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DeHart, Jason; Dunn, Mandie B.

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Shared Viewing From Phenomenological Perspectives: English Teachers and Lived Experience as Text

Jason D. DeHart & Mandie B. Dunn

Key words:

aesthetic
pedagogy;
qualitative studies;
phenomenology;
language
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interpretation;
teacher as artist

Abstract: In this article, we share our different perspectives using the philosophical lens of phenomenology to shape a hermeneutic research methodology considering the experiences of English teachers using arts-based or aesthetic pedagogy. The consideration includes the use of poetry, film, and other texts, and we approach this exploration of method and pedagogy from alternative philosophical stances (AHMED, 2006; MERLEAU-PONTY, 1993 [1964]; VAN MANEN, 2018). What unites the two studies is a sense of the importance of teachers' experiences in meaning-making and interpretation as they work to convey instruction to their students through texts that speak to lived experience in a variety of ways.

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1. Introduction

We explore the ways in which phenomenology helps us to reconsider the relationships between English teachers, students, and the texts that educators use in their pedagogy. In terms of positionality, both of us approach this consideration from a background in K-12 English instruction, as well as prior research from phenomenological stances. We trace these stances throughout this manuscript using voices collected from research in classrooms as a way of exploring the experiences of teachers in artistic pedagogic response to particular phenomena. [1]

Over the course of two months, DEHART worked with five educators who used film to teach reading and writing skills to adolescents in rural, Appalachian communities. In this study, film served as one type of text that teachers used to consider their literacy-focused instructional experiences and elicit the digital narratives of their students. The researcher took a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1993 [1964]; VAN MANEN, 2018), and data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, artifact collection (including teacher-created video clips and handouts), and recorded

reflections on teaching practices. The researcher then analyzed data using SALDAÑA's (2016) transcript coding methods. [2]

Three educators in this project taught English primarily or as part of their teaching load in addition to another content area, while two taught history courses. In order to understand the data generated in this study, the researcher took a phenomenological stance and drew on the work of MERLEAU-PONTY. It was, specifically, MERLEAU-PONTY's (1993 [1964]) essay "The Eye and the Mind" which helped form the foundation of the study's theoretical model. VAN MANEN's (2018) exploration of phenomenology in the classroom served as a supporting voice both in DEHART's use of this stance in educational research, as well as in constructing a written account that included VAN MANEN's tenets of an evocative description of experience with phenomena. Primary data included interviews, as well as recorded reflections from educators [3]

DUNN studied the phenomenon of teaching while grieving by interviewing seven English teachers in the Midwest United States about their lived experiences teaching language arts following the death of a loved one. Drawing on VAN MANEN's (2018) conceptualization of the life world, the interview protocol in the study was designed to elicit lived accounts of teachers' experiences through narrative. In analyzing lived accounts across teachers' interviews, DUNN studied how a teacher's relationship with students and curriculum, including literature, poetry, and art, was influenced by grief. DUNN also drew from AHMED's (2006) conception of queer phenomenology as a frame for understanding how teachers use texts in teaching to orient and reorient classroom relations during times of grief. [4]

Across these two projects, our understanding of texts were underpinned by phenomenological lenses. We use the term "text" to encapsulate the ways teachers drew on a variety of documents and media in their instruction. In particular, DEHART defined film as a text for his study, utilizing ASTRUC's (2014 [1948]) notion of the camera as pen. DUNN suggested the texts teachers used were artistic mediums through which teachers oriented and reoriented relationships with students (AHMED, 2006; SULZER & DUNN, 2019). [5]

In this article, we will first revisit MERLEAU-PONTY's and AHMED's work to provide the theoretical framing for how phenomenology might be implemented to examine texts in educational settings. VAN MANEN's work served as a further source, informing our perspectives. In both conceptions, texts are objects that are part of intentional relations with other objects, in this case teachers. Texts in this conception include a range of semiotic representations, such as film, poetry, paintings, and other artistic forms of expression. Teachers in our study turned to these texts as ways of coming to understand and present their experiences alongside or in response to curricular content. We explore how teachers and these works interact or orient toward one another in educational environments, and how conceiving of the use of texts as part of aesthetic pedagogy highlights the artistic elements of teaching itself. In Section 2, we align artwork within a conceptual framework of text in terms of definition, and contend that the educator

takes on the role of artist in classroom work. In Section 3, we turn those definitions to the focal point of our work with educators. Through a look at prior work, we examine the affordances of artistic work for meaning-making processes in Section 4 before turning our attention to the ways in which teachers consider artistic representations of their own experiences in Section 5. We then conclude as we work to unite our understandings under a phenomenological stance. [6]

2. Bringing in the World

We begin our discussion of the experiencing of art as part of English pedagogy by first taking a closer look at how MERLEAU-PONTY (1993 [1964]) conceptualized the aesthetic process. He wrote that, as part of the artistic role, a painter is "entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees," that a painter participates in a process of "drawing from the world" (p. 121), and that the products such an artist gives the receiver or reader represent "vision" that is "attached to movement" (ibid.). MERLEAU-PONTY pointed out that we see what we are looking at, and that vision is not possible without the movement of the eye. This calls to mind the way the camera in a film functions as the eye of the viewer, showing the audience what is intended to be seen. [7]

In MERLEAU-PONTY's original text, the artist drew from a palette that included "lighting, shadows, reflections, color," objects that "have only visual existence" (p.121). ELLIOTT and SQUIRE (2017) have pointed to a sense of mobility or transportability to the power of narrative, indicating that meaning occurs through a variety of practices. For example, in a canvas, meaning is crafted with acrylics or oils. In a poem, meaning is fashioned from the sounds of words and the arrangement of lines, breaking out the traditional working of prose. In a film, communication occurs in digital engravings with camera movements and angles. When a teacher uses the affordances of literacy in artistic expression, an educator makes use of artistic tools, from technology-afforded vehicles for instruction, to the embodiment of the instructor's teaching itself. [8]

In artwork, it is the artist then who gathers these elements and "asks them [the audience] what they do to suddenly cause something to be" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1993 [1964], p.125). But these representations, as MERLEAU-PONTY wrote, are not the objects themselves. In fact, in order to represent concepts and objects, these elements of reality are artistically salvaged (to borrow the Platonic term, which calls to mind the notion of seizing or capturing what is universal in the always-changing reality of daily living) in such a way that they do not "resemble" their real-life counterparts; they are "only a bit of ink put down here and there on the paper," or a "figure flattened down onto a plane surface" that "scarcely retains the forms of things" (p.8). From poetry to film, and beyond, any text can be conceptualized as a simulacra, a form of life, or captured essence of life, without the full embodiment of living contained in the artifact. [9]

The word MERLEAU-PONTY used for this process is "deform" (p.128); objects represented in artistic fashion, then, are deformed or deconstructed ontologically in order to fashion some sense of resemblance in art. Within this view of art,

JOHNSON suggested that MERLEAU-PONTY's consideration of the artist means that style is "the special way in which our living body experiences, practices, and takes up a tradition of gesture and meaning both to perpetuate it and challenge it" as figures are deformed and represented (JOHNSON, 2010, p.17). In other words, our understanding of style in art is itself a phenomenon, and this process points to a series of deconstructions, interpretations, and co-constructions. [10]

While MERLEAU-PONTY's ideas have specific import for artwork that is rendered on a paper canvas, an application of these ideas to digital canvases is no less true. Building on this conversation, ASTRUC's notion of "La Camera Stylo" (2014 [1948]), or the camera as a pen, aligns with MERLEAU-PONTY's theoretical foundation. ASTRUC was a member of the French New Wave movement, a group of filmmakers who sought to affirm the role of the director-writer as a unique creative artist. The work of this group led to auteur theory, the notion that the director is a kind of cinematic author. Other researchers have expanded on the framework of the filmmaker as author, drawing attention to the varieties of meaning-making that occur within filmic landscapes. [11]

Other scholars have built upon and extended MERLEAU-PONTY's interpretivist phenomenological tradition, including AHMED (2006), who has conceptualized from a queer phenomenological lens how sexual orientation is lived. Important to AHMED's conceptualization is that orientations to the lifeworld are lived in a directed, intentional relationship, or "lines that direct us" (p.14). Her point of view accounted for how "the body gets directed in some ways more than others" (p.15). She explained that human beings are organized by particular directions and experience following particular "lines" (p.16) based on social investment. Thus, in thinking about artists and their relationship to art, AHMED allowed us to see that the subject and object are in intentional relationship and that the artist is "turned toward things" (p.27). It is in the way the artist orients toward objects that the artist "apprehends" the object. In other words, how artists orient toward art influences the point of view of the artist as interpreter of the word. AHMED's conception took up phenomenology as agentive: the artist can use ways of being to orient toward objects. [12]

Across these two phenomenological perspectives, we note that the orientation of the embodied audience considers an object or artifact, and then engages in a process of meaning-making. This textual work finds its personal terminus in the initial interpretation. If the audience is an educator, someone commissioned to share these visions and elicit thinking, then there is yet another terminus. The experience, then, is captured or seized upon initially for the individual's reflection. Yet, in a classroom, the artifact is drawn on further as a communal text for interpretation, reflection, and refinement. [13]

In this way, the classroom itself becomes an entirely new and ever-changing canvas in which, from both MERLEAU-PONTY (1993 [1964]) and AHMED's (2006) view, a series of interpretations take place and meaning is co-constructed. What is initially contained in a canvas, be it poetic, prosaic, or filmic, is then taken up by an educator who facilitates how the ensuing interpretation takes place.

Within this series of instructional and artistic moves, there exist tensions among the values and experiences of those in the learning community, including the decisions the educators make in how much of themselves to disclose as a public embodiment. It is this sense of tension which VAN MANEN (2018) pointed to as essential to a rich phenomenological account. [14]

By considering artistic experience as a facet of teaching, we not only point to the revelatory power of a text, but unite that power with the moves that educators make when sharing these texts with learners. All of these tensions and interpretations revolve around the power of story and, in particular, the significance of the narrative that educators share and shape within the learning community. [15]

3. Experiencing Artwork From Phenomenological Perspectives and Implications for the Classroom

As the first layer of this theoretical consideration, we offer some reminders about MERLEAU-PONTY's exploration of the experience of artwork. His work not only touched on language, but went on to explore facets of artistic representation. In the essay "Eye and Mind" (1993 [1964]), MERLEAU-PONTY considered art and, in particular, focused on the role of painters. The role that the painter takes up in viewing the object is considered in terms of knowledge and action when "ruminating" on the world (p.121). In other words, painters becomes the "actor," sharing their experience through the medium. The layers of experience are then transported to the viewer, who interprets the interpretation. For the purposes of classroom instruction, the educator might take on the role of interpreter, while then moving the artistic role to that of instruction for representation of content. The educator can be one who appreciates, interprets, and/or resituates the artistic product. It is a co-construction between artist and teacher, as well as among the students who take part in the experience. [16]

ROWSELL (2014) took a phenomenological stance to explore the role of an animator as meaning-maker, expanding this traditional framing of what it means to be an artist or painter for texts that go beyond a typical canvas. It may be suggested, based on ROWSELL's application of MERLEAU-PONTY's work, that the role of painter could easily be broadened to the term "artist" or even, for the purposes of this analysis, "filmmaker," "poet," or "teacher." Supporting yet another layer of the phenomenological conception of artistic work, CARBONE (2015) has united the concepts of philosopher and moviemaker when considering MERLEAU-PONTY's work, and it is the epistemology of the painter that unites mind to body in the action, or style, of the artist. By doing so, CARBONE located the experiences MERLEAU-PONTY discussed in terms of a painter's canvas as a broader set of practices that can be located across artistic forms. [17]

What educators choose to represent in the artistic work of instruction is a re-presentation, often made safe and sanitized by a curriculum or educational structure. As DEHART found, educators made decisions about how much of a film to show in a kind of pruning process. Educators make further decisions about

the connections they make and, where possible, the texts and types of texts that they include or highlight in the curriculum. Teachers guard what children are exposed to with the use of technological firewalls and book-weeding practices. In some settings, parents must sign consent forms for some school readings, and there are times when these readings are challenged. So, in taking up meaning in the classroom, the work of the artist/teacher is somewhat constrained by the walls of the educational system itself, as well as the perspectives of stakeholders. [18]

This conception of teacher as an artist who is somewhat constrained is in line with AHMED's (2006) phenomenological framing, which highlighted the significance of "nearness or what is ready-to-hand" in the actions taken up by bodies (p.2). In other words, bodies are in intentional relationships with other objects, but what bodies form relationships *with* is informed by what these bodies are nearest to. AHMED argued that "the body gets directed in some ways more than others" (p.15). Teachers therefore orient within schools according to norms about students, curriculum and text. Yet, she also offered an agentic view of orientation and suggested that bodies can reorient or be "redirect[ed]" (p.19). In this paper, texts become a medium through which bodies reorient or re-direct relations between teachers and students. [19]

Educators offer students a modeled experience, based in reality, but ultimately a kind of testing ground for ideas and representations. It is work that considers the age of the audience and the input of other stakeholders. So too do teachers draw on their own experiences and emotions, including joy and grief, to find connections and expressions in their classroom practice. Moreover, we contend that powerful narratives of both self and the world are embodied in the work of classroom teachers who draw on a range of artistic texts to construct and co-construct meaning, sometimes in response to events that have shaped their own lives. ELLIOT and SQUIRE (2017) pointed to this effect contained within stories, and underscored MERLEAU-PONTY's elaboration on the artistic resonance that is found in aesthetic and, in the case of our studies, pedagogic experience. While a painter explores story and life on flat canvas, and a director represents that simulacrum of reality in a digital space, educators capture elements of their own lived experience and weave these occurrences alongside the words of other storytellers, including the children in their classroom, to shape a learning community and convey concepts of authorship. The classroom, then, is its own canvas, in a sense, and the teacher is an artist in the room who is attempting to lead a community of storytellers, both in present reality and through the prism of existing artistic works. It is complex and emotional work. As one educator suggested in DEHART's study, teachers are the "spider in the corner" who weave an artistic thread of dialogic response, evoking the experiences of authors to align with or challenge their own experiences and invite the responses of students. [20]

Artists, whatever role they play in addition to their creative function, take up a subject, ruminate on the world, and attempt to engage in a representation of what they have seen. From this canvas, teachers-as-artists begins with an object,

travel through its content in their interpretation and perspective, capture what is essential, and then hold up the object or artifact for the class to see. [21]

4. Meaning-Making in Practice

For examples of this kind of work, we turn to the studies we have conducted from a similar, yet divergent, methodological framework. In DEHART's work with teachers using film, a number of examples emerged. Ms. Fitzgerald¹, a teacher who used film to make meaning with her middle grades students, included existing films in classroom instruction. In one example, Fitzgerald used an adaptation of educator Temple GRANDIN's life. GRANDIN (2006) explored what it means to be a learner who is on the autism spectrum, and the film depicts her journey. This teacher then drew discussion as a viewer and interpreter, asking students to comment on GRANDIN's life and what they saw in the filmed depiction. Because GRANDIN advocated for thoughtful educational practices for children who are on the autism spectrum, the conversation turned to a consideration of that particular experience. [22]

Fitzgerald then extended the role of interpreter to creator and asked students to create their own filmed personal narratives. Meaning-making, in this example, begins in the filmed production with the director's intention and artistic arrangement. The teacher then takes on an artistic role in extending this intention and messaging through questions designed to elicit response. The meaning is then embodied in the students' responses and participation in dialogue, as well as the continuing threads for which the teacher provides space. [23]

In discussing the meaning-making that occurred with the film, Fitzgerald first commented on her own experience of apprehension about using the filmed representation of a person's lived experience with autism. When asked about the response of her students, Fitzgerald pointed out that one of the students in the classroom was on the autism spectrum and encountered the text in a completely different way. She said:

"He felt more welcome, he felt like he could talk to them about it. He felt like before they didn't understand, so it was just like (*laughs*) Temple states, 'A door opened, and I went through it.' So it was a door opening for him, and so that was something powerful to witness as well within a classroom. A turning point in that student's life." [24]

In terms of education, these concepts position the educator as considering one's philosophy of instruction, and then enacting that philosophy in classroom practices—assessment, choices, evaluation, conversation, and so much more transpires in a classroom. The educators' experience becomes the canvas for classroom interpretation, and one representation leads to others. At times, the educator's experience mirrors an experience found in a text, or connects to a particular kind of text. Mr. Wahlberg, a teacher who has taught history, as well as writing courses, spoke to this experience as one who loves film. Wahlberg's love

1 Participants' names have been anonymized.

of film led him to use examples from the medium for classroom instruction, serving as a connecting point between the process of instruction and the lived experience of the teacher. Wahlberg found film so engaging that he reported:

"I'll sit through a bad movie and won't think that I've wasted my time. So, I just, a personal interest of people seeing what I see in film and when they don't, that's a teacher's, it's a parent's job, it's a friend's job to go, Hey, did you notice that?" [25]

This kind of noticing formed the basis for conversations with students in Wahlberg's classroom and serves as a locus for interpretation as students vocalize and write about their experiences based on exploring an artistically assembled text. [26]

Much is made in instruction of ensuring that lessons are relevant, and this is no less a process than drawing from the world around the educator. When it comes to textual selection for student experience, the process takes another step. The teacher, along with or in spite of the actions of the student, considers a text that embodies an instructional aim. At times this aim is dictated by an outside set of curricular standards, while at other times the text is informed by the teacher's philosophy—a belief that a particular author, genre, or mode is important, and should be shared, or the belief that students should find their own narratives within the stories of others. In DEHART's study, teachers oscillate between the two, not only addressing a set of imposed standards, but also extending textual interactions to the personal and local. [27]

All of this work centers the ways that educators and their students enact their philosophy and engage with texts in the world. All of these choices are the enactment of the teacher in planning, which is then taken to practice and reshaped as students act as observers and co-constructors, even sometimes subverting the intentions of the lesson. [28]

5. Applications of Art and Film to Aesthetic Pedagogy

Widening this theoretical lens even further, we now apply MERLEAU-PONTY's (1993 [1964]) consideration of the artist, along with ASTRUC's (1948) notion of the filmmaker as auteur, to establish the teacher who draws on these elements as an instructional artist, reaching to an aesthetic pedagogy. LAWRENCE-LIGHTFOOT (2005) has noted the sheer number of activities and decisions that take place in the processes of classroom life each moment of each teaching day. Capturing the essence of this experience is complex work, and classrooms are shaped by the embodied life world of teachers and students in a microcosm community within the larger frame of a social macrocosm. Moreover, as teachers enact their identities, students also navigate selfhood and social embodiment. ESIN (2017) has observed the utility of drawing on a variety of materials for considering the creation and presentation of personal story. In the classroom, the experiences that shape, break, and reshape teachers are taken up or mitigated in instructional planning and implementation. [29]

It is within this flood of classroom voice and activity that teachers work within the frame of what might be considered a daily miracle. Ideas are brought to life, sequenced, and represented so that the learner can make meaning from them. This is no less a feat for older learners as the teacher must take into account the prior experiences of the students and take meaningful steps from there. [30]

For example, in DUNN's study, English teacher Ms. Adams worked as an instructional artist to fully realize her pedagogy, a pedagogy that included the work she did to build strong relationships of trust and care with students. When Adams and her students lost a classmate to death by suicide, she worked as auteur to create a particular moment of heightened connection for herself and students. Across the year, she mostly did not talk with students about the suicide outside of what administration dictated for teachers. However, toward the end of the year, she did address the collective loss with a poem she wrote. Adams explained:

"I wrote a poem that I performed for them ... it addressed [our classmate] ... it wasn't about [him], but ... I kinda gave an intro to the poem of ... how there's this disconnect between how I have to act some days and how I really feel and that we, we love you, but we just don't always say it because we don't always have the space or time for that ... And I would say most kids in most of my classes cried. Like that was pretty much across the board." [31]

Adams used the disciplinary conventions of her subject area of English—poetry—but described performing the poem for students, creating for students a moving picture they could witness. She described performing her poem as showing her love for her students even though "teachers don't always have the space or time for that." Adams went on to explain that her performance of the poem shifted the feel of the classroom, even when her sharing stopped and other students began sharing their poems: "So then I had a few kids that had a hard time getting through their poem ... I think I amped up the emotional level. I didn't anticipate that part of it." She noted that several students cried while she was performing her poem and that her sharing her poem opened up a space for emotion in the classroom. This moment was particularly important for Adams because much of her teaching following the loss of her student remained "focused on the curriculum," in her words, because that was how teachers in the school were directed to respond to the collective loss. While Adams did not feel that her role as a teacher allowed her to share openly all of her emotions, performing her poem drew on the disciplinary norms of language arts to convey sentiment to students. Furthermore, Adams's sharing of her poem had an impact on the atmosphere of the classroom to the point where other students began sharing their poems in an emotionally heightened state. Thus, the text was a way for her to reorient her relationship to students to make space for expressing grief and love, emotions that she did not feel were appropriate to share directly in her role as an educator. [32]

While Adams herself explained in her response that sometimes a teacher does not just get to talk with students about love and their care for their students, in

this case she made a pedagogical decision that allowed her to create an aesthetic, emotional experience with her students. AHMED (2013) argued in "The Cultural Politics of Emotion" that "emotion is the feeling of bodily change" (p.5). For Adams, her actions as auteur created bodily change for her and her students, making teaching, learning, and being together an embodied experience. [33]

AHMED also noted that "[emotions might matter in teaching insofar as they cannot be translated into an outcome, which would be knowable in advance of the pedagogic encounter" (p.182). While perhaps Adams saw her sharing of the poem as a deviation from traditional curriculum or, in her words taken from an interview, "how [she] has to act some days" as teacher, she also most notably brought herself and her students into the frame of embodied experience when she decides to share her poem and emotion circulates in response. While this pedagogic act may not show up in the form of a content-specific outcome on an assessment, thinking of teaching as embodied and relational allows us to see how the relationship between a teacher and students becomes part of how teachers and students learn. [34]

Yet it was also through the experience of sharing her art that Adams brought about change in herself and in her students. Texts, including film, art, novels, comics, and poetry thus can be thought of as materials through which we express and live out our relationships to other human beings. In an exploration of phenomenology and subject and object relationships, AHMED (2006) explained in "Queer Phenomenology" that orientation is about "how we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes" and that "to be oriented is also to be turned toward certain objects" (p.1). Reading Adams's story of sharing her poem with AHMED's conception of orientation and phenomenology, it became possible to see this teacher as reorienting her relationship to students through her performance of the poem. Before her poem, perhaps she was oriented toward students as a teacher with a particular English curriculum. During and after her poem, she oriented herself and her students within a shared relationship of love and she acknowledged their shared experience of loss. [35]

6. Final Reflections

What seems to be commonly held between MERLEAU-PONTY's (1993 [1964]) and AHMED's (2006) phenomenological perspectives, other than a broader methodological framework, is the seizing of texts, whether written, illustrated, or filmed, for the purposes of meaning-making. While MERLEAU-PONTY's stance led to moves in epistemological perspective for DEHART, through examinations of making meaning with materials as a knowledge-building practice in literacy, AHMED provided an ontological perspective whereby the body orients to make meaning. AHMED's ontological perspective accounted for how power relations orient particular bodies, but also suggests that phenomenology as a theoretical perspective allows bodies to reorient. This phenomenological perspective allows for the teacher to embody reoriented relations, such as the way Adams did when she performed her poem for students, reorienting their relationship to each other and their orientation toward their collective loss. MERLEAU-PONTY thus offered

an understanding of how teachers might use texts to engage in aesthetic pedagogy in English classrooms. AHMED's conception focused more on embodiment: bodies are texts that get read but also bodies can read the world. [36]

Though divergent in their approaches and applications, both of us have found commonality in the affordances of phenomenology for exploring the lived experiences of English teachers. We believe that texts are powerful, but that when considering how classrooms work, viewing the lived experiences of educators as oriented toward texts opens up understandings and teaching and being through aesthetic pedagogy. Teachers in both of our studies brought their personhood and lived experiences into their pedagogy through artistry. Indeed, removing the person from this professional work would be a philosophically surgical process of some difficulty. [37]

The implications of this work then bleed further into the kinds of writing exercises that students are asked to take up, or choose on their own, and how these enactments act as further representations. The effect is not unlike a series of doors that continue to open, unless the teacher provides a textual invitation that is refused by the student—in which case, a shut door effect may take place. This work also opens up our understanding of teachers and how they are oriented in classroom spaces toward students, texts, and their own lived experiences. A phenomenological lens orients pedagogy toward the lived personal experiences through which teachers make meaning. Rather than focus our attention away from this use of personal experience, we have examined and conceptualized these experiential influences from the locus afforded us by MERLEAU-PONTY and AHMED. [38]

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Authors

Jason D. DEHART is an assistant professor of reading education at Appalachian State University. In his work, he focuses on the use of multimodal text and digital practice to engage readers, and particularly in the context of upper elementary and adolescent literacy.

Contact:

Prof. Jason D. DeHart

Appalachian State University
287 Rivers Street
325F College of Education
Boone, NC 28608, USA

E-mail: dehartjd@appstate.edu

URL: <https://rese.appstate.edu/directory/dr-jason-dehart>

Mandie B. DUNN is an assistant professor in English education at the University of South Florida. In her work, she focuses on the sociology of the teaching profession, especially how the work of teaching necessitates emotional and relational labor.

Contact:

Prof. Mandie B. Dunn

University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Avenue
EDU 101, Tampa, FL 33620, USA

E-mail: mdunn8@usf.edu

URL: <https://www.usf.edu/education/faculty/faculty-profiles/mandie-dunn.aspx>

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