



9-1-1988

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### Recommended Citation

Lund, Darren E. (1988) "Using Phenomenology to Explore the Meanings of Students Personal Writings," *Journal of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-journal/vol2/iss2/5>

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# Using Phenomenology to Explore the Meanings of Students' Personal Writings

by  
Darren E. Lund

*"My primary emphasis was to understand the elusive nature of the writing experience... (of) high school student writers."*

Understanding the meanings of students who write for themselves is a highly personal process. The research described below represents an attempt to select and implement one approach to studying the writing process. My primary emphasis was to understand the elusive nature of the writing experience as it was experienced by high school student writers. Having kept a journal myself, I felt somewhat qualified to explore with students their own writing experiences. Selecting the appropriate methodology for this enquiry led to an exploration of more interpretive research paradigms.

As Carr and Kemmis (1983) contend, in explorations of any human actions, the phenomena can only be understood and interpreted "by reference to the meaning that the individual actor attaches to them" (p. 88). For Language Arts researchers, and especially those of us who are interested in how people communicate through written language, this attending to the personal meanings of the participants seems a crucial starting point for any inquiry.

My selection of an interpretive methodology seemed especially appropriate for my research interest. The intent here is not to criticize other, more positivistic, research approaches. In order to study the journal writing experiences of students in a high school English class, I required an approach which would

emphasize the individual meanings of the participants. This paper presents a justification for my application of a phenomenological approach to exploring the writer-text relationship of three students.

Heeding the explanations provided by Gadamer (1975), I viewed my task in this interpretive process to be directed toward explicating the "common meanings" of this use of language--the shared understanding between people of what it means to record thoughts in writing. Using reflective conversation as the primary method of data gathering, I engaged with three senior high school students in an interpretive inquiry into the experience of journal writing as a sense-making use of written language.

#### Phenomenological Research

Journal writing can be a highly personal experience of communication with the self. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), phenomenology emphasizes the more subjective aspects of an individual's experiences. Selecting a phenomenological approach enabled me to capture and elucidate the complexity and fullness of the affective dimensions of their experiences. This focus allowed me to self-reflect on my own writing while I explored the experiences of others.

For this study, I was not seeking causal explanations of language experiences; rather, as Carr and Kemmis (1983) suggest, the explanations sought by a phenomenological enquiry should "deepen and extend our knowledge of why everyday reality...is perceived and experienced in the way that it is" (p. 90). As a Language Arts teacher, my gaining this kind of knowledge seemed crucial for achieving professional growth.

#### Reflective Conversations

By engaging with my participants in reflective conversations, I did not conduct "interviews" in the commonly accepted sense of the term as described by ethnographers such as Dobbert (1982) and Spradley (1979). Rather than distancing myself from the event in the manner of an anthropologist studying another culture, I completely submerged myself in the phenomenon, and engaged myself entirely with each participant during our conversations. During these conversations, I did not adhere to a rigid set of research questions which had been prepared carefully beforehand. Rather, I left myself "open" to the other, and allowed our language to find its own questions as they emerged naturally from our mutual search for understanding.

Our conversations were not intended to enable me to define any verifiable, objective "truth" about language or about learners. Instead, as Gadamer (1975) insists, the "conversation has a spirit of its own, and the language used in it

bears its own truth within it, i.e. it reveals something which henceforth exists" (p. 345). This new understanding emerged as an authentic recognition of the essential human quality of writing, the "common ground" which exists between us, within each of us, and across humanity.

#### Gathering Data: Entering the Students' Worlds

During the scheduled interviews with each student, my intent was to become engaged in a sharing dialogue, on the nature of journal writing. I also asked each student to compose two or three separate journal entries during our interviews, in order to provide a fresh example of the writing process to discuss and explore.

It seemed reasonable to expect that these adolescents might be somewhat reluctant to converse with me in the private and honest manner on which much of the success of my research approach depended. After all, they were all 16 years old and in the often awkward and painful time of transition from the teenage years to adulthood. Also, we had not been afforded the time or opportunity to get to know one another very well.

My fears of uncomfortable meetings with unresponsive teens were allayed within seconds of meeting each of the students for the first time in the "interview" setting. I was relieved and then excited to discover that our conversations were characterized by an overwhelming feeling of rapport and trust shared between myself and each of my student participants. Most important to the students seemed to be the fact that my role in these conversations was not that of a teacher or authoritarian figure; rather, I represented simply an interested and non-evaluative adult listener. For individuals of their age group, it seems an infrequent, yet important occurrence to meet an older person who will listen to their thoughts and opinions on issues without making judgments.

At first the immediate rapport surprised me, but when I reflected on the context in which this friendly, honest dialogue developed, I realize that there were similar aspects of our personalities and backgrounds which may help to account for this mutually rewarding symbiosis. Some of our common experiences and characteristics were unstated while others emerged in our talk as we discussed how remarkable it seemed that we could "hit it off" like this.

#### Shared Experiences

In discussing our lifestyles and interests, it became apparent that I shared several common experiences with each of the students. Both Tom and I had grown up under the strict guidance of authoritarian fathers employed in law enforcement. His disclosure of a personal family tragedy struck a familiar chord in me, evoking

strong memories of my own mother's recent battle with a serious illness. Cindy and I shared musical tastes, and could sympathize with one another in our ongoing inner conflicts over religious issues, and in our struggle to deal with having an older, higher achieving sibling. Dan also felt that these sibling tensions, but toward a younger sister. His concerns with peer acceptance brought back vivid memories of my own high school social insecurities.

### Strangers in a Life-Boat

As an outsider, I seemed to hold a peculiar advantage in our talks. Since I did not know any of their family, friends, or other teachers, I could be trusted not to disclose any of the confidential information which appeared in their writing or arose in our conversations. Thus, the students frequently sought my opinion as a safe way of obtaining another perspective from which to view the matters of their personal lives.

A friend and fellow researcher had spoken to me about the "life-boat" phenomenon, and for the first time, I believe I experienced it myself. Drawn together in the peculiar circumstances of this research situation, as enthusiastic participants in an open-ended conversation, we achieved an unexpected sense of openness and trust. We were, after all, two virtual strangers exploring together the phenomenon of writing as it facilitates self-reflection and sense-making. Submerged totally in our own "deep" conversations, each student and I felt we were two people alone, sheltered from the real world for a brief time.

Throughout our conversations, there grew intangible but undeniable feelings of trust and honesty. In the context of my research interest, this was of great importance to the quality and scope of my data gathering; on a more personal level, it provided a basis for the warm and reflective dialogue from which we each gained our own intrinsic rewards.

### Preserving the Talk

Caught up in the conversations, we soon became oblivious to the whirring of the tape recorder. Fascinated with the students' eager sharing of their thoughts and feelings, my mind was flooded with images and ideas. I would think about what was being said, ask questions to help clarify or confirm my understanding, and offer my own thoughts as they emerged from the dialogues. The planned one-hour interviews invariably turned into 80 or 90 minute sessions, filling up both sides of a cassette tape.

These conversations recreated themselves in my mind long after I departed the research situation. Walking from the school to my car, driving back to my

apartment, or while taking a morning run, I would find myself reliving the day's interview, thinking about what was said, what questions I should have asked, and what new understanding I was gaining. The voices of the students echoed distinctly and continuously in my mind; my union with their personality, their being, seemed vivid and ongoing.

Now I had our talks on cassette tapes. Brief moments of our genuine sharing were captured somehow within the alignment of the magnetic particles. I replayed the tapes at least three or four times each to take comprehensive notes for our next interview. But as I listened to our conversations emanating from the speaker of the tape player, it seemed that something was missing. The microphone had not been able to record much of what was vital in our talks: the gestures--smiles, smirks, hand movements; the nodding of heads; the widening and winking of the eyes; and the body posturing. All of this remained only in recalled mental images of the talk, and I attempted to savor and preserve mine in writing after each interview.

My struggle to ensure the authenticity of the data was just beginning. As I further transformed our recorded dialogues into the more sterile form of transcribed text, I reminded myself of the necessity of this stage. Writing out every spoken word was necessary, in that it allowed me a much greater ease of access to the actual "words" used by the students. However, the understanding sought in this inquiry required moving beyond the verbatim utterances to a deeper, interpretive understanding of the students' writing experiences. My results appear as descriptive written accounts of each of the students' experiences with personal writing, which others may be able to understand by virtue of their own experiences with writing. Therefore, I trust that my research findings may be understood, appreciated, and utilized by a relatively broad range of educational practitioners.

#### Conclusion

It is my belief that the phenomenological perspective has an important place in educational research, especially in my research related to personal writing situations, because it focuses on human experience in all its complexity. Seen from this perspective, the human complexity becomes the primary interest and, indeed, the very reason for conducting the research. And the kind of knowledge that is sought can be of tremendous importance to teachers who wish to understand the linguistic experiences of their students. In phenomenological research we are reminded that, as van Manen (1982) expresses it, "the question of knowledge always refers us back to our world, to our lives, to who we are, and to what makes us write, read, and talk together as educators" (p. 298).

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## TEACHING AND LEARNING NOTES

- CORRECTION: In T&L, Spring 1987, June Fox and Mary Dischino were incorrectly identified. Fox is Dean of the Division of Education and Special Education within the Lesley College Graduate School. Dischino is a teacher in the Cambridge public schools. We are sorry for the incorrect identification and thank them again for their contributions.
- NEW BOOK: Catherine Loughlin ("Researching the Learning Environment," T&L, Spring 1987) and Mavis Martin have co-authored Supporting Literacy: Developing Effective Learning Environments, now available from Teachers College Press (ISBN 0-8077-2859-4).
- RECEIVED: The Writing Instructor, "an innovative quarterly publication for composition professionals at both the secondary and university levels," publishes articles "grounded in rhetorical and educational theory." For information, write: c/o The Freshman Writing Program, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0062.