobilage (Madge et al., 2009).

The design of trigger posts varied apart from a standard set of questions which asked for responses in the present tense, such as, 'Where are you?'. In data gathering, Van Manen commends obtaining *direct accounts* of the situation and experience, rather than inviting reflections upon the experience (2014, p. 299). Students were asked to respond from their phones, either from the mobile app or by email. In this way I felt I had a method for hearing 'from the inside' of mobilage.

As I reviewed student messages, it was apparent that some were recalling past events, while others were written 'in the moment' as the trigger questions invited them to. I considered that recalled events may be less authentic, with less fidelity to the original experience as time passed. I decided to code the data accordingly to distinguish statements of differing apparent temporal proximity between experiences and reporting them. Such coding was used to navigate or aggregate the data for hermeneutic analysis rather than with the aim of identifying themes or

categories. This distinction in the immediacy of informant reporting their experiences opened up a variation in the degree to which I seemed to have personal access to the phenomena of interest for the purposes of unveiling it and so I extended this idea to condition the way I thought about each of the various methods used to assemble a data corpus as offering different 'hermeneutic shades', with 'auto' data at one end of the spectrum and survey responses at the other (see Table 1).

Table 1: Degrees of interpretive proximity across different data gathering methods

| | Medium | Media created | Where was 'data' made? | Duration for informant | Physical proximity | Psychic proximity | Interpretive proximity | Coordinates of experience? |
|---------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|--|--------------------|---|---|---|
| Survey | Internet enabled device, screen and keyboard | Text, Ratings | Unknown – anywhere with a Web browser | Reading blurb, responses averaged 10 minutes | Distant | Response to prose by a known person (email and survey) | Remote | External - nil Internal - some |
| Online Focus Group | As above but affords multimedia and 'likes' | Images, video, text | Range of spaces: family trips, library, café, home | Maximum 30 minutes per week for 3 months | Distant | Distant, yet multi-method informants were better known. Virtual presence (see Kehrwald, 2010) varied. | Removed Current events less removed than recall of past events | External - some Internal – some |
| Encounters | Nil, but mobilage present | Images, field notes, audio | With me: cafés, library, canteen, hospital concourse, train, family home, | 1 hour | Immediate | Shared space/time – but recollections are more distant | Interactive | External - shared Internal - sympathetic |
| Auto data | Experience | Images, video, text | My settings | Ongoing | Personal | Personal | Reflexive | External - exact Internal - reflexive |

I did not assume that my own reified reflections of my own digital practice provided the research with undiluted direct access to the phenomena. This acknowledgement lays bare the reliance placed on reflexive conditioning of my own exposure and attitude to the phenomenon through the various media and channels in conducting the research.

Aside from my phenomenological aims for the OFG, I also performed a thematic analysis on the data, with synthesis informed by group consensus, according to the purpose of focus group methods (Davis, 2017). For example, there was agreement amongst the group that, 'work on the move is tricky'. Most of the data related to this theme arose in response to a trigger (see Figure 1) that included an advert featuring four cyclists riding along a wide desert road. The strapline claims that, 'With Google Sheets, you can create, edit and collaborate wherever you are. For free.'

A quote within this theme by Chris is copied here:

I was in the kitchen, trying to access my emails, my research, work out blackboard on the mobile (next to impossible) glue gunning sequins to a tin and painting a fairy post box whilst cooking duck. I was Whatsapping a fellow student with her literature review and trying not to fall over either of my cats. The duck was dry but that was the only casualty! (Chris 8/1/2017 11.57pm)

This quote illustrates the hectic and stressful life of a single parent, juggling multiple roles. Although it is usual to think of mobile learners, from a mobilities perspective, as traversing physical distance (for example, Holton & Finn, 2018), Chris was more than 'mobile', she was a blur *in situ*. Her account chimes with Enriquez's (2011) notion of being in a 'tug-o-where', seeking to operate in physical and online dimensions simultaneously. Academic work seems likely to be compromised in the face of such a tumult of competing interests. Nevertheless, as with Webber's (2017) informants, Chris's account challenges restrictive, i.e. purely academic, notions of 'success' in higher education to appreciate their broader life-wide achievements and contribution.

Given the nature of her experience, it is not surprising that Chris was unable reply to the OFG on top of all the other tasks she was undertaking and thus resorted to providing recollections instead. However, another informant responded while... 'cilycling [sic] on a stationary bike' in the Students Union, where he was taking part in an endurance fundraising event for charity (Benjamin 17/3/2017 4.01pm). Benjamin's account was apparently written in closer temporal proximity between the experience and the reporting of it. Benjamin's cycling, while strenuous, did not preclude the concerted use of eyes and hands to compose a trigger response *in the moment*. Nevertheless, the spelling error and brevity of the message could imply that communication was hampered within that activity. Clearly there were some aspects and moments of mobilage which could not be relayed into the OFG simultaneously. I had thought that temporal proximity was important in data gathering by

informants reporting experiences as soon as they occurred, and the technology appeared to afford this. Yet this now seems naive when comparing the two contributions above, with Chris' reply seeming to supply better phenomenological data than Benjamin's. Indeed, Chris's reply seemed to so capture the experience that I felt no amount of my own phenomenological analysis through writing could better it as vocative prose.

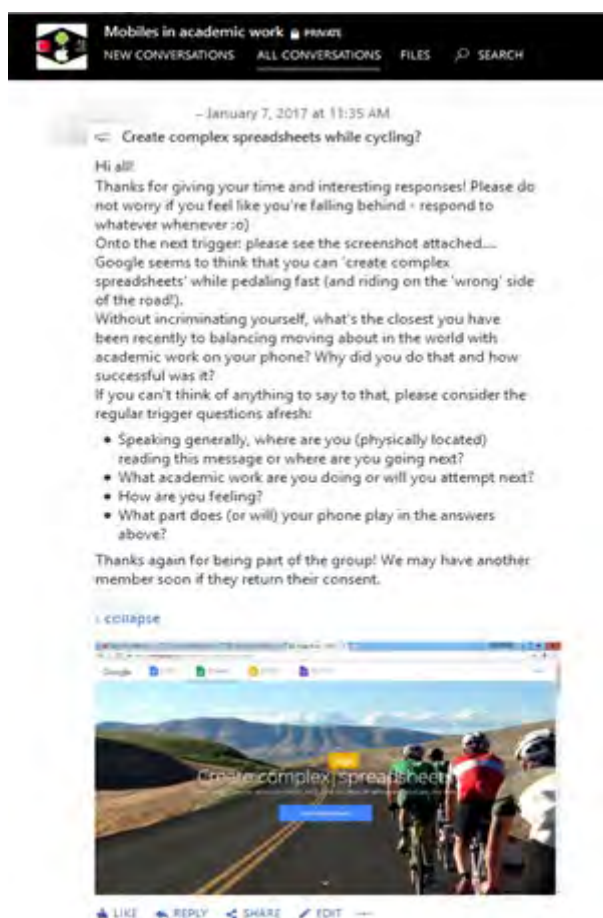


Figure 1: Online Focus Group Trigger 7th January 2017 - create complex spreadsheets while cycling?

Returning to presence

When qualitative research methods rely on interviews for collecting data, some kind of transcription of audio recordings may be presumed (Creswell, 2014). It may be thought that the act of transcribing brings the researcher closer to the data (Evers, 2011). The close attention required when typing up audio or handwritten words encourages a heightened level of concentration that engenders familiarity with and reflection on the data. This opportunity seems to be somewhat foregone when informants supply their responses directly as digital text, as in an online focus group. In a sense, the hermeneutic effort of framing discourse to create and convey meaning shifts to the informant, possibly invoking reflection by them on the topic and act of communication. This arguably further distances the informants' words from fulminating data of use to researchers seeking to unveil and convey something pre-reflective of a phenomenon. However, and in spite of Giorgi's reservations about informant involvement in data gathering and validation, Chris's contribution (above) meets van Manen's criteria for data gathering in terms of being a 'direct account'. Although brief, Chris's words also compare well with van Manen's 'criteria for evaluative appraisal of phenomenological studies' (2014, pp. 355–356), such as 'descriptive richness', and 'strong and addressive meaning', almost rendering the step of phenomenological analysis towards anecdote writing redundant. Conversely, it is conceivable that even the most conducive interview may not be as productive, with informants prone to lapse in and out of awareness of where they are and what they are expressing. The move towards representation is less tightly coupled with the data corpus than might be expected of other forms of qualitative research which borrow claims to rigor through mimicking empiricist aims of fidelity with the precise words and meanings supplied by informants. Instead, in phenomenological analysis through writing the researcher seeks to conjure the phenomenon into consciousness in order to create text which evokes an approximation to the phenomenon each time it is read. Almost regardless

of data and the means of obtaining it, it behoves the phenomenological researcher to work with the information they gather in order to write vocative anecdotes. The aim is different than ‘speaking for’, rather, the researcher is seeking a ‘return to presence’, re-presenting (van Loon, 2007, p. 279) their reader. But if informants speak vocatively for themselves, perhaps through an online focus group, it may save the researcher transcribing time but it presents a methodological challenge to van Manen’s phenomenological analysis, i.e. through writing scholarly and reflective texts. Or does a phenomenological anecdote only qualify as such if it has passed through the researcher’s soul?

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