A brave new world for the educational researcher: becoming a true beginner of phenomenological qualitative research

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Abstract: Using my own PhD research as an example, I attempt to show in this paper how the educational reality may be investigated self-reflexively by the researcher using the phenomenological qualitative methodology that is informed by the phenomenological perspective. I begin the paper with the metaphor of the orphan's spoon, which is borrowed from the movie The Matrix (its first film) to underline the emancipating influence that a phenomenological qualitative methodology can have upon the educational researcher. Such an emancipatory influence is both epistemologically and methodologically significant: it empowers the researcher to break away from taken-for-granted presuppositions; and it enables the researcher to become self-reflective and self-critical towards the research process and the research data. Guidance for the phenomenological qualitative researcher to beware and become free from pre-supposed conceptions is offered by the phenomenological philosopher Husserl and followers through the key concepts and the phenomenological method they use. These include: the concepts of intentionality, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, life-world and common-sense knowledge and the method of phenomenological reduction. The methodology entails that the phenomenological qualitative researcher maintains a critical attitude towards the culturally-derived presuppositions and pre-knowledge both of the researcher and of research participants. The methodology also requires that phenomenological reduction be integrated into the methods of data collection and analysis. It is argued that the phenomenological qualitative researcher can engage in trustworthy and imaginative research by two means: (a) increasing the critical awareness of the possible researcher-bias and the ambiguity and misunderstanding associated with the participants' meanings; (b) seeking to share and collaboratively create meanings with the participants in association with the phenomenon being investigated. Finally, it is argued that the researcher's world view and epistemological position could be transformed through genuinely following the phenomenological qualitative methodology.
Keywords: Phenomenological qualitative methodology, intentionality, phenomenological reduction, life-world, subjectivity/inter-subjectivity

Autobiography

For more than three years, I had been studying as a full-time PhD student at Nottingham Trent University as a foreign student from China. I cherish my experience of studying as a PhD student because it has *transformed* the way in which I perceive and understand the world and, ultimately, the way I choose to live in the world. This paper is the representation of my transformed world view and perception of research into the educational world.

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insightful suggestions relative to the topic of this paper by the above-mentioned teachers and by Philip Garner and Pam Stagg-Jones, my former teacher and fellow student respectively. I extend to them my genuine appreciation. My gratitude is felt deeply for my family and friends in China and UK for always being there to support and encourage me.

Purpose of this paper

Using my PhD research (Yang, 2005) as an example, I explore the following questions in this paper relating to the use of phenomenological qualitative methodology, with particular reference to the context of educational research:

(1) What theoretical perspective underpins the phenomenological qualitative methodology?
(2) What core concepts are related to this theoretical perspective and what implications do they have for the phenomenological qualitative researcher and the methods s/he chooses for the research?
(3) What attitude does it require the educational researcher to take towards the research process and research data and what implications does such attitude have for undertaking trustworthy and imaginative research?
(4) What changes may the researcher go through in his or her world view and epistemology as a result of genuinely adopting the phenomenological qualitative methodology?

Introduction: the orphan's spoon and Husserl's radical scepticism

Not many movies have been so successful as the first film of The Matrix (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999) in throwing the audience into the uneasy scepticism about the human knowledge and human existence. In the movie, the brains of the human race are plugged into a computer-generated virtual reality manipulated by the Matrix, a computer system, which controls how human minds perceive and understand the world. Among the few people in the Matrix who realise the real situation and fight for a 'brave new world' (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 20021), Neo is perhaps the most thorough in his epistemological-existential awakening. A critical moment in Neo's awakening is hearing about a truth told by an orphan, who is bending a spoon: 'It is not the spoon that bends. It is only yourself.' (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999: Chapter 22). The orphan's spoon may be interpreted as the epistemological obstacle of human autonomy of knowing, the obstacle that constitutes externally imposed meanings. Two messages are therein implied: the only way to break away from the tyranny of the Matrix is to free one's imagination and understanding from meanings prescribed by the Matrix, and the key to one's epistemological and existential autonomy lies only in oneself.

The metaphor of the orphan's spoon reminds one of the radical scepticism of Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology (Patton, 1990: 69; Cohen and Omery, 1994: 137; Crotty, 1998: 44). His radical scepticism asserts that human understanding is confined by taken-for-granted meanings and the solution to this confinement is 'freedom from presuppositions' (voraussetzungslos) (Spiegelberg, 1982: 77). Such scepticism arises from his reaction against the positivist position which uncritically accepts scientific knowledge as absolute truth, which assumed a superior status over the knowledge derived directly from the life-world, the life-world that has long been forgotten as the source of all knowledge (Hitzler and Eberle, 2004: 67-68; Spiegelberg, 1982: 72-76). By restoring the life-world as the original and the only

[1] Although Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2002) usefully relate the philosophical implications of *The Matrix* to phenomenology, they misinterpret Husserl's conception of subjectivity as solipsistic, which is a common misreading of Husserl (see the discussion below).

source of knowledge, Husserl also seeks to go back to the ethical concern of human existence, of values and meanings, which find no place in the science of his time (ibid). In offering such a critique, Husserl is not trying to abandon the outcome of science, but to give it the rigour of self-criticism and self-reflexivity (ibid: 74).

Following Husserl's radical scepticism, when engaged in educational research, the researcher needs to return to educational phenomena experienced by participants (students, parents, educators, policy-makers, employers, etc.), to restore such experienced phenomena as the origin of knowledge about the educational reality. Only in so doing can the researcher become free from pre-supposed ideas of the researcher her/himself or others. Adopting a phenomenological qualitative methodology in educational research is a way of achieving such a 'brave new world'.

Throughout the paper, My PhD research is quoted as an example to illustrate how phenomenological qualitative research can be undertaken in a trustworthy and yet imaginative manner, and how such a methodology rooted in a Western philosophical tradition can be used to investigate the educational phenomena in China, a Confucian-heritage culture. The research attempted to answer the question: is online distance learning viable in serving the educational needs of adult learners in higher education in Guangdong, China? My experience of doing the research showed that not only could the methodology be successfully used in researching Chinese educational phenomena, but it guided me as the researcher to go through a journey of transformation in world-view and epistemological position.

Defining the phenomenological qualitative methodology

It can be noted that there are different versions of definition of the term 'phenomenology' in the literature. For instance, Patton (1990: 68-71) and Stern (1994: 213) maintain that phenomenology stresses the context-relatedness of knowledge and studies the essence(s) or common structure of people's experience of phenomena. Yet, Odman (1985: 2162) asserts that the human experience that phenomenologists take into consideration is not context-directed. Such contradictory assumptions about the characteristics of phenomenology are accounted by what Spiegelberg (1982, cited in Cohen and Omery, 1994: 137) describes as 'phenomenological movement', the historical development of phenomenology. In this paper, I focus on ideas of two important figures of phenomenology: Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology (Patton, 1990: 69; Cohen and Omery, 1994: 137; Crotty, 1998: 44) and Alfred Schutz, who brought Husserl's ideas into sociology (Fontana, 2002: 165-166; Gubrium and Holstein, 2000: 488-490; Patton, 1990: 69; Schwandt, 1998: 226-227).

As Patton (1990: 68-71) summarises, insofar as social research is concerned, the term 'phenomenology' may be defined as: (a) the research paradigm that is a reaction against the positivist paradigm; (b) qualitative methodology and methods; (c) the theoretical perspective that seeks to explicate the structure and essence of the experience of a given phenomena for people in the context in question (in which case interviewing might be a suitable method); (d) a methodology of directly experiencing the phenomena being considered (in which case the researcher need to adopt the participatory observation method; and a study using such a methodology is called 'a phenomenological study').

For the purpose of writing this paper, I focus on the last two senses of Patton's definition (ibid). That is, I seek to examine the qualitative methodology that is informed by the phenomenological perspective and uses such methods of data collection and interpretation as

phenomenological interviewing/analysis, observation and other associated methods. Before doing so, I first briefly examine the method of phenomenological reduction and the concepts of intentionality, life-world, naturalistic attitude, subjectivity, intersubjectivity used by phenomenologists, since they all have important implication for the design and application of the methodology.\

(a) Phenomenological concepts and phenomenological reduction and their implications for undertaking imaginative and trustworthy educational research

Husserl's (1970, cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2000: 488) concept of intentionality asserts that perception or consciousness is always directed towards certain objects; and, because it constructs meanings, it forms a constitutive part of objects of experience from the beginning of human experience (ibid). As such, the human experience that constitutes our cultural heritage (Crotty, 1998: 79, 81) can reveal certain culturally-inherited meanings and, on the other hand, conceal other meanings (ibid: 79). Thus, phenomenological reduction or epoché is required for grasping new or fuller meanings of phenomena (ibid: 78, 80-81; Cohen and Omery, 1994: 138-139). The method entails that the inquirer suspends his or her culturally-derived beliefs and assumptions and gain the immediate data relative to the phenomena under study (Cohen and Omery, 1994:138-139; Crotty, 1998: 78, 80-81). It is in this sense that Husserl regards subjectivity as 'the wonder of all wonders' (Spiegelberg, 1982: 81): the first-person perception of direct experience of phenomena (or objects of consciousness) should be respected as the only origin of all understanding and knowledge. In the same vein, his recognition of intersubjectivity (and hence in-direct perception and knowledge) is based on the idea that we come to realise and accept our perception and understanding as real through the confirmation of others as fellow human beings sharing our reality (Husserl, xxx, cited in: Zahavi, 2003: 109-120).

It can be argued that the concepts of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in phenomenology must be conceived in relation to the concept of intentionality. Considered in this way, the two concepts are in harmony with a constructionist world view, which insists that meanings about the world are 'constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting' (Crotty, 1998: 43).

Used by Husserl and followers (Cohen and Omery, 1994: 139), the concept of life-world refers to the world consisting of lived experience. In order to understand the everyday world, the inquirer should not rely on 'the natural attitude' towards the world, but should employ the method of phenomenological reduction. The natural attitude assumes that the world is 'out there' and untouched by human interpretation (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000: 489). Schutz (1967: 97-138; see also: Schwandt, 1998: 226; Hitzler and Eberle, 2004) asserts that the world is intersubjective in nature because social actors collectively construct meanings which form their shared stock of common-sense knowledge about the life-world. It is with the common-sense knowledge that actors interpret phenomena and act accordingly (ibid).

The phenomenological notions and the method of phenomenological reduction discussed above can assist the researcher in attaining freedom from presuppositions or preconceptions, thereby rendering the social and educational research trustworthy and imaginative.

Firstly, the ideas of intentionality and life-world assist the researcher in scrutinising presuppositions arising from the natural attitude of the researcher and the researched by urging him or her to adopt a critical and objective attitude towards the research process and

data. This could be achieved through two means: (a) incorporating phenomenological reduction into data collection and interpretation (for details see the discussion below), using such methods as phenomenological interviewing (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 82; Teichen and Hobson, 2005: 127-128), participatory observation (ibid) and phenomenological analysis (Patton, 1990: 68-71) and (b) using such strategies for achieving trustworthiness as triangulation and peer debriefing. Marshall and Rossman (1995: 144) describe triangulation as a technique making use of more than one source of data in investigating one single point (e.g. a phenomenon), which can be attained by including multiple participants and multiple methods in the research. Robson (1993: 404) suggests that peer debriefing can be carried out between the researcher and peers or critical friends to obtain guidance, advice and criticisms. These methods and strategies were used in my PhD research (Yang, 2005: 106-118; 267-268).

Furthermore, the notions of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and social actors' stock of common-sense knowledge remind the researcher of the inherent intersubjectivity of the research process and the subjective/intersubjective nature of the qualitative data. On the one hand, the research data are inevitably subjective in nature, because they do not necessarily accurately record what happens when the participants experience the phenomena in question and can often be influenced by views of people around them. On the other hand, the research process is intersubjective because it always involves social interactions and mutual understanding between the researcher and the participant (and among participants in group interviewing), which unavoidably have effects on the participant's manner of making sense of their experiences and expressing their perceptions and feelings (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 14-16). Indeed, as argued by Silverman (2001: 86-113) and Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 10-13), it is methodologically problematic to assume that the interview data or any other research data can be authentic or truthful by following structured schedules as in survey research or by allowing the interviewee to talk without being affected by interviewer effects as in open-ended in-depth interviewing. I say more about the implications of the intersubjective nature of the research process for the phenomenological qualitative researcher in next section.

(b) Choosing methods of data collection and analysis appropriate to the phenomenological qualitative methodology

By arguing that the methods of phenomenological interviewing, participatory observation and phenomenological analysis can be used to integrate phenomenological reduction in social and educational research (see the previous discussion), I do not mean that these are the only available methods that are suitable for the phenomenological qualitative methodology. However, it should be emphasised that phenomenological reduction needs to be adopted throughout the research process. This is the principle that I used in devising the methodology and methods for my own PhD research (Yang, 2005: 87, 106-116).

In my PhD research, I used the term 'multi-method phenomenological qualitative research methodology' to indicate that although a combination of methods were used in the research, the chief data collection and analysis methods were phenomenological interviewing and phenomenological analysis respectively (ibid: 109, 111). Moreover, the supplementary methods (questionnaire for data collection; grounded theory analysis, deconstructive discourse analysis and statistical analysis for data analysis) were chosen mainly because they were considered to be compatible with phenomenological ideas or could enhance the critical attitude that is at the heart of the methodology (ibid: 113-115). As noted in the report on my PhD research (ibid):

'*… pre-defined categories were not used in the interpretation of the data; instead, emerging categories and themes were identified while I was intimately engaging with the data. This is the basic principle that I followed in analysing the data, and it was applied to all the methods of data analysis I used*.'

For instance, constructivist grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) was used as a valuable method in the data collection and analysis of the research, because helped in enhancing the analytical strength of the chief data collection and analysis methods (ibid: 114). Deconstructive discourse analysis proposed by MacLure (2003: 12-13, 20-21, 171-172) was used in my PhD research because it reinforced the critical spirit that is innate in phenomenology. The former method seeks to ground the emergent theory in the data through the use of comparative analysis, which involves 'the systematic choice and study of several comparison groups' (Glaser and Strauss, 1999: 1, 9). The latter calls on educational researchers to engage with the discursive educational realities deconstruct (MacLure, 1999: 4), to tear apart and question what seems to be common-sense of educational realities (ibid: 9, 171-173). Indeed, as Philip Garner, one of my former teachers at Nottingham Trent University observed, it is paramount that we challenge the practice of restricting ourselves to pre-determined methodologies/methods, so that we could open ourselves to fresh alternative ideas for attaining in-depth information about educational phenomena (my journal entry, 17 November, 2004).

For the purpose of this paper, I offer here a brief explanation of phenomenological interviewing and analysis. Phenomenological interviewing is defined as a kind of in-depth interviewing rooted in the phenomenological tradition (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 82), in which phenomenological reduction through bracketing the researcher should bracket his or her presuppositions while obtaining the interview data regarding participants' immediate experiences and perspectives (Yang, 2005: 109). In the research, my own pre-knowledge or presuppositions were explicated reflexively and critically so as to prevent them from affecting the interviewing process and data interpretation (ibid: 120). Patton's (1990: 407-409; see also Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 82-83) model of phenomenological analysis was adopted in my PhD research, which comprises three phases:

a. *Epoché*, or self-inspection in order to make explicit the researcher's preconceptions or presuppositions concerning the phenomena.
b. *Phenomenological reduction*, through which the researcher brackets his or her preconceptions while analysing the data as a text. This phase involves a few sub-stages:
    1) *Horizontalising* the data and treating all elements and perspectives with equal weight;
    2) Arranging the data into meaningful clusters;
    3) Eliminating the overlapping data;
    4) Identifying invariant themes within the data for *imaginative variation*, which means seeing the subject matter from varied perspectives;
    5) Describing each theme on the basis of invariant themes in the form of a text. This summarizes the content and illustration of the phenomena in question.
c. *Structural synthesis*, by which the 'true meanings' or 'deeper meanings' of the experiences for the individual are described and the essence and structure of the experiences articulated.

As an illustration, I share below a summary of sources of my own presuppositions/pre-knowledge as well as those of the participants in relation to the research question of my PhD research, which are critically examined in different places of its report (Yang, 2005: 120):

- The influences of the Confucian heritage[2], a major cultural influence in the Chinese educational context;
- Prevailing understandings of education in general and of online distance learning in particular in the Guangdong and the Chinese context;
- The participants' views that reflect prevailing cultural understanding, or in other words, the stock of common-sense knowledge (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 30-37) that concern education and online distance learning in Guangdong;
- The unique experiences, independent understandings of each participant's experiences and preferred way of conveying such experiences and perceptions.

These pre-knowledge and presuppositions were explicated in order that I could (a) be conscious of and lay aside my preconceptions in the process of data collection and analysis and (b) adopt a critical attitude toward the data gained for phenomenological understanding of online distance learning in Guangdong (Yang, 2005: 120). Of course, this is not to say that the pre-knowledge about the phenomena studied would not be useful for the qualitative researcher. On the contrary, the researcher should indeed obtain adequate knowledge about the phenomena in question, which would be indispensable when it comes to preparing the research schedule, interacting with the participants and interpreting the data (ibid: 120, 271). Similarly, the researcher's own experiences in the research context may also be useful for gaining understanding of the phenomena. As I reported (ibid: 271):

> '*…while exploring the Eastern and Western educational models and views, I could reflexively draw on my immediate experiences of learning in the Chinese and British educational systems.*'

Having examined the phenomenological qualitative methodology, its chief ideas and associated methods for data collection and analysis, I now go on to explore the complexity of the research process and the means of reducing researcher-related bias while supporting the participants in actively creating meanings relative to their experiences of the phenomena in consideration.

Reducing researcher-bias and supporting participants in actively constructing meanings in the phenomenological qualitative research

If the phenomenological qualitative researcher recognises the intersubjective nature of the research process, as argued earlier, then s/he would also be alerted to the possible effects of researcher-related bias arising from the researcher's own presuppositions on the research data, which might affect the trustworthiness of the research findings (for detailed discussions about trustworthiness, see: Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 294-301; Robson, 1993: 403-407). However, inherent in the intersubjectivity of the research process is not just the disadvantageous possibility of researcher-bias having influence on the data, but also the advantageous likelihood of the researcher actively supporting the participants' creation of meanings about their experienced phenomena. This idea is congruent with what Silverman calls 'the

[2] 'Confucian heritage' as in the term 'Confucian heritage cultures' (CHC) is used by Biggs (2003: 125) to refer to Asian cultures such as China, Singapore, Thai, Japan, Hong Kong and Korea, which are historically influenced by the Confucian culture.

constructionist version' of interviewing, and what Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 14-16; see also Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 14-16) call the 'active interviewing' and what Fontana and Frey (2000: 663-664) call the 'interview as negotiated accomplishment'. These writers agree that interviewing is a socially accomplished process and the interview data are negotiated text. Although they focus on the interviewing process, their observation is applicable to other kinds of process, such as the process of participatory observation. To be sure, this is also true to the artist, who aspires to capture and represent an emotion or a movement of his/her character at a given moment (Mason, 1957: 13-14):

> *'…A moment could never be complete in itself, since it belonged to a context of movement and mood, and only in this context had meaning; and moreover part of this context was the observer himself, interpreting the moment in the light of his own mind- his own personality and knowledge. Thus when I had seen the Burmese woman by Irrawaddy it was not her actual expression that had moved me, but what this had suggested to me when filtered through my own vision: when fused with my own experience, my own hatred of destruction and war…'*

Just as the artist could not avoid filtering the moment through his own vision, neither could the qualitative researcher. After all, it is the researcher who by reconstructing and representing the participants' meanings of their lived experiences has to 're-live' the participants' experiences of the phenomena being examined in the given context, no matter how s/he wishes to leave such experiences 'uncontaminated'. Thus, the research process demands both creativity and self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher to reduce researcher-bias while supporting the research participants to actively construct meaning rather than pretending that the data is absolutely authentic (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 14-16). How can the researcher meet this demand?

On the one hand, the researcher needs to be aware of the possible ambiguity and misunderstanding that may arise when eliciting, recording, transcribing and interpreting the participants' meanings. The situation faced by the researcher in the research process is complex. This is because the participants' meanings are usually communicated both in verbal and body language (such as facial expressions, posture and hand gestures), which can often be elusive and difficult to capture and retain in written text. It is also because sometimes the participants' words need to be translated from one language (which the participants uses as the medium of communication in the investigation) to another (in which the research is reported by the reporter), which was the case of my PhD research (Yang, 2005). When translation of the participants' interview transcription is required, there would be a risk that some of the meanings conveyed in the original language can be lost, which is true with any kind of translated work (Johnstone, 2002: 30). Two reasons can account for the lost of meanings in translation. First, the target language may not offer appropriate words or expressions that can express the exact meaning of the original words or expressions in the source language. A widely quoted example for such differences in words and expressions between languages is the Eskimo's snow words, which have quite inadequate counterparts in other languages (James, 2005; cited in Mendosa, 2005). Secondly, as phenomenologists alert us, whereas language as an important part of our cultural heritage provides us with a meaning system with which we make sense of the world and pay attention to certain meanings, it also prohibits us from seeing other meanings (Crotty, 1998: 79, 81). Thus, certain meanings that are obvious to speakers of one language (or members of the associated culture) may not be readily appreciated by speakers of another language (or members of the culture) (Johnstone,

2002: 33-34). To a greater or lesser extent, then, this leaves some gaps between the original meanings intended by the participants and the meanings represented by their translation in the target language; and the researcher may have to resort to using his or her own interpretation as a way of compensating the meanings lost in translation. Of course, what the researcher could do when faced with such a dilemma is to make the necessary effort in rendering the translation as close to the participants' meaning as possible. What is more, the researcher can also directly cite translated participants' accounts and stories, thereby offering the readers or users of the research direct access to the experiences and perceptions of the participants, albeit translated , as summarised in my PhD thesis (Yang, 2005: 275):

> *'…To borrow Thomas' (2004) words: 'Stories and narratives help us to understand the experiences of others, to identify with them, laying open our shared humanity.' One interesting story cited in Chapter 5 was told by S3 about her tutor: 'He is very responsible in his teaching. He is already in his 60's or 70's; and his hair is already white…' … Indeed, little stories like this one most eloquently express the participating students' deep appreciation of caring and responsible teachers and their concerns about the problems with their respective learning environment'*

On the other hand, the researcher can seek to share and jointly create meanings with the participants in association with the phenomenon being investigated. This could be achieved by building satisfactory researcher-participant rapport, so that the participants are encouraged to view the researcher and themselves as genuine communicating individuals. In such a process, the researcher needs to bracket his/her presuppositions in order to be sufficiently open-minded to listen attentively to the views and perceptions of the participants, without imposing the researcher's own meanings upon the participants. Yet, in order to facilitate the participants in searching for deeper meanings, the researcher still need to constantly refer back to his/ her pre-knowledge in order that the participants can be probed to offer deeper meanings that can later on be compared with the researcher's pre-knowledge, for instance, themes in the existing literature. Even when the field work is finished, phenomenological reduction is still needed in the researcher's of transcribing, translation and interpretation of the data, as discussed earlier. As I confessed in my PhD thesis (ibid: 273):

> *'…this research is indeed the result of the joint creative contributions of the participants and me as the researcher. Such joint creative contributions also mean that the interviews and the questionnaire… required the participants to actively create meanings in relation to the questions asked, to suggest new questions and issues that were not asked about, and to communicate effectively with me (and among themselves in the case of group interviews). At the same time, I needed to actively probe and ask further questions as the conversation went on.'*

As shown in the above-cited excerpts from my PhD thesis, acknowledging that the qualitative research is negotiated between the researcher and the participants does not harm the trustworthiness of the research, but increases the possibility of extracting and representing fuller meanings given by the participants to their experiences of the phenomena being considered.

Towards a brave new world: my personal journey

As discussed earlier, the phenomenological perspective constitutes a critical epistemological position about culturally-derived preconceptions as well as a world view that is in harmony with constructionism. Below, I use my personal experience to illustrate how a

researcher engaged in the phenomenological qualitative research might go though a journey in which the researcher's worldview and epistemological position are transformed, which enables the researcher to become a self-reflexive researcher.

My PhD research started in autumn 2001 and finished in summer 2005 (Yang, 2005: 281). At the beginning of the research, I adopted a positivist view that research was all about gaining knowledge about an objective world, which was ready to be retrieved if one is equipped with carefully devised techniques. Following the phenomenological qualitative methodology, however, I was able to self-reflexively engage with the participants, the data and findings, which made me abandon the positivist view.

Whereas this gradual process was assisted by my teachers and fellow PhD students, who constantly challenged my taken-for-granted convictions concerning this research, another important factor for the transformation of my worldview and epistemological position was my experience of coming from China to live and study in the U.K (ibid: 271-172). Living and learning in the U.K. enabled me to directly experience the British culture, which is in many ways different from the Chinese culture, particularly the culturally-derived common-sense knowledge held by people in the two countries. Being a Chinese student studying in a British university, I was also able to access the literature in both Chinese and English languages and to obtain personal experience of studying in a non-Chinese educational system. This multiple juxtaposition of the two cultures, two bodies of literature in two languages and two educational systems had two-fold advantages for me: (a) it made me realise that culturally-derived prevailing understandings are context-related and need to be treated critically, which in turn greatly enhanced my capability of critically examining the context and the data; (b) it also allowed me to incorporate a unique comparative element into my research in relation to the literature and my personal educational experiences, which sharpened and enriched my insights into the phenomena studied.

The process of changing my world view and epistemological position made me realise that a qualitative research design following the positivist epistemology would be flawed for two reasons: (a) it would lay too much emphasis on the use of a priori theories, but would pay inadequate attention to the themes emerging directly from data; (b) it would not fully recognise the individuality of each research participant's perspective and circumstance and, therefore, would not encourage the researcher to elicit relevant rich and in-depth data. As I reflected (ibid: 285):

> *'Without the transformation of my worldview and epistemological position, I would not have been able to understand the phenomenological qualitative methodology fully and to choose the methods that are suitable for eliciting and analysing the in-depth and rich data required by the research question…Furthermore, without such changes in my views, I would not have been aware and self-critical of my presuppositions relative to the research question, which could have threatened the trustworthiness of the research. Last but not least, without such changes, I would have regarded a step-by-step research design as sufficient to secure authentic research findings and generate objective new knowledge…'*

In short, the phenomenological qualitative methodology not only guided me in critically exploring the participants' direct experience of the educational phenomena in question, but it significantly changed the way in which I make sense of the world and the way I interact with the world both as a person and an educational researcher.

Concluding remarks: becoming a true beginner of educational research

In the Introduction of the paper, I argued that adopting the phenomenological qualitative methodology is a way by which the educational researcher can reach a 'brave new world', a world in which new and fuller knowledge of the educational experiences of participants could be attained. Such a new world can be reached if the researcher attains freedom from the presuppositions. I further argued that guidance for attaining such freedom is offered by the phenomenological perspective and expressed through such phenomenological concepts as intentionality, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, life-world and common-sense knowledge and through the method of phenomenological reduction. The phenomenological qualitative methodology entails that the researcher maintains a critical attitude towards the culturally-derived presuppositions and pre-knowledge both of the researcher and of research participants. It also requires that phenomenological reduction be integrated into the methods of data collection and analysis, as in the methods of phenomenological interviewing and phenomenological analysis, though supplementary methods can also be used. Having analysed the methods that can be used following the methodology, I then examined how the phenomenological qualitative researcher can engage in trustworthy and imaginative research. I argued that this can be achieved by two means: (a) increasing the critical awareness of the possible researcher-bias related to the ambiguity of the participants' meanings or the researcher's misinterpretation of such meanings; (b) seeking to share and collaboratively create meanings with the participants in association with the phenomenon being investigated. Finally, I examined how adopting the methodology assisted me in transforming my own world view and epistemological position as a qualitative researcher.

In concluding this paper, I would argue that as educational researchers, we should always view ourselves as true beginners of educational research, persisting in our critical renewal of knowledge about the educational reality, just as Edmund Husserl kept in undertaking his radical philosophical adventure of phenomenological investigation (Fraser, 1992: 6).

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