
Article

A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated

Thomas Groenewald
University of South Africa
Florida, South Africa

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Abstract

This article distills the core principles of a phenomenological research design and, by means of a specific study, illustrates the phenomenological methodology. After a brief overview of the developments of phenomenology, the research paradigm of the specific study follows. Thereafter the location of the data, the data-gathering the data-storage methods are explained. Unstructured in-depth phenomenological interviews supplemented by memoing, essays by participants, a focus group discussion and field notes were used. The data explication, by means of a simplified version of Hycner's (1999) process, is further explained. The article finally contains commentary about the validity and truthfulness measures, as well as a synopsis of the findings of the study.

Keywords: phenomenology, methodology, Husserl

Introduction

Novice researchers are often overwhelmed by the plethora of research methodologies, making the selection of an appropriate research design for a particular study difficult. The aim of this article is to illustrate to researchers, both novice and experienced but with little experience in phenomenology, a thorough design, complete with an explication of how it was implemented.

Following seven years of study of research methodology (including periods of formal study, as well as the attendance of short courses and self study) I came to the conclusion that one needs a grasp of a vast range of research methodologies in order to select the most appropriate design, or combination of designs, most suitable for a particular study. One further needs to make a thorough study of the methodology(ies) chosen, to execute good research practice. Often, authors contradict one another, which requires that researchers need to exercise well informed choices, make their choice known and substantiate it.

I wanted to do research regarding an aspect of teaching and learning practice, namely co-operative education, which, based on my experience and literature review, I found to be often misunderstood or poorly practised. Needing a suitable explorative research design that would prevent or restrict my own biases, after some investigation I chose phenomenology. Having selected a suitable research design, I found that the Rand Afrikaans University library held a collection in excess of 250 titles on phenomenology. Most of the titles are shelved under philosophy and the remainder with psychology,

literature/languages, education and sociology. However, I experienced major difficulty in finding literature that provides guidelines on conducting phenomenological research. Therefore, although I do not regard this article authoritative, I offer it as a guide to spare other researchers some agony.

This article includes a briefly explanation of phenomenology as research paradigm, followed by an exposition of the research design as it unfolded for a particular study (Groenewald, 2003). This includes the location of the research participants, the data-gathering and data-storage methods used, and the explication of the data. An informed consent agreement and an example of the various explication phases of one of the interviews are further included. Because the aim of the article is to illustrate a phenomenological study, the literature review of the actual study is not included and only a synopsis of the findings is given. An overview of phenomenology follows.

What is phenomenology?

Europe lay in ruins at the end of World War One (1914 - 1918). Eagleton (1983, p. 54) captures the situation vividly:

The social order of European capitalism had been shaken to its roots by the carnage of the war and its turbulent aftermath. The ideologies on which that order had customarily depended, the cultural values by which it ruled, were also in deep turmoil. Science seemed to have dwindled to a sterile positivism, a myopic obsession with the categorizing of facts; philosophy appeared torn between such a positivism on the one hand, and an indefensible subjectivism on the other; forms of relativism and irrationalism were rampant, and art reflected this bewildering loss of bearings.

In the context of this ideological crisis, the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859 - 1938), “sought to develop a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 54). Although the origins of phenomenology can be traced back to Kant and Hegel, Vandenberg (1997, p. 11) regards Husserl as “the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century”.

Husserl rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable. He argued that people can be certain about how things appear in, or present themselves to, their consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993). To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure ‘phenomena’ and the only absolute data from where to begin. Husserl named his philosophical method ‘phenomenology’, the science of pure ‘phenomena’ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 55). The aim of phenomenology is the return to the concrete, captured by the slogan ‘Back to the things themselves!’ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 56; Kruger, 1988, p. 28; Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Holloway points out that Husserl was a student of Franz Brentano (1838 - 1917), who provided the basis for phenomenology. Brentano first stressed the ‘intentional nature of consciousness’ or the ‘internal experience of being conscious of something’ (Holloway, 1997, p. 117). A student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger (1889 - 1976), introduced the concept of ‘Dasein’ or ‘Being there’ and the dialogue between a person and her world. Heidegger and Husserl respectively explored the ‘lived-world’ and ‘Lebenswelt’ in terms of an average existence in an ordinary world (Schwandt, 1997). A follower, Alfred Schultz (1899 - 1956), furthered the idea that “the human world comprises various provinces of meaning” (Vandenberg, 1997, p. 7). The existential phenomenology of Heidegger was carried forward by among others Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 - 1961). The works of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty extensively expanded the influence of Husserl and Heidegger (Vandenberg, 1997).

However, by 1970, phenomenology “had not yet establish[ed] itself as a viable alternative to the traditional natural scientific approach in psychological research” (Stones, 1988, p. 141). The reason, according to Giorgi (as cited in Stones), was that a phenomenological praxis, a systematic and sustained way, had not yet been developed (Schwandt, 1997). In this regard, Lippitz (1997, p. 69) remarked that after phenomenology flourished “during the first twenty years after the Second World War, this approach was forgotten for a while”. However, in the 1970s, phenomenological psychologists established a praxis, which is a methodological realisation of the phenomenological philosophical attitude (Stones, 1988).

For Giorgi, the operative word in phenomenological research is ‘describe’. The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts. According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p. 189) “the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved”. Husserl’s philosophical phenomenology provided a point of departure for Alfred Schultz who turned it “toward the ways in which ordinary members of society attend to their everyday lives” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, pp. 488-489). A researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the people (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001; Robinson & Reed, 1998) involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being researched. The words of Van den Berg, translated by Van Manen (1997, p. 41) profoundly capture what is stated in this paragraph:

[Phenomena] have something to say to us - this is common knowledge among poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologists. Or rather, we are all born phenomenologists; the poets and painters among us, however, understand very well their task of sharing, by means of word and image, their insights with others - an artfulness that is also laboriously practised by the professional phenomenologist.

Holloway (1997) states that researchers who use phenomenology are reluctant to prescribe techniques. Hycner (1999, p. 143) concurs by stating that “[t]here is an appropriate reluctance on the part of phenomenologists to focus too much on specific steps”. He goes on to say that one cannot impose method on a phenomenon “since that would do a great injustice to the integrity of that phenomenon” (p. 144). However, some guidelines are necessary, especially for novice researchers.

Now that phenomenology has been explored, the following section outlines how the research unfolded. It starts with a synopsis of the research paradigm, then a description of the locating of the research participants, followed by the data-gathering methods, whereafter data-storage methods are outlined. Thereafter follows an explanation of the explication of the data (comprising several stages).

How the study unfolded

The research paradigm of a study undertaken

A good research-undertaking starts with the selection of the topic, problem or area of interest, as well as the paradigm (Creswell, 1994; Mason, 1996). Stanage (1987) traced ‘paradigm’ back to its Greek (paradeigma) and Latin origins (paradigma) meaning pattern, model or example. A paradigm is the patterning of the thinking of a person; it is a principal example among examples, an exemplar or model to follow according to which design actions are taken. Differently stated, a paradigm is an action of submitting to a view (Stanage, 1987). This view is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 157) who define a research paradigm as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action”, dealing with first principles, ‘ultimates’ or the researcher’s worldviews.

A researcher's epistemology according to Holloway (1997), Mason (1996) and Creswell (1994) is literally her theory of knowledge, which serves to decide how the social phenomena will be studied. My epistemological position regarding the study I undertook can be formulated as follows: a) data are contained within the perspectives of people that are involved with co-operative education programmes, either in a co-ordinating capacity or as programme participant; and b) because of this I engaged with the participants in collecting the data.

Based on Davidson (2000) and Jones (2001), I identified a phenomenological methodology as the best means for this type of study. Phenomenologists, in contrast to positivists, believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). In this regard, Mouton and Marais (1990, p. 12) state that individual researchers "hold explicit beliefs". The intention of this research, at the outset (preliminary focus), was to gather data regarding the perspectives of research participants about the phenomenon of the growing of talent and the contribution of co-operative education in this process.

For the sake of clarity of this illustration by example, I consider it necessary to specify what I mean when referring to co-operative education and talent. In the first instance, the International Dictionary of Adult and Continuing Education (Jarvis & Wilson, 1999, p. 37) defines co-operative education and co-operative programme respectively as follow:

A form of education in which the school [educational institution] and the occupational field co-operate in order to provide a joint educational programme with alternate attendance in both school and work. A concept used in US [United States of America] education.

The US equivalent of the sandwich course in the United Kingdom, where a student spends blocks of time in an educational institution and blocks in the workplace. Courses of this nature are usually either at professional qualification or undergraduate level.

The second term, talent, is generally understood to mean the natural endowments of a person, a special aptitude (often creative or artistic), a gift, or high mental ability/intelligence. Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod (2001), three consultants at McKinsey & Company, coined the phrases 'the war for talent' and 'the talent mind-set', based on the belief that the sustained success of business enterprises depends on acquiring and retaining talent at all levels of the organisation. They define talent in terms of key employees who are characterised by an astute strategic mind, leadership ability, good communication skills, the ability to draw and inspire people, having entrepreneurial instincts, possessing the relevant functional skills, and able to deliver results.

So far, I have explained what is meant by phenomenology and outlined the research paradigm of completed research undertaking. In the next section I discuss the research sample, or more appropriately in a qualitative research design of this nature, how the research participants were located.

Locating the research participants/informants

According to Hycner (1999, p. 156) "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants." I chose purposive sampling, considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants. I selected the sample based on my judgement and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997), looking for those who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988 p. 150). I made use of Internet searches and telephonic inquiry to the offices of the academic vice-principals of all higher education institutions in Gauteng, South Africa, to identify the programme managers at such institutions, who are responsible for educational programmes that are

tailored to the needs of and offered in collaboration with commerce, industry and/or government. Interviews were arranged with these programme managers. These interviewees are the primary unit of analysis (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000), with their 'informed consent' (Bailey, 1996, p. 11; Arksey & Knight, 1999; Street, 1998).

In order to trace additional participants or informants, I used snowball sampling. Snowballing is a method of expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing (Babbie, 1995; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Bailey (1996), Holloway (1997), and Greig and Taylor (1999) call those through whom entry is gained gatekeepers and those persons who volunteer assistance key actors or key insiders. (Historically, the common term was informants, a term which is losing popularity owing to negative connotations.) Neuman (2000) qualifies a gatekeeper as "someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site" (p. 352), a person from whom permission is required. Key insiders often adopt the researcher. Bailey (1996) cautions that such adoption may isolate the researcher from some potential informants or subjects. I requested the purposive sample interviewees to give, at their discretion, the names and contact details of persons based in commerce, industry and/or government who a) were co-responsible for the educational programmes; and b) who had participated in the programme presented. Regardless of these strategies, the most accommodating gatekeepers did, as Neuman (2000) cautions, to some extent influence the course of the research unfolding by, for example, steering me to look into 'learnerships'.

In order to ensure ethical research, I made use of informed consent (Holloway, 1997; Kvale, 1996). Bailey (1996) cautions that deception may be counter-productive. However, not asking the leading (Kvale, 1996) central research question (given under the next heading) is not regarded as deception. Based on Bailey's (1996, p. 11) recommended items, I developed a specific informed consent 'agreement', in order to gain the informed consent from participants, namely:

- That they are participating in research
- The purpose of the research (without stating the central research question)
- The procedures of the research
- The risk and benefits of the research
- The voluntary nature of research participation
- The procedures used to protect confidentiality (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000; Kvale, 1996, Street, 1998)

Bailey (1996) further observes that deception might prevent insights, whereas honesty coupled with confidentiality reduces suspicion and promotes sincere responses. The 'informed consent agreement' form was explained to subjects at the beginning of each interview. Most potential subjects signed the agreement and those who did not were not pressured to participate in the study. All who ended up being participants were in agreement with its content and signed.

Because Boyd (2001) regards two to 10 participants or research subjects as sufficient to reach saturation and Creswell (1998, pp. 65 & 113) recommends "long interviews with up to 10 people" for a phenomenological study, a sample size of ten managers, five responsible for educational programmes and five at collaborating enterprises, were selected. In addition to the ten interviewees, one group of programme participants (students) was requested to write essays on their experiences. With another group of programme participants, some participated in a focus group discussion, whereas others wrote essays. The purpose of collecting data from three different kinds of informants is a form of triangulation 'data triangulation' to contrast the data and 'validate' the data if it yields similar findings (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bloor, 1997; Holloway, 1997). Data-collection interviews continued until the topic was exhausted

or saturated, that is when interviewees (subjects or informants) introduced no new perspectives on the topic.

Data-gathering methods

The specific ‘phenomena’ (from the Greek word *phenomenon*, meaning appearance) that I focused on is co-operative education, and more particularly the joint ventures (completed and/or under way) between educational institutions and enterprises in order to educate people and grow talent. My central research question was: what is the contribution that co-operative education can make in the growing of talent of the South African people? However, Bentz and Shapiro (1998) and Kensit (2000) caution that the researcher must allow the data to emerge: “Doing phenomenology” means capturing “rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings” (p. 104). For this reason, the actual research questions that were put to participants (both academics and enterprise representatives involved) were:

- How did/do you experience the joint educational venture?
- What value, if any, has been derived from the collaborative effort?

Kvale (1996) draws a similar distinction between the research question and the interview question. Further, it was important to keep in mind that the findings may, or may not, illustrate that the practice of co-operative education contributes to the growing of talent. In this regard Jon Kabat-Zinn state that “inquiry doesn’t mean looking for answers” (cited in Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 39).

I conducted unstructured in-depth phenomenological interviews with both the educational institution-based programme managers and with the enterprise-based representatives. The remainder of this paragraph explains how these interviews were conducted. My questions were “directed to the participant’s experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme in question” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 196). According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998), Husserl called it bracketing when the inquiry is performed from the perspective of the researcher. Bracketing (Caelli, 2001; Davidson, 2000; King, 1994; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996) in this study entailed asking the participants/informants to set aside their experiences about the collaborative educational programme and to share their reflection on its value. Data were obtained about how the participants “think and feel in the most direct ways” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). I focused on “what goes on within” the participants and got the participants to “describe the lived experience in a language as free from the constructs of the intellect and society as possible”. This is one form of bracketing. There is also a second form of bracketing, which, according to Miller and Crabtree (1992, p. 24) is about the researcher that “must ‘bracket’ her/his own preconceptions and enter into the individual’s lifeworld and use the self as an experiencing interpreter”. Moustakas (1994, p. 85) points out that “Husserl called the freedom from suppositions the *epoche*, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain”. According to Bailey (1996, p. 72) the “informal interview is a conscious attempt by the researcher to find out more information about the setting of the person”. The interview is reciprocal: both researcher and research subject are engaged in the dialogue. I experienced that the duration of interviews and the number of questions varied from one participant to the other.

Kvale (1996) remarks with regard to data capturing during the qualitative interview that it “is literally an inter view, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest,” where researcher attempts to “understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples’ experiences” (pp. 1-2). At the root of phenomenology, “the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms — to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96) and allowing the essence to emerge (Cameron, Schaffer & Hyeon-Ae, 2001). The maxim of Edmund Husserl was “back to things themselves!” (Kruger, 1988, p. 28).

'Memoing' (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 69) is another important data source in qualitative research that I used in this study. It is the researcher's field notes recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process. Researchers are easily absorbed in the data-collection process and may fail to reflect on what is happening. However, it is important that the researcher maintain a balance between descriptive notes and reflective notes, such as hunches, impressions, feelings, and so on. Miles and Huberman (1984) emphasize that memos (or field notes) must be dated so that the researcher can later correlate them with the data.

In addition to the ten interviews conducted in this study, the educational institution-based programme managers in two instances arranged access to programme participants. Depending on the circumstances, I either talked directly to the programme participants to ask them to write essays, or worked through the programme manager and presented the following request:

Write down your viewpoint, perspectives or feelings of the programme you are undergoing, or have completed. You need not give your name. You need not concern yourself with grammar or spelling. If possible, compare this programme with others you may have done, which are not offered through collaboration between an employer and an educational institution (or compare this programme with pure academic programmes, known to you from talking to other students).

Having explained the three data-gathering methods - unstructured in-depth phenomenological interviews, memoing and essays - the data storage will be explained next.

Data-storing methods

I audio-recorded, with the permission of interviewees, all interviews (Arkley & Knight, 1999; Bailey, 1996). Each interview was assigned a code, for example "Participant, 21 May 2002." Where more than one interview took place on a specific date, the different interviews were identified by an alphabet character, (Participant-B, 18 June 2002). I recorded each interview on a separate cassette. I labelled each cassette with the assigned interview code. As soon as possible after each interview I listened to the recording and made notes. I transcribed key words, phrases and statements in order to allow the voices of research participants/informants to speak.

The words of caution by Easton, McComish and Greenberg (2000) that equipment failure and environmental conditions might seriously threaten the research undertaken, was borne in mind. They advise that the researcher must at all times ensure that recording equipment functions well and that spare batteries, tapes, and so on, are available. The interview setting must further be as free as possible from background noise and interruptions.

Field notes are a secondary data storage method in qualitative research. Because the human mind tends to forget quickly, field notes by the researcher are crucial in qualitative research to retain data gathered (Lofland & Lofland, 1999). This implies that the researcher must be disciplined to record, subsequent to each interview, as comprehensively as possible, but without judgmental evaluation, for example: "What happened and what was involved? Who was involved? Where did the activities occur? Why did an incident take place and how did it actually happen?" Furthermore, Lofland and Lofland (1999, p. 5) emphasise that field notes "should be written no later than the morning after". Besides discipline, field notes also involve "luck, feelings, timing, whimsy and art" (Bailey, 1996, p. xiii). The method followed in this study is based on a model or scheme developed by Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss supplemented by Robert Burgess. Four types of field notes were made:

- Observational notes (ON) - 'what happened notes' deemed important enough to the researcher to make. Bailey (1996) emphasises the use of all the senses in making observations.

- Theoretical notes (TN) - 'attempts to derive meaning' as the researcher thinks or reflects on experiences.
- Methodological notes (MN) - 'reminders, instructions or critique' to oneself on the process.
- Analytical memos (AM) - end-of-a-field-day summary or progress reviews.

At this juncture, it is important to note that field notes are already “a step toward data analysis.” Morgan (1997, pp. 57-58) remarks that because field notes involve interpretation, they are, properly speaking, “part of the analysis rather than the data collection”. Bearing in mind that the “basic datum of phenomenology is the conscious human being”, or the lived experiences of the participants in the research (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 98; Heron, 1996), it is very important that the researcher must, to the greatest degree possible, prevent the data from being prematurely categorised or ‘pushed’ into the researcher’s bias about the potential contribution of co-operative education in growing talent. The writing of field notes during the research process compels the researcher to further clarify each interview setting (Caelli, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

I opened a file with divisions for the various interviews and filed the following hard copy documentation:

- The informed consent agreement.
- My notes made during the interview.
- The field notes that I made subsequent to each interview.
- Any notes or sketches that the participant made during the interview, which the participant gave to me.
- Any additional information that the participant offered during the interview, for example brochures.
- Any notes made during the ‘data analysis’ process, e.g. grouping of units of meaning into themes.
- The draft ‘transcription’ and ‘analysis’ of the interview that I presented to the participants for validation.
- The confirmation of correctness and/or commentary by the participant about the ‘transcript’ and ‘analyses’ of the interview.
- Any additional/subsequent communication between the participant and myself.

Data storage includes audio recordings, field notes and filing of hard copy documentation. The interview transcriptions and field notes were also stored electronically on multiple hard drives. The data analysis, or rather explication of the data is explained next.

Explication of the data

The heading ‘data analysis’ is deliberately avoided here because Hycner cautions that ‘analysis’ has dangerous connotations for phenomenology. The “term [analysis] usually means a ‘breaking into parts’ and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon...[whereas ‘explication’ implies an]...investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole” (1999, p. 161). Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 9) regard analysis as the “systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships”. It is a way of transforming the data through interpretation. Now that the term explication has been clarified, we can turn to a simplified version of Hycner’s (1999) explication process, which I used. This explication process has five ‘steps’ or phases, which are:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.
2. Delineating units of meaning.
3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.
4. Summarising each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it.

5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction. The term reduction, coined by Husserl, is regarded by Hycner (1999) as unfortunate, because it has nothing to do with the reductionist natural science methodology. It would do a great injustice to human phenomena through over-analysis, removal from the lived contexts of the phenomena and worse possibly reducing phenomena to cause and effect. Phenomenological reduction “to pure subjectivity” (Lauer, 1958, p. 50), instead, is a deliberate and purposeful opening by the researcher to the phenomenon “in its own right with its own meaning” (Fouche, 1993; Hycner, 1999). It further points to a suspension or ‘bracketing out’ (or *epoche*), “in a sense that in its regard no position is taken either for or against” (Lauer, 1958, p. 49), the researcher’s own presuppositions and not allowing the researcher’s meanings and interpretations or theoretical concepts to enter the unique world of the informant/participant (Creswell, 1998, pp. 54 & 113; Moustakas, 1994, p. 90; Sadala & Adorno, 2001). This is a different conception of the term bracketing used when interviewing to bracket the phenomenon researched for the interviewee. Here it refers to the bracketing of the researcher’s personal views or preconceptions (Miller & Crabtree, 1992).

Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999) recommend that the researcher listens repeatedly to the audio recording of each interview to become familiar with the words of the interviewee/ informant in order to develop a holistic sense, the ‘*gestalt*’. Zinker (1978) explains that the term phenomenological implies a process, which emphasises the unique own experiences of research participants. The here and now dimensions of those personal experiences gives phenomena existential immediacy.

2. Delineating units of meaning. This is a critical phase of explicating the data, in that those statements that are seen to illuminate the researched phenomenon are extracted or ‘isolated’ (Creswell, 1998; Holloway, 1997; Hycner, 1999). The researcher is required to make a substantial amount of judgement calls while consciously bracketing her/his own presuppositions in order to avoid inappropriate subjective judgements.

The list of units of relevant meaning extracted from each interview is carefully scrutinised and the clearly redundant units eliminated (Moustakas, 1994). To do this the researcher considers the literal content, the number (the significance) of times a meaning was mentioned and also how (non-verbal or para-linguistic cues) it was stated. The actual meaning of two seemingly similar units of meaning might be different in terms of weight or chronology of events (Hycner, 1999).

3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes. With the list of non-redundant units of meaning in hand the researcher must again bracket her or his presuppositions in order to remain true to the phenomenon. By rigorously examining the list of units of meaning the researcher tries to elicit the essence of meaning of units within the holistic context. Hycner (1999) remarks that this calls for even more judgement and skill on the part of the researcher. Colaizzi, makes the following remark about the researcher’s ‘artistic’ judgement here: “Particularly in this step is the phenomenological researcher engaged in something which cannot be precisely delineated, for here he is involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight” (as cited in Hycner, 1999, pp. 150-151).

Clusters of themes are typically formed by grouping units of meaning together (Creswell, 1998; King, 1994; Moustakas, 1994) and the researcher identifies significant topics, also called units of significance (Sadala & Adorno, 2001). Both Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999) emphasize the importance of the researcher going back to the recorded interview (the *gestalt*) and forth to the list of non-redundant units of meaning to derive clusters of appropriate meaning. Often there is overlap in the clusters, which can be expected, considering the nature of human phenomena. By interrogating the meaning of the various clusters, central themes are determined, “which expresses the essence of these clusters” (Hycner, 1999, p. 153).

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) and King (1994) remark that many qualitative analyses can be supported by a number of personal computer software packages that have been developed since the 1980s. However, “there is no one software package that will do the analysis in itself” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 169) and the understanding of the meaning of phenomena “cannot be computerized because it is not an algorithmic process” (Kelle, 1995, p. 3). In other forms of qualitative research, software packages (such as ATLAS.ti, NUD*IST, The Ethnograph) can be used to ease the laborious task of analysing text-based data (Kelle, 1995) through rapid and sophisticated searches, line-by-line coding, and so on. However, these programs do not help with doing phenomenology.

4. Summarise each interview, validate and modify. A summary that incorporates all the themes elicited from the data gives a holistic context. Ellenberger captures it as follows:

Whatever the method used for a phenomenological analysis the aim of the investigator is the reconstruction of the inner world of experience of the subject. Each individual has his own way of experiencing temporality, spatiality, materiality, but each of these coordinates must be understood in relation to the others and to the total inner ‘world’. (as cited in Hycner, 1999, pp. 153-154)

At this point the researcher conducts a ‘validity check’ by returning to the informant to determine if the essence of the interview has been correctly ‘captured’ (Hycner, 1999, p. 154). Any modification necessary is done as result of this ‘validity check’.

5. General and unique themes for all the interviews and composite summary. Once the process outlined in points 1 through 4 has been done for all the interviews, the researcher looks “for the themes common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations” (Hycner, 1999, p. 154). Care must be taken not to cluster common themes if significant differences exist. The unique or minority voices are important counterpoints to bring out regarding the phenomenon researched.

The researcher concludes the explication by writing a composite summary, which must reflect the context or ‘horizon’ from which the themes emerged (Hycner, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). According to Sadala and Adorno (2001, p. 289) the researcher, at this point “transforms participants’ everyday expressions into expressions appropriate to the scientific discourse supporting the research”. However, Coffey & Atkinson (1996, p. 139) emphasise that “good research is not generated by rigorous data alone ... [but] ‘going beyond’ the data to develop ideas”. Initial theorising, however small, is derived from the qualitative data. The next paragraph contains a few pointers regarding the validity and truthfulness of the study.

Validity and truthfulness

Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel (1998) emphasise the truth-value of qualitative research and list a number of means to achieve truth. In this study, the phenomenological research design contributed toward truth. I bracketed myself consciously in order to understand, in terms of the perspectives of the participants interviewed the phenomenon that I was studying, that is “the focus [was] on an insider perspective” (Mouton & Marais, 1990, p. 70). The audio recordings made of each interview and again bracketing myself during the transcription of the interview further contributed to truth. Thereafter subjects received a copy of the text to validate that it reflected their perspectives regarding the phenomenon that was studied. A synopsis of the findings of the completed study is presented next.

Synopsis of the research findings

A wide spectrum of perspectives was found regarding the phenomenon of joint educational ventures and the perceived value derived from such collaborative efforts. Among others, the significant role of mentors and the importance of a suitable mentor supervising work-based learning stood out. Associated with this was the importance of commitment by employers and the capacity to devote managerial energy. However, difficulty was experienced in finding suitable experiential learning opportunities. The perception existed that experiential learning does not add value because of deficiencies of experiential learning and the constraints experienced regarding its proper management. However, based on the good results derived from in-service training and satisfaction with the integration of theory and practice, an opposing perspective was encountered. Learnerships as an element of the National Skills Development Strategy were further perceived important and contributing to society at large. Another important perspective was the required responsiveness by educational institutions to the needs of enterprises. Although some educational partnerships tailored to organisational needs existed, the failure of educational institutions and inflexibility of partnerships were also prevalent.

The composite summary above only reflects the themes that are common to most or all of the interviews. However, individual variations or unique themes (Hycner, 1999) are as important as commonalities with regard to the phenomenon researched.

From the study undertaken it is evident that the logistical organisation and co-ordination of joint ventures, between educational institutions and enterprises, are very important factors in growing talent.

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