Can One Teach Tact?

Tyson Lewis
University of North Texas

Norm Friesen's article "Ineluctable Ambivalence: Embodying Pedagogical Tact" can be put in a lineage of educational philosophy that troubles the standardized notion of teacher excellence. Instead of anchoring teacher excellence in abstract rule following, discourses of tactful teaching turn toward situated and embodied forms of understanding. Of course, Max van Manen's notion of sensitive know-how,[1] Hubert Dreyfus's theory of expertise,[2] as well as Derek Gottlieb's recent work on situated judgment[3] all reject notions of good teaching as the simple application of generalizable rules to concrete particulars. In my own work (co-authored with Justin Garcia),[4] I have also advocated for a move away from the intellectualist position of most teacher education psychology toward a more phenomenologically attuned approach to pre-service teacher curriculum development. Friesen adds to this literature in invaluable ways by giving us all an unlikely intellectual ally: Kant! Instead of the typical Kant whom we might want to blame for an overemphasis on intellection in education, Friesen gives us a Kant of and for the body. Indeed, he finds in Kant the seeds for a positive notion of pre-conscious, pre-thematic, fully embodied and situated forms of judgment. Kant emerges as an advocate for reflection that, in its complexity, calls for an improvisational juggling of environmental variables that are so numerous that they cannot be calculated by the mind. The model here is that of the virtuoso organist capable of playing a tune while holding a conversation all at one time.

From Kant, Friesen offers a definition of tact as a kind of "responsive negotiation "between bodies in a situation. The body is responsive to what is given, yet also extends itself into this given, modifying

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it in important ways. The body, in this sense, both receives and sends messages, both exerts and restrains itself according to the specific needs of the moment. Tact is the pre-conscious understanding found within the sensitivities of the limbs as they attempt to find their way through a complex web of situated relationships. What is negotiated here is—at best—an equilibrium of forces and gestures poised in the gap that separates and conjoins what is from what could be. If Kant is the starting point for Friesen's inquiry, he ends with an educational turn toward *Être et Avoir* and its depiction of the teacher Georges Lopez. Through a careful reading of a single scene, Friesen illustrates how the teacher's body engages in a series of responsive negotiations, exhibiting certain forms of tactical push and pull necessary to open up a space where the student might explore her potentialities.

Although Friesen does not use this phrase, we could describe tact as a kind of embodied attunement to the perfect proportionality between presence and absence, force and restraint on the part of the teacher. This form of subtle attunement to what is called for in a pedagogical situation is ambiguous yet necessary. It is ambiguous because the force of the teacher only exists in its *withdrawal*. It is always on the precipice of (dis) appearing. As such, it is difficult to pinpoint and evaluate with certainty. Yet it is also necessary because without it we can imagine deleterious consequences in the form of extremes. Either the teacher intervenes too quickly and with too much insistence or the teacher does nothing at all, abandoning the child. In both cases, a lack of appropriate proportionality ruins the possibility that a child can feel the difference between reality and potentiality, which is necessary for education to unfold.

Friesen's intellectual genealogy is useful for mapping tact, and his turn toward *Être et Avoir* is a nice illustration of his general theory. But unlike van Manen, Dreyfus, Gottlieb, and myself, Friesen does not

tackle what is an important issue: can tact be taught, and if so, how? In my work with Justin Garcia, I suggested that appreciation of tactfulness can be cultivated through a slow introduction to the world of the school coupled with phenomenological reflection/description of lived experiences. Students ought to participate in classroom life, attend school board meetings, and perform community service at schools. Through these experiences, students can begin to become attuned to the worldhood of the school as a place that matters and begin to see how they might project themselves into this place. I utilized this basic format for several years at my former university in New Jersey. Students would have field experiences and write vivid descriptions. The goal was to get them to try to understand schools as places of meaning and rich practices. While an imperfect model, Garcia and myself nevertheless attempted to put into educational practice what might otherwise remain merely an intellectual exercise reserved for academics.

Here I would like to propose a missed opportunity in Friesen's work that would have made a significant contribution to the literature on pre-service teacher education in relation to tact. He cites a scene in the film *Être et Avoir* as recording an example of teacherly tact, in its ambivalences. He proceeds to give a close reading of the gestures of the teacher in this scene. Missed here is how the film itself is a teacher that exhibits a certain kind of tactful approach to tact. Just as the teacher in the film patiently guides the child with just the right amount of close distance and just the right amount of gentle prodding, so too the film offers up a pedagogy in how to observe tact and feel the tactfulness of gestures. The camera lingers on small, incidental moments; it focuses on the seeming minutia of everyday life. There is nothing spectacular here or overtly transformative. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that it is an unspectacular depiction of mundane, average, and everyday life in a classroom. But precisely because of this, the film offers an invitation to

dwell in extended fashion with moments that would otherwise be glossed over for more dramatic subjects. By dwelling with rather than merely looking at, the film puts us in contact with teaching in a very special way; it allows the invisible dimensions of teaching to make themselves visible and thus available for the kind of analysis provided by Friesen. And in this way, the film models phenomenological care for detailed descriptions rich in the texture of educational life as it is lived. The lesson here is not so much in the content as in the mode of presentation. The film teaches a phenomenological way of seeing, and in turn, now seeing is itself already a kind of meditative reflection on a situation.

And in this sense, Friesen opens up a new possibility for how to teach tact in a pre-service classroom: through the use of film that itself exhibits tactful formal qualities. I like this idea very much and feel it can supplement my own approach to pre-service teacher education, as a film can be shared as a common text. The problem I ran into with my own experiential approach to a phenomenologically grounded form of pre-service teacher education was that student observations of classrooms, schools, and meetings remained too isolated and individualized. While we often would discuss snippets of descriptions as a group, there was no way to compare and contrast possible variants of the same experience because most students were assigned different teachers, if not different schools. With a film, all students can watch and reflect on the same scene in order to think through the ineluctable ambiguities of teaching that might otherwise pass unnoticed precisely because of their ephemeral, paradoxical status. In this way, films like *Être et Avoir* can model forms of phenomenological attunement, helping those who are preparing for life in a classroom to see another way of seeing.

1 Max van Manen, "Pedagogical Sensitivity and Teachers Practical Knowing-In-Action," *Peking University Educational Review* 6, no. 1 (2008): 1-23.
2 Hubert Dreyfus, "Intelligence Without Representation: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representations: The Relevance of Phenomenology to Scientific Explanations," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1, (2002): 367-383.
3 Derek Gottlieb, *Education Reform and the Concept of the Good Teacher* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
4 Justin A. Garcia and Tyson E. Lewis, "Getting a Grip on the Classroom: From Psychological to Phenomenological Curriculum Development in Teacher Education Programs," *Curriculum Inquiry* 44, no. 4 (2014): 141-168.