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To cite this article: Morten T. Korsgaard, Federico Rovea & Thomas Senkbeil (2024) Introduction. Pedagogical tact: connections old and new, *Ethics and Education*, 19:3, 255-261, DOI: [10.1080/17449642.2024.2401276](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2401276)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2024.2401276>



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Published online: 29 Oct 2024.



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Introduction. Pedagogical tact: connections old and new

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 3 September 2024; Accepted 3 September 2024

KEYWORDS Pedagogical tact; professionalization; theory and practice

The present Special Issue is the result of a collective effort to try to re-engage with the idea and concept of Pedagogical tact. During two days in 2023, 17 people gathered in Malmö, Sweden for presentations and discussions under the heading *Pedagogical Tact: Connections old and new*.¹ The aim of the symposium was to open a discussion of the relevance of pedagogical tact for educational studies broadly construed. The term was first coined by German philosopher and educationist Johann Friedrich Herbart in his introductory lectures on education in 1802. Herbart (1896) described pedagogical tact as the teacher's ability to adapt educational theory to the present situation, emphasizing the connection between pedagogical theory and practice. Since then, it seems to have led a precarious life in the field of educational studies, appearing here and there, but rarely given sustained attention. In the anglophone context, van Manen (1991) brought the concept into the discussion again in the 1990s. In Germany the concept was revived in 1962 by Jakob Muth in his seminal work *Pädagogischer Takt: Monographie einer aktuellen Form erzieherischen und didaktischen Handelns*. Since then, it all but disappeared in the developments from critical pedagogy to modern versions of *Erziehungswissenschaft*, focused on social science perspectives and moving away from hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches prominent in the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, thinking about pedagogy as the science related to human practice has seen renewed interest in drafts of a new »performative« pedagogy (cf. Wulf and Zirfas 2007).

Works on pedagogical tact are also re-emerging in Scandinavia (Korsgaard 2021; Ljungblad and Rinne 2020; Løvlie 2015), in anglophone scholarship (Friesen and Senkbeil 2024; van Manen 2016), in Germany (Burghardt,

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Krinninger, and Seichter 2015, Burghardt & Zirfas 2019; Götter and Zirfas 2012) and in central Europe (Prairat 2017, 2019; Théodoropoulou 2016). In the German context, tact is increasingly theorized as a regulator for pedagogical relations in schools but also in culture, therapy and social work (Rogge 2021; Senkbeil 2021; Volmer 2019, Fageth 2022). It is argued that what can be identified as tactful action in the execution of a situation is not available to the person as a finished technique, it is seen primarily as an inter-performance that transcends the individual. Studies by Shoko Suzuki (2010) and the working group around Götter and Zirfas (2012) attest to this. The latter bring tact to a prominent position in social discourse about orders and disorders as a modern response to the social upheavals and experiences of loss and change in conventions and values that accompany modernity.

Concerning tact as hermeneutical attitude, scholars mostly refer to Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (2013) and to Aristotle's (2009) account of phronesis in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Fuglseth 2017; van Manen 1991) to describe it. Gadamer's description of tact and *sensus communis* (in strong connection to the ontology of *Bildung*) as faculties at the core of the humanities are indeed helpful in understanding pedagogical tact as the ability to pedagogically interpret contingent situations. Interpretation – be it of a text, of a film or of a present event – is a complex act of judgment in situ, different from the straightforward subsumption of an individual case under a general rule. Moreover, tact according to Gadamer holds the peculiar status of an ability that concerns one's own personal attitude and 'style,' but at the same should be properly trained. Tact is not an innate ability but is formed through studies and – although it holds a universal value as a concept – is to some extent dependent on the individual's personality and characteristics. This account of tact can be easily compared to the tact of teaching, as good teaching cannot be simply described as a technique, but concerns the teacher's personal attitude and style, and a proper training of these personal attitudes.

Similarly, Aristotelian phronesis is a useful concept to describe the attitude of being able to judge in a balanced way the complexity of a situation, and of acting based on good judgment (Prairat 2017). Again, this kind of judgment does not imply a direct reference to a general rule that can be applied to the individual case but has to do with one's personal relation to the present in its uniqueness.

In current educational scholarship there has been a tendency to turn to neighboring fields of inquiry when trying to tackle the complexity of education. Terms such as leadership, coaching, mentoring, facilitation, as well as metaphors such as gardening, managing, preaching, and curation have been applied. These terms and metaphors each help in their own way in shedding light on aspects of the practice of teaching and educating, however, as is the case with any metaphor or concept they tend to hide as well as highlight certain aspects. This seems to lead educational thinking into a kind of impasse, caught between

technical and managerial lingo, and a more psychological and critical lingo. This leaves teachers and educators facing either claims of inefficiency or accusations of reproducing inequality and injustice through their teaching practices. The concept of pedagogical tact may be able to bridge many of these terms and can perhaps function as a kind of umbrella term to cover the complexities and confusions arising from this muddled debate.

It can do so because it carries with it on the one hand something commonsensical in referring back to standards of behaviour in a more every day and ethical sense, and on the other hand, because it is backed by educational research, which has developed its own criteria and concepts, as we try to show in this special issue. These seem to have been lost in the move from pedagogy [Pädagogik, pædagogik, pedagogia, pedagogica] to an understanding of the discipline as a social science, as a consequence of which the validity and value of pedagogical terms have come to be determined by criteria and concepts of other disciplines such as sociology and psychology (see e.g. Biesta 2015). This is obvious in the increasing turn to quantitative and empirical studies employing mainly sociological and economic criteria as standards. This more technical approach certainly has its merits, but rarely seems to speak very meaningfully to educational experiences as these are embodied and recollected by practitioners (for critiques along these lines see Biesta 2010, 2015; Korsgaard 2024; Smeyers 2009). Pedagogical tact, while being almost impossible to pin down with any solid definition, seems to speak precisely to these kinds of practice-related experiences. It is often easy to get students and teachers to point to it, oftentimes in the form of referring to a specific teacher who embodies it. The attempt to define pedagogical tact, and to determine what abilities, characteristics, habits, and skills it involves, is ongoing to say the least.

Tact as conceptual horizon for action and thought

The idea of tact marks a basic pedagogical problem that arises again and again with each new pedagogical situation and intensifies as modernity progresses. Pedagogical tact is relevant in at least two ways. First, it can prevent us from placing overly high expectations on preplanned and standardized action. Second, it directs our attention to the immediacy and embodied nature of all pedagogical action.

If pedagogical theory provides an overview of the world of education, Herbart envisioned a guidebook for practitioners. With this double reference in their minds, educators could enrich their experience by exploring the world of educational practice. Tact underpins a series of processes in which teachers navigate the world of practice, weighing reality against theory and making judgments and decisions about their behavior. Pedagogical tact stands for new beginnings and departures, connections, and improvements in

pedagogical practice with a given theoretical capability and direct application orientation (before, during and after practice).

Yet, the concept of tact is also a timely reminder for us to remain humble and realise that we cannot overestimate the perfectibility of individual action, nor of theoretical guidance.

An outlook on the debate

In our view it is one of the strengths of the idea that tact is not so easily defined, even if many of us believe we are able to recognize it when we see it. This is captured by Max van Manen (1991, 2016) following Herbart's insight – when he claims it to be the ability to 'know what to do when you don't know what to do.' That is to say; it represents the teacher's capacity to act in a pedagogically meaningful way in unexpected situations. It is obviously impossible for a teacher to be prepared for every possible situation that can happen in class, so s/he needs to be prepared to face the unprepared. In addition, for pupils it is often more meaningful to see their teacher react to something unexpected than seeing her follow a pre-determined plan.

Being able to face the unexpected is a key ability for educators, yet a very difficult one to theorize and to enhance. Given this, pedagogical tact should not be seen as a technique, nor as a singular virtue: it entails a hermeneutical attitude (being able to correctly interpret the present situation), an «attention towards the other» (Prairat 2017) to be able to grasp the pupil's needs and deep questions, an improvisational capacity (Løvlie 2015; Muth 1967; Prairat 2017; van Manen 1991, 2008) and a sense of «personal teaching style» (van Manen 1991) to sound believable.

The papers of which this special issue consists, engage with the abovementioned attempts to sketch pedagogical tact as a valuable contribution to the discussion of some of the major problems faced in education and by educational research. They also attempt to outline a path forward (or backwards) for pedagogical tact as a central educational idea, that perhaps promises less than what other concepts promise. It would heed us to promise less and to engage more deeply with the inherent tensions of any educational endeavour. Tensions that are perhaps not meant to be dissolved but are in fact the tensions in which education comes alive and becomes visible as a particular and peculiar human experience. Pedagogical tact, with its resistance to being pinned down and the tension inherent to its appearance, speaks to a kind of necessary humility in the face of what Mollenhauer referred to as the 'magnitude of the matter' (Mollenhauer 2014, 3) of education.

This special issue presents a diverse range of perspectives on pedagogical tact. As briefly outlined, pedagogical tact is currently generating various productive outcomes in educational studies, and this issue seeks to introduce readers to this complex and promising landscape.

The opening contribution by Krinninger and Müller focuses on educational research and on the centrality of pedagogical tact for doing educational research today. The following articles focus on different aspects of pedagogical tact in relation to empirical educational research. Shoko Suzuki demonstrates how pedagogical tact can serve as a guiding concept for interdisciplinary educational inquiry, while Ilona Rinne examines how pedagogical tact manifests in teaching practices. Rothuizen and Togsverd then conclude this section with a discussion on the role of pedagogical tact in fostering a situated understanding of educational processes.

The focus of the issue then shifts to theoretical considerations of pedagogical tact. Zamojski and Korsgaard argue that pedagogical tact not only raises essential theoretical questions but also that pedagogical theorization itself should be rooted in the concept of pedagogical tact. Rovea follows by exploring the hidden connections between pedagogical tact, improvisation, and ecology. Bonafede presents a negative-dialectical approach to pedagogical tact, following Adorno, concluding that pedagogical tact can be fully understood only through its absence – namely, tactlessness. Deumier completes this section with a re-reading of Rousseau's *Emile*, identifying traces of pedagogical tact in this classic work of educational literature.

The next section considers pedagogical tact as a valuable tool for understanding the issue of attention pedagogically conceived. Contributions by Friesen and by Lewin and Waterman-Evans illustrate the usefulness of the concept of pedagogical tact in discussing attention from a phenomenological perspective.

The issue concludes with three articles that return to broader questions. Senkbeil offers an in-depth exploration of the discourse surrounding teacher professionalization and pedagogical tact, while Steffel presents pedagogical tact as a foundational mediating concept between different – and often conflicting – aspects of educational practice (i.e. individuality and collectiveness, theory and practice, rationality and emotion etc.). The paper by Althans² focuses on tact as it is employed by social pedagogy professionals in their work with clients as well as the necessity of this tact as a prerequisite for professional social work interactions.

While it may be considered a weakness that the articles in this special issue go about exploring tact in very different ways, employing disciplinary vocabularies that may seem far apart, we believe it to be a particular strength of the concept that it permits such diversity in approach. At the same time, it can lead to conceptual confusion, as well as difficulty in application for practitioners. A response might be that it is simply too vague to be of help in reflecting and acting on/in educational situations. Nonetheless, we see it as an important challenge to the increasing focus on efficiency and expediency in educational studies broadly. A timely reminder that educational practice requires a sufficiently humble attitude to what

theoretical and empirical studies can provide. Tact reminds us of the connection existing between practice and theory, by being clearly visible to most people engaged in educational practice, yet at the same time exceedingly difficult to pin down in language. The diverse articles that make up this special issue, may contribute to further conceptual confusion, yet they might also remind us of the complexities and difficulties that are always involved in the particular and peculiar activity we call education.

Notes

1. The symposium was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. DNR: F22–0065.
2. The article by Althans is a translated version of a previously published article (Althans, B. 2015. Sozialpädagogischer Takt in familiären Kontexten. In Burghardt, D., Krinninger, D. & Seichter, S. (2015). Pädagogischer Takt. Theorie Empirie Kultur. Ferdinand Schöningh. 61–76).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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