The Phenomenal Class Teaching to Individual Learners

Wayne DeFehr, PhD[1,a,*]

[1]*University of Alberta, Department of English and Film Studies, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada*
a. wdefehr@ualberta.ca
**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper investigates some of the practical implications of a phenomenology of education, exploring how this philosophy can have a daily application to work that takes place in the classroom. Beginning with an overview of key principles in the philosophy of phenomenology, including ideas from Edmund Husserl's and Martin Heidegger's writings in the 19th-century, the paper examines more recent applications of this philosophy as an approach to pedagogy. The discussion includes the work of Malte Brinkmann and Norm Friesen, and then also that of the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus to consider the ways in which phenomenology would shape a teaching practice. The challenge here involves attempting to form authentic and genuine relationships, despite, or through, the various education technologies and platforms that are available these days. These technologies are often promoted as leading to student "immersion" in the subject matter, while the reality is, at the same time, that the teacher becomes distanced from the students, through the mediating effect of all this media. One example that is proposed as a way to address this issue, involves discussing the example of a class that I teach, where the students need to collaborate to build a playable video game in RPG Maker MV. They become immersed in learning the technology required to create an interactive game, while at the same time remaining in contact with their fellow collaborators as they develop the narrative and game play along the inclusive and enriched story telling principles that are presented in class.

Keywords: phenomenology, technology, pedagogy, video games, collaboration, emotion-based learning

1. Introduction

The philosophy of phenomenology continues to influence approaches to pedagogy, and this framework seems to be particularly well suited to the classroom because of the emphasis on deeply personal, emotional, student engagement with the subject matter. At the same time, key arguments from within phenomenology challenging the role of technology in society, and in the classroom, because of assumptions around how especially computer and communications technology will damage society and cool off genuine human interaction. This paper argues that the earnest goals of a phenomenology of education as encouraging emotionally deep student interaction should be re-considered somewhat. At the same time, it is possible to create supportive environments for students to learn and grow, where the primary channels of communication and engagement are computer related through students' collaboration on a capstone game project that they need to build.

2. Tracing the Roots of a Phenomenology of Education

Broadly understood, the philosophies of phenomenology developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the 19th century engage with an educational practice that focuses primarily on the students' experience in the classroom, and how the teachers can intensify that experience through their relationships with the student. The primary focus of phenomenology assumes that students have a central authentic, core being that should receive the attention of the teacher in the classroom, instead of focusing on practical matters involving memorization of facts relating to the field of study, for example. Husserl's formulation that the individual is comprised of a "transcendental human consciousness" [1] and that there are therefore "regional ontologies" that characterize this human consciousness also shapes the practical, day-to-day management of the classroom, where the teacher in their teaching practice attempts to reach students at that fundamental and personal level. The overall direction of phenomenology, and therefore of a pedagogy of phenomenology is practical in that it attempts to describe how people experience the "life-world" and connect those experiences as closely as possible with the subject matter being studied in the course. Focusing on the everyday experiences contrasts with more idealistic, and rational approaches rooted in Cartesian science, where the world could be abstracted, rationalized, and observed dispassionately. This phenomenology of education also contrasts with approaches that would emphasize principles contributing to a free market economy, as promoted by the Koch network [2].

Since the 19th-century, educators have found the concepts around phenomenology to be provocative and continued to develop a framework of education that included these foundational principles of student learning through the student/teacher relationship, and where the student would reveal themselves through acquiring a deeper understanding of the field of study. This is laid out in Malte Brinkmann's summary of a history of phenomenology in education, where they highlight an early paper on the subject by Aloys Fischer, published in 1914 [3]. They present Fischer's argument that education takes place through students' "description" of their experience. Fischer's emphasis on narrative or description as a way to gain understanding – learning – as result of their experiences, shows a certain amount of faith in language that other philosophers in this field began to question – where Heidegger described language as the "house of being" and which was taken up and extended by postmodern philosophers like Derrida. By now "deconstruction" is a cliché that's sometimes used in mainstream media to mean simply "understand better," but as we know "deconstruction" is about the slipperiness of language – or the indeterminate quality of words that can mean something and their opposite at the same time. For Fischer, however, language serves perfectly well as a vehicle for gaining understanding, and for sharing that understanding with others.

3. Recent Approaches Merging Phenomenology and Education

More recently the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus and his group have also emphasized the potential of sharing, communicating, and turning into narrative one's experiences as a way to facilitate learning and understanding. In his seminal book from 1986, *Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer*, he and his brother argue for the fundamental, foundational quality of human experience against the backdrop of increasing enthusiasm for computing sciences and artificial intelligence as areas of study at the postsecondary level [4]. Dreyfus's arguments that place the human and machine in opposition to each other, echo Heidegger's wariness of the impact of technology or *techne* on society. And yet, the overlap of today's language of technology/biology shows for better or for worse how *techne* and *bios* have merged, and especially in every aspect of students' lives. It's common for the mind is described as a computer and to say that the computer has memory. However, as Brinkemann summarizes, "Dreyfus' central premise is that we are not simply aggregators of perceptual data [like computers], but 'disclosers of worlds' and this

model has been widely taken up in education") [5]. According to Dreyfus, knowledge cannot be removed from its context and reduced to "rationalist, empiricist" accounts of mind and knowledge, but instead needs to be understood "intentionally," if students are going to truly learn the material of the class.

4. Phenomenology and Technology Skepticism in the Classroom

Dreyfus's emphasis on human experience and interaction in education apart from the development of computing technologies overlaps with the arguments made by Neil Postman in the mid-1990's, whose writings on the subject of "media ecology" also describe how the impact of media technology on society and on education will be harmful and damaging – because the media will interfere with students' experiences of each other and the subject material. Postman wasn't a "Luddite" about technology or even necessarily a "critic" of its effects, but his discussions of the role of technology, especially in education, as a ubiquitous part of our human "ecology" voice his concerns about technology not as facilitating learning as is often the case in discussions involving "computer-mediated classrooms" these days, but as having an impact on people's ability to share with each other and form communities of practice online. For Postman, connecting computers and students in the classroom is a problem, because the "ecology" of computers, the Internet and social media according to him have the effect of a reducing social connection and emotional engagement with the world. And he's making these arguments back in the mid-1990's. He summarizes this key point in his 1995 interview with Charlene Hunter Gault on PBS' *The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour* [6] by stating that he worries about introducing computers to the classroom because he feels that they will reduce students' ability to socialize, or to work together as a group – exactly the opposite of the goals of a phenomenology of education. In the mid-90's people spoke of the "information superhighway," and advanced computing was in the form of a beige box for the monitor, which students in computer labs could easily hide behind. But even though now days most folks have more computing power in their cell phones, there are still questions about whether our "media ecology" has caused society – and education in the classrooms – to cool down because people are not connecting as often face to face. At the same time, Postman did not imagine the evolution of technology into the many platforms today that attempt to facilitate that teacher/student interaction, though it's difficult to imagine that he would be entirely supportive.

5. More current Examples Engaging Students through Phenomenology Principles

Phenomenology continues to provide a richly engaging philosophy for education, that many teachers subscribe to, in some form. There are many articles that report on studies of students' and teachers' experiences of completing coursework, while emphasizing students' experiences and having them articulate these in response to the class material. For example, Akram Ramezanadeh and others completed research involving interviews of several teachers over a period of time, with questions that attempted to draw out not only how the teachers felt that their teaching methodology was "working" and having "results" shown qualitatively in strong student engagement and correspondingly higher grades [7]. The questions also included the ways in which the teachers felt that they themselves learned, or "grew" as individuals as a result of their experiences in the learning process as they collaborated with their students as learning "guides" and collaborators instead of as knowledge experts. As the authors write, "Therefore, the teachers in higher education can take into account the importance of dialogue and learner-centered teaching and assessment in addition to the act of self-reflection, critical reflections, discussion, sense of responsibility, and critical hope as experienced by the participants of the present study if they seek to bring their own selves into their teaching, change themselves as a teacher and a human, and transform the existing situations" [8]. While they do not

refer to the term, “phenomenology,” in this discussion of their learner outcomes, it’s clear that the emphasis is aligned with this philosophy, focusing on the importance of student having personal experiences while engaging with the course material, and then reporting on those experiences to the teacher.

The importance of forming genuine and authentic relationships with their students is highlighted in their study, with what they called “pedagogical relationships.” One teacher stated that their intentional relationships involved, “’paying attention to how students are making sense of how the teacher is relating to the subject matter’” [9]. The relationships that are described here involve not only the way that the teacher relates to the students – in a supportive and encouraging way – but also remaining mindful of how the students are responding to the course material. In this way, they argue, the teacher needs to make a personal commitment to the area of study – to love it, or to enjoy it – so that the students will also feel that energy and become excited and involved as well. One of the teachers described their approach this way: “’Yes, it is true that our job is a hard job as it is rooted in relations. It is very important to know what we choose to teach, how and why we teach it, how our students receive or reject it, and how we are interacting with each other focusing on that topic or material to be taught in the classroom. ‘“And unlike many other ways of making a living, successful effective teaching involves teaching from a motivation that is connected to what they called the “ultimate meaning.” This group of teachers, “constantly challenged themselves and their educational contexts in their search for equality in order to find their freedom from otherness while respecting and reflecting on others.” This “ultimate meaning” for their teaching involved helping each university age student to find their voice “in the midst of other voices,” through the sharing of opinions and experiences that were provoked by the class material.

6. Noting Challenges to Phenomenology: the Role of Language

Discussing the importance of highlighting students’ voices through classroom dialogue leads to a criticism of phenomenology that has been made, regarding the role of politics in this philosophical framework. We don’t have time to dig into critiques of the phenomenology of philosophers like Husserl and Heidegger, which highlight the importance of describing experience in the “life-world” under the assumption that there is one common entity called “man” and that these descriptions of experience would be given the same validity or “voice” regardless of the context or the person. As is known, Michel Foucault extended many of the concepts of Heidegger’s phenomenology – emphasizing the importance of individual experience, of language or discourse, and especially of social discipline and power structures. And against this backdrop it’s important to consider the ways in which a phenomenology of education, and especially one that’s based almost entirely online – in the “media ecology” that Postman described can facilitate and also complicate the representation of individual voices, and hopefully to amplify the voices of those who wish to be heard, and who might not be readily given that opportunity in society – outside of the classroom.

7. Challenges to Phenomenology in the Class: Personal Boundaries

Furthermore, it could be perfectly valid for students (and teachers for that matter) to establish boundaries in their journey of learning, and uncovering and then revealing to the rest of the class the personal experiences that they are processing as a result of engaging with the course material. These days, when for FOIP reasons instructors are not allowed to know why a student missed a class – unless they choose to reveal the reason – it would be difficult I think to necessarily *require* each student in the class to go on this journey of self discovery, and revelation through narrative to a classroom full of peers that they have just met. All of the emphasis on the importance of social interaction in the classroom is well and good, though it would be beneficial to hear about how some

of the healthy boundaries were also established between students and teachers, while also encouraging students to connect with the course content on a personal level where possible.

8. The Potential for Positive Learning Outcomes in Phenomenology

However, one case study that is discussed in an article , "Going Viral in the Classroom," by Jessica J. Eckstein [10] highlights the potential for the online classroom to become the "place" for meaningful interaction between students, leading to learning that is personal but also engages with the politics of the outside world. Perhaps this is also a version of phenomenology of learning, where students can take their heartfelt understanding of a topic from their various perspectives and use that knowledge to help make the world a better place politically. Eckstein begins her discussion of this example of a politically engaged class of online students by framing the topic around the word, "freedom." "The objective of this chapter," she writes, "is to demonstrate the feasibility of maximizing that educational freedom (and responsibility) through knowledge acquisition and distribution, using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology in the classroom." Perhaps her discussion is overly optimistic in its description of technological innovation unproblematically contributing to new forms of learning: "With each new technology that surfaces, teachers and researchers are able to harness and assess the potentials of these tools for educational purposes" [10]. And yet her discussion about the results of her students' learning from her class maybe help show why she would be so optimistic about this potential.

In Eckstein's example, student-created video provides a way for her students to engage with the course material as well as with political issues outside the classroom by their access to social media platforms like YouTube. Her statement that students are "ever on the cutting edge of emerging technologies" hasn't been my experience with many students in my classes, and so I'm not so sure that all students are necessarily "well-suited to advance alternative practices and social perspectives, learned in the classroom, into mainstream society. Her statistic of 90% -- 97% of young people reporting that they use the Internet at least once a day -- doesn't really show how young people are on the cutting edge of emerging technology. But the follow up statement that "these students use online media as much or more than face-to-face communication to maintain personal relationships" could well be true and could explain how the students were comfortable enough in virtual classrooms to experience a deep emotional connection to the course material, in phenomenological terms, leading to them taking their lessons learned to the world outside the class.

Her argument that instructors making use of online technology for teaching classes must be especially clear in presenting the goals of the course as well as the goals of the day when presenting the education material to the students is compelling. This instead of only relying on the novelty of the technology, which wears off quite quickly. And the goals of her own class were to have students understand first of all the kind of messaging that was already prevalent online on YouTube on a particular topic – in this case regarding Communication in Abusive Relationships. One can see how creating a learning experience for students that has the potential to resonate with them deeply also is determined in part by the subject matter. And she describes the steps of the entire project leading to the students' engagement with the world outside the classroom: "The entire project involves (a) instructor preparation of students through lecture; (b) student analysis of existing online videos pertaining to a chosen topic; (c) Internet background research using credible, scholarly sources; (d) digital film design, creation, and online posting; and (e) class evaluation and project debriefing [11].

9. Conclusions: the Potential of Video Games and Phenomenology in the Classroom

My own creative writing class called "Stories + Games" offers a similar opportunity for students to engage with the subject material of the course while also collaborating through a computer program,

in this case called *RPG Maker MV*. There are at least two aspects to the learning process in this class that relate to the discussion around a phenomenology of education. On the one hand, students are required to learn a software program, and walking through the tutorials need to develop the skills to create avatars in this environment, and have them interact with the setting, and with other avatars. The tutorials are well written (not by me), and the students are smart, so this part of the course usually goes quite smoothly. On the other hand, students are asked to write stories around these computer games and it's here where the students' engagement sometimes connects in ways that are difficult to predict. And this is one area where the emotions can flair up, because whenever someone is creating a character in an environment, there are politics involved, around representation, where one or more students will object to the way in which a character is portrayed, especially if that character resonates with their own *lived experience*. Does learning happen as we attempt to process these challenging conversations? Maybe sometimes . . . it wouldn't be accurate to say that each time there's an emotional engagement of some kind learning *also* takes place. Perhaps a phenomenology of education is a bit too optimistic about this framework as creating opportunities for immense and deeply personal learning. But in my experience, it is possible to invite students to gather around and to agree to try to go on a learning journey that could be personal, and that is also closely intertwined with their experiences with technology in *RPG Maker MV*.

References

[1] *Brinkmann, N., Friesen, N. (2022). Phenomenological Theory of Bildung and Education / Phänomenologische Erziehungswissenschaft. International Handbook of Philosophy of Education 592, 591-608.*

[2] *Levinthal, D. (2015). Spreading the Free-Market Gospel. The Atlantic. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/spreading-the-free-market-gospel/413239/).*

[3] *Brinkmann, N., Friesen, N. (2022). Phenomenological Theory of Bildung and Education / Phänomenologische Erziehungswissenschaft. International Handbook of Philosophy of Education 594, 591-608.*

[4] *Dreyfus, H., Dreyfus, S. (1986). Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer.*

[5] *Brinkmann, N., Friesen, N. (2022). Phenomenological Theory of Bildung and Education / Phänomenologische Erziehungswissenschaft. International Handbook of Philosophy of Education 599, 591-608.*

[6] *Postman, N., Gault, CH. (1995). Neil Postman on Cyberspace, 1995. PBS The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49rcVQ1vFAY&t=186s*

[7] *Ramezanadeh, A. Adel, S.M.R., Zarelan, G. (2016). Authenticity in teaching and teachers' emotions: a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the classroom reality. Teaching in Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13562517.2016.1183616?scroll=top&needAccess=true*

[8] *Ramezanadeh, A. Adel, S.M.R., Zarelan, G. (2016). Authenticity in teaching and teachers' emotions: a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the classroom reality. Teaching in Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13562517.2016.1183616?scroll=top&needAccess=true*

[9] *Higgins, M. (2014). De/colonizing Pedagogy and Pedagogue: Science Education Through Participatory and Reflexive Videography. p. 438*

[10] *Eckstein, J. (2011). Going Viral in the Classroom: Using Emerging CMC Technologies for Social Change 225.*

[11] *Eckstein, J. (2011). Going Viral in the Classroom: Using Emerging CMC Technologies for Social Change 225.226*