



## Editorial

by Hennie van der Mescht

Guest Editor

Special Edition on Phenomenology in Education

The August 2004 edition of the *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* (Volume 4, Edition 1) published a paper on educational leadership reporting on research using a phenomenological research design. The article was accompanied by a request for submissions in and on education using or drawing on phenomenological methodologies. The eight papers in this edition are the result, and I am delighted to have been tasked with writing this brief route map through the pages that follow.

Unsurprisingly in a collection on education, learning emerges as the chief preoccupation of all of these papers, often explicitly – as in the papers by Dahlberg and Ekebergh, Thomson, Makoe, Brackney, Grant and Rau – or by implication – as in those by Saevi and Eilifsen, and Hung and Stables. However, as this editorial will reveal, a phenomenological engagement with education, whether philosophically or empirically, can manifest itself in an exciting variety of approaches and interpretations.

The collection leads with two papers that are essentially philosophical. In “‘Heartful’ Or ‘Heartless’ Teachers? Or should we look for the Good Somewhere Else? Considerations of Students’ Experience of the Pedagogical Good”, Tone Saevi and Margareth Eilifsen contemplate the fundamental question of the ‘pedagogical good’. Drawing on data from phenomenological interviews and works of art, the paper works with students’ lived experiences of ‘good’ teachers. The researchers employ phenomenology both as meta-theory informing their explication

of what the ‘good’ may be in pedagogy, and also as methodological orientation as they construct descriptions based on their data. The ‘good’ is presented in concrete embodied experience, a position informed by Merleau-Ponty, Van Manen and Van den Berg. The writers suggest that the pedagogic good resides in the heart of the teacher and does not submit to analysis. It is not to be found in sets of criteria, and it is not a ‘practice’ that can be learned or trained. It resides in the teachers’ relationship with their students; teachers draw students into shared experience as they get to know the world and themselves. It is a ‘being with’.

A similar ontology underlies Ruyu Hung and Andrew Stables’s exploration of attitudes to the environment. The paper is essentially an exploration of opposing understandings of Husserl’s notion of the “lifeworld”. The authors argue that the Husserlian notion of lifeworld as a world common to all – and hence ‘universal’ – presents the environment as an objective ‘given’ to which we as humans direct our efforts and upon which we believe we can have an influence. A second counter view, similarly present in Husserl’s work but more fully developed in the writings of Merleau-Ponty, sees the environment as ‘lived’. The environment is subjective bodily experience. The paper argues that this attitude is more authentic and more likely to lead to the development of attentive and meaningful responses to the environment.

The lifeworld is also a central preoccupation of the paper by Karin Dahlberg and Margaretha Ekebergh,

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“To Use a Method Without being Ruled by It – Learning Supported by Drama in the Integration of Theory with Healthcare Practice”. The paper searches for answers to the perennial problem of how theory is to be integrated into learning that is essentially practice-based. Working in a context of nursing and midwifery teaching programmes, the authors report on the use of drama as a teaching and learning methodology. They draw on phenomenological interviews with students on the course. Again, it is the phenomenological insistence on the concrete, on ‘lived’ experience, which emerges as the central virtuous feature of this pedagogical engagement. Working through drama enables bodily-lived experience of practice, and subsequent reflection enables critical engagement with theory. In this way the approach collapses the theory-practice divide that characterises much learning into more ‘holistic’ learning, a tendency the authors describe as “intertwining” rather than integration. The use of drama offers unusual modes of expression, helping to ensure that it is the phenomenon itself – rather than theory or preconceived ideas – that remains in focus.

The next three papers offer explicit engagements with phenomenology as methodology. Carol Thomson and Mpine Makoe both explore student experiences of learning in distance programmes. In her paper, “Phenomenology in Teacher Education Contexts: Enhancing Pedagogical Insight and Critical Reflexive Capacity”, Thomson draws on Van Manen’s notion of a ‘phenomenology of practice’, which is characterised by a hermeneutic or interpretive approach to phenomenology. The paper is based on data gathered from phenomenological interviews of students on an honours education course focusing on academic literacy. Thomson argues for the need to focus on students as whole people – taking account of their history, culture, language and socio-economic contexts – as well as the need for practitioners to reflect on their practice. The paper discusses the difficulty of ‘naming’ the phenomenon under investigation, as well as the challenges that arise when cultural, racial, social, economic *and* linguistic differences exist between a researcher and the participants in her/his research, as was the case in this study.

Makoe’s paper, “Using Phenomenological Psychology to Analyse Distance Education Students’ Experiences and Conceptions of Learning”, similarly probes higher education students’ experiences of what it means to engage in distance education. Distance education as a mode of study is explained against a complex background of higher education’s need to grow both ‘access’ and ‘success’ and the fact that for many students distance education is the only option.

Makoe employs a Giorgian research design in the gathering and interpretation of data gathered from students. The central question – What is learning for these students? – develops into a complex answer which suggests that social, cultural, political and economic factors play a significant role in determining these students’ understanding of learning.

In the next two papers, the practice of higher education practitioners is under the spotlight. In her paper, “A Phenomenological Case Study of a Lecturer’s Understanding of Himself as an Assessor”, Rose Grant explores emerging approaches to assessment in higher education. The study was designed along Giorgian lines and set out to explore how a lecturer in education negotiates the apparent tension between the drive for massification and elitism in education. Through phenomenological interviews the paper demonstrates how the lecturer is able to broaden his practice through alternative assessment approaches while still retaining validity and quality. This amounts to a virtual re-invention of the ‘self’ as educator/assessor, embracing students for who they are, rather than trying to work with an idealised notion of ‘student’.

Asta Rau’s paper – “Anarchic Educational Leadership: An Alternative Approach to Postgraduate Supervision” – is not obviously a phenomenological study at all, but is included here for several reasons. First, its relevance and topicality; post-graduate supervision, a central function of an academic practitioner, is rarely the subject of research papers presented for publication. Second, drawing on social theory – in this case a nuanced reading of Foucault’s discourse on power – suggests a shift to a critical realist orientation and allows the researcher to engage with structure and agency in the competitive world of higher education. Finally, and most importantly, the paper demonstrates an engagement with qualitative data that enables access to the lived world of the student and supervisor, a distinctly phenomenological characteristic. The paper examines power relations between the supervisor and student and between that relationship and the university. Within these discourses in competition with each other the paper draws on anarchic leadership theory in terms of setting boundaries and findings one’s own way, and on humanist theory in celebrating and promoting individual agency. In this way the author is able to contemplate the research process as both product and person.

Finally, Dana Brackney’s paper offers the insights of a relative newcomer to the terrain of post-graduate study, asking the all too familiar question: how is it

possible to make sense of theory, of philosophy, in a learning experience that has engaged mostly with practice? In her paper, "Philosophy – Read, Write, Laugh, and Learn: A Student's Perspective", Brackney reflects on the daunting prospect of grappling with theory in preparation for doctoral research. Drawing on the apparently diverging ontologies of Husserl and Heidegger, Brackney offers the interpretation of cartoons as a learning device. Cartoons are in turn interpreted in terms of Husserl's notion of a 'universal' ontology, where what is known of the context is bracketed out, and then in terms of Heidegger's hermeneutics, which rejects bracketing and insists on understanding experience as it makes sense within in its context. In this way, reading texts

viewed through various philosophic lenses enables learning in a playful and memorable way.

In conclusion I wish to thank Chris Stones for inviting me to edit this special edition of the journal. It has been a rewarding experience and the papers collected here constitute an exciting window into the world of phenomenology in education. Naturally I welcome comment or feedback and also encourage fellow educationists to continue to contribute papers; who knows, another special edition may be on the cards!

### About the Author



Hennie van der Mescht (MA, PhD) is a Professor in the Department of Education at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, where he has served as Head of Department, lectures in language teaching and research methodology, and was instrumental in establishing Education Leadership and Management as a major strength in the Department. A member of the Editorial Board of the *IPJP*, he has been Executive Secretary of the journal since 2003. Along with a particular interest in qualitative research methodology and phenomenology, Professor van der Mescht's range of research interests include educational leadership and management, policy implementation, language and discourse in organisation theory, and literary theory.