The Phenomenology of Research: The Construction of Meaning in Composition Research

KEVIN DAVIS

Much composition research, even qualitative research, posits a world "out there" waiting to be understood and sees causes of phenomena without considering the subjective states of either researchers, study participants, or readers. Because of this attitude, many researchers consider social phenomena as "things" which coerce human behavior (Bogdan and Taylor 2). This "things-out-there-to-be-understood" attitude even affects much qualitative research. Supposedly, this objective distancing is the only way to understand "things."

However, even when composition research is solely concerned with "things" which affect behavior or with a world which is "out there" waiting to be understood, the uncovered reality is still an intentional reality because objects acquire structure and meaning through the involved, intentional consciousness of researchers (Swingewood 270). Instead of asking "What does the social world mean to me the observer?" researchers should be asking questions such as the following: "What does the social world mean for the observed actor within this world?" "How did I, the observer, contribute to the creation of this meaning?" and "How will the readers of my research interpret my creation?" By asking these questions, we can begin to understand the process by which actors establish meaning.

To explore further how the above questions affect our research, I want to briefly summarize the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, show how it might inform composition research, and discuss how phenomenology affects both design and analysis in composition research.

Phenomenology as Philosophy
Husserl's phenomenological philosophy is based on the belief that reality is intentional, that humans direct their consciousness toward objects. The meaning of things, therefore, is not inherent in objects, but is actually located in the individual's inner life (Swingewood 270). We can never know what the world is truly like; we can only hope to know how we perceive of the world.
Since meaning is always in the subject, not the object, objective understanding is impossible. According to Husserl, “Everything belongs to a psychophysical nature” which is created when the psychical comes in contact with the physical (Phenomenology 79). Husserl does posit a Material Nature, as he calls it, which exists uniformly through time; however, we can only approach Material Nature through our broader senses of human values, through our Animal Nature without which Material Nature has no value (Ideas 30-34). From a phenomenological perspective, then, we can never know what phenomena truly mean, only how someone interprets those phenomena.

We can, however, attempt to understand objects as they are initially experienced before our cultural filters have affected our understanding, a process which Husserl described as getting “back to things,” examining how subjects directly appear to us (Phenomenology 126). We cannot assume that objects are as we have been taught to assume they are (Wolf 501). Phenomenology is the attempt to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual's consciousness, to get at the interrelationship between life and world (Phillipson 120-123), and to understand how phenomena interact with the way humans actually live in the world. Consequently, scientific data, without a systematic science of consciousness, lacks every possibility of being understood more deeply or utilized in an ultimately valid manner (Husserl, Phenomenology 90).

Alfred Schutz extended Husserl's philosophical concepts to sociological research, saying that the researcher's task is to understand reality as it is actively and consciously constructed by subjects, not as a pure entity which exists “out there.” As Schutz explains:

> The everyday world is a world of intersubjective culture. Its intersubjectivity comes from being bound to others through common influence and work, understanding others and being understood by others. . . . The relation to others obtains its meaning only in reference to the individual. (134-35)

For Schutz, then, meaning is not waiting passively to be discovered by humans, but is actively constructed by them through a structure of multiple realities which are made meaningful through language, rules, roles, and statuses (Swingewood 271). The phenomenological researcher tries to discover how meaning is constructed, not the structure of meaning. The major impact of this philosophy is to make individuals—both subjects and researchers—and their perceptions of the world around them central to the research process.

An individual’s experience and knowledge of the world come only from actively being in the world. It is this being which makes consciousness—the act of being simultaneously in touch with the world and with ourselves—possible in all its forms (Merleau-Ponty 59). These conceptions of consciousness blur the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity,
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blending them into two points on a single continuum of consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty has expressed it, humans are not merely the meeting point of numerous causal agencies. All our knowledge of the world, even scientific knowledge, is obtained from one particular point of view or from some experience of the world (Phillipson 123).

Seen from this phenomenological perspective, a human's being-in-the-world is occasion for behavior, but it is not the cause for behavior (Van Manen 55-56). People relate to the world through intentional experience with phenomena; phenomena, therefore, can only be understood under the conditions through which people first encounter and experience them (Colaizzi 9-10, 21).

Phenomenology as Methodology

Throughout empirical composition research, from the most numerical to the most humanistic research, investigators are trying to describe and explain how individuals interact with writing. Because of this concern, phenomenology provides a philosophical perspective for understanding and completing composition research. If we are ever to understand the phenomenon of writing, we must attend to the conditions through which people first encounter writing or aspects of it. As Husserl explains, "The psychologists think that they owe all the psychological knowledge to experience.... Nevertheless, the description of the empirical data, along with its analysis and conceptual grasp, is affected by a fund of concepts whose scientific value is decisive for all further methodological steps" (Phenomenology 98).

In designing research, phenomenology suggests we try to understand the ordinary world not by examining its structure but by accounting for the ways individuals define and reflect upon situations and actions. Phenomenology suggests that we not reduce subjects to isolated variables or to mere members of a culture but that we allow researchers to study people as they define and first experience abstract concepts and physical phenomena (Bogdan and Taylor 4-5).

Because phenomenological research and ethnography are related and confused—North, for example, interchanges the terms, and Geertz clearly establishes a phenomenological basis for ethnography—it is important to note the differences between these approaches. Basically, ethnography studies the seen-but-unnoticed rules people use to survive in cultures. Ethnography seeks to discover the cultural knowledge people use in life and to develop "theories of culture" (Germain 147) through careful description and analysis of aspects of a particular culture's way of life (Saville-Troike 2-5). Clearly, the emphasis is on cultural and community knowledge.

On the other hand, phenomenology, by focusing on the individual, studies how people actively and cooperatively construct the cultures they take part in (Van Manen 49-50). Phenomenology attempts to forage through the layers of lived experience and cultural knowledge in order to rediscover
experience before knowledge and beliefs are used to make a new sense out of experience (Oiler 72). Instead of focusing on culture, phenomenology focuses on our lived experience. Instead of studying theories of culture, phenomenology attempts to disrupt and to set briefly aside these cultural links so that a phenomenon can be described as it is initially experienced.

Consider, for example, the researcher who is trying to assess the effects of a college writing program. Ethnography would be a valuable research technique for understanding various discourse communities to which students belong, because it would emphasize the cultural boundaries of those communities. Through ethnography, the researcher would be able to describe home and school communities. Ethnography would not, however, help us understand the individual experience of taking up membership in a new discourse community, an understanding which would have important pedagogical implications. Phenomenology, on the other hand, would attempt to bypass the cultural and focus on the individual experience. If the researcher wants to know about discourse communities, then ethnography would be appropriate. However, if the researcher wants to know about the personal aspects of taking up residence in a new discourse community, only phenomenology allows access to that information. Furthermore, because writing classes deal with single individuals and not whole communities, it is the individual we need to attend to if our research is to inform our practice. For example, Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words* actually represents both ethnographic and phenomenological perspectives. Early in the book, when she describe Trackton and Roadville, Heath is an ethnographer describing cultures. Later, as she describe what the residents encountered at school, she becomes a phenomenologist, seeking to understand the phenomena of school as they are initially confronted by people.

Phenomenology suggests that we must first understand what the observed world means to the observed actors. Instead of merely collecting facts or regularities which lead to fundamental assumptions about the world, we must understand the facts within the scheme of human motives, means and ends, planning and action.

**Phenomenology and Data Understanding**

Because phenomenology suggests that objective understanding is impossible and that all meaning is actually located in the humanness of the observer, not in the observed phenomena, the philosophy has major implications for our understanding of data analysis. The qualities of all material things—even research reports—prove to be dependent of the qualities of the perceiver, the make-up of the experiencing subject (Husserl, *Ideas* 62).

Phenomenology suggests that readers have to understand that researchers’ projects allow them to understand understanding, not reality. Composing processes, for example, do not necessarily exist because writers rely on them; composing processes exist because researchers made them exist through
their research. Obviously, writers do something when they write, but it is a human concept which suggests that writers follow quantifiable and regular processes. An object is made to exist and is defined by the researcher's subjective interest in it. Phenomenologically, then, researchers can expect to discover whatever it is they set out to discover, because the researched phenomena becomes an intentional reality.

Phenomenology would also suggest to readers that researchers' conclusions—even in the most positivistic projects—are not objective descriptions of objective realities, of a world "out there" waiting to be discovered. Instead, researchers' conclusions are descriptions of their own constructions of reality. As soon as researchers begin to describe their discoveries, readers must realize that the authors create whatever they are describing. Phenomenologically, everyone—researchers included—constructs the world through descriptions of perceptions. People do not understand an objective world through their observations; reality is created as it is described by the observer.

For example, did research into composing processes—such as the research conducted by Flower and Hayes, Emig, and Perl—define those processes, or did the research and the researchers' intentions create those processes. Obviously, all writers follow some physical and mental process during writing. But the concept that those processes are identifiable, quantifiable, and categorizable was imposed on the research by the researchers' agenda. Phenomenologically, then, Perl, Emig, and Flower and Hayes discovered exactly the reality they had created with their research design.

Obviously, phenomenological philosophy has great implications for the ways we read all research, regardless of the type. If the world is created through human intentionality, then so too are research project reports. The writing of the data adds an additional layer of human intentionality to the process, and the reading of the written report eventually adds other layers as well. In much qualitative research, for example, the subject first understands the culture, then interprets that understanding in an explanation for a researcher. In turn, the researcher understands the account and then interprets the understanding into a written text. Finally, readers interpret the written text, bringing their own intentionality to it. By the time a research report is read, therefore, the original subject's understandings have been changed through a series of phenomenological transitions, and information can be gained, lost, or altered during each of these transformations (Reinharz 78). The whole process is akin to the childhood game called "gossip" in that the reader's understanding may be far removed from the original informant's concept because of the multiple layers of filtering. For example, if the research report reader tried to explain the human subject's understanding back to the subject herself, chances are slim that the subject would recognize her own descriptions of her own culture.
Phenomenology and Research: An Application
To demonstrate how phenomenological philosophy applies to composition research, I will examine Nancy Westrich Baker's "The Effect of Portfolio-Based Instruction on Composition Students' Final Examination Scores, Course Grades, and Attitudes Toward Writing." I selected this article for a number of reasons: First, I wanted to look at something recent and reputable, and the article appeared in the May, 1993, Research in the Teaching of English; second, I wanted a study which followed a standard experimental procedure; third, I wanted a study which addressed a politically hot topic; and fourth, I wanted a topic I knew something about, both from personal experience and from my own research.

Baker's study sought to discover the effects, if any, of portfolio-based instruction on students' exit exam scores, course grades, and writing attitudes. To gather data, she employed a typical control- and test-group structure in looking at ten sections of second semester composition. The control groups were selected randomly, but the experimental groups came from teacher volunteers. The selection process yielded two different groups of teachers: the control group, with 23 to 30 years of experience and an average of 73 composition courses behind them, and the experimental group with between 5 and 27 years of experience and an average of 30 past composition courses taught. The control group teachers used their "standard, process approach," but Baker "worked with" the experimental group "to ensure similar portfolio-based instruction in each of these five classes" (160-61).

We can stop right there. I suspect that anyone can guess the results of this research. I don't mean to question Baker's integrity as a researcher; I'm sure she meant to design a truly impartial study. However, that's not what I see. I see a phenomenologically constructed study the design of which will confirm Baker's world view. First, look at the terminology itself. Baker never defines "portfolio approach" as anything other than an alternative grading method which delays evaluation until the end of the semester. But an approach involves more than practice; it involves the practitioner's ability to structure an entire course to take advantage of the approach. As a portfolio user myself, I know that my entire course structure centers on the portfolio, from the sequencing of assignments to the nature of the feedback I offer students at different points in the term, to the order in which we encounter the textbook. Further, she never defines "standard process approach," an oxymoronic term which seems to come more from textbook implementation of process than from research definitions of process.

In addition, the experience levels of the two teaching groups differ widely. Even beyond that, I imagine that anyone teaching in a personally time-tested way will have better results than someone else teaching a new, externally-imposed system. Her design itself is phenomenologically constructed to create the view of composition which Baker supports. Why else would she not find experienced portfolio teachers to compare to experienced
“standard process” teachers? And in a final note about design, I wonder how Baker “worked with” the portfolio teachers and what were her own attitudes and experiences with portfolios. Was she a practiced portfolio advocate, or was she a non-advocate, teaching portfolios not from experience but from theory? And how might Baker’s attitudes and experiences have affected her portfolio teachers’ attitudes and likely success?

In a partial answer later in the report, Baker gives some of her own history. Baker herself, along with another non-participant, conducted independent, end-of-semester holistic evaluations of all portfolios. In establishing their validity as evaluators, Baker cites their history together, having “scored together on their campus for 15 years and hav[ing] worked for Educational Testing Service as readers and table leaders, holistically assessing essays for such programs as the National Teacher Examination, the English Composition Test, Advanced Placement English Literature, the Test of Written English, and CLEP” (169). Obviously, Baker has “bought in” to holistic assessment as a valid test of writing abilities. Is this the right person to impartially research portfolios?

Again, I must point out that I am not trying to denigrate Baker’s integrity or her intentions. I am merely suggesting that she is not dealing with her phenomena in a pure way, unaffected by previous experience and history. Similarly, I could repeat her study, step by step, and I might find that portfolios are a far better tool than she describes. But I would not be right either, because my own histories and attitudes would color the way I selected and trained participants and the ways I define and implement portfolio and standard process approaches. She phenomenologically creates her research, and I phenomenologically create my interpretations of her interpretations.

Earlier, I suggested that a researcher’s experiences and attitudes could color results as well as method. Baker’s study shows evidence of this phenomenological impact as well. Baker collected two measures of students’ writing attitudes. First, she administered a twenty-item, Likert-scaled attitudinal survey. Second, she collected written responses from the students in the portfolio sections. Her results on the survey indicate that the two groups of students scored the same, but the students’ responses indicate that “students in the portfolio-based classrooms praised the use of portfolios and mentioned their changed attitude toward writing” (167). Why was the anecdotal evidence contrary to the survey findings? Here, Baker does some interesting analysis. Citing previous research, she identifies four areas known to improve student attitudes, all of which she says were present in the portfolio classrooms (a process approach, peer groups or conferences, no specified time frame for assignments, and delayed evaluation). What she fails to note, however, is that at least the first two and possibly all four of the traits could also have been present in the process-approach classrooms. Baker also suggests that the survey may have shown a difference between the classes because of the gradual nature of change and the sixteen-week duration of the
study, but she fails to note that the anecdotal evidence of this gradual change also occurred within sixteen weeks.

So, faced with these discrepancies, Baker seems confused, yet she clings tenaciously to the survey results, data which she phenomenologically values over student comments. However, my first reaction, given a difference between testimony and score reports, would be to question the nature of the survey. What items were asked? Were those items likely to differentiate between the control and test groups? My own previous research (which Baker cites in her study) indicates that survey-measured attitudes almost always improve in a writing course, regardless of method. Why then should she be surprised when two course designs, both based on process approaches and differing only in evaluation method, show the same amount of attitude shift?

Conclusion
Perhaps phenomenological research is wrong about the intentionality of our understanding of the world. Perhaps we can access an objective reality. But even if we do possess that ability—and phenomenologists would argue that we couldn’t know we possess the ability even if we do—researchers need to recognize the fine lines between objectively and subjectively studying phenomena, between describing reality and creating it, between recording data and telling stories. Researchers need to realize that their own subjectivity affects the design and analysis of even the most positivistic research techniques. They need to account for this subjectivity during project design, and they need to admit to it during presentations of results. And readers of research reports need to recognize the subjectivity and human intentionality inherent in all research reports and even in their own reading of these reports. And we all need to stop pretending that our research is objective, definitive, and extendable across situations. Our very humanness precludes such neatness in the world.

East Central University
Ada, Oklahoma

Works Cited


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