Investigating Embodied Presence across Various Formats in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Heuristic Approach from a Bildung-Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract: In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions on face-to-face interaction, digital communication methods have undergone unprecedented breakthroughs, especially in the realm of higher education. The glaring differences between face-to-face seminars and the physical distance of participants in online seminars raise questions about the meaning of embodied presence of subjects in various formats. The understanding of body and lived body is often based on a dichotomous interpretation, in which the body-as-object is instrumentally subordinated to the mind. To revalorize the body, recent theories of education and Bildung-theoretical approaches, in particular, emphasize not only discursive, but also embodied, practices and increasingly focus on the potential of the body-as-subject as a medium for the subjective configuration of interactive situations. As the embodied perspective poses different challenges for qualitative research, it seems appropriate to validate the methodological approach. Utilizing a three-step method, we provide a phenomenological heuristic strategy through which our instrument underwent critical and intersubjective reflection. Ideally, subsequent research endeavors can expand upon and refine this methodology to further explore the concepts of embodiment and embodied presence in higher education.

Keywords: embodiment in higher education; embodied presence; phenomenology; heuristic; Bildung-theory

1. Introduction

The body is a unique organ of reflection [1]. Embodiment theorists and practitioners highlight the centrality of the body to pedagogy and revalorize it as an important medium for educational settings. In (post-)phenomenological tradition [2], the body is elevated to the starting point of pedagogical practice [3]. This understanding is currently also gaining attention in higher education. For example, novel forms of embodied presence in various formats have become more pronounced than ever before [4], particularly after being triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. From this point at the latest, embodiment can be seen as an “exciting paradigm with which to take higher education into the future” [5] (p. 10). Such statements remain remarkable, as the body, in the sense of Cartesian dualism, is still often characterized by a marginalized status, due to a “strong somatophobic tendency” [6] (p. 58) in Western educational landscapes. Despite growth in interest on the topic over the last few decades [7], embodied research still remains limited and persists as a peripheral topic with a “lack of recognition of corporeality throughout the whole educational process” [8] (p. 231).

However, empirical research on embodiment is confronted with its own set of challenges. Two factors seem to be hindering, while potentially supporting, a disembodied perspective. The first factor is the elusive nature of the body. In addition to the absence of a shared theoretical and conceptual basis, one central challenge lies in investigating tacit embodied phenomena: the pre-categorical knowledge of the (lived) body, which...
is often taken-for-granted [9], and the empirical grasp of the body’s speechlessness [10] can be seen as impediments in this context. The second factor is the methodological underdevelopment of the topic. Previous publications have either not dealt with it [11] or appear “fragmented and loosely structured” [7] (p. 435), which has caused criticism [12], and indicates the need for more attention.

As we aim to empirically explore the significance of embodied presence in higher education seminars, the lack of developed methodology poses a substantial challenge, which leads to the central research question in this paper: How can tacit embodied phenomena be empirically investigated?

To address this question constructively, we aim to strengthen and refine embodied research methodology for a pedagogical context. With our heuristic approach, we provide a strategy for qualitative researchers that shall serve as a flexible tool or an initial orientation. In this procedure, we synthesize current interdisciplinary theories to promote the methodology on a wider basis. Thus, our approach introduces the concept of Bildung, which has also gained recognition in the English-speaking world [13,14]. Based on this pedagogical orientation, embodied phenomena can become specifically contoured. The connection of embodiment and Bildung-theory, aligned with scholars like Brinkmann and Meyer-Drawe, posits that Bildung is primordially linked to “the bodily constitution of the human being” [15] (p. 38). In the tradition of Merleau-Ponty [16] and Plessner [17], a sharp distinction between the body and lived body is rejected in favor of advocating for an understanding of the body as a world organ of experience at the interface between subject and world that can be described as a central epistemic category.

Consequently, education is not limited to outcome- and competence-oriented or psychological conceptions. Instead, the term Bildung refers to a lifelong process of working on oneself to become someone who can lead transformations within oneself and throughout the world [18]. By adding this perspective, we combine phenomenological, embodied, and Bildung-theoretical insights into one heuristic approach. In this manner, this contribution illustrates a more coherent methodology with the aim to devise a valid research tool. According to our thesis, the tacit modus of the (lived) body can thus be pedagogically delineated and becomes more researchable.

To achieve this aim, the paper is organized as follows. Section 1 outlines the foundational principles guiding our methods. In a brief theoretical priming, we first characterize face-to-face seminars as a place of intercorporeal response processes [2] to consider embodiment in a Bildung-theoretical horizon (Section 1.1). As the title of this paper suggests, embodied presence is not defined exclusively by physical presence but can also be extended to virtual spaces (Section 1.2), since experiences of presence already arise under the impression of “moving in a social event in which others are present” [19] (p. 6). Section 2 outlines three methodological steps derived from the theoretical framework, facilitating the empirical exploration of the subject area. Section 3 descriptively shows how selected experts rated the original items of our developed instrument. As recommended [20], both the central tendency and variability of the Likert-scaled results are represented using boxplots, thus highlighting the methodological potential and limitations of external item analysis. In Section 4, the results demonstrate positive outcomes while also prompting three key revisions. Section 5 closes the paper with a brief conclusion.

1.1. Embodied Presence in Face-to-Face Seminars

As indicated, this article assumes that moments of Bildung are characterized not only by mental representations, but also by embodied dimensions. In order to avoid reducing the body to its physical shell, we establish theoretical foundations for two dynamics of embodied presence: analog and online.

According to Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of perception, the body is considered to be a double structure, wherein the bodily subject is connected to its environment in two ways [16]. The first connection to the world is demonstrated by the fact that upstream social orders are absorbed and inscribed into the body [21]. Embodiments such as gestures,
facial expressions, or posture become conventionalized, reflected in social interactions, and rewritten. The body transcends mere matter, transforming into a “place of execution”, expressing acquired habits and abilities. This embodiment is also indicative of normalization processes [22,23], wherein societal ideas about the body influence inclusion or exclusion within certain groups. In its second connection to the world, the body is not only the product of external requirements or a passive carrier of incorporated norms and ideals, but also actively contributes to the production of social order by positioning itself within a community. This productive function aligns with practices of subjectivation, aiding individuals on the path of self-determination [24], a concept Brinkmann calls “bodily subjectivation” [2] (p. 149). These transformative experiences can be identified as Bildung [25].

Following Merleau-Ponty [16], the body exists as a continuum of double reference to the world. It acts as a recipient, connecting to socio-cultural and contemporary concepts, and as a producer, actively (re-)actualizing social order. Embedded in this ambiguous structure, the lived body facilitates the integration of these two embodied connections with the world. For Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology, the lived body serves as a “point of transition” [26] (p. 161) in the interplay between reception and production (body and lived body are only to be understood analytically as separate entities, but not from a lifeworld perspective).

This phenomenological analysis reveals the potential for understanding embodied presence in teaching–learning situations for university didactics. Viewing the body not merely as a passive object but recognizing its productive and interactive character allows for a conscious exploration of secret, subterranean effects [27]. This perspective, incorporating the body as an active agent in the process of becoming a subject, underscores the multi-layered nature of the topic and the complex network of connections influencing the bodily experiences of university actors in seminars. The findings demonstrate that embodied knowledge sits “at the heart of teaching and teacher education” [28] (p. 329). In this context, knowledge, skills, and learning are not solely the outcome of conscious processes of understanding, but also start with incorporated external relationships [21]. Cognitive knowledge emerges from a symbolic, body-oriented order of traditional knowledge, expressing itself in the executional character of experience: “As situated bodies, we are already originally surrounded by structured fields of experience that precede us, which we can appropriate, modify or reshape through our behavior and actions in a learning process” [29] (p. 82). This shift from learning from experience to learning as experience [30] adds a crucial dimension to the learning process as an embodied activity.

A constitutive element of this process, also seen in university seminars, is the reciprocal reference to others in an “intercorporeal response process” [2] (p. 151), as the locus of Bildung exists in between the subjects [31]. As Plessner suggests with his model of eccentric positionality [17], humans are outward-oriented beings that exist in an embodied relationship with their environment. From a phenomenological perspective, this interactive constitution of subjects expands to an intercorporeal relationship with others. Thinking about embodiment in a pedagogical context, learners and teachers depend primordially on others. From this perspective, studying is far more than discursive practices. It already includes a subject’s embodied presence and therefore affects teaching and learning in higher education. Hence, discussing and investigating embodied presence emphasizes the intercorporeality of an actor in front of so-called “third parties” (Dritte) [32] (p. 196) that have a significant influence on processes of subjectivation [33,34]. Not only B, the counterpart, “but B and C [the third party] decide whether A is a legitimate actor or not” [34] (p. 94). The third party embodies an eccentric position vis-à-vis the other two [35] and makes self and world relationships possible in the first place. From the third party, “the framework is given in which the subject asks about itself, constitutes itself and under whose condition it perceives, acts, and judges” [2] (p. 133). This sociological paradigm shift [33] recognizes the triad as a basic constellation [34]. Intersubjectivity or trans-subjectivity can “not be explicated solely from a dyad without taking a third party into account” [36] (p. 358), so that the body that becomes visible from “the third-person perspective” [37] (p. 32) expands
the pre-reflective factors that are part of embodied experiences in face-to-face seminars. In this sense, the third party is considered to be a significant element when talking about embodied presence.

1.2. Embodied Presence in Virtual Seminars

In post-digital lifeworlds [38], where digital technologies seamlessly integrate into daily existence, the significance of embodied presence in virtual space also becomes a pertinent question in virtual spaces. The possibilities and limitations of virtual embodiment encounters have become more virulent over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic [4], warranting a closer examination of the effects of virtual teaching spaces on the self and world connections described. Since simultaneity is constitutive of the virtual [39], we refer exclusively to synchronous seminars, which are characterized by participants being present at the same time. The considerations build on the thesis that synchronous seminar practice more closely resembles embodied interaction in face-to-face seminars, while asynchronous seminars resemble an individual practice [40].

Virtual formats pose distinctive challenges to embodied interaction processes, often marked by “bodily borderline experiences” [41] (p. 4) or a sense of lived body withdrawal [42]. The variety of forms of expression is constrained, and the level of embodied contact between the people involved is diminished [4]. In digital conferences, intercorporeal processes oscillating between selfhood and strangeness are impacted by various moments of retreat, such as camera disengagement or futile attempts to make eye contact with other participants. In the two-dimensional realm of online teaching, the lived body space seems “amputated” [41] (p. 3), leading to heightened self-attention and self-control [43]. The omnipresent, though not always visible, gaze of others and the potential for self-observation create a virtual “panopticon” [42] (p. 36).

Nevertheless, this self-directed attention can also be seen as a catalyst for Bildung [4]. Post-phenomenological research underlines that, besides skepticism about the limits, technological mediation is a vital aspect in this context [11,44]. Digital learning spaces can undergo socially effective transformation processes [45] and can open up “educationally relevant possibilities” [42] (p. 39). Instead of abandoning online learning or using face-to-face instruction as an idealized benchmark, “we should focus on designing courses and pedagogies that scaffold the bodily, affective, and interactive dynamics constitutive of understanding in a particular domain” [46] (p. 429). Digitally-mediated pedagogical situations can be extrapolated as specific expressions of a persistent embodiment as the virtual classroom experience is “not so much based on sharing a physical space, but on sharing a feeling of ‘being there’ and ‘being together’” [39] (p. 26). As already articulated in existentialism [47], the bodily constitution of human beings materializes in front of third parties even “when these are only imaginary or virtually present” [32] (p. 196). It is not the actual, but the imagined other that is elementary for online teaching [48]. In social terms, embodied learning is “directed towards others and responds to them, regardless of whether they are directly or indirectly present in the learning situation” [49] (p. 525). Following the approach of Merleau-Ponty, embodiment is not only a physical instrument opposed to virtuality, rather, the body-as-subject is “a system of possible actions, as virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by its task and situation” [16] (p. 291). Caution advises against devaluing digital experience [50], as lifeworld experience in physical presence cannot be idealized as the only authentic form of experience, given that the phenomenon of virtuality is also “a fundamental dimension of corporeality” [39] (p. 32). From a post-phenomenological view, the distinction between face-to-face seminars and online seminars is not to be understood as a juxtaposition in a competitive sense. Instead, the cross-format significance of embodied presence should be explored as an extension that enriches understanding across all dimensions and format-dependent variations.
2. Methods

The theoretical implications give rise to two practical research premises for the reconstruction of the relationship between the subject and the third party in various university formats. On the one hand, the underlying intercorporeality theorem \[51\] guides the development of a methodology that acknowledges the constitutive connectedness of (lived) body beings in the presence of third parties. This acknowledgment applies from both a theoretical perspective, where the decentered subject is not viewed as an autonomous, but as an intersubjective, individual, and a practical research perspective, where our project is not perceived as a self-referential entity. On the other hand, it becomes apparent that the lived body can be present both physically and virtually, yet the respective modes of experience need to be systematically differentiated.

Both premises converge during the process of investigating the subjective meaning of third parties in virtual and analog university seminars, leading to a phenomenological methodology grounded in individual experiences in the horizon of the social and reflexively processed \[52\]. Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that the world is “inseparable” \[16\] (p. 464) from the subject, just as the subject is inseparable from the world, underscores this approach.

To translate these theoretical concepts into a methodology, we chose semi-structured interview guidelines in an episodic mode for the initial stage of the research process. Conducting interviews with students and lecturers enables a comprehensive understanding of the interviewees, fostering a deeper comprehension of others \[53\]. The episodic orientation facilitates an open-ended exploration of subjective experiences, stimulating focused narratives about specific situations \[54\]. Triangulating episodic interviews with visual impulses aims to effectively mobilize interviewees’ seminar experiences.

However, the phenomenological analysis of subjective constructions poses salient challenges for qualitative empiricism. Surveys in the medium of language confront the paradoxical dilemma of discursively fixing mute experiences and raise questions about adequately formulating structural body phenomena. This complexity reveals the methodological challenges of the embodied perspective, emphasizing the need for specific methodological safeguards \[55\]. To elicit insightful statements despite the speechlessness of the body \[10\], the instrument was gradually developed following the principle of circularity \[53\] and refined through multiple cycles. Three complementary techniques for maximizing validity are presented in the subsequent sections, in order of their application.

2.1. Step I: The Deductive Derivation

The initial step in developing a valid instrument involves identifying exemplary embodied moments based on the state of research and organizing them into guidelines for the survey with university stakeholders. The deductive derivation of the guideline concept aims to productively transform body experiences through a phenomenological methodology inspired by Husserl’s analysis of essence \[26\]. This approach involves eidetically reducing response events, pedagogically dimensioning them, and finally eidetically varying them. By doing this, we aim to pinpoint specific classroom moments that we can use as images that serve as prompts during interviews to aid the participants.

Phenomenological research is often initially oriented towards what is known as eidetic reduction. The term “eidetic”, which comes from the Greek word “eidos”, originally meant “essence” and describes a method through which Husserl articulates his logos of an aesthetic world \[56\]. This procedure refers to the superficiality of experiential phenomena to suspend contingent features and exclude presuppositions \[57\]. Rather than interpreting the phenomenon in advance, a descriptive attempt is made to contextualize and situationally dimension “the essential nature of the object” \[58\] (p. 15). For embodied empiricism, a specific situation is constitutive and can serve as a starting point. As Merleau-Ponty describes: “the subject is in situations, it is itself nothing other than a possibility of situations” \[16\] (p. 464).

To further refine the exemplary situation, a methodological approach that focuses on the dimension of the body in intersubjective references is employed \[59\]. The focus is
not on existence, but on concrete, tangible behavior, as this is where the embodied world is expressed [16]. In the pedagogical field, Brinkmann identifies this reference in the interplay of “showing something and showing oneself” [49] (p. 528). The still below, taken from his videography, serves us as a tool to deductively derive an exemplary image impulse, forming the foundation for the instrument’s development. It is also intended to stimulate the participants of our survey: by reducing the complexity of embodied phenomena, they can be supported in their episodic responses, so we are not relying solely on verbal language. The visual impulses aim to provide ample room for subjective interpretation during the interview, enabling the examination of embodiment in its immediate, original experience. Thus, traces of intricate intersubjective situations can be specifically contoured from a Bildung-theoretical perspective, transforming them into a systematical and empirically operationalizable form of embodied pedagogy [49] (as can be seen in Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Exemplary image impulse [2].](image)

It is crucial that the exemplary situation not only reveals a moment of something being shown or a single person showing themselves. The still serves to extend the focus from the verbally present seminar participants to all participants, including those who are primarily embodied as present, such as third parties. All persons shown play a significant role in our interviews, as they reveal varying dimensions of attention in a shared situation. This shared attention contributes to socially framing intercorporeality [2]. In phenomenological terms, “something shows itself as something” (etwas als etwas) [60] (p. 33), wherein actors corporeally locate themselves through their bodily reactions. Subjective experiences of “interattentionality” [2] (p. 149) can be understood through their bodily–gestural character, and they can ultimately be “pedagogically dimensioned with the practice and form of showing aimed at attention” [49] (p. 527). By specifically delineating visible embodiments of interattentionality, the complex theoretical construct becomes graspable in various nuanced content aspects. Following Husserl’s idea of eidetic variation, the reduced and pedagogically transferred situation can be distinguished into various subcategories on which the items’ alignments are based, and in which third parties vary according to the degree of their attention. Drawing on the specific situation, five categories emerge with slight semantic modifications: intensive, active, reactive, receptive, and passive. Based on this foundation, five equivalent stimuli were also created for the virtual space. In this context, it should be highlighted that the pointing gesture functions as a reduced phenomenon for both face-to-face and online instruction, as it “refers to both the actual place from which it is done and to an (virtual) elsewhere as its correlate” [39] (p. 31).

To further support the interviewees, the guidelines are structured according to a question matrix, based on the specifically contoured situations:

1. subjective experiences,
2. perception of one’s own body,
3. perception of third parties,
4. and a specific question depending on the image stimulus.
2.2. Step II: The Collegial Consultation

In addition to eidetic reduction and eidetic variation, validation stands out as another core element in phenomenological Bildung research [13]. Facilitating a responsive process, intersubjective experiences can be exchanged among different researchers, thus contributing to the development of a valid research instrument. To continually enhance the items, an internal consultation was initially conducted with colleagues from the research project. Through several rounds of corrections, the developed item pool underwent revisions and refinements in an exploratory, systematic exchange, with co-researchers serving as an “important corrective” [53] (p. 70). When it comes to qualitative research, the methodological procedure and theoretical construction of the object are disclosed to critical peers, allowing the items to be scrutinized for result openness, value neutrality, and content appropriateness through an expanded perspective [53]. To systematically generate improvement suggestions, the monitoring team provided comments on specific items and the overall structure of the guidelines. The intensive review and subsequent discussion in the research plenum were pivotal in improving coherence between the theoretical frame of reference and the methodological approach. Items deemed to be either trivial or excessively complex in the collective evaluation were eliminated. Technical and methodological revisions to the instrument were presented in a second round with the collegial advisory group, fostering an additional exchange to standardize individual assessments and reach a consensus.

2.3. Step III: The Expert Rating

Before the instrument underwent an initial pre-test and received feedback through a member checking process, a third step was undertaken that involved scrutinizing the items for clarity and conciseness by a panel of experts (n = 6). The targeted survey was conceptualized as a foresight instrument, offering the potential for adherence to various quality criteria. The intersubjective comparison and structured evaluation of both content-related considerations and visual representations are essential to ensure that the intended knowledge interest is served. This guarantees that the study yields valid results through consistent items [61]. Additionally, suggestive tendencies are identified to maintain openness in the methodological approach. The recruited group was surveyed online to assess the indication of the items. Media-mediated surveys can ensure more open communication [53]. To prevent normative influence among the participants, anonymity among the experts was ensured. To simplify feasibility and record item responses, the rating was structured using a five-point Likert scale [62] (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). In addition to this scaling procedure, an open comment field offered the opportunity to express detailed comments and personal thoughts in writing.

Considering practical research considerations and limited resources, a well-founded and comprehensible sampling of experts was necessary (see Table 1). Given the broad use of the term “expert” [63], the initial step in sampling involved identifying knowledgeable individuals with the necessary specialist expertise and professionalism (I). Following the assertions of Bogner et al. [64], an expert in this context refers to a professional occupation in a specific research field, measured by a professorship and at least two publications with fundamental thematic congruences to the body–phenomenological research interest. In line with the (post-)phenomenological perspective underlying the guidelines, recency (II) constitutes the second sampling category. These inclusion criteria compromised only professors who had published in the theme field within the last five years. To balance subjective influences and avoid the risk of overlooking crucial positions, participant diversity (III) was sought, encompassing varying opinions and different approaches. For a spectrum of perspectives with a broad understanding of the topic, the instrument was distributed to professors of different genders, different fields of study, from five different universities, and two countries. To circumvent language barriers, the survey was limited to German-speaking countries.
Table 1. Sampling categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>professionality (I)</td>
<td>qualified employment at a professorial level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recency (II)</td>
<td>publications from the last five years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diversity (III)</td>
<td>various countries, universities, and disciplines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Results

To devise a valid research tool, we deductively developed a specific situation of embodied presence, framed it within a Bildung-theoretical context, and intersubjectively validated it. To prevent the predetermining perception of a single researcher from leading to bias, various experts were sampled and consulted for an evaluation. This section demonstrates the results of the expert rating.

Descriptive statistics with graphical illustrations prove to be an effective means of analyzing the outcomes of expert ratings [20]. For the simultaneous visualization of central tendency and variability, the use of boxplots is recommended [20]. The diagrams are organized based on an ordinal-scale level, exemplifying the respective main phases of the research tool, more specifically the interview guidelines we developed for the empirical investigation of analog and virtual embodied presence (items 4–8). The experts commented on the items that correspond to the five dimensions of attention of third parties (intensive, active, reactive, receptive, and passive), as described in Section 2.1. In this chapter, we refer only to these selected items (see Table 2). Each item is structured in line with the question matrix described above. Item 11 is an additional question, specifically for the expert rating.

Table 2. Items reported in this contribution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Seminar Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>intensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>reactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>receptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>overall evaluation of the guidelines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also, it must be noted that five items (items 1–3, 9, 10) are ignored in this context, as they are part of the less-relevant warm-up or cool-down phases. These items consist of basic questions that were deemed unproblematic by the experts and were merely intended to support the respondents.

The interquartile range, denoted by blue boxes, signifies the middle 50% of the distribution, with the median depicted as a solid line within the boxes. The gray “X” represents the mean value. The T-shaped whisker visualizes the values at the edges of the distribution. The downward whisker indicates values smaller than the first quartile (q1), while the upward whisker indicates values larger than the third quartile (q3). Outliers, situated beyond 1.5-times the interquartile range outside q1 or q3, can be identified by a dot. However, as evident in the figures, no outliers are present, resulting in whiskers extending to the highest or lowest values.

3.1. Interview Guide I—Online Teaching

On average, the items of the main phase (items 4–8, Figure 2) received positive assessments ranging from relevant (4.00) to very relevant (5.00) (M = 4.67 and 4.33, SD = 0.47 and 0.74). However, item 7 stands out in the evaluation, with a relatively low mean value
(M = 3.67) and the largest standard deviation (SD = 1.11). This results in the boxplots appearing slightly asymmetrical due to the varying lengths of the whiskers.

![Boxplot](image1)

**Figure 2.** Feedback main phase, guide I.

In the comments section, one expert justified his assessment by stating that item 7 is “extremely difficult to answer” (Expert 1). This is because item 7 refers to the chat function in online seminars, which, according to the expert’s experience, “is at odds with corporeality” (Expert 1). The expert suggests that a situation in which “the people chatting have their camera switched on” would make more sense (Expert 1). On average, guide I—online teaching (item 11, Figure 3) received an overall rating of good (4.00) (M = 4, SD = 0.82).

![Boxplot](image2)

**Figure 3.** Overall evaluation, guide I.

Two experts rated the guide as very good (5.00), while two others evaluated it as good (4.00). Citing the “ambiguity” (Expert 5) of the third party, which was identified as a “fundamental problem of the survey” (Expert 2), two experts gave the guide a rating of average (3.00). This feedback will be addressed in Section 4.

3.2. Interview Guide II—Classroom Teaching

The structure-equivalent guide, regarding classroom teaching, exhibits slightly higher measured values compared to the online guide, as illustrated by the symmetrical presentation of the boxplots in Figure 4.
Revision I: Refining the Theoretical Anchoring

4.1. Key Revisions

In this contribution, three key revisions are suggested below. In our aim to devise a valid research instrument, these revisions shall report the outcomes of the heuristic approach presented in this contribution.

4.1.1. Key Revisions

Revision I: Refining the Theoretical Anchoring

Originally, we employed a question matrix that inquired about the meaning of the body across all items (e.g., “What meaning do you attach to your own body in this situation?”). However, this formulation appears to be too demanding, as pointed out by one expert: “The picture examples seem similar to those given in guide I—online teaching” (Expert 3).

As the lower ends of the whiskers indicate, the five items of the main phase (items 4–8) are, on average, not rated below relevant (4.00). Consequently, the items yield a high mean value (ranging between M = 4 and M = 4.33) with a low standard deviation (ranging between SD = 0.69 and SD = 0.89).

Consistent with this, the interview guide II—classroom teaching is rated as slightly better (M = 4.12) and exhibits lower variance (SD = 0.69) in item 11 (Figure 5), compared to the interview guide I—online teaching.

![Figure 4. Feedback main phase, guide II.](image)

Figure 4. Feedback main phase, guide II.

The experts uniformly rated guide II—classroom teaching (item 11) as either good (4.00) or very good (5.00). Only one expert assigned an average (3.00) rating and referred to reasons similar to those given in guide I—online teaching. The slightly more positive evaluation of guide II is further emphasized by a comment from one expert: “The picture examples seem much clearer to me than in the online version” (Expert 3).

4. Discussion

The descriptive results of the validation study mostly show positive findings, but they also highlight areas that need improvement in the research tool. By carefully assessing feedback, we can adjust vulnerable items to reduce their influence on responses. From this evaluation, three key revisions are suggested below. In our aim to devise a valid research instrument, these revisions shall report the outcomes of the heuristic approach presented in this contribution.

![Figure 5. Overall evaluation, guide II.](image)

Figure 5. Overall evaluation, guide II.
one expert: “Here we are asking about the ‘meaning’, which requires differentiated reflections” (Expert 2). While the reconstructed meaning of the interviewees remains centrally important, several experts suggest that this aspect can be better explored through questions related to perception. “It needs to be clarified whether we are asking about the meaning of the body or about how the interviewees experience and perceive their bodies in the situations described” (Expert 2). Another expert adds: “Here, I would advise relating the question specifically to the situation: ‘How do you perceive this situation?’”. This linguistic adjustment aligns with phenomenologically oriented literature, emphasizing that phenomenological understanding primarily ties back to “corporeal perception” [55] (p. 9).

The first change demonstrates a positive influence of the expert rating on the validity of the theoretical anchoring. The feedback, with its diverse knowledge and assumptions, contributes to refining the wording of the original items, making them more precise and closely aligned with literature-based formulations.

Revision II: Improving the Accessibility of Terms

A further revision pertains to the theoretical concept of the “third party”. Through the analysis of the expert ratings, it becomes apparent that the term requires clarification and should be explained to respondents both linguistically and visually before being used. This need is particularly evident in items where the “high threshold” (Expert 1) term is employed, as these question areas each exhibit a comparatively high standard deviation in the boxplots. Ambiguities noted by several experts are reflected in specific feedback, such as: “I would ask myself who the third parties are here” (Expert 4). To prevent confusion during the interview, one expert suggests “either choosing a different term or trying to explain it” (Expert 1). The vagueness of the theoretical concept “could be remedied by easily understandable explanations” (Expert 2), allowing for “even more attention to be paid to the requirements of the target group” (Expert 1).

The second change underscores that, although a theoretical foundation is indispensable, practical research must also consider the accessibility of terms. The feedback helps identify terms that may be difficult to grasp or appear complex, allowing for appropriate formulations or explanations before the survey.

Revision III: Adjusting the Respondent Friendliness

Furthermore, experts provided detailed comments on taking perspective, a skill that is required in both image and text stimuli. The experts emphasized the necessity of a clear role assignment, stating that it “should be defined in advance” (Expert 4) to positively influence narrative behavior. One expert raised the question: “Who is this referring to?” (Expert 2), underscoring the need for reduced abstraction and a more participant-friendly orientation. To address this “source of misunderstanding” (Expert 1), we refined the wording of the situation descriptions, with particular attention to the slightly lower-rated online guide, to better suit the target group. Additionally, we made a strategic decision to more specifically tailor the descriptions of each situation to the target audience, while aiming to more effectively account for differences between lecturers and students. Despite the adapted situation descriptions, the same image stimuli were still used for both groups to maintain comparability.

This third change underscores the valuable role of the validation study in enhancing item clarity and ensuring greater intersubjective comprehensibility. By adopting a participant-friendly approach, we aim to make the questions more accessible to individuals outside of the research field, aligning theoretical constructs with the participants’ perspectives.

In summary, the three revisions underscore the importance of intersubjective collaboration and demonstrate the positive impact of our heuristic approach, with which we tried to find a way to deal with the methodological challenges of embodied research. Over the whole process, we faced a balancing act between two poles: Firstly, we wanted to keep the content precise, sticking closely to the deductively developed material. Secondly, as all the experts agreed, the items should not be overly complex to avoid overwhelming...
respondents. Considering both poles, the implemented modifications have strengthened the foundation of our instrument.

4.2. Limitations

The heuristic approach presented portrays a positive image with high validity values, so that the strategy may broaden the range of embodied methodology. Yet, it is essential to acknowledge this study’s limitations. Apart from the financial limits, which restricted the methodological flexibility in the third-party-funded study, it is crucial to note that the subsequent linguistic fixation of a phenomenon cannot be directly equated with an embodied or corporeal experience [49]. The method outlined may broaden the scope of phenomenological analyses. However, this does not imply that bodily phenomena can be fully unveiled through reflection and temporal delay in the medium of verbal language.

The deductively developed image impulses are designed to mitigate this issue, although it is important to recognize that such hypothetical constructs are inherently shortened. Like vignettes, they deliberately do not aim to replicate unequivocal situations but are intended to create ample room for interpretation precisely because of their underdetermination. On the one hand, this underlines the importance of external construct validation. On the other hand, it is essential to highlight that the exploratory design does not assert a universally valid generalization claim for the research results but can only establish a foundation. Instead of claiming complete intersubjective verifiability, the outlined methodology aims to generate intersubjective comprehensibility. This enables the design of other instruments for further theory and hypothesis formation, which would require additional validation through a triangulated method design or an added Delphi method [65,66].

5. Conclusions

Embodied empiricism is an exciting paradigm for future research on teaching and learning in higher education. At the same time, this phenomenological-oriented concern constitutes a slippery field of research due to the tacit character of embodiment and the methodological underdevelopment of the topic. Both factors pose substantial challenges, in our research project also, as we aim to explore the significance of the embodied presence of third parties in seminar situations. Thus, the central research question addressed in this contribution is: How can tacit embodied phenomena be empirically investigated?

To address this question, we aimed to devise a valid research instrument for a pedagogical context based on a Bildung-theoretical perspective. Focusing on processes of transformation and subjectivation, the discourse on embodiment could potentially benefit from a meaningful addition. As shown in Section 2.1, elusive (lived) body experiences reveal themselves to the researcher and the participants as visible embodiments that can be dimensioned pedagogically. By anchoring various perspectives into one heuristic approach, the combined concepts shall enhance the fragmented methodology.

The method employed clearly demonstrates its potential through the boxplots in Section 3. This indicates that our strategy has the capacity to offer guidance on how to validate them. The shared perspectives among researchers and their exchange of experiences is an intersubjective-oriented method that aligns with phenomenological principles. The claims of Merleau-Ponty, that interacting with others leads to a “modulation of my own existence, a transformation of my being” [16] (p. 218), can be extended to methodological approaches in embodiment. By considering diverse perspectives, a “mutual alienation of one’s own view through and with others” [55] (p. 7) can unfold, preventing ideological exploitation and fostering a self-reflective research posture.

However, potential researchers could expand upon and refine our approach or use it as a starting point. If so, they must be aware that not all “blind spots” become instantly visible in the process described. Yet, our approach attempts to breathe new life into a marginalized topic and to build a path leading to a deeper understanding of embodied experiences in higher education. In that sense, this paper shall deliver exemplary research
implications and can be understood as an appeal to further work on the methodization of embodied empiricism.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.K.; methodology, J.K.; software, J.K.; validation, J.K.; formal analysis, J.K.; investigation, J.K.; resources, J.K.; data curation, J.K.; writing—original draft preparation, J.K.; writing—review and editing, J.K. and M.G.; visualization, J.K.; supervision, M.G.; project administration, M.G.; funding acquisition, M.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Heidelberg University of Education.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The research design has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Heidelberg University of Education (Reference number 0087 EV2023_07).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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