

Notes for Talk on Human Science in Education
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Max van Manen

What is Hermeneutic Phenomenology?

"Phenomenology is the study of essences [the study of 'what is'] . . . all its efforts are concentrated upon reachieving a direct and primitive contact with the world. . . It consists in relearning to look at the world. . . It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing. . . It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is. . . We must begin by re-awakening the basic experience of the world" (Merleau-Ponty).

Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. The word derives from the Greek god, Hermes, whose task it was to communicate messages from Zeus and other gods to the ordinary mortals. Hermeneutics is necessary when there is possibility for misunderstanding, and to recover the particularity, or the animating genius or notion of an author's thoughts. The aim is to understand an author as well or even better than he or she understands himself or herself (Schleiermacher). The emphasis for Dilthey was not the fundamental thought of the other person but the world itself, the "lived experience," which is expressed by the author's text. Dilthey's hermeneutic formula is *lived experience*: the starting point and focus of human science; *expression*: the text or artifact as objectification of lived experience; and *understanding*: not a cognitive act but the moment when "life understands itself." Heidegger de-psychologized the notion of understanding. Hermeneutic understanding for Heidegger was not aimed at re-experiencing another's experience but rather at the power to grasp one's own possibilities for being in the world in certain ways. To interpret a text is to understand the possibilities of being revealed by the text.

The idea of hermeneutic phenomenology presumes that in everyday life meaning (truth) tends to hide, therefore the structures of significance of lived experience must be brought to reflective awareness.

Lived experience

- is the world as immediately experienced
- is pre-verbal, pre-reflective, pre-conceptual, pre-theoretic
- is an awareness which is unaware of itself (reflexive)
- cannot be grasped introspectively, only retrospectively
- is a sensibility (lived space, lived time, lived body, lived other)
- is the breath of meaning (what breath is to the body, Dilthey)
- cannot be conceptually explained, only described and interpreted

Why Do Phenomenology?

(1) My interest in hermeneutic phenomenology is first of all pedagogic (not philosophic or purely social scientific).

(2) Phenomenology maintains a view on lived experience--what the child's experience is like for the child. Hermeneutics reminds us that all teaching and all parenting (that is all pedagogy) is an interpretive process. And in my work I use semiotics or the semiotic activity of writing as a research method and as a form of learning.

(3) Phenomenological inquiry sponsors both a body of knowledge and a knowing body: an action sensitive pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact.

Roots of Human Science in Education:

- In Europe: The *Geisteswissenschaften*: "the human sciences": Schleiermacher, Dilthey.
- In Germany: *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*: more hermeneutic: Nohl, Bollnow.
- In the Netherlands: *Fenomenologische Pedagogiek*: phenomenological: Langeveld, Beets

The Simple Phenomenological Question:

"What is this phenomenon (lived experience) like?" "What is its meaning?"

Crudely speaking, there are two kind of questions in educational research:

- (1) **problem** questions (treated by the natural, empirical, or behavioral sciences)
- (2) **meaning** questions (treated by the human sciences and the humanities)

Problem questions involve problem thinking--->theoretic principle -- (before action)--->problem solution [external knowledge]
Natural science approach: theory ---->explanatory principle/technique or method ---->practice.
Application means to put knowledge to technical/instrumental use in action: teaching as decision making.
Meaning questions lead to wondering <----> thoughtfulness ---- (in action) <----> tact [personal/embodied knowledge]
Human science approach: life/action <----> reflection <----> (reflected) action <----> reflection <----> etc.
Application means "to understand in the lifeworld": teaching as thoughtful action or pedagogic tact.

Assumptions of Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research:

It is not a science of facts/generalizations. (Generalization: Never generalize about people!)
Rather, it is a study of existential meaning; it asks: what is the nature of something?

It is not a form of conceptual theorizing. (Don't reduce the world to concepts or categories!)
Rather, it is a study of pre-conceptual, pre-theoretic meaning.

It is not a polemical discourse. (Don't get enchanted/captured by your own accusations!)
Rather, it is a questioning orientation to openness, possibility and underlying assumptions.

It is not a classifying, taxonomizing science. (Don't orient to "mere" difference!)
Rather, phenomenology is a narrative approach to Difference that makes a real difference.

It is not a science which yields final solutions or conclusions.
Rather, it is a never-ending discourse of an ongoing conversational relation.

The Basic Method: (textual) reflection on lived experience.

Aspects of the Method (see also attached Table of Content for a more detailed methodological outline):

- (1) **Fundamental question:**
turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- (2) **Data collection:**
investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- (3) **Reflection:**
reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- (4) **Writing:**
describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) **Orienting:**
maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- (6) **Textual structuring:**
balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

Research as Writing

A Note on Writing

Writing involves a textual reflection in the sense of separating and confronting ourselves with what we know, distancing ourselves from the lifeworld, decontextualizing our thoughtful preoccupations from immediate action, abstracting and objectifying our lived understandings from our concrete involvements, and all this for the sake of now reuniting us with what we know, drawing us more closely to living relations and situations of the lifeworld, turning thought to a more tactful praxis, and concretizing and subjectifying our deepened understanding in practical action. Writing exercises and makes empirically demonstrable our ability to "see". Writing shows that we can now see something and at the same time it shows the limits or boundaries of our sightedness.

A Note on Anecdote

Anecdote can be understood as a methodological device in human science to make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us. The use of anecdote in human science discourse is analogous to the use of metaphor. We use metaphor to explain or provide insight into the nature of one phenomenon at the hand of an other phenomenon. Anecdote too is used as a methodological device to describe something indirectly when this phenomenon resists direct description. However, anecdote has a stronger phenomenological quality than metaphor. While metaphor may tend to dwell at the level of abstraction, anecdote turns the attention more naturally to the level of the concrete.

- Anecdotes form a concrete counterweight to abstract theoretical thought.
- Anecdotes express a certain disdain for the alienated and alienating discourse of scholars who have difficulty showing how life and theoretical propositions are connected.
- Anecdotes may provide an account of certain teachings or doctrines which were never written down.
- Anecdotes may be encountered as concrete demonstrations of wisdom, sensitive insight, and proverbial truth.
- Anecdotes of a certain event or incident may acquire the significance of exemplary character.

The pedagogic lifeworld seems to favor an anecdotal approach. Why? Because anecdotes, like pedagogic situations, are always concrete and particular. And for this reason much of practical "theorizing" that many of us, parents and teachers, practise in ordinary life is done at the hand of anecdotes. (Strangely this is an unobserved or neglected phenomenon in educational theory and research).

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