Embodying Tact in Teaching: Ineluctable Ambivalence, Sensitivity, and Reserve

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INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical tact has been a topic of significant international interest in educational discourse since it was initially defined by J.F. Herbart in 1802—specifically as a "quick judgment and decision" able to address "the true requirements of the individual case."[1] This article begins by tracing the conceptual roots of pedagogical tact in Kant's description of "logical tact" from 1789, and brings these into connection with more recent accounts, particularly those that stress the importance of reserve, of holding back for the sake of the student's independence. Through reference to Merleau-Ponty and his German student Bernhard Waldenfels, this article then explores manifestations of this at once active and passive character of tact in terms of body's own aporias—its simultaneity as physical and lived (*Leib and Körper*), its status as a "visible seer," as "hearing and heard, touching and touched, moving and moved."[2] By reflecting on an example of pedagogical engagement as shown in a short video clip, this article develops the conclusion that this dual corporeal character is mirrored in the "reserved action" characteristic of pedagogical tact. As such, the phenomenon of tact presents an alternative way of understanding questions of "interaction," scaffolding, and "proximal development." It casts the teacher's action not so much in terms of questioning, development, and answering but of giving space for the student as an autonomous individual.

Immanuel Kant, Herbart's predecessor in the chair of philosophy in Königsberg, defines "logical tact" by first identifying two principle "cognitive faculties": 1) "*common sense (sensus communis)*" knowledge or facility "in the application of rules to cases *(in concreto)*," and 2) "clear headedness" (*ingenium perspicax*), meaning the knowledge of "science" and of "the rules themselves before their application *(in abstracto).*"[3] "Logical tact," which clearly belongs

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to the first cognitive faculty, is defined by Kant in terms of a problem whose solution is "based on general and innate rules of understanding."[4] In such a situation, Kant says, "it is more dangerous to look around for academic and artificially drawn-up principles (school wit) than to take a chance on the outburst from the determining grounds of masses of judgment that lie in the obscurity of the mind. One could call this logical *tact*."[5]

Kant also provides a concrete and explicitly embodied illustration of tact as such a pre- or non- reflexive "outburst," asking the reader to imagine a musician who:

> plays a fantasy [or fantasia] on the organ with ten fingers and both feet and also speaks with someone standing next to him. In a few moments a host of ideas is awakened in his soul, each of which for its selection stands in need of a special judgment as to its appropriateness since a single stroke of the finger not in accordance with the harmony would immediately be heard as discordant sound. And yet the whole turns out so well that the freely improvising musician often wishes that he would have preserved in written notation many parts of his happily performed piece … [6]

In this remarkable description, the body can certainly be said to represent both *Leib* and *Körper,* that which is "hearing and heard," "moving and moved": the receptive body perceives harmony, dissonance, pleasure, and discomfort through multiple senses, including the tactile perception of deeper notes, and likely also the responses of the interlocutor and of others present. This passive, receptive sensitivity and awareness, as Kant puts it, awaken "a host of ideas" in the player's "soul." The result is that the body is not merely receptively aware, but also overtly expressive—improvising cadenzas, inversions, transpositions, and more, demonstrating its own "quick judgment and decision," to use Herbart's words.

The body is thus at once the *receptive object* of the musical language being

articulated, and the generative, *expressive subject* extemporizing in and through it. At the same time, the body is also the *medium* for this expression—albeit one working through the further mediation of pedals, keyboard, and organ pipes. Finally, the performance of the body can itself also be said to be the message communicated through it. In a sense, the message is the sound of the fingers on the keyboard, of the feet striking the pedals. In all of these ways, the body is both medium and message, simultaneously author, performance, and audience. "From the perspective of information theory," as Waldenfels observes, "the body can be said to function at the same time as sender, message, channel, and also as receiver."[7]

Finally, listening to examples of keyboard fantasias from the 18th century (e.g., Bach's Fantasia and Fugue in C minor), the repetition of various transpositions and inversions highlights yet another aspect of embodied expression: the body's simultaneously habitual, repetitive, anatomically-articulated motion and its equally unavoidable *individual* expression and style. "Everything is both manufactured and natural in man," Merleau-Ponty explains, "in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being."[8] "Behaviour creates meanings which are transcendent," Merleau-Ponty continues, "yet [are] immanent to the behaviour as such, since it communicates itself and is understood."[9]

Pedagogy, however, can make no claims to the kinds of success that Kant imagines for his organist: that "the whole turns out so well that [he] … wishes … [it] preserved in written notation." Judgment in pedagogical matters is not a question of one's own impression of what just happened, but a question of one or more students' *responses*, ones both immediate and manifest in the future. Also, the improvisational and embodied nature of pedagogical tact—its origin in "the obscurity of the mind"—means that there can be no pretention of direct access to it by the teacher *post facto.* Instead, tact simply "shows itself"[10] directly through words and action, and it is only from thisthat the ethically-informed intention of the tactful teacher or adult can be divined and subjected to ethical reflection. This is evident as we turn to the 95-second video used as an example in this article (https://vimeo.com/223987444) from

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the 2002 French documentary of a one-room country schoolhouse, *Etre et Avoir* (directed by Nicholas Philibert).[11] It shows teacher Georges Lopez at the right side of kindergartner Letitia, sitting together with her peers. They have just learned to write the number seven. The teacher's arm rests on the back of Letitia's chair, and his left hand is close to Letitia's left shoulder; his right hand is generally pointing at the worksheet in front of them both.

Fig. 1: "One, two, … three …"

Fig. 2: "Let's try Alizé or Marie … "

Fig. 3: Nudging Letitia: "Wake up, will you?"

Fig. 4: Letitia looks at the teacher. "Count again now."

Partial Transcript:

Letitia counts slowly: "One, two … three, four, five, six ..."

Teacher: "What comes after six? … What did you draw just now? … What did we learn today?"

Student (off camera): "She can't remember?"

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Teacher: "Let's try Alizé or Marie, then.
What was the new number we just learned?"

Marie (off camera): "Seven … "

Letitia restarts: "One, two, three, four, five, six ... "

Teacher: "And then comes?"

Marie: "Seven."

Teacher: "What comes after six? Marie just said it." Forming his hand into a fist and gently nudging Letitia's left shoulder while looking at her directly: "Wake up, will you?"

Letitia looks at the teacher briefly.

Teacher: "Count again now."

Letitia: "Six."

Teacher: "What did Marie say after six? She said? … Seven!"

To return briefly to the remark from Waldenfels, these few moments and images illustrate the capacity of the body to act simultaneously as sender, receiver, channel and message: through the direction and expression of his glance alone, the teacher acts both as sender and receiver, engaging both receptively and expressively. He attends to Letitia's work (Figure 1), to other students (Figure 2), to Letitia herself (Figure 3), and finally also to Letitia's own attending (Figure 4), with his glance becoming more inquiring when he turns to Letitia. Through the motion of his arms, and of his body as a whole, the teacher's embodied presence is simultaneously immanent to and transcendent of its natural habituation. His body, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, appears to communicate itself and is understood—at least on some levels.

In one sense, one could indeed say with Herbart and Kant that Lopez exercises a "quick judgment and decision" based only on "general and innate rules of understanding." This is perhaps clearest with what he does *not* do in this clip, and with his decision to finally *do* something different at the end. In this

95-second interchange with Letitia, the teacher does not, in response to his own questions, utter the "the new number we just learned," as he reminds Letitia, the one that "Marie said after six," the one that Letitia herself "dr[ew] just now." In all of this, his close bodily proximity, his work with Letitia "down on her level" clearly does not indicate indifference, but rather intense involvement. One could say that he is insisting: "I'm concerned and involved"; "I'm here for you"—all without having to say anything at all. Although the significance of some of the aspects of his physical presence are at best ambivalent, the reality of this presence and proximity is indubitable.

The idea of exercising tact by *not* acting, through *reserve* or holding back, is a key element in Jakob Muth's 1962 monograph on pedagogical tact. Muth identifies "sensitivity and *reserve*" as the "two determining moments" of pedagogical tact.[12] "The point of [this] reserve," Muth (quoting Werner Loch) says, "is the making possible [*Ermöglichung*]" not simply of the *learning* of the student, but "of his or her '*self-activity*'"—their ability to engage for themselves, to realize their own autonomy.[13] Self-activity, characterized by Dewey as "primary root of all educative activity,"[14] has also been defined as situated at the site of *"the difference between what is possible and what is real for the child."*[15] The teacher clearly goes to great lengths to have Letitia articulate the correct answer. One can say that he is trying to encourage Letitia's "possible" knowledge to become "real."

But the teacher also suspends this attempt. Nudging Letitia lightly with his fist, he asks her gently yet emphatically, "Wake up, will you?" and seconds later he also says the number "seven" to her. It is also here that Lopez appears to reach a "quick judgment and decision" regarding what is real and impossible for Letitia. One may be impressed with Lopez's patience; alternatively, one might be concerned that his insistence might ultimately be unhelpful for little Letitia. The point of this article, though, is not to arrive at a normative judgment regarding Lopez's tactful- or tactlessness. Regardless, what is at stake at this point is certainly *not* captured in conceptions of interactivity (or its absence), nor is it a question of Vygotskian scaffolding or the teacher's efforts to actualize the child's "zone of proximal development." This situation, of course, is also

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not simply a question of actions and reactions, or the reciprocal interaction of two or more entities. It is not even primarily about effectively moving to the right answer. It is arguably instead about the *realization of the child's self and his or her well-being*.

In other words, when it comes to pedagogical tact, the video does not so much show an *instructional* failure on the part of Lopez—even if it might be deemed only a minor one. Recognizing or misidentifying what is possible or what is real for the child's autonomous action is instead much more an *ethical* matter. And in enabling a kind of active passivity that might grant the student the freedom to either realize what is possible (however they might realize it), the ineluctable ambivalence of the body's presence in its active passivity is indispensable. For unlike even the richest "interactive" environments or communications, it alone is able to grant space and freedom while remaining immediately present. Only it can be clearly supportive while at the same time also withholding something. And only it can even form a fist, but only to most gently nudge the struggling student who has been placed in one's care.

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1 Johann Herbart, *Herbart's A B C of Sense-Perception, and Minor Pedagogical Works* (New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1896), 20. See also: Elisabeth Blochmann, "Der Pädagogische Takt," *Die Sammlung* 5, (1950): 772–720; Jakob Muth, *Pädagogischer Takt: Monographie Einer Aktuellen Form Erzieherischer und Didaktischer Handlung* (Heidelberg: Quelle and Meyer, 1967); Max van Manen, *Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); Hanna Juuso and Timo Laine, "Tact and Atmosphere in the Pedagogical Relationship," *Analytic Teaching* 25, no. 1 (2015): 1–17.
2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007).
3 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 250.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 24–25.
7 Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, 256.
8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002),

220.
9 Ibid.
10 Muth, *Pädagogischer Takt.*
11 *Etre et Avoir*, film, directed by Nicolas Philibert (Paris: Les Films du Losange, 2003).
12 Muth, *Pädagogischer Takt,* 36.
13 Ibid.
14 John Dewey, *The School and Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 112.
15 Klaus Mollenhauer, *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 89.

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