

Chapter Six

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Experiential Evidence in E-Learning

Introduction

The methodology at the heart of this chapter is phenomenology, which can be defined simply as “the study of ‘phenomena’...as they appear in our experience” (Smith, 2003). Phenomenology is a philosophical movement that began at the turn of the twentieth century, and it lives on today in a number of forms relevant to e-learning research: as an ongoing philosophical tradition (e.g., Derrida, 1976; Rorty, 1991); as the basis for alternative approaches to artificial intelligence (e.g., Clark, 1997; Gams, Paprzycki & Wu, 1997); as a theory of notable interest in software design (e.g., Dourish, 2001; Winograd & Flores, 1986); and also as a set of research methods used in education, nursing, psychology, and other professional practices (Giorgi, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2002). This chapter focuses on phenomenology as a research method, and it combines phenomenology as the “study of experience” with *hermeneutics* as the “science of interpretation.”

Hermeneutics was introduced earlier as a set of interpretive methods, and as one of three forms of knowledge (with the other two being natural-scientific and critical knowledge). Hermeneutics and phenomenology, taken together, are about the interpretation or meaning of human experience. As this chapter will show, hermeneutic phenomenology is closely associated with new or unconventional understandings of phenomena such as technology, communication and experience itself. And like discursive psychology, hermeneutic phenomenology presents particular and sometimes counterintuitive understandings of these phenomena, opening up a rich “alternative universe” (Lynch, 2006, p. 102) of issues and questions for research.

The approach of this chapter is consonant with the book’s earlier characterization of phenomenology as one of a number of “post-cognitivist” approaches to the study of computers and their use (see chapter five; see also Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, pp. 15–16). Like post-

cognitivist approaches generally, the presuppositions and the results of phenomenological and especially hermeneutic-phenomenological research can be radically different from those of cognitive science and the natural sciences generally. As Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) explain, “post-cognitivist theories” like phenomenology and ethnomethodology “provide...important alternative[s] not only to cognitive science, but [also] to authoritative theories in biology, neuroscience, and key areas of philosophy and psychology” (p. 197).

Phenomenology, like ethnomethodology, differs from cognitive and other sciences in a number of important ways. Both phenomenology and ethnomethodology grant primacy to everyday experience and knowledge. Everyday knowledge is not an inferior or incomplete version of expert knowledge; instead, expert knowledge is dependent on everyday or commonsense assumptions and conceptions. Like discursive psychology, hermeneutic phenomenology starts with a recognition of the primacy of research participants’ or members’ knowledge and experience over any theories that would explain them. Rather than as a source of “folk theories” and nonexpert constructions, the everyday is seen as a font of valuable lessons and insights. Insights gained through hermeneutic-phenomenological research are consequently seen as the result the researcher’s refusal to engage in premature theorizing or explanation, and of his or her efforts to attend carefully and open-mindedly to the phenomenon in question.

In some ways, this chapter is similar in its function and emphases to chapter four in this book, which explored “psychology and technology” in terms of “the relationship between mind and machine.” The current chapter lays the groundwork—both theoretically and methodologically—for the hermeneutic-phenomenological study in the chapter to follow. This preparatory “groundwork” is undertaken in three stages or sections:

1. The chapter begins with an overview of the philosophical presuppositions and understandings—in the areas of knowledge, language, and communication—that underlie hermeneutic phenomenology as a method. In so doing, the chapter highlights how these philosophical understandings, despite their theoretical nature, have been put to practical use in the literature of software and usability design.

2. The chapter then considers how these presuppositions inform a particular adaptation of the hermeneutic-phenomenological method that focuses on descriptive, reflective writing. This method is associated with what has been called the Utrecht School and it has been explicated and reinterpreted most recently by educational researcher Max van Manen.
3. The chapter focuses on a particular descriptive device—the “anecdote”—that is central to the hermeneutic-phenomenological method and explores and illustrates how this device can be applied to the study of interaction with computers. The chapter also presents a discussion of how the hermeneutic-phenomenological method—combined with the philosophical understandings articulated earlier—is able to offer alternative conceptions of generalizability and validity that underlie some of the other research methods presented in this book.

This chapter (and this book as a whole) is based in the conviction that philosophy and critical reflection are indispensable in the study of technology: “Technology,” as computer scientist Phil Agre (1997) argues, is “at present...covert philosophy; the point is to make it openly philosophical” (p. 240). The covert philosophy of computers, according to Agre, is rooted in layers of positivistic Western philosophical tradition—from Descartes through Turing to recent discussions of artificial intelligence. Of course, by its very nature as artifact and mechanism, the computer stands as a kind of “existence proof” for the rationalistic core of this tradition. In a single moment, the computer coolly and flawlessly performs millions of mathematical and logical operations, presenting a model for dispassionate cogitation. It is also intrinsically intolerant of human ambiguity and disorder, ultimately reducing all phenomena to the binary terms of 1’s and 0’s, “on” or “off.”

The overall goal of this chapter and also this book, then, is to make this implicit philosophical orientation explicit, to identify its limitations, and to articulate and demonstrate viable alternatives. This chapter is consequently overtly philosophical in its orientation, and as such, the hermeneutic phenomenological understandings of knowledge, language, and communication presented here, for some readers, may at first seem counter-intuitive.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology:
Starting from the Commonplace**

In philosophy as well as in common research practice, there is an understanding that the acquisition of accurate and trustworthy knowledge is best undertaken under very particular conditions. There is a prevailing understanding that knowledge is *not* acquired, for example, by immersing oneself in everyday cares and concerns in general, or through personal and engaged involvement with the specific subject itself. Instead, knowledge that is often seen as the *most* valuable and accurate in research is gained only when the researcher is able to maintain an objective distance from the subject in question. Such knowledge is acquired by systematically excluding the vicissitudes of everyday cares and concerns from one's inquiry and by reducing any forms of bias that may result from the researcher's involvements. The most widely accepted, systematic way of achieving this distance or objectivity, of course, is to use experimental or quasi-experimental methods. Rigorous experimental techniques—achieved through the exercise of controls such as random sampling—are widely regarded in e-learning and other areas of educational research as superior to other methods, as representing a kind of “gold standard” (e.g., Mosteller & Boruch 2002, p. vi; Sawyer, 2006a).

It is possible to see this same tendency in the writings and the “thought experiments” of Alan Turing that were discussed earlier. Turing suggests that a true and trustworthy answer to the question of whether a person or interlocutor is “really” human (or simply a “clever” mechanical or computational imitation) is best provided through systematic isolation and detached evaluation. Turing's (1950) famous “test” for determining machine intelligence involves the isolation of human and computer “interlocutors.” Three hundred years earlier, the philosopher René Descartes (1998) suggested something similar in order to determine whether “machines [that] bore a resemblance to our bodies and imitated our actions...were not real men” (p. 44). To answer this question and in his efforts to reach certainty in knowledge more generally, Descartes argued that the inquirer be removed from worldly involvement or “cares or passions.” Then, from a position of detached “leisure,” the thinker could gradually and sys-

tematically begin differentiating what is certain from what is doubtful, eventually arriving at knowledge that is both “clear” and “distinct” (p. 178).

Significantly, this emphasis on detachment and withdrawal is an essential part of the tradition underlying the “covert philosophy” of computer technology. Philosopher Hubert Dreyfus (1991) suggests that this emphasis has been maintained throughout much of the Western philosophical tradition:

According to the philosophical tradition, whether rationalist or empiricist, it is only by means of detached contemplation that we discover reality. From Plato’s theoretical dialectic, which turns the mind away from the everyday world of “shadows,” to Descartes’ preparation for philosophy by shutting himself up in a warm room where he is free from involvement and passion...philosophers have supposed that only by withdrawing from everyday practical concerns before describing things and people can they discover how things really are. (1991, p. 6)

Hermeneutic phenomenology overturns this supposition: It takes as its starting point our inescapable involvement in practical everyday concerns and activities. In their landmark book, *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*, Winograd and Flores explain: “Detached contemplation can be illuminating, but it also obscures the phenomena themselves by isolating and categorizing them... [Involved] social activity,” on the other hand, is “the ultimate foundation of intelligibility, and even of existence” (1986, pp. 32, 33). The detached, reflective stance, in other words, is derivative, and secondary; and involvement in everyday practical and social activities and concerns—in what phenomenologists call the shared “lifeworld”—is primary. Merleau-Ponty puts this way: “We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of it” (1962, p. 5). If “knowledge through objective detachment” can be understood as the model or paradigm for knowing and truth in much of the philosophical tradition and in scientific research, then “knowledge through lifeworld immersion” can be seen as the equivalent for hermeneutic phenomenology.

This radical shift or inversion in how knowledge, certainty, and the everyday are understood means that many conventional theoretic-

cal explanations and frameworks are called into question. This rethinking of the centrality of objectivity and detachment, therefore, constitutes a cornerstone of phenomenological philosophy and its application in research. Phenomenology asks the researcher to suspend or abandon (at least temporarily) traditional theoretical presuppositions and even commonplace explanations, in order to look afresh at experience, as it is lived. Because this requires the deliberate setting aside of previously held personal and professional explanations and scientific and psychological theory, this aspect of phenomenological research is referred to as the “reduction” or “bracketing” of available understandings.

Instead of relying first and foremost on theory and analysis, phenomenology depends on *description*, particularly on textual description. Descriptive passages can also be used to illustrate the presuppositions and understandings of phenomenological philosophy – such as “reduction” and “lifeworld involvement.” Consider for a moment this descriptive account of an individual engaged in online discussion:

As I click on the titles of the postings in my online course, I am struck by the eloquence with which these messages are written: “The creatures in our woods are preparing for winter. Outside the window next to my computer, I see the birds gathering around our bird-feeder...” This is apparently written by a woman named Maria from Wisconsin. From Manchester, England, someone named Lorna says, “Autumn is my favorite season because it holds a deep secret that I hope to unravel....” And from Hong Kong, James Wong writes, “The persistent heat of summer is slowly dissipating, and the rhythms of the city are becoming more even and measured...”

These messages continue in the way they begin: Beautiful, well-written, and evocative. But I find myself wondering: “Who are these people? How can they be so eloquent, without even trying, it seems? How do they come up with such beautiful messages?” (Friesen, 2003, p. 3)

The descriptive text above presents an example of an individual’s immersion in a lifeworld context that is constituted by the words and messages of various contributors to an online discussion. Like the reader of these online messages, we are “always-already” caught up in the experiential lifeworld, whether it be the world of a text, of the

screen, or of face-to-face social activity. Our awareness arises in and through this involvement.

This condition of being “always already” immersed in experience brings with it a number of further implications that are directly related to hermeneutic-phenomenological understandings of knowledge, language, and communication which are similarly “always already” or “primary” in nature, and are also illustrated in the description above. Speaking first of language, the description indicates that language and one’s experience of the world are inextricably intertwined. The language used in the postings to evoke the coming of the fall cannot be understood without experience (or vicarious experience) of this season and its meanings. Experience is “always already” infused with language through which it is invoked and intimated. Additionally, these descriptions illustrate something similar about *knowledge* itself: “knowing” or imagining autumn in this way is not a question enumerating a series of facts or in discrete sets of data about seasonal change from summer to winter. “Knowing” in this case is more a matter of recalling or imagining autumnal “impressions” or “feelings.” Knowing in this sense is “always already” bound up with impression, feeling, and affect. Finally, describing the coming autumn in terms of “birds gathering around [a] feeder” or “the rhythms of the city becoming more...measured” illustrates the hermeneutic-phenomenological understanding of *communication*. This process is not a matter of information transmission; it is instead understood as a question of shared feeling or common “attunement.”

As indicated above, these understandings of communication, knowledge, language, and experience unsettle or disrupt the way(s) these same phenomena are understood conventionally, in terms of “covert” or traditional philosophy. This part of the chapter, therefore, is devoted to illustrating and explaining these unconventional understandings. The table below offers an outline of the issues taken up for discussion in this chapter, both in the order that they are presented, and in terms of their (often diametric) opposition to conventional understanding(s).

Table 6.1: "Covert" or traditional philosophical presuppositions versus those of hermeneutic phenomenology

| | "Covert" or traditional philosophy | Hermeneutic Phenomenology |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Nature of Knowledge | ... as the accumulation of data and the verification of hypotheses | ... as non-cognitive "attunement" |
| Function of Language | Language designates data, facts and hypotheses | Language "co-emerges" with the shared lifeworld |
| Structure of Experience | Data accumulated and hypotheses verified through experience are not qualitatively differentiated | Experience is structured as movement between "foreground" and inexhaustible "background" |
| Meaning of Communication | Communication as the transmission of information | Communication as shared "attunement" |

Knowledge as Non-Cognitive "Attunement"

The meaning of the first item listed in the table above, knowledge as non-cognitive attunement, can be illustrated through a number of simple but beguiling questions posed by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1969): "Does a child believe that milk exists? Does a cat know that a mouse exists?'... 'Are we to say that the knowledge that there are physical objects comes very early or very late?'" (p. 63e). The answer to Wittgenstein's initial questions about the child and the cat is, of course, "yes"; a child or infant *does* know that milk exists and the cat *is* aware that the mouse exists. But the kind of knowledge or belief about "physical objects" presented in these examples is one that is not so much an explicit act of knowing or believing as it is an inseparable part of the lifeworld, an inextricable part of the cares and concerns of a shared reality: "it's true that knowing something," Wittgenstein concludes, "does not [necessarily] involve thinking about it" (p. 63e).

In keeping with its rejection of the detached, objective stance, hermeneutic phenomenology regards knowledge as more closely allied with action and emotion than with explicit perceptions or cogitations. The existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger describes

“knowing” in terms of a way one “is” in the world. He designates this way of “being” with the word *Befindlichkeit*. This refers literally to how one “finds oneself” in everyday situations and involvements. Heidegger (1962) writes that this emotive, attitudinal way of knowing represents a kind of “openness to the world” and that it is “constituted existentially” by a certain kind of “attunement” (p. 176).

An interesting illustration of non-cognitive knowledge or knowing as a kind of mood-bound “attunement” is provided in a short discussion entitled “In Praise of Tiredness” by Jens Soentgen. Here Soentgen (1998) speaks of knowledge and awareness not in terms of “knowing” discrete facts, but through a vocabulary of “flows” and “atmospheres”:

[It] is the tired person, rather than the person who [is] fresh and wide-awake who is the most sensitive to flows and atmospheres. Of course, there are many forms of tiredness, such as tense or nervous exhaustion which can make one weak, and can prevent sleep. But our concern here is with a more benevolent form of tiredness, one that slackens the whole body without leaving any knots or points of tension whatever. In this kind of tiredness, the body comes to its own, the breath flows steadily and independently. [...] This kind of tiredness not only increases emotional alertness, it also boosts one’s capability for empathic embodied communication. (p. 75; translated by the author)

Such assertions may seem unfamiliar in a culture that values caffeine-addled alertness and epistemological objectivity over drowsy feelings of well-being, but Soentgen provides a number of examples – from corporeal connection between massage therapist and patient, to East Indian attitudes to sleep – to illustrate his point. This understanding of “knowing” would invite the reader (and researcher) to recall – whether from yogic meditation or from intense and complete involvement with work – the experience(s) of his or her mood-bound insights, realizations, or knowledge that resonate with Soentgen’s “praise of tiredness.”

Language as “Co-Emergent” and Experience as Structured

Language for hermeneutic phenomenology is something inseparable from an attuned, “moody” knowledge and from experience itself. Language permeates thought; language and experience, simply put, exist together. Gadamer (1989) explains:

Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under a universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. (p. 417)

Language and experience are in other words “coemergent” (Lye, 1996). The result is that together, language and experience “disclose” or are coconstitutive of the lifeworld. Gadamer explains this inextricable interconnection of experience and language further:

...language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it. Not only is the world *world* only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. (p. 440; emphasis added)

Paul Ricoeur (1981), also an important figure in modern hermeneutics, puts this in slightly different terms: “To bring [experience] into language is not to change it into something else, but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself” (p. 115). Language is also not separate from who humans are. “We are not beings who ‘use’ symbols, but beings who are constituted by their use” (Lye, 1996). We are “always already” immersed in language just as we are immersed in experience. Language emerges with experience, and is not used—as if from the outside—to label and categorize what is experienced.

Consider another brief description of engagement with technology that can further illustrate aspects of lifeworld immersion. This description presents a computer user browsing the Internet in a familiar setting:

“What could that be about?” I wonder as I stumble across yet another colorful blog. But as I click and look at it, the mouse gets stuck again. I look up in agitation, and am suddenly reminded of where I am: in a packed computer lab on campus. The room is filled with people, but it is silent except for the

whirring of cooling fans and the clicking of keyboards. I look at my watch and realize that 15 minutes has passed. I need to get down to some real work! (Friesen, 2003, p. 64)

A person can in some senses be “lost” in the experience of browsing the Web, blissfully unaware of the passage of time, with his or her attention flowing freely from one page or link to another. Awareness of the reality of physical location can be almost forgotten under these conditions: it is pushed into the background, so to speak. At the same time, an interruption in the “flow” of browsing the Web can radically restructure a person’s attention: What was once in the background (e.g., the computer lab) comes to occupy a position that is very much in the center of one’s awareness.

This distinction between experiential foreground and background, or what is sometimes called *figure* and *ground*, is pervasive and fundamental in phenomenology. We do not experience the world as a booming, buzzing confusion tamed through mental categories and hypotheses. It is experienced much more in terms of foreground and background, constituting a unified experiential whole or *gestalt*. The foreground—constituted by an individual’s overt concerns and actions—acquires its meaning only in relationship to a background in which a person may “find” him- or herself. Even a word or phrase articulated or “foregrounded” in conversation gains its meaning from a background constituted by a particular situation, by what was said before and by what is of relevance to the speakers.

The distinction between foreground and background corresponds to two distinct ways of encountering technology (or “equipment”) that are described in some detail by Heidegger. On the one hand, when the technology being used is familiar and routine, it can disappear from our awareness into the background, being simply “handy” or becoming effectively “invisible” or what Heidegger calls “*ready to hand*.” Conversely, in the absence of this routine familiarity, technology becomes an object of explicit attention or contemplation. Heidegger calls this foregrounded technology “*present at hand*.” An especially pertinent illustration of technology as “ready to hand” and “present at hand” is provided by usability theorist Paul Dourish, in *Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction*: “consider the mouse connected to my computer. Much of the time,” Dourish

explains, “I act *through* the mouse” without giving it any thought. “I select objects, operate menus, and so forth. The mouse is, in Heidegger’s terms, *ready-to-hand*” (p. 109; emphases in original). But when “I reach the edge of the mousepad...my orientation toward the mouse changes”:

I become conscious of the mouse mediating my action, precisely because of the fact that it has been interrupted. ...When I act on the mouse in this way, being mindful of it *as* an object of my activity, the mouse is *present-at-hand*. (Dourish, 2001, p. 109; emphases in original)

Engagement with a computer (or any other complex activity) involves a recurring movement from the foreground to the background and back again: When technology is acting as expected, enabling one to concentrate on what is on the screen, one is able to work unreflectively through the mouse. In this situation, this device becomes only one of a number of elements and interrelationships with the other technical equipment within one’s lifeworld context or background. But when this equipment “breaks down,” it enters the foreground and becomes the focus of explicit attention (e.g., Heidegger, 1962, p. 105; Winograd & Flores, 1986, pp. 169–173).

The myriad elements that are part of a background at a given time cannot, even hypothetically, be fully explicated, modeled, or represented in all their rich and ambivalent meanings and complex functions. This aspect of hermeneutic-phenomenological theory plays a prominent role in discussions of technology and technical design. For example, in an article on artificial intelligence (and the formal representation of explicit knowledge upon which it has relied) Radovan (1997) describes this matter rather succinctly:

[Any] attempt to explicate all the content of a background is bound to failure since every step of such an explication would introduce new expressions which would require a further explication, and so on ad infinitum. On the other hand, assertions without a background would have no meanings (i.e. no interpretation) at all. Consequently, there are claims that there is no way to express human knowledge by a purely formal system...nor to obtain human-like intelligence by computation. (p. 220; see also Agre, 1997, pp. 222–240)

The circularity or infinite regress that Radovan invokes here is central to hermeneutic phenomenology. It is a form of the iterative dynamics of the hermeneutic circle. Of course, the ongoing interpretive activity implied in the hermeneutic circle is *not* something to be “overcome” through greater precision or more exhaustive epistemological effort. Instead, as Gadamer (1989) explains, it is intrinsic to understanding in general:

...the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. (p. 291)

This circularity, then, is the movement through which knowledge can be said to arise; the lifeworld becomes known through a kind of circulation from the particular (what is analyzed and known) to the general (the lifeworld background in which its meaning is rooted) and back again.

Communication as Shared “Attunement”

There is one last and vital factor of “primacy” in hermeneutic phenomenology and in the lifeworld that is important here. This is *communication*. Like any other human activity, communication occurs in phenomenological terms as concerned action against the inexhaustible background of the lifeworld. In this context, communication does not appear as the conveyance or exchange of messages from one person to another. As Heidegger (1962) states, communication “is never anything like a conveying of experience, such as opinions or wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another” (p. 205). Communication instead is a kind of “making explicit” of a common, pragmatic foreground focus, in the context of shared or similar background meanings. It is not a question of bridging two otherwise isolated subjective interiors or naming preexisting entities within an unchanging, objectively given environment. Instead, it is a matter of confirming and articulating some of the many aspects of the lifeworld that are shared and are said to be known “intersubjectively.” Communication emerges as a process of the “coordination” of everyday

action, through which “a common world is brought into existence” (Biesta, 2004, p. 15). Communication, in other words, is the collaborative “bringing into existence” of a world that is shared.

Once again, this can be illustrated through a brief descriptive passage. Like the first of these descriptions, this one is about communication in an online educational setting, specifically in a class discussion forum:

Hiya,

My name is Norm Friesen, and I have had a number of years of experience using the Web and training others how to use it in different settings. Earlier, I worked in a variety of educational settings, including university and college libraries, schools classrooms and elsewhere. I've taken a number of humanities courses in the past that combine CMC and F2F communication.

After finishing this brief introductory message, I re-read it and see some problems: “Hiya” sounds too informal. I change it to “Hi”; “settings” is repeated too often, so I try to vary my wording; “CMC” and “F2F” might be unfamiliar to some readers, so I simply say “online humanities courses.” Finally, after reading it one more time, I send it off, to the many unknown recipients on the list. (Friesen, 2003, p. 116)

The above description of the composition of a simple online message illustrates the rootedness of communication in the lifeworld: Writing a message online (and communication in other contexts) is not simply a question of transmitting information or knowledge; it is rather a question of creating an impression or even an atmosphere. In the case of online discussion, this creative process is one in which a participant or interlocutor can invest a significant amount of time and effort, choosing carefully his or her words and a suitable level of formality and specificity. In the case of spoken communication, a particular impression or atmosphere is cultivated not only by choosing one's words in advance, but also in many other ways (e.g., through one's facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, etc.).

Speaking in more general terms, communication, like knowledge, is inseparable from the way in which one simply “is” or “finds oneself.” Communication can be understood as a matter of “finding” oneself *together* with someone else, of sharing a disposition, a common kind of attunement, comportment or *Befindlichkeit*. “Through [communication] a co-state of mind, a *Mitbefindlichkeit*...a co-

understanding gets shared" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 205, 1977, p. 162); the term "*Mit*" here simply means "with"). Through communication, in other words, interlocutors "find themselves" together, in a shared intercorporeal context of copresence. Like knowledge and *Befindlichkeit*, feelings and emotions rather than explicit cognitions are most directly constitutive of this copresence or *Mitbefindlichkeit*—specifically, they are manifest as a shared mood or more accurately as a common flow or *atmosphere*. This kind of shared disposition can be associated with a particular place, a particular person, a relationship or even a particular exchange (especially if it is notably heated, pleasant, encouraging, etc.). Note also that that this copresence does not have to be literal or physical; written correspondence, telephone conversations, video, and other technological forms of mediation also enable those in communication to "find themselves" together to a greater or lesser extent.

As such, atmosphere, mood, and by extension, communication itself, represents what contemporary German phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels (2005) refers to as a *Zwischeninstanz*, an "interstitial entity"—something that, as he says, finds "its adequate ground neither in the order of things, nor in the realm of the mind" (p. 25). Communication arises from somewhere in-between. Whether it takes place through the written word or in intercorporeal copresence, communication as ambience or atmosphere—as something "between"—is something that is not under the control of any one party. At the same time, though, it is a part of a shared, affective character, a way of "finding" oneself that is not simply arbitrary and subjective, or imposed from without.

Applying Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Utrecht School

The particular descriptive method that is the focus of this chapter (and illustrated in a number of passages, above) exists in intimate interrelationship with hermeneutic-phenomenological understandings of knowledge, experience, and communication. Although the characteristics of the method may appear counter-intuitive to some readers and researchers, the descriptive nature of the hermeneutic-phenomenological method is associated with the creation of accessible and rich research texts. These texts can present an appeal to read-

ers and a kind of validity and generalizability that does not require an explicit understanding of Heidegger's philosophy or Gadamer's hermeneutics. The application of hermeneutic-phenomenological methods to research to create such texts was initially conceived by the Utrecht School, and has been developed further and given explicit articulation by Max van Manen, a Canadian educational researcher.

The Utrecht school represents a loose grouping of scholars, working from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, who applied aspects of hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method to a wide range of disciplines. Writing together with Utrecht scholar Bas Levering, van Manen (2002) explains:

The Utrecht School consisted of an assortment of phenomenologically oriented psychologists, educators, pedagogues, pediatricians, sociologists, criminologists, jurists, psychiatrists, and other medical doctors, who formed a more or less close association of like-minded academics. (p. 278)

In recent years, as van Manen (2002) observes, the work of this group "...has inspired...variations of a practice-based phenomenology especially in psychology (e.g., Giorgi [2006] and Moustakas [1994]), in nursing (e.g., Benner [1994]) and in education (e.g., van Manen [1997])." One of the notable characteristics of the work of the Utrecht School is the way its members would "write up" their research in an informal, even conversational way. The research publications that are most characteristic of the Utrecht School skilfully interweave informal descriptive writing with more formal reflection and analysis. This was accomplished in a manner that makes the careful and sometimes painstaking research and writing efforts of the authors difficult for the reader to detect. In addition, these researchers did not produce any texts specifically on the question of methodology. Thus, despite the existence of some exemplary pieces associated with the Utrecht School (e.g., Bleeker & Mulderij, 1992; Buytendijk, 1988; Langeveld, 1983), the very conversational nature of these texts effectively "closed the possibility for others to exercise these same practices" (Levering & van Manen 2002, p. 278). The apparent simplicity of their accomplished writing, in effect, hides the painstaking complexity of the concepts and processes employed by those using hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method.

In this context, van Manen's work (e.g., 1997, 2002) can be characterized as an attempt to "reopen" the possibility of exercising these same practices of "writing up" research. In *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (1997), van Manen explains in some detail how researchers can work toward the close interweaving of analysis, reflection, and informal description that typifies the texts of the Utrecht School. He also details how to collect, combine, and refine interview and other descriptive material to serve as experiential data in this kind of research. As the title of van Manen's book indicates, pedagogy is an important subject area to which this type of research can be applied. However, van Manen does not link his methodology with a specific, explicit set of philosophical understandings. Also, he avoids delineating anecdotal description in terms of its typical, formal and linguistic characteristics.

This chapter takes up these methodological issues, specifically as they relate to e-learning, showing how a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to research follows from the basic philosophical presuppositions outlined above. What follows here, therefore, aims to show how hermeneutic phenomenology and the kind of descriptive writing it employs can provide effective means of opening up and exploring new questions for research.

The phenomenological method articulated here leverages and makes the most of the characteristics of lifeworld involvement, of non-cognitive knowledge, and especially of language as a form of shared attunement, as described above. In keeping with the primacy of lifeworld involvement over detached, theoretical observation, a hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation is one that, as mentioned earlier, begins with the reduction or bracketing of explanation and theory. If knowing is principally a matter of disposition and attunement, this method advocates that the researcher himself or herself take up concerned, involved, and attuned orientation to the subject under investigation. In this sense, practicing hermeneutic-phenomenological research becomes, as van Manen (2002) explains, a question of "attitude or disposition of sensitivity and openness: it is a matter of openness to everyday, experienced meanings as opposed to theoretical ones." Research thus becomes a sort of "dwelling with" a researcher's problem or question, rather than the implementation of

an unambiguous, clear-cut protocol. "Phenomenology," as van Manen (2002) says, "is the active and reflective participation in meaning."

In this sense, this method emphasizes an explicitly hermeneutic dynamic between the irreducible complexity of the lifeworld (on the one hand) and the object of investigation (on the other), which can only gain its meaning in this lived experiential context. Finally, the hermeneutic-phenomenological method also shows how the written presentation of the "results" of the research can attempt to immerse readers and practitioners vicariously in a kind of simulated, concerned involvement. Of course, this immersion happens not through the provision of argumentation or information, but through the careful cultivation of practices of *communication* as shared mood, attunement, or atmosphere.

The researcher can develop and cultivate experiential meaning through the use of a range of sources. As van Manen (2002) explains, these sources can include a range of linguistic sources, including metaphors, sayings, and etymological and definitional distinctions. There are many studies, for example, of the rich, metaphoric vocabularies associated with computing and Internet, and their implications for understanding and experience (e.g., Barry, 1991; Friesen, 2003; Thorburn, 2003). Van Manen also points out that these sources can include "historical, cultural, literary" and aesthetic materials as well. The popular movie *You've Got Mail* (1998), as one example of a cultural, aesthetic source, has been used in a hermeneutic-phenomenological investigation of "keeping in touch by electronic mail" (Dobson, 2002).

In terms of the investigation undertaken in this book and in many other hermeneutic-phenomenological investigations, the principal source of meaning or of experiential data is presented by open-ended, "qualitative" interviews. These are similar to the kind of interviews conducted for the purposes of narrative research (as described in chapter two). As a data-gathering technique generally, this type of interview is marked by its unstructured and unscripted nature. As discussed in chapter two, one of the most important challenges in such an interview is for the interviewer to remain responsive, "flexible and attentive to the...meanings that may emerge as the interview pro-

gresses" (Warren, 2002, p. 87). As noted earlier, such an interview tends to take the form of a kind of an "interpretive" or "guided conversation" that unfolds with very few prescribed questions. Instead, this type of interview relies on the unscripted use of "probes to clarify answers or [to] request further examples, and follow-up questions that pursue implications of answers to main questions" (van Manen, 2002; Warren, 2002, pp. 85, 86–87).

Moreover, like the interview process associated with narrative research, the data gathered from the participant or interviewee in hermeneutic-phenomenological research is *not* seen as coming to an end with the conclusion of the initial interview session. Van Manen encourages researchers to include participants in the ongoing, cyclical, hermeneutic discovery and development of experiential meanings, as these unfold in subsequent stages in the research. This includes discussing interview notes or interview transcripts with the interviewee and exploring themes and common meanings that emerge from these provisional documents. This involvement of the interviewee extends to the review and discussion of more developed and refined descriptive material and drafts of the research text itself. According to van Manen (2002), the question "Is this what the experience is really like?" should be central to and ground all such discussions.

Unlike narrative research, though, the purpose of establishing this kind of interviewer-interviewee relationship is not simply to precipitate and validate "activat[ion of] narrative production" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 39). It is instead, as van Manen explains

an interpretive conversation wherein both partners reflectively orient themselves to the interpersonal or collective ground that brings the significance of the phenomenological question into view. The art of the researcher in [such an] interview is to keep the question (of the meaning of the phenomenon) open: to keep himself or herself and the interviewee oriented to the substance of the thing being questioned. (2002)

In the course of such an interview, it is important for the researcher to be on the lookout for descriptive material having potentially "anecdotal" qualities – taking the form of a short account or a notable or unusual incident that captures or "says" something about the experience in question.

Although this type of data can be elicited using general qualitative interview techniques, as described in chapter two, interviewing in hermeneutic-phenomenological research presents a number of additional challenges. The first of these is that participants or interviewees do not necessarily orient to experiential questions or themes; they do not tend to describe their experience in terms of “incidents” or according to experiential “amplitude.” Research participants may respond more easily to the question of personal stories or narratives overall than they do to the somewhat more nebulous category of “experience.” To help both interviewee and interviewer to maintain a focus on the experiential, it can be useful to employ certain ways of asking questions or setting up “probes” that guide the conversation away from theory and explanation and keep it firmly anchored in the situated and particular. One of these ways is to explore the experience with the interviewee in terms of what van Manen (2002) (and others before him) have identified as the four fundamental lifeworld themes (or existentials). These are “lived space (spatiality); lived body (corporeality); lived time (temporality); and lived human relation (relationality or communality).” Whether the experience involves aimless Web surfing or the careful composition of an online posting (for example), the researcher can “always ask about any experience the fundamental questions that correspond to these four lifeworld existentials” (van Manen, 2002), such as “did time fly or crawl?” or “how did others make you feel?”

A second way of asking questions of these kinds is to switch from a conventional vocabulary of intellection and thought to one of feeling and impression. Thus, asking a question such as, “What did you *think* when that happened?” should be replaced with the question, “How did you *feel* when that happened?” Focusing the participant on his or her feelings and responses can help to orient and open the interview to questions of situated attunement and “non-cognitive” knowledge.

When computer systems and networked environments are involved, a “concrete” or situated orientation can be further strengthened by keeping the technical interface, environment, or “situation” in question close by. At the same time, it is important that such interviews be held face to face or at least in a context that engenders the

greatest degree of informality, comfort, and unstructured interaction as possible. Sharing a physical setting is an obvious and effective way of accomplishing this focus on the “concrete.”

The Anecdote as a Narrative Device

The term “anecdote” has been deliberately chosen by van Manen for its colloquial overtones and its obvious distance from the “authoritative theories” invoked earlier by Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006):

Anecdotes have enjoyed low status in scholarly writings... Evidence that is “only anecdotal” is not permitted to furnish a proper argument. But empirical generalization is not the aim of phenomenological research. [In fact, anecdotes]...express a certain disdain for the alienated and alienating discourse of scholars who have difficulty showing how life and theoretical propositions are connected. (p. 119)

The anecdote as van Manen defines it is a short, simple story, a vividly particular presentation of a single incident that is intended to stand out precisely through its incidental nature, in its compressed but concrete particularity. The “brief descriptions” provided earlier in this chapter to illustrate notions such as lifeworld involvement, communication, and figure and ground are examples of anecdotal descriptions developed as part of the author’s dissertation research.

As a kind of rudimentary narrative, an anecdotal description can be understood in terms of the five sequential elements of narrative structure outlined in chapter two: exposition, crisis, evaluation, denouement, and coda. Due to its abbreviated character, however, the anecdote often begins in *media res*, in the “middle of the action,” so to speak. The anecdote seeks to engross the reader as directly as possible in a given concrete, experiential, lifeworld context. An anecdote, therefore, often begins with a crisis, “complicating action” or “breach.” This crisis element and the narrative “evaluation” element that follows are often the focal points of the anecdote. It highlights the “point” or purpose of the particular incident or account (van Manen, 1997, p. 120). In the narrative stages that follow, specifically the denouement and coda, this situation returns to equilibrium or “canonicity.” If the denouement and coda elements are present at any length in the anecdote, they often have the function of supporting the

“point” that is made in the complication and evaluation presented earlier.

As narratives in miniature, anecdotes also include the narrative dimension of “voice” introduced in the second chapter. The concept of “voice” refers to the manner in which narratives are told *by* someone and are *about* someone. Voice, both literally and figuratively, is something through which the position of a particular person is articulated. Voice also raises the question or issue of “being heard,” of “being silenced,” or of “finding one’s voice.” As vivid and concrete narratives, anecdotal accounts enable voices, positions, and perspectives to “speak through” them. Anecdotes provide the possibility for the expression of certain aspects and kinds of experience that tend to be overlooked in research categories and data aggregations. Using slightly different terms, van Manen (1997) explains that “anecdotes may provide an account” of ideas and perspectives “which were never written down” (p. 119). This can be especially valuable in phenomenological research into the everyday experiences, for example, of underprivileged socioeconomic classes (Charlesworth, 2000), of those with mental disorders (Haase, 2002) or those with physical and mental disabilities (Saevi, 2005). It also applies to descriptions of computer use and design. User practices, frustrations, “work-arounds,” and, of course, technical breakdowns, are generally and sometimes systematically filtered out of research and technical reports.

Hidden from view, almost imperceptible because they blend so perfectly into the backdrop of daily, mundane experience, are stories that beg to be told of people as they work with, against, and through technologies that abound in our lives. These silent, hidden stories have been effaced in modern times, however, as the value placed upon the stories of everyday knowledge—of “know-how”—has given way to the “knowledge in the machine,” or the “knowledge in the system.” (Johnson, 1998, p. 4)

Literature on a new or emerging technology and its functions and capabilities—in e-learning like any related field—will tend to focus on or even promote what the technology can accomplish or the “knowledge” and capabilities embedded in it. It is less common to read accounts that focus on what the technology asks of the user in terms of particular adaptations and work-arounds or that capture the frustra-

tion with a technology or interface for users, both expert and novice alike. Too frequently, informal narratives and anecdotes of such failures, breakdowns, and solutions remain in the neglected realm of user complaints or stories of support service personnel. The hermeneutic-phenomenological study of experience can serve as a means of rescuing such accounts, perspectives, and associated voices from more rationalistic and promotional impulses.

An anecdote can also be characterized by what it is *not*: it does not present general principles, statistical patterns, or theoretical constructs. It is not something that is used as evidence in the sense of a historical incident or something that “really happened” at a given point in time. The anecdote should also be differentiated from the vivid ethnographic accounts of computer use of the kind provided by Sherry Turkle in *The Second Self* (1984, 2005) or *The Life on the Screen* (1995), which Turkle (2005) characterizes as “portraits of what can [and does] happen when people enter into very close relationships” with the computer (p. 25). Anecdotal accounts are quite different. When employed as a means of studying computer use, anecdotal accounts generally do *not* serve as evidence or representations of atypical but “real” users or uses of computers. Instead, they attempt to provide the reader with recognizable experiences that arise in everyday engagement with this technology. Anecdotes are *not* presented to the reader with the tacit claim, “This really happened”; they instead bring with them the tacit appeal: “Is this experientially recognizable or resonant?” And this is done with the intention of raising the further question: “What is the experiential meaning of what happened?”

The Language of the Anecdote

Because language is coemergent with experience itself, it can serve as a tool of remarkable utility in developing experientially based anecdotal descriptions. Language and written communication have been observed as representing a kind of prototypical “virtual reality” (e.g., Ryan, 1994; see also Shields, 2003, p. 43). In the form of books or storytelling, writing and language generally can take readers and listeners to new and different worlds or experiential possibilities; and this is how language and writing are understood in the device of the “an-

ecdote." Language in this sense is a means of emulation, amplification, and simulation, rather than a tool of identification, designation, and analysis. The potential of language for "contextualization and amplification rather than...[for] structural essentialization" (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 9) lies at the heart of the phenomenological method as conceptualized by van Manen. Language, in other words, is used in keeping with the criteria and operating principles identified by Bruner's discussion of narrative in the second chapter of this book. Walter Benjamin's (1968a) characterization of the art of storytelling applies just as well to the anecdote: both seek to provide the reader with an experiential "amplitude that information lacks" (p. 89). When this amplitude is greatest, the anecdote can enable the reader to experience vicariously the phenomenon it describes. More modestly, the anecdote can also present to the reader an experience that is at least plausible, empathically recognizable, within the possible experiences of the shared intersubjective lifeworld.

The anecdote, therefore, is fundamentally literary and *mimetic* or imitative in nature. The term "mimesis" refers to the re-creation of reality in fiction, specifically where such re-creation is as direct and vivid as possible. The anecdote, then, works *mimetically* to enable the reader to experience what it describes. The opposite of mimesis in this sense is *diegesis*. Diegesis refers to "telling" and denotes a type of narrative where readers are distanced from the action, rather than living through and identifying with it. It would be mimetic, for example, to quote statements in a dialogue or even interior monologue; it would be diegetic to paraphrase as a narrator what people are saying. Consider an abbreviated description that attempts to express the experience of waiting for something to download, such as "Waiting for a server response was frustrating." This would be *diegetic* in the sense that it is *telling* the reader what is felt, rather than attempting to simulate or emulate it. A kind of descriptive enactment of impatient waiting could be accomplished by adopting a more colloquial voice and by writing something more along the lines of "The blue line crawled soooo slowly across the screen that I finally picked up something to read." In this way, the experience of waiting can be "evoked" or "imitated" through the description of outward manifestations of its consequences. By depicting how, in the course of waiting, one can "give

up” and become engaged in another activity, descriptive language can be used to present the experience of waiting more powerfully than if terms such as “frustration,” “impatience,” and “giving up” had been mentioned by name. Moreover, the imitative, sonoric quality of some informal and other expressions—their sound, alliteration and rhythms, and forms of “onomatopoeia”—can also be used to heighten this mimetic effect.

Other aspects or dimensions of anecdotal description can be illustrated by considering a couple of extended examples. The first example, below, illustrates how a phenomenological theme related to computer use might be stated in more traditional, diegetic, detached, and dispassionate academic prose. This example could conceivably be from a discussion of user interfaces and interactivity design. What is at issue is the presence of unreflective “non-cognized” interactions with the computer—such as keyboard strokes and habitual or compulsive clicks of the mouse—and the way that these have appeared (albeit indirectly) in the phenomenological literature.

The role of reflexive, habitual actions in computer use has generally been ignored in favour of rationalist accounts where decisions of the user appear to be almost as rule-bound and logical as those of the computer. A good counter-example is provided by the description of typewriting provided in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) account of “the spatiality of one’s own body and motility” (p. 144). He writes “When I sit at my typewriter, a motor space opens up beneath my hands, in which I am about to “play” what I have read.” This space for play is one in which the user can “perform” with habitual ease, and in which an equally strong sense of dis-ease and dis-ruption can presumably arise. Many computer users can also no doubt recall occasions where almost reflexive, habitual actions and interactions—clicking of an “okay” or “no” on a dialogue box, for example—led to consequences that were quite different from what was actually intended.

The second example, below, deals with similar subject matter, but is deliberately “anecdotal,” mimetic, and evocative.

“1 new message in your inbox”! A message box pops up and my computer chimes softly. A quick glance shows that it’s from a friend who also happens to be in an online class I’m taking. It seems a bit impersonal and vague, but I’m glad to hear from her, and I put down my morning cup of coffee to write a reply. I tell her that I enjoy the class we’re both taking, but that I’m finding the subject matter kind of lame. Later in the day, I check my email again,

and am surprised to see that I have received a message from myself! I click on it only to see that it is the message I earlier sent to my friend. I feel an embarrassed blush as I realize what I have done: I've sent my message to everyone in the class, including the instructor! The message that I originally replied to was actually one that my friend sent to our class email list! I feel like an idiot! (Adapted from Friesen, 2007, p. 1)

This last description does not simply invite the reader to "recall an occasion" or provide a snippet from a related account in the literature. Instead, it attempts to emulate or simulate for the reader such an "occasion" or incident. This is an experience in which concrete specificities—the first person narrator, the e-mail notification, the momentary surprise, the pang of embarrassment—are all intended to contribute to a broader recognizability of the description. Inclusion of particular concrete details—reference to "a cup of morning coffee," "my computer chim[ing] softly," and fixed, interactional phrases such as "1 new message in your inbox"—are intended to heighten the mimetic effect of the description.

The value of an anecdotal description such as the one above can be realized both in readers' responses to it as well as in the researcher's written reflections on it. The point in reflecting on the written description, of course, is not to reduce what has been described to one or more theories or explanations, but rather, to further amplify the description and to let it "speak for itself." To accomplish this, one might ask a number of questions of the anecdote: What is striking in the description, upon a number of readings, or to a number of different readers? In writing, rewriting, and rereading the text, what is essential to include and what could be left out? How does the description and its immediate implications compare to still other descriptions, say of the typewriter by Merleau-Ponty? What emerges in such a comparison as similar and as different, experientially speaking? The power of anecdotal descriptions to illuminate these kinds of similarities and differences, connections or patterns—initially as a form of reflective "research" to the writer and later in the form of a descriptive "demonstration" for the reader—is a further, important aspect of this method. As a researcher, it is not uncommon to gain significant insights into the experience in question well after it has been discussed in interviews and written up in anecdotes, simply

through the act of reflecting on and comparing their contents or interpretively amplifying their significance.

For example, the second of the two descriptions can be interpreted as depicting a kind of “breakdown.” It shows, in its own way, a technology or tool that moves from experiential background to the foreground and as such, it can be compared to other accounts of breakdown—whether these other accounts are formulated explicitly as phenomenological descriptions or not. This account of a technical breakdown can be compared, for example, to the description provided by Paul Dourish earlier in this chapter. Dourish’s abbreviated “narrative” of the mouse and mousepad provides an account of breakdown that is in other ways quite different from the description of the misdirected e-mail presented just above. Both cases describe an interruption in routine action through which technical operation is revealed in a new and different light. But the specific way in which this occurs and what is revealed about computer technology in each case is not the same: Dourish’s example is one of a clearly evident physical and technical “breakage.” The e-mail example is much more ambiguous: the interruption of routine action that it represents involves questions of attention and expectation, related issues concerning the presentation of e-mail information and also, the relatively hidden workings of e-mail LISTSERV software (which is responsible for distributing the reply). Such a comparison shows that breakdowns can cover a considerable range of experiences and processes and can involve a wide range of issues and contingencies.

Conclusion: Validity

In concluding this chapter, an important question remains: Just how is it possible to judge the validity of the mimetic and evocative power of the anecdote overall? In statistical research, “validity” refers both to the rigor of the design of a particular study in isolating a causal relationship (internal validity) and to the degree to which the findings can be generalized to other persons and situations (external validity; see Borg & Gall, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 290–291). In phenomenological and other kinds of qualitative research, the overall validity of research findings is not understood in the same consensual

terms. Some authors have urged the use of other words and categories such as “transferability” and “trustworthiness” in place of internal and external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 289–331; Hoepfl, 1997). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that “trustworthiness” can be confirmed by examining the “audit trail” left by the original collection, interpretation, and presentation of research data. They also suggest that “transferability” can be assessed when researchers provide sufficient richness of data to enable “judgments...on the part of potential appliers” or on the part of other researchers who would put the same data to use in a different context (pp. 319–327). In the case of both trustworthiness and transferability, these processes involve the active exercise of judgment and competence of both the original researchers and those who follow in their footsteps. In the case of hermeneutic phenomenology in particular, this judgment and competence are exercised in the processes of writing and of reading the research material at hand.

The actual judgment, evaluation, or validation of hermeneutic-phenomenological writing—and of its transferability and trustworthiness—is of course not to be undertaken through some form of detached objective measurement. Instead, to consider the validity of this research, it is necessary to return to the terms provided by the philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology itself. As indicated earlier, the experiential meanings studied in hermeneutic phenomenology are neither completely objective nor simply subjective in nature. Instead, they are *intersubjective* in their character and they can be used to judge the validity of descriptive writing through two particular processes: (1) specific types of reading; and (2) practices of reading and writing that are cyclical and collaborative in nature.

In reading descriptive, hermeneutic-phenomenological accounts, a special attention to the use of words, expressions, figures, and metaphors—their differentiations in meaning, as well as their force and emotive quality—is important (van Manen, 1997, pp. 58–62). This requires a particular kind of attunement or openness to the text on the part of the researcher, who should allow himself or herself to be “addressed” by it. This attunement requires that the researcher allows himself or herself to be addressed by the text in ways that are perhaps more familiar in reading fiction than in approaching academic texts.

This “address” of the text can be substantially emotional and in this sense non-cognitive. In keeping with hermeneutic-phenomenological understandings, the text can be seen as evocative of a mood or a disposition. The effect of the anecdote or of a phenomenological text generally is confirmed, in other words, if it is able to communicate as communication is understood in hermeneutic phenomenology: as the evocation of a shared mood or more specifically, a common *atmosphere*.

One type of mood or atmosphere that is particularly significant in confirming the strength or validity of a description or passage is “wonder.” This is not wonder in the rather extreme sense of “rapt attention” or “amazed admiration” but more in the sense of the suspension of the mundane. Hermeneutic-phenomenological description and reflection, as van Manen (2002) explains, aims to

shatter the taken-for-grantedness of our everyday reality. Wonder [in this sense] is the unwilling willingness to meet what is utterly strange in what is most familiar. It is the willingness to step back and let things speak to us, a passive receptivity to let the things of the world present themselves in their own terms.

To respond to a text with wonder, to meet the “utterly strange” in a phenomenon that may be otherwise thoroughly “known” and familiar, is to be granted as a reader and researcher the rare opportunity to encounter something radically new and unexpected in one’s area of research. Such an encounter holds the possibility of forming the basis for an enlargement or even reconfiguration of questions, categories, and answers important to a given area of research.

The second intersubjective basis for judging the validity of descriptive writing involves a number of practical ways of both enhancing and gauging the communicative power of a text or a descriptive passage through “cycles” of reading and writing. One of these ways, “collaborative reflection,” is given special attention by van Manen (2002): a hermeneutic-phenomenological text under development can be circulated and discussed by the researcher with his or her research participants, with practitioners in the field or among a “research group or seminar circle” whose members are similarly developing

texts using the same methods. Van Manen (2002) explains that this process allows these other readers and writers to

share their views of the way the description does or does not resonate with their experiences. Themes and insights can thus be examined, articulated, reinterpreted, omitted, added, or reformulated. And the phenomenological research text under discussion can be read aloud to highlight its vocative dimensions.

From the sound of the words (their vocative dimension) to attunement with the experience itself, this reading-writing process can do much to support the resonance of descriptive and also reflective and interpretive writing. After receiving feedback from a reading of one's work among colleagues, this work can subsequently be rewritten, refined, and honed on the basis of the responses of these readers and their sense of the experience in question, and of the text's proximity to it.

In a more general sense, the activity of rereading, reinterpretation, and rewriting represents processes that, like the hermeneutic circle they emulate, do not come to a fixed endpoint. Each time a phenomenological or descriptive text, is encountered anew, the possibility exists for the reenactment and possible validation by a new or a returning reader. Hermeneutic-phenomenological writing, in short, is both a product that is circulated and disseminated and also a process that is reenacted each time life is breathed into the text and its meanings by a reader.