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# Pedagogical tact, sustainability, and edusemiotics

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These pages provide a theoretical approach to the notion of pedagogical tact and its relation to a sustainable and transformative school from an edusemiotic approach. Pedagogical tact can be translated as the ability to generate a certain atmosphere in educational interaction. This requires sensitivity and interpretative skills. We associate the notion of tact and care with current proposals for sustainability as attention to the development of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. We propose an itinerary for educational and learning theories based on the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce and his idea of human experience as a sign to be interpreted. All this implies a relational use of the sign based on the interaction between people and their environment from positions of sustainable development. In other words, the new agenda is based on relational, integrative, empathetic, anticipatory, and systematic reflection of schools according to UNESCO.

## KEYWORDS

pedagogical tact, sustainability, edusemiotics, Peirce, education, semiotics

## 1 Introduction

Tact is a sensibility, a conscious and aesthetic perception, both in its sensory (tactile) dimension and in its meaning of 'good doing'. This notion is an essential part of the epistemological pillars of modern pedagogy. Tact is intimately linked to solicitation, which is associated with sensitivity, flexibility, and care. Tact (or *tone*) and solicitude complement each other and are as much about who we are as what we do (Van Manen, 2016a,b,c).

In one way or another, this ties in with the conceptions of Dewey (1909), Noddings (2006, 2009, 2012a,b, 2015), or Arendt's (1961) *Pedagogy of Natality*. All of them contain a profound magnitude of relationality, care, and reciprocity. Such concepts dialogue with the notion of sustainability as a commitment to future generations and the environment. The link between the present and the future is thus translated into an educational decision that is not only the responsibility of pedagogy but of the entire human community.

According to Peirce (1934), the world "is impregnated with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (CP 5.448). Peirce opens its focus to encompass the whole of existence from pansemiotic perspectives. Semiotics makes it possible to determine the characters of the signs used by an intelligence capable of learning by experience (CP 2.227). As Peirce himself states, all reasoning is an interpretation of signs of some kind. This implies recognizing that a semiotics of signification is mediated by codes that will require specific and contextual responses. If the production of meaning and its analysis cuts across all disciplines, each of them requires from semiotics a disciplinary concreteness. In the case of education, it is edusemiotics that provides these codes.

Peirce's postulates provide a solid theoretical and philosophical approach, which makes it possible to understand the complexity of education and its dynamics through signs. As Semetsky (2017) points out, this author conceives signs as relational entities, a notion that includes the interdependence of the parts of such signs. This relational character, together with an ethical component attentive to socio-educational evolution, makes edusemiotics a

successful framework for meetings between the tradition of pedagogical tact and current sustainable concerns.

## 2 Pedagogical tact and sustainability

In 1802, Johann Friedrich Herbart, the father of scientific pedagogy, placed pedagogical tact at the center of educational experience, stating that the difference between a good and a bad educator lies in whether or not they have developed a sense of tact (Herbart, 1873). This view was taken up by Muth (1961) and later systematized by Mannen. Pedagogical tact presupposes an obligation of the adult toward the child: the task of protecting and guiding, which brings us back to the etymological meaning of the word *paidagōgia*. This implies a certain way of being a teacher: the affective, ethical, and caring dimension that is expressed in behavior and attitudes, a reciprocity that implies a support aimed at minimizing risks and reconciling differences (Ruddick, 1989).

Pedagogical tact can be translated as the ability to generate a certain atmosphere in educational interaction. This implies an affective, emotional, and ethical conception of the educative situation founded on sensitivity and what Van Manen (2016a,b,c) defines as “solicitation”: a special kind of action and knowledge based on reflection on human experience and the practice of paying attention. Such a notion coincides with Schleiermacher (1977, 1989), who identified tact or tone with solicitude, sensitivity, and flexibility.

This links to the proposals of Dewey (1909), whose vision of a democratic school is based on moral education as reflective action and underpinned by respect and consideration. In a similar vein, Noddings (2009) argues for an education of care as an alternative to the education of character. She advocates a relational pedagogy, which displaces aristotelic *virtus* in favor of bond and affection. Educational experience is mediated by care as an “act of community” (Noddings, 1995, 2013), a space of encounter that sees in agologic action a commitment to reciprocity with the environment.

Pedagogical tact preserves the child’s space (Van Manen, 2016a). It is an expression of responsibility and shelter, a conception in which Arendt’s (1961) *Pedagogy of Natality* resonates strongly. Her *amor mundi* implies an ethical commitment to those who are born or are about to be born, a notion that introduces a concern for what happens that points to sustainability as a way of seeing things (Ruddick, 1989). Heidegger (1962) defines this reason for being as *Daisen* or degree of surrender of the human being in relation to the world.

The 2030 Agenda defines sustainability as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising those of future generations (UNESCO, 2015a). Responsibility for the future and the environment requires an attentive relationship with one’s own actions, which calls for a relational, integrative, empathetic, proactive, and systematic reflection of schools as an essential foundation of the new agenda. Thus, educational centers need to become exemplary spaces that breathe sustainability: inclusive, democratic, healthy, and ecological places (UNESCO, 2016).

Such ideas are governed by a transformative desiderata of education, whose essential premises are quality, inclusion, and equity (UNESCO, 2015b, 2016, 2017). Schools are vindicated as spaces of protection, safety, green, and “sustainable futures for all.” This idea reinforces the traditional demands for “non-threatening” school environments governed by principles of care and understanding

(UNESCO, 2003). Or, as Mannen put it, committed to providing children with sensitive relationships and a sphere of reflection in which they can develop responsible maturity.

## 3 Tact, sustainability, and edusemiotics. A relational perspective

To ‘have tact’ implies discernment and intuitive perception, a complex network of qualities, skills, and competences that provide the capacity to (1) interpret the thoughts, motives, emotions, desires; (2) interpret the psychological and social significance of that inner life; (3) be endowed with a keen sense of rules, boundaries, and balance, which makes it possible to know almost automatically at what point to intervene and at what distance to stay; and (4) possess moral intuition, in which it seems to know what is the right thing to do in each situation (Van Manen, 2016a,b,c). These four vortexes unfold in a wide and porous space, in which pedagogy intersects with phenomenology, hermeneutics, rhetoric, or semiotics. This paper is particularly interested in the encounter between education and semiotics from Peirce’s influences. That is, the position that assumes human experience as an interpretative structure mediated and sustained by signs (Deely, 1990, 2017).

Gadamer revisits Herbart and Helmutz’s ideas in tact, claiming that it implies an inexpressible, ungraspable, and inimitable sensibility. In line with Aristotelian *phronesis*, he alludes to prudence as an essential element for acting appropriately in situations, even without being able to explain it. Tact thus has both an aesthetic and a historical function, being both a way of knowing and a way of being (2013). This certain way of being and knowing encompasses the notion of *Bildung* in a broad sense. What is at stake is an ontological vision of the formative, which Gadamer (2001) synthesizes in the idea that to educate(s) is to come together toward each other.

Tact is sensitive and pathic. Aristotelian *pathos* is thus regulated by *phronesis*, an “indication” of knowledge that, in contrast to the modern method, provides another way of arriving at truth (Gadamer, 2013). The notion participates in intuition and hermeneutic *subtilitas*, as a delicate and complex art of interpretation. In this sense, if Manen’s phenomenological pedagogy is interested in phenomena and the importance they have in the classroom, his hermeneutic inclination delves into interpretation and the need to understand the meanings they propose. A complex and subtle network of ‘reading’ mechanisms is involved in the process. Such qualities will help to understand both the visible and the invisible that underlies experience, the phanerological web that Peirce summarizes as the collective totality of that which in some way or in some sense is present to the mind.

Being that can be understood is language, Gadamer says. Everything is sign, Peirce affirms. As can be seen, both hermeneutics and semiotics allow for a conception of learning as interpretation and relationship. The communicative dimension comes from the relational experience, and it could be said that learning becomes fundamentally an act of communication and reciprocal doing. Learning and understanding are presented as two ways of expressing the same act of communication (Rancière, 1991). However, we prefer the notion of signification to that of communication, insofar as signification means that not only information but also structured systems of signs are transmitted (Barthes, 2015). In this sense, the structuralist view brings a relational character and attention to

differences, oppositions, and contrasts, a system that incorporates a relational use of the sign as a triadic and dynamic entity. Such a conception allows us to understand learning as a process of signification or semiosis of unlimited character (Danesi, 2010).

Edusemiotics is based on Peirce's view of the self as an evolving sign (CP 5.462, 8.125; Colapietro, 1989). The triadic relationship (*sign*, *object*, and *interpretant*) contains within itself a process of unlimited semiosis, in which the interpreter (or what the sign produces in that quasi-mind that is the interpreter) guarantees the validity of the sign. Semiotics, like music theory, asserts that beneath the recognizable melody lies a complex interplay of intervals and notes, and beneath the notes are bundles of formants. Sign (or, more properly, Hjelmselev's semiotic function) is a dynamic entity and a meeting place for mutually interdependent elements (Eco, 1979; 2004).

Edusemiotics not only aims to reconcile the relationships between ourselves and others to create ethical spaces of mutual understanding but is also future-oriented in that it proposes a pedagogical sense full of values (Semetsky, 2017). This implies attention to the transformation of subjects (Kukkola and Pikkarainen, 2017), to the environment, and to the processes of becoming, both from a theoretical and practical perspective (Stables, 2012; Semetsky, 2015, 2017; Kukkola and Pikkarainen, 2017; Olteanu and Campbell, 2018).

Stables (2006) notes that the key to contemporary semiotic approaches to education lies in the argument that if living is semiotic engagement, then learning is always semiotic engagement. This observation reveals the intimate relationship between learning and being alive, between education and the sustainability of life. Stables' vision thus closes the edusemiotic circle around sustainability and pedagogical tact, for it somehow places an ethical vision of care at the heart of *learning*. According to Mannen, it is *teaching* that is grounded in pedagogical tact. According to Stables, "if all living is semiotic engagement with aspects of the environment, and if all living results in change, then all learning also entails such semiotic engagement that results in change" (2016, 48).

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

Educational interaction is fertile ground for semiotic research and analysis. Thinking of human beings in terms of relations of signs rather than (monadic) ideas challenges the modern philosophy of education by understanding it as a complex web of semiosis, that is, of semiotic processes and interactions. It is here that concepts such as tact and sustainability gain significance by being inserted into a theoretical framework capable of reformulating them from an integrative and relational perspective. We co-construct each other and the environment through signs and exchanges.

Edusemiotics approaches educational research and praxis not only in the light of what interprets it in the present but also in the light of what it can become in the future. For Peirce, to grow is not only to increase but to give rise to new signs that are distinct from itself (its object or referent), in an unlimited semiosis that is linked to the future. This envisages a dynamic interplay of processes, including the interpretation of people and their environment as relational and constantly evolving entities. Current and future educational processes are thus investigated under the premise of a concern for sustainability: the question of where this semiosis is leading human societies and what their

destiny is. Education plays a key role in this concern, as it is a constitutive expression of present and future well-being from an ethical, reflexive, and factual perspective.

As a discipline that connects the present and the future, edusemiotics offers an ethical foundation both in its communicative and interactive aspect and in its future orientation. It could be said to contain a sustainable purpose in a broad sense, insofar as semiotics sees reality as a continuum between the biological and the social, between the nature of the human being and its cultural dimension. Just as the sign does not phagocytize itself, but through the interpreter becomes another, education is, by definition, relation and otherness. This implies sharing a naturalistic and relational concern for understanding the world.

All of the above leads us to take up notions such as pedagogical tact, care, the pedagogy of natality, and *amor mundi*, which are very present in the theoretical and practical construction of the pedagogical discipline. We conclude that edusemiotic approaches to sustainability and tact are a promising line of research for contemporary education, given that global changes and present and future threats seem to have taken hold in socio-educational processes. Approaching education from semiotics not only demands it but, above all, allows us sensitivity and tact that, while placing educational contexts at the center, strengthens and transcends them. Semiotics, as the science of signs, maintains a strong commitment to life and its preservation, the unlimited semiosis of an evolving world.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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