

What is Pedagogy?

For centuries, pedagogy has neither been primarily concerned with school and curricula, nor with the techniques and politics of teaching. The meaning of pedagogy (or “pedagogics”), in other words, is broader than formal education, constructivist or instructivist pedagogies or even a pedagogy of the oppressed. Pedagogy instead begins by acknowledging the influence that is exercised by one person or group (i.e. the educator) on another (i.e. the educand), and the fact that this influence exists in special relation to the world.

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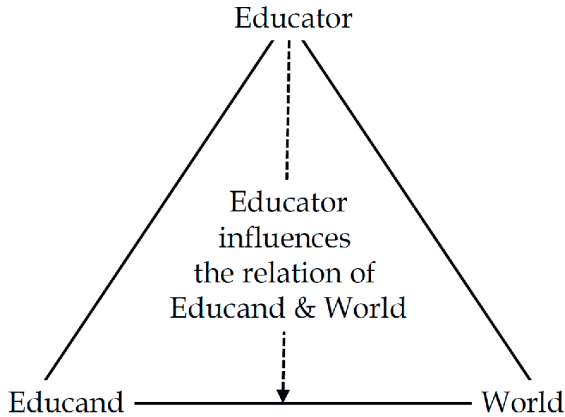


Figure 1: The pedagogical triangle (drawing by the authors).

The resulting interconnection of self, other and world constitutes a configuration central to pedagogy. It is the “pedagogical triangle” which gives particular emphasis to the distinctive relations that connect its three corners or points (Figure 1): The relation between educator and world (like all the other relationships in the triangle) is shaped by the interests of the one being educated, in which aspects of the world are subjected to a “didactic transposition” to have them address the educand as directly as possible. “World” in this sense refers not just to the things “out there” but also to the psyche, the inner world of the educand, as well as to the educator as a free and responsible adult. The relation between educator and the one being educated is known as the pedagogical relation, one that has been defined as a “passionate relation between a mature person and one who is becoming, specifically for the sake of the latter” (Nohl, 1933/2022, n.p.). Finally, the relation between the educand and the world is one which the educator cannot access directly but is also the one that the educator works to influence – both through their direct relation to the educand and to the world.

Although pedagogical relations today can arise between all kinds of people (e.g. between grown-ups in adult pedagogy), the relationship between educator and educand has traditionally been framed intergenerationally as that between *adult* and *child*. In this context, the central



Figure 2: Hannah Arendt, who understood “natality” in terms of “the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth” (1968; p. 196; Photo: Public Domain)

point of pedagogy has been formulated in various ways over time: As “what... the older generation... want[s] with the younger” (Schleiermacher, 1826/2022, para. 8), later as “the reaction of society to the fact of [human] development” (Bernfeld, 1925/1973, p. 90) or still later as “our attitude toward the fact of natality” (Arendt, 1958/1968, p. 196; Figure 2). Correspondingly, pedagogy does not regard education as something to be understood primarily through disciplines like sociology or psychology. Instead, it sees pedagogy as designating a distinctive perspective, as constituting an autonomous discipline with its own, specifically pedagogical questions, terminology, and ways of knowing.

The time and space of pedagogy

The pedagogical relation between the adult and the younger person is an *asymmetrical* one: the educator is there for the other in a way that the other is simply *not* there for the educator. This personal “relation of the educator to the child,” Nohl describes, “is always doubly determined: by the love for the child as he is and by the love for his educational goal, the child’s ideal” (1933/2022, para. 7). This means that educators must balance their engagement with the child between the wants of the present and expectations of the future. The fact that the pedagogical

present is in tension with the future in this way distinguishes the *time* of pedagogy from everyday temporality. As Schleiermacher points out (see, 1826/2022), our being with children is neither marked by sustained indulgence in the present nor by the continuous “sacrifice” of present enjoyment for the future (as might happen at work). Nohl explains that the “peculiar opposition and entwinement of two directions of work [oriented to the present and to the future] constitutes the pedagogical stance and gives the educator a singular distance to his subject as well as to his child or student. In its most refined expression,” Nohl concludes, “this distance is called pedagogical tact” (1933, para. 13). This tactful, slightly distanced disposition is illustrative of the space of pedagogy – one in which the educator gives the child room to become themselves but remains close enough to help.

Tact and the dignity of pedagogical practice

The way of knowing, reflecting and acting suggested just above gives pedagogy a distinctive emphasis on basic relations and on what F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834) called the “dignity of practice”. Before the days of widespread schooling, Schleiermacher reasons, “parents undertook education, and as is commonly acknowledged, they did so without reference to a ‘theory.’” He adds that as a result, it would be “incorrect to say that this practice gains its character and specificity only through theory,” but rather than practice has a “dignity”, a value, integrity and primacy all its own. Also ascribing to practice a kind of value all its own, J. F. Herbart (1776–1841) developed the idea that pedagogical theory and practice could be connected precisely through pedagogical tact. Because theory never aligns completely with practice, he says, a link intermediate between theory and practice involuntarily inserts itself. By this I mean a certain tact, a quick judgment and decision that is not habitual and eternally uniform. But this tact is unable to boast, as a fully developed theory *should*, that while remaining deliberately consistent with the rule, it can at the same time answer the true requirements of the

individual case... Based on continuous practice, there inevitably develops in humans a mode of action that is dependent on feeling but that only remotely relies on certainty of belief (1803/2022, para. 17).

To develop this modality, Herbart emphasizes, requires *both* theory and practice; it requires not exhaustive planning but for the educator to prepare “himself, his disposition[:] He must prepare his head as well as his heart to correctly receive, perceive, feel, and judge the phenomena awaiting him and the situation in which he will be placed” (1803/2022, para. 18). Herbart also emphasizes that educators should study theory not only of the kind outlined above (e.g. regarding the pedagogical triangle and pedagogical relation), but also regarding, for example, what he called an “aesthetic presentation of the world” and a type of instruction that is emphatically *educational*. All of this suggests a way of understanding education *not* as a field dominated by psychology or sociology, but by knowledge that connects with feelings and the senses. This is a knowledge that is not deliberately distanced from educational practice, but that is guided and informed by it, and that is more a kind of description and reflection than it is an exhaustive explanation (see: Bollnow, 1989).

Significantly, Herbart himself wrote about the dangers of “the science of education...being conquered and ruled from afar,” precisely by other sciences or disciplines. Herbart argued that “it would be better if the science of education remained as true as possible to its own *intrinsic conceptions* and cultivated more an *independent mode of thought*” (1806/1908, p. 83; emphases added). This article has just begun to introduce a small number of terms that Herbart would have seen as being intrinsically pedagogical – words like educand, educator, pedagogical relation, pedagogical tact, and didactical transformation. Meanwhile, in the case of what is called ‘education’ in English language, we can say that the colonization of education by other disciplines that Herbart

warned of is almost complete: The dominance of the social and psychological sciences, together with elements of philosophy and critical theory, is now so total in education as to have rendered education almost entirely a “field” of phenomena to be analyzed and directed only from *other* disciplines and vantage points. ■

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