

The distance that unites: phenomenological practices for ubiquitous pedagogy

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Abstract: In an educational context increasingly characterised by ubiquitous configurations of presence and distance, this contribution explores how university education in caring relationships can become a laboratory for the co-evolution of body, technology and relationships. Through a remote phenomenological-hermeneutic journey, 12 students from an online university participated in a group experience that showed how cognition, far from being confined to the individual mind, emerges from the interactive fabric of experiences, narratives and technical devices. The testimonies reveal a transformative process: initial fear, exposure to the suffering of others and the distance mediated by the screen were converted into generative opportunities for care. The group took the form of a container, capable of welcoming fragility and producing new forms of distributed presence. The experience shows that learning, when rooted in embodiment and relationship, is not hindered by distance, but finds in technological mediation a terrain for intensifying bonds. Pedagogical implications emerge from training that develops within the human-environment-technology network, showing how group dynamics, emotional resonance and technical mediation generate embodied learning and transformative relationships, opening up avenues of research for an extended pedagogy capable of inhabiting complexity.

Keywords: Phenomenological hermeneutics 1; embodied learning 2; care relationship 3



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1. Introduction

In the contemporary pedagogical landscape, characterised by pervasive technological ubiquity, the digital realm does not merely represent a new communication tool, but a genuine ontological and post-phenomenological reconfiguration of existence, defined by Floridi (2014) as “Onlife”. Within this context, practices of care and formation emerge through unprecedented forms of mediation that challenge

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traditional categories of “presence” and “distance”, necessitating a rethinking of the conceptual tools used to observe the educational experience from the perspective of complex thought (Morin, 1993; Ceruti & Bellusci, 2020).

To explore this multi-perspective reality, the present study adopts the phenomenological-hermeneutic method (Bellingreri, 2023; Van Manen, 2023), which is particularly suited to investigating pedagogical phenomena as they originally appear to consciousness. The choice of this paradigm allows for the observation of the experience of care in its immediacy and embodied complexity. Phenomenological pedagogy (Bertolini, 1988; Iori, 1988) conceives education as an event involving the subject in their entirety; today, this perspective is enriched by contributions from Embodied Cognition (Sibilio, 2014; Gomez Paloma, 2013), which highlight how learning and care are always situated and enactive processes. In these processes, the lived body (Leib) does not represent a physical limit but a fundamental mediator of meaning, even within digital environments. Consequently, technology is not limited to filtering or mediating communication; it becomes an active component of multimodal didactics, capable of reconfiguring educational action (Rivoltella, 2012; 2014) and supporting the exploration of deep meanings, even amidst the uncertainty of experience.

The study focuses on the relational dimension of care, understood as Heideggerian *Sorge* (concern/care) (Heidegger, 1976) and as responsibility towards the Other (Lévinas, 1980). In a context of digital ubiquity, phenomenology allows us to move beyond the narrative of technology as a “non-place”, investigating instead how the subject inhabits the telematic space through what Ihde (1990) defines as an “embodiment relation”. Empathy and affectivity manifest through “resonance” between subjects (Bellingreri, 2005), transforming the virtual setting into a space of authentic intersubjective encounter and emotional care (Bruzzzone, 2016), in which dialogue remains the foundation of the educational relationship (Cambi, 2024).

The aim of the study is to explore how care can be translated into a living, distributed process, capturing the meanings that students attribute to their online presence. This contribution presents a phenomenological-hermeneutic laboratory conducted at a distance-learning university, where a group of students inhabited the digital space by engaging in experiences of listening and narration within emotionally complex contexts.

The research is situated within a qualitative paradigm and adopts a phenomenological-hermeneutic framework, understood not only as a method of analysis but as a cognitive orientation aimed at exploring and understanding the complexity of the lived educational experience (Van Manen, 2023; Tosin et al., 2017). This approach allows for an investigation into how care is experienced, recognised, and signified by students, placing the relationship with the “Other” and the transformation of meanings emerging from direct experience at the centre. From this perspective, training in care is conceived as a process that develops within reflective experiential spaces, where the student is called to confront their own emotions and the lived experiences of others, even within mediated relational contexts. Technology is therefore considered an integral part of the research setting and the socio-technical network in which the experience takes shape, actively contributing to the generation and transformation of meanings (Latour, 2005; Rivoltella, 2012).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Context and the Online Phenomenological Laboratory

The study took place at an Italian distance-learning university, within a three-year Bachelor's degree course in Psychology. The project's objective was to transform distance into an opportunity for educational presence, activating an experience where care, listening, and reflexivity could emerge as concrete dimensions of training.

The path was structured into four synchronous meetings, designed as spaces for shared experience and guided reflection. Out of the 45 students enrolled in the course, 12 participated; those who could not guarantee attendance at all meetings were excluded. The group of 12 students remained stable, with no drop-outs, thereby fostering relational continuity and trust.

Each meeting consisted of two main phases:

- Shared reading: Guided by a professor and a tutor expert in phenomenology and dynamic psychology, students read texts containing the experiences of parents of severely ill children, children with disabilities, and healthcare workers. The readings activated emotional and reflective resonances, inviting students to confront vulnerability, human fragility, and the affective dimension of care (Mortari, 2015).
- Sharing of lived experiences: Each participant, in turn, expressed the emotions elicited by the reading. This space was designed to facilitate mirroring, the co-construction of meanings, and the shared inhabiting of the care relationship, transforming the group into a shared emotional container (Bion, 1971).

The final meeting involved the production of a digital project created by the 12 participants to communicate the sense of the experience to the entire virtual class (45 students). The group chose digital storytelling (Rivoltella, Villa & Bruni, 2023) as a narrative and reflective tool, transforming digital mediation into an active vehicle for experience and the shared construction of care.

2.2 The Study

At the end of the laboratory path, the need emerged to understand the impact of technologically mediated care on students in terms of emotional experience, relational participation, and educational reflexivity. This need guided the design of the study and the conduct of in-depth narrative interviews, aimed at exploring how digital mediation can transform the care relationship into a concrete, situated, and meaningful experience. Narrative interviews were chosen to access the students' lived experiences and the sense-making processes activated by the experience, capturing its relational, situated, and transformative character (Bruner, 1993; Demetrio, 1993).

In line with phenomenological logic, the depth of the lived experience and narrative richness guided the selection of participants, prioritising experiential saturation over numerical representativeness. Six students, selected based on availability and variety of experiences, took part in the online interviews, which lasted an average of 70 minutes. The choice of this subgroup addressed the criterion of phenomenological saturation: the goal was not statistical generalisation but an analytical excavation aimed at bringing forth the *eidos* (the essence) of the lived experience. In this perspective, the depth of the narrative data prevails over the sample size, as it aims to

trace the invariant structures of the care relationship. During the interviews, participants were invited to share the emotions aroused by the journey, the group dynamics, the perception of emotional proximity, the role of technological mediation in the educational relationship, and the changes in their own experience of care and the relationship with the Other. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was guaranteed through pseudonymisation procedures and the secure storage of transcriptions.

2.3 Content Analysis

The analysis of the interviews was conducted following the inductive method of the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, with the aim of describing and interpreting the students' lived experiences. The analytical process was structured in accordance with the standards defined by the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) Checklist (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007), ensuring transparency and rigour in the qualitative research. The process was articulated through the following phases:

- Immersion in the material: Repeated reading of the interviews, maintaining the phenomenological epoché as a posture to suspend pre-understandings.
- Coding and categorisation: Breaking down the text into units of meaning and grouping them into emergent conceptual categories, which are central to understanding how students experience care, vulnerability, and proximity within the relationship.
- Construction of phenomenological categories: The categories emerge from the criterion of evidence and the processes of revealing meanings, rather than from thematic frequencies.
- Researcher triangulation: Comparison and negotiation of divergent interpretations until a shared consensus was reached, guaranteeing the reliability and depth of the analysis.
- Manual analysis and adherence to the text: The work was conducted without software in order to preserve phenomenological sensitivity and the link between quotes and categories.

3. Results

From the thematic weaving of the texts, a categorical structure appears to emerge, consisting of four phenomenological dimensions that reflect the overall form of the lived experience. The objective was not to measure the effectiveness of technology, but to understand how it intertwines with lived experiences, organising the evidence into nuclei that reflect the morphology of the experience.

3.1. The emotional dimension

The analysis of the narratives highlights how the path appears to have favoured a deep phenomenological immersion; participants describe the experience as a process in which "the phenomenological method drops you right into reality; it's not just raw statistical data, you feel life pressing in" (Student 4). Such an approach appears to have nurtured feelings of belonging and acceptance, transforming the group into a space where each individual appears to have felt part of a "whole": "I felt welcomed. That group is acceptance... each with our own part, our own lived experience, we felt like part of a whole" (Student 1). This climate appears to have supported an enactive openness, in which "being there and trying to open up totally, both to one's own emotions and to those of others... trying to see where the words of others would take us, letting ourselves be transformed" (Student 5) appears to have represented the heart of the process. Finally, the sharing appears to have favoured the development of bonds of solidarity and reciprocity, described as "feelings of union with others, as if there were a sense of solidarity, a walking together, a reciprocal reading of one another's inner selves" (Student 5).

3.2 Evocative and symbolic images

The experience appears to have been re-elaborated through powerful metaphorical images. For some, the laboratory appears to have recalled scenarios of concrete care, such as "the image that immediately came to mind is that of a hospital corridor... the reality of pain and emotional closeness" (Student 1), while for others it appears to have taken the form of an overflowing "suitcase": "we put our hearts into it and came back with a heap of stuff! An image in motion... overflowing, happy" (Student 2). The sense of cohesion appears to be represented by the image of the "ring-a-ring-o' roses": "children holding hands... accepting everyone's differences, because everyone is made in their own way" (Student 3). On a methodological level, the exercise of abstaining from judgement appears to have been visualised as a "flashing 'Epoché' sign": "first it was flashing, now it's steady... a fine lesson, because judging a priori is never right" (Student 4). The group dynamics appear to have favoured a perception of security similar to a "lifeboat": "out on the open sea... someone was rowing, then another, we let ourselves be carried along... we weren't the only ones steering" (Student 5), or a "luminous lighthouse": "it showed suffering... but then on the other side you see this lighthouse with this light, that is, hope" (Student 6).

3.3 Relationship

Distance as a condition of openness Technological mediation appears to have favoured unprecedented forms of resonance among peers; participants report that "the fact of reading and sharing the lived experiences of others always moves something inside you; a bond is created that traverses the shared words and stories" (Student 2). Paradoxically, physical distance appears to have assumed the function of a "shelter": "physical distance allowed for that minimum of 'shelter' which fosters deep sharing, allowing one to open up without the threat of an immediate physical gaze" (Student 2). In this context, the constant presence of institutional figures appears to have favoured the perception of a "secure base": "a cordial, human relationship... the

tutors and the professor were always present, they managed all the complicated situations with care" (Student 4).

3.4 Lessons learned and transformations

The path appears to have favoured a deep understanding of group dynamics: "being part of the group and observing the dynamics allowed me to truly understand the type of work we were doing... being part of it was very beautiful" (Student 1). The exercise of the Epoché appears to have favoured a posture of acceptance: "nothing is taken for granted... suspending judgement is wonderful, it allows you to let go and face your emotions without prejudice" (Student 3). The confrontation with fragility appears to have supported the development of emotional regulation skills: "faced with such deep stories, one must learn to control oneself... crossing these stormy seas requires lucidity, because being lucid helps to help the other" (Student 6). The experience appears to have favoured the rediscovery of essentiality: "it's beautiful to be able to afford the luxury of stripping the plaster off a wall and finding the stone underneath... this group brought out the essential, removing the superfluous" (Student 1). Finally, technology appears to have favoured a "distributed presence": "physical distance allowed for that minimum of 'shelter' that fosters depth of sharing... it became an environment in which the self could expand without feeling threatened" (Student 2).

4. Discussion

The results appear to indicate that technologically mediated care is configured as a concrete, situated, and transformative experience. The analysis of the narratives suggests a move beyond the dichotomy between the real and the virtual: physical distance does not diminish the presence of the lived body, but rather redefines its phenomenological boundaries. Students describe a corporeity that is no longer limited to spatial co-presence but resonates within the relationship, in line with the Merleau-Pontian notion of the reversibility of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1976). This resonance finds its foundation in the embodied dimension of perception (Berthoz, 2009), which allows for the simulation of the other's actions and emotions even under conditions of technological mediation. Furthermore, the narratives show how distance can take on the function of a space for openness and protection. The telematic context seems to foster a situated and "sheltered" cognition, allowing students to expose themselves emotionally without feeling exposed to the immediate gaze of the other. In this sense, technology reduces the emotional burden associated with direct physical corporeity and facilitates more attentive listening and deeper reflective participation. The screen, therefore, does not act as a limit, but as a phenomenological diaphragm that contributes to the construction of an expanded and shared presence. This delineates a distributed environment of relational proximity, in which technological mediation ceases to be a mere tool and becomes an active component of the ecology of care (Latour, 2005; Rivoltella, 2012). From a cognitive perspective, the experience highlights the emergence of enactive and distributed cognition: care is not acquired as abstract theoretical content but is acted out through mediated interaction.

Knowledge is generated in the structural coupling between subjects and the digital environment, confirming the role of the group dimension as a container of agency (Barone & Barbanti, 2020). The emotional resonance and the use of symbolic images emerging from the narratives favour processes of transforming experience, allowing students to integrate the complexity of lived experiences into a shared construction of meaning. In this context, the epoché, understood as the suspension of judgement (Bertolini, 1988), is configured as a fundamental ethical and cognitive posture: it allows one to welcome the suffering of the other without being overwhelmed by it, maintaining a reflective distance that restores centrality to the relationship (Paola & Gomez Paloma, 2018). The human–technology hybridisation allows for the experience of care as a distributed phenomenon, in which body, emotions, cognitive processes, and digital space intertwine. This intertwining fosters the emergence of embodied and reflective forms of learning, in which technology assumes the role of a relational prosthesis capable of sustaining the maturation of deep professional competences, particularly in formative contexts oriented towards helping relationships.

5. Conclusions

The study presents certain methodological limitations related to the limited number of participants and the specificity of the research context, which do not allow for extensive generalisation of the findings. In keeping with the phenomenological approach adopted, the analysis focuses on students' lived experiences and narratives, suggesting the need for further research on larger and more diverse samples in order to deepen the dynamics of hybridisation between embodied presence, educational relationships and digital mediation.

In light of the findings, this contribution does not seek to propose prescriptive models, but rather to offer a space of understanding of how care can be lived and learned within technologically mediated educational environments. The narratives show that cognition and relationship unfold in hybrid and distributed forms, in which the screen does not function as a barrier, but as a generative diaphragm of emotional proximity and intersubjective resonance. The findings invite a rethinking of educational approaches that rigidly separate the human dimension from digital mediation, suggesting the need for a pedagogy of co-evolution capable of inhabiting distance as a new form of proximity.

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