

From Reflective Practice to Practical Wisdom: A Phenomenological Study on Preservice Teachers' Educational Growth in a Method Course

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Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study is to explore how a middle school English method course affects pre-service teachers' understanding and perception of notions of "practice" and "good teaching" by using the theoretical and methodological principles of hermeneutic phenomenology and practical philosophy. It is central to this research study to explore the process of educational "change" and "growth" in preservice teachers' understandings overtime through deliberation, dialogue, and performance in method courses.

Theoretical Framework

While recently there have been numerous models, theories and narratives about teacher education, "reflective practice" has been seen as the dominant concept in the preservice teacher education in the US to help preservice teachers actively shape their teaching identity (Schon, 1983, 1987; Posner, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986; Valli, 1992; Fendler, 2003). My analysis of literature helped me identify two contrasting view of reflective practice and teaching in the field of teacher education: a- *traditional-technical view* and b- *progressive-interpretive view*. However, when I studied and analyzed these models and theories of reflective practice, I realized that none of these conceptions deal with reflection itself in a reflexive way. What was missing in these models or theories was the inadequate representation of cultural, moral, political, practical and aesthetical dimensions of reflective teaching and teacher education.

My exploration and analysis of the literature on reflection and teacher education led me develop a complex view of teacher education in order to eliminate limitations of the traditional and contemporary models of reflective practice and teacher education. This new post-foundational view of teacher education based its premises on the theories on philosophical and critical hermeneutics, and practical wisdom by Dewey (1933), Habermas (1973), Gadamer (1975), van Manen (1990), Higgins (2001), Eisner (2002), and Schwandt (2002).

Methodology

Using hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodology of this study has enabled me to explore how the preservice teachers conceptualize teaching through their experiences while locating the preservice teachers, course instructor and my own pre-understanding and preconceptions about notions of "practice" and "good teaching" within the theoretical discussion. There is a constant dialectical interplay or hermeneutical circular exchange between what literature theorizes about ideal teacher education and what

research participants' prior understanding and realities of the actual classroom are. This hermeneutic exchange or dialectical interplay between theory and practice through the phenomenological investigation provided me a window to understand how the course instructor and preservice teachers were thinking about teaching, the connections that they were making between their field experiences, their course work, and their prior experiences.

According to van Manen (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological research is interplay among six research activities:

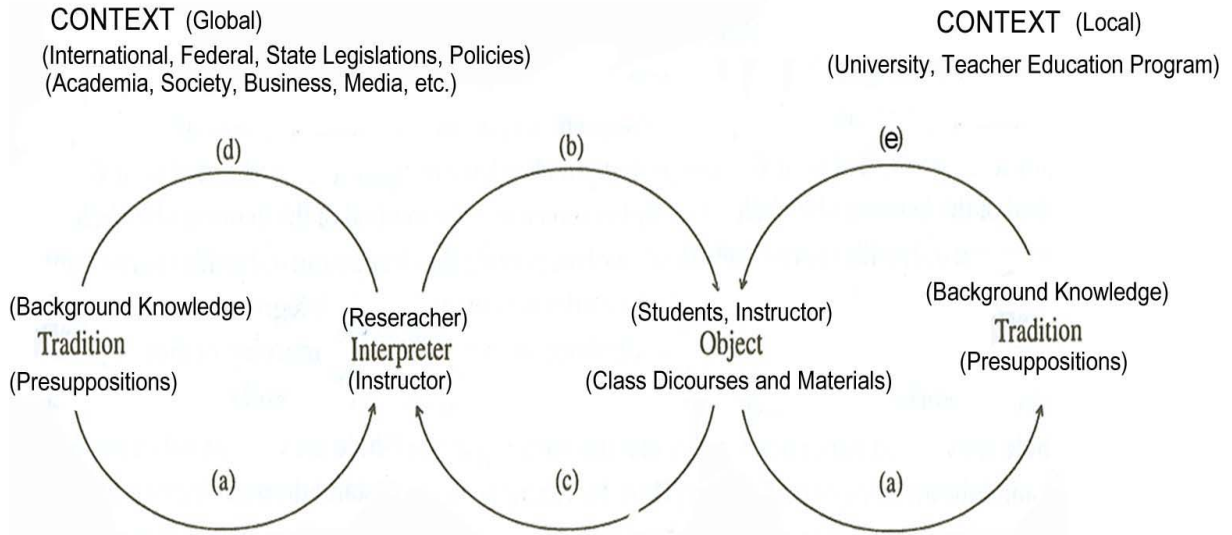
1. turning to a phenomenon that is of compelling interest and to which one is committed;
2. investigating lived experiences by standing in the midst of the world of living relations and shared situations;
3. reflecting on essential themes that characterize the phenomenon;
4. describing the phenomenon through the writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon and to the fundamental question;
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole, and by measuring the overall design of the study against the significance that the parts must play. (30)

Research Questions:

While exploring the process of preservice teachers' educational growth from the theoretical and methodological principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How do preservice teachers in the course understand the practices of a "good" middle school English teacher?
2. How does the instructor for the course characterize the practices of a "good" middle school English teacher?
3. How do these two views conflict or align with each other in principle, and under what conditions do students and instructor engage each other over these issues?
4. What are the immediate and foreseeable outcomes of these engagements, and how do the instructor's power and the students' agency mediate these?
5. How do these engagements enact underlying ideological differences with regard to issues such as aesthetics and the politics of gender, race, class, and language difference? As preservice teachers develop their practice as English teachers over the semester, do they also grow in wisdom about the moral and ethical implications of their actions as English teachers?

Data Analysis:



In the Figure, I demonstrate four major themes emerged during the data analysis in a hermeneutic circle of phenomenological understanding. These themes are: 1- Understanding Context and Participants' Background (a, d, e, f), 2-Instruction (c), 3- Translation (d), and 4-Evaluation which is the result of transaction among interpreter, object of interpretation, tradition and context (a,b,c,d,e,f).