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## Editorial:

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## What's At Stake in Emerging Horizons

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I am delighted to welcome the serialization of Dr. Michael (Mike) Lang's doctoral thesis, *Emerging Horizons: Crafting Meaning and Cultivating Understanding Through Digital Storytelling*, to the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. This is the second time we have embarked on presenting thesis work in this way. The first was in 2016 with the work of Dr. John Williamson who offered his doctoral thesis called *The Case of the Disappearing/Appearing Slow Learner: An Interpretive Mystery*. His five articles were accompanied by five editorials from him first, and then from his supervisor and supervisory committee.

With Mike's work, the same process is followed; we present seven articles taken from this thesis that are accompanied by four editorials: his introductory one; one from his supervisor, Dr. Catherine Laing; one from both of his supervisory committee members: Dr. Deborah McLeod and me; and one from his external examiner, Professor Ted George.

When Mike first approached Dr. Catherine (Catherine) Laing and me about the possibility of studying with us and completing his PhD in Nursing, as well as his idea about somehow wanting to explore digital storytelling, we very simply said "well this is where you should be." And that was it. Catherine became Mike's supervisor and he, a non-nurse, began PhD Nursing studies. In conceptualizing what he wanted to research and how he wanted to research it, Mike was Mike – he wanted to do everything! He wanted to do a documentary since he had experience with that, but he also wanted to interview people who had created digital stories, particularly adolescent

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and young adult survivors of cancer, and he wanted to also help them create those digital stories. But he ALSO wanted to conduct a hermeneutic study. It was suggested in a supervisory committee meeting that he could do it all. He could conduct the workshop to create the stories and teach how to do so, while filming it and then creating a documentary out of that footage of the one weekend workshop (that was all conceptualized by Mike). Then, he could use this as his data to conduct a hermeneutic analysis. This was a huge undertaking that could not be done by all – very few people have the film making style and experience that Mike has. By that time, he had countless experiences of creating digital stories and was an experienced and credentialed digital storytelling facilitator. However, conducting a hermeneutic analysis – deeply immersing himself in the interpretive depth of this data – was new to him and Mike embarked on this experience with an openness to learn and understand what it means to think and write interpretively. With careful coaching and advice from his supervisor, Catherine, and many rewrites and reconsiderations, Mike completed his thesis with an exemplary product of strong hermeneutic research.

What makes this work strong? In reading the interpretations that Mike offers, it is clear that he is not offering a psychological analysis of his participants; he is looking for the deep rich interpretive conjectures that emerge from the data that have the ability to take understanding somewhere – to raise the particular of the situation to the commonality of human life. It is about recognizing something of kinship and familiarity, something we know to be true of something - - something we find ourselves in, even if we have not been in that place. Hermeneutics is showing an integrity of the capacity to hold tension, to be “not quite this and not quite that” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 179). In the hermeneutic humility of knowing that truth is always a flexible encounter with something that allows room for something else, there is also recognition that it offers something that matters or, as Dr. James Risser called it, “something that is at stake” (Risser, 2012, 2019). Mike speaks to many things that are “at stake” in this work, important in understanding cancer survivorship and the effect of cancer on lives and relationships, but also deeply important in understanding ourselves and our place and circumstances in this world. “With respect to the living word, hermeneutics cannot escape from an operation of memory—an operation of memory that is undoubtedly quite complex, for in the movement of its reproduction what is at stake is a central tenet of Gadamerian hermeneutics, namely, the sharing of meaning” (Risser, 2012, p. 92).

I also strongly believe that being supervised by an excellent and experienced hermeneutic researcher is of vital importance. Catherine has done this kind of work and been focused on the same population. She knew his method and his topic area very intimately and I think we cannot diminish the difference that makes. In addition, his supervisory committee Dr. Deborah McLeod and me, both have conducted, taught, and supervised hermeneutic research. Both of us have worked in the area of cancer as well. On the final thesis defense, Mike was examined by Dr. Graham McCaffrey, a hermeneutic researcher, and Professor Ted George, a world renown hermeneutic philosophy expert. This presence of hermeneutic expertise is remarkable; Hermes was alive and present in this process.

I mention these details because they are not meaningless. In my many years in academia, I have seen many students of hermeneutics struggle with learning it philosophically and applying it to research and often that struggle is located in not having the infrastructure and composition of a

team who has the same lens and vision of what the work could do. I am not suggesting that bringing another lens to the hermeneutic table is not useful as, on the contrary, I think it is exactly what hermeneutics asks of us but having a lens that cannot see hermeneutics or cannot appreciate its value is another matter. The work is not to meant to be exclusive but inclusive, thoughtful, and open to the other. In that, however, its job is not to defend itself and to be under constant demand to prove itself of value (see for e.g., Moules et al., 2013, “*Isn’t All Oncology Hermeneutic?*”). The real challenge that lies in the work showing itself well is it having been done well – Mike Lang shows us what work done well can look like, or as in the expression he often uses is “a good story well told” (Mark Twain). Moules et al. (2017) discussed the importance of how hermeneutic work needs to be received, appraised, judged, and promoted through different lenses and criteria of value but Field (2017) reminded us that, perhaps when this work is not done well and fails to reveal something true of being in the world, it becomes a poor advocate for itself. He described the four problems that can emerge in hermeneutic work: making the obvious inescapable, confusing or mixing hermeneutics in other methods, and devolving into “little t” truths. Mike’s work is but one of many of the examples of when the work stays true to hermeneutics, but more importantly to being true of an aspect of being in the world.

Mike Laing’s thesis of *Emerging Horizons: Crafting Meaning and Cultivating Understanding Through Digital Storytelling* is an exquisite event of meaning that reflects, in part, Mike’s artistry, creativity, and sensitivity. It, however, does something even more important: It allows the stories of Amanda, Harmony, Derek, Kelsey, Kenzie, and Bethany to emerge and give us a glimpse into the world of cancer with all its complexities, atrocities, unexpected surprises, cuts, removals, exchanges, and rising awareness. They help us move to the hermeneutic edge of understanding something that defies understanding and almost embrace it with the very sense of humility with which it needs to arrive.

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