

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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The Gestalt of Gestalt pedagogy

1 Talking about ‘contact’?

Gestalt pedagogy is a term used to describe a range of educational concepts that are based on the theoretical and practical ideas of Gestalt therapy (Perls et al. 1951; see Schübel 2023).¹ In this tradition, Gestalt pedagogy has never thought to be an accurate application of Gestalt theory. Most of the time, in fact, the tradition of Gestalt pedagogy/therapy and the tradition of Gestalt theory ignored each other. The aim of this article is to take a first step towards connecting both traditions by finding common ground in education theory. In general, Gestalt theory has received little attention in education science, its reception has so far taken place almost exclusively in the inner circle of applied Gestalt theory (GTA: cf. Guss 1975, Soff 2017). Thus, linking ‘Gestalt’ with education science in a concise theoretical way is a general task, and not just of Gestalt pedagogy.

When we approach the theoretical foundation of Gestalt pedagogy, it is crucial to point out first that the references of Perls to Gestalt theory are inconcise, maybe even not substantial at all (Henle 1978, 25; see also Stemberger 1998). For Perls, Gestalt theory was as important as non-scientific concepts like ‘creative indifference’ by Salomon Friedlaender, the ‘holism’ concept by Jan Smuts, or Zen Buddhism. Gestalt pedagogy, however, has its origins in educational practice, namely in the teaching concept of ‘confluent education’ by George Isaac Brown (1971). Brown’s initial idea was to combine affective and cognitive learning. Originally, he established ‘confluent education’ as a training program at Esalen Institute in California, whose campus was the intellectual birthplace of Human Potential Movement and Humanistic Psychology in the 1960s (see Andersen 2004 for its history). Gestalt pedagogy has never been a project driven purely by the ideas of Gestalt therapy, but rather developed as a part of Humanistic Pedagogy, to which it has added important Gestalt therapy accents (see Shapiro 1998). Gestalt pedagogy has a long tradition in the context of school, university, and adult teaching (Brown 1971, Woldt 2009, Bourgault du Coudray 2020) as well as in the field of special education (Besems & van Vugt 1988; Stein 2005).

¹ Gestalt pedagogy is particularly well established and recognized in German-speaking countries as well as some Eastern European countries. Apart from that, there are, often without calling it Gestalt pedagogy, many references to Gestalt therapy in international academic discourses on education.

The use of Gestalt therapy and pedagogy in social work also has a long history, and, in particular, is closely linked to the development of case work in the US social work tradition (see Felton 1978, Congress 2017). Gestalt pedagogy has made a major contribution to play therapy (Blom 2004) and to the development of trauma pedagogy (Hemsoth 2020).

‘Contact’ is one of the core concepts of Gestalt therapy and pedagogy. It means the relation between person and environment. ‘Contact’ is not a concept in Gestalt theory (Stemberger 1998). Stemberger (1995) rightly noted that Perls’ term ‘contact’ leaves the distinction between environment and field unclear. For Perls, the interaction between organism and environment is in fact more decisive than the field formed by both, as with Lewin. Perls’ wrong interpretation which reduces Lewin’s ‘field’ to mere person-environment interaction has been criticized from inside Gestalt therapy (Blankertz 2020), while the proximity of field theory to Gestalt therapy has been repeatedly emphasized (e.g., Clarkson & Mackewn 1993). However, not all references to field theory in Gestalt therapy refer to Kurt Lewin’s approach (see Staemmler 2006). Newer Gestalt therapy approaches (see Francesetti/Rubal 2020, Robine et al. 2001) emphasize the field again as a crucial aspect, since personal characteristics and situational characteristics permeate each other in subjective experience and behavior. Field theory (as person-in-environment paradigm) forms the frame of reference for Gestalt pedagogy insofar as it understands human beings as situated in situations. As a forgotten meta-theory of education studies (Bogner 2017, 415), field theory has (without being named for it) inspired a variety of theoretical models in education science, including Uri Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) important model of socialization and the highly influential ecosystemic approach of Germain and Gitterman (1980). As a paradigm, contact theory is a precursor to later social-ecological and ecosystemic approaches in the social and education science, which view a person’s experience and behavior as embedded in (not just social) environments.

With its core concept of ‘contact,’ Gestalt therapy/pedagogy proves to be highly compatible with modern developmental psychology and, above all, with current positions in education studies (see Schübel 2023), especially regarding to phenomenological pedagogy, dialogical pedagogy and theories of meaningful learning. All three aspects could provide a common ground for both Gestalt traditions if the concept of ‘contact’ is not only referred to Perls but rather to education theory.

2 Phenomenological pedagogy

Gestalt pedagogy is an experience-based pedagogy of ‘contact,’ what makes it particularly compatible with phenomenological pedagogy (Brinkmann/Friesen

2018). Canadian scholar Max van Manen (2016) emphasized ‘pedagogical tact’ and ‘pedagogical contact’ as core terms of pedagogy. In everyday language, ‘contact’ means a situational attitude towards something or someone, which includes “the possibility of withdrawal, as well as any absence of contact” (Rohr 1966, 33 f., own translation). Talking about ‘contact’ is quite common in the context of education (e.g., ‘first contact,’ ‘parental contact,’ ‘contact avoidance,’ ‘close contact,’ ‘pleasant contact,’ “difficult contact,” etc.). It is rarely used in a theoretically precise way, but rather as a metaphor that is plausible in everyday life. In academic discourses relevant to education, the concept of ‘contact’ appears early on, including the child psychology studies of Charlotte Bühler, the education theory of Friedrich Winnefeld, and the phenomenological pedagogy of Otto Friedrich Bollnow (Rohr 1966; see Schübel 2023, 60). Moreover, it is a core concept in the phenomenological pedagogy of Max van Manen (2016). For all these authors, ‘contact’ refers to forms of interpersonal interaction in education.

In Gestalt therapy, ‘contact’ refers to “all aspects of a person’s ways of making contact” (Joyce & Sills 2018, 112). The term refers to the lived experience of relationships in everyday life regarding five dimensions: (1) Relating: ‘Contact’ in its first dimension means the relatedness (“*Bezogenheit*” with Husserl) of a human being as an existential being-in-the-world (“*In-der-Welt-Sein*” with Heidegger). Existing is relating to the other as an abstract principle. (2) Interacting: ‘Contact’ in its second dimension is what we mean in everyday life when we ask, for example, whether two persons ‘are in contact,’ and by which we mean whether there is concrete interaction or not. (3) Shaping: ‘Contact’ in its third dimension means to give this interaction a special form, including the termination of this interaction, the going back and forth in making contact with the other. (4) Validating: ‘Contact’ in its fourth dimension means validating the quality of the interaction, evaluating a ‘good contact’ as internal consistence or coherence in relating to something or someone. (5) Meeting: ‘Contact’ in its fifth dimension refers to the possibility of encountering the other: personal touch as personal encounter that occasionally results from moments of good contact. In all the results of many (more or less) consistent and touching moments of contact, (inter)personal relationships take shape. Experiencing relationships enables us to experience ourselves as being in the world in relation to a personal ‘self,’ which is nothing other than the result of relational experience. Speaking with phenomenological philosophy, there is no self-experience without experiencing the world: “self-making and world-making” are always linked to each other (Bruner 1999; see also Lanigan 2000). Within the field of education, the empirical concept of ‘contact’ in Gestalt pedagogy refers to the forms and emotional qualities of an interaction as well as the result of this interaction. The concept thus takes a subjective perspective that focusses on a person’s special emotional moments in

adopting of and adapting to interaction. ‘Contact’ always means contact with the situation (Wollants 2012), i.e., the ‘Ganzheit’ (wholeness) of relating to oneself, others, and the world. That is what ‘Bildung’ means in the philosophy of education: becoming a person in the world.

For van Manen, ‘contact’ is an essential aspect of successful educational relationships. Pedagogical tact (in the tradition of German philosopher Herbart) enables contact. The experience of contact is “a soul touching a soul” (loc. cit., 109). ‘Contact’ in the meaning of ‘touch’ is part of life (“To live is to touch and to be touched”, *ibid.*, 103), it promotes personal development: “Contact happens when I touch something or I am being touched by something that matters to this person, this friend, this teacher” (van Manen 2016, 109). “Contact experiences are elementary for human development and learning processes. Only in a contact atmosphere children can have meaningful learning experiences” (*ibid.*). Pedagogical tact only gains its validity through reflection on the other person: “Tact is the touch of contact” (van Manen 2016, 104 f.).

The experience of contact is the conscious and subjectively significant experience of being in the world, of relating and differing at the same time. The Heideggerian term ‘Being-in-the-world’ refers to phenomenological philosophy and psychology (Churchill 2022). At least as important as the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl, the phenomenological psychology based on Heidegger has strongly influenced phenomenological pedagogy (see van Manen 2016). In the work of Max van Manen in particular, ‘contact’ forms the core concept within a phenomenological framework of education science, which fits perfectly with the central idea of Gestalt pedagogy. From a phenomenological perspective on education, it is important to note that experience is a difference phenomenon. A phenomenology of contact is a phenomenology of the experience of relating. For phenomenological philosophy, experience proves to be an event “that gives rise to new insight and thereby thwarts a previous expectation” (Tengelyi 2007, 10). Experience is surprised consciousness (Meyer-Drawe 2010, 8), and consciousness is the precondition for directed intersubjectivity (Pugliese 2013, Schmicking 2013, Gethmann 2007), such that intersubjectivity allows ‘contact’ as a double kind of touching and being touched. ‘Touch’ – speaking phenomenologically with Ratcliffe (2008) – is more than a mere sensory perception (“bodily feeling”), but rather an existential experience (“existential feeling”), since touch is always the simultaneity of touching and being touched, and therefore points beyond one’s own body into the world (loc. cit., 93). Touch is constitutive for our relationship to the world: “it is a matter of belonging and connectedness, rather than of full-scale confrontation between body and object” (loc. cit., 97). The self-world relationship is a two-way process. The focus on “the structure of touch” with „varying degrees of differentiation between the two sides, can serve

as a guide to this aspect of experience" (ibid., 99). Thus, we "manage and change our 'boundaries'", there is never just one fixed boundary (loc. cit., 98). This seems to be very similar to Perls' idea (1951, 227): „Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment (...).“ Taking self-world relationship seriously, pedagogy has to have the form of dialogue.

3 Dialogical pedagogy and encounter

Education is a pedagogical dialogue, as Waldenfels (1971, 248) argues from the perspective of social phenomenology: "The intention of education is to free others to themselves by freeing them for dialogue (...)" (ibid., own translation). Phenomenologically, dialogue is characterized by the fact that it allows for more than one answer (Waldenfels 1971, 295). Dialogue is the form of contact (as a form of interacting) that "is most consistent with the basic concepts of Gestalt therapy" (Yontef 2002, 23). It is the reciprocity of distantiation and rapprochement that characterizes dialogue in its most genuine form (Hycner, 1989, 146). Contact as dialogue is a mutual response, "the phenomenological perception of the other person with a strong sense of our boundaries and limitations (...). We are attentive, we do not think the thoughts or feel the feelings of the other person. But we know what we feel, think, see, and hear ourselves. When we pay attention to the other person, we (implicitly) acknowledge that the other person has a separate existence and that we are interacting with him" (Yontef 1990, 75). In Gestalt pedagogy, following the dialogical turn in Gestalt therapy (cf. Jacobs & Hycner 2010), 'dialogue' is existential. Based on the work of philosopher Martin Buber, dialogue is the foundation of interpersonal relationships. In the dialogic You-relationship, there is "embrace" ("Umfassung," Buber 1964[1925]), meaning the grasp of the other that is necessary for confirming me as a person. Embrace is more than empathy (Buber 1964[1925], 31). There is no power imbalance in such a dialogue. It is about the "reciprocity" of the relationship (ibid., 19) and to open up to the other person. For Buber, encounter is a fundamental possibility given to man and at the same time not a matter of course, but rather the ideal of becoming human. The proximity to the language of phenomenology is obvious because dialogue philosophy also addresses experience in which the world (for Buber: God) becomes real by experiencing our connection with all living things. Buber himself wrote on education (Buber 1970). Education according to Buber is "educating for relationship" (Blenkinsop 2005).

Yontef (1993, 250 ff.), referring to Buber, emphasizes how important it is "to accept the other as he is and to confirm his spontaneous growth" (loc. cit., 130). Dialogue is about confirming the other's existence through one's own presence as a human being (ibid.). Dialogue is essential for the development of one's own identity. As a form of contact, dialogue is based on maintaining connection

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Dialogue is a personally consistent way of meeting the other, which includes the possibility of personal encounter, but does not force it. Encounter has the form of dialogue (Hycner 1989, Jacobs 1989). Buber (1970) attaches fundamental importance to genuine encounters between people within I and You. Encounter is the interpersonal form of contact that is most touching. When two people meet in this way, they touch ‘in their hearts,’ ‘in their souls,’ they feel ‘meant,’ and suddenly ‘a connection’ emerges. People have found many names for such special moments that are rare and precious. Encounter is the confirmation of the other person as a human being, just as he*she is. Following Schneider (2011) the idea of ‘encounter’ has a long tradition in education theory. It is the principle of mutual engagement without manipulation. Dialogue is a personally consistent way of meeting the other, which includes the possibility of personal encounter, but does not force it. Encounter has the form of dialogue (Hycner 1989, Jacobs 1989).

In Gestalt theory/pedagogy encounter is not the knowledge that I am accepted as a human being, but the experience that I am. It is experienced situationally as a “good moment” (Polster & Polster 1973). Experiencing encounter means experiencing touch while knowing that this experience depends on the presence of the other person. Schack (Melnick et al. 2007, 26) illustrates this special moment of encounter as follows: “We smiled when our eyes met. (...) I knew her experience anew, and she knew that I knew it, and I knew that I knew that she knew it” (Melnick et al. 2007, 26). Experiencing moments of encounter means that an interpersonal meeting is created that we both perceive – and we know that we are both perceiving it, and we are emotionally touched by this shared experience. It makes us smile. For a brief moment, I and You become We (Lichtenberg 2001, 73). For Lore Perls, encounter means presence, being addressed and respected (L. Perls 1999, 179), a swinging back and forth between I and You (ibid.). Contact as dialogue is “presence and liveliness in dealing with the other person, in contrast to withdrawn or manipulative ways of dealing with one another, in order to create confluence” (Yontef 1990, 74).

Education phenomenologist van Manen describes ‘contact’ as eye-to-eye encounter: “The sensitive eye of tact mirrors back is caring glance” (loc. cit., 82). Eye contact has always fascinated phenomenologists (e. g. Yin 2013). It is something that can easily be overlooked, while at the same time it is so essential for human interaction. ‘Seeing someone’ is often equated with ‘appreciating,’ and ‘overlooking someone’ with the opposite. People want to be ‘seen’ as ‘I am.’ However, eye contact is only one form of touching the soul. In general, ‘touch’ is a metaphor for people entering into a connection with each another that ‘touches’ them. “To live is to touch and to be touched,” says van Manen (2016, 103), and “touch, touching something” say Perls et al. (1951, 373), referring to the affecting way in which I come into touch. Schübel (2023, 108 ff.) shows the proximity of ‘contact’ as ‘encounter’ to Daniel Stern’s “present moment” (see Stern 2006 for that assessment and the joint publication Spagnuolo Lobb et al. 2009; in more detail: Schübel 2023, 56 ff.). it is (with Schack, see Melnick et al. 2007, 22) “the experience of meeting” (loc. cit., 23) – a “mutually satisfying experience” (loc. cit., 24), which differs from “good contact” with Perls. ‘Good contact’ (as validating interaction) means relating to each other in a way that suits both persons engaged in the situation. Not every of such moments is a profound, existentially uplifting and/or shattering experience – and it does not have to be.

Buber’s work had a major influence on European pedagogical theory (see Schneider 2024), although his work is often misinterpreted in pedagogy. As Woo (2012) states: education is not just I-You. For Buber, encounter is an ideal state that cannot last. And he, too, emphasized in his seminal writings that education is not just about I and You (cf. Buber 1964). Education also includes the ‘Id-relationship.’ Pedagogy is always characterized by the fact that something third (‘Id’ instead of ‘You,’ e.g., solving problems together) plays an important role. It would be simply irresponsible to act as if the pedagogical situation had no framework, no prerequisites, no goals, or no power asymmetry between those involved. Gestalt pedagogy provides support to clients by sustaining a dialogic framework, which facilitates moments of encounter without claiming to be pure You-relationship. A dialogic framework also contains the functional aspects of the pedagogical situation and thus enables a professional and responsible relationship without degenerating into manipulation. Dialogue allows for meaningful learning.

4 Meaningful learning

Dialogue has been considered an adequate teaching and learning method not only referring to Buber but also for linguistic reasons, based on Bakhtin’s constructive linguistics (Alexander 2020; for a review Teo 2019). Dialogical pedagogy encourages personally meaningful learning. Following the tradition of pedagogy as a science of didactical thinking, German Jörg Bürmann (1992) summarized

the central pedagogical idea of Gestalt pedagogy, namely that learning should be a “personally meaningful learning”. He understands personally meaningful learning to be self- and world-experience in the educational situation (Bürmann 1992): “The things of the world become things ‘for us’ because we enter into a specific and different relationship with them that is determined by our context and our activity [...]” (Bürmann 1992, 25, own translation). Learning is about relating to the experience of the new. Learning always takes place in a world that is already interpreted and ordered. Only experiential learning (understanding, processing, integrating new things) changes the interpretations of one’s own being in the world.

Consciousness, learning and knowing are dialogic by nature. Dialogic pedagogy (for an excellent overview see Skidmore and Murakami 2016) aims to enable critical thinking and analytical reasoning in an atmosphere of cooperation between teachers and students, “while actively interacting with these ideas and meanings by probing and filtering them through one’s own knowledge, ideas, beliefs” (Teo 2019, 176). The new edition of Wolfgang Metzger’s “Schöpferische Freiheit” (2022, edited by Soff and Stemberger) shows that education is more than just student-centered teaching (for a review see Schübel 2022). Metzger’s theses deal with the question of how to do what is necessary to objectively achieve a goal – provided it is attractive. The variability of goals and the freedom to achieve them, combined with a respectful and relationship-oriented attitude, still resonate with modern dialogical pedagogy today. Dialogue respects the boundaries of contact. Gestalt pedagogy always takes into account that education takes place under certain political circumstances and power relations. Meaningful learning therefore means not only asking students or clients about their interests within a given set of possible interests but involving them in the organization of the professional fields of education.

There is a wealth of empirical evidence that learning only takes place (in a profound and sustainable way) when the learners connect it with meaning. This is the central insight of Gestalt pedagogy. Personally meaningful learning means to be involved. It cannot be forced, but conditions can be created that make such learning likely. However, it will not take place uniformly, and there is not even certainty as to whether it will take place at all. If it does take place, not every such learning process is equally biographically significant, but learning that is focused on the relevance of the addressees enables biographical relevance as transformative educational processes – even under difficult social and living conditions.

5 Outlook: Gestalt and pedagogy

Being based on a theory of contact, i.e., the experience of relating, Gestalt pedagogy contributes crucial ideas to contemporary pedagogy that will help to

meet the educational challenges of the 21st century: learning to get in contact as a balance of autonomy and solidarity. Gestalt therapy/pedagogy according to Perls and Gestalt theory/psychology differ in many ways. What both have in common is that they have lost connection with academic educational discourse for some time now, whereas they both have been influencing the pedagogical discourse for decades. For the future of both Gestalt traditions, it will be crucial that they become more closely connected with academic pedagogy in theory and empirical research than has been the case in the past.

Gestalt theory, with its emphasis on cognitive processes, and Gestalt pedagogy, with its emphasis on experiencing self-world relationships ('contact'), can together strengthen their perspectives if they manage to shift pedagogy from knowledge to meaning through understanding the principles of thinking and interacting. Applied Gestalt theory and Gestalt pedagogy can meet in their reference to field theory and their phenomenological tradition striving for meaningful learning and its institutional preconditions. They both should jointly clarify their theoretical concepts strictly referring to current theory and research within education studies – not only to keep pace with academic discourse, but also to enrich it.

Summary

Applied Gestalt theory in the tradition of Gestalt psychology on the one hand and Gestalt pedagogy in the tradition of Gestalt therapy on the other hand are two different ways of thinking about education. Gestalt pedagogy proves to be compatible in many ways with current positions in education studies, in particular those of phenomenological pedagogy, dialogical pedagogy and theories of meaningful learning. All three approaches could provide a common ground for the two Gestalt traditions – not only for bringing them into relation, but also for strengthening their theoretical frameworks and thus enriching education studies.

Keywords: Gestalt pedagogy, education, contact

Zusammenfassung

Angewandte Gestalttheorie in der Tradition der Gestaltpsychologie einerseits und Gestaltpädagogik in der Tradition der Gestalttherapie andererseits stellen zwei unterschiedliche Ansätze dar, um über Bildung und Erziehung nachzudenken. Die Gestaltpädagogik erweist sich in vielerlei Hinsicht als kompatibel mit aktuellen erziehungswissenschaftlichen Positionen, insbesondere mit Blick auf phänomenologische Pädagogik, dialogische Pädagogik und Theorien bedeutsamen Lernens. Die drei Aspekte könnten eine gemeinsame Basis für die beiden Gestalttraditionen darstellen – nicht nur, um noch mehr aneinander anzuknüpfen, sondern auch, um den je eigenen theoretischen Rahmen zu stärken und auf diese Weise den bildungs- und erziehungswissenschaftlichen Diskurs anzureichern.

Schlüsselworte: Gestaltpädagogik, Bildung, Kontakt

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Biography

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