

“To speak of pedagogy is to speak of everything at once”: A review of Tact & the Pedagogical Relation. Introductory Readings Norm Friesen (Ed.).

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Introduction

While reading this book, I realize that it is long over-due. It offers the English translation of ten German texts written over more than 200 years on the themes of tact and the pedagogical relationship, both fundamental to European or Continental Pedagogy. Three of the chapters are presented as pre-visions to the book’s topics, three are excerpted texts discussing the meaning of the terms, and the last four chapters offer re-arranged and contemporary interpretations of tact and the pedagogical relation. Friesen’s introduction helps the reader to connect, pedagogically and historically, to the ten texts and their threefold grouping. The editor convinces me that these classic pedagogical texts speak to each other over centuries of influence and alteration. For example, Friesen connects Zirfas and Pestalozzi (the last and the first chapters) with regard to the core qualities of tact and the pedagogical relation. To cite from the introduction:

Zirfas effectively brings this collection of translated texts on tact and the pedagogical relation full circle: Back to the question of awakening, fostering and giving space for the “other,” for the inner life of the child or young person” [...] “by describing pedagogical tact as nothing less than “a response to the riddle of the other” – “a resonance with the openness, dynamics, variability and unfathomability of the other” (Zirfas, 2015 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 7)

In the introduction Friesen lingers with the word ‘pedagogy’ and its explicit meanings in European educational thinking and practice. He says pedagogy is about “the *influence* of *one* person or group on *another*” (p. 7) and in the introduction to Schleiermacher, Friesen quotes the author who writes that without it “every generation would have to start from scratch ...[to] achieve that which was already accomplished before” (Schleiermacher, 1826 as cited in Friesen 2022, p. 41). The broad thought of moral influence includes everything from the slightest and most indirect touch of society toward the young to the tactful and relational care of the child from one close to that child. Jürgen Oelkers’ exploration of the common qualities of the various pedagogical movements in Europe indicates that they share this broad understanding of educational influence (Oelkers 2001; Oelkers, 1994). Pedagogy is seen as the moral interest of the older generation toward the lives of the younger generation, and this interest takes the form of a pedagogical relationship that by nature incorporates power asymmetrically. The adult or the educator

is responsible for the quality of the pedagogical relationship and thus of bridling his or her power on behalf of the child or young person (Oelkers, 1994). An educator (rather than simply a *school teacher*) is not “a social roleplay, something that a person takes up from time to time” [...] “One is not an educator like one is a weaver, streetcar conductor or bank director – but in the manner of being a worker, lover and fighter. ‘Educating’ belongs to the central phenomena fundamental to human existence,” Fink writes (Fink, 1959 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 121). Friesen, in his introduction to Fink’s chapter, says that “Educators are thus nothing less than the keepers and perpetuators of our (still questionable) human essence; they both represent this essence and keep it open for the future” (2022, p. 119). These are strong words. For some perhaps too strong. I think, however, that how we understand the words has to do with what or who we consider to be the subject of our educational endeavor.

Friesen includes suggestions for further reading with different purposes, including recommended readings from the translated author, but also from additional authors relevant for the topic, and a wonderful system of useful notes following each chapter. This makes the book valuable also as a kind of handbook of pedagogical tact and relationship for readers of different levels. As I did with my own masters students this past semester, we read chapter-for-chapter of Friesen’s edited collection as a study of core characteristics of Continental pedagogy and a few selections from Klaus Mollenhauer (2014) and O. F. Bollnow (1969). The students responded to the texts with growing interest and expressed in conversations and written accounts a surprising ability to grasp the meaning and relevance for their thinking and experience as parents, students and student-teachers.

A Closer Look at Three Chapters

Three of the chapters in particular captured me, speaking to my initial interest. Those were Chapter 3, by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Chapter 6, by Jakob Muth and Chapter 11, by Jørg Zirfas. The three chapters in different ways brought forth insights to me that put earlier understanding in a new light, and as I see it, these are insights that speak directly to contemporary educational dilemmas. Some aspects of the chapters triggered my curiosity and former understanding and I read them twice or more. The chapters coincide with the ones Friesen mentions as the future extensions and investigations into certain chapters that extend the themes of tact and the pedagogical relation (Schleiermacher, 1826 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 43).

To start in chronological order, I find it rather refreshing that Schleiermacher (1826) mentions the quality of chance in the pedagogical relationship (Schleiermacher, 1826 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 44). Risk, possibility, alienness, foreignness, are words we connect with Continental pedagogy, but the quotidian word ‘chance’ alludes to opportunity, luck, something that may or may not be realized, made me see the pedagogical relationship with new eyes. How do we encounter a child that we meet by chance, who we are to some degree responsible for (although Levinas claims responsibility is always infinite), whose future is unforeseen and whose life is based on luck and accident as well as of planned education? Parents, teachers and grownups would be entirely shaken up if they realized the pedagogical depths of the human and pedagogical encounter with the newcomers and continuous ‘new comings’ of the world.

Schleiermacher writes “[t]he influence exercised on the younger generation is a part of this moral undertaking [the advancement of human activity on earth]. [It is] thus a purely ethical matter” (Schleiermacher, 1826 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 48). How did he, more than 200 years ago, understand “the advancement of human activity”, and what does he mean by “purely ethical matter”? It would be fascinating to have the chance to discuss this with Schleiermacher. While this is not possible, the meaning of an orientation to human achievement, how pedagogic thinking and practice should be understood in relation to, and also in contrast to ethics should be debated today. He further asserts that “the theory of politics and the theory of pedagogy are inextricably intertwined; both constitute fields of ethical inquiry and need to be treated in the same way” (Schleiermacher, 1826 as cited in Friesen 2022, p.49). He is right that the two are connected in society, and I would add, pedagogy is an excellent vantage point to review and understand society, but I seriously doubt the intrinsic educational ethics of market policy, consumer-oriented theory and publicity, and populist strategies. To be sure, old philosophical texts interrupt thought and contribute to a reflection on our own present.

Muth’s chapter opens with a focus on sensitivity and reserve that he argues are the most prominent qualities of tact (Muth, 1967 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 86). Practicing sensitivity and reserve by necessity belongs to the unplannable and unforeseen in concrete educational situations, a condition that cannot avoid failure and misinterpretation. Tact is an existential quality, having its place in our everyday-life, and sometimes turns out well, other times not so well. Noticeably, the existential quality as well as its unremarkable quotidian practice connect pedagogical tact to the realm of phenomenology. Muth writes that “Only with the opening of the dimension of unplanability does the phenomenon of pedagogical tact become clear” (Muth, 1967 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 89). The understanding of pedagogical tact as an unplannable event adds a dimension to the phenomenon of tact that recently has been developed by Romano (2014) who understands an event as something that cannot be repeated or put forth as an exemplary practice without losing its quality as moral event. He writes: “On the contrary, events are “openings to the present” (p. 128), and thus could always be different and care differently for the other. Event as opening and tact as rupture improve each other’s meaning in everyday life as both are “irregularity in that which is regular” (Muth, 1967 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 91). Intriguingly, the contact between tact and event is encouraged with Zirfas quoting Suzuki¹ (Zirfas, 2015 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 187): “Takt is dependent on the situation of each moment [...] Takt also acts to generate the next situations as it works. [...] Takt is a motion that continues to form itself and it also forms a boundary by itself.” Tact thus is seen as an act that may have consequences that although unplannable, make possible something that comes after the tactful situation itself, like ripples in water.

It is interesting to read Muth’s explorative elaboration of tact as sensitivity and reserve, where his thinking seems to take for granted the adult’s will and ability to restraint their power. Muth appears to see authority and restriction of power as culturally integrated, even incarnated qualities, that go without mention in Germany. He also seems to see didactical qualities a definite part of pedagogy. When he mentions the term ‘didactical’ it is as an instructionally narrower aspect in contrast to a specific educational quality like tact (Muth, 1967 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 90).

His analysis of the naturalness of teaching touches upon some of the educational pain receptors we know today. The didactical triangle, as he sees it, should move both the teacher and the child into the background to accentuate the intention and affairs of the school, like the subject, the material, or the student work. Since school is the institution that all children in our culture face, it is not the individual child nor the problems of childhood that should set the standard for what takes place in school. With regard to the teacher, Muth (1967) asserts that “it is not really the teacher who “educates” (if you like); but it is the tasks and demands themselves to which he submits and as whose speaker he appears to the children” (Muth, 1967 as cited in Friesen, 2020, p. 101). This, he says,

“is the real depth of the natural action to which the teacher is called in our time [...] and “what is alone decisive is that the educator is able to appropriately “open up” those issues relevant to the class and to not distort them or deprive them of their essence through himself or through artificial methodological refinement”. (Muth, 1967 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 101)

Muth speaks of a naturalness in teaching that avoids a focus on the teacher’s own interests or on specific methods or approaches suitable for everything. Self-activity, responsiveness, and contemplation are natural approaches for the pupil. In contemporary Norway this is turned upside down with one-dimensional learning methods on the very top and pupils expected to assimilate and spit out undigested what they have learned. The teacher in the midst held accountable for the results, is projected to be a communication channel rather than a genuine translator of life as existential and cultural reality. He quotes Marcel “from the moment that I become preoccupied about the effect I want to produce on the other person, my every act, word and attitude loses its authenticity” (Muth, 1967 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 101). In today’s educational life the ‘I’ is exchanged with ‘market’ or ‘policy’ (unfortunately those are often exchangeable), and the desirable effects of education at all levels are rendered secondary to competition and profit.

Finally, I turn to Jørg Zirfas’ chapter, which is a scholarly re-interpretation of German explorations of tact with Helmut Plessner and Jakob Muth as fore figures cultivated by Shoko Suzuki’s understanding of ‘takt’ and Jacques Derrida’s studies on justice. To me what stands out are thoughts that challenge and words that take my thinking in a new direction. A quote of Adorno from Zirfas’ fourth thesis on tact did that: “Tact is the determination of difference. It consists of knowing deviations” (Zirfas, 2015 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 183). The paradox of tact very clearly is expressed by Adorno as the attempt or even possible ability to do justice to the subject as well as to society. Justice as human impossibility is expressed convincingly by Derrida (1992), and still tact is a “plea for plurality and heterogeneity” (Zirfas 2015 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 183). How can this paradox be kept together in its inconsistency and impossibility? Zirfas argues that tact is only possible because it is not “defined in a very precise sense, and it is precisely the fact that it remains indefinite and indefinable that distinguishes it. One can say that the “essence” of tact is the indeterminability and its openness” (Zirfas 2015 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 186). He quotes Plessner, who calls tact “ungrounded” and argues that tact can never be safe. Rather, he writes: “tact is the capacity to perceive imponderable differences, the capacity to comprehend that untranslatable language of appearances”

(Zirfas, 2015 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 187 and 191). This means that tact is only possible in practice where also contradictions, paradoxes and aporias make a kind of common human sense. Moreover, professional educators in practice exercise subjective ability to balance these aporias and manage to live with the uncertainty of pedagogical contradictions and take on responsibility for living well with and responding to the “riddle of the other” (Zirfas, 2015 as cited in Friesen, 2022, p. 192). The protection of the child’s dignity or human value, is in European pedagogy a relationally tactful awareness of the otherness of others, and in particular the otherness of children and young people.

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ⁱ Suzuki, S. (2010). *Takt in Modern Education*. Waxmann, p. 167.