Mobilage thinking and empirical encounters: data gathering and analysis of networked learning experiences

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Abstract

This short paper heralds a chapter in a forthcoming book showcasing phenomenology in networked learning research and practice. One of the arguments treated in the chapter relates to expectations that doctoral educational research projects will gather data, often through interviews. Doctoral students would also be expected to ground their projects philosophically and this can be difficult without a background in philosophy. Various methodologies seem attractive because they have dealt with the philosophical groundwork, laying out a parsimonious, safe and routinised path from proposal to completion. One such candidate methodology is phenomenography, which also appeals because of its origins and achievements in the field of educational research; and not least in networked learning, where phenomenography supported early work in defining networked learning and researching staff and student experiences, helping maintain a focus on human relations in online learning. Phenomenology and phenomenography are used to research experience, and both observe a hermeneutic gap within interview-based research: between the phenomenon of interest and what is said in interviews about that phenomenon. The latter provides interview-based research with data but without necessarily addressing the hermeneutic gap. By contrast, phenomenology's concern with the prereflective, the so-called structures of consciousness, acknowledges that researchers bring their own preconceptions to any enquiry and some attempt ought to be made to recognise and set them aside: also known as "bracketing" (or epoché), originating in nonempirical philosophy, has been taken up in empirical qualitative research, including phenomenography. However, far from closing the hermeneutic gap, admitting even a simplistic place for bracketing also admits of a need to attain greater clarity in what bracketing is and what it entails. Something of the illusiveness of absolute bracketing may be understood if we consider that even naming the experience for investigation sets off wandering thought paths. This paper suggests "reverse bracketing" may help, by redirecting those thought paths which may be anticipated, to restore thinking to the desired state of wonder instead. Mobilage thinking is proposed as one example of how a blend word was constructed to help maintain a state of openness to the target experience: in this case, being a healthcare student with a mobile phone.

Keywords

Phenomenology, methodology, methods, qualitative research, interviews, bracketing, phenomenography, reflexivity

According to the Networked Learning Conference website, short papers "aim to introduce and promote a new piece of research", and in this case, that new work is a chapter in a forthcoming book showcasing phenomenology and networked learning.

Many doctoral candidates in networked learning may envisage their main (thesis or dissertation) research project with the assumption that data gathering and analysis will be central parts of the process, as well as finding some appropriate method of presenting their findings. The exact choices of methods may well follow on from the research aim and question. Where this indicates qualitative designs, students may be expected to take up data gathering methods such as survey, interviews (individual or group), and/or observation, and perform some kind of rigorous and transparent thematic analysis on gathered data, perhaps following Braun and Clark (2013). Findings may take the form of various themes that arise from the data, supported with pithy quotes. One of the main purposes of following standardised methods is likely to assure fidelity and validity in each stage of exploring and reporting participants' experiences. At some point in the thesis, students may well be expected to locate their research design philosophically, such that they can present a consistent line out of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Trowler, 2015). This can be challenging without a prior background in philosophy, making the more well-worn methodological paths a rational, not to say parsimonious, choice. Descriptive qualitative approaches provide a straightforward route through a research project that avoids becoming entangled in arcane philosophical debates, even though doctoral level work may seem to require that to some extent. In the case of phenomenology, the encounter with nonempirical philosophical research presents the interested student with a dilemma as they seek to, "demonstrate an appreciation of phenomenology's philosophical roots" (Oberg & Bell,

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2012, p. 203) and yet apply such roots to doctoral projects while retaining an empirical basis. Two "quasi-phenomenological" (Friesen, 2023, p. 139) methodologies appear to resolve this: interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and phenomenography make claims to phenomenological roots and offer procedures for gathering and analysing data. Creanor et al. (2006) offered a foray into IPA but phenomenography is a staple of networked learning research and so this paper takes the latter methodology as a foil to surface and discuss a qualitative dilemma common to interview-based research (Richardson, 1999).

Phenomenography seeks to discover varieties in the ways of experiencing a given phenomenon (Marton et al., 1997). Marton and Säljö's 1976 paper (Marton & Säljö, 1976) has enjoyed seminal status for identifying deep and surface approaches to student learning (although we seem to be no closer to finding a cure for the latter). Since it started in 1998, papers presented at the networked learning conference have been interested in investigating and representing the experiences of staff and students, somewhat underpinned by concerns to push back against forces which, it is assumed, cheapen or blunt education as an egalitarian, generative and emancipatory process. Phenomenographical research of student and staff experiences was important to framing the early work on and definition of Networked Learning (Jones, 2000; McConnell et al., 2012). Jones (2015) identifies the relational aspect of phenomenography as making it particularly suitable for the study of networked learning experiences. As with any methodology, there are acknowledged shortcomings. Jones (2000) mentions two critiques of phenomenography:

1. From ethnomethodology, citing Fleming (1986), that accounts given at interview are partial and incomplete.
2. From phenomenology, citing Richardson (1999), that interviews gather expressed conceptions rather than the phenomena itself.

The first point is not addressed but some mitigation may be possible to envisage, through data saturation, i.e., continuing to gather accounts until no new material arises. Jones (2000, p. 154) claims that the second critique is addressed through his participation as a tutor on the course, which gave him access to the rich context that could help situate the interviews. Whatever the validity of that claim, it does admit a flaw in the interview method, yet without seeming to take it that seriously.

Interviews may be conducted under the assumption that the researcher can achieve straightforward access to the participants experience through what is said. What the participant says their experience is is what they utter and this speech can be recorded, analysed and generalised as a rigorously authentic aggregation of the often quite small number of *variations in what people say about their experience* of a phenomenon. This accepting of what people say is a so-called second order perspective which Marton argues for in his 1981 paper (Marton, 1981). Marton, taking aim at Piaget, can seem to hurry us along in his outlining four points of difference between phenomenology and phenomenography. A major strength of the latter being that useful work can and has been done even because of its pragmatic approach. However, research on experience that elides the hard problem of human consciousness risks being under-problematised from the start and lacking fidelity with the phenomena of interest by the time it is written up. It is not my aim to knock phenomenography down, but I do suggest that anyone who thinks it should have privileged status as the default methodology for researching 'experience' in networked learning may be usefully troubled towards reflection and engaging in helpful debate amongst delegates at the conference.

One of phenomenology's gifts to qualitative research has been to notice how hard it is to be objective, how cluttered our own consciousness as researchers can be when trying to research phenomena. This may be understood as an interpretive gap, or a loose coupling, between what is said at interviews and the phenomenon experienced. This is not just in the words used by our informant but how they strike the researcher at the time and may sneak in every time thereafter. Husserl, the Father of Phenomenology, suggested "bracketing", which is to identify our own ideas, preconceptions, theories and prejudices, and mentally put these aside: this could allow the phenomena of interest to show itself for more faithful description that approaches what it is in its essence. As van Manen (2023, p. 141) observes (learning from Hegel), the sheer illusiveness of bracketing is indicated in the way that merely to name something reduces its existential richness. When we name our foci, it can set off wandering thoughts, when the ideal is to maintain a state of openness, "wonder in the face of the world" (Fink, in Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. XV). It is debatable to what extent bracketing is possible, even though it has an intuitive parallel in that any of us may attempt something like it when we suspend judgement, e.g. when a nurse helps a notorious criminal to better health or honouring the legal maxim that one is innocent until proved guilty. Indeed, this indicates the origins of the Greek word also used for bracketing, i.e., epoché, or abstention (van Manen, 2023). In a move that acknowledges something about the influence of the mental in the researcher, Marton give a place for

Husserlian bracketing (Marton, 1994), yet he still seems to assume his interviewees express their experiences without embellishing them. In any case, phenomenography seems to assume it can rinse out such pollution by getting enough of closely related meaning units, i.e. similar statements. Any research that adopts this position, even that which claims to be phenomenological, may not have seriously considered the complexity of consciousnesses, of the informant or of the person being informed. Furthermore, to admit the case for any amount of bracketing, necessarily admits a case for taking *the researcher's consciousness* into reflexive account.

In some ways, the research questions which phenomenology and phenomenography address are different and complementary. And yet anyone planning, doing, or has done interviews has already, tacitly or intentionally, made some decision to accept some level of veracity in second order perspectives. For example, Crook's classic work (Crook, 1994) involved gathering and analysing student experiences but does not address this question of a first and second order; it tacitly accepts that what people utter can be straightforwardly taken as what they mean, especially in an interview, which, the ethnographer Paul Atkinson asserts, carry a certain cultural baggage in terms of power relations and ways of behaving (Atkinson, 2015). This a problem for all interview-based research; i.e., researchers are never alone with a phenomenon of interest when they encounter it, a historically affected consciousness (Gadamer, 1992) is at work. Akin to ideas of unconscious bias (Thuraisingham, 2013) prejudicial tendencies may be lurking in consciousness to influence data gathering. This is important if we preserve a role for the researcher's mind in interpretive research analysis. But is bracketing enough, or perhaps there are other mental moves that a researcher could consider in their approach to researching the phenomenon. In approaching networked learning research, we may consider several candidate biases. For example, it may be difficult to reflexively identify and correct one's enthusiasm for or fascination with *new* technology, or a tacit ontological commitment to a familiar methodology, for example, when one is used to seeing the agency of non-human things, as with actor network theory. But similarly, our own, perhaps Freirean, values may lead us to give primacy to human agency. These are not one-off ideas that crop up betimes, but part of the researcher's background familiarity. *Mobilage thinking* is forwarded as a kind of "sensitising theory" (Sibeon, 2004), a *reverse* bracketing, whereby, rather than trying to bracket plausibly unhelpful lines of unconscious bias with the aim of at least acknowledging, if not disarming them, it may be useful to also identify ideas which can act as a kind of antidote to the researcher's prejudice. Mobilage is a blend word taken up by Johnson (2018) to encompass student-plus-phone in a single unit of analysis to avoid fixating on the person or the technology in use by them before, during and after the encounter in analysing the phenomena towards representation.

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