

Understanding the Lived Experience of Online Learners: Towards a Framework for Phenomenological Research on Distance Education

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Abstract

Not all instructors in higher education enter the classroom with teaching experience, but all have observed teaching in higher education from the perspective of a student. This “apprenticeship of observation” that Lortie (1975) wrote about decades ago at least gives instructors the opportunity to empathize with their students, an important disposition for successful instructors. As more and more instructors are being asked to teach via distance education, they are being asked to do so with no online teaching experience and no or limited experience as an online student. One way, then, for them to develop empathy for online students and become a better online instructor would be to read systematic explications of the lived experiences of online learners. Phenomenology as a research design is purposeful towards gaining an understanding of “lifeworlds.” There is a small but growing body of phenomenological research on distance education, but most of the work is thin, not consistent with core principles of phenomenological research, and not tailored to the uniqueness of the distance education environment. This article makes the case for more phenomenological research on distance education and works towards a framework for this kind of research.

Keywords: phenomenology, distance, online, learning

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Over a decade ago, an anthropology professor pseudonymously calling herself Rebekah Nathan published a book about the year she spent as an undergraduate at the university for which she had been teaching. Nathan, later revealed to actually be Dr. Cathy Small, fully immersed herself in university life for a year, including living in a freshman dormitory and participating in extracurricular activities. She wanted to understand the culture of her university as an example of the American public university and wanted to know what students want from college and how they negotiate university life. *My Freshman Year* represents all that she learned as she explored her interest in the changing American university.

Underlying Small's work was the idea that by undergoing a recent and in-depth firsthand experience as a student, the author-professor would be a better, more empathic professor. That is, she believed that she needed to understand better and more fully what it is like to be a college student to be the best professor she could be. While college and university teaching faculty are often asked to teach traditional, face-to-face classes without any prior teaching experience, they are at least fully equipped with experiences as students in higher education at multiple levels. In the K-12 context, Lortie (1975) referred to this as the "apprenticeship of observation." Currently, though, huge numbers of faculty members are being asked and challenged to translate traditionally face-to-face courses to a qualitatively different modality: online learning. Many of these faculty members have little to no experience with distance education either as a student or an instructor. Though all faculty members cannot be expected to undertake the work of experiencing life as an online student, in the same way Small did as a traditional, face-to-face student, these faculty members would surely benefit from the research and writing of others about the experiences of online students.

One way that the American university is currently changing is in the growing number of online courses and programs being offered. According to a 2019 report from the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), from fall 2016 to fall 2017, overall postsecondary enrollment dropped by half a percentage point. However, over that same time, the number of students who took at least some of their courses online grew by 5.7%. Furthermore, during that same time, the proportion of all students who were enrolled exclusively online grew from 14.7% to 15.4%. And, whereas 31.1% of students took at least one course online in 2016, by fall 2017, 33.1% of students had done so (McFarland et al., 2019). Per the subtitle of a 2016 report, distance education is "no longer an institutional accessory" (Poulin & Straut, 2016). Therefore, we need research to guide practice in a growing discipline.

Small's main goal for publishing her findings in a book was to share her observations and understanding of the contemporary academic experience with other similarly situated professionals. That is, other university and college professors could read her account of life as a contemporary college student and tailor their own work to what they learned from Small's research. Small is an anthropologist and chose to design her research using anthropological methods. The field of distance education would benefit from anthropological investigation as well, but there are other ways to systematically investigate the experiences of individuals or groups of individuals, including, but not limited to, phenomenological research.

Therefore, this article attempts to accomplish the following:

1. Make the specific case for phenomenological research on distance education.
2. Review and critique the existing phenomenological research base.
3. Lay out a comprehensive framework for future phenomenological research on distance education.

The Case for Phenomenological Research on Distance Education

As with any field looking to be guided by research, in higher education, within the scholarship of teaching and learning, we need a diverse array of research from a range of philosophical orientations. Much of the research in the field of distance education is comparative, attempting to establish the relative efficacy of distance education. An examination of the trends in the field of distance education research during the period of 2009 to 2013 revealed that less than half of the research on distance education used qualitative data exclusively (Bozkurt et al., 2015). Furthermore, two-thirds of the naturalistic inquiry was small-scale case studies of one class or one particular practice. To generate research that is helpful to online instructors, though, we need more research about the students and their essential experiences. In other words, there is a need for naturalistic inquiry that is conceived as “narrow and deep”; intimate research that focuses definitively on internality and on first-hand experiences of learning. That is what phenomenological research is about. This section lays out a comprehensive argument for phenomenological research in distance education.

Why Phenomenology?

Research can be roughly categorized into three types: descriptive, correlational, and causal (National Research Council, 2002). The latter two types of research necessarily involve quantitative data. Descriptive research can involve quantitative data (e.g., survey research and descriptive statistics) and/or qualitative data. There are many designs for research that intend to be descriptive and that involve exclusively qualitative data. Ethnography, case studies, etc. are all valuable designs for answering relevant research questions and that yield qualitative data. Ethnography, for example, might be an appropriate design where the research question(s) are about social life and/or culture in a particular social system. There are certainly even research questions about distance education that need to be asked and answered via ethnography or any number of designs and methods that yield qualitative data. However, if our goal is to truly describe the experience of learning at a distance, to be able to share what those experiences are like for faculty members who are new to teaching online, phenomenological research is likely the most appropriate approach.

The operative word in phenomenological research is “describe.” In other words, the goal of the phenomenological researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any preconceived notions while remaining as true to the facts as possible. According to Welman and Kruger “the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (1999, p. 189). Put simply, phenomenology is an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it.

More specifically, phenomenology asks us to consider the ontological presence of a being before considering the epistemological presence. Traditional scientific and social scientific research designs and methods tend to shy away from looking at the subjective aspects within a study, but phenomenology calls researchers to move towards understanding the lived experience of the subjects. By getting at the lived experience, the goal of the phenomenological researcher is to understand how to interact and get along, which is a nuanced understanding of humanity. Not only do phenomenological methods allow us to look at the lived experience, but the ultimate hope is that it reveals the pre-predicated consciousness, thus allowing a natural attitude to come through and be fully realized. Furthermore, phenomenology allows the researchers to acknowledge their role and bias in order to bracket or bridle their experiences and capture the lifeworld of the participants (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008). In effect, phenomenology offers researchers the opportunity to look deeply into subjects that might allow for a nuanced understanding.

Why Phenomenology on Education?

The context of education is more complex than can be communicated through even observational data. Glimpsing into the world of an educator or a student can be difficult as there are many factors to consider. Furthermore, research does not occur in a vacuum but in a world full of meaning. Research performed in a dynamic environment, as all learning environments can be, therefore requires a method to facilitate a deeper understanding of the subject, which is what phenomenological research encourages. Thus, phenomenological researchers in education choose to employ phenomenological methods to explore the nuances of the human experience in the context of education, a deeply human endeavor.

Oftentimes in education research there is too much emphasis on looking at systems and understanding how they impact people; the individual is glossed over. In phenomenological research, though, the hermeneutic cycle of creating meaning allows the researchers to understand the subject matters' intentions that become clearer as their being, their essence, is unraveled. Phenomenology aims to capture the lived experience of a person as they experience their lives within a system; learning is usually experienced within a complex system. It is the job of the educational researcher using phenomenological methods, then, to bracket/bridle things that are not really part of their natural attitude in order to understand their being.

Once the experience of students can be understood, the complex systems of learning can be comprehended, and improvements can be made that benefit these individuals whose lifeworlds are so tightly bound to the educational experience and institution. The hermeneutic circle is also where the researcher begins to develop a level of understanding that allows for empathy as the ontological knowledge helps in the acknowledgment of another's being. Ultimately, empathy is important in education for a couple of reasons. First, empathy is critical for educators looking to improve their practice. "Empathy is commonly described by researchers as the moral emotion concerning the welfare of others that facilitates interpersonal relationships and positively influences people to engage in prosocial and altruistic behaviors" (Mencl & May, 2009, p. 208). Empathic teachers, then, are facilitators of learning who have high moral standards, communicate well with their students, and encourage students to build these kinds of interpersonal relationships. There is a significant body of research linking instructor empathy to student success. In a study of teachers using grounded theory methodology, Cooper (2010)

concluded that “[e]mpathy was considered central to successful teaching and vital to demonstrating care, even ‘the most important thing in life’” (p. 86).

The second reason empathy matters is that there is research that indicates that teachers can learn to be more empathic (Ming Lam, Kolomitro, & Alamparambil, 2011). The argument presented here is premised on the idea that phenomenological research on distance education is necessary to help instructors who have no personal experience with teaching or learning online. That is, by conducting phenomenological research on distance education and sharing it, instructional faculty can gain levels of empathy necessary to be successful in the endeavor. Thus, the next section ties those ideas together in making the case for phenomenological research in distance education.

Why Phenomenology on Distance Education?

In the K-12 realm, Lortie (1975) wrote about the “apprenticeship of observation,” the phenomenon whereby student teachers begin their preparation programs having spent thousands of hours as students in classrooms observing and evaluating teaching professionals in action. Buchmann (1987) refers to the behaviors that follow from this apprenticeship as “folkways of teaching” or “ready-made recipes for action and interpretation that do not require testing or analysis while promising familiar, safe results” (p. 161).

Yanchar, Spackman, and Faulconer (2013) offered a revised take on Dreyfus work simplifying his skill acquisition model to include three progressive terms: “basic, working, and skilled” (p. 227); these terms work under the larger ethos they defined as “embodied familiarity.” This ideal coalesced from many (Heidegger, etc.) who have worked in the development of phenomenological methods as a valid instrument for empirical work. While their work is not wildly disparate in nature from Lortie (1975) and Buchmann (1987), the authors do signify the importance that “agents will not fit squarely into any category and will exhibit features of multiple categories simultaneously, especially in cases of complex learning over time” (p. 227). Put simply, they acknowledge the complex nature of acquiring new knowledge, yet in line with Lortie and Buchmann, Yanchar et al. (2013) places emphasis on knowledge growth through exploration over time.

While the apprenticeship of observation Lortie describes can be problematic and constraining for new and aspiring teachers, equally troubling is the teaching professional who brings no experience to the classroom, or, in the case of distance education, the virtual classroom. That is, it can be unsettling and/or excessively difficult for college and university faculty members to attempt to facilitate learning online or from a distance with absolutely no preconceptions or understanding of what it is like to be an online learner or to learn from a distance. In other words, the instructor cannot be empathic where empathy is defined as “the ability to express concern and adopt the perspective of the student involving cognitive and affective domains of empathy” (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007, p. 50).

Therefore, one way to help new online faculty understand the experience of learning from a distance is to provide them with research that systematically investigates individual learners’ experiences with distance education; research that would help them be more empathic. Cilesiz

(2011) argues for the suitability of phenomenology to investigate the learner experience with technology, which now mediates much of modern life and increasingly more of education.

Because phenomenology is concerned with uncovering and describing the essence of human experiences, it has the potential to offer valuable insights about the use of technology in teaching and learning; its increased application to study experiences with technology has the potential to both expand existing areas of research at the core of educational technology as well as to help create new lines of inquiry. (p. 506)

Similarly, instructional faculty are increasingly being asked to use new digital technologies for teaching, while bringing myriad preconceived ideas to the experience. This is something that phenomenological research can address.

So, the phenomena of Technology Enhanced Learning might then benefit from being seen anew, devoid of conceptual expectations that lead us too often to the familiar. Seeing it anew means not using those concepts already researched as a lens for gazing, but as Husserl (1980) argues abstaining from the natural view of understanding and looking anew by going back to the things themselves, their essences. Here, a person builds knowledge of reality through conscious awareness and by intentionally directing his/her focus on the world around them. By the researcher intentionally attempting to ‘bracket’ his/her biases, beliefs, theories or preconceived ideas about the world s/he can get to the phenomena’s essence. (Oberg & Bell, 2012, p. 203)

Thus, experiences with technology are increasingly embedded in students’ and teachers’ lifeworlds. Distance education, in particular, is a space that is a growing presence in the lifeworlds of individuals within institutions of higher education. Additionally, many faculty members come to the endeavor of distance education with strong beliefs and biases. Phenomenological research on the lived experience of online learners, therefore, can help us see these experiences anew and be more empathic instructors.

Existing Phenomenological Research on Distance Education

In 2005, Sharpe & Benfield reviewed research on the student experience of e-learning in higher education. They concluded that students, “[c]ommonly positively evaluate having access to course materials and key contacts online... Experience intense emotions characterised [sic] by one learner as ranging from inspiration to frustration... [and] are concerned with time” (p. 6). Additionally, Sharpe & Benfield found online learners needed to learn online. More recently, in 2012, Blackmon and Major conducted a synthesis of the research on student experiences of distance education and generated five recurring themes about online student experiences: the ability to balance school and life; time management skills; acceptance of personal responsibility; instructor (in)accessibility; and connection with peers. Of online students, they conclude

Several factors influence their experience, some of which students control and some of which faculty control. Students have to balance work and family, to manage time, and to make a personal commitment. Instructors should work to establish presence in the

absence of physical copresence, work to build intellectual relationships with students, and work to create a sense of community. It is a balance of student and instructor factors that influence faculty and student experiences. (p. 83)

In 2013, Pazurek-Tork claimed that “[v]ery little phenomenological research has been published on technologically mediated learning contexts such as online learning environments in which communication and interaction (among instructors, learners, and content) is facilitated exclusively through online technologies...” (Pazurek-Tork, 2013, p. 25). That was true then, but it is less true now. While we lack true rich, thick descriptions of the student experience of distance education, there is a small but growing body of research on the lived experience of distance education students.

To develop the research framework articulated in this article, some of the studies reviewed by Blackmon and Major as well as new studies published since their review were identified and retrieved. Ultimately, 36 studies were reviewed. Those studies included 1 book chapter, 19 dissertations, and 16 peer-reviewed journal articles. They are all referenced with an asterisk in the references section.

A comprehensive synthesis of that literature is surely warranted, but what follows is purposefully a surface-level description and summary of what is in that literature. The summary is intended only to be descriptive; to give context to the methodological critiques that follow and to the research framework that is ultimately proposed in this article.

The participants in the studies reviewed include undergraduate and graduate students and represent experiences ranging widely, from those taking online courses while active-duty military to K-12 teachers working in rural areas. Additionally, most of the studies examined the lived experience of online learners broadly. That is, in most of the research, the phenomenon under study is simply that of being a learner at a distance. However, there are some studies that are more narrowly focused on a particular aspect of being a learner. Some of those phenomena are aspects of the lives of any learner irrespective of modality, but some are focused on phenomena that are likely unique to the distance learning. For example, the research on the lived experience of the distance education student examines a number of different, related phenomena, including, but not limited to learning support needs (Brown et al., 2013), caring and uncaring behaviors in distance education courses (Bork, 2014), student disabilities (Heindel, 2014), and technological breakdowns (Cresman & Hamilton, 2014).

Substantively and procedurally, the literature suggests that the lived experience of the distance learner is multifaceted and qualitatively different from that of a traditional, face-to-face higher education student. Without dedicated class time and with no other students or faculty or staff in the day-to-day life of a fully online student, self-regulation skills become paramount. For example, time management and self-discipline take on a particular primacy for students in distance education courses and programs. Also, in the absence of physically proximate students, faculty and staff, distance learners seek a sense of community online, and that community may or may not be facilitated or supported institutionally. Finally, given that many distance education students are “non-traditional,” that is, adults with complicated professional and personal lives,

they often have to lean more heavily on external supports such as family and friends to be successful as an online student.

There is much to be learned from the extant phenomenological research on the lived experience of learning at a distance, but for practitioners and policymakers to truly be able to tailor and develop online learning experiences that are most responsive to the distinctiveness of learning at a distance, we need more and higher quality phenomenological research. Too much of the existing phenomenological research on distance education suffers from poor conceptualization and design and is not methodologically rigorous enough. The modal study reviewed simply involved one-time, in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of participants followed by standard coding and theming typical of any study involving qualitative data. A study is not phenomenological simply because there is a specific phenomenon under investigation. In the next section, then, we offer both a critique of the existing research base and a more comprehensive framework for phenomenological research of distance education.

A Comprehensive Framework for Phenomenological Research on Distance Education

In this section, we build up to a framework for phenomenological research on distance education by working through four core areas of the framework: phenomenological research as ontological and epistemological pursuits; alignment of research questions around bounded phenomena; positionality; and data collection and explication. These areas have general considerations but need to be particularly focused for phenomenological research on distance education.

Phenomenological Research as Ontological and Epistemological Pursuits

Phenomenological research is a systematic attempt to expose and describe structures and textures of lived experience to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of experiences of phenomena (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Also, phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld (*lebenswelt*), defined as “what we know best, what is always taken for granted in all human life, always familiar to us in its typology through experience” (Husserl, 1970, pp. 123–124). According to Cilesiz (2011),

...the philosophical background of phenomenology is intimately tied to any proper application of the phenomenological method, making it essential for a researcher to understand the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology in order to conduct sound and rigorous phenomenological research (Giorgi, 1997). Consequently, any phenomenological researcher is strongly advised to include some discussion about the philosophical presuppositions of phenomenology along with the methods in this form of inquiry. (p. 494)

There are different kinds and approaches to phenomenological research, with each approach essentially based in a different school of philosophical thought. Ideally, then, phenomenological researchers are purposeful and reflective of the philosophy they embrace. Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio (2019) highlight two of the more widely used approaches, the transcendental and hermeneutic approaches. The former approach, a largely descriptive approach, draws most on the

work of Husserl wherein the goal is to achieve “transcendental subjectivity;” the researcher is regularly checking their bases and preconceptions to not influence the study. “The researcher is to stand apart, and not allow his/her subjectivity to inform the descriptions offered by the participants” (p. 93). The latter approach, more interpretive, is based on the work of Heidegger who held that individuals understand themselves within the world. Therefore, “hermeneutic phenomenology must go beyond description of the phenomenon, to the interpretation of the phenomenon” (p. 94). To embrace hermeneutic phenomenology, then, is to be aware of the influence of the research subject’s background. The researcher must account for the influences they exert on the research subject’s experience of being.

Phenomenological research, then, is an epistemological and/or ontological pursuit. The importance of the ontology is encapsulated by “Dasein,” a term coined by Heidegger to explain the complex nature of looking closely at phenomena. Dasein has two meanings: exists, “the essence of Dasein lies in its existence” (Heidegger, BEING AND TIME, p. 67) and mine, “the Being; whose analysis our task is, is always mine” (Heidegger, BEING AND TIME, p. 42). These two meanings coalesce to confront the Western philosophical idea of separation of body and mind, and even the elevation of the mind over the body. This is where the ipso facto catchphrase associated with phenomenology, “being-in-the-world,” emanates from. Placing ontology back into the equation when performing research allows for the consideration of the entire being with their lifeworld, and ultimately as van Manen (2017) states, “And the methodological meaning and significance of the concept of lived through experience is that we can ask the basic phenomenological question, ‘What is it like?’ ‘What is this experience like?’” (p. 811).

Considering just the transcendental and hermeneutic approaches to phenomenological research, Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio (2019) compare the ontological and epistemological assumptions of each. Table 1 is a modified version of a table created by Neubauer et. al (2019) on page 92.

Table 1
Comparison of transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology

	Transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology	Hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology
Ontological assumptions	<i>Reality is internal to the knower; what appears in their consciousness</i>	<i>Lived experience is an interpretive process situated in an individual’s lifeworld</i>
Epistemological assumptions	<i>Observer must separate him/herself from the world including his/her own physical being to reach the state of the transcendental I; bias-free; understands phenomena by descriptive means</i>	<i>Observer is part of the world and not bias free; understands phenomenon by interpretive means</i>

Too many of the existing studies, however, failed to treat the research project as a venture with philosophical underpinnings. Very few, for example, commit to a particular approach. Most of the studies reviewed were reported as doctoral dissertations. While it may be understandable that dissertation research may not be as rigorous or of equal quality to studies reported in peer-reviewed journals, dissertations are themselves peer-reviewed by a committee of faculty.

Therefore, it is disappointing to see the philosophical shallowness of much of the phenomenological research reviewed.

For researchers to claim phenomenological methods, they must state and understand the aim of phenomenological research is not simply objective knowledge gathering, but as van Manen (2017) stated:

The entire endeavor of phenomenological inquiry, the point of phenomenology as qualitative research method, is to arrive at phenomenal understandings and insights—phenomenal in the sense of impressively unique and in the sense of primordially meaningful. (p. 820)

A good example of epistemological awareness in doing phenomenological research is Groenewald's (2004) study of co-operative education. In the article reporting both the methods and results of his research, Groenewald wrote:

My epistemological position regarding the study I undertook can be formulated as follows: a) data are contained within the perspectives of people that are involved with co-operative education programmes, either in a co-ordinating capacity or as programme participant; and b) because of this I engaged with the participants in collecting the data. (p. 45)

Similarly, while not explicitly using phenomenological methods, Paulsen & McCormick (2020) attempt to reassess disparities in online learning environments by using the 2015 National Survey of Student Engagement data. The motivation of their work lies in understanding the effects of online learning on student engagement. Their work touches on the same stream of phenomenology, even if it is more implicit, looking to understand the ontological presences of online students through surveys helps to gauge student engagement. Furthermore, the survey (ontological knowledge) does not operate outside of the bounds of the students' epistemological gains in an online environment. The interplay between the ontological and the epistemological supports the relevance of phenomenological research in distance education as it calls for in-depth knowledge creation of student experiences. While Paulsen & McCormick (2020) use quantitative methods to compare student engagement, phenomenology offers a similar perspective by compiling student "Dasein" moments where the researchers are identifying moments wherein the learners are expressing their being in an online environment. By capturing students' being, or epoche moments, distance education researchers can further understand best practices associated with online learning.

Aligning the Study: Research Questions and Bounded Phenomena

At the heart of rigorous research lies the research question or questions. These inform readers of the study's parameters. However, what often occurs with phenomenological research is the lack of alignment between the research questions and the overall research design. This is incredibly problematic as the collection of data while performing phenomenological research relies on the full commitment of the study to phenomenological methods. In other words, researchers cannot simply apply phenomenological research analysis at the end of the study

because it seems appropriate. From the very beginning, researchers should be explicit in their approach and understand the implications of relaying the belief they will be conducting a phenomenological research project. This seems obvious, but often as phenomenological research is seen as less restrictive in the sense of research design, many researchers do not see the importance of maintaining alignment starting with research questions all the way to the analysis.

The research question and the system within which it is answered should be bounded. A bounded system is a term associated with case studies (Yin, 2017); however, in the context of phenomenology it could have similar implications. As case studies seek to closely understand connections within a specified system, phenomenologies look to expose the lifeworld complexities. While the former tends to focus on observational data and looking for trends which coincide with epistemological collation, the latter looks deeply at how participants are creating ontological meaning through their interactions with the exterior world. Borrowing from the case study concept of a bounded system it behooves phenomenological researchers to approach the work with a similar ideal.

Before embarking on a phenomenological research methodology within distance education, researchers must define the lifeworld they are studying. Binding the lifeworld to a specific sphere would allow for the ontological presence of the distance education participants to be front and center. The removal of some of the noise from the equation of phenomenological research allows for a deeper take of a specific characteristic of a person's being. Researchers tend to use phenomenological methods as a lens to excavate deeper meaning from previous research, but this does not allow for the careful construction of a research project which, if created with the intent of using phenomenological methods, allows for a more complete picture to emerge. Furthermore, when researchers clarify and communicate the bounded phenomena that is being analyzed, it allows for a concise analysis of the intentionality associated with the specific phenomena. Focusing on a specific lifeworld allows for the research to revolve around the experiences within the lifeworld that call forth the being of the person to the forefront of the research.

An example of a bounded research question is as follows: *How do male freshmen who have been cyberbullied by fellow students in the past experience an online composition class?* The example specifies not only the participants but allows for an introspective look at a male freshmen creating meaning through an experience that begins and ends during a specified time. This type of question allows for a glimpse of not only the present being of the participant, but also to understand how the past experiences influence the current experience. Therefore, the question aligns with and binds what the phenomenological researcher is concerned about.

Similarly, Brown et al. (2013) studied online students' experiences of learning supports provided by the institution. This is an example of a good decision to conduct phenomenological research in distance education because the bounded phenomenon (learning supports) is actually and qualitatively different in the realm of distance education. As Brown et al. (2013) frame it:

Amid rising numbers of online learners, there is increasing interest in ways to support students from a distance. Distance students and campus-based learners have a very different student experiences and engage with their study differently... which means that

bespoke interventions are called for. Against this background, the objective of the current research was to investigate the nature of the distance learner experience in their own words... and the interactions they have with learning supports during the first semester of university-level study. (p. 347)

Thus, in addition to asking a research question that was justifiable in the space of distance education and that specifically called for phenomenological research, the researchers bounded the study in scope (interactions with learning supports) and time (the first semester of university-level study).

Finally, for phenomenological research in distance education, it is important to consider the uniqueness of online learning environments and approaches and to bound the study appropriately. For example, a growing space within the distance learning ecosystem is competency-based education (CBE) programs, which are often offered via distance education. If the study involves participants in a CBE program, it may prove difficult to bound the study with respect to time as CBE programs effectively do away with things like seat time and semesters.

Positionality

A major consideration in performing phenomenological research is the researchers' positionality. Being clear and upfront about the bias/es present from the researcher/s conducting the study can add or distract to the final analysis of the data. Therefore, when performing phenomenological research, a clear communication of the state of being of the researchers and their perspectives of the proposed study is essential for interpreting the data.

Once a clear communication of positionality has taken place, then there can be the further development of its impacts on the overall study. This is important in the consideration of the specific phenomenological methods (e.g., descriptive, interpretive, post-intentional, etc.). The implications associated with bracketing and bridling as they pertain to you the research methodology adds to the clarity of overall phenomenological research.

Bracketing assumes the ability to remove or suspend one's biases and perspectives from the study, which is typically aligned with descriptive phenomenological research. Bridling is more of an ongoing process that adds to bracketing the goal of not making definite what is indefinite. "Researchers should practice a disciplined kind of interaction and communication with their phenomena and informants, and 'bridle' the event of understanding so that they do not understand too quickly, too carelessly or slovenly" (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 130). Additionally, bridling looks forward beyond restraining pre-understanding. Both bracketing and bridling allow for the acknowledgement of the researcher in the study; it is when there is no acknowledgment of researcher's presence that problems can arise as the research does not acknowledge his presence and possible bias, which could affect the validity of study. The purpose of phenomenological research is to capture the state of being of defined subject/s, yet by not being transparent about it clouds the interpretation of the data.

Al-Harthi (2005) explored the distance education experiences of Arab graduate students pursuing degree programs in the United States. Specifically, they looked deeply at the role of

their culture in their distance education experiences. Al-Harthi's positionality statement is noteworthy as it essentially confesses to an important assumption.

Since the researcher is the main instrument in qualitative research, qualitative research carries with it a lot of the researcher's perspective... Therefore, the researcher finds it important to address a number of assumptions here. The researcher assumes that research participants knew their home culture well, which is not always the case, given their young age and potential lack of involvement in their society due to living abroad for a long time. (p. 6)

Here, Al-Harthi (2005) explicitly stated that they are the main instrument of the research and admits to awareness that their perspective is carried into the study. Also, they are upfront with at least one particular assumption or bias. This bracketing and bridling are one hallmark of good phenomenological research

In the field of distance education, where researchers are embedded within the world of higher education, clearly defining our interests in the relative success of distance education should be stated at the forefront, as we may be deeply involved in its epistemological growth as a field, and its importance as a whole in comparison to other fields. Alternatively, researchers within higher education may have a priori biases against distance education. Furthermore, while our knowledge of the field does allow us insight into the nuances of what a participant or participant might state, the experiences that we might consider outside the bounds of distance education that might affect the participants, may be oblivious to us. We then have to ensure that we check and reflect on our own experience not just with whomever we may be interacting with, but also our past history with the subject at hand, so that we can bracket/bridle our own experience to allow for the participants to come through. The best position statements start from reflective journaling and develop into a complete picture of the researcher's perspective.

Data Collection and Explication: Towards the Hermeneutic Circle

Many researchers who purport to have used phenomenological research methods failed to gather data pertaining to the lifeworld of the subject. The lack of data from which to construct an in-depth understanding of the complexities from the whole being creates a misunderstanding of the purposes associated with phenomenological research methods. Analysis within phenomenological research is not merely describing the environment and context, like an ethnography, but it is distilling the encapsulated experiences of your subject matter in order to gain insight into their being-in-the-world.

Data collection and analysis methods in phenomenological research are often too thin. Again, according to Cilesiz (2011),

To study experiences with technology through phenomenology and based on the phenomenological concept of experience, research methods such as phenomenological interviewing and phenomenal analysis are most suitable. Participant selection, validity considerations, and ethics are also among the important elements of research design in phenomenology and contribute to the rigor of a phenomenological study. (p. 498)

Methodologically, then, phenomenological interviewing and phenomenological analysis are the most suitable forms of data collection and analysis. However, interviews alone, even in-depth interviews of a group of people about a distinct experience or “phenomenon” does not a phenomenology make. Yet far too many of the existing studies that purport to be phenomenological study of some aspect of distance education do not go beyond surface level interviews and basic qualitative data analysis techniques.

Furthermore, in phenomenological research, different data sources and data collection activities are more consistent with the various traditions of phenomenology. For studies framed as transcendental phenomenology, for example, in-depth interviewing is the most sensible method to collect data on personal experiences (Kvale, 1996). However, interviewing participants one time, no matter how long, is probably not appropriate or sufficient. Practitioners of transcendental phenomenology should, then, consider using something like Seidman’s (2006) framework of three open-ended interviews that combines life-history interviewing and more focused, in-depth interviews. Based on the work of Dolbeare & Schuman (Schuman, 1982), Seidman’s method for interviewing involves three semi-structured interviews per participant. The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience (“How did you get here?”). The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context (“What is it like being you?”). The third interview extracts participants to reflections on the meaning they associate with the experience (“What does it mean to you?”) (Lauterbach, 2018; Granot, Alejandro, & Motta, 2012). This interview format is more philosophically compatible with phenomenology.

It is also possible that data collection activities can be even more specifically matched to the phenomenon under investigation. Lauterbach (2018) conducted a phenomenological exploration of expert teachers’ perceptions of teaching literacy within their content area to secondary students with learning disabilities. Previous literature suggested that interviews with expert teachers may be flawed because they often depend solely on teachers’ ability to think about and describe their instruction retrospectively. Therefore, Lauterbach included think-aloud interviews, claiming that “[r]esearch on think-aloud interviews has demonstrated they provide an accurate source of data regarding participants’ thinking, especially when interpreted through a qualitative lens” (p. 2884). Ultimately, Lauterbach (2018) started collecting data through a semi-structured initial interview, before conducting two think-aloud interviews with each participant. Then, the study concluded with two stimulated recall interviews in which the participant and the researcher watched a videotaped observation.

I instructed teachers to identify moments in the lesson that demonstrated the provision of instructional support for student literacy needs. I asked the teachers to elaborate on what knowledge they had been drawing upon, and on the source of that knowledge. Furthermore, I asked the participants to explain the rationale behind their choice of practice. I also pointed to the moments in the instruction that I had identified prior to the stimulated recall interview. By asking teachers to reflect on their teaching practice through watching their video, I situated their reflections and perceptions within their particular classroom context so as not to depend on teachers’ memory. (p. 2888)

In a similar vein, when conducting phenomenological research on distance education, it makes sense to take advantage of technologies as a technological lifeworld is under investigation. Andrews et al. (2011) studied the everyday “lived” experience of distance learners’ use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including new media, for teaching and learning. To gain an understanding of those experiences, the researchers used multiple modes of data collection including pictures of learning spaces, the Day Experience Method (DEM), Charting the Week’s Activities (CWA), and follow-up group discussions with twelve participants. “The DEM requires students to respond to irregular SMS prompts on their mobile phone” (p. 324) over an 18-hour period. The student participants were prompted to respond to brief questions about what activities they were engaged, the resources they were using, and other people they were engaged with at the time they were prompted. The CWA method involved student participants keeping diaries that “...outlined their typical work, learning, family and social activities over a week” (p. 324). Collectively, these modes of data collection allowed the researchers to develop a rich description of the lived experiences of the distance education student participants.

Similarly, Brown, Hughes, & Delaney (2015) studied the lived experiences of first-time distance education students. Methodologically, they adopted a “Reflective Prompt” protocol wherein participants uploaded at least one five-minute digital video file per week via a secure website. A research assistant sent an email to participants with a set of four prompts.

The original intention was that the email would contain an amiable, yet emotionally detached greeting followed by a set of “reflective prompts” designed to trigger reflections for the participant’s next video diary. In other words, all participants would be encouraged to reflect on their online/distance learning experiences by prompting their thoughts with personalised “fish-hooks” that were based on each individual trajectory, as it emerged over time. (p. 178-179)

This method ensured both consistency in responses and also remained true to the particular intent of the study, which was to understand what it means to experience distance education for the first time.

A consideration in the explication of data is the creation and consideration of how information captured through the data is being re-contextualized through the researcher’s perspective as well as the students. The creation of meaning that occurs from a phenomenon happens within a hermeneutic circle, which means the subject creates meaning from talking to a specific part and back to the whole. This creates a sort of transitional meaning whereby the researcher is not only looking at how the subject matter might arrive at the definition of a thing, but also its departure. Phenomenological research calls for the analysis of the process even more so than either the departure or arrival of the latent meaning. Furthermore, the concrete nature of the definition is not always ensured as the person is constantly constructing and deconstructing meaning from their surrounding environment and their personal life. Looking towards the hermeneutic circle as a way to construct knowledge from gathered data will allow for a nuanced approach to phenomenological methods employed in a study.

Discussion

We argue that there is a significant need for phenomenological research in distance education because this design is ideally suited to uncover data and information that will allow instructors and instructional designers to better understand and, therefore, sympathize with the learners' experiences of learning from a distance. And a more sympathetic instructor is a better instructor. But it is not just about the experience of humanity for the instructor.

...when researchers in educational studies... make use of phenomenology, it is generally because they have a deeply felt interest in the 'humanity of experience'—rather than the experience of humanity—and thus, have adopted a philosophy and a methodology that lend themselves to existential considerations of Being on the one hand, and the possibilities and challenges of accessing unselfconscious, concretized, inadvertent revelations of experience on the other. (Thomson, 2009, p. 796)

Researchers who choose to use phenomenological methods must fully commit to the phenomenological process and not think of it as an afterthought, which will help in the analysis of the data. This is challenging, but it helps to alleviate the complexities found through performing this type of research, as more often than not distilling the findings to one simple generalizable nugget is not what occurs at the finish of the data explication. The potential beauty and importance of distance education, the humanity of the experience, we contend, can be unearthed by digging through the layered complexities of human experiences of distance education.

To do that work, we lay out a framework for conducting phenomenological research in the field of distance education. That framework is summarized in Table 2 below. Combining the considerations in Table 2 along with the four dimensions outlined in Table 3, a comprehensive framework for conducting phenomenological research on distance education emerges.

Table 2

Summary of framework for phenomenological research in distance education

	General considerations	Distance education considerations
<i>Phenomenological research as ontological and epistemological pursuits</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Commit to a particular approach to phenomenological research (e.g., transcendental, hermeneutic, etc.) and its philosophical underpinnings. ● Be aware of and state explicitly the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the chosen approach. ● Align all aspects of the design of the study to the chosen approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider at the outset whether being descriptive or interpretive would be best for answering your research question and what would most help an audience interested in pedagogical or policy issues in distance education. ● Consider a transcendental approach wherein the participants' background is less relevant if the study participants are students and/or faculty newly come to distance learning.
<i>Alignment of research questions around bounded phenomena</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask research questions for which phenomenological methods are suited ● Ensure that the study takes place within a bounded system; a clearly defined lifeworld ● The study should be bounded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask research questions that are phenomenologically important and unique to distance education (see e.g., Cressman & Hamilton (2010) and "technology breakdowns") ● Consider the uniqueness of online learning environments and approaches

	within a reasonable time frame	and bound the study appropriately
<i>Positionality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be clear and upfront about biases ● State assumptions clearly early on ● Use bracketing and bridling techniques to keep biases and assumptions in check throughout the research process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider your experiences with and biases around distance education and how those might influence the study. ● Consider your relationship to the participants. If they are colleagues and/or students, that needs to be accounted for.
<i>Data collection and explication: toward the Hermeneutic Circle</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider data sources and data collection activities that are more consistent with the chosen tradition of phenomenology. ● Match data collection methods to the phenomenon under investigation. ● Look to the hermeneutic circle as a way to construct knowledge from gathered data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Take advantage of the technology-rich environment of distance education and use technologically aided data collection methods. ● Match data collection methods to the distance education phenomenon under investigation, including having participants do things like take screenshots, share artifacts of learning, video diaries, etc.

Additionally, Cressman & Hamilton (2010) wrote about studying distance education phenomenologically, with specific reference to the “...four existentials—how does the user-experience of online education filter through their experience of space, body, time, and relation?” Table 3 includes questions and considerations around the four existentials for anyone conducting phenomenological research in distance education.

Table 3
The Four Existentials and Distance Education

	Distance education considerations
<p>Lived space—spatiality “Lived space is 'felt space' and thus it is hard to put into words since the experience that is felt is in some ways pre-verbal - we rarely reflect on it, yet we still experience it .”</p>	<p>“Do users set aside a specific space for interacting with online educational programs? How does the experience differ if one is performing a task on a campus or in the comfort (or discomfort) of one's home? What are the experiential differences between online and face-to-face education, or between different experiences of both, if the researcher attempts to understand the relation between lived space and use? What is the difference, because surely there must be one, between the physical space of the classroom and the virtual space inhabited by a person in a networked learning situation? How does sitting alone at a computer at home compare to sitting in a seminar room with other students?” (p. 60)</p>
<p>Lived body—corporeality “This concept answers to the phenomenological fact that we are always already inhabitants of bodies in the world, and that it is only through our embodiment that we experience at all.”</p>	<p>“How do students experience their own ‘presence’ in online classes? How do they constitute notions of "being there" or "participating" in virtual contexts when these things are so critically defined by the existence of a body in a classroom? Do they experience it in terms of the freedom of anonymity, as has frequently been assumed (Turkic)? Or does it manifest in them as an anxiety to make themselves present? One possible question raised, then, is how we experience our own bodies when they are physically attenuated, abstracted, and/or anonymous?” (p. 61)</p>
<p>Lived time—temporality “Temporality refers to subjective time as opposed to clock time or objective time—our experience not of the ticking clock, but of time slowing down or time flying,</p>	<p>“How fast or slow does time pass when the user is involved with online educational technology? Is this different from the temporal experiences of traditional classroom learning? Can the way that time drags on or flies by during a dull or interesting lecture be perfectly translated to online education? How is time linked to pleasure in the student's experience? What happens to the illicit pleasure one experiences in skipping class, or the sense of liberation</p>

<p>of killing time or having the time of one's life.”</p>	<p>resultant from waking up to a snowstorm knowing that classes will be cancelled? What about the dread that comes with facing a time consuming commute from home to campus?” (p. 62)</p>
<p>Lived other—relationality “...another critical aspect of our basic experience is that we share the world with others, who are also beings in the world. The final existential, then, involves the experience of interrelation, ‘the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space we share with them’ (van Manen 105)”</p>	<p>“The challenges of attaining "presence" online in the absence of the body is exacerbated when we think of the challenges of negotiating and maintaining relationships. How do we experience our interpersonal relations with others when there is "no body" present? How does one get a sense of others as ‘presences’ online? How is online interaction experienced? On another level, if someone commends your work might you be inclined to attach specific physical features to that name? What if someone is critical of your work? Is it a natural assumption to project negative physical traits to only a name?” (p. 63)</p>

The foundational work by Moore (1997) on transactional distance theory gives us a better understanding of the struggles associated with distance education, as Moore (1997) breaks up distance education into three different arenas: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. The proper implementation of these three elements can create a higher or lower space between the learner and instructor within a distant education platform. This established model of thinking and discussing online learning becomes even more artful when we bring in phenomenological research as it brings forth to the discussion the idea of ontology.

While transactional distance theory is bent on exploring the complexities of the roles of an instructor and a student in an online setting that still centers around the assumption that the only exchange occurs at the epistemological level, phenomenology requires the acknowledgement of the ontological. Both student and teacher bring a pre-formed level of being to the online environment that affects the exchange of knowledge whether it contains high or low level of transaction. These ideas fall in line with John Dewey’s (1916) work whereby he suggests the process of education relies on cognitive and sociological features, and neither should be prioritized over the other, or it would be detrimental to the whole. Again, we see the acknowledgement of the complexities of the creation of knowledge creation, and to two important thinkers struggling with coming to terms with how humans construct learning. This of course leads back to phenomenological research as it takes into account factors that may have been overlooked by previous research methods which focus on the epistemological importance of their work.

In trying to reduce the distance between learner and instructor found in online learning environments, researchers must delve into and become comfortable with producing more questions than when they started. A huge question that is at the forefront of online researcher is the learner’s experience in online environments. As Veletsianos (2020) expresses:

The elusive nature of online learners’ experiences is a problem because it prevents us from doing better: from designing more effective online courses, from making evidence informed decisions about online education, and from coming to our work with the full sense of empathy that our students deserve. (p. 6)

Understanding the learner's experience will go a long way to establish best practices associated with online learning. But, simply encapsulating a learner's experience through quantitative means will not capture the complexities found within a learner's experience, as online learning is not merely an epistemological download, but a fully embodied experience filled with a multiplicity of experiences. , Capturing the differing lived experience is the direction needed to be taken in order to contribute significant changes to the learning environment.

Ultimately, the power of phenomenological work is not just its focus on ontology as an imbedding truth separate from epistemological gains, but its ability to cause researchers to consider a student and instructor's being a major contributing factor to how learning is conducted. Using this type of method allows for a deeper understanding of the overall learning experience, and a closing of the distance between learner and teacher.

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