

Book Review

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A review of van Manen, M. (2015). Pedagogical tact. Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do. Walnut Creek (CA): Left Coast Press Inc.

Max van Manen emigrated from the Netherlands to Canada in 1967 after he completed the State Pedagogical Academy, and since then, he has successfully continued, elaborated, renewed and revived the Continental tradition for pedagogy as a human science. A short time after he left the Netherlands, the tradition of the “Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik,” and the phenomenological variant known as the Utrecht School, was displaced by sociologically inspired critical pedagogy and by mainstream empirical educational science. It is remarkable that the tradition has remained lively and vigorous in exile so that it now can return to the old continent as both a constructive and a critical voice in the current educational debate.

The book's subtitle: “Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do” presents in a subtle way the difference between two forms of knowledge and their relation to practice. One form of knowledge is achieved through a view from the outside, looking for regularities that subsequently can be used instrumentally. In the best case, this knowledge can be applied in the journey from a well-defined initial situation towards a predefined goal; knowledge as a guarantee for knowing what to do. However, in human life, in upbringing and education, situations are rarely well defined. In these instances, goals have to be chosen actively and the child is not just an object but also an active participant in his or her own development. Acting knowledgeable in these kind of situations requires something else: tact, acquired by attentive and thoughtful inquiries and participation in educational practices. This form of knowledge is intertwined with the actor's being in the world. It is firm and fallible, therefore it requires that we as educators do not settle for routines and rules, but retain the ability to wonder and to research lived experience. Despite the dominant discourse about evidence-based practices in education, it is obvious for most of my students that the difficult part of “knowing what to do” is not the knowledge they can look up in a book and transform into a plan-do-check-act circle, but the wisdom in action that knows in the moment and finds the way by the day.

This form of knowledge is powerfully illustrated on the books cover with a painting by Virginie Demonty-Breton: ‘Into the water.’ We see a mother and her two children at an ocean beach, the oldest toddler resists being taken into the water. He resists and at the same time holds onto his mother, who carries his little sibling on her other arm. Every parent and teacher recognizes what is happening. There is no quick and easy plan that can guarantee a pedagogical solution, but something should be done anyway. The painting somehow asks: What does it mean to act with tact in this situation? What is at stake? We need to try to understand what this moment might be like for the mother as well as for the child. Will the mother be able to act tactfully –what would I do, if it were my child? Throughout the book, van Manen uses the

picture as an icon that can remind the reader of the complexity, situatedness and urgency of acting pedagogically and with tact.

Pedagogical Tact—knowing what to do when you don't know what to do contains eleven chapters and two appendixes. Each chapter evokes thoughtfulness and can be read independently. In my reading however, there is a clustering. The first three chapters make the reader ready to enter the field of pedagogy. Van Manen argues that pedagogy deals with human beings in the process of becoming, and requires a phenomenological attitude. Pedagogy has a qualitative and ethical aspect, as this process of becoming requires our ability to respond, “the ability to distinguish actively and reflectively what is good from what is not so good in our interactions with the children, for whom we carry responsibility” (p. 25). The first chapter, “The primacy of pedagogy,” introduces the insight that pedagogy is a human affair. As life requires adults to act pedagogically, “we start to question and doubt ourselves. Pedagogy is this questioning, this doubting” (p. 19). In chapter two, “Experiencing pedagogy vicariously,” van Manen takes the reader by the hand into the virtual pedagogy in film and literature. He sensitizes the reader for the lifeworld of children and the question of what is good and what is not good for the child. In the third chapter, “The nature of pedagogy,” van Manen rounds off the introduction with the insight that pedagogy is autonomous as a professional practice and a theoretical discipline of child-ethics. The autonomy of pedagogy and the integrity of practice have always been the hallmark of pedagogy as a human science. Chapters four and five take the reader by the hand in further exploration of how to cultivate a phenomenological and pedagogical attitude as they engage “The pedagogy of reflective practice” and “Observing with pedagogical ears and eyes.” As a genuine phenomenologist, van Manen does not provide a method, but shows what it means to wonder. Chapters six and seven, “Pedagogical tact” and “Pedagogical con-tact,” comprise the core of the book. The following three chapters can be considered as phenomenological studies in their own right that engage “Pedagogical regard and recognition,” “The phenomenology of student experience” and “Cyber pedagogy.” Chapter eleven, “Pedagogical knowing and acting,” is written as the completion of the book with a powerful statement of the difference between the dominating language of education and the embodied language of pedagogy: “Having ‘measurable objectives’ differs from ‘having hope’” (p. 192). Hope is the experience of the child’s possibilities. It requires that “we truly open ourselves to a child’s way of being,” that “we are able to experience openness ourselves” (p. 193). Traditional objectivating educational sciences study what the child has become and drive a technological understanding of being, so knowledge about the child is confused with the child itself. Phenomenological pedagogy is open for the child as a becoming. This openness implies a sensitivity for not knowing what to do. It makes demands for the active alertness, ethical sensitivity and practical flexibility, in short for the formative power of pedagogical tact “issuing from the sensitizing effects and affects of phenomenological reflections on our lived experiences” (p. 190). “The child needs that openness to make something of him or herself” (p. 193).

The two appendixes, “Ethical-pedagogical perspectives” and “Historical notes,” are helpful for those who want to gain greater insight in the relation between van Manen’s approach and other historical, ethical, philosophical and pedagogical theories. The introduction to the historical roots of thinking pedagogy as a normative practice with an interest “to support and strengthen the (young) person, never to break or diminish the person for whom we carry pedagogical responsibility” (p. 203) may be helpful for the reader who is not familiar with human science pedagogy.

Van Manen gives voice to a tradition that has not lost its actuality. He is an important voice in a choir that opposes the instrumentalization of education, resuming and renewing a continental pedagogical tradition that by now might be named as a science of action (in German: Handlungswissenschaft). Van Manen argues that the pedagogical practitioner and

inquirer should deal with knowing, acting and being, while at the same time, his text is helpful for those who wish to learn more about and practice pedagogy. What makes the book unique and noteworthy is that it is not an example of *how* to think philosophically about educational questions, but of pedagogical thinking *with* philosophical insights. Van Manen demonstrates and teaches that pedagogical thinking requires attentiveness for lived experience that it is conceptual and pathic at once and tied to dialogue, action and being. *Pedagogical Tact. Knowing What To Do When You Don't Know What To Do* is at once a substantial contribution in the academic debate about the nature of pedagogy as a science and an impetus for practicing pedagogy in education and other childcare practices.