The (Secret and Password Protected) Diary of a Web 2.0 Novice doing Subtextual Phenomenology.

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Abstract

This paper presents a new methodology for examining reflective data. It is called Subtextual Phenomenology. It is authentic phenomenology in the true Husserlian sense, and it taps into the subtext of the data, using psychological techniques akin to psychoanalysis. At Central Queensland University, we are doing research into *Personal Learning Environments* (PLEs) as they are enabled through Web 2.0 technology. The governing *group-approach* for the project is Action Research, in which the researchers are required to reflect on the issues, plan together for new action, implement that initiative, and then reflect again: Plan; Act; Reflect. This is the ongoing Action Research cycle. Subtextual Phenomenology is the methodology I use to make sense of the *reflective phase.* Like autoethnography (Boucher 2002) and Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas 1990) it requires the user to be both researcher and research subject. As such, I record my experiences as a novice practitioner using Web 2.0 social media tools. I write my impressions and observations of this process in my blog. When I switch to analysis mode, I then analyse the candid, autoethnographic blog using the research paradigm of Subtextual Phenomenology (Vallack 2005). The approach strives to reveal archetypal, mythical forms, which act as analogies for the research issues. At the end of the first reflective phase in the Action Research spiral, Subtextual Phenomenology has shown that the plight of the Web 2.0 Novice is akin to that of the unfortunate protagonist in the Greek myth of *Echo and Narcissus*.0

Key words: Subtextual Phenomenology, Blogs, Web 2.0, Personal Learning Environments,

Action Research.

Glossary of Terms

The purpose of this brief glossary is to provide an easy reference for the reader. As there is much ambiguity with common terms used in phenomenology, it may be helpful to the reader to be able to identify how I am using these words in the paper. I believe that I am adhering to Husserl's usage of phenomenological terms, however I am mindful that even he changed and interchanged meanings from time to time.

apophantic domain
that of the senses and propositions. In contrast to this is the ontological domain that of life-world things- relationships, business, politics

a priori
eternal and timeless structure. Constructed in the mind and not based on experience. Not empirical.

essence
element. A mandatory feature, fundamental to a given phenomenon. In Transcendental Phenomenology, I use this word as a simile for universal object.

Existential Phenomenology
Originating from the work of Heidegger, it fixes on an ontological, psychological phenomenology, as opposed to Husserl's philosophical and epistemological phenomenology, that is, Transcendental Phenomenology. The author argues that Existential Phenomenology alone produces only life-world *themes*, not the universal *objects* of true phenomenological reduction.

intuition
Knowledge which is not based on perception, memory or introspection. A hunch.

intuit essences
to allow the essential features of a phenomenon to just occur, as opposed to trying to work it out.

phenomenology

A methodology and a philosophy based on the work of Edmund Husserl. It's about getting to the core of an inquiry. The results are often images and metaphors rather than descriptions. In popular use, it is informed by an epistemology of either objectivism or constructionism. Pure phenomenology, such as that cited in this paper, embraces Husserl's notion of the transcendental object, and is objectivist. Phenomenology is a process of inquiry through which universal objects are presented.

radical
Fundamental. Subtextual Phenomenology is radical in that it is informed by the essential and original phenomenology of Edmund Husserl

Subtextual Phenomenology
I created Subtextual Phenomenology in 2005. (Vallack 2005) Here it offers a set of methods, non-sequential steps, for the practical of Transcendental Phenomenology to blog-based research.

Introduction

Web 2.0 social media tools, such as *Twitter, Second Life, Delicious, Flickr, RSS* feeds, Weblogs, Webcasts and more, are mutating on a daily basis and have already permeated the communication activities of our clients, our students and our loved ones. At Central Queensland University we are doing research into encouraging and enabling the use of Web 2.0 technology in the form of personal learning environments (PLEs). We tag this project, *PLEs@CQU.* Within the Action Research framework, we are using an intuitive, blog-based methodology called *Subtextual Phenomenology* (Vallack, 2006), to deal with the reflective data, and to thus identify the obstacles faced by recalcitrant users of this new technology.

In this paper I set out the research design and show how it is used to analyse reflective, blog data. This autoethnographic style of reflective data is a twenty-first century phenomenon. So much information is being recorded daily on personal blogs, it is becoming the new frontier for qualitative research. Surfacing from the thick and candid blog-data that has emerged to inform our research project, are images and metaphors related to the learning experiences of an academic, middle-aged, Web 2.0 novice, as she struggles to master the social media that will enable her to build her web-based, Personal Learning Environment(PLE). That's me. Subtextual Phenomenology works with data from the researching practitioner. So far in our research, Subtextual Phenomenology has revealed the mythical images of *Echo and Narcissus (Jalic 2007)*, symbols for the relationship the blogger perceives as having with the technology itself. The focus of this paper, however, will be on the data analysis processes and the conceptual framework of *Subtextual Phenomenology* as a methodology for processing the (seemingly) random blog data.

The methodology is served by a series of post-positivist methods. Consequently, this paper argues that systematic positivism should give way to more layered and comprehensive qualitative data, if the opportunity of tackling research through Blog analysis is to be maximised. It explains and demonstrates the phenomenological processes that reveal the essential elements of experience for the Web 2.0 novice as she writes about the development of her Personal Learning Environment (PLE) online. I bind the research with a manageable definition of the Personal Learning Environments, about which the blog is written.

Although this paper is about process, the PLE product for investigation provides the context in which the methodology is presented. Atwell describes the PLE succinctly:

> *The idea of a Personal Learning Environment recognises that learning is ongoing and seeks to provide tools to support that learning. It also recognises the role of the individual in organising his or her own learning. Moreover, the pressures for a PLE are based on the idea that learning will take place in different contexts and situations and will not be provided by a single learning provider. Linked to this is an increasing recognition of the importance of informal learning(Atwell 2007)*

The general framework for our inquiry into the PLE phenomenon is Action Research. Within the reflective phase of the Action Research, *Subtextual Phenomenology* is used to critically manage the subjective Weblog data.

Our Action Research has evolved alongside our research questions, to best support and validate the inquiry into PLEs. I demonstrate that the essentially reflective and subjective data can be rigorously processed through *Subtextual Phenomenology*, to inform the researchers as they confront Web 2.0 communication phenomenon.

There are assumptions underpinning any methodology. I think that it is best to identify them up front so as to make the research transparent. The assumptions that inform Subtextual Phenomenology are:

- Blog data, when analysed psychoanalytically, yields information that is not just relevant to the single subject, but has archetypal (Jung 1968) themes with universal implications.

- Phenomenology, in the true, Husserlian sense, reveals universal, Platonic forms, which cut to the essence of the research question by revealing images rather than descriptions.

Let us now look at blogging, and it's forerunner, personal journal writing.

Personal experience as data

Some years ago I had an experience that seeded the development of the research methodology, Subtextual Phenomenology (Vallack 2002):

> *Once I stood only a few feet from a lioness that would have surely killed me had not the force of her fury impacted against the bars of her cage. My back was up against the brick wall that edged the narrow walkway alongside her cage. I had been told to keep away from the bars because lions could reach through them. I had been holding her three-week-old cubs, already able to challenge my embrace with real strength in those little arms and thick paws; claws and teeth already formed.*

> *When they were returned to her cage, and she was released from her security enclosure, she flew at me. Maybe there was four feet between us by the time she hit the bars, but for an instant, before I knew what was happening, there was a moment of impending doom, so profound that in Polyani's (Polanyi 1967) terms, it was more than I could say. It was primal. I suppose there was some fear – no – I just made that up then. There was no fear. It just didn't occur to me until later. But there was something greater – like a surrender to an inevitability – a strange sort of calm, and there was a predominant sense of awe at her beauty and power. This description is quite inadequate. It was one of the most basic moments of my life. My identity was dwarfed in the shadow of the beast. My place in the scheme of things had been given a new perspective. Comparatively, and on her terms, I was nothing much.*

> *With the sensation of the animal's body falling into the cyclone wire, that I had forgotten, had separated us; with the momentary defeat of her power by the reality of the barrier, I too fell. I fell from the transcendental attitude back to the natural attitude – then fear, then a roar in my ears that was my own blood, then a scanning for labels to categorise the experience, an estimation of the distance between myself and the cage, a guess at the length of the cat's arm and its ability to come at me through the gap at the bottom of the cage, a strange pity for the beast as it was now rendered impotent by its imprisonment, then someone nearby said something – then a decision to move away – then a cognitive minimisation of my experience...*

> *The "new" (Crotty 1996) phenomenologist might ask, "What was that like for you?". But is that really what we, as potentially hunted ones actually wish to know? Or do we want to know more about that suspended moment of awe – that archetypal dimension in which we irrationally prepare for lion attack; the instant that transcends one's fears and pathetic dreams of greatness, and confronts us with the I am cat food crisis! (Vallack 2002)*

Stories interest us because we are able to project ourselves into the described situation. The subjective experience of others can be important for me because I may at sometime share such an experience. Yes. Our autoethnographic (Boucher 2002) descriptions may be interesting, but more than that, they contain within them the elements of human experience that transcend the everyday events on which they are based. It is the job of the phenomenologist to find these elements and present them as research outcomes; as universal objects of human experience, distilled and rinsed clean of the original, thick descriptions from which they were born. Whereas the source of data was

often first person journal information, increasingly this data is becoming available in massive proportions online.

Husserl's Authentic Phenomenology

The philosophy of Husserl (Husserl 1964/1929; Husserl 1977/1925; Husserl 1981; Husserl 1981) and the evolution (and near demise) of his pure phenomenology are enthralling! As a PhD student I spent some years gripped by the scandal of it all. I was shocked by the Heidegger's letters (Hopkins 1999), which I interpreted as no less than contemptuous. Heidegger showed disregard for Husserl, his former mentor, and for Husserl's transcendentalism. To some degree he was successful in changing the popular conception of phenomenology, and much of the methodology today, which calls itself *phenomenology*, is in fact the consequential bastardisation of Husserl's work. Heidegger just didn't "get" the essential connection between transcendentalism and phenomenology, so he created something else, while retaining Husserl's essential terminologies. Students today complain that Phenomenology is a difficult methodology to understand. I maintain that there has been an essential piece of the puzzle missing for over a century. It's the intuitive part that facilitates the transcendence from the lifeworld to the philosophical reality. For this current research project, I am putting back the intuitive ingredients. It should now make more sense. Subtextual Phenomenology is a pure phenomenology, informed by Husserl's transcendental perspective.

Subtextual Phenomenology

Subtextual Phenomenology emerged as a new arts-based methodology during my ten years of PhD research into qualitative inquiry. Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology sets out the theoretical perspective on which I based this practical approach. Subtextual Phenomenology is now put to use in our current research inquiry into *Personal Learning Environments* (PLEs) and Web 2.0 technologies. The diagram below shows the bigger picture of the research. We are using Action Research (Kemmis 1988; Reason 2006) to approach our emergent inquiry into PLEs. Within the perennial action cycles of *Plan, Act, Reflect*, Subtextual Phenomenology manages the reflective blog phase of the research paradigm. The diagram below shows the position of Subtextual Phenomenology as a methodology within the broader mechanisms of Action Research. The remaining focus of this paper will be confined to this reflective phase of the PLE Action Research.

The diagram below shows the Action Research model for the PLEs research project.
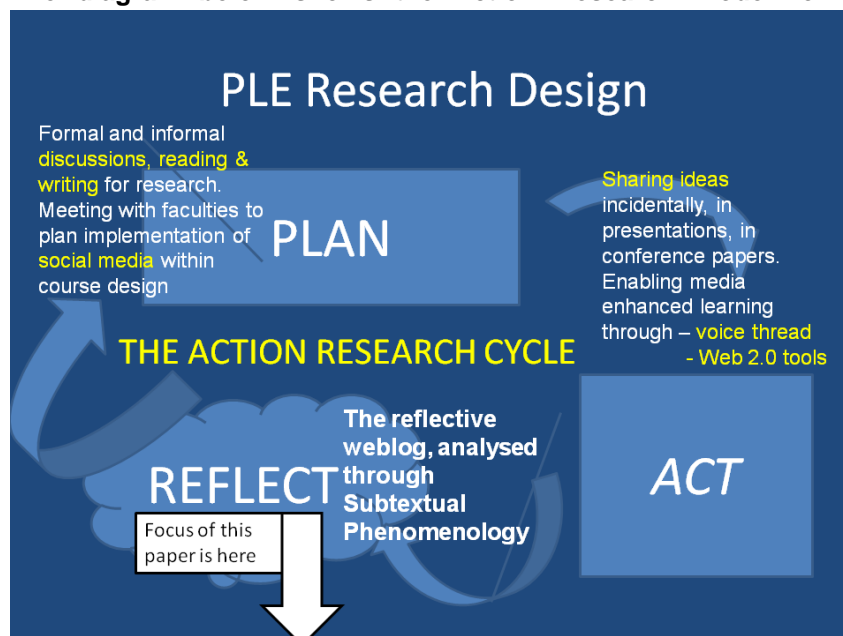

Figure 1

This table sets out the methodological design of Subtextual Phenomenology (Vallack 2005)

Subtextual Phenomenology	
EPISTEMOLOGY	OBJECTIVISM
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE	TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY
METHODOLOGY	SUBTEXTUAL PHENOMENOLOGY
METHODS Although the methods appear to be sequential, in practice the researcher intuits the interaction of the methods.	• SOLO JOURNEY • FREE ASSOCIATION DATA/ BLOGGING • DISTILATION THROUGH DREAM/MEDITATION/FURTHER WRITING • IDENTIFICATION OF KEY RESEARCH OBJECTS AND RECOGNITION OF MYTH • RETURN TO MYTH TO INFORM RESEARCH and (optional) PRESENTATION TO AN AUDIENCE FOR FEEDBACK & TRIANGULATION OF RESULTS

Table 1

Epistemology: Objectivism.

Subtextual Phenomenology is founded on an epistemology of Objectivism. Curiously, it is an objectivism that is reached via deep subjective reflection. Unlike positivist research, Subtextual Phenomenology seeks universal objects, otherwise known as archetypes or Platonic forms. Through reflection and meditation, these objects present themselves to the researcher through what Husserl calls transcendental, phenomenological reduction.

Theoretical Perspective: Transcendental Phenomenology.

The lifework of philosopher, Edmund Husserl, culminated in his development of Transcendental Phenomenology. I have argued that this is the only true phenomenology (Vallack 2005; Vallack 2005).

Existential Phenomenology, the popular form of phenomenology in use today, is an ontological disfigurement of pure phenomenology. It became popular largely due to the influence of the modernist philosophy of Heidegger. I contend that Heidegger's inability to acknowledge Transcendental Phenomenology resulted in widespread misuse of phenomenological terminology and distortion of the methodology.

Methodology: Subtextual Phenomenology

Informed by the Theoretical Perspective of Transcendental Phenomenology, Subtextual Phenomenology is set out as a (not necessarily sequential) step-by-step approach towards the concretion of Husserl's philosophy as methodology.

The Methods of Subtextual Phenomenology

The five methods are offered here as a template for other research using Weblog journal data:

- The solo research journey – the blog is a personal online journal detailing the experiences of the Web 2.0 Novice.

- Free association to set the unconscious in action – blogging seems random during the writing phase, but reflection shows underlying patterns and themes evident in the writing.

- Attention to altered states of consciousness through dream and meditation – I have found walking to be a useful way to synthesise the impressions in the unconscious into accessible thought images for research analysis. Also, incidental day-dreaming, such as I do when driving the long, straight, country roads in Australia (not as extreme as it sounds), can be a

very productive use of time. Ideally, a myth or fable will emerge as a kind of analogy for the research.

- Interrogating the myth for further insight into the research. Also, arts-based activity, such as play writing or painting, will synthesise thoughts and provide a vehicle through which the phenomenological object/ universal form (or image) may be presented.

In this case, the writing of the paper fulfilled this cognitive and creative activity. The myth of Echo and Narcissus emerged as an analogy for the novice's relationship with technology. Any feedback following the conference paper delivery would serve to verify and perhaps triangulate the analysed data results. For example, once a mythical image is presented to the researcher as a metaphor for the researched situation, debate about the appropriateness, even the authenticity of this image is useful.

Why not use a positivist approach?

My critics will ask me how I can claim rigor in research that uses the data of one subject. They may be unfamiliar with the traditions of qualitative methodologies that embrace the depth rather than the breadth of the data - Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas 1990), Performance Text (Denzin 2003), and Narrative Inquiry, to name a few. They may be unfamiliar with the philosophy of Kant, which purports that through subjectivity one may reach universal validity (Atalay 2008).They may believe that only a positivist approach offers research certainty, the facts! I ask you then to suspend any such disbelief and consider this for a moment:

The attraction of scientific method is perhaps its promise of certainty. It makes us feel that amidst our atrophying, life-world realities something is permanent – even if it is only a theory, it is rigorous. But are we being deceived? Has positivism been ascribed an undeserved status of objectivity? Crotty (1998) explains that describing scientific knowledge is one thing, but claiming it to be absolutely accurate is another. With reference to the early pioneers of this intractable thinking, Werner Heisenberg (1901-76) and Niels Bohr (1885-1962), he tells us:

> *Heisenberg, a German scientist, is one of the founders of 'quantum theory'. He articulates an 'uncertainty principle' which well and truly calls into question positivist science's claims to certitude and objectivity. According to Heisenberg's principle, it is impossible to determine both the position and momentum of a subatomic particle (an electron, for instance) with any real accuracy. Not only does this preclude the ability to predict a future state with certainty but it suggests that the observed particle is altered in the very act of it being observed, thus challenging the notion that observer and observed are independent (Crotty 1998).*

So much for hard science. He goes on:

> *This principle has the effect of turning the laws of physics into relative statements and to some degree into subjective perceptions rather than an expression of objective certainties....There is a chasm between what science purports to do and what it actually does. For all the positivist concern that statements be verified by observation, before being accepted as meaningful, a host of elaborate, scientific theories have emerged whose development clearly requires the acceptance of much more than direct conclusions from sense-data. Many of the so-called 'facts' that serve as elements of these theories are not directly observed at all. Instead they have been quite purposefully contrived and introduced as mere heuristic and explanatory devices. This is true of alleged 'entities' such as particles, waves and fields. Scientists act as if these exist and function in the way they postulate and, in terms of their purposes, this may prove an effective way to proceed. In this situation, it is very easy to go on to reify these presumptions. Yet, by positivism's own criteria, such reification is unjustified (Crotty 1998).*

Bringing this into my personal learning space research approach

If I aim to do research around the sorts of questions that take me away from the imagined safety of positivism, then I need to observe certain protocols. Unlike science, other disciplines using other

methods appropriate to their inquiry have needed to *qualify* their research design with statements to defend the post-positivist position as one of rigor and validity. And that is as it should be. Here I have aimed to address these concerns as far as the scope of this paper will allow.

I maintain that for the reflective phase of our research into PLEs, Subtextual Phenomenology is the appropriate methodology for dealing with the complex and subjective, blog data of the solo researcher/practitioner. It is also rigorous, as illustrated in *Table 1,* because each level of the research design agrees, philosophically, with the next.

Blog data and the results to date

So far in this research, the data and the unconscious filtering of that material have allowed the first essences of the experience to take shape. I have mentioned that it has recently occurred to me that the communication difficulties experienced by this Web 2.0 novice are akin to those of the legendary nymph, Echo. The Subtextual methods of blogging, meditating through walking and attention to dream image have revealed a link between the sorts of issues in the blog sample below, and those of Echo. The nymph is unable to speak except to humiliatingly repeat the words of others. She can't articulate her love for Narcissus because of a curse. He turns from her with distain, preferring his own image. He loves only himself. He is without empathy or need for others. And similarly, the problematic technology renders this blogger incapable of the creative expression that she seeks:

> ***(Secret and password protected) Diary of a Web 2 Novice***
> *October 8th, 2008*
>
> *Gee you spend a lot of time for nothing in front of a computer screen. I have wasted hours this week trying every password I've ever used to get back into this weblog (for some reason I prefer the full name of the thing. The abbreviation sounds obscene.). Anyway, Edublog has been closed for renovations, but, of course, I just thought it was me. When it asked me if I had forgotten my password, I affirmed that this was the case and put in a request for a new one to be sent to my email. Unfortunately, when I set up this blog, I had to use my home email, and to get into that from work required me to send for another password from Bigpond. This line of obscurity is now prominently in my work diary, for there is no way I could remember it, and I am afraid to change it to something else that, clearly, is forgettable. I try to use the same password, but then some machine demands that I embellish it by adding a lot of **B*##y!**l style characters. So then, like it not, I have another password to contend with. Another password that will ensure that no-one can break in to see what I am about to publish on my PUBLIC WEBLOG!*
>
> *I don't know what all this security is about – it's just a nuisance. Anyway, I work with a shop load of super-geeks (all gorgeous) who could break into anything I construct (if they really wanted to be bored out of their brains!).*
>
> *So the thought for the day is – just because you've hit another "invalid username", doesn't mean that it's not because the system isn't down! (Love all those triple negatives when I'm feeling like the martyr.*
>
> *Which reminds me - I still haven't been able to access my car radio since they took out the battery!*

Although the blog resonates with good humour, the blogger alludes to the narcissistic quality about the technology. It's impermeable. Perhaps too, the technicians may at times have this narcissism also projected onto them, since in the blogger's frustrated mind, they are the faces of the technology. Any ontological justification for this is a moot point. But in the reality of the blogger, they alienate the novice through their inability to empathise, or even turn their gaze from their own view of things. Like

Narcissus, they stare transfixedly into the pool of their own creations, and seem indifferent to those who might ask for flexibility and recognition. More so too, the technology itself is inflexible and unfeeling. It can not welcome the newcomer into its world. It just *is*, and it *is* self-contained.

This Echo and Narcissus phenomenon may be recognised again in this later blog:

Out of/for control?

October 21st, 2008

I have been listening to a voice-thread by Scott Wilson at Bolton University on PLEs. He mentions control, and I have been pondering on that as a factor in the debate about PLES vs CMSs. (Look at me! A month into this stuff and I'm sounding like them – all acronyms. My apologies to anyone there still able to communicate in plain English – rage! rage against the dying of the light…!, as DT would almost say) So we can eliminate the control factor from the support staff, because they can pick up any other system without bother – or can we?

Maybe it is not about which system, so long as there is something or other in place to make the rest of us need them so very much. And if it metamorphosises intermittently, so much the better. Ah- ha!

Hmm. The power of the nerd. Interesting. Why else would they actually want to engage with all that code – all those acronyms?! They block us out with them, make us feel isolated, inadequate until it gets so bad that you just can't…can't hear them ask again- yet again - "ar sorry, don't you know what that means?"…and so you smile glibly, almost convincingly, and just nod in acknowledgement to some string of consonants, as your brain starts thrashing through the alphabet, heading for a crash. Don't send that error report again today. How much stupidity can one admit to at one time! Lots – I'm brave – but not that much!

That's how they control us! BUT if we start using PLEs – JUST THE STUFF WE LIKE - instead of having to do it all THEIR way, we might stage some sort of turnaround, the new revolution. They will have to catch up with us when we call in the helpdesk. "Ar, what's this?" they will ask. "ar sorry. Don't you know what that means?", we reply, dry as chips! Pure as power. Then! - what if I refused to focus on new tools and instead thought about some issue or question? Something I knew about but wanted to explore further – in an expert kind of way? What if I slipped into alpha-theta mode and the technology didn't thump me back to beta with error messages? What if it was gentle and poetic and polite?? What if 'it' wasn't akin to fascism?

But wait. Willis points out that some people don't like the idea of PLEs because they don't want to be independent learners. I suppose that's like the prisoner who falls in love with the prison guard (don't look for the link. I wouldn't know where to start). Imprisonment is safe. You can't make mistakes if you can't make decisions. And how judgemental do I sound now! Who's the fascist here? And how the heck do we reconcile this?"

The reference to falling in love with the prison guard reinforces the narcissistic implications. Echo was trapped by her love for the unfeeling youth. Like Echo, she feels dumb and unable to communicate with the technology and its minders, both seen by her at this time as self-contained and impervious.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

This paper has been about the methodology that has brought us to this point of seeing the relationship between technology and the Web 2.0 novice as akin to that of the mythical Echo and Narcissus.

Subtextual Phenomenology has been set out and illustrated as a methodology for analysing Blog data in research. The phenomenological objects that arise through the practiced intuition of the researcher must then be analysed cognitively. The strength of the research outcomes will then depend on the psychoanalytic skills of the methodologist.

Our *PLES@CQU* project, having identified the metaphor of Echo and Narcissus, through Subtextual Phenomenology, might now progress with a professional development plan, for other Web 2.0 novices, in an informed way. Perhaps we will be able to structure workshops in technology that do not chill the creative passions of our users. Perhaps we can engage the passions of otherwise recalcitrant academics through creativity. The cyclic, Action Research process will accommodate an ongoing spiral of refinement and outcome review. Its first reflective phase passes with this paper. Now we act!

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Response to review comments

Advice offered	Action taken
see Husserl's Cartesian Meditations – which I think should be cited	**I have cited Husserl's later works because I think they better articulate what Husserl was just starting to express when he wrote Cartesian Meditations.**
I was vexed as to why some words have been blocked out.	**These were references to the author's publications and place of work. They were blocked out to ensure anonymity.**
The author uses contractions at times – avoid these and put the words in full.	**I have attempted to remedy this. Unfortunately the use of acronyms is so entrenched in technology that it is difficult to avoid them.**
I would also have expected some note and reference to surrealism, especially as the blog data is/was generated as a free expression of the author's subconscious.	**An interesting suggestion, but not within the scope of this paper, I think.** **The connection between mythology and the unconscious dates back at least to Plato, and I have chosen to present my view within this context. This is not to say that another paper, written from a surrealist perspective, would not be worthwhile.**
The section concerning the positivist approach has too many long quotes. Can these be reduced and amalgamated with the following section?	**Yes, thank you. I have attempted to modify this section.**
The attacks on Heidegger are wee bit to polemic....	**Yes. I have modified my tone, and the argument is the stronger for it.**
The reference to Echo and Narcissi was an interesting interlude – but their significance did not bear through	**Thank you for this observation. I have made significant changes regarding this reference. The research pivots on the analogy inherent in the mythology. I needed to make these connections much stronger.**