Tact and the pedagogical triangle: The authenticity of teachers in relation

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We must finally have the courage… to open up and keep open the realm of the natural, the unintentional and the involuntary. This is of special importance since this domain is obscured by the means-ends thinking of our time that stops at nothing—with neither the school nor educational theory standing in its way. –Jakob Muth (1962, p. 47)

Teachers around the world are now commonly subject to standards defining their role and activity in terms of the effective application of the most efficient teaching methods, in terms of optimizing inputs and outputs, means and ends. Measures of student learning and competencies, of the "value" that can be "added" by teachers to student test scores have become the common currency for educators and administrators alike. Little room is left, it seems, for the unintentional and involuntary, for student individuality and autonomy—for anything outside of the quantifiable ends and the means for their attainment. For example, besides tying teacher remuneration to student outcomes, the US No Child Left Behind policy mandates "scientifically based" instructional strategies—ones that tightly script lessons in ways that exclude teacher and student spontaneity.

It is difficult to imagine anything more alien than these standardized performance policies to the motivations and beliefs that motivate novice teachers and sustain more experienced ones. From Boise to Brunei, from Leuven to Santiago, the desires and values of teacher candidates appear remarkably similar. They are to work with and help children and young people, to change society for the better, and to enjoy the rewards of teaching itself.[1] These morally-charged personal convictions have too often been observed to run aground of scientific performance benchmarks, prescriptive instructional strategies, and the measures of teaching efficiency and effectiveness. The result is what some have called an epidemic of teacher burnout—with

burnout defined as personal and professional collapse caused by stress and overwork (e.g., see: Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014 for recent meta-analyses; see also Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Dworkin & Tobe, 2014). But as Santoro (2011) maintains, it is arguably not so much that "individual teachers' *personal* resources cannot meet the challenge" of their profession, but that teachers feel deprived *professionally*. And this can be regarded, she further maintains, not as teacher burnout but *demoralization*—a deprivation of teachers' and teacher-candidates' moral meaning and purpose. Santoro explains: The "problem lies in their gradual inability to access the moral rewards of teaching; it can lead to feeling depressed, discouraged, shameful, and hopeless" (p. 19).

How can teachers, whether novice or more experienced, sustain themselves—and be sustained—under these conditions? Is it possible to hold on to the conviction and inspiration that originally led them to the field? This article responds to these questions by exploring the relational phenomenon of pedagogical *tact*. It examines manifestations of tact through a video recording of one teacher working with a class of black boys at a middle school in an upper Midwestern inner-city. It studies the actions and interactions of teacher and student(s) in relation to a grammar lesson on the construction and analysis of "complex sentences." This examination is structured through the heuristic of the "pedagogical triangle" which connects the teacher, student and content—in this case, the teacher and student(s) in an inner-city classroom and exercises in parsing complex sentences. This paper does so in order to address the conflict between teacher candidates' moral and interpersonal grounding in their new profession, and impersonal technocratic lessons, outputs and pedagogies. We present tact and the pedagogical triangle, in other words, as means by which teacher candidates might navigate between the means-ends thinking embodied in standardized teaching and testing on the one hand, and the dangers of unsustainable demoralization on the other. Pedagogical tact—and the analysis of a video recording of its exercise in terms of the pedagogical triangle—can accomplish this, we believe, by addressing one of the moments where teacher candidates might feel most completely abandoned by their teacher training: In those situations for which there are no ready prescriptions, moments which *are not*, and indeed *cannot be* anticipated in the methods and techniques provided for them before their entry into the field. In the light of our topic, the 1962 quote from Jakob Muth above shows that our con-

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[1] This characterization reflects findings from a variety of experiential and academic sources: Brunei is covered in Yong (1995); we have surveyed classes of teacher candidates (informally in the context of guest lectures) at the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven about their motivations for teaching, and we are familiar with teacher education and teacher educators in both Boise and Santiago. See also: Kyriacou, Hultgren, & Stephens, 1999; Han & Yin, 2016.

cerns are not new. Our paper uses Muth, 1962 classic on pedagogical "tact-in-action" (*Pädagogischer Takt… ein Form erzieherischen und didaktischen Handelns*[2]) as an interpretive guide; indeed, it can be seen as an overview of a number of Muth's key points through the close "reading" and interpretation of an illustrative video clip.

1. Frame of reference: tact and the pedagogical triangle

This article was developed through the convergence of two quite different approaches to a common question for research. This is the question of the ethical or normative nature of the teaching, as manifest in everyday classroom activity. The first approach comes from the German traditions of *Pädagogik* and *Didaktik*, and is covered throughout the paper. Although less overt in the paper, the second approach is no less significant. It comes from recent American research into "character education" and specifically into *teacher manner*. Drawing from Aristotelian sources, "teacher manner" has been defined "as action consistent with one or more relatively stable dispositions or traits of character" (Richardson & Fenstermacher, 2001, p. 631). Although tact or tactfulness are generally defined (here and elsewhere) as in terms of situated interaction rather than subsisting in one's *character*, there are many points connecting conceptions of teacher manner and pedagogical tact. These include a common emphasis on the personal nature of the relationship between the student and the teacher, the problematic nature of theory (moral or otherwise) for pedagogical practice, and above all, an affirmation of the unavoidably ethical nature of commonplace teacher action and interaction (e.g., see: Fenstermacher, 2001; Richardson & Fallona, 2001). Ethics in this case is not a matter of teaching students right and wrong, but of seeing one's own engagement with and responsibility to one's students in ethical terms. Also important is the fact that video data collected originally for the "Manner in Teaching Project" led by Virginia Richardson and Gary Fenstermacher has been adapted for the purposes of this study, as explained below.

Tact was first introduced to pedagogical discourse over 200 years ago by Johann Friedrich Herbart, who inherited Immanuel Kant's chair in philosophy at the University of Königsberg. Herbart speaks briefly of tact in the context of a lecture to his own teacher candidates on theory and practice in teaching, describing it as "quick judgment and decision, not proceeding like routine, eternally uniform, but [adapting to] …the true requirements of the individual case" (1896, p. 20). Over 150 years later, Jakob Muth significantly expanded on Herbart's references to tact, in part by analyzing this phenomenon through the lens of the "pedagogical triangle," as mentioned above.

To understand tact in a specifically *pedagogical* way, it is first important to understand the relations of the student, teacher and content as configured in the context of the pedagogical triangle. Simply put, the pedagogical triangle is an elementary, heuristic structure that can be used to highlight and analyze the specific interrelationships and interactions between *teacher*, *student* and *content* (e.g., student lessons, exercises and projects) in a given *pedagogical situation* (Fig. 1; see
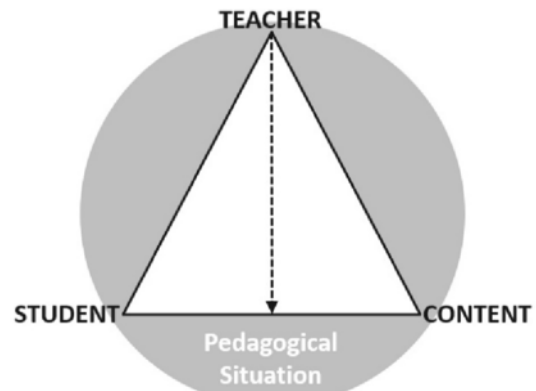

Fig. 1. The pedagogical triangle consists of: 1. Triangle outline: Teacher-student-content in relation. 2. Circle: The pedagogical situation. 3. Vertical, dashed line: The influence exercised by the teacher on the student-content relation, or: how the teacher relates *to* the student *through* the content (see Fig. 2).

also Author, 2017).[3] In Muth's and others' accounts, each element in the pedagogical triangle is connected to another in multiple senses. Each of the three solid lines or connections delimiting this triangle brings with it a different emphasis: Student and content are linked through learning, study and work; teacher and content are linked both through preparation and instruction. The student and teacher, finally, are connected through the much-studied student-teacher relationship, or what is known in the German context as the "pedagogical relation" (see: Author, 2017). The dotted vertical line and arrow in the middle of the triangle indicates the focus of the teacher on affecting the relationship of student to content—both through his or her direct relation to the student and to the content. In the pedagogical situation, the teacher intends to change the relation of student to content from unnecessary uncertainty or confusion to clarity and confidence. In this sense and as illustrated further below, the teacher can also be said to be relating to the student *through* the content. In its most elementary form, the pedagogical triangle can be readily identified in the widest range of pedagogical situations, including in snapshots of everyday pedagogical interactions (Fig. 2).

The idea of the pedagogical triangle, like work on teacher manner mentioned above, draws on Aristotelian sources. Specifically, it is derived from the conception of rhetoric and the *rhetorical* triangle presented in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Zierer & Seel, 2012, p. 5). In an explanation that sounds remarkably like Herbart on tact, Aristotle defines rhetoric "as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 1924/535 BCE). Pedagogically tactful action, for its part, can be described as the ability to see and make use of what is available in a given situation for ends that are specifically *pedagogical*—that are for the good of the student *and* for his or her learning. As students of communication and composition will recall, the rhetorical triangle defines the interdependent relationship of the speaker (or *ethos*), the audience (*pathos*) and the message (*logos*).

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[2] The full title of this book is: *Pädagogischer Takt: Monographie einer aktuellen Form erzieherischen und didaktischen Handelns,* "Pedagogical Tact: Study of a contemporary form of educational and instructional action." Parts of this book are currently being co-translated by this article's first author.

[3] We trace the development of what is known in the original German of Muth and Herbart as the *didaktik* triangle, with *Didaktik* referring to the study and practice of teaching and learning. At the same time we acknowledge that variations of this triangular configuration have appeared—apparently independent from the German tradition—in the work of Maggie Lampert on mathematics instruction (2001) and elsewhere in English-language scholarship (e.g., Anderson, 2003). In addition, we recognize the narrow and often pejorative significance of the term "didactic" in English, in comparison with the rich breadth of *Didaktik* in German research and practice. As a consequence, this triangle is referred to here as the *pedagogical triangle*. In choosing this name, we follow the example of Jean Houssaye who knowingly adapted this construct from the Herbartian tradition, and termed it the "*triangle pédagogique*" in French (2015).

Fig. 2. The pedagogical triangle in a concrete teaching and learning situation, illustrating all of its essential elements: The teacher points and looks at the instructional content (on the computer screen); the student's attention appears to be shifting between the screen (student-content) and the teacher (student-teacher). The teacher, by leaning in and literally intervening between the student and the content with her hands, can be seen as mediating the student's relation to this content, or to be relating to the student *via* the content. (Photo courtesy of the US Dept. of Education).

Ethos, first of all, refers to the character demonstrated by the speaker—the person who is working through his or her words (*logos*) to affect the thoughts and feelings (*pathos*) of the audience. In the pedagogical context, it is the ethical *character* of teacher's actions in relation to the child or student and what he or she is to learn that are paramount. In the rhetorical situation, on the other hand, it is *pathos*, the feeling of the audience, that the speaker seeks to pathically affect that is important. In pedagogy, however, it is the pathos of the *child* or *student*, his or her ability, congeniality and confidence and that the teacher is to sense, affect and influence.

Comparing the rhetorical and pedagogical situations further, one could say that standing too close to a student or being relentlessly insistent about student success can have just a jarring and unpleasant effect as a speaker telling jokes at a funeral. And both, it should be noted, are problematic in specifically *contextual* and *ethical* terms, in terms of the speaker's or teacher's character or *ethos,* rather than in terms of context-free causality or efficiency. We don't ask whether inappropriate jokes at a funeral were actually funny or not, just as parents might not initially wonder whether their child heard more clearly or worked more quickly when the teacher was invading their space. In both the rhetorical and pedagogical triangles, all three elements are always in play, even if the actions of only one or two of these points are all that is immediately apparent. Finally, just as the speaker is always communicating to a *particular* audience, a teacher never just gives a lesson; it is always a lesson for *particular* students in a *particular* context.

As it is used both here and in other work, the pedagogical triangle does not provide any predictive or causal insight; its visibility in an instructional context does not necessarily mean that "good" or "effective" teaching or learning are taking place. This triangle also is not a structure or technique for manipulation in the now-familiar sense of the psychological "triangulation." Rather, as we show in our interpretation and discussion, what *is* important is *keeping* all three elements in play, and sustaining their mutual separation through tactful words and actions: The student (and his or her worth) always needs to be distinguished from curricular content and its demands, just as the student-teacher relation is not something that exists entirely for its own sake, but always—either implicitly or explicitly—subsists in relation to the scholastic tasks at hand. Finally, as we show below, the rela-

tions constituting the pedagogical triangle are not necessarily constituted through overt action or interaction. Recognizing both moments of pedagogical tact and of relation and connection in this triangle can be just as much a matter of looking for what the teacher (or student) is *not* saying or doing, rather than for explicit actions or deeds.

Returning briefly to Herbart's original definition of pedagogical tact, it is important to note that the role of tact in the relation of pedagogical theory and practice is not just a question of putting explicit instruction into corresponding action. Teaching cannot proceed mindlessly or mechanically—based on the abstract principles of psychology, classroom instruction or management, or even pre-existing moral theory. Students and the conditions of the classroom demand flexibility and improvisation, and no amount of planning and strategy development can prevent this. Indeed, as Herbart himself has put it, if a teacher "has anticipatingly indulged in extensive plans, practical circumstances will mock him" (p. 21). One could say that a kind of "gap" always exists between the best-laid plans on the one hand, and myriad classroom details and demands on the other. It is this gap according to Herbart where the "quick judgment and decision" of tact "involuntarily inserts itself"—forming "a link intermediate between theory and practice." "Pedagogical tact," Herbart continues, comes to occupy "the place" of moment-by-moment decision-making "that theory leaves vacant, and so becomes the immediate director of our practice" (p. 20). Following Herbart, and emphasizing his debt to Kant, some scholars have characterized tact as the exclusively "*intellectual* ability to understand something particular as a case of something general" (Hopmann, 2000, p. 9; emphasis added), as the logical adaptation of unchanging universal principles to the variability of everyday practice. As some scholars have observed, other interpretations (e.g., Parmentier, 1991; Suzuki, 2008) see tact as being based primarily on feeling, attitude and improvisation rather than on reason, and on the dynamics of practice rather than the logic of theory.[4]

This paper follows the second, pragmatically- and affectively-oriented interpretation of tact, emphasizing the improvisatory, intuitive, even "felt" or "pathic" nature of tactful decision and action. In this connection, tact has been characterized as having a distinctly *pathic* quality, rather than as being based on intellect or cognition. To quickly sense or know "the right thing" to do in a particular situation means to rely on knowledge or sense that is implicit, and even emotional, rather than explicit and logical. Appropriate responses in these situations are "sensed or felt, rather than thought," as Max van Manen—one of the few to have published on tact in English—puts it. Quoting philosopher Eugene Gendlin, van Manen emphasizes that tactful understanding "may not even be sensed or felt directly with attention" (E. Gendlin, as quoted in van Manen, 2016, p. 268). Although we do not utilize van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology in our investigation of tact, it we follow van Manen's recommendation "to employ noncognitive … methods in order to address pathic experience [s]" such as those entailed in the van Manen the exercise of pedagogical tact (2010, n.p.).

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[4] Taken on its own, the account of tact provided by Herbart is ambivalent when it comes to the relation of tact to the universality of theoretical principles. In many cases (and as indicated above), Herbart opposes tact not to so much *theory*, but rather to *routine* and *habit*—to aspects of teaching that are all but inseparable from practice and with no necessary connection to universal and unvarying principles. The implications of defining tact in this way (rather than in terms of the judicious application of unchanging principles) are significant. Tact in this case becomes above all a matter of improvisation and extemporization, a particular kind of responsive practice that is based not on intellect and the careful application of principle, but on one's sense of the requirements of the situation. More specifically, it can be seen as being based entirely on one's impression of what is appropriate or best for *this* child's present and future well-being.

2. Method and data

Tact is thus defined in this paper by the fact that it evades theorization and generalizable findings and principles. As we understand it, it is neither overtly cognitive nor even necessarily *directly* sensed or felt. Instead, as both Muth and van Manen after him make clear, it is a phenomenon that is manifest or "shows itself" in different types of action and interaction.[5] This means that methods focusing on cognition and theory, such as think-aloud protocols or grounded theory would be epistemologically inappropriate to its study. This is arguably also the case for methods that would ask teachers or students *about* their actions and interactions after the fact: Tact, after all, shows itself through observable word and action, not so much through the language and thinking that might, arise *post facto*.

The epistemology thus implied by tact appears similar to that of ethnographic thick description and its emphasis on the intensive rather than extensive exploration of meaning. Instead, following the suggestion of Derry (2006), we take a single video sequence or "event" as an occasion for developing narratively-structured "thick description." Recall Clifford Geertz' 1973 characterization of thick description in terms of the "wink" in his *Interpretation of Cultures*: A wink, Geertz observes, can take many forms: "an involuntary twitch, a conspiratorial signal to a friend," even a "parodic" or "fake-wink" (for example, in response to its overuse by others). All of these possibilities and many more can be communicated in a single infinitesimal motion of the eyelid. Geertz emphasizes that it is precisely in this focused but ambivalent multiplicity that "the object of ethnography…lies [:] a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies … are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not… in fact exist" (pp. 6–7). Like Geertz, we take here a single, observable or thickly-described and intensively "interpretable" incident or instance—with its compounded structures of meaning—as our unit of analysis. As in Geertz's example, our orientation is etic rather than emic: We do not seek an insider's (emic) perspective on the classroom community and culture, but take the (etic) perspective of outsiders. We "drill down" into the possible significances and implications of this instance, attempting to match the "thickness" of our account with an equally "'thick' interpretation" of it—to borrow Norman Denizen's term (2001, pp. 117–118). The illustrative and analytical value of such an example lies precisely in its "focused, microscopic" attention to the "flow of behavior" (Geertz, pp. 17, 22)—rather than in its typification of a larger corpus of coded and triangulated data that might include participant interpretations of their own purposes and intentions.

For this study, we selected a 10:37 segment of video more-or-less randomly from a large, pre-existing corpus of well over 1000 min of video on over 40 digital video tape cartridges. This represents a partially random and partially deductive form of selection or sampling. Our intent was not to find something representative of a larger corpus; it was instead to find a segment with the potential to illustrate or exemplify complex and possibly tactful interaction. In other words, one could say that we used a type of nonprobability sampling, based on our judgment as researchers, and informed by a broadly deductive—rather than narrative or inductive—criteria for the selection of a segment from a larger body of video data (see: Goldman, Erickson,

Lemke, & Derry, 2007). In this case, we attempted to deduce the presence of the pedagogical triangle between teacher, student and content, and of complex interactions within this frame-of-reference. The video analyzed here was originally recorded using a single camera following the teacher's instructional action and interaction with students *in situ*. Through their extended presence in the classroom, the camera personnel and their work are hardly attended to by the teacher and her students (although the teacher does mention this once in passing in the segment analyzed). In selecting a segment for this paper, one of these cassettes was played at random, leading to the selection of 10:37 min from only the first 15 min that we initially viewed. This segment is described and analyzed here at the "macro" level, and a 1.5 min sequence from within it—featuring a difficult and extended student-teacher interaction at the blackboard—identified for "micro analysis" (e.g., see: Pea et al., 2006). This 1:30 "event" was transcribed and stills were extracted for further analysis and illustration (see Figs. 3–11).

As mentioned earlier, the video data analyzed here is from an all-boy's middle-school classroom of about 24 students in an upper Midwestern inner-city, with the instructional focus on complex sentences.[6] The recording begins with the teacher asking and offering hints for a definition or explanation of complex sentences. The teacher holds the floor throughout the 10.5 min segment, using colloquial language and offering emphatic praise each time a student provides a correct answer. In this way, the teacher prompts her students to define the complex sentence in terms of its two sub-components—the independent and dependent clause. With hands raised for each of her questions and prompts, she then asks her students for examples of conjunctions, the "keywords" used to begin the dependent clause. At this point the students provide answers like "as if," "whereas," "because," "since," and "so that," and the teacher responds by saying that some are "good ones" and that others are even her "favorites." She undertakes all of this initial question and answer from her desk, projecting her voice and gesturing (Fig. 3). She then points to a number of sentences on the blackboard at the far end of the classroom, saying "We're going to go to the board on this one." She asks two students to draw a line under two different subordinate clauses, and they go to the board in succession and do so relatively quickly. Each time, she responds enthusiastically: "Awww-shucks! Alll-right!"

Moving through the class towards the blackboard, the teacher emphasizes how easy it is to find conjunctions in the examples and to thus identify the dependent clause: "And… and… and what is it that makes it easy?" she asks. "Study. Yes. … But what, what… The who? The con-JUNC-tion, that's right!" she exclaims. Two more students go to the board and underline subordinate clauses, with the teacher exclaiming at the conclusion: "I'm really PROUD of you all today!"

After this, the "event" transcribed and analyzed on a micro level in this article begins to unfold. It starts with the teacher standing at the board:

Teacher: "Who do I call?"

Students: "Marvin![7]" "Me" "Nobody." "Marvin." (etc.)

[Marvin is chosen.]

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[5] Both Muth (1962) and following on him, van Manen (1991), speak of tact "showing itself as" (*sich zeigen als*) various teacher actions and other relational phenomena, for example, "as holding back" (*Zurückhaltung;* Muth, pp. 24–25; van Manen, pp. 149–152) as "situational confidence" (*Situationssicherheit*; Muth, pp. 74–81; van Manen, pp. 157–159) and as "improvisational gift" (*improvisatorische Gabe*, Muth, pp. 88–94; van Manen, pp. 159–160).

[6] "We note that as researchers analyzing this recording outside of the field, our positionality is relevant. Neither of the authors claim membership to a visible or ethnic minority. Both authors have experience teaching and advising students and teachers belonging to various ethnic, racial and other groups and populations. We both have experience working in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-racial classrooms in different countries."

[7] Pseudonyms are used in identifying all individual students.

Fig. 3. Prior to the segment transcribed, the teacher announces: "We're going to go to the board on this one.".

Fig. 5. Marvin comes up, hesitates and tentatively underlines the incorrect word. The relative positions of student, teacher and content can be said to form a triangle here and also later in the 1.5 min segment.

Fig. 4. The teacher walks through the class to the board. "But what is it that makes it easy? […] The con-JUNCTion!".

Fig. 6. Teacher responds: "Woahoahohoaaa Woah! […] Al-most, Marvin, al-most.".

Teacher (quietly): "Let's go. Go Marvin."

[Marvin comes up to the blackboard and hesitates (Fig. 5). He begins to underline the wrong word.]

Teacher: "Woahoahohoa! Woah!" (Fig. 6)

[Marvin stops his underlining and looks at the teacher.]

Students: "Can I help him?" "Can I help him?" "I wanna help him." "Can I help him?" (etc.)

Teacher: "Mitchell will come here and help."

Teacher (turning to Marvin): "Almost Marvin, almost. Al-Most!"

[Mitchell comes, the teacher steps back and makes an inaudible aside.]

Teacher: "Here we go… Al-most Al-most! We need some help. Need some help."

Fig. 7. Mitchell comes up to the board.

Fig. 8. The teacher steps further back, saying: "We need some help." Reilly comes up to the board.

Fig. 10. Teacher puts her hand on Reilly's and Marvin's shoulders. "That's it!".

Fig. 9. With Reilly's correct answer, teacher looks to the class and smiles broadly.

Fig. 11. Scattered applause as Marvin returns to his seat, gesturing unhappily.

3. Interpretation and discussion

3.1. Tact as manifest between teacher and student

[Reilly, a third student, comes up to the board (Fig. 8)]

Teacher: "Can you do it? It's 5 letters."

[Teacher still remains at a distance; the board is hidden behind the students.]

[After a few seconds, the teacher looks at the class and smiles broadly (Fig. 9).]

Teacher: "That's it! Y'all got it. Y'all got it!"

[Teacher steps closer to students at the board, and puts her hands on the shoulders of both Marvin and Reilly, as the students slowly head back to their seats (Fig. 10). There is scattered applause. Reilly looks pleased, but Marvin appears discouraged (Fig. 11).]

Teacher (to the class): "Not a problem, once you see the key word."

As Marvin arrives at the board (Fig. 5), we can easily superimpose the pedagogical triangle on the relative positions of the teacher, student and content. As Marvin points the chalk at the sentence written on the chalkboard, the teacher stands close to but slightly behind him, and she can be said to be engaging with Marvin in terms of his work with this content. The literal distance between student and teacher increases slightly as the teacher steps back when the other students come to help Marvin at the board. Otherwise, over the course of the 10.5 min—as the teacher moves from her desk through the class to eventually place her hands on Marvin's and Reilly's shoulder—the teacher's physical proximity to Marvin and the other students varies greatly, sometimes appearing to form the pedagogical triangle in conjunction with the student and content, and at other times, not.

In our analysis, however, our primary focus is on another type of distance: This is a kind of instructional or pedagogical distance that is

often expressed by the teacher in terms of what she does *not* do: For example, even when two or three students are attempting to parse the sentence originally undertaken by Marvin at the board, the teacher does not intervene. Instead, she remains behind them and to one side—although she could easily reach out and point out the conjunction herself. Her words, actions and position all direct the students' attention and efforts to the content or question at hand without giving away its solution. Also, her refusal to intervene and help seems to be the expectation or norm in the classroom, as is the students' readiness to step in and help each other. But what kind of distance and refusal is this, and why might it be important?

Jacob Muth explains that the figurative distance maintained through pedagogical tact is one of its defining features: "It is in the appropriate distance for singularity of a situation… that pedagogical tact can be measured" (p. 49). However the distance involved in specifically *pedagogical* forms of tact is quite different from the distance a teacher might maintain in other contexts. It is different, for example, from tactfully *not* saying exactly what's on your mind to a friend or colleague at a given moment. Muth points out that outside of pedagogical contexts, we often maintain a general, social and personal tact and reticence for our *own* sake, and he refers to this as *distance*. However, the distantiation maintained by the teacher in tact that is specifically *pedagogical*, he emphasizes, *not* for the teacher's sake, but only for the sake of the *student.* This type of distantiation is referred to by Muth as *reserve*:

> Through *distance*, the person attempts to protect himself, for example the teacher tries to protect his or her own being as a teacher. *Reserve*, on the other hand, is always exercised for the sake of another. […] As such, it is maintained for the sake of the child… as opposed to the isolating distance that is often exercised in life in general. It preserves the correct middle-point between the educative help of the teacher and the possible self-help of the child. (Muth, 1962, p. 55; emphases added)

Examples of this specifically *pedagogical* reserve are not difficult to identify and imagine. For example, a teacher might sense that it is better *not* to interrupt focused concentration or a lively discussion unfolding in his or her classroom. Or under different circumstances, the same teacher might chose *not* to continue a lesson or an attempt at generating a focused discussion if that same class appears greatly stressed or fatigued. Referencing Herbart, these and similar cases can all be said to rely on "quick judgment and decision" in response to the true requirements "of the individual case." Significantly, Muth puts this final point in a slightly different way, suggesting that a central challenge for tactful teacher is to balance the tensions or "distances" of the pedagogical triangle, to maintain "the correct middle-point" between teachers assistance and "the possible self-help of the child" (p. 36).

"The reason for the reserve of the teacher," as pedagogue Werner Loch explains, is thus "the facilitation" not simply of the *learning* of the student, but "of his or her 'self-activity'" (as quoted in Muth, 1962, p. 36). This "self-activity" of the student is *not* defined in by these and other scholars in instrumental terms. It is not seen as the means needed to attain a predetermined goal or end or as a learning outcome to "scaffold" or facilitate. Instead, it is understood in ethical terms as the independent activity of the student or child that is significant insofar as it expresses his or her personality and personhood,

and prefigures his or her adult autonomy and responsibility.[8] As Mollenhauer, a more recent scholar, describes it, self-activity is manifest at the boundary "between what is *possible* and what is *real* for the child" (2014, p. 89; emphases added). The teacher's reserve that is to allow for the emergence of this self-activity, moreover, is to be carefully modulated according to *this* child's activity and personality—in terms of their singularity and the uniqueness of their situation. Who the student is, his or her feelings and subjective experiences, life history, even what is known about his or her home and family life, are all a part of this singularity.

But can we say that the teacher's words and actions in the video segment are *actually* attuned to Marvin's individuality and situation as well as to his (potentially) independent activity? Can the teacher's reserve, her tacit refusal to help, be said to be unequivocally tactful, given Marvin's obvious disappointment at the end? Teachers are sometimes advised to allow students to succeed publicly, but to fail in private, and this sense, the teacher's actions appear flawed or insensitive. However, in the context of the non-routinized "quick judgment and decision" of tact, the validity of this rule or convention is not necessarily assured. Neither pedagogical tact nor the heuristic of the pedagogical triangle can point the way to what is unambiguously "right" or "wrong" in teacher action—or to what is *certain* to be either "tactful" or "tactless" in terms of the outcome of any given situation. Instead, tact and the pedagogical triangle provide us with ways of learning about and understanding the ethical and relational implications of our own pedagogical engagement—rather than with a way of reducing these concerns to a kind of geometric or probabilistic calculus. These constructs also provide ways of recognizing the ultimate *undecidability* of many pedagogical moments and situations and their apparent consequences (e.g., see: Green, 2009). For example, it might be the case that Marvin's experience of disappointment here is acute, only adding to problems already weighing upon him. Alternatively, it may be that he'll simply forget about it with the next activity or the next class. We simply cannot know; and even the most careful reflection by a student or teacher after such an interaction cannot settle the question of whether such an interaction was definitively "tactful"—beneficial to a student's well-being now and in the future. Indeed, if we recall some of our own unforgettable moments in the classroom as teachers and students, their character as ultimately "good" or "tactful"—or "harmful" or "tactless"—may also be beyond resolution.

As a sense of discernment of the right thing to do for the student's well-being—for his or her present experience and for his or her future—pedagogical tact cannot assure or guarantee any one desirable or optimal outcome. Even the most sophisticated psychometrics or neuro-analyses, of course, can never provide certainty about what to do in a particular pedagogical situation—even though, unlike tact, these scientific methods might lead us to believe they actually *can* provide such certainty. Tact and the pedagogical triangle instead can help us comprehend and refine the possibilities and limitations of our own abilities to speak and act—and also to understand and reflect—not only in the interests of the well-being of the student but also in the interests or the demands of curricular content and learning, which is our next concern.

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[8] The term "self-activity" is also used by Dewey, who borrowed it from the German early-childhood educator, F. Fröbel (founder of the kindergarten). Dewey characterizes it as follows: "the instinctive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child… [the] numberless spontaneous activities of children, plays, games, mimic efforts… [which ultimately form] the foundation-stones of educational method" (1915, p. 112). See also Author, 2014, pp. xxxvii-xliv.

3.2. Tact as manifest between teacher and content

In addition to maintaining the balance between student and teacher, there is a second delicate and complex equilibrium that is to be preserved in tactful teaching, one exercised in relation to the content, the subject matter or the task at hand. As with the teacher's relation to the student—which, as we have seen, is always interpenetrated by concerns related to subject matter—the student is also always present in the teacher's relation to the content. In the video, the teacher is constantly modulating her relation and position with regard to the tasks presented by complex sentences and their demands, while also seeking to affect or mediate the students' relation to these as well. She begins by discussing this content verbally at her desk, underscoring the "ease" of mastering the parsing of such sentences while moving through the class, and finally standing closer by as Marvin and others complete the exercises on the board.

Although the teacher is certainly concerned with this content from this start, she can be observed to gradually allow it to become ever more central as the 10.5 min of the clip unfold. Perhaps the clearest example of this attention to content is when she transitions from her question and answer with the class about complex sentences in general, to the specific examples on the board. At this point the subject matter is no longer simply expressed in verbal exchanges, but is provided in black and white for all to see. However, the teacher modulates her *figurative* distance to this matter in a way that is rather more controlling than her relationship with her students. She both selects the examples and exercises and also directs students' attention quite explicitly to them. Indeed, Muth goes so far as to say that

> In the final analysis it is not only the teacher who here (as one might say) "educates," but it is instead the *exercises* and *demands* that [s]he assigns, and as whose spokesperson [s]he appears to children. (p. 40)

The teacher is indeed a kind of representative for the content; she sets and controls the topic and exercises, and advocates for their accessibility and simplicity. Initially, a number of students analyze these sentences quickly, and with little apparent difficulty. Their success is affirmed and celebrated through the teacher's smiles, gestures and words: "Aww-shucks! Alll-right!" It may be fortuitous or it may be with some purpose that the first two students and examples chosen by the teacher present few difficulties, and that she is ready at the board when it is Marvin's turn.

It goes without saying that for Marvin himself, his performance at the board (however brief) is not a trivial matter. To fail in front of the class is not simply to miss the point about conjunctions or complex sentences; it is to live or embody failure before one's peers. Connecting questions of student academic performance and competition to pedagogical tact, Muth emphasizes that such "tact is particularly important in schoolwork" because in a sense the student "stands in this task, and makes its emergence possible" (p. 53). Students, Muth is saying, can be in danger of effectively *becoming* their task or schoolwork in the eyes of their peers, their teacher and themselves, of *being* the failure that for a brief moment might occur at the board. Here, too, pedagogical tact as the careful exercise of reserve or distance is paramount. In this case, however, this reserve is exercised not only in relation to the student, but in relation to the demands and the evaluation implied in the content.

Despite determining, representing and speaking for curricular content, the teacher must in other ways be careful to maintain her own distance from it. A tactful teacher may hold back when a vulnerable student is struggling with an exceptionally difficult assignment; however, the same teacher might exercise a rather different distance and relation—perhaps being much more insistent—when students are

completing a basic quiz on the previous day's lesson. Even though the teacher in the video may be mindful of the ultimate significance of the lesson for her students' up-coming test performance or their long-term academic success, she of course brings no such concerns to bear directly on her students. She exercises this restraint despite the fact that school tests and students' longer term success are the only plausible justification the subject at hand. In addition, the teacher does not appear capricious in the demands she makes of students, and she maintains the expectation that her students will ultimately succeed, at least collectively, in the task she places before them.

Muth characterizes this particular kind of restraint as "the natural action of the teacher." In this action, Muth explains, tact is manifest in the teacher's "stepping back from the requirements that [s]he has placed on the children… [and] in not acting consciously and willfully on the basis of the desired effects and scholastic goals" (pp. 39–40). The teacher does *not* confront the end or goal of her students' competency or mastery in any direct or overt way. Instead, she again exercises a kind of distance or even passivity. And she exercises this perhaps not so much for the sake of students' learning as for the sake of their *well-being* which she must always weigh against learning and teaching objectives and outcomes. To do otherwise would be to again to lose the balance in the relations and tensions constitutive of the pedagogical triangle. Any one student cannot be allowed to become in effect indistinguishable from his or her abilities and performance. The teacher, for her part, also cannot allow herself to simply serve as a stand-in for the ultimate expectations encoded in curriculum outcomes or student performance measures. If either of these scenarios were the case, the two-dimensional structure, distances and relations of the pedagogical triangle would collapse into a one-dimensional, one-way relationship between current student deficits and expected student performance.

Thus, despite the enormous pressures placed by high-stakes testing and performance evaluations on both teacher and student, pedagogical tact requires that these be kept at bay from the pedagogical situation. Neither the student nor the teacher can simply be reduced to performance or demand. Instead the tactful teacher keeps the content and its ultimate demands at a safe distance from both her relations with her students, and also from the student's own uncertainties, incremental learning and "self-help." To fail to do so in moments of student need and uncertainty would ultimately be to mirror the crudest behaviourist punishment-and-reward scenario, or to reproduce the most reductionist means-ends thinking decried by Muth at the outset of this paper. In these cases, as Muth puts it, the action of the teacher would simply "solidify into sheer *power*" (p. 42; emphasis added).

4. Conclusion

With these observations about means and ends, and about the arbitrary exercise of teacher power, we are able to return to the question of teachers' demoralization and alienation from the moral rewards of teaching discussed at the outset. According to Muth, what is at stake in the reduction of pedagogy to mere means-ends rationality is nothing less than the "authenticity" of the teacher him or herself: "From the moment that I become preoccupied about the effect I want to produce on the other person, my every act, word and attitude loses its authenticity" (Muth, p. 42; Marcel, 1951, p. 17). The student is not addressed as an individual or a person, but only as a means to a predetermined end or outcome. Muth here is actually quoting from *Homo Viator* ("the human way") by French existentialist Gabriel Marcel. Marcel himself continues:

> From the very fact that I treat the other person merely as a means of resonance or an amplifier, I tend to consider him as a sort of apparatus which I can, or think I can, manipulate, or of which I can dispose at will. I form my own idea of him and, strangely

enough, this idea can become a substitute for the real person, a shadow to which I shall come to refer my acts and words. (pp. 17–18)

Although Muth does not include this last passage in his book, it makes a point that is indispensable here. This is one closely connected to the fact the "morally-charged personal convictions" that lead students to enter the profession, and that sustain those already in it, can also be said to be the source of their authenticity as teachers. What is important here is not authenticity in the sense of "authentic learning" or "authentic assessment," but the authenticity of the teacher's selfhood in relation to both the content and the student's own self. Marcel's quote suggests that the connection to this authenticity and moral grounding is jeopardized by pressures to optimize outputs and outcomes. It results not only in every "act, word and attitude" of the teacher losing its authenticity, but also in the "substitution of the real person" of the student to a mere shadow or apparatus—one which can be manipulated and disposed of at will. Scientific performance benchmarks, prescriptive instructional strategies, and means-ends thinking that dominate education today threaten to reduce both the student and teacher to the status of a "means to an end"—the end of optimal performance. For example, even when teacher-candidates are doing everything that is prescribed precisely as required—indeed maybe *because* they are doing this—they can be reducing their children to means to an end, and placing themselves a position of professional inauthenticity.

Muth emphasizes that instead of becoming a mere tool in the service of ever greater efficiency, both teacher and student must be seen as being ends in themselves. In this sense, within the pedagogical situation, there is no ultimate goal for being either a teacher or a student. Ideally both occupy their respective roles ultimately and authentically for their own sake, rather than simply being required to be a teacher or a student for a moment or an hour to achieve a predetermined end or objective. It is in maintaining the distances and tensions constitutive of the pedagogical triangle, we submit, that the reduction of both teacher and student to external goals and outputs in the pedagogical situation can be avoided, and the authenticity and individuality of both teacher and student can be protected and preserved.

We have thus presented the pedagogical triangle and the exercise of pedagogical tact as ways to understand how teachers might prevent their own alienation and demoralization under the pressures of the dominant instrumental culture of our era. We have done so not only to share our findings and insights with other researchers and teacher-educators, but with the hope that they might also benefit those who are about to enter the field of teaching—those whose moral convictions and grounding are likely to be most forcefully tested and challenged. Although this study is only a kind of proof-of-concept—intended as the first step in a larger effort to explore structures and phenomena characteristic of teachers' ethical engagement in everyday activity—we believe that tact as a notion, as a possibility for sensitive pedagogical action, can be of great value for teacher candidates.

Together with concrete examples of pedagogical situations and the use of the pedagogical triangle as a heuristic, tact gives the opportunity for student-teachers to see what might be tactful and certainly what would *not* be tactful. And these distinctions, as emphasized above, are indispensable precisely where there are no prescriptions for the *one* right thing to do. Tact becomes important exactly when the limits of the teacher candidates' instructional and management methods have been reached, and there is no prescription for what to do—for example, when three students are at the board, struggling towards the right answer, or when students surprise us with unexpected successes or failures. Needless to say, in most classrooms, moments like this present themselves many times over in the course of a teaching day or even a block of classroom time. Teacher educators need to help teacher candidates understand how to balance the tensions of the pedagogical triangle—tensions that are exacerbated by a myopic focus on standardized tests and accountability, as well as by scientifically-based strategies for teaching. Neither of these account for the unpredictable nature of the teaching situation—an unpredictability that rears its head countless times a day for teachers, especially in their early years in the profession.

Jakob Muth wrote his 1962 book on *pedagogical* tact in the conformist atmosphere of a nation actively repressing the horrors of WWII and obsessed with industrial and commercial recovery and efficiency. In this context, Muth observes that "uniformity and conformity" that reduce the individual into "an organizational category… only work against tact," and "obstruct the possibility of tactful action" (pp. 7–8). Today, similar pressures for uniformity and conformity continue to mount, obstructing the everyday exceptions and improvisations constitutive of tactful action. As these corrosive pressures increase, tactful teacher action is made not only more challenging, but at the same time, all the more vital and urgent.

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