

# Practice Makes Perfect: Learning the What, the How and the Self



Tanja Westfall-Greiter, M.A.  
Center for Learning Research  
Department for Teacher Education and School Research (ILS)  
Leopold Franzens University of Innsbruck



“Phenomenology formatively informs, reforms, transforms, performs, and preforms the relation between being and practice. In-formatively, phenomenological studies make possible thoughtful advice and consultation. Re-formatively, phenomenological texts make a demand on us, changing us in what we may become. Trans-formatively, phenomenology has practical value in that it reaches into the depth of our being, prompting a new becoming. Per-formatively, phenomenological reflection contributes to the practice of tact. And pre-formatively, phenomenological experience gives significance to the meanings that influence us before we are even aware of their formative value.”

- Max van Manen 2007, p. 26

## Vignette: Practicing Writing, N1

The students are working quietly. They are decoding a story in which each sentence is written as a chain of letters and writing the correct version in the notebooks. While they are working, the teacher sits at his desk and corrects their homework, helps when needed. He gives a tip about writing fluently: „Those who write big need more time. The smaller I write, the faster it goes. You’ll see.“ A student asks if the word „Landung“ has to be written with a capital letter. The teacher reminds her on the question for nouns: “Could I use an article, *der*, *die*, *das*?”

## Focus Group on Learning and Homework, NFG1

- R What is learning for you?  
S Future.  
S New knowledge.  
S Experience.  
S In primary school we didn’t have to learn so much at home.  
R In the sense of homework, you mean?  
S Mhm, homework.  
R Hardly at all.  
S Except in the fourth grade.  
S Somehow that has its advantages.  
R And which?  
S For example, if we have English on Monday and then on Wednesday, then we have -  
S have two days to do our homework.  
R Mhm, ok. Do you learning something from doing homework or is it something that just keeps you busy?  
S Both.



## Learning

The human experience of learning brings forth the need for a theory to approach understanding that learning. On the most basic level, we seem to reflect in an instant on a sudden felt sense that something is different, that something is available to us which was not formerly available and we have changed in small or significant ways. Where did that come from? Have we learned something? If so, how did that happen? And lurking in the corner is the question, how can we make it happen again?

This dissertation takes a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to understanding the experience of learning, specifically learning in practicing. Seen as a phenomenon, learning is a lived experience of a specific kind which leads to a fundamental change or transformation in how we live in the world (Meyer-Drawe 2008). Göhlich and Zirfas summarize the learning theory of pedagogical phenomenology as follows:

“... learning is not a physical or behavior-related process of adaptation, nor is it a process of information-processing memory-building or brain-physiological programming, nor a process of logical progressivity or a process of successive exactness through inductive or deductive procedures, but rather it is a meaning-generating and meaningful process of expanding and limiting possibilities of perception, thought and action” (p. 48, my translation).

Phenomenology sees the whole person firmly connected to and in the world, as Merleau-Ponty made clear: “There is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (1962, xii). Coming to know ourselves, becoming ourselves is central to practicing.

## Learning as Practicing

“I can say I *have* learned, but not that I *am* learning, unless I mean that I am engaged in practicing” (Meyer-Drawe 2010, p.8). Practicing is conscious, purposeful learning; its prerequisite is the recognition that I have learned, that there is still more to be learned and that it is a worthwhile pursuit. The past and future are inherent in our perception of the present moment; Husserl calls this field of potentialities contained in the present moment the “horizon” of experience. It is this horizon which practicing pursues, with the goal of expanding possibilities of perception, thought and action. Brinkmann (2008) reveals that practicing is not a rudimentary form of learning but rather an essential learning experience in which novices become practitioners, even experts, and exposes three aspects of practicing: the what, the how and the self. In practicing, we simultaneously deepen our understanding of the thing itself and improve the method involved in the activity. The third, often unrecognized, aspect of practicing is the self, which becomes more of itself through practicing.

“Inevitably we know and can do more than we realize” (Meyer-Drawe, 2010, p. 6); practicing is the conscious accumulation of a specific kind of experience (sedimentation). Husserl sees the person as driven by a logic of “I can” in the lifeworld, which is particularly essential for the decision to willfully engage in practicing. Meaningful practice manifests that which previously only lurked within us, unseen and unrealized. It reveals the potential in ourselves to be able to know and do that which heretofore was unknown. It is a specific setting of the stage, in which the person is both director and actor. Practicing is spontaneous in that it breaks from habit. It is creative. “The innovative and the artistic is found in all areas of life, as soon as it is about not simply following certain rules or programmes, but rather defining situations, gaining new perspectives (Waldenfels, 2000, p. 207).