



Phenomenology in Teacher Education Contexts: Enhancing Pedagogical Insight and Critical Reflexive Capacity

by Carol Thomson

Abstract

This paper draws on a phenomenological study of students' experience of the demands of a module, Reading and Writing Academic Texts (RWAT), designed with the specific aim of developing students' academic literacy. This module is a core, compulsory component of the mixed-mode Bachelor of Education Honours programme offered by the School of Education and Development at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. The study thus foregrounds issues of language and literacy, and is contextualized within a "distance" model of teacher education.

The paper proceeds with a brief focus on teacher education through "distance" and the role and nature of this form of pedagogical delivery. It then engages directly with phenomenology and the relevance of a phenomenological sensitivity to pedagogical contexts. In order to demonstrate the type of process that can nudge phenomenological sensitivity into being, two aspects of the phenomenological research process that shaped this study – namely, identifying the phenomenon under study, and the phenomenological interview – are presented. The paper concludes with an explanation of the type of data analysis used, and examples of its application in this study.

Teacher Education through "Distance"

In South Africa, "distributed" forms of teaching and learning are increasingly dominating the Higher Education landscape ("distance" provision accounted for 43% of all headcount students in 2001¹), particularly with regard to teacher education provision (a 25% increase between 1999 and 2001). From a global perspective, there are approximately 60 million practising teachers worldwide, and approximately a further 15 million will be needed by the year 2010 (Dhanarajan, 2003, p. xv). Dhanarajan

draws attention to the fact that this latter figure does not even take into account the impact of HIV/AIDS, and the natural attrition of the teaching force through retirement and migration into other spheres of employment. Traditional paths to teacher training will, of course, need to be continued, but "governments and all other parties interested in the health of global education need to explore other methods of teacher education and training. One option is the application of distance education in order to deliver teacher training much more aggressively" (Dhanarajan, *ibid.*). In effect, therefore, "distributed" models of learning are not only here to stay, but already comprise the dominant model for teacher education worldwide.

Key elements that most readily distinguish "distance"

¹ Council on Higher Education (CHE). (2004). *Enhancing the contribution of distance higher education in South Africa: Report of an investigation led by the South African Institute for Distance Education*. Pretoria: CHE.

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teaching and learning contexts from “contact/residential” contexts, include: (i) *numbers*, the majority of “distance” and/or “mixed mode” programmes tending to reflect the global trend towards massification; (ii) the *heavy weighting of self-study and resourced/text-based learning* in relation to “contact”; (iii) the *size and nature of the administration mechanisms* necessary to support large programmes; and (iv) the employment of *temporary staff*, at the level of tutors, to teach these programmes.

But, regardless of the size and shape of a particular programme, all higher education students today are caught up in a nexus of constraints, tensions and opportunities, over which they exert very little real influence. The macro socio-political environment, characterized as it is by change, conflicting interests and new market-driven imperatives, impacts on the lives of students in ways many of them do not even recognise. It is therefore becoming increasingly, disturbingly easy to lose sight of students-as-people (and not mere ciphers and statistics) in contemporary higher education, and in contexts where issues of literacy are foregrounded (as in this research project) – or should be if they are not – the situation becomes immensely more complex and riven with unequal power relations.

It is against this backdrop, therefore, that this paper argues that all higher education practitioners, but particularly those involved in open and distance teaching and learning programmes, have an obligation not only to constantly research their own practice, but to do so in ways that thrust them into a new consideration of what it means to engage in critically reflective pedagogy and research. There is an urgent imperative to gain fresh insights into existing practice and to move beyond well-worn and familiar pathways. This paper posits that hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology, as both a philosophy and a research methodology, provides a particularly appropriate point of departure for such a journey.

A Phenomenological “Point of Departure”

Speaking of how researchers make use of the phenomenological approach within, particularly, pedagogically orientated contexts, van Manen (1990, pp. 1–2) says that,

when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way ... pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience [that contributes] to one’s

pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact.

How one might come to develop and own the phenomenological sensitivity of which van Manen speaks here, and the relevance of such a sensitivity for both higher education practitioners and the transformation agenda in general, forms the focus of the remainder of this paper.

While there is little scope in this paper to trace the history of phenomenology or to present the many forms of phenomenology that have arisen over the years, phenomenology can be defined as, essentially, the study of “essences”. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) says in his Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, “phenomenology ... puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’. ... It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is” (p. vii). It is, in other words, about going back “to the things themselves”.

Phenomenological Positioning

There are many positions from which one can engage with phenomenology as both a philosophy and a research methodology, ranging from the purely philosophical to the thoroughly interpretive, with the latter most widely exemplified in the fields of psychology, education, nursing and anthropology. This study, contextualised as it is within an explicitly “applied” discipline, namely teacher education, is orientated towards what van Manen (2002) terms a “Phenomenology of Practice”, signifying that it is characterized by a hermeneutic/interpretive response, rather than, for example, an existential/transcendental response. Thus the form of phenomenology which governs this study foregrounds “being-in-the-world” – following Heidegger’s (1954) use of the term to emphasize the “situatedness of human reality” (Walters, 1995, p. 793), and all that that might imply. Ontologically, it admits to a reality that stands separate from consciousness, but that can only be “known” through consciousness. It is, thus, an approach that foregrounds self-reflexivity and self-knowing.

Methodologically, phenomenology is, in the first instance, “discovery orientated” – in other words, it is concerned with revelation and disclosure, not explanation and prediction, and with the particular and the ambiguous rather than with the replicable and the clearly defined. The phenomenological researcher therefore does not set out to prove a hypothesis. However, *hermeneutic* phenomenology opens an interpretive space that allows the researcher to move

beyond “mere description” to a contemplation of the relationship between the phenomenon under study and the meanings/experiences articulated by participants. In contrast to, for example, existential phenomenology, it does, therefore, engage in explicit processes of interpretation. But reading phenomenologically, and writing phenomenologically, are not simple tasks, and the exacting demands of these two forms of textual interaction with both spoken and written language, in order to interpret their value and relevance, are central to what, at best, is a profoundly quiet and considered process. Hugo (2004, pp. 18–19) astutely describes the kind of reading (after the initial consolidation and validation of interview texts is completed) that characterizes “good” phenomenology in the following extract:

... a more simple paying attention to the plain statements overtakes this [early] reading. Rather than making the text into an image of the agenda pursued, a letting lie forth allows a clearing to emerge. This way of reading involves less not more, but it is not an isolated kind of reading, rather you enter a moving and complex dynamic of enormous power. Yet this power is predicated on the silence of the self, a dropping of questioning analysis, a disarming that lets unfold. It does not seek to add to or overturn the text, choosing rather to humbly follow its path. It is a reading that steps away from casual explanations that expect the text to move in specific ways, leaving the text to chart its own course.

Given the intense relationship between researcher and text that reading in this way implies, it should be quite apparent that phenomenology acknowledges the inevitability of the researcher’s subjective influence and so does not seek to erase it, or to present “value-free” claims about experience and/or knowledge. What it does do, however, is offer strategies for reducing the impact of this influence, with the intent of the processes of “reduction” and “bracketing” being to attempt to render oneself as “non-influential” as possible during the process of research (Giorgi, 1985).

But to “do” phenomenology requires much more than an intellectual grasp of the principles and concepts discussed above. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. viii) says of phenomenology that, while it can be identified as “a manner or style of thinking”, “the practice of phenomenology requires an experiential change in the phenomenological practitioner” (in Priest, 1998, p. 29), and because of this “cannot be wholly learned

verbally and cannot be wholly learned second-hand or on authority” (ibid). To grow in and towards van Manen’s phenomenological sensitivity means finding a way to transform apparent abstractions into practice. And it really is only when one faces the demanding, confusing, illuminating process of trying to effect this transformation that the exactitude of phenomenology as both a philosophy and a methodology is experienced.

In the remainder of this paper, and following a short description of the theoretical framing and pedagogical thrust of the *RWAT* module, I selectively highlight two aspects of phenomenological research to illustrate how they might significantly enhance one’s capacities for critical reflection and practice, whilst simultaneously affording unique insight into individual students’ lived experiences of the *RWAT* module.

Reading and Writing Academic Texts (RWAT)

The *Reading and Writing Academic Texts (RWAT)* module was conceived in 2002 in direct response to academic programme staff members’ increasing disillusionment with the quality of the majority of students’ written work in formal assessment tasks. Its development has been explicitly informed by the broad field of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the Genre Approach. The use of the term “genre”, and hence the “Genre Approach” in SFL contexts, reflects a socially critical position – a position similarly articulated in the *RWAT Learning Guide* given to students, where “genre” is defined as “the term used (in language contexts) to refer to the differences in the way language is used to achieve certain social goals” (Inglis, Thomson, & Macdonald, 2000, p. 91). Martin and Rose use the term to “refer to different types of texts that enact various types of social context” and identify as a key feature of genres the “predictable patterns of meaning” that characterise each one (2003, p. 7). In the *RWAT* guide prepared for tutors, they are told that:

... we understand language to be “social”, never neutral, and intimately connected to issues of power, control and identity. When it comes to “teaching writing”, we are aware that certain genres, and the “discourse communities” which own them, are more powerful than others, and that powerful discourse communities – like the academic discourse community – act as gatekeepers in society. (*RWAT Tutor Guide*, 2003, p. 1)

Notwithstanding the acknowledgement that enormous

power resides in academic discourse communities, the greatest amount of time and focus in the *RWAT* module has been given to teaching students “the academic argument”. This has been done according to the “Scheme for the Academic Argument” developed by Hyland (1992). While helpful in that it presents a very structured approach to the organisation and logic of an “academic” argument, it tends to be used formulaically and naïvely by students – and, over a single semester, with a programme offering only 21 contact hours, very few students are able to master more than a rigid “three-move” introduction, comprising “background information”, a “thesis statement” and a “list of contents”, and a conclusion. The vast majority have enormous difficulty formulating “claims” or writing coherent, evidence-based paragraphs in support of a position taken, and exit the module with no sound grasp of the “political project” (Johnson, 1994) that is intended to frame the “pedagogical project” of the Genre Approach. In many respects, therefore, the module is rendered null and void in terms of its capacity to develop a critically reflective faculty in students, and in terms of its contribution to the South African social transformation agenda.

Besides the centrality of the Genre Approach in the *RWAT* module as just described, another key feature of the module is the inclusion of translations of two key prescribed readings into isiZulu, the dominant indigenous language of the region. At the time (mid-2003) when the decision to include isiZulu translations was made, no precedents had been set in the Honours programme, or indeed any other programme in the Faculty, for making use of indigenous languages in programmes, and thus there was little immediate experience on which to draw.

When making the decision to translate the two texts into isiZulu, however, certain clearly articulated assumptions were made. In brief, they were: (a) that reading in one’s own language facilitates “meaning making” more effectively than when having to read in one’s second or third language, (b) that unless students are reading at the “independent” level – that is, “with 98% decoding accuracy and at least a 95% comprehension level” (Pretorius, 2002, p. 92) – it is unlikely that they are accessing the information in the texts sufficiently effectively to internalise and transform this information into knowledge, (c) that the “act” of inclusion (of an indigenous language) would resonate positively at an affective level, if not for all students, then at least for isiZulu-speaking students, and (d) that there is a direct correlation between being a “good reader” and being a “good writer”.

From a policy perspective, more than sufficient provision is made in South Africa’s Constitution, the National Language Policy Framework (2002), the Language in Education Policy (1997), and, at an institutional level, by the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Language Policy (2006), for the inclusion and development of all eleven official languages. Thus, from a range of viewpoints, this particular reading development strategy was deemed appropriate in the context for which it was intended. Coming to a greater appreciation of the impact of the experience of texts in both a first and additional/second language has thus constituted a second major focus of the research.

“Naming” the “Object” of Research

Having established the “content” of this study, let me move to the first example of how an engagement with phenomenology can pique existing understandings and sharpen one’s reflective lens. In this instance, it is all to do with how phenomenologists “name” the object of their reflections and/or research – the “it” of their investigations. In phenomenological parlance, the “object” of reflection must of necessity be “a phenomenon” and one that is “lived”, since phenomenology’s primary focus is on human experience. Approaching an aspect of practice (such as a “module” or “course” or “assignment”, and so forth), and speaking about it in this way, using a language quite different from routine descriptions of it, can work to subtly sharpen a lens of *objectivity* unexpectedly available despite the apparently overwhelming degree of *subjectivity* embedded in the actual process of “uncovering”. From my own experience, the word “phenomenon” has a ring of impartiality to it, an “unrelational” potential as a *term*, that frees the mind from established perceptions of what it is one should be looking at, and how and why. Despite this phenomenologically legitimated space, however, it can be an extraordinarily difficult one to access. But it is precisely through one’s attempt to penetrate and define this space that one’s reflective capacities can be stretched to new and stimulating limits.

In the context of this research, for example, and speaking somewhat broadly, that which is *lived* is central to its focus. But *what* of “that which is lived” constitutes the most relevant phenomenon in terms of the pursuit of a greater understanding of the impact of the *RWAT* module? The struggle to get increasingly greater clarity on what exactly the phenomenon under study should be demanded increasingly strenuous intellectual debate and questioning, pushing reflective limits to an extraordinary level. It was necessary to find a way to speak about the *RWAT* module in such a

way that it could be “seen” to be standing in its own space, despite its fundamentally non-autonomous nature. Doing this kind of intricate, multifaceted, illusive kind of thinking, however, took time and energy, and was a far cry from previous reflective processes. As the notion of “lived experience” was carefully pared away to its core contextual meaning, a disconcertingly large tapestry of possibilities revealed itself.

To start with, it was extremely difficult to imagine anything but “students’ lives”, but constituting the *phenomenon* as “students’ lives” rang shallow and inappropriate – and augured a methodological nightmare. Which students? Where? Why them? What period of their lives? But if “students’ lives” was not the phenomenon, then what was? Consideration was then given to the purpose of the *RWAT* module, and its outcomes. Thereafter “the academic argument” that, as indicated earlier, is taught in the module (according to the model developed by the Sydney School of Systemic Functional Linguistics) became a possible phenomenon. If the main goal of the module is to teach this genre (in the very limited, formulaic way that it is taught), shouldn’t this be the “object” of enquiry? Dozens of possible research questions were drafted and re-drafted, but the words needed to define a single, recognizable, researchable phenomenon remained unformulated. Reaching the point, thus, when the phenomenon for this study could be identified as “*RWAT* as a *lived module*”, was a culmination of months of rigorous and disciplined thought, the full extent and rigour of which is impossible to convey adequately here.

Finally, it was possible to see that, if the *RWAT* module was uncovered as a *lived module* (as opposed to the module as *thought about*), it would be possible to claim that “what we would learn about the module in *this* way could enable us to reach a far more profound insight into the module than we could ever have reached by thinking about it. Such an uncovering of the ‘lived module’ should make possible an insight which would enable us to understand *how* it enhances the students’ powers: which would enable us to predict its effect on the students, which would enable us to develop it, to compare it to other modules, enhance its effectiveness etc. If we succeed, then we will have shown that the ‘lived module’ is ‘more objective’, in Heidegger’s sense, than the module thought about” (E. Wait, personal correspondence, 2004).

Satisfied at last that this indeed was the central phenomenon of this study, the first round of a series of multiple-interviews with the six self-selected

participants in the study was organised. Since interviews are the primary source of data in phenomenological studies of this kind, they are an immensely important component of the entire research process. But planned experiences do not always materialize as such in reality, and phenomenological interviews are no exception. Given their exacting, often delicate, but always rigorous nature, they too can work to nurture and develop critical reflective capacity, and thus constitute the second aspect on which I wish to focus in this paper.

Eliciting “Lived” Experience

In all qualitative interviews, the “‘social relationship’, that is the conscious awareness of the intersubjective nature of the interviewing context, and existent or emerging power relations, is of critical importance” (Seidman, 1991, p. 72). In the phenomenological interview, however, the researcher aims to provoke, through possibly only one or two governing questions and sporadic prompts and requests for clarification, a narrative-style response to the experience of the phenomenon under study. When asked to describe his/her experience of a phenomenon, an ideal phenomenological interviewee would then go on to describe, unselfconsciously and fluently, her/his experiences, inadvertently (because that is the nature of story telling) concretizing these descriptions in physical actions and behaviours. Such a goal in phenomenology works from the premise that, normally, what one expresses in speech is what one thinks. Merleau-Ponty (1948/ 1968, p. 126) puts it this way:

But because he has experienced within himself the need to speak, the birth of speech as bubbling up at the bottom of his mute experience, the philosopher knows better than anyone that what is lived is lived-spoken, that, born at this depth, language is not a mask over being, but if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and all its foliation – the most valuable witness to Being.

So the goal in phenomenological interviews is to capture the experience of the phenomenon through that which is spontaneously and unwittingly given, rather than through a thoughtful, intellectualized response. Problems arise, however, when the language that would normally be “bubbling up at the bottom of his mute experience”, and which I take to be the mother tongue/primary language of a speaker, is not the language of the interview. When cultural, racial, social, economic *and* linguistic differences exist between a researcher and the participants in the

interview process (as is the case in this South African study), that “bubbling ... of mute experience” which the phenomenologist so badly wants to hear – that is, the “unedited” *lived-spoken* – will inevitably take a more winding, self-conscious, uncertain, considered route to the surface. So, particularly early on in the interviewing process, and despite a concerted effort to diminish researcher input, there was an inordinately strong temptation to constantly fill silences and lengthy pauses, simply to keep an interview moving. Instead of long, uninterrupted tales of *RWAT* experience, these early interviews threatened to become a series of short, continually prompted, one or two sentences exchanges, revelatory of the complexity of this particular interview context.

With practice, however, interviews have become infinitely more consonant with the good, if not the ideal, phenomenological interview. It has become increasingly apparent that, as much as one needs to learn to *read* phenomenologically, so must one learn to *listen* phenomenologically. Drawing again from Hugo (2004), it is best to understand this kind of listening as “paying attention to the plain statements” participants make, in other words, those seemingly ordinary comments and responses that at first glance seem to hold little more than a tangential reference to experience of the phenomenon so urgently being pursued. Rather than constantly anticipating what a participant is leading up to, or relentlessly prompting him or her to say more, one needs to “silence the self” (the process of “bracketing” in Husserlian terms), so that a “clearing” is allowed to emerge. One needs to get comfortable with silences, pauses, and halting expressions of experience, and trust that a participant is fully capable of finding the words to convey exactly what she/he wishes to convey – even though that meaning is being articulated in a second language. When one consciously drops “the questioning analysis”, and allows the text/context to unfold, not seeking “to add to or overturn the text” but rather to “humbly follow its path”, the interview context becomes a site of extraordinary revelation and insight – and, as such, a springboard to greater self-awareness and reflexivity.

In the final section of this paper, I offer some explanation of phenomenological data analysis as a prelude to engaging with two short extracts – from a present total of 257 pages of interview transcripts – to illustrate the potential richness of phenomenological data, despite the inherent challenges of the process of gathering it.

Phenomenological Data Analysis

Although there are many variations of the way in

which phenomenological data analysis can be undertaken (see Devenish, 2002; Giorgi, 1975, 1985; Koivisto, Janhonen, & Vaisanen, 2002; Sadala & Carmargo Ferreira Adorno, 2002), the process applied in this study followed the five broad steps identified by Fischer and Wertz (1979): (1) familiarization with the transcripts by re-readings; (2) demarcating transcriptions into numbered *natural meaning units* (NMUs); (3) casting these units into temporal order; (4) organising clusters of units into scenes; and (5) condensing these organized units into non-repetitive narrative form with non-essential facts dropped.

Natural meaning units represent “distinguishable moment[s] in the overall experience of the phenomenon” (Fischer & Wertz, 1979, p. 144). Speaking metaphorically, “distinguishable moments” can be understood as the beads that go to make up a necklace. Together they constitute a whole, but between each is a minuscule but distinguishable “space” – and recognising these spaces is as important to appreciating the whole as is seeing each bead for what it is, as without both space and bead there would be no necklace. Determining just where one moment begins and another ends, however, does depend entirely on the researcher’s “felt sense” of the “spaces” described above. As arbitrary as it may at first sound, there comes a point in one’s immersion in the words of the participants at which moments do become noticeably distinguishable from one another. Fischer and Wertz (1979, p. 144) note that the purpose of demarcating NMUs “is not for technical reliability, but rather for the disciplined thoroughness and accountability it requires of the researcher – disallowing the rush to conceptual closure”, once again underscoring the need for a still, unhurried analysis process.

In the following extract, Phindi (pseudonym), having just said that she had benefited from the *RWAT* module “for the fact that I can argue”, gives a unique explanation of what this means for her. To shorten what is usually a fairly lengthy exposition of process, I have collapsed steps 2–4 of the data analysis process described earlier by simultaneously organising the demarcated numbered units (NMUs) into “a scene”.

Demarcated and Numbered Units Organized into a “Scene”

Interviewer: *So to go back to how it means that you have learnt to argue, what does that mean in reality for you?*

Phindi: *[1] Er – I’ll refer again to our SADTU* meetings,/ [2] when you got there/ [3] they have three cards, yellow card,*

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green card and a red card./ [4] The green card you raise/ [5] when you want to make a point./ [6] yellow card if you want clarity./ [7] and the red card if somebody is saying something out of order./ [8] So you would just raise up your hand/ [9] and say something./ [10] and just see that red card/ [11] and it means, my goodness, oh/ [12] I'm not speaking on what – on anything that is relevant to what is being said now./ [13] So that issue of cohesion –/ [14] it came up/ [15] so, it helped me a lot./ [16] because you'd say, ok./ [17] we're talking about this point now./ [18] So I won't go further to that one./ [19] because it doesn't link to what is being discussed at the moment.

*South African Democratic Teachers' Union

What, one might ask, makes this phenomenologically rich data, and what does it tell us about the RWAT module as a *lived module*? In the first instance, the narrative has been voluntarily offered, without prompts or cues. It is also embedded in concrete, lived experience, thus disallowing a label of “mere opinion”. What is also clear is that Phindi's experience of structure and logic in the development of an argument, so explicitly modelled and taught in the RWAT module – and a primary source of personal concern to me – has in fact had a positive spin-off in her life. Perhaps only *because* of the single-minded application of the “Scheme for the Academic Argument” in the module has the experience been internalised and transformed in the way it has, and its applicability to a context entirely unrelated to writing (of any sort), or the Honours programme in general, been manifested. In short, what this very small fragment of data does – and only because of the way in which it was elicited, “heard” and received – is reveal the significance of a learning experience which no broad-based questionnaire, survey, conventionally structured or un-structured interview would have considered foregrounding. And, through the process of demarcating and numbering the natural meaning units, the “rush to conceptual closure” is avoided, and engagement immediately strengthened such that, after several readings, one comes to fully apprehend the “motion” of the experience, its depth, and lived application.

In this second “scene”, Nombulelo (a pseudonym) undertakes, voluntarily, to explain why the *isiZulu* translations of two key prescribed reading texts in the RWAT course proved problematic. For ease of reading, I have omitted the numbering of units in this

second example. Every backslash, however, denotes my discernment of *natural meaning units*.

Interviewer: *How did you experience the isiZulu translations in RWAT?*

Nombulelo: *I asked them,/ guys [i.e. fellow students] have you seen that there is a Zulu part/ of the explanation – of this text?/ They said, we didn't understand,/ it's something else/ when you are reading in Zulu/ – they discouraged me a lot,/ and they say, no Nombulelo, forget about Zulu./ It's other thing/ – just go back to English./ So you get it really/ when you read it in English/ and then maybe sometimes when you do find a paragraph that is difficult/ then you go back to/ – I went back to the Zulu part,/ but I don't get it/ in the Zulu way of putting things./ I think maybe if the person that was translating/ maybe read the context/ or the paragraph/... maybe, and then try to write/ in a real Zulu,/ not English ... Zulu-wise English./ I don't know what to say/ ... that was the problem of this translation./ Otherwise it is a good thing./ [How did it make you feel?] Happy ... ja, I was happy./ I ... I ... felt that ... oh, they are thinking for us/ because they know we are different./*

How should Nombulelo's experiences here be understood? As a preliminary response to her words, one could observe that her experience of the *isiZulu* texts was characterized by ambivalence: frustration at not finding “*real Zulu*” (and “*real*” has yet to be probed further), being discouraged by her fellow students to “forget about Zulu” because it's the “other thing”, being motivated to draw on the *isiZulu* translations for help only to find that she couldn't get it “in the Zulu way of putting things”; and yet “happy” to see *isiZulu* in print in this context because it meant for her that “they” – the “Other” (the more powerful? the university?) – were “thinking for us because they know we are different”.

What could be mooted is that, as a result of the tensions experienced around trying to find sense in the *isiZulu* text, and/or constantly moving between the two languages, ironically it is *isiZulu*, not English, that comes to be positioned as “the other” – that which is problematic and hence a barrier to learning, an interference in the already-difficult process of sense making. Instead of being rewarded with meaning through an engagement with the “language

of thought” – which is generally assumed to be the mother tongue – meaning is twisted out of shape and becomes “something else when you are reading in Zulu”, so much so that it is impossible to “get it in the Zulu way of putting things”. So great is the struggle for meaning in the isiZulu text that the only alternative is to stay with the English because “you get it really when you read it in English”.

It would be premature to impose too much interpretation on Nombulelo’s experience as she articulates it here, as there are still further interviews to be conducted with her. Suffice it to say, however, that the solid certainty of my misgivings about the RWAT module have been fundamentally shaken. I do not doubt that I am right to be concerned about the module, but, at no stage in my research planning or preliminary analysis of the existing problems with the module, did I ever consider aspects such as those articulated by Phindi and Nombulelo. Through my sustained engagement with phenomenology, my position in relation to students’ experience of the RWAT module has been significantly reshaped. I no longer hold any “given” assumptions about the module, and “bracketing” my own beliefs and experiences in relation to student experience and/or literacy development and/or learning and/or

curriculum structure is becoming an increasingly conscious and self-knowing process. In terms of critical practice, therefore, I continue to grow – as a direct consequence of this research being a phenomenological enquiry.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to illustrate that hermeneutic phenomenology has much to contribute to higher education research and practice, particularly that characterised by “distance”, despite the challenges and complexities inherent in it, because it foregrounds lived human experience. By its very nature, contemporary higher education *is* a complex and contested enterprise, particularly in countries such as South Africa where there is a history of discrimination, educational inequity and social injustice. Complexity in research should thus be expected and not avoided. As I have illustrated, phenomenology can provoke new insights, both human and educational, compassion, critical reflection and socio-political engagement, all of which need to become the very fabric out of which teacher education is woven. To do less is to compromise quality teaching and learning, social transformation and our own humanity.

About the Author



Carol Thomson is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. She teaches almost exclusively within the context of continuing teacher education and is, thus, able to stay constantly connected to the lived world of teaching and learning in schools and in higher education. Her research interests include the relationship between language, learning and identity; teacher education, particularly in the context of distance/mixed-mode learning; and phenomenology – as a complex possibility for learning ‘the Other’.

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