

Hermeneutic Inquiry as a New Way of Knowing

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Hermeneutic Inquiry as a New Way of Knowing

Much of my "old way of knowing" is rooted in common learning theories for K-6 and adult learners. As a result, my current knowledge often falls into one of three big learning theory groups—behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism—or around lesser-known but equally essential learning theories such as transformative learning, social learning, and experiential learning. Regardless of whether the audience is children or adults, these learning theories focus on how individuals acquire, process, and store knowledge. However, when I reflect and take inventory of my theoretical grounding as an instructional designer, my knowledge and practice is predominantly rooted in constructivism.

Constructivism – shaped by the works of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Ernst von Glasersfeld, and John Dewey – has significantly shaped my education and careers in education and instructional design. Karagiorgi and Symeou (2005) noted that constructivism was the dominant learning theory taught to and used by instructional designers during the 1990s, despite not being an explicit instructional design theory. Even in 2023, Lodge pointed out that learning designers were fluent in various instructional design epistemologies but relied heavily on the constructivist learning theory to guide their design.

Given my deep and steep propensity for a single theoretical approach to instructional design, I am now exploring what other approaches could inform my practice. As part of that consideration, I am particularly interested in discovering complementary approaches that may provide an opportunity for a deeper understanding. While it is beneficial for learners to construct new knowledge by connecting prior knowledge to new learning opportunities, I want to delve into how learners interpret experiences to achieve a deeper understanding. Additionally, I seek to determine if their interpretations can be integrated into instructional design. To address this, I

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will examine hermeneutics, compare it to constructivism, and assess their compatibility within the institutional design discipline.

Historical Roots

Epistemological Foundations

To define hermeneutics, it may be helpful first to explore its philosophical foundations. Court (2020) places hermeneutics within the critical theory/realism paradigm, though it does not explicitly state the ontology or epistemology. Here, Moon and Blackman (2017) add clarity by positioning it in the critical realist ontology, aligning it with the constructionist epistemology, and categorizing it as a subset of the interpretivist philosophical perspectives. Additionally, they describe it as a method for understanding and define it as the "hidden meaning (of language) [that] exists in texts, practices, events, & situations, beneath apparent one" (Court, 2020).

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Philosophical Formation

Viewed as the father of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy, Hans-Georg Gadamer anchors his early influences on philosophical inspirations from Plato, Aristotle, Paul Natorp, Stefan George, and Martin Heidegger to investigate the basic conditions of human understanding and reveal its limitations (Malpas, 2022; Barthold, n.d.). From this groundwork, Gadamer published *Truth and Method* in 1960, which became the scholarly basis for understanding and using hermeneutics today. This publication served as his foundational work, establishing hermeneutics based on ideas like viewing prejudices as chances for exploration, accepting that understanding is neither fixed nor permanent but always situated in history, and growing comfortable with never achieving understanding while constantly pursuing it. Arguing against Gadamer's discussions on the authority of understanding to unlock and achieve success, Jurgen Habermas asserted Gadamer ignored power as a construct, E. D. Hirsch claimed hermeneutics

fell firmly in relativism instead of objectivism, while Jacques Derrida declared that any attempt to understand will always result in misunderstandings, and Paul Ricoeur argued that the point of hermeneutics is to understand ourselves better as well as the text and its broader context world (Barthold, n.d.; Malpas, 2022; Rohden, 2019). However, despite his critics' remarks, modern hermeneutics has grown into a current and helpful philosophy with practical applications that examine many of today's socio-political issues (Barthold, n.d.; Malpas, 2022).

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Simple Definition

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy succinctly defines hermeneutics as "the study of interpretation" (George, 2020). It explains that its rich history originated from the need to study religious, legal, and research texts for proper clarification, explanation, and understanding. Born of necessity, hermeneutics progressed into a philosophical approach that "treats interpretation in the context of fundamental philosophical questions about being and knowing" (George, 2020) and then developed into a qualitative research methodology called applied hermeneutics. Today, a broad category of liberal arts disciplines commonly uses hermeneutics to study the intricacies and nuances of human communication, understanding, and experiences that arise from interpretative investigations (Barthold, n.d.; George, 2020; Stewart, 2019). Hodge (2023) contributes to the explanation of what hermeneutics is by pointing out its distinguishing characteristic as "not really a discipline but rather a body of knowledge and debate derived initially from problems in other fields of study" (p. 8).

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At its core, hermeneutics is an enriching and enlightening understanding of one's interpretation of a topic. However, this understanding is more than just awareness or familiarity. Hermeneutics knows both the sum and the parts of a topic from a position of embodiment and expertise that educates a person about the topic, themselves, others, and the larger world

(George, 2020). Ring's 2018 AP news article, '*Homer Can Help You': War Veterans Use Ancient Epics to Cope*', is an excellent example of how one can know the sum and the parts concurrently. Here, Ring reports how groups of military combat veterans read and interpret Homer's "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" as therapy. Hermeneutistically speaking, the education they gain from these historical works of literature helps them understand themselves and make sense of the world around them. Because veterans can relate to the emotional elements, situations, and circumstances they are reading about, they can use their experiences as warriors who have endured combat to interpret the books. Because their experiences aid their interpretations and understanding of each chapter, scene, and narrative, those experiences then inform the other chapters, scenes, and narratives. Their iterative efforts for understanding transform into a broader and embodied experience, inform and influence different further aspects of their life, and permeate the more significant elements of their world.

Complex Process

Because of its iterative nature, it is common to describe hermeneutics as a circular process instead of a linear one. This circular process, known as the hermeneutic circle, is built on the belief that meaning can only be derived when one can understand the whole as it relates to its parts, the interaction between them, and how the parts interact with the whole. Martin Heidegger visualized and vocalized this concept in his 1927 book, *Being and Time*, when he discussed that as one's understanding changes and refines, so does the interpretation of one's experiences (Wheeler, 2011). To explain it another way, consider being told to read research articles three times: first for an overview of the text, then for understanding the context, and finally for interrogating the context and text together. First, by reading the text within its context and understanding the context, one can gain an initial understanding. The reader then takes this initial

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understanding and forms new knowledge after reading and negotiating the text and context a second time. Finally, as one continues to negotiate the text and context with a final reading, their understanding will be challenged to create a new **context**.

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As an unpaid assistant who studied under Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer expanded hermeneutics past the passive act of interpretation into the active act of engaging in **dialogue**. Gadamer stressed the need to examine cultural backgrounds and biases to adjust or change the perspective of our knowledge (Malpas, 2022). Because he viewed the act of understanding through the subjective and situated lens of one's history, he moved hermeneutics from the antiquated practice of decoding the works of others to a very contemporary opportunity for engagement with critical reflection of self.

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Sub-Categories: The Parts of the Whole

Hodge (2023) noted that many disciplines use hermeneutics. To clarify the multiple ways hermeneutics is used and discussed within research, Steward (2024) offers a clear path to understanding the various sub-categories within hermeneutics. Aligning hermeneutics as a viable qualitative research method, Steward reminds the researcher that each sub-category views the concepts of interpretation and understanding in a particular light. While individually specific, these sub-categories collectively "highlight the multifaceted nature of understanding, underscoring the importance of context, dialogue, and reflexivity in the interpretive process" (Stewart, 2019). Using the hermeneutical approach in order to understand hermeneutics as a whole, it is necessary to briefly explain each of the sub-categories (parts, if you will):

- **philosophical hermeneutics:** Interpretation is a natural, subjective aspect of the human experience influenced by personal history and cultural contexts.

- **biblical hermeneutics:** Interpretation of religious texts examines the content and context of the writings as well as the application of that interpretation in modern times.
- **postmodern hermeneutics:** Interpretation is viewed in light of power dynamics and studied through discourse.
- **objective hermeneutics:** It is a qualitative research methodological framework for examining texts using a detailed, prescriptive analytical method.
- **applied hermeneutics:** It is the practical application of interpretation principles to determine the text's letter and intent and understand individual experiences and contexts in everyday settings such as law or medicine.

Continuing to use the hermeneutic approach, iteratively reading the parts listed above and then considering them within the broader context of hermeneutics will enhance understanding of the process. As the reader reflects, interprets, rereads, reflects, interprets, and rereads, their knowledge expands, deepens, and evolves.

Assumptions

Because hermeneutics is so firmly rooted in drawing understanding from interpretation, it is open to multiple subjective interpretations that may deliver more than one truth. Additionally, as the interpretations are iterative based on the circular examination of text and context, they may change over time or during different engagements. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight several significant assumptions regarding language, context, and researcher bias:

- **the hermeneutical circle:** There is no beginning to the cycle of moving between the whole and the parts to understand the whole and the parts. One must understand the whole to understand the parts better and understand the parts to understand the whole (George, 2020).

- **construction of meaning:** The researcher and the participants create meaning together as they share in the research and communicate their experiences. Conversely, if the researcher or participants make assumptions, meanings can be misinterpreted or misconstrued (Boerboom, 2017).
- **understanding is situated in history, society, and context:** The time period, group understanding, and group identity influence the interpretation (Boerboom, 2017).
- **interpretive bias:** Interpretation is subject to the researcher's prejudices, culture, and history (Stewart, 2019; Malpas, 2022).
- **the role of language in communication:** How one uses language and exerts efforts to make the communication "make sense" will impact their interpretation. (Boerboom, 2017).

These principles highlight the essential role that interpretation plays in shaping research outcomes. Looking internally, when researchers engage in self-reflection and recognize that communication serves as both a lens and a tool for understanding, they significantly reduce the potential for interpretive bias in their work. Looking externally, researchers should adopt three clear steps: identify, explore, and examine. First, researchers should identify specific strategies that effectively minimize interpretive bias. Next, researchers must actively collaborate with participants to co-create meaning throughout the research process. Finally, they need to analyze how various cultural contexts influence the hermeneutical circle and interpretation. Researchers can create a helpful framework that makes it easier for them to understand the complexities of interpretation and meaning-making if they take time to look at both the internal and external influences. When applied with care, this framework encourages a thoughtful approach that allows researchers to appreciate the rich details of human experience even **more**.

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Connections to Research***As a Method***

Within research, hermeneutics is a qualitative research method that keenly focuses on "the interpretive analysis of texts, communications, and human interactions...[and] is concerned with understanding the meanings embedded within texts, spoken words, social actions, and even cultural artifacts" (Stewart, 2019). Hermeneutics is relevant in any discipline that values individual, cultural, or historical perspectives. It provides a framework for contextualizing existing concepts instead of inventing new ones when analyzing language, actions, interactions, history, and their contexts (Stewart, 2019). A researcher's work can be enhanced through this process because their work will deepen their findings, may reveal psychological insights, or offer experiential data on topics such as curriculum, perspectives, and various issues. As they engage in this process, researchers recognize their views continuously evolve as they explore different situations, make new connections, and refine their thoughts. Each time they revisit their ideas, they gain a deeper understanding because the whole process is about reflecting, learning, and making references.

Hermeneutical research is a way of studying that combines gathering data and artifacts with working together in discussions. It looks at the overall data and the separate pieces to get a complete picture. As researchers go through this process, they interpret what they find, build a connected story, and keep tweaking their ideas through multiple rounds of review. To maintain research integrity, researchers should engage in critical peer reviews, take thorough notes, write an in-depth narrative, and repeatedly reflect on their work.

Within Curriculum

In his recent 2024 article on the use of hermeneutics as a methodology to examine

teachers and their relationship with curriculum work, Hodge asserts that teachers should be considered knowledgeable professionals who expertly interpret the curriculum and apply their insights to teach students effectively and not simply be seen as conveyors of the curriculum. In the context of curriculum analysis, Hodge (2024) offers three areas where hermeneutics can provide valuable insights:

1. Hermeneutics can be used as a form of inquiry to examine a curriculum's contextual meaning, embedded values, and underlying assumptions.
2. Hermeneutics can incorporate various viewpoints and determine areas of tension, inconsistency, and improvement to advise academic research strategies, applications, and examinations. In doing so, interpretation is centered more on a dialogue about the text, context, and perspectives held by students and teachers.
3. Through self-reflection, teachers may use interpretation to determine the presence of bias and personal perspectives.

Studies such as his point to the need to consider hermeneutics as an appropriate vehicle to inspect what should be interpreted and why it should happen. In doing so, researchers may learn the vulnerabilities, clarify the strengths, understand the strategies that work, and how to hold conversations around complex topics.

Constructivism and Hermeneutics: A Comparative Discussion

To understand the designer's role, I will compare the constructivist and hermeneutics approaches to instructional design. But first, I would like to explain instructional design briefly to set the context for the theoretical comparisons and will use Alexander Linkov's 2018 interpretation and explanation from his paper, "Hermeneutic Grounds for the Interpretation of the Concept 'Instructional Design'" (2018). Using the interpretive lens of hermeneutics, Linkov

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explains that instructional design is "a direction in pedagogical science concerned with the studying of objects, conditions, situations, scenarios, and projects supporting the educational system" (2018, p. 115). In short, the intent of instructional design is to focus on the learning environment and its materials—both physical and virtual—used in education and change participant behavior within a dynamic learning context (Linkov, 2018, p. 115-116).

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The Literature

To explore my old and new ways of knowing, I have selected two articles for review to serve as the basis for comparison. Each article discusses approaching the instructional design process using one of the ways of knowing. My old way of knowing is constructivism, and my new way is hermeneutics.

For my old way, I selected Elander and Cronje's (2016) article, *Paradigms Revised: A Quantitative Investigation into a Model to Integrate Objectivism and Constructivism in Instruction Design*. This study explores the incorporation of objectivist and constructivist approaches in instructional design by developing and testing a quantitative model. The authors used a survey to gather data from 214 instructional design professionals to understand how they navigate the balance between two conflicting paradigms. In their article, Elander and Cronje highlight the importance of connecting theoretical paradigms to meet diverse learning needs effectively. Through statistical data analysis, the authors found evidence using Conje's 2006 four-quadrant model for hybrid instructional design models that combine the rigor of objectivism with the flexibility of constructivism to enhance instructional design processes.

For my new way of knowing, I selected Arkhipova et al. (2021) article, *Hermeneutical Approach to the Design Process Interactive Learning Environment Technologies*. This article examines designing interactive learning environments using a hermeneutical approach.

Emphasizing student engagement and understanding, the authors explore how hermeneutics can guide the creation of interactive, context-rich learning technologies. The study provides insights into the methodological framework and its potential to enhance the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning through interactivity and personalized feedback.

Comparing Approaches

I chose to break down each article into sections and compare the articles by section instead of by comparative overviews. This aids in understanding the key features and differences of each approach. I will discuss the constructivist approach (the old way of knowing) first and then the hermeneutics approach (the new way of knowing) second for each section below:

Participants. Elander and Cronje enlisted instructional design professionals for a survey, ensuring practical relevance to instructional design practices. In contrast, Arkhipova et al. conducted a conceptual study without empirical data, emphasizing theoretical frameworks over direct participant involvement.

Primary Focus. Elander and Cronje concentrate on integrating objectivist and constructivist paradigms to develop a balanced instructional design model. Arkhipova et al. emphasize the hermeneutical methodology in crafting interactive learning environments, highlighting understanding and engagement.

Engagement. Elander and Cronje rely on quantitative engagement with participants through surveys and data analysis. Arkhipova et al. engage primarily with theoretical constructs, analyzing how hermeneutics can inform design.

Context. Elander and Cronje's research focuses on instructional design and its application in diverse educational contexts. Arkhipova et al. emphasize the technological and pedagogical aspects of interactive learning environments.

Position on “Truth”. Elander and Cronje adopt a pragmatic stance, proposing a hybrid model that reconciles objectivism's commitment to universal truths with constructivism's context-dependent truths. Arkhipova et al. align with constructivist and interpretivist epistemologies, viewing truth as arising through dialogue and contextual understanding.

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In Practice

Elander and Cronje recommend integrating objectivist and constructivist paradigms by developing hybrid instructional design frameworks that use elements of both approaches. For instance, instructional designers might adopt objectivist principles for foundational knowledge delivery, such as predefined learning objectives and assessments, while using constructivist approaches for applied learning tasks, like collaborative problem-solving and adaptive learning technologies. Educational institutions could provide professional development workshops to train instructors on effectively blending these paradigms.

Arkhipova et al.'s hermeneutical approach emphasizes the design of interactive, interpretive learning environments that cater to individual learners. This approach could be applied by creating technology-enhanced learning platforms where students engage in discussions, simulations, and reflective activities tailored to their unique contexts. If learning technology developers use the hermeneutical approach with their design process, they can design systems that adapt to students' cultural and personal backgrounds. This would aid in fostering deeper connections between the learner and the material and may prove to be particularly valuable in multicultural or multidisciplinary learning settings.

New Lessons Learned

Researchers are considering hermeneutics as a methodological approach across a wider array of disciplines. As they do, they should also revisit several key gaps and limitations. First,

empirical validation is needed to strengthen its foundational aspects. Additionally, they must acknowledge the influence of their backgrounds on their interpretations and consider the dynamics of communication in the interpretive process. It is also crucial to consider how changing socio-historical contexts shape understanding and the increasing role of technology in these interpretations.

Next, it's **imperative** to recognize that effective learning in e-learning instructional design goes beyond using **technology** tools and sharing information. The design should create deep, meaningful, empathic connections with learners (Walshaw, 2014). These connections are necessary for developing practical learning experiences that deliver rich content while being firmly rooted in sound teaching principles (Kanuka, 2006).

While hermeneutics **scholars** appreciate **multiple interpretations**, it often overlooks the inclusion of voices from marginalized groups. To address concerns, researchers should take several actions to bolster the ways to incorporate diverse perspectives to deepen interpretations and address this concern (Stewart, 2019). Furthermore, the dynamic nature of hermeneutical principles requires more extensive study. Solid empirical evidence is necessary to bolster the theoretical framework effectively. Finally, while interpretive bias is acknowledged, it is crucial to delve deeper into how researchers' backgrounds and biases impact their interpretations. Researchers may gain a better understanding of their bias and influences if they choose to use tools like reflexive journals to track interpretive biases and analyze specific case studies, such as how individuals from varying cultural backgrounds interpret historical **texts**.

Reflection

I have struggled to write this section because I genuinely believed I had chosen two distinct ways of thinking. Upon reexamining Court, I discovered a statement that clarified why

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these perspectives felt familiar: "Constructivism is another name sometimes given to the interpretive paradigm" (p. 54, 2020). When I review the epistemological foundations of hermeneutics and remember that Moon and Blackman (2017) consider hermeneutics a subset of interpretivist philosophical perspectives, I realize I have been interpreting many aspects of my role as an instructional designer. By exploring both approaches, I have learned that interpreting is inherent to my identity as both a person and a practitioner. However, what is new for me and what I will carry forward is this: while constructivism emphasizes the learner's role in constructing knowledge and meaning through their interactions with the text and the learning context, hermeneutics focuses on *how* the text, context, and power structures shape the learner's interactions.

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While I am not fully comfortable with incorporating hermeneutics into my future research, I am responsible for using it. It has a role in my research. This will change the way I approach my research as I move from *learning*-centered to *learner*-centered practices. Encouraged by Agrey's 2014 article, "Opportunities and Possibilities: Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Educational Researcher," I have more clarity on how hermeneutics can enrich my role as a researcher and offer opportunities for transformation. By including hermeneutics in my future practice, I can follow Agrey's reassurance that I have a place as a researcher and an interpreter and lean into his suggestions to realize that my historical context and current preconceptions will influence my research. By understanding that my research will be neither wholly objective nor neutral, I now have the opportunity to understand educational phenomena in more dynamic and contextually grounded ways (2014). In accepting this as an option, I realize that I do not have "to write the end of an existing story but [can] write a more helpful beginning for new stories" (Ellis, 1998, p. 10).

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