

Exploring Digital Lifeworlds: Doing Postphenomenology in Networked Learning Research

Workshop Facilitators

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Intended Audience

This workshop is intended for NLC 2024 delegates who are interested in exploring postphenomenology as a theoretical framework and as a methodological approach for doing networked learning research.

Workshop Description

Networked Learning (NL), originally presented by Goodyear et al. (2004), has recently been reimagined to embrace a richer, more context-sensitive understanding that incorporates the entangled, emergent and “messy” nature of learning (NLEC, Gourlay, Rodríguez-Illera, et al., 2021). Postphenomenology was cited as one of the multiple methodological frameworks relevant to this redefinition. Matthews (in NLEC, Gourlay, Rodríguez-Illera, et al., 2021) recommends postphenomenology for its focus on human-nonhuman mediation and questions of agency in sociotechnical networks. Similarly, Thestrup & Gislev (in NLEC, Gourlay, Rodríguez-Illera, et al., 2021) draw on postphenomenology to reconceive the learning network as a media ecology where “technology, not being neutral, but multistable (Ihde 1990), mediates the perceptions and actions of the participants (Verbeek 2005), and by that co-shapes the space, the connections, and the network” (p. 346). But what is postphenomenology? This workshop will introduce participants to postphenomenology as a philosophy of technology, a theoretical framework, and a pragmatic approach to doing NL research.

Postphenomenology emerged from philosopher Don Ihde’s (1975, 1979) early phenomenological investigations of specific technologies being used in everyday life: chalk, eyeglasses, telephones, etc. His inquiries led to several key discoveries including the occurrence of distinct forms of human-technology-world relations (embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity and background) which can be further characterized by their amplification-reduction structure. Today, Ihde’s approach to studying technologies “phenomenologically, i.e., as belonging in different ways to our experience and use” (1993, p. 34) is known as postphenomenology and has evolved into an increasingly popular posthuman form of qualitative inquiry in education and the social sciences (Aagaard, 2016). As a theoretical framework, postphenomenology views technology not as a neutral tool but as an active mediator in shaping and co-constituting human actions, perceptions, and interpretations including interactions with others and their world (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2005). Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005) expanded postphenomenology to include key insights from Actor-Network Theory, drawing especially on the work of Bruno Latour (1992, 2002), and thereby broadening its theoretical reach to include the morality of hybrid beings and the ethical design of things.

As an approach to research, postphenomenology allows for in-depth explorations of how digital technologies mediate educational experiences (Aagaard, 2017; Adams & Turville, 2018). It is especially well-suited to studying how technologies shape ethical actions and decisions (Verbeek, 2011, 2023). Through “investigating how technologies help to shape human practices, perceptions, and interpretative frameworks, [postphenomenology] makes visible a moral dimension of technology itself” (Verbeek, 2023, p. 49). Postphenomenology employs a variety of phenomenological and empirically grounded methods to capture the everyday, lived experiences of different technologies including disciplined observation of humans employing specific technologies (Aagaard & Matthiesen, 2016), “interviewing objects” (Adams & Thompson, 2016) and “thing writing” (Adams & Yin, 2017). Here, doing postphenomenology demands an out-of-the-corner-of-one’s-eye attentiveness to everyday life, “an *ear for meaning* and an *eye for materiality*” (Aagaard & Matthiesen, 2016, p. 41, *emphasis in original*). Postphenomenological analysis often begins by first reconstructing “posthuman anecdotes”, that is, descriptions of human-technology-world interactions as they are lived, then subjecting these “reassembled resemblings” (Adams & Thompson, 2016, p. 31) to a set of postphenomenological analytic tools to help untangle how humans and different technologies in use are mutually shaping and co-constituting each other. Analytics include studying breakdowns (e.g., the “broken hammer” strategy), attending to the invitational quality of things, and discerning the spectrum of human-technology-world (HTW) relations (Adams & Turville, 2018; Adams & Thompson, 2016).

Participant Engagement

We have designed the workshop to engage participants throughout, providing multiple opportunities to experience postphenomenological concepts and research practices firsthand. For example, after a brief introduction to the (post)phenomenological understanding that our immediate world “speaks” to us prereflectively, participants will be invited to move around the room and affix post-it notes to different objects with a description of what it is saying to them (e.g., a chair says, “Sit down and get comfortable!). Participants will also have the opportunity to experience (1) attuning to the lived meaning of specific technologies through using different writing instruments, (2) writing a postphenomenological description of their experience, and (3) in small groups, trying one or more analytic techniques (e.g., uncovering human-technology-world relations, phenomenological variation) towards composing a postphenomenology of writing with GenAI.

Participant Outcomes

- Participants will gain an introductory understanding of postphenomenology, including how it relates to phenomenology, its emphasis on the mediating role of technology in human-world relations, its core concepts and methods, and its relevance to NL.
- Participants will experience what it means to attune to the technological lifeworld, and the centrality of developing this attunement to doing postphenomenological inquiry.
- Through a short writing activity, participants will gain an appreciation for the complexity of composing concrete, posthuman anecdotes for postphenomenological analysis.
- Working in small groups, participants will try different postphenomenological methods of analysis

Workshop Alignment with Conference Themes

The workshop is aligned with the conference theme, *Philosophies, theories, methodologies, and research designs for networked learning*, and will provide participants with a theoretical introduction to and practical understanding of postphenomenology. Postphenomenology is an outgrowth of *phenomenology*—a conference subtheme—that extends and focuses inquiry into the realm of human-technology-world relations and emphasizes how technologies mediate and transform human experiences and realities. Additionally, the facilitators will discuss how a postphenomenology of generative *artificial intelligence* (e.g. *generative pre-trained transformers (GPT)*)—another conference theme—must also attend to earlier (writing) practices.

Workshop Process/Activities

- Introduction to postphenomenology
 - Warm-up activity: “Invitational quality of things” bridge exercise
 - Core concepts
- Postphenomenological methods and “doing” postphenomenology
 - Methodological approaches: data collection
 - Activity 1: Attuning to our embodied and material engagements with technology: writing with different writing instruments
 - Activity 2: Composing lived experience descriptions (posthuman anecdotes)
- Doing postphenomenological analysis
 - Methodological approaches: analyzing HTW anecdotes, varying the example (eidetic reduction)
 - Activity 3: Working in small groups, studying variations, breakdowns, and human-technology-world relations
- Wrapup

Workshop facilitator details

Cathy Adams is a professor of educational computing in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta. Her research investigates digital technology integration across K-12 and post-secondary educational environments, ethical and pedagogical issues involving digital technologies including Artificial Intelligence, and K-12 Computing Science curriculum and computational thinking (CT) pedagogy. Cathy employs a range of posthuman-postdigital methods in her inquiries including interviewing objects, postphenomenology, phenomenology of practice, media ecology, and other new materialist and sociomaterialist approaches.

Lesley Gourlay is a Professor of Education in the Department of Culture, Communication and Media at University College London. Her scholarship focuses on technologies and knowledge practices of students and academics, with a particular emphasis on textual practices and the digital. Her recent theoretical work has focused on sociomaterial and posthuman perspectives on engagement in the university, exploring themes of space, inscription, nonhuman agency, and digital media. She is a recipient of a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship (2021-2024) and is writing a new monograph for Bloomsbury on the topic of *The Datafied University: Documentation and Performativity in Digitised Education*.

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