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Phenomenology for Educators: Max van Manen and “Human Science” Research¹

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Phenomenology, in qualitative educational research, tends to be misunderstood. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is that scholars/researchers working in the field often emulate and imitate the dense writing styles of the philosophical forerunners in phenomenology such as Hegel, Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Thus the writing is beyond the comprehension of many education professionals and practitioners. Phenomenology need not be highly complex, and thus I have sought to provide a summary of the main themes from Max van Manen’s (1990) *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Active Sensitive Pedagogy* in highly accessible terms, so that educators might see the potential this philosophical practice might hold for enhancing educational endeavors.

1. Conceptual framework

A **systematic** and overarching **mode-of-disclosure** (serving thematic analysis) wherein one is **attuned** in a specific manner to the phenomena one is investigating; it’s a distinct way of **disclosing** phenomena for **thematic analysis**, which is comprised by and expressed through a unique set of codes, signs, and symbols. **Conceptual frameworks** each have their own unique modes of **understanding**, **methods of interpretation**, and **modes of discourse** for viewing, analyzing, and expressing their respective positions. E.g., when attuned by the conceptual framework of Marxist philosophy-critique, one reveals and analyzes phenomena in terms of the **understanding**, **interpretation**, and **discourse** associated with “economic-political-ideological issues as related specifically to instances of ‘human alienation’ in its multifarious forms (e.g., from others, oneself, nature, product, and means of production).” (1) Research method - mode of inquiry; (2) Research technique/procedure

2. Phenomenology

A philosophical “method/practice” of observing, recording, and interpreting “lived experience” through vivid and detailed descriptions. The practice of phenomenology seeks to expose, uncover, or reveal “universal” (transcendental) elements of human existence that are instantiated within practical, “particular” empirical situations (e.g., Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*)

Philosophy: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Marcel.

Education/curriculum: Huebner, Grumet, Jardine, Greene, van Manen

¹ This text is taken from a phenomenology lecture presented to doctoral core students at the National College of Education, 2012. NB: All page numbers for van Manen represent the 1990 edition of the text.

2.1 Philosophical Hermeneutics

A philosophical “practice” of interpreting “texts” of all types, e.g., works of art, literary texts, human beings, social institutions, etc. Its goal is not to arrive at categorical solutions to its inquiries, but rather to clarify and deepen our understanding of the things that we engage (e.g., Heidegger’s *Being and Time*)

Philosophy: Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas, Derrida, Rorty

Education/curriculum: Huebner, Smith, Jardine, van Manen

3. Human Science

A discipline/practice/methodology that interprets “meaningful expressions of the active inner, cognitive, or spiritual life of the human being in social, historical, or practical contexts,” with its goal being the explication of meaning associated more with “critical hermeneutic rationality of the humanities and philosophy than with the positivistic rationality of empirical-analytic of behavioral cognitive science” (van Manen, 1990, p. 181). NB: “In this text we will simply use the term ‘description’ to include both the interpretive (hermeneutic) as well as the descriptive (phenomenological) element” (p. 26).

3.1 *Phenomenological research is a poetizing activity* (p. 13).

1. It is an informed process of meaning-making (interpretation) – *poiesis* in the Greek means “informed-enlightened creating, or bringing forth.” (1) We are informed by our immersion in the phenomenon we seek to thematically elucidate, and (2) through interpretation we engage in an active process of meaning-making, producing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.
2. “We must engage language in a primal incantation or poetizing which hearkens back to the silence from which the words emanate. What we must do is discover what lies at the ontological core of our being. So that *in* the words, or perhaps better, *in spite* of the words, we find ‘memories’ that paradoxically we never thought or felt before” (p. 13).

4. The Pursuit of “Essences” in Phenomenological Research

“An appropriate topic for phenomenological inquiry is determined by questioning of the essential nature of lived experience: a certain way of being in the world,” and such concerns are twofold in nature: “a preoccupation with both the concreteness (the ontic) as well as the essential nature (the ontological) of lived experience” (pp. 39-40).

A basic claim for most phenomenological-existential thinkers runs thusly: There are transcendental ontological structures that provide form to our empirical existence, we instantiate these structures when enacting our existence, yet proximally and for the most part we are not aware of them. These structures represent “the inescapable realities in relation to which alone human life can be made genuinely meaningful,” they cannot be “changed or surmounted; they can only be acknowledged” (Manheim, 1959, p. 20).

van Manen gives the following example: “There is the empirical essence (ontic) of actual ‘teachers’ with all of their inevitable peculiarities and inadequacies, and there is the fundamental or ideal essence (ontological) of the Teacher as the essence which every real teacher is oriented to” (p. 177). We might do a phenomenological analysis of: sadness, teaching, madness, learning, love,

learner, discourse, illness, religion, health, or education, e.g., Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* inquires phenomenologically into the moods of existential anguish, despair, forlornness, along with the “essence” of inter-personal relationships.

5. On the Nature of Original Questions

1. Original questions are those questions that are concerned with the *whatness* of things over their *thatness* (p. 177). In traditional philosophy there is a distinction between the fact “that” a thing exists, and its essence, or what it is (*quiddity*). It is perhaps better, however, to think of this distinction as follows: Phenomenology is more concerned with *how something is in the world*, or the manner in which its existence unfolds, than it is concerned with simply “that” it is – or even “what it is.”
2. van Manen references Marcel’s book *The Mystery of Being* – wherein Marcel draws out the distinction between empirical “investigation” and philosophical “inquiry” – the scientific “problem” and the philosophical “mystery” – “scientific knowledge” and “philosophical understanding” - we solve problems (thereby bringing the investigation to a close) and we release ourselves into the mystery of Being (open ourselves up to continued inquiry).

5. 1 Investigative questions: Answers provided in the form of verifiable propositions

What is an ideal democratic student?

What is an ideal democratic teacher?

What is an authentic education?

5. 2 Phenomenological questions of inquiry: Answers cannot be formulated as “empirically” verifiable propositions (they are non-propositional in nature)

How is that an authentic education unfolds in its essence?

How is that that ideal student enacts her potential-for-being in the unfolding of her education?

How is that the authentic teacher enacts her potential-for-being in the classroom her with students?

Phenomenological inquiry anchors us in the lived world of our experience, they allow us to be “steadfastly oriented to the lived experience that makes it possible to ask the ‘what is it like’ question in the first place” (p. 42). “The essence of the question, said Gadamer (1975), is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities (p. 266). But we can only do this if we can keep ourselves open in such a way that in this biding concern of our questioning we find ourselves deeply interested (inter-esse, to be or stand in the midst of something) in that which makes the question possible in the first place. To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being.” (p. 43).

6. Method of Pedagogical Phenomenology

Phenomenological research contains three primary components: (1) stage of gathering life experience material; (2) stage of analysis, which consists of focusing on identifying and elucidating essential themes within the descriptions gathered in stage one: (3) stage of practical application, or better, stage wherein phenomenological research suggests ways for inspiring improved praxis. van Manen names six (6) research activities comprising the methodological structure of the research:

(1) Turning to the nature of lived experience; (2) Investigating experience as we live it; (3) Reflecting on essential themes; (4) The art of writing and re-writing; (5) Maintaining a strong and oriented relation to lived experience; (6) Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30-34).

I want to focus on 1, 3, and 4 as related to what has already been presented regarding the three primary components of research, most specifically with respect to gathering and analyzing descriptions of lived experience.

6. 1 We begin by turning to the nature of lived experience

We are always already in the world as *Being-in-the-world* as *Being-with-others*, and all of our activities are directed toward interpretation, understanding and discoursing about things that matter to us as human beings.

6. 2 Phenomenological research is predicated on the understanding that we “care” about our own Being and that of others

1. We gather experiential data through a variety of activities and media, all of which emerges from and finds its way back to our personal experience: Observation, descriptions of others' experiences (biography), protocol writing (the generation of phenomenological texts), interviews (which might include self-interview), journals, logs, diaries, works of art, and phenomenological literature (which might included poetry, literary texts, or philosophical writing).
2. “Literature, poetry, or other story forms serve as a fountain of experiences to which the phenomenologist may turn to increase practical insights” (p. 70). van Manen lists seven (7) ways in which literature can enhance our research, e.g., number seven speaks of literature's ability to transcend the particularity of plots and characters in order to speak to the universality of the human condition, thus making the transcendental structures of our lives available for analysis and criticism.
3. Literature also allows us as researchers to engage an interpretation of an issue or question we're considering in ways that we might not have occurred to us, “allowing us to set our limits and to transcend the limits of our interpretive sensibilities” (p. 76). Literature allows us to enter into a discourse that allows us to “reflect more deeply on the way we tend to make interpretive sense of lived experience” (p. 75).

6. 3 We reflect on “essential” themes emerging from our engagement with the descriptions of lived experience and in a poetic manner give “literary” form to these essential themes through analysis

1. Phenomenological “themes” are related to those structures of existence that have meaning for us. Through reflection we “determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up experience” (p. 79). For van Manen, themes relate to the overarching existential categories or essences discussed above. See page 79 for the significance of the “theme” as related to our universal understanding of particular instances of lived experience.

2. The formulation of “themes” allows us to control and give order to our research and its written expression (see pages 92-93). “There are three approaches to uncovering or isolating thematic aspects of a phenomenon in some text”: (1) the holistic or sententious approach; (2) the selective or highlighting approach; and (3) the detailed or line-by-line approach, or the “close-read” approach (pp. 92-95).
3. To engage in phenomenological research “is already and immediately and always a *bringing to speech of something*. And this thoughtful bringing to speech is most commonly a writing activity” (p. 32). Through writing we give form to that which is made manifest through the thematic analysis, through writing we communicate the thematic analysis of essences. The art of writing is “the application of *logos* (language and thoughtfulness) to a phenomenon (an aspect of lived experience), to what shows itself precisely as it shows itself” p. 33). Writing is the *poietic* act of formulating and communicating our “phenomenological-ontological” understanding of lived experience.

7. What Human Science Cannot Do: *How it Differs From Quantitative Research*

1. It is not an Empirical/Analytic Science: “It is not a science of empirical facts and scientific generalizations” (p. 21). It is based on/in experience but it is not “inductive,” i.e., it does not move to formulate generalizations about students, education, or curriculum. It cannot be used to “show or prove, for example, that one reading method is more effective than another reading method, or that certain instructional techniques produce higher achievement scores, and so forth” (p. 22). How people empirically, physiologically, neurologically learn is the realm of “concept empiricism” in education. Here there is a warning about the scientific procedure of generalizing (*thematizing* in Heidegger, 1962; Jardine, 1992; Huebner, 1999): “The tendency to generalize may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience” (p. 22).
2. Phenomenology does not problem-solve: van Manen is making the distinction between “problem” and “mystery.” Each requires a specific methodological approach: “problems require solutions, ‘correct knowledge,’ effective procedures, winning strategies, calculative techniques, methods with get results!” (p. 22). This Marcel (1972) would call “investigation” – phenomena manifesting in terms of “mystery” require an approach that stresses original questioning, or “meaning questions,” which are unique in that they cannot be categorically solved, they can’t be done away with. Such questions ground and direct what is called “inquiry” – they never close down. Always remain open to some extent, they may lead us down paths which close off, they may end in what the Greeks termed *aporia*, or a place where are research comes to a halt.

