



PEDAGOGICAL TACT

Knowing What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do

MAX VAN MANEN

Phenomenology of Practice

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Knowing What to Do When You
Don't Know What to Do



Max van Manen



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For Luka and Jude

It works!
(the child has stopped crying)
. . . but did I do right?

*I know it sounds absurd
but please tell me who I am*
("The Logical Song," Supertramp)

The pedagogical question:
How are we to act and live
with others, young and old,
in times of uncertainty and contingency,
realizing that we are apt to do damage?

More Praise for *Pedagogical Tact*

Van Manen's latest book Pedagogical Tact is a true work of art, elevating classroom pedagogy to an unheralded level of fascination, and revealing the committed teacher as a truly gifted and unique professional.

—Frank Crowther, University of Southern Queensland

Having experienced a journey of insights and understandings from Max van Manen's writings on phenomenology and pedagogy since the mid-1970s, I see Pedagogical Tact as an elegant culmination that weaves together five central themes of his work, beautifully illustrated, and highly accessible for educators, childcare workers, and others who are interested in improving education at any level: the meaning and being of child sense, personal pedagogy, interpretive reflectivity, onto-theology, and pedagogical ethics are desperately needed as a necessary antidote to the autocratic, mechanistic, surveillance-oriented policies and practices that dominate schooling today.

—William H. Schubert, University of Chicago

While The Tact of Teaching provided the initial inspiration for our popular Dutch program "Pedagogical Tact for Teachers," Max van Manen's new book deepens the phenomenon of (con)tact even further—doing so at a pleasant pace and with profound thought, and thus instilling and strengthening the swift in-the-moment-tact that a teacher, parent or school leader needs in everyday situations, and sensitizing our awareness of the truly human, truly vulnerable beauty of the teaching vocation.

—Luc Stevens and Geert Bors, NIVOZ (Netherlands
Institute for Educational Matters)

Pedagogical Tact is a masterful synthesis of Max van Manen's explorations of the relational qualities of work with children, the relational work that carries educational experience. It is a critique of much contemporary thinking about schools and an introduction to thinking in ways that go beyond critique. It is a must-read.

—Ian Westbury, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This book demonstrates that pedagogy is a powerful practice in the caring contact of the adult-child relations. Children's lives are not fully visible to us, and yet we live in the same world. Through vocative examples and sensitive experiential reflections Max van Manen shows how pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact are urgently required of all adults who carry caring and formative responsibilities for children and youths.

—Tone Saevi, NLA Høgskolen, Bergen, Norway

Preface

Dear Reader, this book does not need to be read in a sequential order. I have aimed to develop thematic chapters on pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact that can be read independently and in any order, though the opening chapters do begin with some introductory topics. There are five main pedagogical elements woven throughout the various chapters that explore how pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact may become conditioned in our personal lives (as teachers, parents, childcare professionals, and others) who carry pedagogical responsibilities for the young.

These thematic pedagogical elements are (1) *Child-sense*: possessing the active and reflective sensitivity to sense what goes on in the life of a child or young people in a particular and concrete situation, (2) *Personal pedagogy*: developing the self-reflexive awareness of one's own personal background and emotional make-up that contributes to a sensitive personal pedagogy, (3) *Interpretive reflectivity*: the intuitive or phenomenological reflectivity that helps to understand the lived meanings of certain phenomena or experiences in a child's or young person's life, (4) *Ontotheology*: the ontotheological awareness of what are the contemporary cultural forces that seem to shape not only the character of young people but also the pedagogical character of the adult in positive and negative modalities and directions, and (5) the personal and professional ethic that distinguishes "good" from "bad" ways of supporting and dealing with children and youths in particular situations and predicaments.

I will show that the notion of pedagogy, in the contemporary sense of this book, enjoys little currency in the present educational English language community. But the advantage of the dearth of a language of pedagogy is that it allows for a reinterpretative use of the terms "pedagogy" and "pedagogical tact," and a more sensitive attuning to the reality of adult-child relations. In this book the specification of meaning of the concept of pedagogy is not inconsistent with aspects of the long historical tradition of pedagogy in continental educational thought. But, the new language of pedagogy does not refer narrowly to a science or techniques of teaching, the production of learning outcomes, or curricular programs and competencies. Rather, pedagogy in the contemporary sense has to do with the personal relational and ethical aspects of teaching and bringing up children and youths: the pedagogy of teaching, parenting, grandparenting, etc.

The new pedagogy is that more elusive notion that lies at the heart of teaching and all other childcare practices. But even though pedagogy is a somewhat difficult subject to study and practice, a professional pedagogical

perspective on teaching should be mandatory for all education. It forces us to try to see and understand the complexity of classroom and school experiences as a formative reality for children's and young people's growth, learning, and transformative becoming.

We need to restore to education its proper pedagogical impulse and meaningfulness. The notions of pedagogical thoughtfulness, reflection, and tact have preoccupied me for many years. Pedagogy lies at the heart of the formative process of growing up and the educational development of human potential as well as the unique character of each person. We must aim for depth and richness. But as parents, teachers, policy makers, and educational leaders, we neither serve our children nor their classroom teachers and school administrators well when we only focus narrowly on "learning outcomes" and "testable results" that fail to acknowledge that deep and rich educational experiences cannot properly and adequately be described in terms of programs of learning and school productivities. In our increasingly technologically mediated worlds, the personal and relational dimensions of teaching-learning and interacting are at risk.

I was "blessed" to receive my own early schooling in an inner-city school. None of us came from middle-class homes with hope of further education. I was very lucky to encounter some teachers who gave me a chance at further education that my other school friends unfortunately did not receive. These early life experiences prompted my fascination with a novel such as *Ciske the Rat* (see Chapter 2) that I read several times as a young adolescent. My heart hurts for the hundreds and thousands of children who are orphaned by wars, who suffer from abuse, disease, or starvation, or who are recruited as child soldiers in distant lands. Their miseries press on our collective conscience for a guilt we cannot wash off. Yet it is not my intent to infuse a particular social cause into this pedagogical text. Stories from and about children were gathered from a variety of schools and from a variety of backgrounds and social contexts. In putting their experiences into words young people come to know their experiences and in reflecting on their experiences young people come to know what they mean to them.

I hope readers of this text will personally recognize an impulse that has motivated me over many years to remain focused on and guided by the philosophical perspective of life meaning, the methodology of existential reflection on lived experience, and the inspirational motivation that bring us to the study of pedagogy in the first place. I think this is the same impulse that brings young people to opt for a pedagogically charged career: teaching, education, counseling, social work, psychology, health science, and so forth. I genuinely feel that pedagogy is the vocational calling that lies at the origin of humanity and at the heart of our humanness and our purpose for being human in a fragile but fascinating world.

About the Cover Image

Into the Water! (1898), by Virginie Demont-Breton, The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium.

The cover painting *Into the Water!* by Virginie Demont-Breton, portrays a mother and her two children at an ocean beach. For many children, playing on the sandy beach and splashing in the shallow water is an adventurous and pleasurable activity. But this mother has difficulty with her toddler, who resists being taken into the water. The mother pulls the child's arm with a strong stride to force him to walk on his own feet. But we see from his whole physically tensed body that he is tenaciously struggling to stop her. Simultaneously he is clutching her skirt as if to seek security in holding onto her. He is burying his head in his mother's clothing. But the mother's demeanor seems firm and not at all playful. Is the little boy simply being recalcitrant? It would not be very helpful to call it a battle of wills.

This painting may be seen as an apt metaphor for pedagogical tact (or the lack of it) in situations in which an adult has to know what to do when not really knowing what to do. Although the image here is of a small infant, the metaphoric quality of the image applies to all ages and pedagogical situations and relations.

We need to try to understand what this moment may be like for the mother as well as for the child. Perhaps the mother wants to introduce the child to the pleasures of the beach? Perhaps she aims to simply let him experience the water on his feet? We do not see the face of the toddler. Is he crying? Is he scared looking at the wide ocean stretching out in front of them? Is he afraid of the water? Is the water too cold? Does he not like to get his feet wet? Or does he just want to go home? The small infant on the mother's shoulder looks unstirred by all the turmoil. It is a classic painting of a recognizable pedagogical moment of a caring parent who attempts to draw her child into the world.

The mother seems determined and may feel that she is doing what is best for her child. What emotions motivate her? And what is her child experiencing right there? Does the mother understand and recognize the meaning and significance of her child's distress? Her hand holds her child's hand in a firm, full-fisted grasp. She appears intent to have him experience this wondrous water world. But the child does not appreciate her intent. Should the mother stop and reflect on her attempt to take an unwilling child into the water? Or does she feel at the end of her rope? If her gestures do not seem tactful, they sure raise questions of pedagogical tact. Should she try to be a bit gentler and more patient in persuading him to venture a few steps into the water?

How many of us have not experienced times when we were coerced or influenced by an adult (a parent, teacher, or other caring adult) to be or do something we did not want to be or do? Or we experienced times when we

were prevented to do something we wanted to do? Perhaps it was for the best? Or perhaps not? The latency of some tactless pedagogical actions of a parent or teacher may still haunt us for the rest of our lives. At the hand of many evocative experiential practical examples, this phenomenological text asks: What role does or should pedagogy play in schools, families, communities, and in our media-mediated worlds that are increasingly being rationalized and ruled by instrumentalist managerial, technocratic, and economic policies, forces, and values? This book on pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact aims to complement and reflectively enrich teaching- and learning-oriented texts and childcare literature in educational, psychological, health science, and childcare-oriented programs.

Acknowledgments¹

I thank the numerous school students and their teachers who have shared their experiences with me in writing and research projects that were generously funded by the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada. I also thank my graduate students, who have shared their personal experiences and their phenomenological reflections on pedagogy and pedagogical stories with me.

Over the years I have benefitted from ongoing discussions with many friends and colleagues about pedagogical issues and the fragilities of the future for our own children. Unlike other academic or political involvements, pedagogy is always a very personal concern. In a sense teachers do not care for abstract children; they care for the actual children with whom they live and for whom they personally hold educational and pedagogical responsibilities, here and now.

I sincerely thank my friends and colleagues Catherine Adams, Geert Bors, Frank Crowther, Teresa Dobson, Bas Levering, Wilfried Lippitz, Tone Saevi, and others who have contributed to or commented on aspects or topics of this text. And I thank my publisher, Mitch Allen, for believing in the importance of pedagogy in our personal and professional lives.

I thank my wife, Judith van Manen, a gifted teacher, for her pedagogical insights and sensitivities. And I am grateful to my son Mark, who thoughtfully recalls childhood stories (some of which I might rather forget), and to my son Michael and daughter-in-law Miep, who exemplify how to be thoughtful parents to our grandchildren, Luka and Jude. I thank them all for their love and incredible accomplishments and for showing me tactfully the need to remain humble for often not knowing what to do when I had to know what to do as a parent or grandparent in life's predicaments.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Primacy of Pedagogy

Missed Moments of Pedagogical Tact?

At a pleasant social evening some friends are sitting around talking about a symphony orchestra that is playing in town. Edward, a retired businessman, expresses his admiration for the concertmaster. Some other people join in talking about the challenges of being a successful musician. Then Edward takes the floor again:

You know, this is a memory that has obsessed me my entire life. Until recently I have not been able to talk about it with anyone because it is so hurtful. Even as an adult, sharing it would have brought me to tears. When I was sixteen years old, after studying violin for a number of years, I realized that I could never really be good enough. I just lacked something. I could not really excel. So I decided to give it up. My father was very unhappy about my decision. He tried to change my mind. But I refused. I told him that I knew that I would never be able to play the instrument properly. Angrily, my father took the violin from my hands. He hung it on the wall of the living room and said, “From now on, whenever you look at this violin, you will know what a failure you are in my eyes.” I felt horrible. After several weeks my mother took the violin down from the wall. She felt sorry for me. But the empty spot could not be taken down. It haunted me: I was a failure in my father’s eyes. The memory of that moment has troubled me all my life. Therefore, I have always told my own kids that they should do whatever they feel is right for them and not what they may feel I expect from them. My father never took his words back about me being a failure, even though eventually I became the successful head of a large company. But now, at the age of eighty-two, I finally feel that I have dealt with my secret pain or, at least, that I can share it here with you.

Edward’s story shows how the latency of pedagogical moments can affect us for the rest of our lives, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. We can easily recognize the significance of the occurrence of *negative* pedagogical moments. At times we may still blame certain adults from our childhood

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for their neglect, their negative influences, or past harmful actions that still haunt us. These blames and accusations also constitute the pedagogical narratives of our lives. And they may determine our own pedagogies.

But hopefully each of us can also recognize what good pedagogy can do when we gratefully acknowledge the love and care we received from a mother, father, teacher, or some other significant adult who worried about us and was there for us when needed. This is especially clear when we reflect on the happiness, successes, and blessings we experienced in our families as children and in classrooms as students. We may recognize the consequences of pedagogy when we become aware of the latent, lasting, and lingering effects of the events that make up the innumerable often-forgotten experiences, foggily fragmented and half-remembered pedagogical happenings in our childhoods. The latent values of these events mean that they have formative—and yet often untraceable—consequences for our unfolding sense of self, personal identity, secret interiorities, and for who and what we (have) become.

How many of us are still longing for the father's recognition or the mother's appreciation that still somehow drives what we do and what we hope to make of ourselves? This powerful pedagogical theme of the latent significance of an adult's approval in our lives is a poorly recognized and a little understood pedagogical phenomenon. Even those who have developed conflicts or messed up relationships with their parents may at times realize to their surprise (or even chagrin) how this father's regard or this mother's love is still a deep-seated object of desire that makes us do or achieve things that give positive meaning to our lives. We recognize these pedagogical latencies in the lives of famous authors such as Franz Kafka or Marcel Proust who suffered from dysfunctional relations with their fathers. But no doubt we can recognize the entanglements of recognition and (dis) approval in our own lives or in the lives of others close to us.

Theories of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and reward are existentially simplistic mechanisms that fail to realize that the long-term latency of pedagogical events belongs to the silent secrets of the narrative themes of our lives. Some parents place high expectations on their child, expectations that the child may or may not be able to live up to. Other parents claim not to pose expectations, but the children experience them nevertheless and perhaps even more compellingly. Again, other parents may truly not entertain any expectations, or so it seems. But how do their children experience the lack of expectations? Only pedagogically-sensitive teachers may surmise the consequences of such potential entanglements of expectations when during a parent-teacher conference they encounter the parent in the child and the child in the parent.

We simply cannot predict in childhood how the latency of pedagogical influence is felt and realized throughout life, even when this particular child

has meanwhile become an adult. Of course, the child also influences the adult. The pedagogical relation is complex, and in part it signifies also a process of self-development and self-understanding for the adult. The mother, father, grandparent, teacher, psychologist, nurse, counselor, pediatrician, and those others who care for children learn to understand themselves in new ways as they are prompted to reflect on themselves and their interactions with the children for whom they care.

A Pedagogical Moment

In a poem entitled the “Bearhug,” Michael Ondaatje (1979, p. 104) describes how his son had been calling him from the bedroom for a goodnight hug and kiss. Ondaatje is a loving father but he is busy with something and so he yells “okay” to his son—that he will be there in just a moment. Then, after finishing, he finally and absentmindedly walks into his son’s bedroom, and what does he see? His son is standing there, expectantly, with his arms outstretched and a huge smile on his face. He is ready for the ritualistic good-night bearhug. In the next stanza, Ondaatje gives a sensitive poetic description of the way a parent hugs a child. But then, almost as an afterthought, two short lines trail the end of his poem:

How long was he standing there
like that, before I came?

Between the calling of his young son and this lingering moment of reflecting, Michael Ondaatje experiences a pedagogical moment. A pedagogical moment that takes the form of personal responsiveness: the father acts (says “goodnight” to his son, though after letting him wait rather long), and he reflects (asks himself, “What was it like for my son to have to wait like that?” And by implication, perhaps, “Should I have been a bit more attentive?”). The goodnight kiss may seem a simple ritual, but in actuality it can be filled with psychological and pedagogical significance, as, for example, the many references and studies about the goodnight kiss in Marcel Proust’s writings attest (1981)—in his staying awake while waiting for his mother to come and whose kiss would finally be able to put Marcel to sleep, his father’s disapproval of him, and the psychoanalytic entanglements.

Unlike Proust’s interpreters, Ondaatje does not seem to want to make a psychoanalytic issue out of this childhood incident. And yet Ondaatje alludes to the implied meanings of this common, significant childhood moment (the child cannot sleep and calls to the parent for a goodnight hug; Ondaatje dawdles, and dawdles some more, and then, finally, comes to the child’s bed). Ondaatje makes this moment into a pedagogical incident by wondering how long his son had been waiting for him. And he prompts us

to reminisce what this moment may be like for the child. How many of us did not have childhood experiences like this—as parent or as child: waiting for the goodnight hug or kiss? Of course, one might hear the irritated adult refrain that parents should not always have to be at the beck-and-call of their children, that children should not be spoiled, that overprotectiveness may unwittingly create children who remain emotionally too dependent on their parents, and, of course, that children should learn that they sometimes have to wait for their parent to be available.

But it is quite clear from the poem that Ondaatje did not deliberately let his son wait for the goodnight hug (e.g., this kid is just too demanding—I don't want to be too overprotective). But these considerations show the thoroughly ethical nature of pedagogy. Ondaatje's poem has such a pointed pedagogical significance in that it shows how the reflexive turn of his afterthought is a pedagogical wondering: What was his child's experience of waiting like? What calls in the calling of the child for his father? What kind of waiting was this? How does this waiting condition the child's experience of the pleasure of the anticipated hug and kiss? How good is such good-night bear hug? How is this waiting and the goodnight kiss experienced as a portal for sleep?

Pedagogical experiences occur in situations when and where adults stand in pedagogical relations with children or young people. These situations do not need to be uncommon. Usually pedagogical moments happen in ordinary situations when an adult is required to act pedagogically. It is a matter of acting pedagogically responsibly and appropriately in everyday situations. Sometimes, if not commonly, in our daily living with children we are required to act instantly, in the spur of the moment. As a rule, we do not have time to lean back in our chair and deliberately decide what to do in the situation. And even when there is time to reflect on what alternative actions are available and what best approach one should take, in the pedagogical moment one must act immediately, even if that action may consist of holding back.

What Is Pedagogy?

So what, then, is pedagogy? Well, this is a question that does not really seem to need an academic answer. Anyone knows what pedagogy is who has received the attentive care and worries of a mother, a father, a teacher, a grandparent, or some other adult who, at various times, played a supportive and formative part in our young lives. Without the pedagogical support from these adults, we simply could not and would not be who we are, or, worse, we would not even be alive today.

So don't we already know what pedagogy is? The answer is paradoxical: we do and we don't. We do because parenting (and teaching) is the oldest

profession in the world. Child rearing is as intrinsic to human life as is feeding, clothing, caring, sex, and sheltering. Pedagogy inheres and is rooted in our phenomenological response to the child's natural vulnerability. In spite of the historical atrocities human beings have inflicted on their offspring, we recognize that there is a need to do right with the young child. (Call it instinct, sentimentality, culture, motherhood, or paternity—call it whatever you wish.) It is the poverty of social science that it fails to see an obvious given: the young child, by virtue of his or her very vulnerability, tends to bring out the best in grown-ups.

Yet, in a sense we don't know what pedagogy is because the phenomenon of pedagogy is ultimately a mystery when we push for a more originary understanding of pedagogy. The primal meaning of pedagogy is beyond rational understanding. The child is born crying, and the parent experiences the cry as an appeal, as a transforming experience to *do* something: to hold the child, protect her, smile, and perhaps worry whether everything is all right. This first overwhelming sensual and sensitive sensibility that a new parent experiences is often this ability of a seemingly natural responsiveness: response-ability, the unfolding of our pedagogic nature. As new parents, before we have a chance to sit back and reflect on whether we can accept this child, the child has already made us act. And luckily for humankind, this spontaneous needfulness to do the right thing usually *is* the right thing. As we reach to hold the child (rather than turn away and let it perish), we have already acted pedagogically.

When living side by side with adults, children soon prompt increasingly reflective questions. In other words, as soon as we gain a lived sense of the pedagogic quality of parenting and teaching, we start to question and doubt ourselves. Pedagogy *is* this questioning, this doubting. We wonder: Did I do the right thing? Why do some people teach or bring their children up in such a different manner? We are shocked when we see or hear how children are physically or psychologically abused. We also may notice with distress how many children are more subtly ill treated or abused. We see this all around us in shopping places, in public transportation locations, in the neighborhood, in newspapers, and on the street.

From the history of child psychology and child studies we know that young children, who do not experience a minimum of proper care, tend to do poorly in life. Abandoned babies in crowded orphanages that lacked adequate nursing care have died from the simple deficiency of loving touch and affection—they perished from lack of contact. Children who must somehow grow up while surrounded by neglect or, worse, by suffering abuse and maltreatment may be doomed to be damaged for the remainder of their adult lives.

The simple point is this: it is pedagogy that makes the crucial difference in a child's life. Pedagogy involves us in distinguishing actively and/

or reflectively what is good or right and what is life enhancing, just, and supportive from what is not good, wrong, unjust, or damaging in the ways we act, live, and deal with children. In this sense pedagogy is the experience of the good, the meaning of the good, of goodness. A positive pedagogy of parenting and teaching may promise a life with adequate doses of meaningfulness, happiness, and healthy and responsible relations with others. The good of pedagogy is not some social product or educational outcome but rather goodness itself: goodness *of* and *for* this or that child or these young people. This goodness must constantly be recognized, realized, and retrieved in particular actions in concrete and contingent situations and relations. In the words of Levinas: "Only goodness is good" (1995, p. 61).

Upon reflection the meaning of pedagogy in the adult-child relation is profoundly enigmatic. The inceptual phenomenon of the pedagogical relation is probably the most elemental dimension of human existence. So, in this book I use the term "pedagogy" to refer to this primordial adult-child relation that is biological and cultural, ancient and present, mundane and mysterious, sensuous and sensitive to the ethical demand as it is experienced in pedagogical relations, situations, and actions. As well, the relational affect for the child or young person is constitutive of the relational ethics between the adults who are caring for the child. This relational ethic intends fidelity, love, trust, mutual dependency, and the acceptance of caring responsibility of the adults for their child and for each other.

"In this brilliantly conceived and poetic book, Max van Manen, makes clear that pedagogy cannot be reduced to either an abstraction, a science, a methodology, or a mind numbing form of measurement. On the contrary, for van Manen it is a practice that is as deeply self-reflective, moral and personal as it is imaginative—this is a book that not only inspires, it energizes."

—HENRY GIROUX, McMaster University

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MAX VAN MANEN is emeritus Professor in Research Methods, Pedagogy and Curriculum Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta and Adjunct Professor at the University of Victoria. He is the leading proponent of the practice and meaning of phenomenological inquiry in pedagogy, psychology, health science, and the human sciences.

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