

# On the Epistemology of Reflective Practice

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*ABSTRACT Schon (1987) has suggested that professional education undervalues practical knowledge and grants privileged status to intellectual scientific and rational knowledge forms that may only be marginally relevant to practical acting. This is not just an issue of sociology of knowledge. The literature of teaching and teacher education has shown that professional practices of educating cannot be properly understood unless we are willing to conceive of practical knowledge and reflective practice quite differently. It is for this reason that I would like to raise some questions about the meaning and place of practical reflection in teaching and about the relation between knowledge and action in teaching, the kind of teaching that is educational or pedagogical.*

## **Introduction**

The concept of 'pedagogy'—the study or practice of guiding or rearing children—has long carried the meaning of discretion, judgment, caution, forethought (van Manen, 1994). So, on first thought there is nothing provocative to the idea that reflection is central to the life of the educator. It is in the very nature of the pedagogical relation that the teacher reflectively deals with children, rather than doing so unthinkingly, dogmatically, or prejudicially. Moreover, the concept of teacher as pedagogue assumes that he or she is motivated by a caring interest in the growth and welfare of children. In other words, teaching is not only governed by principles of effectiveness, but also by special normative, ethical, or affective considerations. In colloquial language: the teacher teaches with the head and the heart and *must feelingly know* what is the appropriate thing to do in ever changing circumstances with children who are organized in groups but who are also unique as individuals. Therefore, the idea of an unreflective type of pedagogy or teaching would really be a contradiction in terms (which is not to say that there are no unreflective 'teachers'). Reflective thinking is important not only as a tool for teaching, but also as an aim of education, said Dewey (1964), since 'it enables us to know what we are about when we act. It converts action that is merely appetitive, blind, and impulsive into intelligent action' (p. 211). However, to suggest that teachers need to be reflective practitioners begs the question that we know what the process of reflection consists in. The concept of reflection is challenging and may refer to a complex array of

cognitively and philosophically distinct methods and attitudes. Dewey's thought about the nature of reflection alone gives us ample opportunity to feel provoked (1933). He argued that reflection consists of several steps including: (1) 'perplexity, confusion, doubt' due to the nature of the situation in which one finds oneself; (2) 'conjectural anticipation and tentative interpretation' of given elements or meanings of the situation and their possible consequences; (3) 'examination, inspection exploration, analysis of all attainable considerations' which may define and clarify a problem with which one is confronted; (4) 'elaboration of the tentative hypothesis suggestions'; (5) deciding on 'a plan of action' or 'doing something' about a desired result (1973, pp. 494—506). A proper sequencing of such reflective steps make up reflective experience which in turn can lead to analysis and evaluation, and then to further reflective action. For Dewey, 'thinking is the accurate and deliberate institution of connections between what is done and its consequences' (p. 505).

But knowledge of reflective methods alone is not sufficient. There must be a union of skilled method with attitudes. Dewey spoke of the need for developing certain qualities or traits of character such as open-mindedness or sincerity, wholehearted or absorbed interests, responsibility, as well as the need for a habit of thinking in a reflective way (1964, pp. 224-228). He further made distinctions between theoretical judgments and judgements of practice; though he hastened to point out that practical judgements too are by their very nature intellectual and theoretical. The reflection involved in practical situations only differs in that it has a specific kind of subject matter; it is concerned with 'things to do or be done, judgements of a situation demanding action' (1916, p. 335). But in making this distinction Dewey passed over the more recent observation that reflection in action may have a logic of its own. Schon has suggested that phrases such as "thinking on your feet" and "keeping your wits about you" suggests not only that 'we can think about doing something but that we can think about something while doing it' (Schon, 1983, p. 54).

The notion of reflection is further complicated by the temporal dimensions of the practical contexts in which the reflection occurs. The thinking *on* or about the experience of teaching and the thinking *in* the experience of teaching seem to be differently structured. *Retrospective reflection* on (past) experiences differs importantly from *anticipatory reflection* on (future) experiences (van Manen, 1991). In contrast, *contemporaneous reflection* in situations allows for a 'stop and think' kind of action that may differ markedly from the more immediate 'reflective' awareness that characterizes, for example, the active and dynamic process of a class discussion, a lecture, a conflict situation, a monitoring activity, a one-on-one, a routine lesson, and so forth.

It is especially this active contemporaneous type of reflection that is probably the most challenging dimension of teaching since it is 'reflection' in the very moment of acting that seems to be a puzzling phenomenon (van Manen, 1991, 1992). By focusing on this dimension of the task of teaching I do not want to undervalue in the slightest degree the formative relevance and practical significance of reflection on the experiences that educators share with children. I

have already indicated that the notion of reflection is implied in the very meaning of pedagogy which, by definition, signifies that teaching is done in an intentional manner that constantly distinguishes what is good or most appropriate from what is bad or inappropriate for this child or those children in particular circumstances. In fact, much of my work has been dedicated to exploring the methodology and practical applicability of hermeneutic phenomenological reflection in the pedagogical lifeworld (van Manen, 1977, 1984, 1986, 1989, 1990a,b). And maybe this paper too is an example of reflecting on the practical experience of teaching as we may find it in the classroom.

How reflective is the active moment where the teacher is engaged with the children in his or her charge? Or how reflective can it be? And how appropriate is the image of reflection in action (thinking about doing something while doing it) as evoked by Schon and others? It is true that, at times, when there is a lull in the activity of teaching and when the teacher can momentarily stop from participating, hang back, or step away from the classroom situation in order to reflect on what needs to be done next, one can speak of reflection in a fuller sense of the term. But even in such situations it would appear that reflection is only limited and restricted to the task at hand rather than take into consideration the full range of possibilities of interpreting what is going on, understanding the various possible modalities of meaning, considering alternative courses of action, weighing their various consequences, deciding on what must be done, and then actually doing it.

In the daily life of teaching children, teachers often feel that they are constantly on the spot. And in the spur of the moment only limited true reflection seems possible. When the teacher is "live" then thirty some pairs of eyes may be registering his or her every move and mood. This quality of engaged immediacy certainly seems to be a main factor that contributes to the common phenomenon of teacher fatigue and enervation. We should not underestimate the complexity of this immediate situatedness of teaching as practical action. This also means that we cannot take for granted that teacher thinking or critical reflection is a uni-dimensional or simple concept. It appears then that, in everyday life, the practice of pedagogy can only be reflective in a qualified and circumscribed sense.

One should even say that, ironically, in the active or dynamic situation of teaching one cannot help but be 'unreflective' in the curious sense that the classroom teacher *must* constantly act on the spot and cannot step back and postpone acting in order to first reflect on the various alternatives to this action and consequences of the various alternatives. And even the teacher who has carefully reflected about what to do or not to do in each and every case, in the end must commit himself or herself to some action or non-action. Thus, a teacher who acts is always a dogmatist—the teacher may reflect or think about all kinds of possibilities but while acting one can only do one thing at a time.

Nevertheless, the acknowledgement that the active practice of teaching is too busy to be truly reflective does not mean that teaching is condemned to Dewey's blind impulsivity or routine habit. Teachers feel that they can act with students in the classroom with more or with less thoughtfulness. While they are involved in

teaching, good teachers 'thinkingly act' and often do things with immediate insight. As teachers, we sometimes catch ourselves about to say something but then hold back before we have completely committed ourselves to what was already 'on our lips'. Other times the situation we are in seems to 'tell' us as it were how we should act. The upshot of all this is that teacher thinking and teacher reflection is a challenging notion that needs phenomenological, philosophical, conceptual, and empirical exploration. I will limit myself to some phenomenological reflections on the significance of the experience of teaching as practical acting. The phenomenological question is, where and how does reflection enter the reality of the pedagogical lifeworld? How is reflection in action experienced? and how may this be different from the conceptualizations of reflection in action as found in the literature? Thus the question is, where and how does reflection enter the teaching reality of the pedagogical lifeworld? What kind of reflection or thinking, if any, is possible *in practice*? And what are the forms of knowledge or skill that informs or constitutes practice?

### The Novice Teacher

It is long-known that beginning teachers typically encounter problems in the interactive reality of teaching. Let me first paint an ideal condition: A well-prepared student teacher has acquired excellent subject matter expertise, has successfully studied theories of child development, has become thoroughly knowledgeable about sound models of teaching and classroom management; the new teacher has honed his or her practical and reflective skills with successful peer-teaching exercises and classroom observations, and he or she has developed critical understanding of philosophical, political, and professional educational issues. Finally, upon entering the classroom in earnest, the novice teacher has conscientiously prepared to meet the students with innovative, well-structured, finely tuned, smoothly paced lessons and units.

But it is not uncommon that, in spite of this excellent preparation, great frustration is encountered: now, facing the students, the new teacher finds, to his or her disillusionment, that all this planning still falls short of what is required by the classroom reality. And, somehow, the hard-won knowledge base of subject matter, teaching skills, educational theories, and curriculum programs still does not live up to the demands of the pedagogical life in the classroom.

What the teacher discovers is not that his or her knowledge base is false or useless—in fact, the new teacher may even have felt a smug of superiority over some of the 'old-fashioned' senior teachers. Yet, something seems wrong. The acquired knowledge base somehow does not fit. How else can one explain the awkwardness one feels when the great lesson plan fizzles? when the class seems unresponsive? when you feel that the kids do not seem to like or respect you? when, instead, one feels like a stranger, a fake, an outsider? when one simply does not know how to deal with situations that change before you had a chance to actually realize what was going on?

And so the novice teacher wonders: 'How come that I learned all this math, that

I know all this methodology—but when Liz insisted that the stuff was too difficult, that she and other kids just did not get it, I simply was not able to really help them?' 'Why is it that I received top marks in my courses on educational psychology—but when Jane broke down and told me to "get lost" when I tried to help her, I did not know what to say?' 'How is it that the teacher next door can command the students' attention just by looking at them—but, with all my knowledge of classroom management and discipline, I do not know how to hide my feelings of uncertainty when Sean smirks at me, or when Mona utters derogatory remarks, or when some kids seem to invent a thousand tricks of stalling, disrupting, and not participating in the lessons?' 'Why do I feel exhausted from constant preparation, time spent on marking—but, in comparison with all my hard work, many kids seem unwilling to complete their homework and unprepared to work even half as hard as I do?' 'How can it be that I try so hard to put into practice what I learned about motivation and enrichment—but I felt totally deflated when a parent today told me that her son feels bored in my class?' 'How strange that I had to learn so much about teaching and learning—but much that goes on in school has so little if anything to do with teaching?'

Beginning teachers often seem to feel the tension or the poor fit between what they learned *about* teaching and what they discover is required *in* the practice of teaching. Teacher educators have generally become quite aware that the tried 'knowledge into practice' model of teacher training falls short of effective professional preparation.

The concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner is, in part, a response to the sense that a technical theory-into-practice epistemology does not seem sensitive to the realization that teacher knowledge must play an active and dynamic role in the ever-changing challenges of the school and classroom. Yet, much teacher preparation remains stuck in the traditional epistemology of practice and the concept of the teacher as reflective practitioner; and the knowledge-in-action model suffers from practical flaws as far as the interactive reality of the classroom is concerned.

### The Experienced Teacher

The recurring theme in teacher testimonials is that the life of teaching is hectic. Yes, indeed, it is hard to pace oneself and fight for time on the Xerox machine; yes, it is unpleasant to eat your lunch while supervising the library and hallways at noon; and it is especially unpleasant not to have enough time to make it to the bathroom before the bell goes again; yes, it requires inventiveness to somehow respond to or push off the many pressures and demands made on you by administration, parents, kids, colleagues; and yes, it is difficult to give teaching all that it takes and still have enough time and energy left to attend to your own spouse or kids at home.

Moreover, cutbacks and underfunding of education in many districts are causing all kinds of pressures among teachers:

My language arts prep and program needs time has been cut back to the contractual minimum. I have been assigned to teach additional high school courses for which I do neither have expertise nor interest. The enrollment in all my classes is at maximum. And it seems that every day we have so many problems in our schools so that we are required to attend lengthy staff meetings several times a week. I rarely get home in time to make supper. Then there are the daily morning 'student needs' conferences, lunch hour supervision, phone calls to and from parents, and all kinds of other ad-hoc meetings.

Many days I cannot even get to the bathroom before the afternoon school buzzer because three out of five days I have lunch hour supervision which leaves me exactly ten minutes for dealing with contingencies, getting coffee and eating my own lunch in the staffroom.

Moreover, my husband and kids at home complain, because I spend many of my evening hours dealing with more than 150 weekly student writings, assignments, and projects.

I have been feeling so down and besieged that I simply can no longer see how I can do my job with any degree of adequacy. So when individual kids at school come to me for extra help or to discuss their problems, I now tend to react in ways that sometimes surprise me when I reflect on it afterwards. On more than a few occasions I have told students to back off, take charge of their own affairs, and expect no special treatment from me.

What disturbs me most is that my relationship with my students seems to become less personal. Things are just not as they should be.

Yet, as I tell these things, I feel guilty and quite mixed up about it all.

I am not just interested in portraying the generally frenzied nature of what Philip Jackson described as the life of classrooms, but rather, I like to focus on the peculiar phenomenological structure of practice and the immediacy that characterizes almost every minute of the ongoing activity of teaching.

We could walk into any classroom almost any time and notice the involved nature of the practice of teaching. Whether the teacher is explaining something to the whole class, initiating an activity, monitoring group work, holding a class discussion, responding to a student's work, or trying to deal with some enthusiastic, restless, or disruptive students—what may strike us is the lack of space and time for the teacher to take required distance from any of these situations in order, in the Deweyan sense, to reflect on, decide on, and act on, why and what it is that he or *she* should really do or not do in any of these circumstances.

When one asks teachers how they do this; how they handle things from moment to moment, they tend to answer in generalities. This is indeed difficult to describe. And if one insists with the question then teachers may respond with a story, a complaint, a self-deprecating joke, an anecdote, or an observation. Let me offer one of these anecdotes. It is quite an ordinary anecdote, reflecting a situation that is only memorable because it seems to show that, often, success in teaching

is measured in little victories. But the brief account also contains an element that speaks to the immediacy of practical acting. The teacher preambles the story with a few contextual comments about the student in order to make her anecdote intelligible.

There is this student, Tony, in one of my grade nine classes; and he is constantly trying to mobilize other students around him to disturb or boycott the class. Tony will make silly comments. He tries to avoid having to do assignments. He will ask questions that do not appear to make any sense. He will do as if he does not understand what is going on. He rarely concentrates.

We were having a class discussion and we were brainstorming ideas as a solution to a problem. Students were invited to make suggestions. A brief discussion would follow and then I listed each useful idea on the board. When it was Tony's turn he made a suggestion that obviously was meant to poke fun. However, in a flash I said, 'Yes, that is very good Tony . . .' I treated and discussed his comment seriously and added it on the board to our list. Tony was obviously surprised and thrown off-guard. But I could see in his face that he did not seem displeased that he had contributed positively. He became more focused, participated in the discussion, and lasted for the rest of the lesson.

Teachers will tell many such stories. The accounts often seem to portray the reality of teaching as a mundane and unglamorous process. But what is most interesting for me, is that these stories are at odds with the methodological, philosophical, and theoretical accounts of 'teacher reflection in action' and 'teacher decision making' as we find them in the professional literature and research reports.

Does the concept of teaching as reflective decision making aim at a plausible and attainable reality? Many teachers have given me testimonials that are at odds with the concept of teaching as deliberative reflection in action. It is true, of course, that when you ask a teacher 'what made you decide to act in this way?' then the teacher readily will give reasons. Teachers admit that they must be making countless decisions throughout the day. But when you ask the same teacher how much reflective thinking really went into each of these many 'decisions' the teacher will equally readily admit that in actual fact you do not really make decisions in that sense. Rather, you say and do what is appropriate in a thoughtful kind of way. One university teacher confided that, at times, he quite purposefully tries to reflect on what he should say or do while saying and doing it. 'But', he said, 'doing this quickly becomes highly frustrating. I feel that I become artificial and, in fact, the reflectiveness with which I approach the students, the class discussion, the presentation, or the classwork that I do becomes an obstacle for a smooth lesson. So instead of improving my teaching it worsens . . . Sometimes the result is that I grow more self-conscious and I become aware of the students looking at me and judging me. Then I experience a kind of

split sense of self—a self as observed and objectified by others and a self trying to deal with this situation.'

As a result of the emphasis on reflective practice in teacher education programs, student teachers have been pressed to live up to the expectation that good teachers are reflective teachers. But they have not always learned where and how the reflective process should enter the life of teaching. Some beginning teachers receive the strong message that they should not only be reflective in the pre-active and the post-active phases of teaching, but that in the thick of classroom action teachers should be constantly thinking about why and what they are doing while they are doing it; constantly considering alternatives to their aims and methods; constantly being prepared to alter their course midstream; constantly reflecting on the significance of student behavior and constantly taking into consideration alternative interpretations of what is going on with students, socially and psychologically in their learning of subject matter.

Even with the best of intentions things do not happen that way. What makes true reflection in action difficult is that life in classrooms is contingent, dynamic, everchanging: every moment, every second is situation-specific. Moments of teaching are ongoing incidents that require instant actions. As the teacher of Tony suggested, one must quite literally act 'in a flash'. In some languages the term 'moment' (*Augenblick* in German, *ogenblik* in Dutch) literally translates as 'in the twinkling of an eye'. Indeed, the substance of pedagogical acting takes place at this level of temporal immediacy that does not permit a reflective stepping back from or out of the situation in order to consider the various alternatives and consequences of those possible alternatives in concrete everchanging situations.

Again, I am not suggesting that good teachers act without thought. But we have not really examined what the nature is of this 'thought'. While immediate acting does not consist in distancing oneself from a situation as one would do in *post hoc* reflection on experience, we can, to a certain degree, maintain a reflexive dialogue between the I and the self. The I monitors as it were what the self does while doing it. One teacher described how her thoughtfulness is more something like a mood, an attitudinal state of mind in relating to students:

When I walk into my classroom I am aware that I adopt quite purposefully an attitude of tolerant forbearance towards my students and my class. In that sense I am quite different in class than I am with my kids at home. And yet, I am not just acting or playing a role all day long. That would be too tiring and too exacting of my energies and resourcefulness. In school I employ an other side of myself than I show at home.

With my own family I am quite aware that in certain situations with my kids I should not act impulsively and, therefore, I quite literally may 'count to ten' sometimes, or take 'time out' before I say or do something that I might later regret. But in the classroom it is usually impossible to take time out. Although there are moments that I take a breath and almost force myself to count to ten. Of course, I rarely make it to ten. There are thirty students in this class and you can't walk away from it,

or turn your back and take a break. You must get on with what you are doing. And so my attitude of forbearance provides me with a patient alertness and tolerance so as not to act and interact with my students in a manner that is impulsive, careless, or unthinking.

A phenomenology of tactful action may reveal several styles of intuitive practice: from acting in a largely self-forgetful manner to a kind of running inner speech that the interior eye of the ego maintains with the self. This split awareness of self manifests itself as a kind of natural schizophrenia whereby one part of the self somehow dialogues with the other part. Teachers often say things such as: 'part of me wanted to complete the lesson and another part of me knew that I should stop and deal with the concern that had arisen'.

In everyday life in classrooms, the thousand and one things that teachers do, say, or do-not-do, all have normative significance. Not only the ends or goals of education but also the means and methods used all have pedagogical value and consequences for learning. Any teaching situation could pose innumerable questions of how to act: What is appropriate and what is less appropriate with these children? What should one say in this or that situation? How does one enter a classroom? How does one close the door? How and what atmosphere is created by the many seemingly innocuous things that teachers and students do? How does this work differently with different kids and different cases? How does the teacher address the class? Where does he or she stand, sit, or move around? What speech climate is created? What tone of voice? When should a teacher be silent? What glance? What gesture? Which teaching techniques and what evaluation approaches are pedagogically more appropriate in particular circumstances? What type of experience is good for children here? And what material is less good for them? Should this difficult subject matter be taught? Should it be made easier? What kind of difficulty is good for *this* student? And what about *that* student? How much pressure is too much? What kind of discipline is right in this situation? And what expectations may be inappropriate? What should one do now? Any of these questions may be posed or occur to teachers, but if they do present themselves then they usually occur upon reflection on the situation in which one found oneself. In real situations the teachers must constantly and instantly act in a manner that hopefully demonstrates a thoughtful considerateness.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the interactive nature of teaching and the kind of knowledge used in this action resembles a type of experience that we ordinarily call 'tact', or better 'pedagogical tact'. With this notion of tact I do not mean to propose some new skill or knowledge base. But rather, the notion of pedagogical tact may help us see with fresh eyes what is the nature of the experienced reality of teaching. In the early eighties, I had begun to employ the couplet notion 'pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact' to describe the improvisational pedagogical-didactical skill of instantly knowing, from moment to moment, how to deal with students in interactive teaching-learning situations (van Manen, 1984, 1986).

### The Epistemology of Tact as Practical Acting

In trying to describe the way that knowledge seems to function in action, I had been quite pleased with having coined the notion of 'pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact'. But one day a German colleague sent me the small book on 'pedagogical tact' by Jacob Muth (1982), showing that the notion of pedagogical tact has already been explored, although mostly at the philosophical level, and that Herbart had actually used the term 'pedagogical tact' almost 200 years earlier! I searched through all the Herbart literature in my university library, but, except for a 100-year-old translation of the actual 'Lecture on Pedagogy' (Eckoff, 1896), I could not find any other reference to pedagogical tact in his writings. Apparently, the orientation to epistemology of practice, as he initially formulated it, was left behind in his later work.

Herbart's *Lecture on Pedagogy* dates to the very beginning of his career as a university teacher, when he gave the two talks to pedagogy students at the University of Göttingen in 1802. Especially suggestive are the connections that he makes between the nature of pedagogical knowledge (theory or science) and the tact of pedagogy that was required in the practice of teaching. One finds curious foreshadowing in this lecture to recent trends in North American educational thought—for example, to Joseph Schwab's (1969) Nachomean idea of 'the language of the practical', and to the concept of 'the reflective practitioner' and 'professional knowledge in action' as found in Donald Schon (1983, 1987) and others.

Herbart's first lecture on pedagogy may still spur insights and suggestions that could be instructive to present-day concerns with teaching. He begins with a discussion of the relation between theory and practice by suggesting that it is in the nature of theoretical knowledge that no social scientific facts, no moral philosophy, no teaching method can tell a teacher what to do in particular circumstances. The social context of any classroom incident is always too complex for any single theory or set of principles to fit the bill. The application or reach of theories is both too limited and too universal, too partial and too general to be of immediate practical use in teachers' dealing with children. In complementing Herbart's view I would say that from the other side too, the nature of practical action makes a partnership with theory impossible. The interactive contingency of the pedagogical lifeworld lacks the reflective distance that deliberative rationality of theory requires for its application (van Manen, 1991). In common teaching-learning situations and relations the teacher must constantly and immediately act with a certain degree of confidence. This confidence is already a kind of situated practical knowledge that inheres in the act of tact itself.

Usually, the teacher does not have time to distance himself or herself from the particular moment in order to deliberate (rationally, morally, or critically) what he or she should do or say next. This temporal dimension of direct or immediate action parallels the close quality of relationality that the interactive dimension of teaching seems to require. The normal teacher-student relation does not allow (artificial or critical reflective) social distancing. Practicing teachers know this

all too well. Only aloof 'detached' teachers may be able to adopt a more or less calculating or rationally deliberative relational approach to their minute interactions with children.

Discussions on the relations between theory and practice (the translation of theoretical knowledge into practical knowledge and vice versa) tends to depart from the epistemological assumption that the solution to good practice lies in conceptualizing a reflective relation between theory and practice. A reflective relation takes into consideration the critical, perspectival, and cultural nature of scientific theories, as well as the implications of the psychological (cognitive) and the social (ideological) genesis of knowledge for the living reality of pedagogical relations.

Sometimes the relation between reflective knowledge and action is conceptualized in a more or less straightforward manner. For example, cognitivists and social constructivists tend to presuppose that every teacher carries (socially and personally) constructed 'theories' or 'philosophies' in mind, so to speak. To find out what makes a good teacher behave in certain ways, researchers attempt to retrieve the theories by 'reaching into' the teachers' mind, and recovering the theories that prompted teachers to act in those ways in the first place. Researchers have studied the behaviour, reflections, memories, and meaning constructs of 'excellent' teachers in order to determine what are the knowledge forms that underlie their exemplary practices.

Whether one gives priority to theory or to practice, to the psychological or to the ideological, in either case it seems that one cannot easily shake loose from an epistemology that is already committed to an intellectualized theory-practice distinction in the first place. For this reason I have suggested that the notion of pedagogical tact may allow a third option. Tact can neither be reduced to some kind of intellectual knowledge base nor to some set of skills that mediates between theory and practice. Rather, a third option is offered in the realization that tact possesses its own epistemological structure that manifests itself first of all as a certain kind of acting: an active intentional consciousness of thoughtful human interaction. The interesting thing about tact is precisely that it is insensitive to traditional theory-practice distinctions. At the same time we know intuitively that tact must always remain receptive to the social context of human life. In other words, tact should neither be seen as a theoretical form of knowledge nor as pretheoretical social practice; and while the notion of tact is inherently a factor of personal style of individual teachers it is also at the same time inherently an intersubjective, social, and cultural ethical notion. To be tactful is by definition a moral concern: we are always tactful for the sake of the good of the other (the child). In this feature tact distinguishes itself from diplomacy, etiquette, etc. which may serve other interests.

I have described how Herbart was not the only one who used the notion of tact in order to refer to a special form of human interaction. The notion of tact has fascinating connections with music and the moral dimensions of social interaction (van Manen, 1991). Gadamer refers to the work of a contemporary of Herbart, the physiologist Helmholtz, to bring out two aspects of tact: tact as a form of human

interaction and tact as a human science facility which Helmholtz had elaborated. In the first sense, tact is commonly understood as 'a particular sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations, and how to behave in them', but for which 'we cannot find any knowledge from general principles' (1975, p. 17). In the second sense, tact is moreover a kind of scholarship and *Bildung*, such as a sense of the aesthetic or of the historical, that the human scientist uses to do his or her hermeneutic work. Thus, tact can refer both to the intersubjective pedagogical relation between teacher and child as well as to the hermeneutic didactical relation between teacher and curriculum content or knowledge.

Pedagogical tact shares features with general social tact, but it possesses its own normative integrity. To act tactfully as an educator may mean, in a particular situation, to be able to see what goes on with children, to understand the child's experience, to sense the pedagogical significance of this situation, to know how and what to do, and to actually do something right. Often tact involves a holding back, a passing over something, which is nevertheless experienced as influence by the student to whom the tactful action is directed. To act tactfully may imply all this, and yet, tactful action is instantaneous. The *perceptiveness* needed, the *understanding* or insight required, the *feeling* for the right action are not necessarily separate stages in a sequential process. Somehow, perceptiveness, insight, and feeling are instantly realized in a mode of acting that is tensed with a certain thoughtfulness or thinking attentiveness; tact could be defined as a thoughtfully acting (van Manen, 1991). While steering clear of the stubborn theory-practice distinction, we may follow Muth (1982) and suggest that, with Herbart, tact is a kind of practical normative intelligence that is governed by insight while relying on feeling.

While tact cannot be reduced to a set of techniques, I have suggested (1991) that there may be several creative or inventive abilities involved in pedagogical practice: (1) A teacher who is tactful has the sensitive ability to interpret inner thoughts, understandings, feelings, and desires of children from indirect clues such as gestures, demeanour, expression, and body language. Pedagogical tact involves the ability to immediately see through motives or cause and effect relations. A good teacher is able to read, as it were, the inner life of the young person. (2) Pedagogical tact consists in the ability to interpret the psychological and social significance of the features of this inner life. Thus, the tactful teacher knows how to interpret, for example, the deeper significance of shyness, frustration, interest, difficulty, tenderness, humor, discipline in concrete situations with particular children or groups of children. (3) A teacher with tact appears to have a fine sense of standards, limits, and balance that makes it possible to know almost automatically how far to enter into a situation and what distance to keep in individual circumstances. For example, it is a basic feature of educational intentionality that teachers always expect more and more from children. Yet, they must realize that they should not have expectations that, when challenged, children cannot manage to live up to. So, paradoxically, tact consists in the ability of knowing how much to expect in expecting too much. (4) Tact seems characterized by moral intuitive-ness: A tactful teacher seems to have the ability of instantly sensing what is the

appropriate, right or good thing to do on the basis of perceptive pedagogical understanding of children's individual nature and circumstances.

How does tact arise? Herbart suggests that tact is the mode of action that we employ quite naturally in everyday life as we are constantly confronted by social situations where we must deal with people in certain ways. In this view tact appears as a spontaneous bridge or link between theory and practice when a direct technical relation is not possible—as it would be when one applies theoretical knowledge to solve a practical problem such as in case of repairing a broken appliance. Thus tact spontaneously emerges as a certain type of active (but ungrounded) confidence in dealing with ever-changing social situations. As Herbart puts it, 'tact occupies the place that theory leaves vacant'.

### Practical Knowledge as Noncognitive, Nondiscursive Confidence

Tact is a form of practical knowledge that realizes itself (becomes real) in the very act of teaching. As immediate and thoughtful pedagogical action, tact is *in its very practice* a kind of knowing, an active confidence. This means that what teachers do is not first of all reflectively reasoned thought translated into action. Rather, action itself already constitutes a type of knowledge that cannot always be translated back into prepositional statements or cognitive theories. And yet, the question of how knowledge somehow functions in practice has been a major theme in literature dealing with professional knowledge.

For example, Ryle (1949) stresses the importance of the role of thinking and learning to differentiate between 'intelligent practice' and 'habitual practice'. His distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' gets at this difference between cognitive and active knowing. A similar discrimination is made by Polanyi (1958), who has given us the now well-known example of the tacit form of personal knowledge, an active awareness that we rely on while we are involved in activity. It is difficult to articulate tacit knowledge because it is embodied in skills that are located inside practices, ways of doing things, knacks, sensitive touches, etc. Broudy *et al* (1964) argue that apart from replicating and applying knowledge principles in new situations, professional practice also requires active judgement that relies on interpretation and metaphoric association, on ways of seeing and imaginatively understanding what is required in practical changing situations. Likewise, Oakeshott (1962) distinguishes between technical knowledge that can be captured in written text and practical knowledge that can only be expressed in action and learned through experience. More recently, Molander (1992) and Johannessen (1992) explore tacit, silent knowledge as a confidence in action. And Gendlin (1988) and Beekman (1993) discuss the application of Heidegger's notion of *Befindlichkeit* for the implicit, moody and noncognitive practical knowledge that we have of our world.

What all these epistemologies of practice have in common is that they locate practical knowledge not primarily in the intellect or the head but rather in the existential situation in which the person finds himself or herself. In other words, the practical active knowledge that animates teaching is something that belongs

phenomenologically more closely to the whole embodied being of the person as well as to the social and physical world in which this person lives.

### The Embodied and Moody Nature of Practical Knowledge

I am visiting a school and I accompany a teacher into her classroom. I cannot help but notice how competently she moves around. While I feel, as visitor, somewhat strange and awkward in this place, she moves amongst the tables without bumping into them, turns to her own desk, holds the door for students who enter the room, talks to one student then to another while doing this or that, and I notice how she simultaneously tunes in to the gathering class. Then she gets the attention from the whole group and proceeds with the lesson in a confident and easy manner that is only unremarkable because it seems to require such little effort. She walks about the room, spurs a student on with a quiet gesture, stops here, interrupts there, responds to some commotion or a question, and so forth. Obviously this teacher feels at home in this room, in a way that allows her to act with such confidence and self-forgetful ease. Indeed this teacher is so effective precisely because she can forget herself and completely absorb herself in this situation with her students.

If we were to ask the teacher to give an account of every one of her actions then she would most likely be stymied. Yet, it is the totality of all those micro-situations (and not just the overall intent and pattern of the lesson) that defines the teaching-learning reality of the classroom. The study of the practice of teaching would need to be sensitive to the experiential quality of practical knowledge: the acknowledgement that much of this tact, this instant knowing what to do, issues from one's body and from the things and the atmosphere of one's world. We might even say that the practical knowledge of teaching resides *in the things* that surround us: in the physical dimensions of the classroom that I recognize as my room to which my body is adapted. My practical knowledge 'is' my felt sense of the classroom, my feeling who I am as a teacher, my felt understanding of my students, my felt grasp of the things that I teach, the mood that belongs to my world at school, the hallways, the staffroom, and of course this classroom.

Molander (1992) suggests that this practical skill is like a silent knowledge that is implicit in my world and in my actions rather than cognitively explicit or critically reflective. This silent knowledge cannot necessarily be translated back into prepositional discourse. Indeed, the ultimate grounds of propositions are not even themselves propositions. As Wittgenstein (1972, 1968) has argued, the ground of a legitimized belief or justified knowledge claim is not some ultimate ungrounded proposition, rather, it is an ungrounded way of acting. The rationalist fear of ungrounded action actually should extend to theories and moral principles as well. Even theories and beliefs cannot finally be grounded in certain basic assumptions or basic truths. Arguments to support a belief, proposition or theory have to come to an end somewhere. And what we are left with then again 'is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting' (Wittgenstein, 1972, sect. 110; p. 17e).

In his discussion of Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit*, Beekman (1993) emphasizes that the way we normally exist and act in our world should not even be conceptualized as a silent knowledge, an implicit knowing, and even less as implicit theories that somehow guide our actions. Rather, when we are involved as teachers with our students then we are part of this classroom, this world, in which we practice what we know as teachers. In other words, our pedagogical practice expresses itself as an active understanding of how we find ourselves here as teachers with certain intentions, feelings, passions, inclinations, attitudes, and preoccupations. And yet this active understanding is not necessarily reflective or even articulable in a direct conceptual manner. To make this practical knowledge available we may need to employ *vocabularies*, as Rorty (1989) would say, that are attuned to the lived meanings of the forms of life of teaching. This is, I believe, the task of phenomenological and narrative human science methods.

If teaching is so embodied and so tied into the phenomenology of one's world, then it is no surprise that the experience of practice teaching or internship is so important for the pedagogical preparation of teachers. The student teacher must somehow acquire this knowledge in an imitative and personal relation to the master teacher. By observing and imitating how the teacher animates the students, walks around the room, uses the blackboard, and so forth, the student teacher learns with his or body, as it were, how to feel confident in this room, with these students. This 'confidence' is not some kind of affective quality that makes teaching easier, rather this confidence *is* the active knowledge itself, the tact of knowing what to do or not to do, what to say or not to say.

So, rather than see practice teaching as applied theoretical (university-generated) knowledge one needs to see that practice possesses its own integrity. And rather than say that implicit theories (such as constructivist knowledge) give meaning to the actions that we perform, it would seem equally valid, if not more accurate, to presume that our actions give meaning to the words we use. Wittgenstein has suggested that ultimately actions are not so much founded upon propositions (rational accounts and principles) but rather upon other actions (Johannessen, 1992; Molander, 1992). That is why good teachers often have difficulty identifying why things work so well for them (or why they do not work well for that matter). If teachers are requested to account for their successes or if they are asked to convert their actions into verbal propositions then they will normally be tempted to reproduce the kinds of abstracted principles or theories that they feel are expected of them. What else can they do? It is much more difficult to capture in language the kind of fitness that inheres in our body and in the things of our world (van Manen, 1990b).

At the micro-level, there is difficulty determining where the boundaries are that define a discrete action component and that allow distinguishing the action from its context and from other related actions. For example, a teacher's gesture may carry the meaning of a personal understanding, an encouragement, a secret shared, the exclusion of others; or it can be seen as a confirmation of a problem solved; or it can be seen as part of a larger instructional process or teacherly style; and so forth. While on first sight any particular action may seem singular in

meaning, intent, and structure, action really is multi-layered, multi-dimensional, multi-regional, multi-perspectival. The meaning of any teaching act is therefore interpretable in a variety of ways. For example, a teacher's joke may be intended to take the edge off a situation, but it could also be a manifestation of the teacher's desire to be liked, to appear chummy, to seem flexible, approachable, to appear clever, etc. From their side, students may experience the teacher's humor variously as invitation, as critique, as fakery, as hint, as secret message, and so forth.

If my allusion to the practical tact of teaching is indeed in keeping with how thoughtful teachers actually experience their practice then the requirement for critical-reflection-in-action may need reconsideration. Why should we demand that everything one does as a teacher requires critical reflection, reasons or justifications? Molander (1992) and Socket (1987) have made a provocative counter suggestion. They have suggested that it is doubt and distrust in certain practices that may require reasons or justification. Indeed we may sometimes put a misplaced emphasis on critical reflection in teaching. The aim of critical reflection is to create doubt and critique of ongoing actions. But it is obviously not possible to act thoughtfully and self-confidently while doubting oneself at the same time. If teachers were to try to be constantly critically aware of what they were doing and why they were doing these things, they would inevitably become artificial and flounder. It would disturb the functional epistemology of practice that animates everything that they do.

This does not mean, of course, that one should devalue the extensive cognitive knowledge base that the professional preparation of teachers require. But we should also include knowledge forms and reflective practices that can address the tact of teaching that inheres in the embodied and existential qualities and virtues of being a teacher (van Manen, 1994). Moreover, I would insist that this phenomenological knowledge includes not only the felt knowledge that inheres in pedagogical perceptiveness. Novice teachers should not be cheated out of learning a cornucopia of rules of thumb, techniques, skills, knacks, models, theories, etc. that can furnish them with a rich and an effective body of knowledge. The ultimate success of teaching actually may rely importantly on the 'knowledge' forms that inhere in practical actions, in an embodied thoughtfulness, and in the personal space, mood and relational atmosphere in which teachers find themselves with their students. The curricular thoughtfulness that good teachers learn to display towards children may depend precisely upon the internalized values, embodied qualities, thoughtful habits that constitute virtues of teaching. And the notion of pedagogical tact implies that qualities or virtues are the learned, internalized, situated, and evoked pedagogical practices that are necessary for the human vocation of bringing up and educating children.

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