



Teaching Phenomenology¹

Ronald J. Silvers²

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Introduction

How does one write about “Teaching Phenomenology”? When I first began assembling my notes for this paper, the task seemed straightforward. I conceived my discussion to be a narration and critical guide of what goes on in my courses and thesis supervision. However, the more I addressed myself to *understanding how* I taught phenomenology, the more I realized the undertaking would be portentous—even more so than actual teaching, which I experience to have a natural ebb and flow. Similar to other teachers, I have a way of my craft but, in the words of Michael Polanyi, “we know more than we can say” (Polanyi, 1966).

By “what we know” I am not referring to an intended course organization nor to a design of the format of seminar discussions, for they themselves are a product of the tacit understanding of our teaching. “What we know” is the tacit knowledge of our craft, our habits of teaching. What “we can say” of “what we know” requires us to search within the meanings of our own teaching experiences for interpretations and conceptualizations worthy of teaching itself. This is an ongoing self-reflective process of phenomenological inquiry. And here, in writing this paper about my teaching of phenomenology, it requires that I engage in a phenomenological study.

Since it is not my understanding that I teach phenomenology—insofar as that term would refer to students being taught a subject or instructed in a method—and since I will attempt to formulate what teaching may be, my use of the term “phenomenology” refers only to my practice of phenomenology within a classroom setting.

What I am teaching is the engagement of self-reflection as an analytic and hermeneutic movement found in phenomenology. My own relationship to phenomenology is not to a field as objectified *knowledge* but to the possibilities of phenomenological *knowing* made open to us through the reflective practices of our inquiry.

Organizing Courses as a Constitutive Practice

To begin a course, lecture, or talk at a conference, a speaker must assume that what she or he says is comprehensible and relevant to the listeners, that the movement of the talk is intelligible and sensibly fits the frame of what has been identified as the occasion: a seminar meeting of a course; a conference talk.

I am here relating the paradox of the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1978, p. 194) to communication: for listeners, an understanding of what is presented by a speaker assumes a prior grasp of the whole of what is to be understood. In teaching phenomenological reflection, as an engagement in a phenomenological talk that is reflective, I continually find that I cannot make this assumption. How reflective talk may be grasped and how a dialectic tension of its consciousness may be brought into a course are fundamental problems in teaching. Speaking reflectively in a course, or engaging in a reflective discourse, is not a conventional form of talk. I regard reflective discourse as a tension between what one says and what one subsequently discovers reflectively through one's subsequent discourse, as the latter pursues tacit features of the former. The return to what one said in a seminar meeting often takes the form of trying to explain what was meant. But in reflective discourse, rather than the speaker elaborating on the former comment (providing different examples or substantive information), the return is an analytical effort to discover the interpretative roots of its intended meaning. In this analytical movement the uncovering of the tacit dimension dialectically alters the understanding of the meaning within that former talk so that what one said is now recognized anew. Within seminar discussion, just as within research writing, reflective discourse permits us to become conscious of the shared social meanings of our own words; we come to realize the social basis of our speech. But, more important, we become aware of and then are able to conceptualize our limits of understandings—"silences" which as ruptures of discourse reveal to us the boundaries of our understandings of others (Silvers, 1983). Discovering these limits through reflective analysis transforms such boundaries from that state of absolute difference in which people believe that dialogue is no longer possible since they regard others as holding values, beliefs, or understandings of reality based on a biographical context different than their own.

I teach an existential phenomenology course in sociology and education which is offered to graduate students who generally have had no previous study in the field. Hence my course, particularly the opening meetings, is an introduction to a new form of thought. It calls for a departure from current prevailing modes of thought in the social and human sciences.

I attempt to encourage students to engage in phenomenological reflection through written weekly exchanges, which are distributed by each member to all seminar participants. All members of the class, including myself, participate in exchanging our commentaries at the beginning of each class meeting. The commentaries address previous seminar discussions and assigned readings and act as a written dialogue among members of the class. They also constitute a record of the class which may be referred to for future work. The written exchange allows me to begin each meeting with a response to student concerns, to contentious or searching issues that have emerged in previous meetings. For example, in the first meeting of

the course, at the suggestion of one of the students that all participants identify themselves, their field of study, and anticipated research, there was sharp disagreement whether such an introduction was warranted and helpful. The discussion was attached to the general topic within the seminar as to how the personal of the researcher may be brought into inquiry in such a way that those studied would not be objectified—a topic introduced by Robert Jay's article "Personal and Extrapersonal Vision in Anthropology" (1974). For some students, the introductions of their names and statements of their research interest was such an objectification; for others, identifying themselves and their previous and ongoing studies constituted a personalization of relationships.

Sandra, who suggested and encouraged introductions, writes after the heated discussion of the first meeting:

We conventionally introduce ourselves by name. What's in a name? My name is mine! It is not me, but it is a part of me. I am wrapped in it, ensconced in it. I own it. I take it with me wherever I go—through time and space. It is a part of my definition. It makes me unique—separate from all others. It personalizes me. When I give you my name, I give you something of myself. When you give me your name, I believe that I have something of you.

In response to that first meeting, Claus writes:

I have no interest in learning names before seeing the person in action. I am trying to think of less formal ways of introducing each other. I find myself incapable of stopping the game. I avoid an argument with those who express their wish to hear each person's self-introduction.

It is now my turn to present myself. I hear myself talking of "Curriculum," "Germany," "The . . . Project." The first two points I don't like because I have mentioned them too often; the last point I don't like because I haven't heard myself mentioning it often enough to feel at ease. The little performance is over. I feel frustrated because I said what should have remained silent, and didn't say what will have to be articulated in the future.

In the following class meeting I attempted to respond to students' comments in my written comments about James Agee's ethnographic work. I was attempting to develop a concept of "presence" in terms of Agee's graphic descriptions of his experiences in studying sharecroppers in the Southern United States during the Depression:

I take the comments of Claus, Mary, and Charles to point to the problem of how we are called upon to be present through announcements of identity, when such declarations appear to prevent our very presence.

As Claus points out, in the very naming we experience an inauthenticity, an absence of the very self we are attempting to bring forward. I say inauthentic in the sense that what is named does not correspond to what we regard as what-we-are-about. And I say "what-we-are-about" rather than what or who we "are" because the sense of ourselves is a dynamic, something that we are coming to be. As Charles points out in his written comment, "To reveal myself in a name, or a few details, is to force me to artificially arrest the unfolding of my self."

It is instructive that disclosures were not present in the announcements during that first day of class but came later in your writings, in what Mary has conceptualized as the "confessions"—a confession which seeks through self-reflection to relate ourselves to our very declarations.

The confession (as found in Claus's written comment) is an attempt to locate ourselves proximately to our earlier introductory statements, to find within them what we were a part of by a sighting of the unfolding self in relation to the declared self.

Bringing the personal into our work, insofar as we may learn from our discussion and writings on introductions, rests in being able to witness and reflect upon the lived moment in a manner which brings an understanding of our experience of presence forward.

As I return to these and other class writings a year after the exchange and consider the comments, I am struck by the reflective quality of the students' writing. When one student writes of his introduction as an experience of the failure of labels and when another describes her feeling of giving her name and receiving another's name, there is within each account an articulation of the subjective dimension of their understanding as an interpretation of their sentiment. Students drew opposite conclusions with respect to the question of whether naming objectifies oneself and the other. By beginning with an account of their experiences in the class, they start to recover the interpretive ground of the understandings they vigorously expressed during the initial debate. In these accounts they have commenced with their biographies in an effort to move to an understanding of self. (This movement from biography to an examination of self, I take to be the trajectory of an existential-phenomenological inquiry.) My commentary does not initiate self-reflection but merely continues it in further interpretation.

What is also significant in the exchange of commentaries between teacher and students is that the biographical narrative is not only an unannounced beginning of phenomenological reflection; it is, in the context of a course, an invitation to oneself and to others to participate in that reflection. The biographical narrative allows us an opportunity to see anew the possibility of introducing phenomenological consciousness: not by a teacher offering or showing a new form of thought to his students, but as a way of providing for the possibility of students' entering into that thought.

In my seminars, particularly in my first meeting, I begin with my own biography as an invitation to participate. I refer here to biography as a locus of experiences of self which is expressed in a narrative form and which is the initial source of understanding for uncovering the tacit dimensions of those experiences. In my first meeting this year I explored biographically my own intellectual movement from a study of the sociology of knowledge to a current existential and hermeneutic concern with the phenomenology of discourse. Such a narration provided me and my students an opportunity to discuss the transformations that we experience in the movement of our intellectual work, the way in which we take for ourselves the identities of

fields of study, the re-forming of fields to fit our own practices of inquiry, and the experience of incompleteness in what we seek to know. In one sense the narration of my intellectual biography and movement may be seen as providing students with a historical background for the organization of the seminar. But that would be of secondary importance to the narrator's invitation to participate in a self-reflective process. Within the discussion which followed, we were able to reflectively focus upon the dialectical movement of my work and, thus, to bring the topic out of a particular biography and self and into a general realm of the dialectics of knowledge. What I offered in this discussion was a description of changes in the ideas that I found necessary for my research. Each shift in ideas was not a purposeful choice, nor was it founded on abstract solutions. The necessity of each change was born out of tension between the language of theories I had been using and the language I found myself voicing in a current research project. Each dialectic was a transformation of paradigms to meet the emergence of a new language of research in spite of the fact that all projects aimed at the same topic: the processes by which we come to understand our work and our self.

This part of the discussion was not intended in the preparation of my narration; this discovery of the dialectics was a constituted feature of seminar discourse emerging from the discussion between myself and my students. What my participation in the course would be in future meetings is what it was on that first meeting: the recovering of meaning through a constituting structure of self-reflection found in seminar discussions. The same dialectics of discourse is found in students' writings. In Claus's later commentary, he states:

Personally, I derived a sense of significance from the juxtaposition of my own negative judgments to positive comments about the experience of introduction. I learnt that my frustration about the introduction was by no means inevitable, and I gained an insight into other people's perception of a situation which so far had purely negative overtones. The practical value of this learning process is two fold. In future introductions I can either attempt to empathize with other people's wishes, or I can use my insight into their concerns as a starting point for the presentation of my own preferences. In moving from a personal to an interpersonal knowledge of the experience of introductions, I have thus gained new and liberating insights into an otherwise frustrating situation.

What was not said on that first day of the course, but what was imparted to the students, was the sense that "there is no intended pre-structure or pre-design for how the course is to be conducted." I did not present my biography in order to evoke self-reflection from students, for it is only now in retrospection and in a recovery of my teaching practices that I find what the biographical narrative offers. But even had I known the potential of the biographical narrative at that time, it would not have been "used" for the purpose of introducing phenomenological consciousness as an eliciting of self-reflection from others. Attention to seminar discourse in general and the biographical narrative in particular is itself a listening and a witnessing of what is said in order to move to communicative understandings.

While the course has its own telos, it has no pre-structure. I say this in spite of its syllabus, schedule of required readings, and required writings. Even as an orientation to phenomenological study, they do not constitute a structure for grasping the what and the how of phenomenological reflection. They provide seminar routines but not the design of a movement-of-attention embedded in the seminar's discourse. It is the discourse of the seminar that is the constituting organizing force that provides a structure and possibility for phenomenological reflection. However, insofar as this conceptualization may be thought to absolve my own responsibility, I would like to say that, unlike the non-directive teacher as discussed by Carl Rogers (1961), I have a commitment equal to other seminar members to initiate discourse in a pursuit of inquiry.

Even if I had made explicit the absence of a pre-structure of the seminar, it would not ensure the students' understanding of the constitutive nature of the structure they were engaging in. For whether made explicit or not, constitutively structured courses are initially experienced as courses that are unorganized in themselves and disorganizing for the student. Though it was not originally intended, I now recognize that insofar as this design of a course is experienced as lacking structure in a conventional way—that is, students often report they are at a loss to understand what to do for seminar participation and that the normal expectations of courses appear to be suspended—they sense the loss of a familiar world.

Hence, in “teaching” phenomenological reflection by engaging others in a discourse of self-reflection, the familiar world falls away. This, I believe, allows the entrance of the existential into phenomenology, whereby a participant in the seminar need not be asked to suspend a natural attitude in order to enter into phenomenological reflection. Through the biographical narrative and the interpretation of its meanings in the movement of the seminar's discourse, the student is brought beyond his or her own familiar world and into the possibilities of phenomenological consciousness.

Seminar Talk and Writing as Reflective and Meditative Discourse

This separation from the familiar and orderly world does not ensure a reflective response. Indeed, some of my students respond by returning to the familiar as a vantage point for launching a critique upon the reflective activity of the seminar. They ask, “What is the purpose of being so obsessively introspective about the course?” And they see the talk and writing of the other members, including myself, as “a masking behind verbiage that part of our humanness which would allow for new insights. . . . Moreover, such talk prevents each from being present with other in relationships.” In their response to the reflective activity of others, these students identify the language of the seminar as obstructive to our purposes and inauthentic in our practice. They make language a topic in a recognition that phenomenological talk and writing is distinctive and, for

what is necessary in its engagement, exclusive. What they discover is that reflective activity attends not only to the topics or readings explicitly under review, but to the talk and writing of the seminar as its members attend to topics and readings. They identify a discourse which turns upon itself.

By reflective discourse I mean a phenomenological, self-conscious, dialectical discourse: one that constantly refers back to itself in showing its own grounds of interpretation as it proceeds. In reflective discourse, as speaker or writer, we seek to be self-aware about what is being said or written as we speak or write so that our attention not only is directed to a focused topic, but turns back upon itself and attends to the language of its expression. Interestingly, that bending back upon its own talk *in* the seminar is a bending *upon* seminar discourse as a recovery of the inter-personal communication among the members of the course.

While the value of the critical students' comments is in identifying seminar discourse as reflective, such discourse appears to them as a wall that separates them from others. Their criticism is an attempt to show this obstruction and its separation of personal understanding. But in trying to show the other seminar members' limitations, they fail to show how they come to their own interpretations; their own talk and writing remains inaccessible to the other members as it is unreflective in its construction—it does not reveal what lies behind its words. While they wish to gain access to others, their own understandings are unavailable since their own talk objectifies and reifies the language which they criticize.

But such is not the experience of all students. Let me offer an excerpt from Aileene's written class commentary. She also begins with a discovery of the distinctiveness of the seminar talk, of her own exclusion from it, but arrives at another formulation:

I hardly know where to begin. I try to visualize the discourse during the last class, to see myself as doubtless I appear to others: a person who is "not here with us." I wonder if I am . . . as visually absent . . . or is it that my written thoughts are not in the collective pool, that the absence of my written work has created for some an absence of myself since they feel they cannot know me as they cannot read my thoughts.

Here the problem of discourse and seminar participation is taken as an initial point of departure to explore the subjective source of her experience and through that exploration to discover what is absent in the inter-personal of the seminar. Aileene continues to write in this exploration:

Strange my written work is not me. It is only a facet of myself at a particular moment of time, and that facet is not someone that even I could say "this is me" or "this is all of me." My written works are fragments of ideas that float around in my head somewhere, and that which eventually finds its way to paper are those thoughts snatched from the collection and transferred to paper. Nor are all the snatched thoughts on paper; In my haste to commit to paper fragments of my thoughts, I may have lost a portion of them irretrievably.

What Aileene accomplishes is not only identifying seminar discourse as that which separates her from other participants; she goes on to uncover the meaning of her writing as a feature of her ruptured relationship to other members of the seminar by examining her experience and the meaning of her writing. Through her examination the division between herself and others in the seminar begins to fade.

The same examination and relationship is accorded to the study of seminar readings. I select studies in the human sciences that contain the researcher's biographical narrative and which are themselves self-conscious of the text's discourse, such as James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1969), Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981), and Carlos Castaneda's *The Tales of Power* (1976). Students examine the writings of these authors not as a review of ideal studies and methods of inquiry, nor for exegetic treatment of these texts, but as an analytic and hermeneutic study of accounts of researchers' biographies in conjunction with the study of their own biographies as beginning researchers.

In this way previous phenomenological research is encountered dialectically and constitutively: the members of the seminar attempt to arrive at the movement of other phenomenologists' practices of inquiry by a recognition of what they themselves existentially and communicatively bring to the interpretation of these studies.

There is yet another feature of the constitutive structure of seminars that bears upon the examination of seminar discourse: "meditative discourse" as the inter-personal, joint discourse of self-reflection. Similar to reflective discourse it includes a self-referencing practice to its own language of expression. However, whereas in reflective discourse we conceive the single reflective inquirer, in meditative discourse we refer to the multi-presence of speakers or writers in their communicative efforts to come to understandings within an interpretive analysis.

Meditative discourse is a tensive relationship between the solitary and the social, between one's own thinking and the expressed ideas of others. It is based on a constant invitation to others and acceptance by oneself of participating in an unprescribed manner. Students, and equally the teacher, are witnesses and members of this process. For each meditative discourse is a spontaneous effacement of separate roles and persons, so that what is offered is not recognized as being presented by a particular member of a course. In contrast to Buber's formulation of dialogue (1965), within meditative discourse there is a loss of difference so that, as found in Zen, the participant is selfless.

Teaching as a View Above Process

Within this paper, I have attempted to locate the features of communicating self-reflection in an examination of my teaching prac-

tices. Much of what I have discussed is, by necessity, a formulation of the practices of phenomenological reflection, just as the engagement of reflection in a seminar requires an attention to the relations of members in their discourse. Throughout the formulations discourse occupies a central, pivotal point as the subject of phenomenological consciousness and as a practice of communication. Thus, the examination provides a view of a process of communication in and for phenomenological reflection. To bring the features of this process and their relations into summary form, the teaching of phenomenological reflection may be understood in these ways:

- a. It includes commitment to non-objectifying interpretive analyses for the recovery of existential meanings.
- b. This commitment is made manifest in the introduction of personal experience and sentiment through the biographical narrative.
- c. The biographical narrative is the initial point of a reflectivity upon our own consciousness and its embeddedness in our language.
- d. Reflectivity upon language brings attention to one's own discourse as an expressive movement of "reflective discourse."
- e. Reflective discourse is made possible by an absence of a pre-structure and the presence of an uncertainty in the direction of the eventual theoretical formulation beyond the personal of the biographical narrative.
- f. Participation in self-reflection as a joint communicative movement is found in a dialectic of meditation as a tension between the solitary movement of reflective thought and the social movement of communication.

26

It would be antithetical to an existential and hermeneutic study in self-reflection to conclude a paper (here, this paper on teaching phenomenology) with a summary of an interpretive process. It is antithetical since in an existential pursuit we labor forward to find our essential presence amid an array of appearances. But when we stop rather than pause in our phenomenological inquiry, and as soon as we are relieved of the dialectics of appearances through analysis and conceptualization, we find not an authenticity of the presence of ourselves (here, my presence as a teacher), but yet only another appearance of ourselves, another objectified formulation of ontology. Existential phenomenology, however, does not bring despair as we learn in the Myth of Sisyphus (Camus, 1955), but a recognition of the necessity of our own laboring to learn about the nature of what we have been and are becoming. As we realize that there is no inherent meaning in life, we recognize that reflection cannot bring us substantive knowledge but only touch upon our presence in the process of knowing.

A "summary" as presented above is also antithetical to a hermeneutic endeavor if it were to conclude a paper. If such a summary were to bring a writing to its closure, its form and place in the paper would

constitute an epistemological rather than a hermeneutic work. For while epistemology attempts to set out conditions by which others come to the same understandings and conclusions, hermeneutics strives for dialogical and dialectical knowledge. It is dialogical in its efforts to encourage further interpretation by others of what is offered as the results of research, and it is dialectical in attempting to reach beyond cultural interpretation in a transformation of understandings. A hermeneutic study of what we are would open up what we may become.

But what is that possibility in a hermeneutic understanding of teaching phenomenology? How may it be realized? It is at this juncture that I realize that what I have formulated in the paper about self-reflection in my seminars does not identify teaching as a particular practice. While I have written about my way of initiating reflective and meditative discourse in my seminars, those practices remain undifferentiated among the members of the seminar. In the participatory language of the seminar I find myself indistinguishable from my students. Indeed, it is just that undifferentiated participation within meditative discourse that is necessary for phenomenology to take hold in the seminar. How then may one talk about the *teaching* of phenomenological reflection as distinct from participating in phenomenological reflection?

The answer begins to take shape by locating what is contained in an undertaking necessary for the question: to make the distinction requires an examination of one's own special practices in the ongoing activities of a seminar. Such an examination, as found in this paper, takes me from the experience of a seminar to a "view above process"—that is, to a vantage point from which I may begin to formulate the what and the how of the movement of the process. It is from such a view that I have earlier conceptualized a movement that includes biographical narrative, the constitutive structure of organization, reflective and meditative discourse. In this conceptualization I transform what I find from process to praxis: that is, a shift from conditions which shape my understanding to understandings which shape my conditions. As Laing and Cooper point out (1971, p. 95), "thought . . . is the praxis of an individual or a group in determined conditions at a particular moment of history." What I had experienced in the seminar as an independent, objective force is now revealed to me as project and responsibility. Teaching is the bringing forth interpretively, analytically, and conceptually from a view above process what I knew tacitly, but what I felt to be external to me. It proceeds through such self-reflection to move to a praxis: that is, to find an intelligibility and comprehensibility of the reality I and others had created in the seminar so that the future no longer remains pre-figured.

My view above process emerges here in my interpretive inquiry but it does not lie solely within the pages of this paper. In a movement from process to praxis I come to recognize that my teaching presence in a course is found in the trust and appreciation I bring to an

unplanned and uncertain future of a seminar in existential and hermeneutic phenomenology. Teaching is that constant presence of comprehending the particularity of an idea, unrestrained by its history and the intensity of the present, but moving with a widening flow of meaning and ideas toward future discourse. A teacher of phenomenology is a listener for, and a discoverer of, the polysemous harmony of reflective voices.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was prepared as an invited address to the Annual Meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Pennsylvania State University, 1982. This paper has been prepared as part of a research project within a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Program Grant (#431-770006): "The Problem of Self-Reflection and the Study of Children's Culture."
2. With the assistance of Ann Dean, Shawn Moore, Terrance Trussler, William Walcott, and Claus Wittmaack.

References

- Agee, J. (1969). *Let us now praise famous men*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Buber, M. (1965). *The knowledge of man*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Camus, A. (1955). *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. New York: Random House.
- Castaneda, C. (1974). *The teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Heidegger, M. (1978). *Being and time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Jay, R. (1974). Personal and extrapersonal vision in anthropology. In D. Hymes (Ed.), *Reinventing anthropology*. New York: Random House.
- Laing, R. D., & Cooper, G. D. (1971). *Reason and violence*. New York: Random House.
- Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension*. New York: Doubleday.
- Rogers, C. (1966). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1948). *Existentialism and humanism*. London: Eyre Methuen.
- Silvers, R. J. (1983). On the other side of silence. *Human Studies*, 6, 91-108.