

3-1-2020

"It Is What It Is:" Literacy Studies and Phenomenology

Jason D. DeHart

Appalachian State University, dehartjd@appstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

DeHart, J. D. (2020). "It Is What It Is:" Literacy Studies and Phenomenology. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 596-603. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4216>

This How To Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



"It Is What It Is:" Literacy Studies and Phenomenology

Abstract

This investigation of the tenets of phenomenology is based on work completed using this methodology in educational studies. Specifically, the author writes about the way that phenomenology can be used when completing studies in the field of literacy. The author highlights foundational thinkers, along with major elements of methods and data collection that form the working parts of phenomenology. The author frames this article as a partially reflective account, looking at work that has been completed already, while also attempting to compose a descriptive investigation that other researchers can adopt for their own work in other fields.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Methodology, Pedagogy

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

“It Is What It Is”: Literacy Studies and Phenomenology

Jason D. DeHart

Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

This investigation of the tenets of phenomenology is based on work completed using this methodology in educational studies. Specifically, the author writes about the way that phenomenology can be used when completing studies in the field of literacy. The author highlights foundational thinkers, along with major elements of methods and data collection that form the working parts of phenomenology. The author frames this article as a partially reflective account, looking at work that has been completed already, while also attempting to compose a descriptive investigation that other researchers can adopt for their own work in other fields. Keywords: Phenomenology, Methodology, Pedagogy

As a qualitative researcher in education, it has been my hope to find what is universal from the particulars of others’ teaching experiences, especially related to engaging students in literacy instruction. Phenomenology has afforded me the unique opportunity to examine details of specific pedagogical experiences, rather than crafting dissolute reports about every aspect of what happens in a classroom. In this article, I look at the utility of phenomenology as a focused methodology for research work in pedagogy draws on the contributions of a number of theorists, including both those within the methodology and those who have looked at phenomenology from a wider vantage of educational research methods. Indeed, van Manen (1997b) has written about the structure and nature of pedagogy explicitly in his text, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. I first begin with a brief history of the phenomenological movement before exploring methods that have implications for literacy and general pedagogical studies.

Plato, Husserl, and Heidegger: Voices in the Methodology

Part of my discovery in beginning to investigate phenomenology has confirmed that there is a rich, philosophical, and complex historical background that forms a basis for this mode of working. Spiegelberg (1994) has written a detailed history of this methodology in *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*. I will endeavor to draw on this Spiegelberg’s (1994) work, as well as others, to offer a succinct history of this methodology, particularly as it relates to this inquiry.

Husserl is seen as the founding figure of phenomenology (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Spiegelberg, 1994). This early approach to the methodology took place around 1900 but reaches even further back into the initial steps of Western thought. To that end, Spiegelberg (1994) has cited Plato as an early thinker in the methodology’s development, specifically in terms of Plato’s “attempt to salvage (σώζειν) the appearances from the world of Heraclitean flux by relating them to world of the logos” (p. 7). In other words, phenomenology finds its earliest roots in seizing on always-changing experiences and relating them to some sense of logical order; truly, this is a philosophical methodology that extends to a very early time and works in an essential and universal manner. This affordance of phenomenology for examining the ebb and flow of human experience makes it uniquely positional for educational students, and a rich design to draw on for literacy work as researchers examine how language and written practice change over time. Particularly in educational studies, this desire to find the moments

and themes of daily instructional life to “seize” upon is useful, given the many variables and dynamic interactions that take place in classrooms. Phenomenology has, in fact, been used in a variety of literacy studies, including Rowsell’s (2014b) examination of the ways children experience reading practices using iPads.

Drawing on this Husserlian mode of phenomenological inquiry, the researcher’s concern is focused on a pure sense of consciousness, or what Husserl (1965) called “consciousness from the phenomenological point of view” (p. 91). Considering experience this way, the challenge for the educational researcher is closing in on a particular phenomenon, rather than writing up an account of the entirety of the interactions and the multitude of phenomena that occur in classrooms. Thinking of research questions and the process that follow in this way highlights the unique role phenomenology plays in helping a researcher who wants to engage in a “fully intuitional realization” (Husserl, 1965, p. 96). In the same vein, Sartre (1956) wrote, “consciousness is consciousness through and through. It can be limited only by itself” (p. 15). In our modern vernacular, we might say, when it comes to phenomenology, *It is what it is*. Part of my process as a phenomenological researcher has been rooted this notion of self-expressive ontology in the write-up of findings. My duty is as an honest reporter and, when my account begins to leave behind the experiences of the teachers I have worked with and strays into my own experiences, I have shed my skin as a researcher and must find a way to reattach myself to the study of the phenomenon under inquiry.

Husserl’s student Heidegger (1958) went on to write ontological considerations of place and human experience, while foregrounding the experience of the researcher as a potential site for bias. In Heidegger’s view, transcendence of the phenomenon was not a legitimate possibility; indeed, our act work as researchers is a constant balance of our own biases and lenses, and the need to step into another’s view to craft a trustworthy account of the experience of another person. Perhaps it is this step into another’s perspective that makes inviting the participant as a co-author so illuminating.

Finally, from this rush of names and authoritative voices from the professional literature, I have located other direct implications from the work of both Merleau-Ponty (1993a) and van Manen (1997b). As suggested earlier, van Manen (1997b) has written work that focuses intently on the nature of pedagogy, while Merleau-Ponty (1993a) has written about the experience of the artist and even experiencing artwork itself, as well as the experiential nature of linguistic forms (Merleau-Ponty, 1993b). Here again Rowsell (2014a) has written an account of the experience of the artist, with literacy practices as a consideration. It is this dual consideration of pedagogy and artistry which I believe has the potential to shed light on the experiences of teachers who engage with a variety of texts for the purposes of posing questions of literacy and learning development, and who do so in responsive and creative ways.

Both from this history and from contemporary voices in phenomenology, I will reflect on my own research processes, and point the way to what I hope is future work using this methodology.

Tenets and Characteristics

Firstly, as a methodology, phenomenology is heavily philosophical and carefully, iteratively considers a particular experience or phenomenon. From a broad perspective, Merriam (1995) said that qualitative research is aimed at “clarifying and understanding phenomena and situations where operative variables cannot be identified ahead of time” (p. 52). When it comes to educational work and studies focused in other active and changing social environments, these settings lend themselves to unpredictability; this means that to be phenomenological in such a hurried and complex environment means a consistent return to the questions that form the basis of the study.

Secondly, phenomenology takes one of two major paths in its trajectory; these are hermeneutical (also called interpretive) and descriptive (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). A researcher has to make a decision about where they see themselves in relationship to the work. Husserl's phenomenological stance revolves on the notion that the "observer could transcend the phenomena and meanings being investigated to take a global view of the essences discovered" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 7). My own stance as a research is more hermeneutic in nature, given my inability to transcend the phenomenon I am inquiring about – in fact, it is this lack of transcendence that leads me to the interest points of my work.

This process calls for arriving "at an *investigation of essences* by shifting from describing separate phenomena to searching for their common essence," and "calls for a suspension of judgment as to the existence or nonexistence of the content of an experience" in a process referred to as "bracketing" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). Such bracketing involves placing "common sense" or "foreknowledge" about phenomena parenthetically "to arrive at an unprejudiced description of the essence of the phenomena" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). In terms of my work, my questions about the experiences of teachers led me to a process of bracketing or thinking through my own biases and assumptions both prior to and during the research process. Talking through my experiences helped me to sort out some of the voice that I brought to the phenomenon (in this case, teaching using a particular kind of text), so that the voices that came through in my final documents were more clearly those of the teachers who took part in the study.

Barnacle (2004) commented on the life-world that phenomenology seeks to describe, and defined it as "the everyday, intuitive, world of our day-to-day experience, in contrast to the idealized, cognitive world of the sciences and mathematics" (p. 58). This notion of an everyday experience constitutes a third tenet of phenomenology. From Sartre (1956), a vocabulary can be developed to talk about this process of uncovering what is existent but not always obvious and understood in daily life. For example, *noesis*, which is defined as "the intentional direction by consciousness toward an object external to it," leads to the *noema*, "the object intended by consciousness" (Sartre, 1956, p. 804). In these two terms, the phenomenologist considers both the object of the study and person whose life-world includes interaction with this phenomenon. This is a human enterprise, and so both must be considered; researchers cannot eclipse the person when considering the object – to do so would miss the point of the project. In my work, this consideration of voices leads me first to consider the words of participants, verbatim, as I look for thematic unity.

Finally, from this process of building a phenomenological lexicon, is the term *epoché*, or "putting into parentheses' all ideas about the existence of the world so as to examine consciousness independently of the question of any worldly existence" (Sartre, 1956, p. 802). What these terms signal is that to conduct a phenomenological study, keeping with the traditions of the methodology. In other words, there must be an object (an experience) under consideration, and the role of the researcher is to focus on that object/experience as the object or direction throughout the study. In order to accomplish this focus, researchers can make use of bracketing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), a process that involves careful consideration of and intentional management of biases. I have found, in my own experience, that a bracketing interview serves as a kind of initial therapy for maintaining focus and understanding in the rest of the project. This inward and vulnerable process puts the researcher on stage at beginning of the project and asks them to consider their own experiences, thereby touching on their motivations and potential biases.

Noted Methods

In exploring pedagogy and literacy, phenomenology has been helpful in honing in on particular aspects of experience and drawing those aspects into light with vivid detail. Those details are only supported by the kinds of methods the researcher chooses to build the framework from the framework of the methodology.

Chief among these potential methods of data collection is the first-hand account of the participant. These *first words* from the person who has experience with a specific phenomenon is perhaps the richest source of data that can be gathered.

Interviewing In-Depth

Of unique distinction with the phenomenological interview is the role of the interviewee in shaping the direction and nature of the interview. Moustakas (1994) has commented on the centrality of the interview in phenomenological work. Rather than following an outlined form, avoiding a kind of verbal surveying technique, the phenomenological interview follows the pathway of the interviewee's responses as closely as possible. In this way, the agenda or intention of the researcher is not imposed on the interviewee – this also means that the interview becomes a kind of conversation.

Echoing Moustakas (1994), Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) have suggested that the interview may be seen as the centerpiece of data as the interviewee considers the experience and mitigates potential difficulties with lapses in memory (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Of note in co-constructing the interview is the importance of open-ended questions, not for the purpose of imposing judgment but for the purpose of gathering the person's words and feelings in relation to the phenomenon. Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) have encouraged opening the interview with inviting questions and urge that the interviewing process not be one of judgment.

This lack of imposing judgement, from the perspective of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), can be seen as a kind of "deliberative naivete," meaning that the interviewer "exhibits openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having readymade categories and schemes of interpretation" (p. 30). There is a sense of focus to the interview, and a tolerance for ambiguity, "reflecting contradictions" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 28). Van Manen (1997a) maintains a similar emphasis on embracing the tensions that might be present when going through the phenomenological research process.

While the focus researchers place on the interview reaches into the experiences of participants, it can be problematic to pose an entire research project on the basis of what some may consider subjective data, like the first-hand work of participants. Ironically, it is this first-hand experience that is the aim of a phenomenological study. Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997), for example, point to problems with memory as a potential difficulty when collecting data using this method. This difficulty is not without merit in an age where words like accountable and measurable are applied to classroom practices; however, the difficulty of replicability among even quantitative studies has been noted.

Backing Up the Interview

As with all methodologies, researchers can record field notes based on conversations and experiences to ensure that the account that is constructed matches with the moment-by-moment process of data collection. Kendall (2008) suggested a utility for interviewing when approaching literacy studies and wrote that such interviews include "the active listening process within the interview itself" (p. 137). Kendall (2008) maintained that analysis of

participant interviews should include deep and rich description (p. 143). Once gathered, interviews can be transcribed, and then coded in a number of ways. Saldaña (2016) has provided a multitude of methods for researchers to explore coding, including codes that respect the original structure of the participants' words, as well as codes that capture emotions and other features that become evident in the interviewing process. These descriptions should then, hopefully, show a multitude of perspectives and help the research to compose an account that is rich and multidimensional.

In addition to the interview, many methodologies employ observations. The use of this particular method creates an intriguing conundrum for the phenomenological researcher. When undertaken, an observation is completed from the perspective of the researcher. Beyond verifying first-hand experiences with the phenomenon, then, the data gathered from an observation stems primarily from the researcher and not the participant.

What further complicates the phenomenological observation is the role of the observer and the ultimate implications that an observation carries for the research project. Is it the role of the researcher to enter the experience and attempt to verify the words of a participant prior to or following an interview? Does stepping into a classroom, for example, and having a common experience with educators and students add to the interviewee's account in any way? Or is the observation simply a way of verifying that the interviewee does, in fact, have direct experience with the phenomenon? Such questions, one would hope, would have been considered and managed prior to the beginning of a research project and would undergird what is essentially, often, a purposive sample.

In terms of my study, the day-to-day data I collected were completed in the form of teacher reflections (Rowan & Correnti, 2009). This use of data corresponded with my desire to get at the first-hand descriptions of participants and went beyond the interview in collecting their words and experiences.

Another verification. The possibility of analyzing documents provides yet another avenue for verifying experience with the phenomenon. In terms of teaching practices, however, documents may add another dimension to seeing what educators create, edit, and employ in order to make their experiences concrete. Flick (2014) suggested that documents can be analyzed qualitatively, specifically focused on questions of the ways in which "the life history of a person constructed in the official records about this person in different institutional settings" (p. 353). For teachers in my study, I collected documents as a way of seeing how practices took shape in paper form to share with students. This process involves questions of what teachers propose to convey to students, and how this experience is reflected in the materials teachers choose to incorporate. Material can mean a variety of things in the classroom, including texts, handouts, lesson plans, and even the arrangement of physical objects, like desks and reading materials. At the outset of the project, I visited teachers to see their classrooms, and even sketched out some settings in my research journal.

Ideally, what is shared in an interview is again verified by the kind of documents and other materials teachers use; what is more, the experience of the teacher has the potential to take shape in written form, providing another artifact of what the experience looks like when it is communicated to others. Furthermore, the existence of documents can create a visual record for the reader who encounters the research project in published form, without the benefit of having been present for the rest of the inquiry process.

Moving to the Report

As a qualitative researcher, we work to maintain quality. Merriam (1995) wrote that, in order to maintain validity and reliability in their work, qualitative scholars engage in a variety

of methods grounded in the framework of the research method. Among these, Merriam (1995) suggested triangulation, member checks, “peer/colleague examination,” subjectivity statements, and “submersion” in the research environment could offer steps toward validity (p. 55). In my own work, I have drawn on as many of these methods for building reliability and validity as possible, including each of these aforementioned recommendations. In spite of this, the dominance of the objectivist paradigm, speaking from the perspective of educational research, still threatens to undermine qualitative work.

In an effort to achieve triangulation, researchers use multiple forms of data, often gathered from multiple sources or sites. The talk of the research interview forms the basis for understanding an experience, but we can then seek other forms to add details to the record. For example, interviews I have conducted have been triangulated with teaching materials used in the classroom to form a secondary document analysis, as well as on-going reflections from research participants in an effort to capture their thinking in situ.

Once data are collected, member checks can then act as another way of establishing the validity of data throughout the analysis and writing process, providing opportunities for participants to speak up and correct interpretations that fall afield. In research projects I have completed, member checks are valuable opportunities to clarify potential misunderstandings about process-oriented steps or relationships among groups of people (as is the case with mentor/mentee roles).

Furthermore, as modeled by Peshkin (1988), researchers can also complete a robust subjectivity statement that considers personal history, biases, pedagogical practices, and even the researcher’s own literacy habits. The first voice about research is very often the researcher themselves; determining the potential for bias in that voice can be helpful for attempting to represent the experiences of others. No representation is ever quite as clear as the original – yet, we continue to strive for reliable and valid accounts. Very often, the researcher endeavors to discover the essential nature of a phenomenon that has provoked some interest or appears to be missing from existing literature. By carefully detailing and then managing subjectivities, researchers work to ensure that the final research report rings true of those that represent the phenomenon – an account that is rendered, as much as possible, through the lens of another person. It is this final account or rendering that becomes the end-product, in most cases, of the research process. If the phenomenologist’s work is done well, then the result is a kind of evocation, what van Manen called (1997a) an experiential recognition. This evocation leads a vivid reflection as a detailed account helps the future audience of the project to register the presence of the phenomenon under consideration. So detailed should be the work of the phenomenologist that the layers of experiential meaning are “embedded in the text” (van Manen, 1997a, p. 355).

Whether the subjectivities of the researcher are considered through a bracketing process, a subjectivity statement, or both, we best meet the goal of interpretation and the desire to share what is essential about phenomenon by being honest in our accounts – even when our honest account contradicts our assumptions and complicates our predicted outcomes. In phenomenological research, quantitative measures and numerical models are set aside in lieu of descriptions and the biographical data our participants share about their lives.

I am still learning about the essentials of the phenomenological process as I continue my growth as a research, and there is much to uncover. Phenomenology’s philosophical depth, rich and populated history, and contemporary implications hold compelling possibilities for probing the experiences of individuals in school settings, among other human-oriented locations of situated learning and practice. It is, perhaps, the dynamic of learner, teacher, reporter, and observer that serves to add authenticity and depth to qualitative inquiry – when researchers are willing to step into the work.

References

- Barnacle, R. (2004). Reflection on lived experience in educational research. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 36(1), 57-67.
- Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). London, UK: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Heidegger, M. (1958). *The question of being*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers Inc.
- Husserl, E. (1965). *Phenomenology and the crisis of philosophy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Kendall, L. (2008). The conduct of qualitative interviews. In J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear, & D. J. Leu (Eds.), *Handbook of research on new literacies* (pp. 133-149). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1993a). Eye and mind. In G. A. Johnson (Ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader: Philosophy and painting* (pp. 121-149). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1993b). Indirect language and the voices of silence. In G. A. Johnson (Ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader: Philosophy and painting* (pp. 76-120). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Merriam, S. B. (1995). What can you tell from an N of 1?; Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 4, 51-60.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity – one's own. *Educational Researcher*, 17(7), 17-21.
- Pollio, H. R., Henley, T., & Thompson, C.B. (1997). *The phenomenology of everyday life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge.
- Rowell, J. (2014a). "The mood is in the shot:" The challenge of moving-image texts to multimodality. *Text & Talk*, 34(3), 307-324.
- Rowell, J. (2014b). Toward a phenomenology of contemporary reading. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 37(2), 117-127.
- Sartre, J. (1956). *Being and nothingness*. New York, NY: Washing Square Press.
- Rowan, B., & Correnti, R. (2009). Studying reading instruction with teacher logs: Lessons from the study of instructional improvement. *Educational Researcher*, 38(2), 120-131.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Sloan, A., & Bowe, B. (2014). Phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology: The philosophy, the methodologies and using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate lecturers' experiences of curriculum design. *Quality & Quantity*, 48(3), 1291-1303.
- Spiegelberg, H. (1994). *The phenomenological movement: A historical introduction*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- van Manen, M. (1997a). From meaning to method. *Qualitative Health Research*, 7(3), 345-369.
- van Manen, M. (1997b). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Author Note

Jason D. DeHart is an assistant professor of reading education at Appalachian State University. His research interests include multimodal texts and the ways teachers use texts to engage adolescent readers and readers who struggle. He can be reached at dehartjd@appstate.edu.

Copyright 2020: Jason D. DeHart and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

DeHart, J. D. (2020). "It is what it is": Literacy studies and phenomenology. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 596-603. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss3/2>
