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the tactful teacher: a role model for learning democracy

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The concept of the role model is elaborated with regard to the concepts of mimesis and pedagogical tact. Two propositions are put forward: First, tactful teachers can be seen as models of democratic citizens for their students. Second, teachers can also serve as role models for student teachers to learn pedagogical tact.

Keywords: democracy, mimesis, pedagogical tact, role model, teacher training

In this essay, I take up the old and still controversial question of whether and to what extent teachers should be considered role models (e.g., Oelkers, 2019; Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023), and discuss it with reference to the concept of pedagogical tact. I advance two propositions: first, teachers who have developed pedagogical tact can, in a sense, be seen as models of democratic citizens for their students. Second, teachers can also serve as role models for student teachers to learn pedagogical tact. I begin by addressing the importance of role models for human learning with reference to the concept of mimesis. Here, I suggest using a broad understanding of the concept of role model. Next, I consider the concept of pedagogical tact in systematic and historical perspective, showing that tact is a necessary skill not only for teachers in democratic societies, but also for democratic citizens in general. Finally, I relate the considerations of mimesis and pedagogical tact and ask how tact should be learned by both students and student teachers. Here, mimetic engagement with role models is crucial.

Mimesis, Role Models, and Pedagogy

In order to understand the power of role models, I suggest elaborating the concept of mimesis as it has been developed by Christoph Wulf (2022). For Wulf, mimesis is a human condition. He refers to Aristotle who held that the human being "is the animal that is most mimetic" and also "takes pleasure in mimetic processes" (Wulf, 2022, p. 73). Mimesis is defined as imitation in a broad sense: "Mimesis means here not only 'imitating', but also 'making oneself similar', 'representing', 'expressing'. When I refer to the mimetic character of many educational processes, then mimesis is not restricted to art, poetry, and aesthetics" (Wulf, 2022, p. 44). Rather, mimesis also refers to social practice and highlights the impulse of humans to behave similarly to others. Mimetic behaviour can already be observed in small babies, for example, when they return the smile of their parents (Klasen, 2008). Importantly, mimetic behaviour is often reciprocal and contains moments of mutual contagion. In this sense, Plato and Aristotle were already aware of "the irresistibility of mimetic processes" (Wulf, 2022, p. 74).

The concept of mimesis, understood as a "desire to become similar to other people" (Wulf, 2022, p.

74), explains why role models are so important for human beings: "The ability to identify with other persons, to understand them as intentional agents, and to focus attention on something with them is tied to the child's mimetic desire to emulate adults, to align themselves with them or become like them" (Wulf, 2022, p. 92). Who a child takes as a role model is therefore often decided by emotional arousal rather than by deliberate thought. The mimetic capacity is not in itself moral. From an ontogenetic point of view, a person's mimetic capacity develops earlier than his or her linguistic abilities and the associated capacity for critical and moral reflection.

The concept of mimesis also provides a theory of learning. Building on his or her mimetic ability, the individual is able to acquire new behaviours, feelings, ideas, and even ways of speaking and thinking. Wulf points out that each individual has some freedom in his or her mimetic reference to others, since the imitating behaviour will differ at least slightly from the original. Indeed, individuals cannot even truly copy themselves. For example, each concrete, written signature of a person is slightly different from the other written signatures of the same person.

Through mimetic processes, students relate to their teachers; at the same time, teachers also relate mimetically to their students. In this sense, learning is to be understood as an interaction in which all participants are mimetically involved and thus also learn from each other. From the viewpoint of mimesis, pedagogy cannot be considered a technology of unidirectional knowledge transfer from a teacher to a student.

The mimetic capacity is associated with forms of tacit knowledge (Wulf, 2022, pp. 119-121). Wulf emphasises that through mimesis humans learn bodily and acquire a knowledge that becomes ingrained in their bodies and is only accessible reflexively and to a limited extent. For example, the way we greet other people refers to such bodily knowledge. At the same time, mimetic processes also stimulate the imagination, as can be shown by the example of rituals. Through repeated participation in a ritual, participants develop both external behavioural patterns and internal images of the sequence of actions.

According to Wulf, two different pedagogical approaches to dealing with the mimetic capacity of human beings can be distinguished (Wulf, 2022, p. 74). The first approach, which Wulf associates with Plato, suggests protecting youth from bad role models, such as by censoring media content. The second approach, associated with Aristotle, assumes that youth should be enabled to resist their innate mimetic desire to copy (bad) role models through rational reflection.

These considerations on mimesis suggest that the concept of role model should be understood quite broadly. In pedagogy, a relatively narrow concept is often used, according to which role models are outstanding people with exemplary qualities, but with whom one does not uncritically identify (e.g., Böhm & Seichter, 2022, p. 506). In this tradition, student teachers should take pedagogical classics like Pestalozzi as role models (Oelkers, 2019). In contrast, taking mimesis into account hints that anyone can become a role model, not only because they may have particular characteristics, but also because individuals simply interact with others and thereby tend to tacitly adopt certain behaviours from each other (such as gestures, tone of voice, use of certain words, etc.). Furthermore, the concept of mimesis points to the bodily-sensual and emotional dimension of the reference to role models. At the same time, of course, a rational distancing and moral reflection on role models is possible and certainly often necessary from an educational point of view. Through moral reflection, other people can also become *negative* role models that the individual does not want to follow.

Tact, Pedagogical Tact, and Democracy

The concept of tact was introduced to pedagogy by the German philosopher and educator Johann Friedrich Herbart in the early 19th century and has since been further developed in both German and international scholarship (e.g., Burghardt & Zirfas, 2019; van Manen, 2016). Herbart saw pedagogical tact as a bridge across the gap between theory and practice in education. In their pedagogical practice, Herbart argued, teachers do not have much time for theoretical reflection and thus must make quick judgments and decisions in order to act appropriately (Herbart, 1880, p. 236). These decisions should be in accordance with pedagogical theory. However, since every situation is different, the theory must be applied according to the context and teachers must not follow predetermined schemes. Therefore, Herbart argued that pedagogical tact contains both *feeling* for situational context as well as *rationality* in terms of theory.

Since Herbart, much thought has been given to what 'to act appropriately' means. A widely received consideration comes from Jakob Muth, who defined the normative orientation of tactful action in education with reference to the concepts of sensitivity (*Feingefühl*) and retention (*Zurückhaltung*) (1962, pp. 15-26). In this sense, teachers must not impose certain forms on students but must help students develop in their own, individual ways. Teachers can only achieve this if they develop a 'sensitivity' for the students' impulses, which are often difficult to perceive, and also, by way of 'retention,' open up opportunities for the students to follow their interests and cultivate their particular abilities. Adding to Muth's considerations, Twardella (2014) points out that educational practice always involves power asymmetries between teachers and students, to which tactful action must also cultivate an equal sensitivity. Moreover, Twardella argues that pedagogical tact needs to take the diversity of modern democratic societies into account.

Pedagogical tact has been discussed as a form of tacit knowledge (e.g., Suzuki, 2010, pp. 20-22): since there is not much time for reflection in pedagogical practice, the tactful teacher must act quasi-automatically. The teacher must be able to read students' faces, gestures, postures, comments, etc. on the spot and immediately respond in a pedagogically supportive manner. In most situations, teachers must process so much information about what is happening in the classroom that they must rely on their practical, embodied knowledge in their actions and reactions (van Manen, 2016, pp. 182-184). The teacher's tacit knowledge is then articulated not only in the content of what he or she says, but also in his or her own use of tone of voice, gestures, posture, etc.

Thus, pedagogical tact has an *interpersonal* aspect. In addition, in terms of the pedagogical triangle, there is also an aspect of tact that relates to the *content* to be taught (van Manen, 1995, pp. 67-68). Again, sensitivity and retention can be guiding principles. The teachers' task is not to impose their own opinion on the content, but to present the content in such a way that the students not only understand it but can also develop their own opinions on it. The interpersonal aspect and the content aspect of tactful teaching are thus closely linked.

In addition, tact itself should be included as educational content (although not necessarily in terms of the official curriculum, but rather in terms of a hidden one). Students should not only learn the explicit content of the curriculum, but also develop the skill of tact so that they become both knowledgeable and tactful citizens.

This consideration links tact with democracy. When Herbart introduced the term pedagogical tact, he was referring to the then-emergent use of the word tact in the broader society of his time. Tact

can be seen as a new regulative idea in social interaction that came up with the Enlightenment and democratic reform tendencies. In absolutist states and feudal societies, the individual had his or her social place from birth. Social interaction in the given hierarchy was regulated by formal etiquette. Teachers imparted to their students a body of knowledge that represented the true order of the world that the students in turn had to follow without dissent. Thus, according to Zirfas, pedagogy could not develop a concept of tact before the 18th century (2012, pp. 166-167). Accordingly, violence in education, which served to impose certain ways of thinking and acting on students, was not problematised.

In democratic societies, by contrast, direct social interaction must be guided by tact: individuals must fundamentally be treated as equals and with respect for their human dignity (Burghardt & Zirfas, 2019, pp. 100-104; 159-163; 177-181). Democracy also requires that people deal tactfully with knowledge. The apparent tactlessness that has been observed in recent years, both toward other people (e.g., hate speech) and toward knowledge (e.g., 'alternative facts'), therefore threatens—along with attacks on more tangible democratic institutions—the very foundations of democracy.

Tact in general and pedagogical tact in particular overlap in many ways, but they also differ. Tactful teachers treat their students with respect and hold back their own personal interests in favour of the students' interests and opinions to be developed. Tactful citizens, on the other hand, treat other citizens with respect, but know how to articulate their own interests and, if necessary, assert them against the interests of other citizens.

The Significance of Teachers as Role Models in Learning Tact

For Herbart, pedagogical tact determined whether a teacher was a good or a bad teacher, and he suggested that teacher training should focus on the development of pedagogical tact (Herbart, 1880, p. 237). In this final section, I take up these considerations and elaborate on them with reference to the discussion above.

First, I would like to address how teachers can be seen as role models for their students. With regard to the mimesis concept, it can be said that teachers generally serve as role models for their students. Students tacitly learn from their teachers through mimesis how to relate to others and how to relate to learning content. Now, if their teacher is tactful, they tacitly learn tactful ways of relating to others and to knowledge through mimesis. Moreover, they develop an internal, implicit image of tactful behaviour, even if they do not know the theoretical concept of tact itself. The same can be said, of course, of tactless behaviour on the part of the teacher.

Students are able to distinguish between tactful and non-tactful actions. When the teacher is not tactful, students will feel disrespected or even hurt in one way or another. In other words, students value being treated tactfully, and they devalue tactless behaviour. In this sense, students will develop a tacit knowledge of what makes a good, tactful teacher (again, even if they lack words like tact in the theoretical sense). With reference to the concept of mimesis, then, it is hoped that tactful teachers will inspire students to become tactful themselves. Since the mimetic ability does not involve the aim to become the same, but to become similar, the students' mimetic reference to tactful teachers leaves room for individual articulation of tact.

Tactful teachers provide an important learning opportunity for interpersonal interaction and for

handling knowledge in a democracy. Students learn how to be tactful through mimetic processes, and they learn how to treat others as well as knowledge tactfully. However, teachers can only serve as role models for *pedagogical* tact. Since teachers must hold back their own opinions in the spirit of pedagogical tact, they cannot serve as role models for the tact of democratic citizens as considered above. Tactful teachers can hardly serve as role models when it comes to articulating and asserting one's own interests against the interests of others. Here, other people, for example, members of political parties or labour unions, or activists, are more suitable role models.

Second, I would like to address how teachers can serve as role models for student teachers in the learning of pedagogical tact. Since pedagogical tact should bridge the gap between theory and practice in education, Herbart developed the concept of the 'circle of thought' (*Gedankenkreis*) (Muth, 1962, pp. 113-119). As indicated above, developing pedagogical tact comprises of cultivating feeling as well as rationality. According to this, teacher training should consist of both theoretical learning and practical experience, which should be closely related: student teachers should enter practice with a theoretical foundation and then reflect on their practical experiences from a theoretical perspective.

This basic idea of theoretical reflection on pedagogical practice was refined by van Manen's (1995; 2016) suggestion of reading and discussing with student teachers so-called "anecdotes": recorded and transcribed narratives given by students about the behaviour of their teachers. Such narratives are usually very concrete and do not contain theoretical reflections. On the one hand, their concreteness and vividness stimulate the readers' mimetic capacities; on the other, they encourage theoretical examination (e.g., with regard to concepts such as sensitivity, retention, and power relations). Student teachers consider whether or not the teachers mentioned in the anecdotes acted tactfully. Engaging with the anecdotes can thus train readers' "normative sensitivity" (van Manen, 1995, p. 63).

Student teachers take the teachers mentioned in the anecdotes as role models through mimetic reference and decide through reflection whether they are good or bad role models. In their own pedagogical practice, they will then try to behave similarly to the good role models and avoid behaviours that resemble that of the negative ones. Mimetic learning from role models here, then, refers to the above-mentioned Aristotelian approach to the human ability for mimesis.

While van Manen particularly emphasises anecdotes, pedagogical tact can also be learned with reference to empirical observations. Fageth's (2022) videographically created case vignettes are a good example. Again, it is critical that observations be very concrete and detailed in order to stimulate mimetic engagement of student teachers. Also, invented "normative case studies" (Reid & Levinson, 2023) will certainly train the student teachers' pedagogical tact. Of course, pedagogical practice itself is also important for learning pedagogical tact, as van Manen points out: "By observing and imitating how the teacher animates the students, walks around the room, uses the board, and so forth, the student teacher learns with his or her body" (2016, p. 183). Student teachers can therefore develop pedagogical tact by mimetically referring to other teachers as role models using a variety of methods.

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