

# Phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology: the philosophy, the methodologies, and using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate lecturers' experiences of curriculum design

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**Abstract** This article investigates the philosophy of phenomenology, continuing to examine and describe it as a methodology. There are different methods of phenomenology, divided by their different perspectives of what phenomenology is: largely grouped into the two types of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. The focal methodology is hermeneutic phenomenology—one type of phenomenological methodology among interpretive phenomenological methodologies. The context for phenomenology and the location of hermeneutic phenomenology is explained through its historic antecedents. When using phenomenology as a methodology there are criteria for data gathering and data analysis and examples of these are cited in this paper. Also in this paper we give examples from a study of curriculum design of thematic statements, defining whether they are useful data for a hermeneutic phenomenological study.

**Keywords** Qualitative methodology · Phenomenology · Hermeneutic phenomenology · Curriculum design

## 1 Introduction

Human science is rationalistic in as much as it operates on the assumption that human life may be made intelligible and accessible to human reason in a broad or definitive sense. To be a rationalist is to believe in the power of thinking, insight and dialogue, and in the possibility of understanding the world by maintaining a thoughtful and conversational relation with the world. Rationality is the belief that we can share this world, that we can make things understandable to each other and that experience can be made intelligible. However, human science also assumes that lived human experience is always more complex than the result

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of a singular description and that there is always an element of the ineffable to life (van Manen 1997). This perspective of human science allows for insight into the complexity and/or broadness of peoples' experience as they engage with the world around them.

A rigorous human science is prepared to be 'soft' and reflective in its efforts to bring the range of meanings of life's phenomena to reflective awareness (van Manen 1997). The meaning of human science notions such as 'method', 'objectivity', 'subjectivity' and 'understanding', and the meaning of 'description', 'analysis', 'interpretation', etcetera, are always to be understood within a certain rational perspective (van Manen 1997). An example of such rational perspective is phenomenology. The broadest definition for phenomenology is that it is a theoretical point of view advocating the study of individuals' experiences because human behaviour is determined by the phenomena of experience rather than objective, physically described reality that is external to the individual (Cohen et al. 2007). It can be seen as a method or methodology when employed to garner meanings for individuals through the analysis of their language as spoken or written (Kvale and Brinkmann 2008; Langdrige 2007).

This article describes phenomenology and a particular type of phenomenology as a methodology, called hermeneutic phenomenology. It continues with some case examples of interview text for different participants in a study that we conducted, using hermeneutic phenomenology, to compare statements that individuals have made, some of which contain phenomenological themes and some that do not.

To undertake a study using hermeneutic phenomenology, we feel that knowledge of the philosophical phenomenology, and its evolution as a methodology, is an asset. With that, one might better understand hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology. Using this type of phenomenology as a research methodology, one has to apply the skill of reading texts, such as the text of transcripts—spoken accounts of personal experience—and, as van Manen (1997) put it, 'isolating themes'. The themes can be viewed as written interpretations of lived experience. So in the application of hermeneutic phenomenology the requirement is to examine the text, to reflect on the content to discover something 'telling', something 'meaningful', something 'thematic' (van Manen 1997). Having isolated phenomenal themes, one rewrites the theme while interpreting the meaning of the phenomenon or lived experience.

When one is new to hermeneutic phenomenology as a method of analysis in qualitative research, it is easy to make mistakes in identifying experiences (or, as described here, isolating themes) and it is difficult to know that one got it right—that one has extracted proper lived experience and defined the meaning of an individual's (a research participant's) experience. Phenomenology is difficult because, as a methodology for analysis, it is difficult to get it right. The phenomenological view of experience is complex (Smith et al. 2009).

As researchers interested in the experiences of lecturers as curriculum designers, we found phenomenology to be the philosophy and methodology that best described the experiences we wished to elicit from our study. We found that hermeneutic phenomenology, employed as a research methodology, provided us the best opportunity to 'give voice' to the experiences that we found that lecturers had, in the context of the study. Herewith we give examples of finding experiences in samples of the interview transcripts of that study. These are presented as examples of data that were properly phenomenological and some that were not. We expect that comparison of the examples will inform the reader of how to use hermeneutic phenomenology for qualitative data analysis. Far from being a tutorial in hermeneutic phenomenology and the data analysis thereof, the examples should, at least, give the would-be researcher in this field a 'taster' of how hermeneutic phenomenology might be applied to textual data as part of data analysis. But first, it will be useful to see a description of phenomenology and where it came from.

## 2 What is qualitative methodology and what is phenomenology?

'Methodology' refers to the process, principles and procedures by which a researcher approaches problems and seeks answers (Bogdan and Taylor 1975). Langdrige (2007) defines methodology as a term referring to the general way to research a topic, whereas method is the specific technique(s) being employed.

Qualitative methodologies are very different to the objective quantitative methodologies that require rigidity of data (Gunzenhauser and Gerstl-Pepin 2006). Qualitative methodologies seek to portray a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex and ever changing (Glesne 1999). Therefore qualitative methodological approaches tend to be based on recognition of the subjective, experiential life-world of human beings and description of their experiences in depth (Patton 2002). Further to the practicality of qualitative research being applicable to observation of socially-constructed reality, qualitative research is preferred by human scientists for its main features, such as text as data and foci on meanings and/or interpretation (Silverman 1998).

Phenomenology is a philosophy, a methodology or an approach to study or research. There are several types of phenomenology that overlap philosophy and methodology (Langdrige 2007), and that fact should become clear as we continue our account of the development of phenomenology through the years. Generally, and as a methodology, phenomenology is qualitative. In principle, phenomenology focuses on peoples' perceptions of the world or the perception of the 'things in their appearing' (Langdrige 2007, p. 11). Phenomenology is often defined in terms of the study of phenomena as people experience them - human experience in his or her life (von Eckartsberg 1998). As a methodology, one follows a set of tasks that require the researcher to collect data, analyse them and report on findings. The findings—or outcome—of this type of study is a collection of descriptions of meanings for individuals of their lived experiences; experiences of concepts or phenomena (Cresswell 2007). The descriptions will usually appear as written phrases or statements that represent the meaning that a person—a study participant, for example—attributes to a related experience (Smith et al. 2009). So Phenomenology reduces a human subject's experiences with a phenomenon to a description of its 'essence', written down, usually, and so a qualitative researcher will identify a phenomenon as an 'object' of human experience (Cresswell 2007) and give voice to it.

## 3 An historical perspective on phenomenology

We can use the historical perspective to clarify the earlier statement that there are several types of phenomenology. It is considered that there are two main approaches to phenomenology: descriptive and interpretive. Descriptive phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl and interpretive by Martin Heidegger (Connelly 2010). Husserl's descriptive phenomenology was and is also known as transcendental phenomenology and preceded Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology historically (Spinelli 2005). Interpretive phenomenology is also known as hermeneutic phenomenology (Langdrige 2007; Laverty 2003) and as existential phenomenology (Spinelli 2005). Hermeneutics is the interpretation of text or language by an observer and can be used as a methodology or as an enhancement of phenomenology (Webb and Pollard 2006), hence the alternative description of 'interpretive phenomenology'. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the type of phenomenology cited most often in the second half of this article as it is the type used for the data analysis examples later in this paper.

Edmund Husserl, around the turn of the twentieth century, established his phenomenology as a philosophy to challenge the Cartesian philosophy that was clearly objective, empirical and positivist (Barnacle in [Barnacle 2001](#)). From a philosophical perspective Husserl saw phenomenology as a way of reaching true meaning through penetrating deeper and deeper into reality. In this sense it was seen as a movement away from the Cartesian dualism of reality being something ‘out there’ or completely separate from the individual ([Laverty 2003](#)). Husserl’s phenomenology was about the relation between consciousness and ‘objects of knowledge’ with an emphasis on the objects—‘the things themselves’ (Barnacle in [Barnacle 2001](#)). Husserl wanted to develop a science of phenomena that would clarify how objects are experienced and present themselves to human consciousness ([Spinelli 2005](#)). One of the key aspects of Husserl’s work was his identification of the ‘life world’ ([Langdrige 2007](#); [Smith et al. 2009](#)). This idea became a context for subsequent phenomenological studies.

Husserl had been a professor at Freiberg University, Germany for some years and had a student, later an academic assistant, called Martin Heidegger ([Smith et al. 2009](#); [Spinelli 2005](#)). Heidegger developed his own strand of the philosophy; existential phenomenology ([Spinelli 2005](#)) or hermeneutic phenomenology ([Smith et al. 2009](#)), which can be viewed as a ‘follow-on’ from Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology.

To compare the two versions of phenomenology; Husserl’s descriptive or transcendental phenomenology was so called because the observer could transcend the phenomena and meanings being investigated to take a global view of the essences discovered; i.e. settling for generic descriptions of the essences and phenomena without moving to a ‘fine-grained’ view of the essences and phenomena under investigation. This meant that there was an objectivisation of the meanings of human experiences ([Smith et al. 2009](#)). Heidegger was of the view that the observer could not remove him or herself from the process of essence-identification, that he or she existed with the phenomena and the essences. He or she would be required to bear that in mind during the phenomenological process, hence the alternative description of ‘existential’ phenomenology ([Smith et al. 2009](#)). Heidegger suggested that a philosopher cannot investigate ‘things in their appearing’ to identify their essences while remaining neutral or detached from the things—that it is not possible to bracket off the way one identifies the essence of a phenomenon ([Langdrige 2007](#)). Also, the use of language and the interpretation of a person’s ‘meaning-making’, their attribution of meaning to phenomena, is central to Heideggerian phenomenology ([Smith et al. 2009](#)). Again, this is the interpretive part of ‘interpretive phenomenology’.

After Husserl and Heidegger had established their two classic versions of phenomenology, other philosophers and methodologists became involved—mainly during the second half of the twentieth century. They added to or refined the ideas and approaches put forward by Husserl and Heidegger. They included Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ademeo Giorgi, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Max van Manen ([Langdrige 2007](#); [Smith et al. 2009](#)).

Hans Georg Gadamer followed the works of Husserl and Heidegger and was a student and colleague of Heidegger’s in the mid-1920s. Working with Heidegger, Gadamer wanted to add to hermeneutic phenomenology and developed interpretive phenomenological thought into a philosophy now called gadamerian hermeneutics.

Gadamer, through hermeneutics, concentrated on how language reveals *being*, with the philosophical stance that all understanding is phenomenological and that understanding can only come about through language. He saw language, understanding and interpretation as inextricably linked ([Langdrige 2007](#); [Rapport 2005](#)). For Gadamer language is not independent of the world: the world is represented by language and language is only real because the world is represented within it. Gadamer connected language with ontology and, from the influence of Heidegger’s work, focused on a mode of being rather than the epistemological

mode of knowing that was most prevalent in philosophy up until that time (Rapport in Holloway 2005).

More recently, Max van Manen has been developing the hermeneutic approach of phenomenology. His approach follows Gadamer as his philosophy is that language reveals being within some historical and cultural contexts, understood by participant and researcher and through language, such as the language of the interview (Langdridge 2007). Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology can be used to clarify phenomena in the fields of, for example, pedagogy, psychology and nursing in a practical way. He has stated that phenomenology formatively informs, reforms, transforms, performs, and pre-forms the relation between being and practice (van Manen 2007). This suggests that hermeneutic phenomenology has been evolving from a philosophy to a methodology.

We return to Max van Manen's perspective on interpretive phenomenology later in this article. In the meantime, let us clarify the distinction between descriptive phenomenology and interpretive—or hermeneutic—phenomenology.

#### 4 Descriptive versus hermeneutic

It is important to point out that, although Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology followed Husserl's descriptive phenomenology in time, it did not diminish the value of descriptive phenomenology as a means of identifying essences of human experience or supersede the earlier approach. It is a matter of judgement as to which of these philosophies or approaches is appropriate to a particular study.

Husserlian phenomenology and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger and Gadamer have some similarities. Both of these traditions emerged from German philosophy; their creators having worked with and influenced one another. Each of these phenomenologists sought to uncover the life world or human experience as it is lived. Husserl and Heidegger were convinced that the world is simply one life world among many worlds, so both called for a review of the truth of our world and ourselves as conscious beings (Laverty 2003).

There are many differences between descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenologies. Hermeneutic phenomenology is more complex than descriptive phenomenology, with its temporality and 'being-in-the-world'. That is to say that time is a factor for hermeneutic (or interpretive) phenomenology, but is not for descriptive phenomenology, and the participants existence and relation to the world around him or her is also a factor for hermeneutic phenomenology. This added complexity was an attempt, by Heidegger, to provide more clarity about phenomena for the philosopher or the researcher, and to allow more practical applications of the approach to a wider range of scenarios to which phenomenology might be applied.

In descriptive phenomenology one has the technique of 'bracketing off' influences around a phenomenon to get to the essences (Smith et al. 2009). The focus of descriptive phenomenology is the correlation of the noema of experience (the 'what') and the noesis (the 'how it is experienced'). Once 'the things themselves' have been identified, or otherwise analysed, descriptive phenomenology considers its work done. The researcher can do what he or she likes with the outcomes, but those actions will be a departure from descriptive phenomenology.

In hermeneutic phenomenology one has approaches that recommend to the researcher to interpret the meanings found in relation to phenomena. Often these approaches suggest the analysis of text to find these meanings and allow interpretation. The focus is on understanding the meaning of experience by searching for themes, engaging with the data interpretively,

with less emphasis on the essences that are important to descriptive phenomenology. Also, hermeneutic phenomenology prefers not to formalise an analytical method so that the context of the phenomenon itself can dictate how the data are analysed (Langdridge 2007). Whichever phenomenological methodology is chosen, the phenomenological focus on experience is key (Langdridge 2007).

## 5 Phenomenology becoming a methodology or approach

The way phenomenology moved from being a philosophy to a method of scientific study seems to have been a subtle change occurring over decades. Edmund Husserl wanted to establish lived experiences in all disciplines of science but the discipline of psychology was the one which adopted his methods in the late twentieth century to allow psychologists to understand specific aspects of our human experience of the world (Langdridge 2007). This may be seen as one example of the ‘extension’ of phenomenology from philosophy to methodology, as there have been many variations in the application of the philosophy of phenomenology and many variations in the application of the methodologies of phenomenology (Finlay 2009) and those methodologies’ various types.

The philosophical perspectives offered by phenomenology have been adopted as a methodology—or a family of methodologies, so that phenomenological psychology can be seen as a ‘family of approaches, which are all informed by phenomenology but with different emphases, depending on the specific strand of phenomenological philosophy that most informs the methodology’ (Langdridge 2007, p. 4). So there are a number of different types of phenomenology within the field of qualitative investigative methods. Some have their antecedents in descriptive phenomenology and some in hermeneutic phenomenology. Examples are:

- Descriptive;
- Hermeneutic;
- Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA);
- Template analysis (Langdridge 2007).

Interpretive phenomenology became a prominent member of the list of qualitative methodologies and is applied to many sorts of qualitative studies in human science.

## 6 van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology

Max van Manen has been developing the hermeneutic approach of phenomenology. His approach follows Gadamer as his philosophy is that language reveals being (or existence) within some historical and cultural contexts. Language, such as the language of the interview, provides the means for data. The researcher moves in the ‘hermeneutic circle’, between part of the text and the whole of the text, to establish truth by discovering phenomena and interpreting them (Langdridge 2007). This circle is the process of understanding a text by reference to the individual parts along with the researcher’s understanding of each individual part, by further reference to the whole document.

Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of lived experience and semiotics is used to develop a practical writing or linguistic approach to the methodologies of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Semiotics is the study of signs and, in this context, refers to the meanings (signs) in language.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science which studies persons (van Manen 1997). van Manen draws upon and connects phenomenology and hermeneutics. He has applied the approach to pedagogy and parenting and considers that a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is especially relevant to researchers in education, health and nursing (Smith et al. 2009).

## 7 Hermeneutic phenomenology and reflexivity

When using hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology as a methodology, reflexivity—a person's reflection upon or examination of a situation or experience—can help in interpreting the meanings discovered, or add value to those types of interpretations. Reflexivity describes the process in which researchers are conscious of and reflective about the ways in which their questions, methods and subject position might impact on the data or the psychological knowledge produced in a study (Langdrige 2007). Cresswell outlines the philosophical assumption associated with phenomenology as the study of the life experiences of individuals, with the view that these experiences are conscious ones. The study includes the development of descriptions of the 'essences' of these experiences, not explanations or analyses (Cresswell 2007). Without explanation or analyses, the means of describing essence may best be provided by the researcher's personal reflection. The viewpoint of hermeneutic phenomenology is: a belief in the importance and primacy of subjective consciousness, an understanding of consciousness as active—as meaning-bestowing, essential structures to consciousness of which we gain direct knowledge by a kind of reflection (Cohen et al. 2007).

For van Manen phenomenology is a project of reflection on the lived experience of human existence (van Manen 2007), where the reflection can be seen as being part of an investigation of the nature of a phenomenon. Reflection is not an explanation for the nature of a phenomenon, but allows a description of it as it appears in consciousness, where 'nature' is that which makes something what it is, and without which it could not be what it is (van Manen 1997). Not only is the essence important, but the reflection by the observer also. Phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through (van Manen 1997).

Reflexivity is often mentioned in hermeneutic phenomenology—in all interpretative methodologies, in fact. This is where the researcher uses empathy or relevant prior experience as an aid to data analysis and/or interpretation of meanings. Reflexivity has no place in descriptive phenomenology—it is antithesis to the principle of bracketing out influences on the phenomena so that they can be seen as 'the things themselves'. Reflexivity may or may not be used in the existential-type phenomenology, depending on whether there is any advantage to using it. Sometimes it informs interpretation, sometimes it does not.

## 8 Interviewing

A very common and useful research method in various qualitative research methodologies has been the open and deep interview, carried out in a dialogical manner (Åkerlind 2005; Booth 1997)—interviewing of individuals as research participants. This data gathering technique will afford the researcher data for transcript analysis. It has variations that can be used for specific qualitative research needs (Cohen et al. 2007; Miles and Huberman 1994).

Whether using descriptive or hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology, data are often found by using the techniques of personal interviewing, analysing written accounts such as documents or diaries and/or by making observations of subjects in contexts or environments. The phenomenological type chosen to be used will dictate how the data are approached (Langdrige 2007). Cresswell describes in-depth interviews as the primary means of collecting information for a phenomenological study, with a selection of individuals; ten, perhaps, and that the important point is to describe the meaning of a phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Cresswell 2007).

van Manen suggests that there are many means of data gathering for the analysis of lived experience, of which phenomenological study is an obvious type, but he seems to favour interviewing of individuals when gathering their reflective recollections. He states that reflective interview transcripts require interpretive analysis by the researcher in order to produce a human science (phenomenological) description of the experience of the interviewee (van Manen 1997).

## 9 The research method

Qualitative approaches to research such as phenomenology seek to include knowledge as co-constructed. That means that the choice of focus made by the researcher and the choice of his or her interview questions, for example, will aid in data gathering as much as the recorded experiences of the participants (Langdrige 2007). In the case of reflexivity, the researcher might allow his or her own background, prior knowledge and experience of the research subject to influence the processes of data gathering and analysis of a research project of a hermeneutic phenomenology type. That is to say, one might use their background for data gathering and analysis.

van Manen's phenomenology allows the researcher to use experience common to the researcher and the participant to conduct a structural analysis of what is most common, most familiar and most self-evident to the researcher. The aim of the analysis is to construct an evocative description of human actions, behaviours, intentions and experiences as one might meet them in the lifeworld. To this purpose the human scientist uses comparable human experiences (van Manen 1997).

van Manen believes that human science research in education ought to be guided by pedagogical standards—that control should be imposed on this type of research and that an academic method of control is appropriate. A model of this approach is textual reflection on the lived experiences and practical actions of pedagogy with the intent to increase thoughtfulness and/or tactfulness (van Manen 1997). In other words, documenting and controlling research of human experience will lead to clear understanding of the research data and a concept of practical use for the data.

In our example of analysis using hermeneutic phenomenology that follows, the data come from the reduction of interview transcripts from a research study that we undertook. We had two groups of twelve interview transcripts—the first twelve belonging to 'Round 1' and the remaining twelve belonging to 'Round 2'. Round 2 was carried out some months after Round 1. We analysed these two groups of transcripts, in turn, using the hermeneutic phenomenology described by van Manen. So, for each transcript, themes were identified as 'structures of experience'—first taking a wholistic theme from each individual transcript. This was followed by a 'selective', 'highlighting' approach to statements or phrases throughout the transcript (van Manen 1997). These were rewritten with an attendant interpretation that was written above or below the extracted statement. The extraction and interpretation, with



consideration for the wholistic theme, constituted the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Smith et al. 2009; van Manen 1997). We used van Manen’s ‘existentials’, which are theme types that act as guides for reflection on the data under analysis:

- Lived space—Spatiality;
- Lived body—Corporeality;
- Lived time—Temporality;
- Lived human relation—Relationality (van Manen 1997).

These may be seen to belong to the existential way that humans experience the world (van Manen 1997).

From the process of analysis might emerge new documents containing ‘hermeneutic reductions’, one for each transcript, that represent findings for each participant.

## 10 Examples of isolated thematic statements

To demonstrate the description of hermeneutic phenomenology given in this paper one might consider examples of analyses of sample data. The reader might learn more about hermeneutic phenomenology through a presentation of the data, analysis and commentary on both. Our study is, as yet, unpublished as it was and is part of a larger doctoral programme. Our study was of lecturers’ experiences of module and curriculum design. We will here remind the reader that the rationale for our use of hermeneutic phenomenology is that it allowed for the summarisation of the experiences of lecturers, as curriculum designers, that we were interested in investigating. It allowed us to identify the essences of the phenomena of curriculum design for academics, and it allowed us to interpret those phenomena to provide a richer research picture of their situation as curriculum designers.

Our use of hermeneutic phenomenology provides the following extracts from twenty-four ‘hermeneutic reductions’. The extracts make up seven examples of thematic statement that may, at first reading, represent phenomenological themes. They are accompanied by described analyses and the conclusion drawn as to whether they are actually themes or something else. These are replacements for the ‘comments’ that were related to the statements—the interpretations—as mentioned earlier in this article. Only phenomenological themes constitute quality data in such a hermeneutic phenomenology study (van Manen 1997). The ‘other things’, such as opinion or speculation, are much less valuable to phenomenology as a methodology, usually, and, by implication, less valuable to qualitative research. We identified opinion and speculation by listening to and reading, later, the statements made by each participant, and comparing the essence of each statement to the context of the discussion. Clear examples of statements of opinion and/or speculation by the participant are those that begin with the words, “I think...” That is not to say that all ‘I think’ statements are bad data. The context may suggest that the participant ‘thinks’ something about a situation based on lived experience. Those sorts of ‘I think’ will be good data. The researcher must listen to and read each statement of each interview, consider its context, and discern which are good data and which are not. This interpretation, by the researcher, with its complexity, is what makes hermeneutic phenomenology difficult, but it is what makes phenomenology hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen 1997).

There follows seven examples of the data analysis that we carried out on our interview transcripts as part of our use of hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology.

*Example 1* A participant described what he or she learned while designing a module:

“...you... become... explicitly aware of how (the curriculum) is changing... You might learn things about your colleagues and yourself. (Their) different emphasis (in a design)... You also learn about the bureaucracy of the institution that you’re working in.”

This first example is an easy and obvious example of the experience of learning while doing a task. Learning about what one is observing and what one might observe about other people while working with them. This participant learned about the evolution of curricula, the bureaucracy of the institute, about how colleagues design modules and about him or herself as a designer, because he or she was forced to ‘think outside the box’ and so felt that he or she was changed by the experience personally. The quote shows clearly a lived experience—a learning experience. This is an example of two of van Manen’s (1997) lifeworld themes together: Relationality and Spatiality. Relationality because the participant’s experience is in relation to other lecturers, and Spatiality because the experience is set in the space of the institute. The research of hermeneutic phenomenology does not look for ‘truth’ but for the participants’ perceptions of ‘their truth’—their own experiences as they perceive them.

*Example 2* A participant was asked about why they had not used a pre-existing module design as a basis for their module design and described the situation thus:

“(The previous design) was a good design, but it was written by a person who didn’t know the students as a group, so it’s very hard to write an abstract course document without taking the students into account. So it was a good course document, but it wasn’t really suitable for (my) particular group of students.”

This looks a lecturer’s experience of a module design—albeit a design by another lecturer, but there is only a trace of experience here. This statement is properly described as the participant’s opinion that the pre-existing curriculum design was not student-centred. Phenomenology is not about opinion—or is very rarely about opinion. This is not an example of good data for phenomenological enquiry.

*Example 3* When asked, “For whom are course module descriptors written?” a participant responded thus:

“First, (the module descriptor) is for the external examiner. It’s to get the course document approved... Second, it’s for me, the lecture... It gives me a vision for what the course is going to be all about... because then I know, in my head, what I’m going to teach. I don’t think students read them. So, while it might be there, and you might think that they’re for the students—I don’t actually think students ever read module descriptors.”

Though this extract reads like opinion it is not—not in the context of the interview. The reader might consider the question as asking for opinion. Usually this would be true of this example, but in the interview, previous to asking this question, we had, by other questioning and discussion, drawn the participant into thinking about experiences. The question list was a strategically designed sequence that contributed to the data gathering by their structure. This response is the participant’s understanding of the audience for the design document. Even his or her last line, “...I don’t actually think students ever read module descriptors.” is his or her experience of how students treat the course document that contains module descriptors. Because of the relating of the participant’s understanding to external examiner, lecturers and students, this is a Relationality theme.

*Example 4* When asked about what is important to include in a module, a participant said:

“(Regarding curriculum design experience)... you have to get the right terms in (the design document). (Perhaps) there should be a common terminology applied to (design descriptions). That’s particularly relevant in... Assistive Technology, where you have a lot of non-standard definitions... You need to specify a lot of key terms in... curriculum design... so that you at least define a working terminology for the subject.”

This might be a participant’s experience that terminology is important to curriculum design, but it might be opinion. One can read the statement and interpret that to be the case. The researcher must read the statement and interpret the experience, then read it again, considering it to be just opinion. Whichever of experience or opinion feels the more appropriate to the researcher must decide the value of the data. This reads more resolutely as an opinion rather than an experience. It is better to exclude low-value data than to include data that is only arguably experiential.

*Example 5* In the context of curriculum/module design at the institute, a participant had this to say about other lecturers as they are undertaking module design:

“... people are under such time constraints here, and there’s so many curriculum developments going on... There is also other agendas, in terms of rationalisation and stuff like that...”

This reads like the statement of a casual observer complaining about the problems a module designer faces as they go about the task of creating a specification for a course module. In fact, this is a spoken reflection of the participant’s own experiences. This is a case where reading the whole transcript brought that fact to light, so that it was easy to interpret this statement as personal experience for the participant. He or she found time and institutional agendas to be negatively contributing factors to design as a task. Time for design was short, and things like modularisation and/or semesterisation and rationalisation of resources put pressure on the module designer. An example of two of van Manen’s (1997) lifeworld themes together: Temporality and Relationality.

*Example 6* A participant mentioned, unprompted, the constructivist approach to teaching:

“I would try and use the, and I just discovered this word recently, the constructivist approach. In other words, I try and get the students to figure out the process themselves and develop their own solutions.”

This seems to be about teaching, so we can exclude this as data. As it stands, this statement is about teaching and is weak on experience, so ought not to be considered as data. But it could have been picked up on, refocused for design and discussed with *ad lib* questioning, but the thread, in the case of this interview, ended there. The experiences of a constructivist approach to design would have been good data, but the interviewer did not have tight control over the flow of the interview, nor ready follow-up questions to interesting side-issues mentioned by the participants. That lack of control was a direct consequence of lack of experience of conducting qualitative research interviews.

*Example 7* When asked how he or she felt about doing the job of module design, a participant said:

“I would describe it as enjoyable. Definitely... Writing module descriptors about things that you enjoy is kind of fun. And I’m proud of the ones that I’ve written as well. I’m happy with them... (but) I definitely want us to get a bit better at sharing our content, and sharing our experiences in what works and what doesn’t work in a classroom environment... we could get better at learning from each other.”

There are experiences of pride and enjoyment evident here. These are examples of van Manen's (1997) Corporeality lifeworld themes, but what the participant added, unprompted, was the understanding that lecturers could design better modules if they cooperated. He or she felt that improvements in course design could be attained if there was more peer review by lecturers designing similar modules, or in identifying modules that might be aligned. This is another example of van Manen's (1997) Relationality lifeworld themes.

## 11 Conclusion

Phenomenology has an interesting history. From Husserl's philosophy, at the turn of the twentieth century, of objects of human experience (Barnacle in Barnacle 2001), to van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology of the latter part of the twentieth century (van Manen 1997), phenomenology has provided ways of considering the phenomena of human experience to the means of expressing them. As a methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology uses some of the features regularly attributed to qualitative research methods (Smith et al. 2009). This methodology was the research methodology of choice for our study of the experiences of lecturers as academic module and curriculum designers. The examples of data analysis and interpretation in Sect. 10 came from our study, and are representative of the many that might be discovered when performing a research study involving hermeneutic phenomenology. These examples show that there is a requirement to get to know the text to which they belong, so that data can be isolated and recognised as being valuable to the study or not. That is to say, textual statements can be seen to contain phenomena—experiential data—or not. When isolated, there is a requirement to interpret the experience or meaning attributable to the statement to be able to write a comment or interpretation that represents the phenomenon which the researcher wishes to bring to light. Bringing the phenomena to light is the result of the study and the contribution to knowledge. Phenomenology, as a methodology, is related to human science and is useful for representing studies and projects in this type of science. Phenomenology began as a philosophy and has a history of evolution to become a variety of methodologies, some of which are grouped in the category of interpretive phenomenology. In this article we wanted to write down the important aspects of phenomenology, as we came to understand it, and to give examples of analysis with hermeneutic phenomenology that we simply could not find in any published book or journal paper. We wanted to present what we discovered and to give examples of how we used hermeneutic phenomenology so that the reader could better understand phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology and how it might be used.

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