

Contemplative practice and Transformative Phenomenology: A methodology for engaging university students in praxis

Whitney P. Strohmayer and David R. Jones

Abstract

Educating graduate students about praxis represents a challenge and an opportunity. This essay explores an experience of learning praxis along with Transformative Phenomenology, the combination of which indicates a promising means for scaffolding graduate students to deeper self-reflection and changed thinking. The emergence of changed thinking is reasoned as a shift from subconscious thought processes to conscious ones. Contemplative practices drive the shift but require structured practice or engagement to achieve. The objective of such practice is internal clarity that manifests in mindful action that generates new understanding. The lived experience and examples outlined in this essay demonstrate how Transformative Phenomenology suits consciousness-raising and fosters more intentional praxis. Several techniques from phenomenology contribute to consciousness and warrant a brief discussion, including phenomenological reduction or bracketing, recognizing vantage points, and identifying motives and intentions. Additionally, we outline a process for exploring experiences intentionally through protocol writing. Teaching praxis along with Transformative Phenomenology contributes to the cultivation of aware social science graduate students who are self-reflective, conscious, and effective in their actions.

Keywords: praxis; contemplative practice; graduate education; Transformative Phenomenology

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Introduction

What is praxis? I (Whitney) found myself asking this question at the start of a graduate praxis course. As it turned out, my fellow student-colleagues in the course seemed equally perplexed by the term and concept. The course aimed to explore the relevance of theories and research for professional problem-solving. Objectives

included applying concepts from an academic setting to professional situations and developing reflective practitioner skills.

Davey and I concurrently completed a writing phenomenology course together in graduate school. We learned the tenets of phenomenology and how to apply those to a writing project. We explain the writing phenomenology process later in this essay. Throughout our graduate school experience, we both grappled with what it means to integrate theory and practice and how to develop scholar-practitioner skills.

A few years later, while serving as a teaching assistant for the praxis course, I encountered more students who, like me, were unsure what to make of praxis. This essay attempts to explain what I discovered through the praxis course, both as a student and teaching assistant. Also, the essay explores the intersection of praxis and Transformative Phenomenology, specifically how praxis integrates Transformative Phenomenology with “real world” practical application.

After graduate school, I began teaching Transformative Phenomenology to graduate students as an adjunct instructor while working as an anti-violence advocate at a domestic violence shelter. I continued musing over my understanding of praxis, how it intersects with Transformative Phenomenology, and how it applies in the real world (i.e., as a domestic violence advocate).

Beyond graduate school, Davey and I continued our mutual influence through collaboration. As it applies to this essay, we reflected together on our graduate school learning, writing phenomenology project (Strohmayr & Jones, 2021), and our professional experiences teaching in higher education. Our individual and shared experiences underpin this essay as we attempt to describe our understanding of praxis, how it can be applied, and how it informs becoming a scholar-practitioner. In the following sections we describe our individual and collective experiences. Throughout this essay, the pronoun “I” refers to Whitney’s experiences while the pronoun “we” describes our shared experiences and opinions. Admittedly, we continue grappling with the integration of theory and practice as we understand it constituting praxis. We invite readers to grapple with these ideas along with us.

This essay begins by reasoning praxis as two parts: (a) practice and self-reflection leading to (b) changed thinking. Self-reflection leading to changed thinking represents a shift to conscious processes from subconscious ones. The shift occurs because of contemplative practices. Finally, phenomenology as the study of consciousness is described along with specific techniques for engaging with the methodology: phenomenological reduction (bracketing), recognizing vantage points, and identifying motives and intentions (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008). Protocol

writing is also described because it scaffolds deeper engagement with phenomenology and yields raised consciousness.

Origin and meaning of praxis

Praxis is defined as ‘action, practice, practical application of theory’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para. 2) and derives from a Medieval Latin word meaning ‘practice, exercise, action’ (Etymology Dictionary [ED], n.d.c, para. 1). It is understood as the opposite of theory, partly based on Aristotle’s delineation of praxis opposite *theoria* (ED, n.d.c; Nielsen, 2016). Praxis often includes a wide variety of activities and approaches such as action research, action science, engaged scholarship (Nielsen, 2016), reflective practitioner (Cunliffe, 2016), experiential education, service-learning (Breunig, 2014), critical reflective practice (Ng & Wright, 2017), internship, and practicum. The principle that anchors praxis is the integration of theory and practice with an emphasis on self-reflection for the formation of new knowledge, discovery and internal growth for the practitioner, and betterment of the community (Breunig, 2014; Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Furman, 2012; Ng & Wright, 2017; Nielsen, 2016).

How might the blending of action and theory result in scholar-practitioner skills? The answer may partially stem from the observation that, through action (praxis), one may develop a way of knowing that extends—perhaps enriches—the principles of a theory (Nielsen, 2016). Action research, or action science, utilizes theory to apply change to the external environment. For example, applying critical race theory to research processes can lead to advocating for marginalized communities through engagement (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Nielsen, 2016).

Other examples of praxis-informed education include service learning, experiential learning, and internships or practicums. Service learning incorporates community-based involvement to enhance social science classroom learning, reciprocally benefiting the practitioner and community (Breunig, 2014). Experiential learning can provide practitioners with the opportunity to apply philosophical orientations or theories in the real world (Breunig, 2014). An internship or practicum can extend the principles of experiential learning by providing practical application in tandem with, or after, acquiring theoretical knowledge. These forms of praxis—in optimal circumstances—move the practitioner out of the classroom, armed with the knowledge of theory, into real-world settings.

Praxis involves more than developing a specific skill or validating a theory (Ng & Wright, 2017; Nielsen, 2016). Instead, it entails self-reflection, resulting in

new knowledge intended to improve the world. Breunig (2014) described praxis as a cycle including concrete experience, observation and reflection, formation of new knowledge, and application in new situations. Notably, observation and reflection precede the formation of new knowledge. The creation of new knowledge requires the practice of self-reflection.

Self-reflection includes how one thinks during action and about one's actions, as well as how one learns from action and thinks about improving action (Ng & Wright, 2017). Cunliffe (2016) suggested that self-reflection also includes examining assumptions informing thought and action. Accordingly, the practitioner reflects upon potential biases and assumptions underlying theory or the application of theory, before, during, and after action.

The practice of self-reflection facilitates internal changes within the practitioner enhancing the cognitive understanding of theory and practice. The self-reflection process that occurs during praxis produces knowledge from action as opposed to knowledge for action (Nielsen, 2016). Self-reflection prompts the development of knowing-from-within, with an embodied and responsive interpretation (Cunliffe, 2016).

Praxis redefined

As we understand praxis now, it includes the double-loop process of self-reflection while integrating theory and action (Cunliffe, 2016; Nielsen, 2016). Praxis includes personal transformation through deep, critical self-evaluation. In addition, praxis includes learning how to experience the world at a deeper level of consciousness. The personal awareness and growth (i.e., transformation) that results from the action of writing produces new knowledge that potentially impacts one's professional environment and action in the world.

Now, years since our first forays into phenomenology and subsequent reflections, we imagine praxis as something more than applying techniques derived from theory, such as learning how to make an incision with a scalpel (Ng & Wright, 2017; Nielsen, 2016). Praxis does more than apply book knowledge to the environment. Book knowledge, theory, and scholarship provide the necessary foundation to develop a scholar-practitioner; however, praxis integrates scholarship and action science. The dynamic merging of the two combined with critical self-reflection can result in personal transformation that impacts interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological domains (Furman, 2012).

Praxis implies action and action implies doing. But doing for the sake of doing without self-reflection may not yield a scholar-practitioner or change agent. Then how do we define action and doing? What does the action and doing in praxis involve? The self-reflective process represents the action that constitutes praxis.

The active process of self-reflection results in internal transformation within the practitioner, bringing forth conscious action in the environment as a scholar-practitioner.

After years of shared and unique experiences, we currently think of praxis as the integration of theory and action with an emphasis on self-reflection for the formation of new knowledge. Our current stance results from shared and unique experiences—both of us as graduate students and scholar-practitioners, me as a TA and graduate instructor of phenomenology. We wonder how self-reflection can lead to internal growth for practitioners. Such wonder emerged anew for each of us after immersing in scholarship, applying theory through writing (action), and engaging in the self-reflective process inherent in praxis.

Contemplative practice

I began engaging in contemplative practices about a decade ago. My practice deepened in graduate school and thereafter. Over the years, I noticed that my outer world often reflects my inner world. Present day, I recognize how a fast-paced day at the office manifests as a whirlwind of racing thoughts. Inversely, I recognize when my internal state spills into the external environment, such as a dark mood projected outward. What and how I think and feel internally impacts how and what I experience in my environment.

When a high-drive, action-based culture dominates my present-day existence, my mind and body find few opportunities to quiet, still, and return to their natural state of being. I find that a natural, quiet state serves as fertile ground that yields creativity. The quiet constitutes the internal place where the deeper-self presides and connects to pure consciousness (i.e., what some might call God or ‘something greater than oneself’). For me, contemplative practices provide mental and physiological space for inspired thought and creative expression.

The subconscious mind operates without conscious thought (i.e., unconsciously). The subconscious resides in lower brain structures, while consciousness inhabits the prefrontal cortex (Lipton, 2015). The subconscious literally and figuratively operates below conscious thought. Literally, it operates below because it appears physically lower in the brain. Figuratively, it operates below consciousness because it operates through habitual patterns that represent lower cognitive processing.

The subconscious mind functions automatically, running scripts programmed in infancy. From birth until six years old, infants download experiences and absorb information into the subconscious mind. The downloading

of these experiences results in a programmed subconscious mind that operates habitually without conscious thought (Lipton, 2015).

The subconscious mind processes 20 million external stimuli per second (Lipton, 2015), evidencing the vast amount of information from the external environment that bombards the mind. Twenty million stimuli per second download into the subconscious without conscious processing, thinking, or noticing. When the 20 million stimuli appear chaotic and frenetic, demanding high-drive and high-production, I find that my internal landscape mirrors the chaotic and frenetic external environment.

Lipton (2015) suggested that 95% of behavior results from subconscious processing. He proposed that, in effect, humans behave or act from a script operating unconsciously. In other words, the subconscious mind dominates action. If the subconscious mind—which represents lower-level programming—dominates action and occurs habitually, one might find their thoughts and actions to be imitative and uninspired. Conversely, creativity, ingenuity, and inspiration emerge from consciousness (Walsh, 2016), where the deeper-self connects to pure consciousness.

Quieting the inner landscape amid chaos entails shifting awareness from the subconscious to the conscious, from automatic processes to deliberate thought. Instead of allowing the subconscious brain to pattern behavior and action, shifting awareness to a conscious state engages the prefrontal cortex and deliberate thought (Lipton, 2015). Using contemplative practices to quiet one's internal state can facilitate the shift from subconscious to conscious. In the following sections, we further explore how mindfulness and meditation, as forms of contemplative inquiry, may benefit scholar-practitioners. We see contemplative practice(s) as a technique that supports praxis, specifically the double-loop, self-reflexive process we described earlier and the shift from subconscious to conscious we describe herein.

Contemplative inquiry

Contemplative inquiry refers to various practices, all of which emphasize contemplation. The Old French root of contemplation suggests 'religious musings'; however, the Latin root refers to the 'act of looking,' to gaze 'attentively, observe, consider,' and marking 'out space for observation' (ED, n.d.a). Although ancient wisdom traditions and religions hold contemplation as a central tenet, contemplative practices matter beyond religious dogma (Konecki, 2018; Moody, 2016; Tideman, 2016; Walsh, 2016). The act of looking or gazing attentively describes a shift in awareness from the subconscious to the conscious. Contemplation opens space, which refers to the quiet, internal space where pure consciousness can arise.

Mindfulness

Through the practice of mindfulness, thought and action occur consciously. One becomes aware of conscious thought and action—a shift from unconsciousness to consciousness. In some, an awareness of awareness emerges. Mindfulness means ‘bringing one’s attention to experiences in the present moment’ (ED, n.d.b). The word mindfulness is a translation of the word *sati* from Buddhist texts (ED, n.d.b). In Buddhism, the shift from automatic, programmed behavior patterns to consciousness involves becoming present. Mindfulness encompasses ‘the awareness of being here and now’ (Konecki, 2018, p. 10) and ‘remembering to come back to the present moment’ (Konecki, 2016, p. 203).

Recall that the subconscious processes 20 million external environmental stimuli per second, while the conscious mind processes 40 external stimuli per second (Lipton, 2015). The disparity in the number of stimuli processed suggests that a shift in awareness decreases the number of external stimuli processed by the brain. By extension, the reduction of stimuli slows mental processes. Slower mental processing can settle the mind. By extension, practicing mindfulness to shift consciousness slows the internal state, resulting in a quieted state relative to subconsciousness.

Mindfulness can bring about inner transformation that extends to outer environments. Tideman (2016) concluded that ‘contemplative practices allow us to transform both our inner and outer reality’ (p. 13). Yet, the contemplative practice of mindfulness is not a solitary, detached state of non-action, but a co-created, interconnected state of awareness during action (McCown, 2016; Moody, 2016; Tideman, 2016; Walsh, 2016). Mindfulness connects the individual with the collective—not only because the collective comprises the individual, but also because the individual requires consciousness while interacting within the collective (Konecki, 2016). McCown (2016) argued that the relational nature of mindfulness-based interventions suggests a model for community development. In other words, the effects of mindfulness do not remain inside the individual. Instead, contemplative practice connects one with the collective while fostering interpersonal collaboration and social bonding (McCown, 2016).

Meditation

Ancient wisdom traditions and religions use meditation as a contemplative practice. Medical research supports the practice and touts its psychological and physiological benefits (McCown, 2016). The benefits of meditation extend beyond individual well-being and physical health. Meditation yields personal transcendence and transformation (Moody, 2016), as well as the transcendence of interior-exterior dichotomies (Tideman, 2016). Meditation raises consciousness and fosters

interconnectedness and interdependence between the inner state and external environment (Tideman, 2016).

Meditation involves focused attention or paying attention in a specific way while going within (McCown, 2016; Renteria-Uriarte, 2016). Meditation techniques include repeating a mantra, focusing on the breath, focusing the mind, open monitoring of the mind, or just sitting (Moody, 2016; Renteria-Uriarte, 2016). The contemplative practice of meditation results in stillness and equanimity (Moody, 2016), transcendence (Renteria-Uriarte, 2016), insight (Konecki, 2016), creativity, wisdom, compassion, space, (Walsh, 2016), and ethical space (McCown, 2016).

Meditators use various techniques to achieve certain goals, not as a means to an end, but an end in and of itself. Ideally, meditators practice for the purpose of enjoying meditation. Even so, the practice yields benefits. With increased practice, meditation can result in personal transformation. Meditation quiets the inner landscape and shifts the mind from the subconscious to the conscious, from habitual responses to higher cognitive processes. Consciousness emerges from the contemplative practice of meditation that “opens a space for possibility beyond present-day constraints, inviting the impossible to become possible” (Walsh, 2016, p. 36).

Contemplative practice as praxis

As a result of contemplative practice, scholar-practitioners may inspire lasting and meaningful change in the external environment. Drawing on my professional experience as an advocate at a domestic violence center, I consider how a domestic violence advocate such as myself may use contemplative practice as a form of praxis.

An advocate participating in social justice praxis aims to support women who have experienced domestic violence. Providing strength-based, person-centered advocacy for these women, the advocate engages in praxis. Contemplative practice includes, first, meditating to center the advocate’s internal state in preparation for her work at the domestic violence center (i.e., praxis in the external environment).

Next, the advocate utilizes mindfulness during interactions with the women. Mindfulness readies the advocate for conversations with them. The advocate listens in a deep and meaningful way as the women share their experiences of domestic violence. The advocate does not tout theory but listens mindfully, fully conscious and present. During deep listening, the advocate utilizes phenomenological techniques such as bracketing (discussed in the next section) to set aside assumptions or biases she may hold in her subconscious.

After listening to the women's experiences, the advocate engages in contemplation. She sits with the experience, allows her mind to process and reflect upon the fullness of the conversations with the women. She contemplates their vantage points. She may meditate again after the conversation with a subtle intention to discover how she may best serve the women she wants to help.

The final phase of contemplation takes place after the action component of praxis (e.g., conversations with women who experienced domestic violence). The advocate shifts her awareness to consciousness to reflect upon conversations with the women. She holds the space for a creative and inspired solution to emerge. This type of contemplation simulates the double-loop process critical for the formation of new knowledge. We suggest that the potential for lasting and meaningful change, both internal and external, arises through consciousness.

For scholar-practitioners, phenomenology represents a structured practice for engaging consciousness and enhancing praxis. Two competencies relevant here that emerge from practicing phenomenology include embodied consciousness through somatics and transcendence of everyday reality (Rehorick & Bentz, 2017). Additionally, the competencies include a capacity to identify the essence of experiences, lifeworld construction through communication, and authentic leadership. The lifeworld represents any external environment where a practitioner applies theory through praxis. These competencies transform individuals into scholar-practitioners.

Praxis informed by Transformative Phenomenology

Phenomenology is defined as 'the study of experiences of consciousness' (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 172) and epitomizes contemplative practice. Phenomenological principles and techniques can bring about embodied conscious awareness. The practice of getting 'back to the things themselves,' as posited by Husserlian phenomenology (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, p. 11), exemplifies the shift in awareness from the subconscious to consciousness. Phenomenology calls for deep reflection (i.e., contemplation) upon experiences to discover the whatness of a phenomenon (Bentz, 2016). Phenomenological techniques shift one from the subconscious to the conscious, unlocking 'the doors of consciousness' (Bentz, 2016, p. 51).

Transformative Phenomenology can be described as the methodology of somatic-hermeneutic-phenomenology put into action for change in the lifeworld. It hinges on essence-based phenomenology founded by Edmund Husserl, the social phenomenology of Alfred Schultz, embodied phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the ontological-existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, and the

hermeneutic methods of Hans-Georg Gadamer (Nishii, 2019). Transformative Phenomenology is a way of knowing and being that fosters awareness and consciousness and uncovers the meaning of lived experiences.

We propose that creative and inspired action in the external environment requires consciousness within the practitioner. Transformative Phenomenology exemplifies the self-reflective process and catalyzes the internal transformation that promotes creative and inspired action in the lifeworld. In other words, Transformative Phenomenology epitomizes praxis. The change in one's consciousness during the self-reflective process represents the action element of praxis and precedes dynamic action that extends to the lifeworld.

Phenomenological inquiry places consciousness at the center of explorations in the lifeworld, a reference to 'the world as experienced' (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 55) or 'the world of everyday life' (Wagner, 1983, p. 109). Phenomenologists refer to the lived experiences of human beings in the lifeworld, which consists of the individual, environment, and totality of interactions within collectives (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). As a methodology and way of being, phenomenology investigates the lifeworld from the inside out, starting with the inquirer (i.e., scholar-practitioner).

Phenomenology aspires to thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1997), which aligns with the self-reflective process involved in praxis (Cunliffe, 2016; Nielsen, 2016). Said another way, reflective discipline embodies phenomenology. Pursuing thoughtfulness increases the ability to engage with others through praxis in the lifeworld (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology encompasses several techniques that foster thoughtfulness, which receive further discussion in the next sections.

Phenomenological techniques

Phenomenology utilizes techniques to understand the essential structure of a phenomenon while noticing how a phenomenon presents itself within the practitioner's consciousness (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008; van Manen, 1997). Many phenomenological techniques aim to transform the practitioner's consciousness because 'all we can ever know must present itself to consciousness' (van Manen, 1997, p. 9). Effective engagement in praxis requires awareness of theory as well as consciousness of the lifeworld components. That is, applying phenomenological techniques in everyday life represents a form of praxis. Four techniques that support personal transformation and drive praxis are discussed here: phenomenological reduction (bracketing), recognizing vantage points, identifying motives and intentions, and protocol writing.

Phenomenological reduction (bracketing)

The phenomenological technique of bracketing, also known as the epoché and phenomenological reduction, typifies the shift from subconscious to conscious awareness. Bracketing reveals the phenomenological reduction of an experience and requires conscious awareness to peel back the ‘layers of associations with attachments to a thing’ (Bentz, 2016, p. 53) such as downloaded, pre-programmed, and automatic subconscious patterns and responses. One reaches the transcendental level when utilizing the bracketing technique (Bentz, 2016). Transcendence through bracketing reveals an awareness of the self beneath the experience leading to pure consciousness (Bentz, 2016).

The epoché involves suspending assumptions, conceptual frameworks, and previously held knowledge of a particular phenomenon (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008; van Manen, 1997; Wagner, 1983). It entails putting aside what one already knows. The object of self-reflection shifts from an external object ‘to the object of [one’s] own consciousness’ (Perry, 2013, p. 267). After bracketing assumptions, the practitioner reduces the phenomenon to its essential structures instead of evaluating the phenomenon based on preconceived interpretations (Wagner, 1983). This technique allows the practitioner to suspend judgment, concepts, and labels to fully engage in practice with conscious presence. Bracketing allows the practitioner to fully experience or reflect upon the phenomenon or lifeworld.

Then the practitioner engages in self-reflection to merge theory with the experience that took place during practice in the lifeworld. Inner transformation takes place during the self-reflective process and involves integrating prior scholarship and practical action. Personal transformation extends into the professional lifeworld, bringing a new level of understanding about the self, the phenomenon, theory, and creative application into the practitioner’s professional environment.

Recognizing vantage points

Phenomenology attempts to understand taken-for-granted experiences of individuals in the lifeworld (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Individuals take experiences for granted when they fixate on a vantage point, especially their own. In doing so, they view the environment from the center of the individual self, also known as the ego (Wagner, 1983). Scholar-practitioners require awareness of their own vantage point when involved in praxis, not only during the self-reflective process but also when engaging in the external environment.

Phenomenology requires the recognition of another person’s vantage point. The phenomenologist recognizes that another person also views their environment from their vantage point. Individual subjective vantage points emerge based on

relevance (Wagner, 1983), meaning that individuals attend to what they find relevant situationally or within their consciousness. What one individual finds relevant may not match what another individual finds relevant. For this reason, examining vantage points and relevances are useful to facilitate improvements in the lifeworld.

Identifying motives and intentions

Phenomenology also explores motives and intentions. Two types of motivation follow the phrases “because” or “in order to” (Wagner, 1983, p. 58). “In order to” motives represent deliberate action intended by an individual and within one’s conscious awareness. “Because” motives are performed by the individual outside of one’s consciousness, or while unaware of the motive. Often, “because” motives do not appear to the scholar-practitioner until a self-reflection process or after the action occurs. The delay in appearance suggests that “because” motives are hidden from consciousness during action (Wagner, 1983, p. 58). Understanding how motives shape consciousness and action readies the practitioner for effective practical application of theory and constitutes an essential component in the self-reflective process.

Protocol writing

Protocol writing applies phenomenological techniques to the writing process. Rehorick and Bentz (2008) developed a series of writing prompts, called writing protocols, to teach doctoral students how to use phenomenology and apply it to social and human sciences. We learned and practiced these writing protocols, and I later served as a TA to other graduate students learning them. The writing protocols continue to inform my work teaching graduate students. The phenomenological writing protocols consist of writing prompts that center on finding the essence of a phenomenon and exploring lifeworld structures. The reflective writing process evokes awareness of a phenomenon or lived experience.

Extending the previous example, an advocate engaging with survivors of domestic violence can use the phenomenological writing protocols as praxis. Through the writing process, the advocate explores her experience with domestic violence survivors. What is it really like to work with these survivors? What is the experience of domestic violence really like from the vantage point of the survivor? The advocate may begin by recalling her most poignant experience working with a survivor of domestic violence—she reflects on the experience, then begins to write about it while applying phenomenological techniques.

First, the advocate brackets her prior knowledge of domestic violence literature and theory. Then, she attends to the poignant experience with the survivor,

writing about what it was like for her to work with the survivor, perhaps recalling how it felt in her body. She considers the vantage point of the survivor, recalls the lived experience of their interactions, and ponders the experience of the survivor, what the survivor shared with her, how the survivor shared the experience, how she experienced the interaction.

The advocate explores her own experience through writing. The iterative process of bracketing, reflecting, and writing eventually reveals the essence of the experience. The advocate may understand the survivor in a new way. She may understand her work in a new way. She may also understand domestic violence literature and theory in a new way. This new understanding is fertile ground for transformation, both personally and practically.

Protocol writing using phenomenological techniques serves as a vehicle for transformation. Rehorick and Bentz (2017) discovered 10 competencies that emerge from phenomenology, transforming individuals into scholar-practitioners, including (i) finding the whatness of experience, (ii) authentic leadership, (iii) embodied consciousness through somatics, (iv) collaborative interpretation of meaning through writing, (v) creativity and wonder, (vi) contribution to method, (vii) lifeworld construction through communication, (viii) immersion in foundation theory, (ix) discovering the epoché, and (x) transcending everyday reality (pp. 273-278).

The act of writing phenomenological protocols requires deep contemplation and can result in personal transformation (Bentz, 2016; Bentz & Marlatt, 2021b; Rehorick & Bentz, 2008). A phenomenologist writes from a place of conscious awareness while applying phenomenological techniques. As a result of contemplation through the phenomenological writing practice, rich descriptions of a phenomenon emerge, often inspired by and inspiring creativity, wonderment, and ingenuity (Rehorick & Bentz, 2017).

Discussion: Into the double loop

Although praxis is described as theory applied to action—suggesting theory prior to action, new knowledge results from action rather than knowledge for action (Nielsen, 2016). New knowledge emerges when the scholar-practitioner engages in a reflexive, double-loop process. Van Manen (1997) indicated that ‘practice (or life) always comes first and theory comes later as a result of reflection’ (p. 15). Self-reflection represents a crucial component of praxis, prompting a practitioner to critically examine underlying assumptions that inform thought and action (Cunliffe, 2016).

Self-reflection requires first a stilling of the mind and engagement with consciousness. Contemplative practices combine consciousness and praxis: self-reflection and contemplation. Such practices also support the scholar-practitioner during praxis because they trigger a double-loop process. The scholar-practitioner experiences a shift in awareness from the subconscious to consciousness.

Phenomenology provides scholar-practitioners with an apt framework for the self-reflective process necessary during and as praxis. Transformative Phenomenology integrates theory, action, and self-reflection. We suggest it serves as a framework for graduate students to pursue multiple goals simultaneously: think deeply, work methodically, and engage transformatively.

As previously mentioned, Davey and I engaged in a writing phenomenology course in graduate school. We each chose a deeply meaningful phenomenon for us at the time. I wrote a series of protocols focused on unravelling. Davey wrote about the experience of grief. Later, we collaborated to explore the intersection of grief and unravelling in relationships (Strohmayer & Jones, 2021).

We can attest to the personal transformation that resulted from engaging with phenomenology and its techniques. We each wrote rich descriptions of our lived experiences, which unveiled deeper meaning. We looked beyond the taken-for-granted experiences in our everyday lifeworld to discover the essence of our lived experiences and discovered how our inner world impacted authenticity, relationships, and the lifeworld. The knowledge gained from phenomenological exploration evoked a new sense of creativity and wonderment in us (Bentz & Marlatt, 2021b; Rehorick & Bentz, 2017). The experience embodied praxis and provided new insight by excavating deeper levels of consciousness.

Bentz et al. (2025) described their work guiding over 300 graduate students through phenomenological writing over the past 25 years:

These participants, usually doctoral students in the human and social sciences with no prior phenomenology experience, found a gateway to phenomenological practice and often experienced personal transformation, adopting a phenomenological attitude that benefits themselves, scholarship, and practice. Writing rich descriptions of lived experiences and collaboratively interpreting their meanings can enhance self-awareness and understanding of the everyday world. (p. 14)

Our exploration and experience suggest that phenomenology can facilitate internal transformation for a practitioner and aids in praxis for the lifeworld (Bentz & Marlatt, 2021a). Practitioners can raise their consciousness utilizing Transformative Phenomenology and gain new knowledge in the form of heightened

awareness and deeper states of consciousness. The knowledge gained from the use of phenomenological tools and techniques can extend to the scholar-practitioner's professional lifeworld (Bentz & Marlatt, 2021a; Bentz et al., 2025).

In our life and work, we can attest that the interior mirrors the exterior and vice versa. In a fast-paced, high-demand, chaotic society, we think contemplative practices are important, especially for a scholar-practitioner. Scholar-practitioners assume the responsibility of merging theory with practice through praxis to improve their communities. Praxis is participatory and the scholar-practitioner represents an essential component. As such, praxis necessitates conscious participation on behalf of the scholar-practitioner.

Based on the above discussion, we imagine that praxis results when the marriage of theory and practice are accompanied by efforts to shift scholar-practitioners' consciousness. Our experiences as doctoral students, as well as my work as a TA and instructor, revealed the efficacy of Transformative Phenomenology for scaffolding consciousness. To the extent that Transformative Phenomenology incorporates the contemplative practices described in this essay, it might connect individuals with creative and inspired solutions to social problems.

Author biographies

Whitney Strohmayer, PhD, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses. Her teaching and research interests include Transformative Phenomenology, gender studies, research methods, and intimate partner violence prevention. She also works in various capacities with doctoral students in the Creative Leadership for Innovative Change at UVI.

David Jones, PhD, lives and teaches in central California, working with undergraduate students and post-baccalaureate teacher candidates. His work investigates praxis through multiple frameworks, including inclusive worldbuilding and the praxis of becoming.

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