This document is meant to be a short guide to the phenomenological dissertation as it is done in the School of Education at the University of Maryland, particularly as directed by Francine Hultgren. Although it is in no way meant to be comprehensive, it may be helpful in order to orient students to the concept of phenomenological research at the graduate and especially at the doctoral level.

Prepared by Sarah L. Morris, Ph.D. 2013
Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership

What is Phenomenology?
Phenomenology is the study of lived experience, as characterized by pre-conceptual, pre-theory understanding.

It is rich textual interpretation of life as it is lived. The purpose of phenomenological research, according to van Manen (1984), is “to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (p. 44). Phenomenological work does not attempt to prescribe, to generalize, to predict, or to explain. Rather, it seeks to answer questions like “What is this phenomenon like?” and “What is the lived experience of this phenomenon?”

This kind of interpretive work is characterized by thoughtfulness and attentiveness, which allow us to “engage language in a primal incantation or poetizing which hearkens back to the silence from which the words emanate. What we must do is discover what lies at the ontological core of our being” (van Manen, 1984, p. 39).

As a phenomenological researcher, you are a part of your work, and phenomenological work is:
always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence. But while this recognition does not negate or relativize the plausibility of the insights gained from a specific piece of phenomenological work, it does show up the scope and nature of the phenomenological project itself. (van Manen, 1984, p. 40)

To engage in thematic reflection is to identify and illuminate the elements that cannot be removed from an experience without changing the meaning of that experience: essential themes. Van Manen (1997) discusses thematizing as a means for bringing a lived experience into meaningful focus, to openness, of concretizing into presence the phenomenon one wishes to engage. To engage in thematic reflection and grasp the significance of phenomena to which we are drawn, we must set aside our common sense in order to reveal essential elements. When essential elements begin to reveal themselves in patterned and rich ways, they become the themes we seek. Identifying themes as parts of a whole, we seek to make connections, circling the essence of the phenomenon, living within the phenomenon, returning to the words of others, making meaning. By thematizing, then, we create a structure that becomes a story of the phenomenon. Your written work—be it an essay, an article, or a dissertation—is that story.
Van Manen, in his foundational work on human sciences inquiry, identifies **six specific research activities**, which involve:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world
2. investigating experience as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized
3. reflecting on essential themes which characterize the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting
5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole

(1997, pp. 30-31)

These research activities form a method for phenomenological inquiry and writing that helps to shape the phenomenological dissertation work and text. It is the interplay among these research activities that creates the form and process through which the dissertation comes to life, representing a descriptive interpretation of life as it is lived.

---

There is no carbon copy formula for composing a dissertation, however, there are some general commonalities among dissertations written in the school of education at University of Maryland, College Park. These general ideas are outlined here. However, it may be helpful to read others’ dissertations (see section IV).

**Chapter 1** is a turning toward the phenomenon. As such, it opens the phenomenon for your reader through an examination of your own experience and engagement. Chapter 1 also introduces your phenomenological questions, especially the overarching question which frames your work: “What is the lived experience of this phenomenon?” Some writers begin to open themes in Chapter 1, especially as those themes arise from their own turning toward the phenomenon of interest. The first steps in phenomenological inquiry are those that begin from our own understandings. Chapter 1 allows a description of our own living in the questions that call forth from the heart. In Chapter 1, we examine our own assumptions and pre-understandings, as well as our own positionality as researchers and not philosophers. We also learn and elaborate upon what we don’t know—which opens new questions and allows us to further engage the phenomenon through the work of others.

**Chapter 2** further explores the phenomenon as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized or theorized through various **manifestations of the phenomenon in the world**. This involves pre-analytical descriptions of the phenomenon for others. These descriptions may come from literature, art, music, history, research, culture, informal conversations, etymological tracings, and other texts that further illuminate essential themes related to the phenomenon.

**Chapter 3** provides **philosophical grounding** for the research work, as well as a **plan for research**. In Chapter 3, writers are able to show their understanding of phenomenological tradition in context, to connect the work of prevalent philosophers to the phenomenon itself, and to show why and how hermeneutic phenomenology is the best method for researching the questions opened through uncovering the phenomenon. Some writers may also choose to show why and how phenomenology is most appropriate for their own research identities, since our research defines, in part, who we are. Our research approach defines us, too, since reflection—pedagogical and phenomenological—begins in the self. Depth of reflection and relationship grows from the research, and so connecting method and one’s own understandings may be beneficial here. It is also in Chapter 3 that a plan for research is clearly laid out, providing information about conversant selection, the conversations themselves, and other means for gathering lifeworld texts, such as journals, reflections, letters, observations, etc. Together, Chapters 1, 2, and 3 make up the dissertation proposal.

---

**What Shape Can a Phenomenological Dissertation Take?**
Chapter 4 serves to uncover and illuminate essential themes culled from the lifeworld texts contributed by participants or conversants in the phenomenological study. To seek these themes, we may engage in rich discussions with others, co-conversants who also are moved by this phenomenon and its potential. We engage their texts (collections of “data,” which may include interview conversations, journals, reflections, emails, discussions, stories, etc.) in order to find lived language that uncovers essential themes related to the phenomenon. Lived language allows a revealing of the obscure and particular. We engage with conversants by reflectively asking what it is that brings us to our understanding of the nature of this phenomenon. As writers, then, we begin making the implicit explicit through felt understanding and intersubjective knowledge in order to address the essential elements and common themes of the phenomenon. It is in Chapter 4 that we convey new themes uncovered in conversation and return to previously discussed themes as they come to light in new ways. Some writers find that many themes emerge and so devote two chapters to this portion of the dissertation, composing a work of six chapters rather than five.

Chapter 5 (or the final chapter, if there are six) brings to light the pedagogical implications of this phenomenon and the research. According to van Manen, “The end of phenomenological research is to sponsor a critical educational competence: knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of a carefully edified thoughtfulness” (1984, p. 36). As such, the final chapter of a phenomenological dissertation in this style serves to convey in a thoughtful way the significance of this work and the phenomenon as it resonates for learning. These pedagogical implications need not be those grounded solely in the academic classroom, rather, they may spring from any pedagogic situation, any relevant moments of learning and growth, with learners engaged together.

Who are my guides?
The Foundational Philosophers

Some perhaps helpful philosophers and brief descriptions of their work follow. Many of these thinkers and their works will be used in introduction to phenomenology courses.

David Abram, a modern phenomenological writer, reflects upon language, upon embodied knowing, and upon our positionality in nature and with other, non-human beings in his works, The Spell of the Sensuous and Becoming Animal. His works are compelling reads and present a compelling example of ways in which the 21st century writer can engage with phenomenological texts.

Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher, writes eloquently about places and spaces in his work The Poetics of Space.

Edward Casey, a modern philosopher, writes about places and their impact upon human understanding in his work Getting Back into Place.

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, broke from his teacher’s belief that one can bracket oneself from a phenomenon of interest. Rather, Heidegger argued, we are a part of that which we attempt to understand and cannot separate the research from our own being in the world. Students engaged in phenomenological work may find Being and Time helpful, as well as “The Origin of the Work of Art” and “The Question Concerning Technology.” Heidegger’s other writings may also provide guidance in phenomenological work.

Edmund Husserl, the founder of a school of thought in phenomenology, shunned positivism and developed a method for uncovering the essence of phenomena. This reduction is still used in today’s phenomenological work. Although Husserl’s idea of bracketing is not widely used in our method of phenomenological human science research, his work is foundational.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a contemporary and student of Heidegger, writes on philosophical hermeneutics and contextual understanding in his foundational work, Truth and Method. This may be helpful to beginning phenomenological writers in understanding research and writing phenomenologically.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work focuses on embodiment, specifically relating to the body as the source of all understanding. We know what we know, he argues, by virtue of our embodied being in the world. Particularly helpful are his works The Phenomenology of Perception, The Primacy of Perception, and The Visible and The Invisible.

Max van Manen is a contemporary pedagogue who practices phenomenology as human science research. His works are the foundation of the method for research used in the School of Education at The University of Maryland. Accessible and easy to read, van Manen’s texts lay out well-explained guidelines for conducting research phenomenologically. Among his many helpful books are Researching Lived Experience, The Tact of Teaching, and Writing in the Dark.
Who are my guides?
What Resources Are Available to Me?

On-Campus Support is available in a few forms to the University of Maryland phenomenology community. Although you will begin to form your own group of collaborators through your phenomenology courses, and although much support will come from your advisor, it is helpful to see yourself as part of the legacy of work in phenomenological human science research at Maryland.

Hermes Circle is a group of students engaged in phenomenological writing and a forum for sharing work and receiving feedback. In addition to being connected by listserv, Hermes Circle meet monthly during the academic year. Students in the introduction to phenomenology course are invited to join. Please see Dr. Hultgren for more information.

Because phenomenological work can take varying shapes and draw from many areas, it is beneficial to read others’ work. The Digital Repository at the University of Maryland (DRUM) contains an archive of dissertation and thesis work from students across the university. Just searching by keyword “phenomenological” provides a long list of dissertations written in recent years. DRUM is accessible here: http://drum.lib.umd.edu/

Other sources that may be of use in phenomenological inquiry and writing are listed here:

Two different organizations sponsor conferences for work engaging in phenomenological inquiry each year. These are the Interdisciplinary Coalition of North American Phenomenologists (ICNAP), online here http://www.icnap.org/call.htm, and The Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences (SPHS), online here: http://sphs.info/.

As is the case with any burgeoning scholar, it is wise to present your work to engaged audiences and to see other scholars at work; both SPHS and ICNAP provide constructive and attentive feedback during sessions.

Many sources for exploring and understanding phenomenological research and writing, including a list of journals of phenomenological publications and manuscripts of phenomenological work, can be found at Phenomenology Online, available here: http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/

Hubert Dreyfus has a helpful series of lectures on phenomenology available through UC Berkeley on the Internet Archive, here: http://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Hubert+Dreyfus%22

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is available online and explicates briefly and clearly important ideas about philosophical movements and those thinkers who pioneered them. It is available here: http://plato.stanford.edu/

For more information about the UMD Graduate Writing Fellows, please visit:

http://www.gradschool.umd.edu/Writing_Fellows/homepage.htm

References
