

Phenomenology

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Phenomenology is the contemplative study of human experience. It refers to a philosophical framework as well as a methodology that can inform educational practice and research. It seeks to reveal and understand how phenomena may be experienced as they are actually lived in the everyday world, or what some phenomenologists refer to as the lifeworld. Phenomenological philosophy suggests that everything in the lifeworld is inextricably connected in a social context, and so phenomenology aims to be more attentive to such meaningful connections—or intentional relations—within lived experiences and to illuminate them as a means to deeply understand the experience of the phenomenon under focus. Phenomenology can support all aspects of education by increasing sensitivity toward the many processes and practices it involves. When used as a naturalistic research methodology with qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, it can provide authentic insight for educators to use educational technologies in ethical and socially responsible ways.

Keywords: [Experience](#), [Phenomenology](#), [Philosophy](#), [Qualitative Methods](#), [Research Methods](#)

In light of increased advocacy for ethical, socially just, and empowering practices in education (see Selwyn et al., 2020), there has been a growing interest in understanding the experience of teaching and learning with technology. The ways that contemporary technologies are being used today, for learning and beyond, positions them as more than simply objects or tools (Ihde, 1993). Technology can radically alter how teaching and learning are experienced. Thus, there continues to be a need in the field of educational technology to understand the contextual nature of learning with technology as well as the relationships that are shaped and the connections that are made possible in unique learning contexts (Cilesiz, 2021). An in-depth exploration of these issues can be guided and informed by phenomenology, which involves the open and contemplative study of lived experience or direct human experience of a phenomenon of interest in the lifeworld.

Phenomenology can be leveraged in the field of educational technology as a philosophical and theoretical orientation to inform practice or as an action-sensitive methodological approach to research (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological philosophy is marked by openness, or an open and unbounded sense of wonder and curiosity, that is oriented toward what it is like to experience a particular phenomenon and how it feels affectively and somatically through embodiment and human consciousness (Benner, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). According to many philosophers, any phenomenological inquiry or practice requires the technique of *phenomenological reduction*, or the reflexive act of suspending preconceived judgments about the phenomenon in order to more openly understand it (Moran & Mooney, 2002).

In addition to phenomenological reduction, another core tenet of phenomenological philosophy is the theory of intentionality, originally proposed by Edmund Husserl, who is purported to be the founder of phenomenology around the turn of the 20th century (Sokolowski, 2000). Intentionality, in a phenomenological sense, refers to directing attention toward relationships, or the meaningful connections, among all things that exist in the lifeworld (Vagle, 2014). That is, phenomenology assumes that

everything in the world, and in our lived experiences in the world, is interconnected, interdependent, and inextricably linked. Phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty offered the helpful metaphor of *threads of intentionality* that connect all things in the fabric of everyday life experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). These threads hold significant meaning, but they are tightly woven, making them difficult to notice and recognize. Karin Dahlberg and colleagues assert that phenomenology assists in slackening these meaning threads, allowing for a more attentive, aware, and contemplative examination to tease out the intentional meanings within lived experiences (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

Practically speaking, these theoretical and philosophical tenets that ground phenomenology can help guide pedagogy and learning design in educational technology contexts. Educational technology practitioners enacting a phenomenological approach are particularly attentive to the experience of learning with technology, and they contemplate what is necessary to support learning and teaching by remaining highly reflexive about the educational experience. In the context of a digital learning environment, such practices of attentiveness and contemplation can, for example, increase educators' sensitivity toward the particular needs of learners and challenges that may arise throughout their experience. This attunement and insight can also help guide the informed reasoning and decision-making that is uniquely required for supporting teaching and learning with technology.

From a research standpoint, phenomenological methodologies must be informed by and draw upon phenomenological philosophy to ensure rigor, quality, and integrity. For example, when using this form of scholarly inquiry, researchers are advised to integrate core phenomenological philosophical assumptions in the research design and then discuss how they also frame the study (Cilesiz, 2021, p. 151). Many historical and contemporary phenomenologists assert that an orientation toward Husserl's theory of intentionality is what makes phenomenology phenomenology and not something else (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). While other qualitative research methodologies, like case study and ethnography, share some similar interpretive characteristics, phenomenology uniquely focuses on the experience of a particular phenomenon as the central unit of analysis. Intentionality is then used as a theoretical and analytical lens to

explore and illuminate the meaningful connections associated with the phenomenon as it is lived or as it manifests in lived experience. Phenomenologists also ensure openness and unboundedness throughout their research design, in contrast with case study, which is bounded.

Because of this central commitment to openness, phenomenological research resists a rigid structure as well as prescriptive strategies, steps, and methods (Ahmed, 2006; Giorgi, 1997; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). In line with openness, phenomenological methods of qualitative data collection and analysis are iterative, emergent, and reflexive. Data collection in phenomenological research has traditionally included interviews and written lived experience descriptions (van Manen, 1990). However, modern phenomenologists now recommend that any data, such as digital media and learning artifacts generated with educational technologies, can potentially serve as valuable sources of insight into the phenomenon under investigation when analyzed through the lens of intentionality (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). This analysis leads to findings that provide a highly textured and nuanced depiction of lived experiences by illuminating meanings and meaningfulness (Benner, 1994; Dahlberg et al., 2008). Such findings are often written as an evocative phenomenological description that incites a sensed, felt understanding of the phenomenon using expressive language that aims to “connect to [readers] in a heartfelt way and be complex enough to awaken not just a logical understanding but the sense of it as it lives” (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 570).

Phenomenological research has been pluralized in contemporary literature, with several different approaches emerging and being published today. To aid in understanding some notable distinctions, phenomenological approaches can be roughly organized into three main categories according to their purpose and aims. As shown in Table 1, these categories include transcendental or descriptive, hermeneutic or interpretive, and critical or postmodern. In each category, the terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, while some authors and theorists assert further distinctions for each.

Table 1

Three Main Categories of Phenomenological Approaches

Phenomenological Approach	Transcendental or Descriptive	Hermeneutic or Interpretive	Critical or Postmodern
Hallmarks, Purpose, and Aims	Pursuing the essence (stable core features) of a phenomenon and identifying essential structures among participants' experiences	Interpreting unique meanings of a phenomenon and exploring particularities or nuances within participants' experiences to identify experiential themes or converging patterns of meaning Resists the idea of a singular, stable essence	Critiquing power relationships in the lifeworld, exploring diverse orientations toward phenomena, resisting the stability of meanings and manifestations of experience Includes feminist phenomenology, queer phenomenology, and post-intentional phenomenology

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