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EDUCATING AUTOMATONS. PEDAGOGICAL TACT IN THE AGE OF THE SCRIPT

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Abstract

Despite the continuously insinuated chasm between educational theory and educational practice, there remains an unbreakable bond between both: Not only does every pedagogical act rest on a conceptual frame that precedes it, but also with every pedagogical act, a specific conceptual stance towards the world is consciously or unconsciously being affirmed. The traditional answer to the question for the relation of both has been the introduction of the concept of Pedagogical Tact by J.F. Herbart who formed the concept along the lines of Kant's theory of judgement. Pedagogical Tact, so Herbart, functions as mediator between what we might call pedagogical theory and pedagogical practice, and becoming a successful educator then means to develop a heightened capacity to employ such tact in pedagogical practice – a capacity which, according to Herbart, needs the studying of theory before the educator's encounter with educational practice.

What already in Herbart's version seems to be a rather complex and maybe even somewhat miraculous notion, becomes even more complex with the realization that the encounter of human and world in general, and of pedagogical theory and practice in particular, nowadays seems to rest much more on mediating devices than it used to: the act of interpreting the world, and with it the pedagogical situation, seems to be guided much more by the fabricated interpretation offers made by the media that surround us. However, realizing the increased complexity does not yet mean to truly understand the way in which the capacity of Pedagogical Tact will be influenced by this changed ways of making sense of the world. The contribution here attempts to open a horizon for discussing those matters. To achieve this goal, firstly, the concept of Pedagogical Tact in Herbart's sense will be presented, while leaving it to a second step to closer investigate what the all-encompassing technologization of human life might mean for this pedagogical fundament.

Keywords: pedagogical tact, pedagogical theory, pedagogical practice, education.

*I got too many friends
Too many people that I'll never meet
And I'll never be there for
I'll never be there for
'Cause I'll never be there
My computer thinks I'm gay
What's the difference anyway
When all the people do all day
Is stare into a phone*
Placebo, *Too Many Friends* (2013)

Introduction

This paper has to begin with a confession: In large parts I have to write about a phenomenon that I only know from outside, as an observer. Having never owned a mobile phone, a social media account of any sorts, a personal website – having never engaged in a twitter feud, with a blog or podcast, or tried to duplicate my life in WhatsApp-messages and Instagram posts, I will speak without lived experience. I do own and use a tablet computer, but since this is online only wherever there is free Wifi, my everyday life is usually not interrupted by news, messages, calls. So, whatever I will say will be limited by this kind of outsider position, and I can only hope to be able to make up for this by having some valid questions. Or, for here and now, one valid question: What does it do to an educator to be immersed – or trapped – in such a life?

This question arises out of two observations: an everyday observation, and an academic observation. The everyday observation is that people do seem to pay less and less attention to their surroundings. When I walk the streets or take a bus, a subway, or a train, I see more and more people being taken hostage by their little screens: they do not look around at each other but exclusively stare at their phones or tablets (less often their book readers). What used to be spaces of mutual inquisitive and often embarrassing staring and inevitably judging are now places of solitary screen-confinement in which people are maybe bodily placed next to each other but do not seem to mentally recognize each other. The embarrassment has, at least for me, disappeared as people do not even realise anymore that I stare at them, scrutinise them, judge them. And even in walking, more and more people seem to resort to some sort of automated pacing while fixating on their small screens, barely managing to avoid bumping into each other. In other words: attention and awareness for the world around us, the world outside of the worlds presented by those devices, seems to decrease.¹ And increasingly, the world gets ignored – even if it knocks forcefully at the doors of perception in the guise of children

¹ It would be interesting to explore the relation of this new ‘shyness’ to Sartre’s concept of the ‘Look’ (Sartre, 1984). However, this reaches beyond the scope of the present essay and will therefore not be discussed here.

demanding attention and engagement from their parents who barely manage to disengage for one second from the devices that apparently consume even the last rest of energy.

The second, more academic observation is that pedagogical discussions around technology and its effects are often aimed at the recipients of education, i.e. mostly children, who are seen as being in danger and who are therefore in need to be saved through either shielding or, if that's not possible, at least through development of some sort of digital literacy. If the educators come into view, it usually is to discuss the ways in which those new technologies, the devices and screens can be, or should be, or should not be, used within the education process. Hardly anyone asks what the ubiquity of those devices does to the educators as people who are educating. Yes, we are discussing to what extent the capacity for attention and awareness (i.e. the fundament of all successful pedagogies) is radically altered in children as effects of extended device-usage – but where do we ask what it does to the educators and their capacity and proficiency to educate and to teach? As has been the case so often in history, it is the 'weak' children who get the, mostly unwanted, attention, while the adult educators seem to think that they are safe from any such negative effects.²

Based on those two impressions, the following wishes to explore one aspect of educating, on which the onslaught of technology may actually have an effect that should not be underestimated. This aspect in question is the educator's capacity to exercise Pedagogical Tact – the basic capacity of at least those educators who wish to enhance their educational practice through the conscious application of or inspiration by educational theories. As such, the following explorations will not be more than a hopefully somewhat intelligent posing of a question. Finding a definitive answer will take some more time.

But before the effects of device-usage will be discussed, the concept of Pedagogical Tact needs to be clarified. Quite central to Continental-European pedagogical discussions, the concept remains rather elusive in Anglophone debates of education and pedagogy. Moreover: When it is discussed, it suffers from a re-interpretation that has little connection to the concept as it was introduced by J.F. Herbart and which will provide the foundation for the following discussion (Kenklies, 2023). Therefore, we firstly have to ask: What is Pedagogical Tact?

² There is indeed a vast literature on precisely the wider negative effects of these devices on adults, but such literature does not focus all that specifically on educators and the activity of educating from the educator's perspective.

1. Pedagogical Tact – Mediation between Pedagogical Theory & Practice

1.1. What is Pedagogical Tact

Herbart began his workings at a time in which the modern understanding of scientific, i.e. academic work, developed and finally took shape in form of the modern research university. With this process, certain questions were raised and answered – questions that gave direction to Johann Friedrich Herbart who had just been appointed as lecturer for pedagogy at the University of Göttingen. Not only was he there confronted with the question of the nature of academic theories (and with it, of the nature of Pedagogy, or Education Studies, as an academic discipline), but – teaching in pedagogy – he also had to answer the question of the nature of pedagogical practice, and of the relation of pedagogical theory and practice. It is therefore not surprising to see him addressing exactly those questions in what is regarded as his first lecture of 1802:

Discriminate, in the first place, between pedagogy as a science and the art of education. What is the content of a science? An orderly combination of propositions, logically constituting a whole and where possible proceeding one from another—corollaries from fundamental principles, and fundamental principles from axioms. What is an art? A sum of skilful devices and methods which must be combined in order to secure a certain purpose. Science, therefore, demands the derivation of propositions from their logical grounds—philosophic thinking. Art demands a constant activity in conformity with the mere results of science. An art while it is being exercised must not become lost in speculation. (Herbart, 1896a, p. 17)

According to Herbart, a pedagogical theory, therefore, is a set of propositions, derived from fundamental principles and axioms while, on the other hand, the practice of education – highlighted as an art – is supposed to be a way of engaging with the (pedagogical) world that is successful in achieving the goals and aims set for it. To be successful, practice needs to conform with the propositions set out by the theory while avoiding getting lost in mere speculations. This attempt to formulate the characteristics of Education Studies as an academic discipline that has as a goal the improvement of pedagogical practice through its marriage with pedagogical theory, causes a certain problem triggered by the very nature of both theory and practice:

Theory in its universality stretches over an expanse of which any one in his practice touches on but an infinitely minute part. On the other hand, in its indefiniteness, which is the immediate consequence of its universality, it passes by all details, all the individual circumstances that surround the practical teacher at every given moment, and all the individual measures, reflections, and exertions by which he must respond to those circumstances.

In the school of science, therefore, we shall learn both too much and too little for practice. (Herbart, 1896a, p. 18)

The momentary demands of the pedagogical practice are at once narrower in their scope (while being much deeper in their detail) than pedagogical theory which – in its universality – attempts to embrace and include, comprehensively, all possible instances of education. Theory and practice are therefore seemingly never really aligned: for propositions to represent an academic theory, they have to be derived from principles and axioms and therefore are far wider than the conditions encountered in an actual pedagogical situation – a situation whose absolutely individual circumstances never can find reflection as such in theory. Necessarily, theory is too wide and too narrow at the same time. It therefore has to be asked how both sides can successfully be aligned if it is the demand of pedagogical practice as an art to be governed by theory.

In his lecture, Herbart suggests at least three different ways in which the theory and practice of education could, in principle, be related (Kenkies, 2012).

i. No relation – Practice without theory

The first possible relation of theory and practice is one of disconnection: here, the educator does not at all relate his/her practice to a theory, i.e. the educator ignores all theory leading her/him beyond her/his own horizon, his/her own experiences. Only the educator's own past experiences guide this pedagogical practice, and in absence of any other sort of imagined practice (encapsulated in theory), there will be no intentional development, while changes are merely accidental. (Herbart 1896a: 18f.)

ii. Ideal Relation – Practice completely ruled by theory

The second possible relation between theory and practice would be one of an ideal alignment. Herbart questioned that this could ever be possible because “such a recollection, such a complete application of scientific propositions, would require a supernatural being” (Herbart 1896a: 20) – to retain “strict consistency with the rule” while at the same time answering to “the true requirements of the individual case” (Herbart, 1896a, p. 20) seems impossible to him. While Herbart remains silent here about the very possibility of such a theory (e.g. how could a complete theory, i.e. description of human behaviour and life, relate to ideas of human freedom and spontaneity), he blames the incapacity of human educators for such failures.

iii. Best Possible Relation – Practice inspired by theory

Both so far introduced possible relations of theory and practice seem undesirable or impossible: No relation to theory would render educational practice unreflective; perfect alignment between theory and educational practice is impossible to achieve. Therefore,

while necessarily bound to each other, theory and practice will therefore inevitably represent two sides of a gap in need of bridging, and it is exactly this bridging that makes the practice of educating an art. While a complete alignment of theory and practice would render the educator an automaton exercising a pre-given programme, it is the artfulness of educational practice that suggests a certain type of intuition; a bridge between the theory – which is always to be wide to be applicable to practice – and the practice – which is, necessarily, too individual to be described by universally valid propositions. And to mediate between both sides, to bridge the abyss, Herbart introduces a notion that subsequently became one of the fundamental, and widely discussed (Metz, 1995), theorems of German educational reflections: Pedagogical Tact.

Responding to the problem of the individual case, Herbart follows Kant in his explorations of *Urteilkraft* (power of judgement; Pleines, 1980).

The power of judgment in general is the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given, then the power of judgment, which subsumes the particular under it [...], is determining. (Kant, 2000, p. 66f.)

This faculty of determining judgement (in pedagogical situations) Herbart calls (pedagogical) tact. He formulates:

[I]n every theorist, no matter how good a one he may be, if he practises his theory, and provided only that he does not proceed with the cases occurring in his practice with pedantical slowness, [...] there inserts itself quite involuntarily a link intermediate between theory and practice. There is, to wit, a certain tact, a quick judgment and decision, not proceeding like routine, eternally uniform, but, on the other hand, unable to boast, as an absolutely thoroughgoing theory should, that while retaining strict consistency with the rule, it at the same time answers the true requirements of the individual case. (Herbart, 1896a, p. 19f.)

Universal theory and individualistic practice are related through the judgement of the educator that enables the subsummation of a given situation under a pre-formulated rule expressed in theory. (Herbart is, at this point, not interested in the way in which theory evolves – a process that would probably involve reflective judgement, as going from the particular to the universal). Tact therefore is a hermeneutic capacity: the ability to interpret a given situation correctly, i.e. to identify a situation as a case of a more universal pattern or structure. To be even more specific here: Pedagogical Tact is the capacity firstly to interpret a situation as a pedagogical situation in the first place, and secondly to then also be able to recognise this pedagogical situation as a specific kind of pedagogical situation. This capacity is not one of feeling – as the notion of tact seems to suggest – but a capacity of reason: Herbart follows Kant's notion of logical tact in his wording:

This much is certain, that if the solution to a problem is based on general and innate rules of understanding (possession of which is called mother wit), it is more dangerous to look around for academic and artificially drawn-up principles (school wit) and thereafter to come

to their conclusion, than to take a chance on the outburst from the determining grounds of masses of judgment that lie in the obscurity of the mind. One could call this logical tact, where reflection on the object is presented from many different sides and comes out with a correct result, without being conscious of the acts that are going on inside the mind during this process. (Kant, 2007, p. 250)

The decisions based on (logical) tact are therefore not decisions based on feelings or emotions or an emotional bond (between educator and student); they are based on movements of the mind (*Gemüt*) which remain somewhat hidden and unconscious. It is for that reason that, later, the Herbartian Tuiskon Ziller called it “rational tact” (*rationaler Takt*; Ziller, 1856, p. 28; 1876, p. 38). It is indeed this rational foundation of pedagogical tact that then suggests for Herbart a certain way of becoming pedagogically tactful.

1.2. How does an educator develop Pedagogical Tact

It [tact, K.K.] is only formed during practice, and by the action of our practical experiences upon our feelings. This action will result differently as we are differently attuned. On this, our mental attuning, we can and should act by reflection. It depends upon the correctness and weight of this reflection, upon the interest and moral willingness with which we give ourselves up to it, whether and how before entering upon the office of education and, whether and how, consequently, during the exercise of that office, our mental tone will order our mode of feeling, and finally, together with the latter, will guide the employment of that tact upon which rests success or failure in pedagogical endeavour. In other words, by reflection, reasoning, inquiry, in short, by science, the educator must prepare not his future action in individual cases so much as himself, his tone of mind, his head as well as his heart, for correctly receiving, apperceiving, feeling, and judging the phenomena awaiting him and the situation in which he may be placed. [...] There is then – this is my conclusion – a preparation for the art by means of the study of science, a preparation of both the understanding and the heart before entering upon our duties, by virtue of which the experience which we can obtain only in the work itself will become instructive to us. Only in action do we learn the art and acquire tact, aptness, quickness, dexterity; but even in action only he learns the art who has in previous thinking learned the science; has made it his own; by it has attuned himself; has predetermined the impressions to be made upon him by future experience. (Herbart, 1896a, p. 21f)

It does become obvious that for Herbart, the hermeneutic capacity of (pedagogical) tact that enables one to give the right interpretation of a (pedagogical) situation develops only through practicing it. Equipped with an awareness of a wide range of possible interpretations (as expressed through a wide range of theories which are to be learnt within the study of Education Studies before one encounters a pedagogical situation), it is only the enacting of judging interpretations and the reflective observation of the consequences of those interpretations (e.g. the evaluation of the actions based on them, or the continued unfolding of the observed event), that a person/ educator can determine whether or not the chosen interpretation was the right one. (This, of course, assumes

that the theories are correct, i.e. that the only uncertainty lies in the choice of theory, not in the theory itself³).

Unfortunately, neither Kant nor Herbart are more specific in describing how the act of interpretation actually grows out of the marriage of a perception and a theoretical/notional schema. While Kant usually remains on a transcendental plane, offering the (somewhat hazy) idea of a transcendental schema to relate perceptions and pure notions, the Herbart of those early years seems to suggest that reality is revealing itself to the observer if only the observer has learnt to put him_herself into the right, i.e. theoretically prepared, frame of mind (which is why for Herbart at this time, education – also of the educator – is nothing but the right aesthetic representation of the world (Herbart, 1896b; also Kenklies, 2012), hereby offering reality a chance to reveal itself to the student).

Far from being an outdated, the idea that such tact can only be learnt through a prepared practising still offers the foundation for many didactic strategies employed in professional-pedagogical education; they are grounding ideas of the inclusion of reflective placements in teacher education as much as in video-analysis exercises in which aspiring educators are confronted with pedagogical situations (on video) and are called to offer interpretations and suggestions for ensuing actions based on their interpretations of what they have perceived (Janík & Janíková, 2020). In response to an accusation often brought forward – that pedagogical theory remains disconnected from pedagogical practice – Herbart insists that the necessary hermeneutic acts that govern pedagogical practice have to be founded upon an awareness of a wide range of pedagogical theories in order to be successful, i.e. appropriate; the necessary tact, therefore, is a “theoretically prepared and intellectually formed intuition that is based on extensive knowledge of the possible interpretation of a situation represented by the universalist propositions that make up a scientific/academic theory” (Kenklies, 2023, p. 120). Taking the concept of a theory somewhat wider, i.e. realising that the concepts we use to interpret a situation always only exist within wider frames of reference, it can be stated that there simply never is any sort of practice that is detached from theory inasmuch as every practice presupposes firstly an interpretation of a given situation before then – based on the same concepts used to interpret the situation – a reaction to the situation is designed and exercised. Looking from here, life in general, and pedagogical life in particular, can only be mastered when our capacity to interpret situations is alive and developed through continuous reflective practicing.

This is now where we turn to the observations outlined above, and the question of the extent to which the capacity of (pedagogical) tact has been affected by the constant

³ For Herbart, there is indeed a correct interpretation of a situation. Modern sensibilities would want to talk about not a correct, but maybe a pragmatically convincing interpretation.

use of mobile devices.⁴ Of course, questions of effects and influences can always ever only be answered based on what we may call empirical evidence (ignoring for now the question whether or not there really is a difference between positivist-empirical research and linguistic-philosophical considerations). What will follow is therefore nothing more than an outlining of different lines of investigation without giving much of an answer to any of them. But before those few lines of questioning are exposed, one caveat: What will not be discussed are the numerous health & wellbeing issues reliably connected to usage or over-usage, i.e. addiction, to such devices and the engagement with them (Nesi et al., 2022). The sheer number of issues that emerged over the last couple of years remains staggering – and has to be discussed another time in another context. However, for philosophical consideration, it already is relevant to see that a wide range of new notions came into being related to pathological or pathologized states of being: *smartphone addiction* (e.g. Yu & Sussmann, 2020), *Facebook addiction* (Chakraborty, 2016), *Social Media addiction* (D’Arienzo et al., 2019), and many more.

3. Interpretative Judgements in Scripted Realities

Before the effects of device-usage on educators will be discussed, one lament needs to be sung for which technology is maybe not responsible. As stated above, pedagogical tact is two-sided inasmuch it enables the interpretation of a situation as pedagogical in general, before then qualifying it in a second step as a specific pedagogical event. Whereas the second step still is very much relevant for every educator, the first step has largely disappeared in today’s educational world: that something is indeed ‘education’ or ‘pedagogy’ is no longer the result of a hermeneutic decision but of a habitual categorisation of institutionalised structures. Largely disinterested in discussing definitions of ‘education’ and/or ‘pedagogy’, modern practitioners and academics are guided in their interest solely by the historically established classification of some places as ‘educational/pedagogical’, e.g. schools, nurseries, universities (in some countries also families, youth clubs, etc.). Questions now arise not any longer based on a developed understanding of those contexts as ‘educational/pedagogical’ but simply based on the desire to understand how such (pre-categorised) institutionalised contexts work or why they do not work, i.e. do not produce the pre-formulated desired outcomes. One could argue in a way that this still is the result of technology or technological thinking (e.g. through the implementation of a *What works* agenda), but that would take us too far here and therefore has to remain a discussion for future occasions. Let us therefore draw attention to

⁴ At this point, I limit my argument to hand-held mobile devices as it will refer to the constant use of such devices throughout the day at any opportune (or not so opportune) moment. It will not discuss here screen devices (e.g. TV) or the effects of multimedia representations of reality in general.

the second hermeneutic act described as the capacity of pedagogical tact: the interpretation of a situation as a specific educational/pedagogical situation.

It might be of benefit to begin with a simple statement: Every second that someone is immersed in the reality presented by the screen-device is a second that the observer is not at all or only partially/superficially immersed in the reality outside of the screen-world. As (pedagogical) tact is the capacity to interpret the world with the (pedagogical) categories/concepts/theories available, the question then will be whether or not this hermeneutic capacity is changed by the difference in attention described here: does the continued immersion in screen-realities – replacing the immersion in non-screen realities – change the hermeneutic powers of a person?

This remains indeed an open question. However, the assumption for now is a simple Yes: repeated diversion of attention from life to screen (to use for now this somewhat under-complex distinction) has indeed an effect on the hermeneutic powers of a person as the hermeneutic practice one engages in by perceiving either one or the other is a different one. To gain a better idea on such effects, the actual difference between the two realities would need to be discussed. In totality, this seems impossible, given that the screen-world does depend on what is shown on the screen. This could, of course, just be an electronic book-reader replacing a physical book; and burying one's head in a book instead of watching the world and its people would also mean to divert attention away from the life surrounding us. So, it makes little sense to pretend that any conclusions would be universally valid. But still, maybe some educated guesses are possible when thinking about what people usually engage with when staring at their hand-held screens, e.g. social media, games, video clips.

However, before engaging with those questions, another distinction needs to be drawn when we are interested here with the hermeneutic capacity of the educators in light of their extended usage of hand-held screen devices. It is relevant to distinguish between the world represented *through* those devices, and the world represented *by* those devices. Whereas the first perspective asks for the effects that the mere existence and usage of such devices has on the hermeneutic activity of the educator (independent from what the screens of those devices present to the observer), the second perspective would be interested in the effects that repetitive perception of the worlds presented by those devices has on the user as educator.

3.1 The world as represented through Devices

The first perspective is, of course, one that people have been engaged with for quite some time. It is the debate around the effects the use of technology has on people in general. From the more pessimistic descriptions that began already in the wake of the industrial revolution and that continued with philosophers like Heidegger, to the more optimistic visions coming from, for example, technophile authors like Jules Verne or the modern transhumanists –, sides have been taken with varying degrees of complexity

in their reflected justifications. And, to add yet another dimension of complexity: those discussions are seemingly very much culturally dependent. To give just one example: the apparently unfettered admiration of the technologisation of everyday life that one can perceive in a country like Japan (from ubiquitous vending machines, care robots and dogs, to the celebration of the human-robot amalgamations in *mecha*-anime), a close human relation to technology seems to be much less controversial than, let's say, in Germany.

The discussions hinted at above do not need to be repeated here *in toto*, but only some questions should be raised that are more specifically relevant for possible effects on educators. For example: is it justified to assume that the constant use of technologies shapes the interpretation of educational processes through educators to the extent that those processes are now expected to run in a more 'technological' way? Cybernetic didactics has been around since the 1970s, and with it a metaphorization of education in terms of input-output control. However, are people becoming more prepared to see education in this way because their lives are now much more ruled by 'touch-of-a button' acts? There seems to be less and less acceptance of education as a rather messy, unpredictable, trial-and-error process. And one can widely perceive – for example in public discussions or political programmes – an approach to (especially institutionalised) educational practice that seems to expect it to work like a well-oiled machine which solves all societal problems as fast as possible (especially those which have not been caused by education in the first place – an expectation that has already been rejected by Siegfried Bernfeld (1973) at the beginning of the 20th century).

However, not everyone in the education or Education Studies business is opposed to such machinations: In line with such mechanised expectations, Education Studies is presenting itself more and more as working according to a natural science paradigm (i.e. empirical research of a certain kind) that promises evidence-based and easily applicable solutions to the higher powers governing education with utilitarian minds rather than as a hermeneutically uncertain project in tune more with a Humanities approach to academic research. And such an atmosphere of efficiency is fortified through the experience of everyday life as constant series of technologically executed acts that can justifiably produce technologically exact results (well, from that point of view, we are still lucky in that technology does not always yield to our expectations – at least my computers do not always do what I want or expect). Whatever the exact reason might be: it seems that there is an increasing appetite and preparedness to perceive education as a process that follows the same rules as input-output technologies (and already all the talk of *What works* is part of this development in its apparent ignorance of the time-frame in which transformations occur: as if human transformations could be compared to push-button-get-change processes, which unfold within an extremely short period of time, while the awareness for the sometimes very much postponed effects of certain pedagogical acts seems to recede); there seems to be an increasing expectation of fast

development and improvement (often, but by no means only, part of the political debates around formal education) – and maybe we can also see a transfer of those expectations to the educational process: expectations of fast and unending improvement that can be fabricated and directed by the push of a button. So, the question is: to what extent does the constant experience of technological processes, their characteristics of temporal brevity and (usually) instant effectivity, frame the pedagogical interpretation of reality through educators?

This question leads into another question: the brevity and effectivity of technologically executed acts is also part of what one might call a de-complexification of life. Indeed, as has been pointed out before (Lewin, 2021), designers of technology are striving to make the experience of dealing with technology as painless and easy and intuitive as possible. Hiding an ever-increasing complexity of mechanics, technology-interfaces are designed to become ‘user-friendly’, i.e. leave little room for error, confusion, uncertainty. This is nowhere more pertinent than for the handheld devices in focus here. The hermeneutic efforts needed to deal with technological situations decreases continuously; the more intuitive an interface becomes, the less a person has to ‘make’ sense of it as sense is more or less forced unto the user. Keeping in mind that hermeneutic power is a capacity that needs to be practiced, the question then becomes if the practice of such interpretative powers is exercised somewhere else? Where would that be the case if more and more of daytime is routinely given to the dealings with such simplifying interfaces? If the ‘making’ of sense is substituted by the ‘reception’ of sense, where does that leave the educator in an eternally chaotic educational situation? This indeed is for me now an open question – I do not wish to make any assumptions right now. I am just wondering. And I am wondering because the simplification of life through interfaces is, of course, not the only simplification that such hand-held devices offer (and here we begin the exploration of the second of the above introduced aspects: the world as presented *by* those devices, not through them).

3.2. The world as represented by Devices

Most of what apparently is consumed on such devices seems to fall into the same category: simplified life. Not necessarily, of course: the screen could show a book on the theory of relativity, a treatise of Heidegger, or a complex game of Chess or Go, and nobody would pretend those to be invitations to simplified experiences (although maybe playing Chess or Go with a real partner might offer a different sort of complexity than playing with a computer: as Star Trek’s android Lieutenant Commander Data had to find out when playing poker with Commander Ryker – it’s not all about calculations of probability). However, looking at the curated identities in social media, the scripted ‘realities’ depicted by so-called reality shows, and the short-spanned video clips usually consumed on *TikTok* or *youtube* or else such platforms, one wonders not only to what extent those ‘realities’ begin to supersede the realities outside of those devices, but also

to what extent the capacities to interpret a non-curated, temporally extended reality become diminished by an increasing exposition to such simplified abbreviated versions of life. Indeed, there seem to be signs that at least some people do appreciate those curated realities as a form of escape from an overly complex, complicated, opaque, and perhaps unmaneuverable, reality outside of those screens (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2019). While e.g. *hikikomori* retreat from the all too complex social interactions, they seem not to have such great problems with using social media and internet in general (Tateno et al., 2019), which seems to suggest that the scripted reality offers a far less intimidating environment, which is socially less complex, opaque, hermeneutically challenging. Or, in a pedagogical example: understanding the momentous effect of an educator on his her audience (e.g. in a lecture) demands the ability to read faces and body language – it cannot simply rely on the four or five simple smilies and gesture icons expressing the moods of the audience that have become so common in faceless virtual learning environments. And while often the technologically presented world is offered together with its own notional interpretation – the girl crying on screen does not only cry but also tells us how very sad and disappointed she is about the perceived infidelity of the guy or girl who plays her trusted partner for at least this season of some ubiquitous dating show –, the real world does usually not come with such an inbuilt interpretation: the bodies and faces and noises made by students need hermeneutic effort to be adequately deciphered by an educator.

4. Traversing Pedagogies?

Processes of simplification are not unknown to pedagogues: they have always been an integral part of transformative efforts. They have been called ‘pedagogical reductions’ or ‘transpositions didactique’ (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022) and have been deliberately used for centuries to great effect for inducing a change of and in people. However: here, the curated reality presented to the student is (or at least should be) curated in a way that allows for leaving and overcoming the simplified perspective eventually (i.e. there is an end to the educational effort), whereas the simplifications presented on little screens are usually not thought to be or treated as passing appearances – they present themselves (or are presented) continuously as reality itself. The question then is not one of a general *If?*, but of a more particular *How?* this increasing perception of curated realities affect our educators. Maybe it doesn’t – and me personally, I am still living in hope that educational or transformational calls like the presentation of a simplification are not as powerful as often described or desired, especially by pedagogues and educators. And I am thrilled to see that people are not unenlightened enough to believe that ‘reality shows’ show ‘reality’ (the relation is much more complex: Mast, 2016), or that simplifying through so-called ‘safe-guarding’ strategies like trigger warnings are actually of little use if not outright counter-productive (Jones et al., 2020) in avoiding the educationally

necessary challenge of alienation (Kenklies, 2022), but still: What happens to interpersonal-hermeneutic capacities of educators if they are used to being presented with, for example, emotional expressions in the exaggerated way of Love Island or Big Brother or whatever the latest fad showing the ‘real life’ of people? If nothing is left to the hermeneutic-imaginative struggle anymore, if everything seems to be so clear and certain – what then happens to the capacity of an educator to interpret what is in front of him/her in a pedagogical situation? Will they be lucky enough that the world that presents itself to them is itself now structured according to the modes of re/presentation exemplified on those small screens? This of course could be the case at some point: if people have learnt that emotions are expressed in Love Island mode, then educators who have been brought up on those will be able to recognise it as such. And so we might actually only look at the unavoidable distance between young and old ways of ‘making’ sense of the world – a distance that has driven adults up the walls when dealing with children or youngsters since the beginning of time.

However, having said that: I might be too old-fashioned or too much of a mobile-phone avoider to believe that there ever will be a complete congruence between reality and screened reality. But that then means that educators would need to be educated to make this difference, to look up from their phones to practice their hermeneutic powers in real life situations, to learn how to endure the unfolding boredom and opacity of the mundane life that unfolds in front of them, to indeed struggle to ‘make’ sense – and cope with the impossibility of it and the possibility of there being more than just one (oh so obvious) interpretation. Which then also means to learn to cope with the unavoidable failing that results from giving the inappropriate interpretation of a situation (which might just be a little more damaging when done by an educator – or doctor, psychiatrist, bus driver, etc. – than in some other situations of everyday life). After all, it might just be a simple formula that needs to be kept in mind: as long as one’s educational practice unfolds in real life (as an encounter of bodies) the educator needs to be exposed to as much of the real life and its inbuilt encounters of bodies as possible to practice her/his hermeneutic powers – once all education has moved into the cyberspace, it may be necessary to extensively practice those interpretative capacities in the same virtual universe; in short: hermeneutic powers are trained only in the space for which they are needed.

And therefore, I might just simply continue to refuse stepping aside on a pavement when yet another person sleep-walks towards or even into me, being immersed into their scripted reality while forgetting that their bodies still move around between other people – a movement that needs to be negotiated – a fact that maybe forces itself into the minds of those people who run into me while forgetting to pay attention. After all: moving yourself around in the world is somewhat more, or differently, demanding than moving your mind around in the cyberspace – obstacles do not simply disappear on the push of a button.

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