Learning environments research is generally premised on an assumption that something like an environment independent of the individual can be identified. However, research in many disciplines questions this assumption. I outline here a phenomenological perspective of theorizing the environments in which we act and to which we react, our individual lifeworlds. Lifeworld analysis requires a sense of solidarity. Because it allows an understanding of the world of the Other, it constitutes a lens particularly important and useful in teaching as praxis.

KEY WORDS: hermeneutics, learning environments, lifeworld analysis, phenomenology, solidarity, teaching as praxis

Once one drops the traditional opposition between context and thing contextualized, there is no way to divide things up into those which are what they are independent of context and those which are context-dependent.

(Rorty, 1991, p. 98)

Learning environments research in schools is most often premised on the assumption that individual and environment can be separated analytically so that particular behavioral and structural attributions can be made to each. A problem with this approach is that responsibilities to enhance the learning environments are sometimes attributed to some agent (e.g. the teacher). However, this approach in behavioral science has not helped us to understand the regulation of human behavior, its purposefulness, adaptivity, or even the generation of the most simple perceptual phenomena (Jarvilehto, 1998a, 1998b). There is no well-grounded psychological or neurophysiological theory about the connection between stimuli coming from the environment and the associated subjective experiences in the individual. On the other hand, there is increasing empirical evidence and theoretical work on using the organism-environment whole as the analytic unit. With respect to learning environments research in schools, if different students perceive the learning environment to be different, they will act (differently) to adapt to or change this environment to provide a better fit. Therefore, it makes sense to theorize learning environments as an integral part of the learner.
During a large research project in an Australian Grade 12 physics class, we observed and recorded 10 students for a six-week period and interviewed them on five or more occasions (often with replays from the video) about classroom events (e.g. McRobbie et al., 1997; Roth et al., 1997). Rhonda and Sean (pseudonyms), who were among these students, provided us with the following descriptions after having observed the same clip. This clip shows their laboratory group (consisting of Brenda, Jon, Rhonda, and Sean) during a hands-on activity. On the video, Rhonda (as Brenda) appears to be passive, sitting back and watching Sean and Jon manipulate the equipment.

Rhonda: We’ll sit there, because we nearly always sit with Jon and Sean, and we’ll put something together wrong or something or have a wire in the right spot, and we will say we don’t understand this and ask you to explain again. Sean’ll say, “Oh you should have been listening” and start to complain that “you’re going to blow up the equipment”. And he starts to complain, so you sort of don’t want to say anything. But then you don’t get experiments done, because you’re sort of sitting back and waiting for [Sean] to check the equipment before you touch anything.

Sean: I mean they get involved and all but I don’t think they really decide to, like get down and do hard work and all that. I think they both got sound achievements or something. Jon and I just automatically go ahead and do it. Whether they want to get involved or not is up to them I suppose. It would be interesting to just let them go ahead and do it and let us just sit by and watch. I don’t think we’d be able to do it, we’d want to have some sort of impact.

Rhonda describes a world of particular power relations. In this account, the two young men (Sean, Jon) are more expert in dealing with physics equipment. Rhonda (speaking for herself and Brenda) does not dare to operate the equipment for fear of snide remarks about not having listened. Not experiencing herself as knowledgeable enough, she (as Brenda) sits back and waits for the men to check what they have done or, as in the case of the present clip, does not touch the equipment at all. She experiences and lives in an environment that is threatening, impedes her completing an activity, and ultimately impedes her learning. Yet she is genuinely concerned with understanding, eager to engage in the activity, and willing to learn.

Sean describes a different environment. It includes two women who “don’t really decide to get down” and “do the hard work”. He contrasts the women’s “sound achievement” (equivalent to C) which contrasts the (very) high achievements (A+ and A) that both he and Jon obtain. Because of the women’s lack of interest in doing the hard work, he (speaking also