

Research in Networked Learning

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Phenomenology in Action for Researching Networked Learning





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Research in Networked Learning

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The field of Networked Learning has been emerging as an exciting and innovative area of work since the 1990's. It now includes a very active community of senior researchers investigating the nexus between the use of technology in higher education, and its underpinning theory, practice and pedagogy. Networked Learning is generally restricted to learning that is mediated by digital and social media that support user connectivity, interaction and content generation. Like CSCL it has a strong interest in collaborative learning but networked learning implies a greater concentration on remote rather than face-to-face collaborations. Networked Learning literature also emphasizes more collaborations involving medium to large numbers rather than dyads or very small groups. However Networked Learning is not restricted to collaborative learning nor is it restricted to the strong links that terms like cooperation, collaboration and community imply. Rather the theory and pedagogy of networked learning is more concerned with developing approaches to learning that encourage and support learners to be critical and ethically responsible citizens in both their practice and lives. The Research in Networked Learning book series is likely to appeal to and be purchased by a diverse core audience to include:

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The series is supported by the international Networked Learning Conference. The innovative, and level of work produced at the conference and by scholars in this domain makes this a very exciting and dynamic series.

Do you have an idea for a book on research in Networked Learning?

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Phenomenology in Action for Researching Networked Learning

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Foreword

It is a great pleasure for us as editors to welcome this book into the book series Research in Networked Learning. The book is titled *Phenomenology in Action: Researching Networked Learning Experiences*, and it is a welcome and timely contribution to the area of Networked Learning.

As the editors' state in their introduction: "Phenomenology has flickered, but not flamed". There is indeed existing and good work on phenomenology within Networked Learning, but phenomenology has received less attention than other theories and methodologies. Concepts such as lifeworld, experience, and embodiment have been present in Networked Learning research, but often explored through other theories, such as phenomenography, activity theory, or situated learning. In this book, the editors present 'phenomenology unfiltered' or as they state their intention, "to take phenomenology head-on, rather than mediated through its reception and transformation by other theories".

The book is therefore an important foundational work for establishing phenomenology as philosophy, theory, and methodology within Networked Learning, and an invaluable resource for future work within this area. As we wrote, it is a timely contribution, which might sound odd as phenomenology emerged in the early twentieth century well before computers, information and communication technologies, online networks, Artificial Intelligence, and so forth. However, as the editors write, the book adopts a "primarily human-centred approach of phenomenological inquiry; in particular by investigating the interplay between humans and technology in a way that underscores human existence in digital realms". This might even seem untimely, in a time where posthumanism, actor-network-theory, sociomaterial theories, and postdigital perspectives are flourishing and where the boundaries between human and technology are indeed blurring. Most recently, the re-surfacing and re-popularisation of AI in the guises of Generative AI has certainly ignited debates on intelligence, and what humans and machines can respectively do. The implicit anthropomorphisation of advanced algorithms and processing power through use of words such as *intelligence* and *deep learning* may well be critically scrutinised by enhancing our understanding of concepts such as intentionality and experience. In

this sense, it is perhaps timely to investigate “the interplay between humans and technology in a way that underscores human existence in digital realms” not as a counter position to, e.g., posthumanism, but as a complementary perspective.

While the book is about Networked Learning, the emergence of the book itself is also emblematic of networked learning. It is a story of researchers finding each other and forming connections through the conferences and sustaining their collaboration and mutual interest both through onsite and online interactions. These engagements over time led to the establishment of the hanfod.NL community as “an intersection for dialogue, exploration, and collaboration among scholars, practitioners, and enthusiasts of networked learning and phenomenology”. These dialogues and interactions have solidified in the digital or printed page you are engaging with now as a reader.

The book is structured in three sections, with the first section introducing foundational aspects of phenomenological research within networked learning and asking: “How do you do phenomenological research on networked learning?”. The second section zooms in on the practice of conducting phenomenological research within networked learning asking: “What does a phenomenological investigation of specific phenomena in networked learning reveal?”. The third and final section foregrounds critical perspectives that challenge traditional assumptions and norms in networked learning asking: “How can phenomenology challenge networked learning?”. The book presents the reader with a theoretical foundation, explores phenomenological research practice, and engages critically with and challenges our current understandings of Networked Learning. It is therefore an excellent resource for both newcomers to phenomenology within Networked Learning, as well as a strong foundation for future discussions not only of phenomenology, but networked learning research, design, and practice more widely.

We are therefore humbled and happy that we can introduce this new book into the series, and we are sure it will stand as a foundational pillar around which new discussions and insights will emerge. We are thankful to the editors and all the contributors for making such a resource available to the Networked Learning Community.

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We also acknowledge our huge debt to those who inaugurated the Networked Learning Conferences.

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Introducing Phenomenology in Action for Researching Networked Learning



Michael R. Johnson , Felicity Healey-Benson , Catherine Adams ,
and Nina Bonderup Dohn 

Abstract This chapter introduces the book, providing definitions of the book's scope and key concepts: phenomenology and networked learning. It briefly contextualises these historically. The book project emerged from a collaboration known as hanfod.NL, and we offer a brief account of its development, including the organisation of an online workshop in 2021, and a double symposium at the 2022 Networked Learning Conference, Sundsvall, Sweden. After highlighting some benefits of bringing phenomenology to networked learning, we present a passage that situates the book within pertinent current debates, seeking to anticipate some responses: that refocusing upon 'the human' runs counter to recent posthuman work, which de-centres human agency; that networked learning and other learning technology research already features phenomenological work; and that phenomenology exhibits a Eurocentric bias. The chapter closes with a brief overview of the book's sections and the chapters within them. In summary, the sections progress from laying out what phenomenology offers to networked learning research, exemplifying topics and approaches taken up in phenomenological studies, and finally showcasing how a phenomenological lens can critically inform and interrogate networked learning practice and research.

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Introduction

This book introduces phenomenology to the research field of Networked Learning. It takes up foundational issues such as how to engage methodologically in phenomenological investigations and which kinds of phenomena within the field lend themselves to such investigations. Further, the book provides a set of phenomenological studies of networked learning phenomena. These studies provide new insights into understanding human experience in information technology (IT)-mediated learning settings whilst, simultaneously, showcasing what a phenomenological approach may involve. In phenomenology’s spirit of questioning the original question, two chapters in the book highlight the ways that a phenomenological perspective can provide a radical critical re-evaluation and re-envisioning of networked learning—as a research field and as practice.

Situated in the field of Networked Learning (NL), we take our outset in the characterisation provided by NLEC (2021); NLEC et al., (2021):

Networked learning involves processes of collaborative, co-operative and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action, underpinned by trusting relationships, motivated by a sense of shared challenge and enabled by convivial technologies (NLEC 2021; NLEC et al., 2021, p. 319).

More particularly, NL researchers are concerned with connections between people, mediated by digital information technologies: physical equipment and the software developed for it. Thus, we take “network” to refer to both IT infrastructure and the social structures of relationships between people (Dohn et al., 2018). Our focus is on the *human experience* of such connections—of the technological mediation itself and of the resulting communicative situation and the interaction with others afforded by it—and how one can investigate such phenomena.

Overall, in taking this focus, we are in correspondence with the definition of phenomenology provided in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP), according to which phenomenology is

the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view [where t]he central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something. . . . An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning . . . together with appropriate enabling conditions (Smith, 2018, para 1).

The SEP definition provides a reasonable entry point into the perspectives of this book for readers not well acquainted with phenomenology in advance, even if concepts therein, such as “structures of consciousness” and “intentionality” may strike the phenomenological neophyte as impenetrably terse. However, in the course of the book, the SEP definition will be addressed, nuanced, and challenged, directly (Dohn, [this volume](#)) and indirectly, through alternate accounts (e.g., Osler,

this volume) and in analyses that develop more specific understandings (e.g., Healey-Benson et al., this volume; Adams et al., this volume). Ultimately, “conscious experience”, especially where technology is involved, must be reckoned with as but “the starting point of phenomenology” [as] experience shades off into less overtly conscious phenomenon” (Smith, 2018, para. 16).

As regards the characterisation of Networked Learning presented above, most chapters concentrate their phenomenological analyses within the field it demarcates. In line with our aims for the book—of enriching NL research with phenomenological perspectives and insights—the characterisation is itself brought under scrutiny from a phenomenological point of view (Friesen, this volume). This scrutiny highlights tensions between descriptive and prescriptive priorities suggested by the term and its definitions. Friesen also considers how the term “learning”—used in the phrase networked learning or elsewhere—encourages conflation of student and teacher roles and confusion regarding cause and effect in education more broadly. Friesen’s chapter thus speaks to the continued discussion within Networked Learning of how to define the field — of which the above characterisation was itself a step, as it was put forward in a paper inviting redefinition and renewed discussion of the field’s distinguishing traits (NLEC 2021; NLEC et al., 2021).

In sum, the book aims to provide new insights to the field of Networked Learning; to reinvigorate existing debates with new perspectives; and to challenge existing understandings in research, design and practice within the field. We do this by adopting the primarily human-centred approach of phenomenological inquiry; in particular by investigating the interplay between humans and technology in a way that underscores human existence in digital realms.

Background

The Networked Learning Conference (NLC) has run alongside 25 years of digital technology change and an emergent interconnected world (Castells, 2000), casting a critical eye over the contested space of education and positively advocating “critical and emancipatory dispositions” (Networked Learning Editorial Collective [NLEC], 2021; NLEC et al., (2021, p.317). Interest in networked learning *experiences* has been a mainstay of the NLC proceedings. Despite this focus, the conference has not found a significant place for phenomenology in its purview (Jones, 2018). For example, the edited collection from the 2012 conference in Maastricht is entitled, *The Design, Experience and Practice of Networked Learning* (Hodgson et al., 2014). Yet, none of the chapters focus on researching *experience per se*. Jones has pointedly called for research into “the experiences learners and students have with digital and networked technologies” (Jones, 2015, p.218), but does not list phenomenology among candidate methodologies. The aforementioned NLEC article tabulated seventeen “intellectual foundations” of NL (NLEC, 2021; NLEC et al., 2021, p.315), but gave no place to phenomenological theories or theorists. Perhaps omitting phenomenology reflects a wider reluctance to reach for phenomenology in learning

technology research into experience, as Cilesiz noted (2011) without offering reasons. One plausible explanation is offered in Oberg and Bell's (2012) p. 203 assertion that, "It is incumbent on any researcher using phenomenological research methods to demonstrate an appreciation of phenomenology's philosophical roots", because gaining such an appreciation can expose one to some of the most profound and challenging authors and concepts, all heading off in various directions.

The would-be phenomenological researcher is also faced with the issue of how to operationalise what they have begun to appreciate. Closer inspection reveals fractal-like complexity with enfolding variations and apparent contradictions between proponents of phenomenology (Healey-Benson, 2020). For example, some authors offer neophytes a straightforward recipe to follow (Beck, 2021; Giorgi et al., 2017), while others eschew reducing phenomenology to a technique (van Manen, 2023; Vagle, 2018). The uninitiated can quickly feel led to cry out, "Will the real phenomenology please stand up?!". In his advice to those wanting to learn phenomenology, Heidegger draws on the relatable analogy of learning to swim, emphasising personal commitment and involvement, even immersive experiential learning, as key to properly understanding and applying phenomenological concepts:

Neither phenomenology nor swimming can be learnt in a purely vicarious way. "We shall never learn what "is called" swimming . . . or what it "calls for," by reading a treatise on swimming. Only the leap into the river tells us what is called swimming." (Heidegger, 1968, p. 21 in Quay, 2016, p. 486).

While the prospect of diving into new realms of knowledge may be enticing for some, it also carries inherent risks; such as those which come with stepping away from disciplinary "tribal" affiliations, methods and values (Trowler et al., 2014), or simply concerns that time and effort expended may not bear timeous fruit, or may result in a frustrating dead end. As Valentine et al. (2018) observe, "descriptive methodologies are attractive because they are somewhat formulaic." While research that is "somewhat formulaic" could offer a straightforward process to follow, a predictable and quantifiable project timeline, and a level of rigour and replicability, as is basic to empirical science, survey or descriptive qualitative research designs may not consider the shortcomings of data constituted of recalled memories as a proxy for the phenomena of interest (Healey-Benson, 2023; Johnson, *this volume*). In phenomenology, a reliance on recalled memories is insufficient, since, "the domain of phenomenology—our own experience—spreads out from conscious experience into semi-conscious and even unconscious mental activity, along with relevant background conditions implicitly invoked in our experience." (Smith, 2018, para. 19).

In a global market for knowledge, there are also pressures on academics to "publish or perish", especially in high ranking outlets (Roth, 2005). In-depth qualitative work may not be the quickest route to tenure or as obviously useful as studies of effectiveness. In general, the field of learning technology already suffers from the fast-moving context where developments and fads in information technology come and go so rapidly that in-depth research projects may struggle for currency by the time they are published (for example, electronic whiteboards). However, we have

found that the generous company of others has greatly mitigated apprehended risks and allowed us to reap some of the anticipated fruits of committing to phenomenology. For example, by trying, struggling with, but maintaining fidelity to van Manen's (2023) phenomenological methods of the "reduction", we discovered new purchase and insight into everyday human experiences. For us, phenomenological writings and methods help sustain an optimistic belief in and pursuit of untapped subtleties and possibilities alive in every everyday phenomena, with an ethical demand that corresponds with NL's social justice agenda (e.g., Healey-Benson et al., [this volume](#); Goetz, [this volume](#)). Taking up phenomenology may have lasting effects on one's own professional practice. For example, it may bring a sense of liberation to embrace uncertainty beyond the confines of conventional empirical research that can only represent what others say in its stymying pursuit of objectivity (Lee, [this volume](#)). We have learned that abandonment to "the leap" and "learning to swim" are not only for beginners but also key aspects of each and every phenomenology. Each demands a willingness to leap again and flail again in the expectant attempt to flounder and yet progress, grappling phenomenology and phenomena into greater clarity.

Phenomenological philosopher Hubert Dreyfus exemplified this openness to plunge back into ideas, to re-think them, in his *Being and Time* lecture series (Dreyfus, 2007). Far from presenting a one-way *tour de force*, Dreyfus can be heard to correct his opinions and revise lecture notes he had used for decades at the suggestions of undergraduate students. Such openness, epistemic humility perhaps, is, we hope, a hallmark and fruit of phenomenological inquiry which burrows into themes that can be elusive to apprehend and hard to delineate (van Manen, 2016). For example, Heidegger asserted that the concept of *being* is the "darkest of all" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 23). To ask, "what is an experience like?", may seem simple enough, but it presumes straightforward access to the present, that is, "being" *now*, the "is", *after* the fact, or else stable and faithful mental representations readily enunciated. For a paradox closer to home, *learning* may seem a suitably everyday word to use in a book title, yet it remains, from a phenomenological perspective, *non-disponible*: inaccessible, non-available and non-controllable (Friesen, [this volume](#)). Here, we concur with Gadamer that, "essential to an experience is that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or grasped as its meaning" (Gadamer, 1992, p. 67). The prospect of adding to extant scholarship in such a problematic space may indicate another rational fear for would-be phenomenologists to overcome: the fear of "getting it wrong"; when so many professional philosophers have argued related ideas inside out, spilling so much ink, how can a novice researcher even begin to say anything in this field? For example, Dohn ([this volume](#)), picks up on the significant Merleau-Pontian hole in Smith's entry about phenomenology in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ie. that of the "figure-background structure": that what stands out for consciousness as the figure of experience does so on a background that co-determines the figure, but itself—for that very reason—eludes consciousness. One may think that these high-level discussions are the preserve of Titans! While we cannot promise or pretend that phenomenology, of any hue, is for everyone, we do assert that it can no longer be ignored, and making mistakes is part and parcel of being a phenomenologist at any level. We hope that this book—and the

small society on which it builds, hanfod.NL—can provide a locus of conviviality, even Illichian *graceful playfulness* (Kune & Quillien, 2022), where we can make mistakes and grow through them.

The Coming Into Being of hanfod.NL

hanfod.NL (pronounced “han-vod”, Cymraeg for *essence*) is a small learned society which has served as a joyful intermediary in the development of this book. hanfod.NL emerged through a fortuitous meeting of minds and a shared passion for phenomenology within the networked learning community. As Mike previewed the NLC 2020 programme, he noticed Felicity’s nearby (South Wales) locale and phenomenological round table discussion abstract and reached out, suggesting calling upon Cathy for support. Felicity’s round-table event focused on the less frequent use of phenomenology compared to phenomenography in submissions to the Networked Learning Conferences to date (Healey-Benson, 2020). The session offered a platform to delve into the complexities, challenges, and potential misconceptions that have influenced researchers’ preference for phenomenographic approaches. Through interactive discussions, the event aimed to uncover underlying factors and stimulate a more balanced consideration of phenomenological methodologies in future networked learning research. After the conference, the NLC Consortium offered Mike the opportunity and sponsorship to host a node event in Cymru (Wales) in 2021, somewhere to “geek out” with phenomenology. It soon seemed more strategic, if possible, to establish something more durable and fundamental than a one-off event.

Undeterred by hurdles presented by the pandemic, hanfod.NL was birthed as an interface and intersection, for nascent dialogue, exploration, and potential collaboration among scholars and practitioners interested in phenomenology. We especially wanted to preserve an openness to alternative phenomenological approaches and on actually *doing* phenomenology. Although COVID-19 restrictions were easing, we made the most of the decision to revert the in-person event planned for Cardiff to an online format, which, of course, spread its geographical availability. The event broke ground as this was the first time Cathy would run a phenomenology of practice (van Manen, 2023) workshop online. Further inspiration for neophyte delegates was provided through a series of brief video logs (VLOGs), entitled, “Voices from the River” (Johnson & Healey-Benson, 2020), which also referenced Heidegger’s learning to swim metaphor, featuring experienced researchers inviting viewers to try phenomenology. With sufficient success and interest, we hoped to organise a symposium at the following NLC, with a view to publishing this book. Having drafted additional scholars, the “found chord” double symposium featured six full papers (Johnson et al., 2022). Mike named it “found chord”, in opposition to the English “lost chord” idiom. By this, Mike posed the idea that phenomenology had previously been something like an uncannily felt absence, noticed as illusively lacking in the harmonies and composition of previous conferences.

Phenomenology has flickered, but not flamed at the conference. Nina's 2006 paper provides our earliest example, and she contributed again in 2012 (Dohn, 2006, 2012), while Oberg and Bell (2012) explicitly challenged doctoral researchers to consider phenomenology. Cathy gave two papers at Edinburgh (Adams & Thompson, 2014; Adams et al., 2014), but again it seems the note was lost. Mike's doctoral thesis project provided the stimulus he needed to engage (Johnson, 2018) but it was a happy coincidence that Felicity, Mike and Greta were presenting at the 2020 online conference, with Cathy so supportive of Felicity's round table. With the prospect of hosting an in-person phenomenology workshop, Cathy was keen to enlist facilitators and so began an extended series of online meetings whereby Mike and Felicity were gently introduced to van Manen's phenomenology of practice. Following van Manen's approach to teaching phenomenological research and writing (Adams & van Manen, 2017), Cathy facilitated Felicity and Mike in selecting a "limited, 'bitesize' topic for phenomenological exploration" (Spielgelberg, 1975, p. 26). A version of the resulting "practice" paper appeared in the Sundsvall "found chord" symposium (Healey-Benson et al., 2022), and is further developed for this book (Healey-Benson et al., [this volume](#)).

For us, it is a small but singular indication of hanfod.NL's impact that, for the first time, phenomenology was given a place in the NLC call for papers for the 2024 conference, alongside other methodologies which have regularly featured at the conference. With this collaborative book project, we seek to strengthen the bridgehead for phenomenology in NL, and learning technology research generally. It may be fair to say that NL itself is laden with ambiguity as a term: is it theory, pedagogy, practice, or all three (Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al., 2011)? Friesen ([this volume](#)) grapples with NL's incoherence (see also Hansen, 2018). Definitions have arguably helped coalesce the field, while also laying a path to further questions: for example, what is meant by "promoting connections" (Beaty et al., 2002)? Whose agency is implied, and what is the nature of these connections? Similarly, with more recent definitions, what and when is "convivial technology" (NLEC, 2021; NLEC et al., 2021)? Or perhaps we might turn to the substantial corpus of open access research in decades of proceedings to enquire, "what characterises NL as a community" (Öztok, 2021; Hodgson & McConnell, 2020)? In a scholarly and critical drive for precision where words can be argued inside-out, there is a danger of losing sight of the fact that 20 years previous networked learning was more or less synonymous with almost any use of digital networked information technology in education (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014). Since then, a community of researchers—never in agreement, always in dialogue—has emerged who understand themselves as "Networked Learning researchers" and whose work informs the larger field of research on learning with digital IT. We hope that the present volume will align with this trend by appealing to anyone adhering to NL but also well beyond it, for the insights that engaging phenomenology's pedigree and challenge may bring to almost any field.

Situating the Book in Current Debates

As *human* science researchers and editors of this collection, we feel compelled to attend to the *human* in interaction with technology, “mak[ing] visible what is invisible without depriving it of its invisibility.” (Wadenfels, 2003, p.27). Our phenomenological work is engaged with attending to and disclosing *human* being-in-the-world, illuminating *human* coping, dwelling, building and becoming, in congress with and through an increasingly technologically saturated landscape. This work may never have been more necessary, given the advances of machine learning to deepfake us, not only altering perceptions of reality but also pushing the boundaries of creativity, automating complex decision-making processes, and revolutionizing how we interact with both the physical and digital realms. These advancements challenge our understanding of authenticity, autonomy, and the very essence of human experiences in an age where the line between human and machine blurs. Phenomenology’s radical mission to sense and apprehend “what is invisible”, echoes Orpheus’s tragic turn to see his beloved Eurydice as she emerges from the dark underworld (van Manen, 2023, p. 265). In his tragic quest to retrieve Eurydice from the underworld, Orpheus loses her when he cannot help but look back to catch a forbidden glimpse of her, a mirror of the impossibility of our task of probing the depths of human experience in digital networks/landscapes without obscuring their mystique or discounting the uncanny. Phenomenology serves as a bridge to connect the human and the technical in the realm of networked learning without oversimplifying the relationship into one of either voluntarism or determinism. As Swer and du Toit (this volume) put it: “virtual space arises as that ‘between’ in the relationship between the digital technology artefact and the embodied individual” (p. 122).

Here, postphenomenology may appear to be of instant and obvious application to research in networked learning, since, over 40 years ago, Don Ihde (1975) forwarded phenomenology as a way to interrogate “the learning process vis-à-vis machines and in terms of direct connections between man-machine relations” (p. 201). Such words may indicate a disconnect with what may be considered as the proper field of concern for networked learning research since the NL community has placed a key emphasis on collaborative learning (NLEC, 2021; NLEC et al., 2021). Perhaps NL research should focus on *the experience of learning when in collaboration* with other learners, teachers, and resources, across the internet; or could NL research include a focus on the everyday experience of any of those people in their own settings, wherever that connectivity finds them. The former may appear to be the central and proper concern of NL research, whereas the latter may not if its scope strays too far from the Internet or explicitly *learning* activity. Yet phenomenology is interested in radically embodied in-the-worldness, in prereflective experience *before* it begins its speed of light transit to or from another screen or speaker. Phenomenologists should have to make no apology for calling out any tendency to privilege *virtual experience* at the expense of the actual, depending on the phenomena. Adams and Turville (2018) helpfully provide an example of where this dichotomy can end up,