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A Review of The Phenomenological Heart of Teaching and Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice in Higher Education

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Abstract

This review of *The Phenomenological Heart of Teaching and Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice in Higher Education* focuses on the organization, strengths, and weaknesses of a newly-published qualitative research text that also serves as a guide for teachers who wish to improve their practice. The case study nature of the text is explored, as well as the contributions of the text's authors. The book is most notable as a text that draws on the rich history of Merleau-Ponty and seeks to consider classroom instruction in higher education in light of phenomenological tenets.

Keywords

Pedagogy, Phenomenology, Transformative Practice

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A Review of The Phenomenological Heart of Teaching and Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice in Higher Education

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*This review of *The Phenomenological Heart of Teaching and Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice in Higher Education* focuses on the organization, strengths, and weaknesses of a newly-published qualitative research text that also serves as a guide for teachers who wish to improve their practice. The case study nature of the text is explored, as well as the contributions of the text's authors. The book is most notable as a text that draws on the rich history of Merleau-Ponty and seeks to consider classroom instruction in higher education in light of phenomenological tenets. Keywords: Pedagogy, Phenomenology, Transformative Practice*

In *The Phenomenological Heart of Teaching and Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, authors Katherine Greenberg, Brian Sohn, Neil Greenberg, Howard Pollio, Sandra Thomas, and John Smith aim to broaden the reader's understanding of phenomenology, moving from a methodological approach in qualitative research to a way of being and learning in a classroom environment.

The focus on embodiment and practice that forms the basis of phenomenological thinking supports the book's central thesis of thoughtful and reflective teaching. These authors are uniquely positioned to offer this work, as they are members of a transdisciplinary research group that specializes in phenomenological studies at the university level. The group has acted as a support in more than 100 research studies since its inception in the early 1990s by providing feedback and opportunities for transcript analysis. This process has been described by some of the authors elsewhere (Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg, & Pollio, 2017). In this review, I first consider the audience, organization, and theoretical foundation of the text, and then discuss the strengths of the work before I conclude by commenting on the next steps that readers can take from this book in terms of research and classroom practice.

Audience and Organization

Both researchers and practicing teachers at the university level will find this book relevant because of the authors' descriptions of embodied teaching practice and thoughtful pedagogy. In order to reach this audience, Greenberg et al. (2019) structure the work so that the reader is first introduced to the classroom environment in chapter one. Anyone who has read *The Phenomenology of Perception* knows that this use of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) work is no easy task. The subsequent chapters briefly turn to the biological ramifications of learning in chapter two, including the thinking and embodied experience of the learner, and then begin to describe other aspects of a phenomenological pedagogy in later chapters, always returning to the case study as the prime example.

Specifically, chapter three explores the experience of planning meaningful instruction. From there, the authors describe the classroom environment in a more detailed case study in chapter four, discuss the implications of this case study in chapter five, and discuss student experiences in chapter six. Each of these sections holds practical and theoretical implications

for setting up a classroom that works in a higher education setting. The book is rounded out by an investigation into the ways a phenomenological approach can be transformative in a classroom ethos in chapter seven, while chapters eight and nine explore adaptations of the approach and wider applications in higher education.

This book would be useful for any teacher who wishes to improve on their practice and reconsider the constitution of their classroom environment and approach to learning. While instructors in high education settings can benefit from this text, the book can serve as a starting point for thinking about the approach teachers take in the K-12 setting, as well.

While a number of figures exist in the range of phenomenological theory, the authors draw on Merleau-Ponty (1962). The authors support their use of this theorist because they consider a Merleau-Pontian approach as one that can “bring explicit awareness to the lifeworlds of teachers and students” (Greenberg et al., 2019, p. xvii). This explicit awareness of embodied experience leads the authors’ discussion of what works well in a classroom. It is an interest in the immediate and present descriptions of practice the forms the basis of this theoretical foundation.

Highlights of the Text

The book works at its best when the authors focus in on their descriptions, with attention centered on one professor’s way of constructing a learning environment. The authors describe this case study, noting that they collaborated on each stage of the project, from developing the research questions to collecting data. In this way, the sense of a cohesive group of researchers with a common vision for education comes through strongly. In addition to the voices of the teacher-authors, student voices are retained here in the form of quotes and excerpts, helping to make the case for the effectiveness of this teaching style. This use of student voice is another strongpoint in the book, as reflections include but are not limited to the words of the teachers, adding credibility and interest to what the authors describe as “an *existential phenomenological approach*” (Greenberg et al., 2019, p. 2).

The learning process is summed up as a journey, and *The Phenomenological Heart of Teaching and Learning* is an introduction to a different way of being in the classroom to help other educators think through their theory and practice. The process of uncovering aspects of this style of teaching is conveyed for the reader in both the narrative descriptions provided by the authors, as well as coding table examples. This use of both description and data speak to the practical and theoretical possibilities readers can think through as they read this book. The coding tables take up almost eight pages once the authors begin to unpack the findings of the case study. This juxtaposition of story and visual data help to offer the reader a more detailed picture of phenomenological instruction.

The authors wish to convey that a phenomenological approach can lead to engagement of students, as well as high level of attendance and participation in the classes. The book includes positive comments from students to frame this discussion, and the authors place these comments throughout the chapters to make a comparison between the punitive and teacher-centered practices that sometimes take place in higher education classrooms, and the inviting and human approach of the case study professor. There were three larger “phenomenological concepts” that informed this pedagogical style, and one of these concepts, the “Lifeworld” contained three “intertwined influences” (Greenberg et al., 2019, pp. 10-11).

Along the way, authors share reflections, set off from the main text in borders. The reflections acted as practical and concise anchor points for what phenomenological teaching might actually look like in action, with both students and educators responding to the inviting way teachers can shape their interactions with students for more inviting exchanges, including the way teachers frame questions, as well as how work is graded. In this way, even if the reader

is unfamiliar with the finer points of phenomenology, the major points of this approach are still represented in clear steps.

By the end of the book, we meet each of these authors by name and we are given a metaphor for the way that they see themselves as teachers. This connection of both author and teacher makes the findings of the books more credible. What lands from all of this process and post-class reflection is a strong sense of what should be happening in higher education settings.

Next Steps

Most helpfully, the authors' descriptions and reflections serve a scaffold to help the young teacher begin to think through putting these concepts into practice. Greenberg et al. (2019) suggest that this kind of teaching can lead not only into what the case study professor hoped would be a cognitive and intellectual process, but into one that is transformational. This instructional trajectory might be considered a lofty goal. Future work that focuses on phenomenological teaching might expand on the kind of case study methodology that is offered in this book and revisit phenomenological teaching in other settings, and in relation to other levels of instruction.

From this text, I gather that perhaps the best way to become a phenomenological teacher is to begin to play with some of the authors' concepts in practice. Greenberg et al. (2019) contend that a dialogical approach to learning is a key feature of this kind transformational learning, and that the case study professor's approach proved to be helpful in disrupting the difficult of encountering "dense, complex readings" (Greenberg et al., 2019, p. 56). Key phrases from the actual moments of instruction guide the reader in a way that feels organic and descriptive, rather than prescriptive and rote.

At the end of reading this book, the result is inspiration to reflect on instruction and reconsider traditional classroom structures and practices that are meant to entice but punish instead.

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