# Networked Learning and Three Promises of Phenomenology

**Abstract:** In this chapter, I consider three 'promises' of bringing phenomenology into dialogue with networked learning. First, a 'conceptual promise', which draws attention to conceptual resources in phenomenology that can inspire and inform how we understand, conceive of, and uncover experiences of participants in networked learning activities and environments. Second, a 'methodological promise', which outlines a variety of ways that phenomenological methodologies and concepts can be put to use in empirical research in networked learning. And third, a 'critical promise', which suggests how work done in the realm of critical phenomenology is complementary to and useful for exploring the social justice and emancipatory aims of networked learning researchers. Through this framework, I reflect upon multiple ways in which phenomenology has and might continue to fruitfully inform and shape networked learning research. In doing so, I emphasise that deploying phenomenology in the context of networked learning not only enriches our understanding of networked learning but that phenomenology itself is enriched through testing, finetuning, and expanding its methods, concepts, and understanding, as well as unveiling its own limitations and constraints.

**Keywords:** networked learning, phenomenology, digital technology, methodology, critical phenomenology

## Introduction

Networked learning thematises the role that human relationships, technology, and interactive activity play in the context of learning and educational practices. Goodyear et al. (2004, 1) define networked learning as:

> learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors, between a learning community and its resources. (Goodyear et al. 2004, 1).

Learning, here, is understood as something relational; something that emerges from interactions between people and resources mediated through technology, with an explicit focus on the role of 'connections'. We might also describe such an approach as adopting a distributed or decentred view of learning, where learning is not something that simply happens 'within' an individual but is distributed across and emerges from processes of connection between people and resources (Pischetola & Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2021). This relational theory of learning, then, is interested in dynamic technologically-supported systems or assemblages that connect the learner to others and resources for learning.

Although technology has always played an important role in learning and education, from pens and paper to compasses and calculators, the rapid increase in digital resources and modes of interaction has involved large shifts in how learning and education are delivered. As such, while networked learning does not strictly limit itself to digital technology (Jones 2015, 5), much of the literature in this field focuses on digital technology and, for the sake of simplicity, I shall follow this trend here. Goodyear et al. (2004, 2) also stress that while connections can arise between people and online materials, they see networked learning as an inherently social approach to learning. They state that "[h]uman–human interaction, through computer-mediated communication or CMC, is an essential part of networked learning". In doing so, Goodyear et al. note that the field of networked learning is underpinned by certain pedagogical commitments

about learning as a social process. Given this background, I will also take as my focus how digital technologies facilitate social interactions and create spaces for learning.

Recently, the Networked Learning Editorial Collective (NLEC) proposed a revised and updated definition of networked learning:

> 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. Networked learning promotes connections: between people, between sites of learning and action, between ideas, resources and solutions, across time, space and media. (NLEC 2021, 320)

This more recent definition is both more specific and more idealistic than the one provided by Goodyear et al (2004). On the one hand, this definition intends to make it easier to identify what counts as a case of 'networked learning'. In doing so, it limits the term networked learning to a certain *kind* of connection (i.e., ones that involve processes of collaborative, co-operative and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action), driven by a specific motivation (i.e., a sense of shared challenge), and carried out in a specific way (i.e., via convivial technologies). On this definition, not all digitally mediated connections between individuals, others, and their resources used in a learning environment necessarily fall within the parameters of networked learning. As Steeples and Jones (2012, 3) put it, "Networked Learning…is a contingent outcome of using networks". Only those processes that involve collaboration, trusting relationships, and so-called convivial technologies meet the grade.

On first blush, this renewed definition might strike us as more informative than the one provided by Goodyear et al. (2004), making it easier to identify how and when connections emerge that fall within the scope of networked learning. On the other hand, this redefinition risks turning networked learning into a success term. A process only qualifies as a case of networked learning where it already involves "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". Such a definition blurs the distinction between describing what networked learning *is* (i.e., describing what kinds of interaction and activity take place in digitally-supported learning environments, and investigating whether and how this leads to learning) and prescribing what networked learning *should be* (i.e., setting out the ideals of a certain kind of education theory) (see Friesen, in this volume, for an in-depth discussion of this).

Indeed, as Friesen (this volume) suggests, perhaps we are best off interpreting the NLEC et al. 2021 outline less as a definition, and more as a credo — a manifesto of what the collective sees as the promise of networked learning. A declaration about what networked learning ought to be and ought to strive for. Given the advocation within the sphere of networked learning of promoting and designing connections and networks that are emancipatory in nature and lead to social justice (Beaty et al. 2002; NLEC 2020; NLEC et al. 2021), this move towards more idealistic conceptions of networked learning is, perhaps, no great surprise. For in promoting the promise of digital technology for creating rich and positive networks for learning, there is a hope that we move towards a more social, relational form of learning, that promises fairer access not tied to traditional hierarchies or geographies.

Nevertheless, whether we see this reworking of networked learning either as a definition or a declaration of intent, a host of questions about what networked learning, its activities, its

practices, and its products, really involves and what it is really like raise their heads. If networked learning, as the NLEC 2021 suggests, involves collaborative, co-operative, and collective inquiry, we must ask what such activities look like and whether and when digital technologies can connect us in ways to support such activities. We must ask whether digital technologies create (new) opportunities for collaborative activity and, how, this might impact or benefit learning. To more fully understand 'learning in which information and communication technology is used to promote connections', we are left wondering, *inter alia*:

- What kinds of human-human connection and interaction are supported in digitally enabled networks?
- What kinds of environments are created by digital technologies? And how do these support connection and learning?
- Can digitally supported learning environments give rise to connection, co-operation, and collaboration? If so, how?
- Are trusting relationships important for learning and can they be established between individuals via digital technologies? If so, how?
- What makes a technology 'convivial' and for whom?
- How do the answers to these questions change in relation to different digital technologies, digital platforms, and assemblages, and for different participants with different needs, wants, and interests?

In short, if one's point of interest is either investigating or promoting the use of digital technology for facilitating connections for learning, you should expect to be asked: What happens at these points of connection and how do they support, or give rise to, learning?

All of this is to say that while networked learning has placed much emphasis on how digitally enabled connections play an important role in learning processes and practices, connections are not made equal and there is still much work to be done exploring the various ways in which digital technology connects us. Posing and exploring such questions, in my view, involves moving away from thinking about networked learning primarily in terms of the 'networks' and 'processes', and refocusing attention on the points of contact and connection that technology facilitates (also see Gourlay in NLEC et al. 2021; Jones 2018). This involves bringing the experience of the participants back into view; looking at how digital technologies can, and can't, bring us together; what kinds of activity and interaction digitally enabled connections support and promote; and, examining what kinds of sites of learning such technologies help create. It is only then that we can ask whether such points of contact are valuable and whether and how they support learning.

It is specifically in this turning to the experience of participants that I think phenomenology holds some promise as both an ally and a tool in networked learning research. In this chapter, as a phenomenologist researching how digital technologies shape and influence our connections and encounters with others, I speculatively explore three (non-exhaustive) ways in which I think phenomenology might contribute to the field of networked learning:

1. **A conceptual promise**. Phenomenology has a rich history of investigating the structures of experience. As such, phenomenology offers a trove of conceptual resources for uncovering and illuminating the structures of experience of students and learners connected via digital technology. I suggest that phenomenological work on sociality, and the growing sphere of work done on online sociality, in particular, can conjoin with, inform, and inspire networked learning research.

2. **A methodological promise**. The increasing call for networked learning to engage with and consider the experience of students and learners of particular platforms, devices, and environments for learning points to the need for more qualitative research. While phenomenology is originally a philosophical programme of investigation, its methods are increasingly being used and adapted in other fields. I outline some phenomenologically-inspired methodological approaches that could be deployed in the context of empirical research. In particular, I stress how phenomenological concepts can ground and inform empirical research.

3. **A critical promise**. Growing work in critical phenomenology points to the way that phenomenology can disclose contingent social-political factors that shape our experiences, as well as revealing sites of emancipatory resistance and creative action. In line with networked learning research's critical and emancipatory aims, insights from contemporary critical phenomenology can be employed to disclose socio-material factors that also shape the experience of networked learning, e.g., gender, skill, race, etc.

In outlining these three potential promises of phenomenology, I do not want to suggest either that what phenomenology offers networked learning is entirely new or that phenomenological work is not already present in networked learning research. Indeed, the foundations for exploring the relationship between phenomenology and networked learning can already be found in the work of those such as Cathy Adams, Nina Bonderup Dohn, Hans Oberg, Alex Bell, and Chris Jones (Adams 2014; Dohn 2018; Jones 2018; Oberg & Bell 2012). Rather, I seek to draw attention to the various 'points of contact' that phenomenology and networked learning might form to further enrich their relationship. I also do not intend to portray a one-directional relationship between phenomenology and networked learning. Quite the contrary, deploying phenomenology in the context of networked learning not only enriches our understanding of networked learning but tests, finetunes, and expands phenomenological methods, concepts, and understanding more broadly speaking. Thus, as should be the case in applied phenomenology, the relationship between these disciplines can be seen as mutually beneficial and enforcing. I am not proposing, then, that we should view phenomenology as some kind of 'instructor' but aim for something more entangled and dialectical, to place phenomenology and networked learning as "dialogue partners", to use Nina Bonderup Dohn's words (Dohn 2018).

It should be noted that due to my own research interests, I have focussed on how phenomenology can be employed to conceptually, methodologically, and critically contribute to networked learning research through thematising and investigating how we experience, encounter, and connect with others in digitally-supported learning environments. My focus, then, is on how phenomenology can help investigate our experience of being networked with others. A similar approach could also be used to phenomenologically conceptualise and investigate learning – through, for instance, the consideration of embodiment, habit, shared knowledge, memory, and so on. The specific inflection of this chapter reflects my own particular interests, but I think the framework can be taken as more broadly illustrative of how phenomenology might be deployed in the context of networked learning research.

## 1. Introducing phenomenology

Let us begin with a very rough and ready reminder of what phenomenology as a philosophical method and practice is. To be clear, while phenomenology is often spoken of as a unified philosophical approach, there is much contention about what phenomenology is, what its methods are, and what its subject matter is or should be. This brief introduction to phenomenology will not present an exhaustive account of these many approaches, contentions, and debates. Rather, the aim is to situate us broadly within phenomenology as a philosophical discipline.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach founded by Edmund Husserl, that (*inter alia*) involves unveiling the structures of consciousness through the description and consideration of lived experience. Husserl's mantra, "back to the things themselves" (Husserl 2001,168), illustrates the phenomenological method of investigating how things appear to us. Phenomenology, not surprisingly, has become known as a philosophy of lived experience. However, phenomenology, should not be confused with a form of introspection. The phenomenologist is not simply interested in revealing simply *what* we experience but is concerned with *how* things show up in our experience. Lived experience is attended to as a way of discovering the structures that shape how we experience things as we do.

Phenomenology is well-known for its methodological starting point of putting aside, or bracketing, the presuppositions and assumptions that suffuse our 'natural attitude' to the world – such as our assumption that the objects we see really do exist. This method of bracketing works to, or at least attempts to, divest us of our prejudices and theoretical commitments in order that we might investigate experience without preconceived ideas or conclusions. Phenomenology "asks us not to let preconceived theories form our experience but to let our experience inform and guide our theories" (Gallagher & Zahavi 2020, 9). For instance, in attending to my perceptual experience of my laptop in front of me, I bracket my pre-held views that my laptop is a solid object that really exists in the world and examine how the laptop appears to me. Through this phenomenological reflection, I uncover, among other things, that even though only the side of the laptop facing me strictly 'appears' to me, I experience the laptop as having a backside, as being a three-dimensional object, that I could get up and walk around. What I perceive involves my anticipation of aspects of the object that I can't yet see and implicates how my perceptual experience presupposes and is structured by my own embodied situatedness and bodily capacities.

Classical phenomenology is well-known for its studies of temporal, spatial, self-, affective, and embodied experience. However, its application has rapidly grown and includes, among many other avenues, phenomenological explorations of social encounters (Szanto & Moran 2015; Dolezal & Petherbridge 2017), illness (Carel 2016), psychopathologies (Fuchs 2013; Ratcliffe 2014; Sass & Pienkos 2013), race (Ahmed 2007; Yancy 2008), pregnancy (Young 1984), technology (Ihde 2002), and more.

As a starting point, we can say that a phenomenological approach to networked learning involves attending to the first-person experience of using digital technology to connect with and encounter others. It involves investigating the lived experience of digitally supported learning environments and the activities and actions that such spaces afford. Importantly, it involves bracketing, or setting aside, assumptions about how digital technology impacts our connections – e.g., assumptions about technology impacting our experience of others as present, as disembodied, as being either harmful or beneficial for collaborative or collective encounters and activities – and examining how we experience others, ourselves, and various activities in these digitally-supported environments. Note that the aim is not just to reveal what participants experience but how using digitally technology shapes their embodied, affective, social, and perceptual experiences (Aagaard 2021; Osler & Zahavi 2022; Verbeek 2005).[1]

In the following, I suggest that a phenomenological approach can broadly be used in networked learning research in three (interrelated) contexts: first, by making use of the conceptual resources found in phenomenology and applying them to theoretical analyses of connections,

[1] For a discussion of how to think about the way technology might shape but not overly determine experience, see Jones 2015.

encounters, environments, and activities relevant to the field of networked learning; second, by using phenomenology to inform empirical research done in networked learning to uncover and investigate experiences of networked learning; and, finally, by appealing to recent work done in critical phenomenology to bolster and support the ambitions of the networked learning community to pursue an emancipatory agenda. Before embarking upon this, a caveat. While I endeavour to outline some suggestive ways for thinking about the promise of adopting a phenomenological approach to networked learning research (as well as reflecting on how some of this is already occurring), as mentioned above there is not a singular understanding or approach to phenomenology, and this gets even more complicated when we turn to the intermingling of phenomenology with other disciplines. As such, my tripartite exploration risks presenting a deceptively simple picture of what the relationship between phenomenology and networked learning is and might be. In practice, both the use of and the relationship between phenomenology and networked learning is significantly messier than what I present here. Given the relatively nascent conjoining of these two fields, I think there are benefits to adopting this simplified picture, but this is by no means an exhaustive approach. Rather, I hope this works as an invitation to think theoretically about how a collaboration between these two disciplines might take hold, be built upon, and put into practice (as many of the following chapters in this volume illustrate).

## 2. A conceptual promise

Phenomenology provides a plethora of concepts and conceptual frameworks that can be used to inform theoretical work in other fields. Take, for instance, phenomenology's long and fruitful relationship with psychiatry. There is growing recognition that in order to understand, diagnose, and treat mental health disorders, we need to better understand the lived experience of such disorders. This has sparked growing interest in phenomenological approaches to psychopathology which aim to provide analyses of experiential alterations and differences in various mental health disorders (e.g., Stanghellini et al. 2019). This phenomenological approach draws attention to how various psychopathologies are experienced from a first-person perspective, exposing how such disorders can radically alter the structure of one's experiences and one's lifeworld, thus deepening our understanding of mental health disorders and informing treatment. For example, phenomenological work on embodiment has found great traction in the analysis of disorders from depression (e.g., Fuchs 2013; Ratcliffe 2014), to anxiety (e.g., Bortolan 2023), to anorexia nervosa (Bowden 2014; Legrand & Briend 2015).

I suggest that a similar move is useful in the context of networked learning. Networked learning is interested in how digital technology puts us in contact with one another and "developing nuanced understandings of relationships between humans and technologies" (NLEC et al. 2021, 327). Drawing from phenomenological work on temporality, spatiality, embodiment, affectivity, to name but a few, we can examine the learning environments and connections that digital technology enables. We can, for example, consider how technological mediation impacts our experience of engaging with other people, in terms of how we experience them as present, as embodied, as sharing time and space with us.

Influenced by my own research interests, I want to gesture towards what I take to be a particularly rich pool of phenomenological resources. Phenomenology has a long history of investigating interpersonal interactions and experiences, including exploring how we encounter others and engage in shared and collaborative activities. Such concepts, I suggest, can be fruitfully put to work in exploring digitally mediated and supported social interactions. Happily,

this work need not start from scratch. Phenomenologists, and post-phenomenologists, are increasingly turning their attention to the digital technology and the ways it structures our experiences of the world and others. Take, for instance, the small but burgeoning field of the phenomenology of online sociality. Researchers in this field thematize the way in which digital mediation shapes, drives, and sustains particular social interactions with others. Concepts found in the phenomenology of sociality, such as empathy, embodied interaction, and shared experiences, are used to investigate what kinds of social interaction can occur while participants are digitally mediated, and what new forms of sociality might arise in digital spaces (e.g., Aagaard 2021; Bortolan 2023; Ekdahl & Osler 2023; Elliott 2023; Grīnfelde 2022; Horenstein et al, 2023; James & Leader 2023; Osler 2020, 2021, forthcoming). Such work undertakes phenomenological investigation of various digitally-mediated experiences, across various platforms and technologies. These investigations are complementary to the kinds of the questions that the networked learning researchers are asking to better understand the kinds of learning activities and learning environments that digital technology might facilitate. They can help explicate, among other things, *how* we encounter others when not physically co-present with them and consider whether and how such encounters can lead to collective experiences and activity.

Let's illustrate the potential of mining phenomenology for conceptual resources by looking at how the phenomenological concept of 'lived space' might be applied in the context of networked learning. Remember that in the 2021 NLEC definition, we find networked learning described as involving collaborative, co-operative, and collective inquiry that takes place mediated via technology. One might suppose that when we interact with one another mediated via technology, there are constraints on the kinds of collaborative, co-operative, and collective activity that we can engage in where we are not sharing physical space with one another. We might, for instance, be able to access the same materials, communicate via Zoom or instant message, but we cannot carry out certain experiments or engage in the manipulation of physical objects in ways that might drive learning. When jointly attending to a film or carrying a table together, the participants understanding of one another and their collaboration is anchored in the world that they share. They can see that they are both attending to the same object, can see that they are both intending to carry out the same action through their engagement with the objects around them. As Husserl puts it, sharing an environment allows us to move beyond a world of mere communicative exchange to a rich shared world that forms the backdrop for our collective experiences and actions (Husserl 1973; Meindl & Zahavi 2023). Rich forms of collective activity and inquiry, then, might seem to presuppose the participants sharing space with one another.

While digital technology can place us temporally together with others even while we are physicality apart, we remain physically separated. This has led some to describe online encounters as allowing us to experience one another as "there and now", as opposed to the "here and now" of physically co-present sociality (Zhao, 2006). What might be thought missing when our environment is, in part, facilitated via digital technology, is the ability of individuals to interact with and triangulate their attention and action via a shared environment. The concept of 'lived space' can be used to complicate, even challenge, this picture by drawing attention to the way in which people can experience virtual or digital space as a shared space of possibility and action, that might provide the conditions required for robust forms of collaborative and collective activity.

In 'The Origin of Geometry', Husserl (1970) claims that space as it is conceived of in mathematics and the sciences, is an idealization of what he describes as 'lived space'. While we

can describe my mug as being 8 inches away from my left hand, the bathroom as being a 48 second walk away from my office, and the John Percival Building in Cardiff as being located 51° 28' 53.6988" N and 3° 10' 44.7240" W, this is not how I typically experience the space in which I am currently living. Rather, I experience my mug as being easily reachable, the bathroom as slightly further than convenient, and my place of work as somewhere familiar to me. Measurements of space and distance are abstractions from the way I experience the space around me. Instead, I typically experience the space around me as a felt experiential space, organized around and given meaning through my own practical interests and concerns.

Lived space is experienced as a space of action and possibility, rather than as a geometric Euclidian space (Ekdahl 2022; Osler & Krueger 2022a). Moreover, this space of action and possibility is a space that can be shared and intersubjectively constituted with others. The plate of food can be experienced as near 'us' and offering 'us' a moment of respite from work, the park as offering the possibility of a companionable walk. Indeed, through sharing and attending to things in our lived space, the world opens up both as something intersubjectively available but also a space of shared action and agency – what Joel Krueger (2011) describes as a we-space.

Employing the concept of lived space can help us understand how we might experience shared space with others in virtual contexts, even though we are not physically co-present with one another. For sharing space might not rest on us co-habiting the same geographic location but involve us experiencing ourselves as sharing a space of co-possibility and action. This concept can help us explore how certain technologically-enabled learning environments might be experienced by participants.

There are various ways we might experience a virtual space as a shared lived space. On social media platforms, we share posts that can be commented upon and responded to. This not only creates channels of communication but objects in the world which we can mutually and reciprocally interact with. These become objects which offer intersubjective possibility, creating a space of action not only for me but for others. Thus, forming part of an intersubjectively constituted world (perhaps even a we-space). By commenting on or retweeting a thread on Twitter, for instance, we can disclose where our attention is directed, even use these functions to co-direct the attention of others to that particular thing. This might work in a way akin to pointing at something in the environment around us. As such, we can use the concept of lived space, as a space of meaningful (possible) action, and the analysis of how we use the world to triangulate our attention and action to explore how digital platforms might provide more than mere channels of communication but a more complex shared space with others. The concept of lived space, then, can help us understand and unpack why we might experience a virtual environment as an *environment*. And, in getting the notion of lived space off the ground in the context of digitally mediated interaction, we open the doors to asking how shared actions might take place in those environments.

While this is a very broad-brush analysis of how we can investigate experiences of sharing of technologically mediated space, it is sufficient to give a taste of how concepts that have their roots in philosophical phenomenology can be put to work examining how digital technology can connect us in various ways. With just a few phenomenological tools in our belt, we can begin to analyse learning spaces and environments that digital tools might create, and consider what kinds of collaborative activities and action such environments afford. Phenomenological work on embodiment, joint attention, joint action, atmospheres, empathy, recognition, communication, intercorporeality, interaffectivity, betweenness, and communal experiences, *inter alia*, are all likely to be conceptually useful in moving the level of description and analysis away

from 'the network' to specific forms of interaction on particular digital platforms. In part, this explicit phenomenological work has already begun, as evidenced by this very volume, such as du Toit & Swer's (this volume) application of Merleau-Ponty's concept of intercorporeality to virtual interactions and Dohn's (this volume) use of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of figure-background to investigate particular synchronous and hybrid learning situations.

To be clear, I do not think this promise arises *merely or even predominantly* from scavenging concepts from phenomenology. Indeed, my phenomenological analysis of virtual lived space has precursors in networked learning research which conceives of virtual spaces as places (e.g., Ponti & Ryberg 2004; Enriquez 2011; Jones 2012; Carvalho, Goodyear, de Laat 2016). While some networked learning researchers have explicitly adopted a phenomenological approach, others have reached similar conclusions through adjacent methods. This might suggest to some of you that all my analysis shows is that networked learning already has what it needs without the introduction of yet another interdisciplinary bedfellow. However, I'm inclined to think that networked learning's shared interest with phenomenology in experience, embodiment, and the lifeworld, does not render phenomenological concepts redundant for being nothing more than a doubling up, but shows the potential compatibility of these fields. As such, what I am encouraging is better thought of as a dialogue between phenomenology and networked learning whereby suggestive and complementary ideas can be brought together in ways that further and enrich our understanding. Not only might phenomenological concepts parallel, and potentially, enrich insights in networked learning but networked learning research can also reveal rich areas of interest for phenomenological investigation and conceptualisation.

### 3. A methodological promise

We now turn to how phenomenology can contribute to empirical research done in networked learning. My aim here is not to provide a single in-depth template for how to do phenomenologically informed empirical work. Rather my aim is to outline a non-exhaustive list of approaches that could serve as inspiration for networked learning.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in how phenomenology can inform empirical work done in networked learning. One approach that has already found early adopters in networked learning research (e.g., Healey-Benson, this volume; Lee, this volume; Johnson, this volume), is the collection and use of 'lived experience descriptions' as suggested by Adams & van Manen's phenomenology of practice (Adams & an Manen 2017; van Manen 2023). Adams & van Mahen advocate the use of phenomenological methods to disclose and reflect upon pre-reflective dimensions of everyday experience. They suggest one way to do this is for researchers to both write and to collect written first-person descriptions. The aim is to collect written descriptions that capture "the living throughness of the pretheoretical and prereflective immediacy of experience" (2017, 784) that do not already contain opinions and interpretations. Through both the process of writing and reflecting upon lived experience descriptions, the researcher is to carry out the kind of phenomenological bracketing described above in order to protect against bias and presupposition and engage with the phenomena in an open-minded way. So, to go back to our example, a researcher might write lived experience descriptions of how they experience sharing space with others while, for example, co-writing a paper in googledocs, listening to someone give a presentation on Zoom, or interacting with others on the platform previously known as Twitter. In doing so, they might bracket, for instance, "a belief in some form of 'principled distinction' between 'virtual' and 'actual'" (Ekdahl & Ravn 2019, 136) to distance themselves from the presupposition that when interacting using digital technology we are spatially apart from others.

While the use of lived experience descriptions has already found uptake in networked learning, it is but one iteration of phenomenologically-inspired empirical work. Another prominent approach, advanced by those such as Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher & Zahavi 2020; Zahavi 2020), is 'front-loaded phenomenology'. This approach advocates using and incorporating phenomenological concepts into the design of empirical studies. For instance, the phenomenological concept of lived space could be used to set the scope of the study and home in on the particular dimension of experience that is to be investigated. Høffding and Martiny (2016) set out a 'two tier' approach to framing a phenomenological interview that combines qualitative research with phenomenology. The first tier involves collecting the empirical data through interview. They stress that as a phenomenological interview, the aim is not only to find out what an interviewee experiences but to uncover the structures of that experience. As such, they state that the interviewer adopts a specific orientation. The aim is not to get the interviewee to re-enact the relevant experience, but rather involves a "co-generated" description of the experience by the interviewer and the interviewee. This is carried out through a semi-structured interview, shaped and inspired by the relevant phenomenological conceptual framework. Drawing from their own work, they describe the interviews as moving from more open general questions to questions that prompt more detailed and nuanced descriptions of concrete experiences.

Note that Høffding and Martiny do not provide a manual on how to do a phenomenological interview, emphasising that interviewing is a skill that must be practiced and acquired. Rather, they "emphasize that in the interview process one should be aware of one's phenomenological commitments, take up an empathetic, reciprocal and second-person perspective when encountering the subject, and ask specific open questions in order to get descriptions that are as detailed as possible" (2016, 558). The second tier is concerned with analysing the data collected using the relevant phenomenological concepts and accounting for validity. Helpful illustrations of such an approach can be found in the work of Ekdahl (2021), He and Ravn (2018), and Ravn and Høffding (2017).

Recently, Klinke & Fernandez (2023) have suggested that phenomenological conceptual frameworks could also be used in the design of observational studies, either in addition to or in place of interviews. Their concern is that while phenomenologically-inspired interviews and data analysis are useful in many ways, they have inherent limitations due to their reliance on informants ability to reflect upon and describe their experiences. As such, they advocate for the use of phenomenology in the collection and analysis of behavioural evidence. They suggest that phenomenological concepts can be used as "windows or lenses that provide us with a definite perspective on the phenomenon of interest" (Klinke & Fernandez 2023, 178). For instance, the concept of lived space could be used to ground and inform the observation of how students use digital tools and platforms to anchor or co-ordinate attention and activity and create spaces of collaboration. While there might be concern that such an approach could render the researcher biased towards their own phenomenological framings, Klinke & Fernandez stress that the researcher should engage with the research programme with an attitude of openness, including an openness to finding that an individual study informed by a particular concept could lead to a dead-end and must be abandoned. Thus, they show how observational methods can be informed by phenomenological concepts without becoming dictated or constrained by them.

While the use of phenomenological concepts has predominantly been discussed within the realm of qualitative research, this method can also be used in the context of quantitative research too. Jessica Hocking (2023), for instance, has recently devised a scale to measure embodied experience called the Disrupted Embodiment Scale (DES), inspired by

phenomenological accounts of embodiment, to collect data on the experience of individuals with eating disorders. Here she used phenomenological psychopathological accounts of eating disorders to inform the questionnaires that made up the DES, in order to collect data on experiences of the body as threatening, out of control, separated from the self.

Fernandez (2020) also highlights that not only might qualitative researchers benefit from theoretical frameworks in phenomenology to shape qualitative research but that medical practitioners might also benefit from an understanding of certain phenomenological concepts, such as embodiment. While we have so far focussed primarily on the promises that phenomenology might hold for networked learning *researchers*, this points to the way that phenomenological concepts might also be informative for networked learning *practitioners* – including those designing and co-ordinating courses underpinned by networked learning strategies and values. For example, we might suppose that an understanding of lived space and the role sharing lived space can play in joint attention and action might be helpful for choosing and designing various digital tools and platforms for certain activities or tailoring certain activities based on the kinds of digital platforms one has available. Indeed, following Fernandez's discussion of the use of phenomenology in clinical practice (drawing from Havi Carel's (2012) work on how to run a phenomenologically-grounded workshop), we might even suppose that phenomenological concepts can be used to update and refresh how we obtain feedback on student experience. Rather than relying, as is so often the case, on forms, student feedback could be elicited through workshops that introduce phenomenological concepts such as embodiment, lived space, shared experience, as a way to facilitate their reflections upon and conversations around their experiences of course and educational tools. As such, there may be a case for using phenomenological concepts within networked learning as a practice.

Note again the advantages of approaching empirical work through phenomenology are not uni-directional. As Høffding and Martiny (2016) emphasise, doing phenomenologically inspired or inflected empirical work is a skill, one that can only be gained, and importantly finessed, through practice. As phenomenological methods are put to use in networked learning, new concepts and understanding will arise, and insight and practical know-how gained about how to carry out this sort of research. This not only involves improving and adapting phenomenological methodologies for empirical ends, but better understanding their limitations and constraints.

## 4. The critical promise

The networked learning community emphasises its commitment to social justice in the context of learning (NLEC et al. 2021, 327). Many of those contributing to the NLEC's 2021 community definition explicitly state that the future of networked learning lies in directing more attention to the ways in which technologies, on the one hand, aggravate and embed bias and how they might be used in an emancipatory manner, on the other.

Lee & Bligh, for instance, emphasise the importance of disclosing socio-political factors that influence people's experiences of networked learning practices and environments. Crucially, they draw attention to the importance of acknowledging and investigating how social, cultural, and political backgrounds saturate and shape experiences of technologies and networked learning, as well as not forgetting "how skewed are technologies and their impacts on different people" and the way they might "not only enable but disenable, producing many agonies for humans in actual society" (Lee & Bligh in NLEC et al. 2021, 341).

Gourlay also highlights that the promise of collaborative and collective inquiry mediated by technology should not mask the multiplicitous ways individuals can engage in learning and not

overlook those who might "value solitude, reticence, silence, and different ways of 'being' in education—digital or otherwise, connected or not" (Gourlay in NLEC et al. 2021, 329). In doing so, she highlights that we should not let enthusiasm for the promise of technology, connection, and collaboration overtake or undermine insights into diverse learning approaches and preferences. In a related vein, Scott stresses that networked learning researchers must not fail to ask "who is not there and seek to understand and integrate those who are excluded" and "to capture the penumbral and liminal thinking that is in the minds of those at the outer edges—the outliers, lurkers, and peripheral participants" (Scott in NLEC et al. 2021, 344). Thus, networked learning must ensure to adopt a critical stance on its own practices of research and research topographies and recognise the inherently situated and political factors entrenched in educational and digital institutions (Pischetola & Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2021).

What we see, then, are explicit demands that networked learning research not only considers the potential connections that digital technology might create but examines how these connections are experienced by different users, including asking about those who do not have the opportunity or ability to access such technologies and connections in the first place. Phenomenology, with its aims of describing universal structures of experience, might strike us as peculiarly ill-suited for engaging with such critical aims and endeavours. Indeed, we might worry that in attempting to uncover the structures of lived space, temporality, intersubjectivity, embodiment, etc., in the context of digital mediation, phenomenological insights precisely ignore, even mask, differences in experience across participants, and fail to disclose the role that social, cultural, and political factors play in experiences of networked learning.

However, the influence and scope of critical phenomenology is growing. Critical phenomenology calls attention to how contingent social structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity shape our experiences in a quasi-transcendental way (Guenter 2019, 12) and to how affectivity can be a source of critique and resistance in our emancipatory practices and struggle for liberation (Lugones 2003; Ahmed 2007; Weiss et al. 2019). Such critical work often explicitly thematizes what and who is absent in the very purview of classical phenomenological study. In doing so, attention is drawn to how experiences subjected to phenomenological exploration are presumed to be universal but are, in fact, shaped by the social and cultural privilege that the phenomenologist himself occupies. Thus, critical phenomenology stresses the situatedness of phenomenology itself.

Critical phenomenology, then, specifically aims to disclose how social, political, and cultural structures and power relations shape, drive, frame, and sustain experiences. Notably, critical phenomenologists also emphasise that critical phenomenology is not just a philosophical practice, but a political one as well. As Lisa Guenther puts it:

> As a transformative political practice, critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world. (Guenther 2020, 16)

Thus, critical phenomenology does not aim merely to uncover and describe structures of oppression but to use these insights to actively devise and deploy tactics to create emancipatory possibilities for being and experiencing.

Even with this brief overview of critical phenomenology, its complementary concerns and aims already point to its potential use and application in the realm of networked learning. In line with section 2 and 3 above, critical phenomenology's relevance applies both in relation to conceptual

and methodological phenomenological approaches. My above discussion of lived space in digital learning environments was predicated on an understanding of lived space as a space of possibility and opportunity. However, such a conception assumes that merely having access to a space of activity will give rise to the experience of active possibilities and possibilities for action, interaction, and, potentially, collaboration. Yet, critical phenomenologists (e.g., Ahmed 2007; Fanon 2012; Ortega & Lee 2014) have stressed that the assumption that the world is experienced as a space of positive and comfortable possibility fails to take into account how certain bodies are routinely stopped and made to feel unwelcome in shared spaces. And that being perceived as the wrong kind of body by others can result in one feeling unable to take up certain possibilities of action. Sara Ahmed (2007), for instance, describes how whiteness acts as a pre-condition for experiencing spaces as offering possibilities for social action and how non-white bodies routinely are stopped and made to feel not-at-home. Such stopping works to curtail an individual's experience of lived space as a space of easy action and possibility, instead giving rise to experiences of uncertainty, vulnerability, and threat. Such an analysis draws attention to the affective and embodied textures of occupying or entering lived space and how these textures are experienced differently across different groups, bodies, and people.

Through critical phenomenological analysis, socio-political factors are revealed as structuring the experience of lived space, shaping both social interactions and the material configuration of places themselves. Such insights are equally important for thinking about lived spaces that are (in part) created through digital technologies (Osler & Krueger 2022b). Whiteness saturates both the design and the norms of many networked environments, thus politicising how such lived space is experienced – whether as a space of action, familiarity and belonging, or as a space of closure, unfamiliarity, and disconnection. Liao & Huebner (2021), for instance, have drawn attention to how oppressive structures create oppressive things – such as technologies that propel whiteness as the norm and Blackness as deviation. We can find all manner of biases baked into the design of digital technologies, such as biases in facial recognition technology and other algorithms (Zou & Schiebinger 2018), gender bias in gaming dialogues (Rennick et al. 2023), and cases of certain bodies and people being 'stopped' in digital spaces, such as the disproportionate amount of hate experienced by women online (Richardson-Self 2020).

To carry out a nuanced phenomenological investigation of how digitally-supported and structured learning environments are experienced involves attending to how socio-political factors structure participants' experiences and identifying where harm and vulnerability surface and are embedded. Critical phenomenology can provide instructive conceptual frameworks for such analysis. Work done on (dis)orientation (Ahmed 2007), hometactics (Ortega & Lee 2014), world-travelling (Lugones 2003), misfitting (Garland-Thomson 2019), and ontological expansiveness (Sullivan 2004), to name but a few, can be used to inform a critical investigation of networked learning experiences and environments.

Critically-orientated phenomenological work can also inform critical reflection upon and practice of qualitative research. Jessie Stanier (2022), for instance, in her excellent work on engaged phenomenology, argues that in carrying out phenomenologically inspired qualitative research it is essential that researchers acknowledge and reflect upon how "phenomenological research itself, as an activity that affects change in the world, will influence discourses and serve particular interests (both within and beyond the academic sphere)" (2022, 235). This involves recognising how structures of oppression and power can suffuse and shape research methods and practices, from shaping a researcher's thematic interests, to the selection of research participants, to the accessibility of research participation, to the power structures embedded in, for instance, the interviewer-interviewee relationship.

One suggestion that Stanier makes is a move to phenomenological research that actively engages with communities whose experience is being investigated in a way that allows "not only in the sharing of their experiences but also the interpretation of these experiences" (2022, 236). This active collaboration in research aims for communities' experiences not only to be disclosed but for communities to play an active role in generating and co-creating meaning. Her manifesto on how to carry out engaged phenomenological research involves, *inter alia*, sensitivity to the situatedness of lived experience, recognising that meaningful experience is relationally constituted, and considering the transformative potential of participating in meaningful sharing of lived experience rather than treating the sharing of lived experience as valuable purely within the confines of academic utility. While this engaged approach is still in its relative infancy, it presents important and powerful insights and inspiration to those engaging in phenomenologically informed empirical work that not only strives to improve the practice of research qua research but seeks to promote the transformative, emancipatory power of such research (see also: Fernandez 2020b; Miglio & Stainer 2022).

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to present a number of ways, conceptual, methodological, and critical, that phenomenology might positively contribute and shape various avenues of networked learning research. While some of these approaches are already well underway within networked learning research, I hope this calls attention to a wider array of potential routes than perhaps is typically considered.

I want to close by stressing again that the promises that I see phenomenology holding for networked learning are not unidirectional. Rather, through the application of phenomenology to networked learning, phenomenology itself will be enriched. Phenomenological concepts around topics such as temporality, spatiality, affectivity, embodiment, and sociality have been predominantly analysed in the context of 'offline' experiences. Using phenomenological concepts to explore and investigate digitally-mediated experience will not only enhance our understanding of those experiences but contribute important new concepts to the phenomenological roster. Ideas such as 'mediated immediacy' (Plessner 2019), 'telepresence' and 'teleabsence' (Friesen 2014), are examples of new concepts that have arisen through the application of phenomenology to digital technology.

Bringing phenomenology into dialogue with other disciplines, then, is a crucial way in which phenomenological work is both tested, critiqued, and advanced. Think, for instance, of the importance of bringing feminist and critical theory to bare on phenomenology for the inception of and on-going flourishing of critical phenomenology. Indeed, the engaged phenomenological approach posed by Stanier that explicitly aims at generative meaning-making, can only be achieved through active community collaboration and co-operation. Moreover, as we have seen, empirical approaches that use phenomenology are varied and in a state of advancement and refinement. Through their application and use, such approaches can be further tested, developed, and built upon. *Only* through application and conversation can applied phenomenology grow as a practice and a skill.

In short, as a phenomenologist specifically interested in digital worlds and relationships, I see many promises in the relationship between phenomenology and networked learning – promises that this volume already bears the fruit of.

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