

DIDACTIC THOUGHT AS RATIONALITY OF EDUCATIONAL ACTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the revised English version of the article El 'pensamiento didáctico', published by the author in this magazine in 2011. It is assumed that the concept of didactic thought has a great explanatory potential to understand the rationality of educational action. This rationality is embedded in the phenomena of the construction of knowledge and meaning; it is a rationality that articulates the processes of objectivation and subjectivation of knowledge. It characteristically unfolds in the intersection between the objective world, the intersubjective world, and the subjective world to which Habermas (1987) makes reference; in the action-being, within contexts and involving singular subjects. It is constructed from the existing theoretical knowledge, but it takes a new interpretative structure, open to interaction and completion in its very unfolding.

Keywords

Teacher training - teacher identity - didactic thought - new rationality.

1. INTRODUCTION

A large part of the theoretical developments dealing with technical, hermeneutic and critical rationality applied to educational practice offer a fragmented view of the human actions involved in educational projects. In line with this, the present article develops the concept of didactic thought with the aim of describing and interpreting the rationality within it, be it as actions of knowing, as ways of doing and knowing, or as proposals for modes of being –all of these, ways of life contained therein. The above mentioned theoretical developments, highly valuable for educational theory, are nevertheless insufficient to understand knowledge, being as they are the cause and content of actions located in the heart of cultural processes, of social building processes, and of educational processes, in this case institutionalised at school.

It would seem that most of these theoretical developments refer to crystallised practices, not to skills that unfold from the interaction of these processes; therefore, they give the impression of a static, definitely finished reality. In their background is the implied belief that human action (in this case,

educational action) can be easily trapped inside a theory, which does not represent by itself the complexity needed to interpret the action-being or as a static, analytical category. This is the case in all the theoretical developments that refer to educational practices classing them as rationality, when descriptions and interpretations of these practices are undertaken as if they were objectivised products under a unique rationality, thus simplifying their complexity.

Educational action can only be partially described by theories of technical, hermeneutic or critical rationality; these provide significant –although fragmented– interpretation keys. They do not offer a dynamic explanatory theory of educational action as a phenomenon of the unfolding and construction of knowledge, as the unfolding and construction of subjects' rationality, or as a space for the interaction and construction of explicit and implicit meanings, of ways of life. They do not offer an explanation of educational action as a simultaneous presence of the objective world, the intersubjective world, and the subjective world to which Habermas (1987) makes reference; they do not explain the interaction of these worlds within the same space-time coordinates.

In view of this, the concept of didactic thought endeavours to contribute, from the teacher's view, to understand the type of rationality or knowledge needed by these professionals so they can get on in the complexity of educational action (González & Gramigna, 2009) –an action contained within cultural and economic processes, within the construction of social matter, and within processes of the construction of knowledge and meaning. Thus considered, such an action is defined on the basis of the interaction between the subject and the structure –the more or less explicit, consolidated ways of life or of operating in the world. This action involves an interaction between the world of life of which Husserl speaks in his transcendental phenomenology (1962, 1982, 1992), the world of everyday life (Heller, 2001), the social world (Schütz, 2003), and the objective world (Habermas, 1987). It is defined in essence by the presence and the construction of meanings in the current here-and-now (Heiddeger, 2003), but in a relentless attempt to transcend them or, as Bárcena (2009) writes in his approach to Hannah Arendt's philosophy of education, by the relation established by education with the world. It is therefore a potentially relevant concept to explain the teacher's professionalism and identity (Herrán, 2014).

2. THE TEACHER'S FUNCTIONS: A JUSTIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF DIDACTIC THOUGHT

Educational action refers to a social behaviour based on existing intentions (Schütz, 2003); it is the moment when the subject participates directly in the world of life, trying to realise the intentions, objectives, ideas and theories that are linked to certain projects. Educational action is a number of ways of doing, a set of characteristics that make it be one way or the other. As a matter of fact, part of the meaning of teaching is to be found in the functions or intentions which are implicitly and explicitly assigned to it; they mark out the functions or tasks that are entrusted to us teachers. Among these functions stand out the acquisition of knowledge and development of competences, cultural elements that have been selected and represented in the curriculum

(Lundgren, 1992). Nevertheless, other intentions –more or less distinctly expressed– enter the picture: forming citizens for a life in democracy, forming persons, preparing for life, etc. Moreover, although they are not the subject of this article, a large number of intentions or reasons underlie the teacher's task. In the midst of this, there always seems to be a latent question about the way in which what is taught in each subject is linked to these broader goals of teaching. And there is still another equally important question: how the particular lives of subjects connect with what we do as teachers, with what is done in each subject or topic that abound in the students' schooling (Monarca, 2009).

Whether we like it or not, education, our work, is influenced by this question, by the purpose of what we do in our daily practice, by the purpose for society, for us as teachers and for the students. If there were an opportunity to actualise the above three purposes, it would give meaning to educational action. Although the latter does not only endeavour to realise already existent meanings, meaning is also a construction performed by subjects, the meaning lies in discovering oneself as a subject (and society) in the making, making oneself in relation with others. The teaching staff must discover that educational action, beyond the specific curricular subjects, is an opportunity for this development. Here we include the teaching of a specific subject, with the purpose of pinning down certain socially selected and organised cultural contents so that they may contribute to the construction of such meaning, of a being in the making, giving shape to him or herself together with other beings. The contents will provide unique aspects aimed at people who will have to understand a specific world, shared with others, and act in it.

Within the framework of educational intentions, the educational action performed by teachers is always an opportunity for what has been discussed above. This action cannot but imply a proposal to create some kind of meaning from the proposed knowledge and from the ways in which this is done. In educational action, knowledge and the phenomenon of knowledge come together.

We need a teaching knowledge that can be fully present within its action, this is, a knowledge that is inbuilt in the subject, subjectivised (it cannot be otherwise), which allows for unity of thought and knowledge in action. I am referring to various types of knowledge, general didactic knowledge and that pertaining to a specific curricular subject, all of which are objectivised as socio-historic production (Goodson, 1998), as science or as various fields of knowledge, all of which must be possessed by the teacher. In other words, thanks to certain formative actions, the teacher has participated in the dialectic process implied in the subjectivation and objectivation of knowledge. By the way, this knowledge is subjectivised in order to make interaction possible in a specific professional context: teaching.

We can thereby speak of didactic thought as the rationality implied in the unity (organism)-knowledge-thought-action-(existence). Therein are comprised imagination, reflection, affect, emotion –in sum, the subjects' biographies, what they are (Herrán, 2014). Subjects are jointly inserted in meaningful action, with a multiplicity of meanings, for the construction of other meanings. For its part, didactic thought can incorporate (subjectivise) a plethora of areas of socially constructed (objectivised) knowledge, allowing for interaction in specific

educational contexts against a backdrop tied to the construction of meaning. Likewise, by virtue of its characteristic reflective attitude, it permits the use of other knowledge which may arise from the interaction between objectivised knowledge (theories) that has been subjectivised, contexts and the subjects involved, the educational action that takes place within and with these, and the wide range of intentions present in action.

I am speaking of a rationality that is typical and renders singularity and specificity to educational action, beyond the concrete subjects, and that is therefore a constituent element of the teacher's professional identity. In this sense, didactic thought offers the keys to interpret the educational phenomenon, the contexts and the subjects involved in it, thus giving specificity to the task of teaching.

Didactic thought gives unity to the most disparate modalities of knowledge possessed by the subject, ranging from those that are part of the disciplinary field the teacher must deliver, to the great variety of ways of knowledge that contribute to situate the specific knowledge within a concrete educational action (Chevallard, 1998), and, at the same time, in relation to certain educational intentions that go beyond the specific action of one single subject and the immediate context in which it takes place. Didactic thought links the subject with the possibilities of being that are associated to the construction of meaning, in the sense that all educational action harbours an aspect of evaluation, a model of how subjects and situations should be (Bárcena & Mélich, 2000; Monarca, 2009; etc.).

3. DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF 'DIDACTIC THOUGHT'

In the previous paragraph I wanted to place didactic thought within the frame of educational intentions and the teacher's functions, as the unity (organism)-knowledge-thought-action-(existence) of a subject who participates in a specific context within the limits of a preconceived project –in this case, the curriculum. We are therefore speaking of a constructed knowledge, a possibility of knowing, ways of doing and, through these, of possibilities of construction. Didactic thought is knowledge that always remains open and incomplete –a fact of which it must not lose awareness in its knowing; its necessary completion will become clear in its very development. It is an incomplete knowledge, for it keeps completing itself in each situation, in each educational action. That is why I speak of thought, since this term comprises the necessary knowledge already constructed by the subject and, at the same time, its unfolding in the world with the aim to carry out different comprehensions and executions which will generate more knowledge.

Didactic thought incorporates certain types of knowledge produced (objectivised) in research practices of different fields; but within its very construction (subjectivation) is the direct implication with the educational phenomenon. This is to say that although it incorporates the typical view of science, given that it has been constructed from the interaction with its productions, in didactic thought, science is integrated within a new approach that goes beyond the intentions characteristic of the research practices that generate theoretic knowledge –although they may have many coincidences.

The meanings constructed by theory are an integral part of what I call didactic thought –although, in its own construction, it will be the latter that offers theory a new structure of thought (knowledge, after all) that allows it to interact with educational phenomena. Didactic knowledge must always put the stress on the singularity of contexts and subjects while aspiring to a constant transcendence of these. It is defined by its possibility of unfolding in singular contexts where it is assumed that subjects, in their everyday lives, will acquire and use the concepts and theories constructed by the different fields of knowledge on the basis of perception, observation, experience, analysis, criticism..., put into context in the light of the theories in which these processes have their place. We should not forget that in current teaching, as explained in the previous pages, this knowledge should be considered in the context of the intentions that go beyond the subjects, beyond fragmented and specialised views of the world of life.

Due to its quality of constructed knowledge, action of knowing and ways of doing in educational contexts, didactic thought allows to generate specific processes which favour the construction, in some specific subjects, of an intersubjectively constructed knowledge by means of historic processes and the specific processes of the respective fields of research; later, it is transformed with a view to its communication, teaching... For all of this, it becomes necessary to recreate these intersubjective processes –or other pertinent ones– which now tend to this appropriation. Didactic thought thus appears as an articulator between socially constructed knowledge, the knowledge taken by singular subjects, and a wide range of different modes of knowledge present in educational action.

A feature of didactic thought is its ability to put together general and specific aspects associated to educational action:

- ⇒ General educational intentions and the educational intentions of the centres and the subjects who participate in educational practices: parents, students, and teachers.
- ⇒ General educational intentions and the singular aspects of contexts where they will to be executed.
- ⇒ Scientific knowledge and the knowledge incorporated to the curriculum, and these, in turn, with the teacher's and the student's respective knowledge.
- ⇒ The social conditions of schooling and the specific conditions of students.
- ⇒ Specific actions in the classroom, their mutual relations, and their links to larger contexts.
- ⇒ Schooling in its current manifestation and other possible realities (Zeichner, 1987).

Another important feature of didactic thought in this set of relations is that it interacts with educational phenomena as they occur –this is, not as interpreted and as presented by theory in its orderly analytical schemes. Of course, it is nevertheless clear that a didactic thought formed by theoretical interpretations cannot but be affected by these and reflect them in its considerations and interpretations. With this I am not arguing that there is such

thing as a view devoid of theory –at least not in didactic thought–; our appreciation of phenomena is always filtered by our knowledge (Schütz, 2003), which is constructed from our theoretical and practical interaction with the educational phenomena. The point is that the current context in which interactions occur does not have fixed meanings –that are validated within a certain theoretic frame where reality has been trapped and represented in a certain way. Now interaction occurs with a phenomenon, with action-being. It is clear that it is done from scientific representations which are an intrinsic part of didactic thought, but it is done seeking its completion in the being-becoming of the educational phenomenon, together with all unforeseen events that singularity, spontaneity, immediacy... may generate. Interaction also takes place with other knowledge objectivised in ways of life, conventions, institutionalised practices and other subjectivised knowledge, by both teacher and students.

Hence, didactic thought is a knowledge constructed by the subject (subjectivised) from knowledge that is socially produced (objectified), characterised by its potential for generating more knowledge, comprehension and ways of doing associated with educational intentions; a knowledge ready to do this before and after educational action, but that comes especially into play while this action is taking place. This property of didactic thought, of being intrinsic to educational action, becomes a potential source of new knowledge that can only arise from this implication in its own unfolding, as an action of knowing. This action of knowing allows the teacher to represent phenomena with other plots that can contain an order and a certain disorder, among which there is room for contradiction (Morin, 2003) without action losing its meaning. Without this approach, typical of didactic thought, simplifying or stereotyped views, empty or with fragmented or limited meanings, would prevail.

Didactic thought allows us to become aware of the relevance of educational action; in other words, it provides a comprehensive view of this type of intervention in the world of life, a view and a rationality centred on the educational phenomenon –which, as mentioned above, is characterised by a teleological background and a marked normative character of the ‘ought to be’ (ethical background) which are transmitted by way of a number of intentions (Monarca, 2006, 2009). Didactic thought is addressed to these aspects; it allows its constructor to be aware of his part in the implications of the features of the educational event as well as of implications that, in this sense, may exist or not in his own educational actions (Lévinas, 2001). Didactic thought is therefore linked to ethical and political dimensions, as we find ourselves in the field of the ‘ought to be’ contained in the explicit and implicit educational intentions which exist in a wide range of forms. Likewise, it is related to a cultural dimension, also expressed by means of educational intentions insofar as it is a proposal of access and participation in a culture, of understanding the world of life –this leads us to an epistemological dimension, since the comprehension of the world of life is related to the knowledge built on fields of knowledge. It is also linked to an institutional aspect, as long as the previous dimensions are materialised in cultures of specific centres of which the professor is an integral part –cultures that are expressed in certain practices, rituals, ways of doing, projects, etc. Finally, didactic thought is related to a practical dimension, since it necessarily locates the mentioned aspects in the

here and now, making them present by means of specific and concrete actions, giving unity to a complex phenomenon.

4. THE CURRICULUM IN THE FRAMEWORK OF DIDACTIC THOUGHT

As per the way in which present education is institutionalised, didactic thought should take into consideration, as knowledge constructed by a subject, as action of knowing and as ways of doing within educational action, the so-called curricular logic, which contains the explicit and implicit intentions already discussed in this article, with clear and explicit global intentions that may often seem to dissolve in the different curricular subjects.

Curricular logic, with its various processes of realization (Gimeno, 1995), constitutes a way to understand the process of socialization. Among other things, it covers the selection of certain elements of culture which are considered as valuable and that are introduced in this curricular logic so they can be represented in a school format –but, in principle, already far from the culture where they make full sense; consequently, these elements are not taught in a cultural environment where they make full sense (Lundgren, 1992), but in a social atmosphere that is specific and historically created for that purpose. In this scene, one of the main tasks for a teacher, rendered possible by didactic thought, is to relocate these elements within a context, at first artificial, providing them with meaning so that the educational proposal becomes viable –in other words, so that the phenomenon of knowledge may take place.

Almost all cultural elements are linked to fields of knowledge, at least explicitly. There is no doubt that extracting an element from a context to include it in another context implies an important loss of meaning, as this objectivised knowledge acquires its full meaning within theoretical plots that have been historically constructed or are under construction. As contended by Bernstein (1994), pedagogical discourse serves a recontextualising function, selecting something from a discipline; it is not the discipline, but rather the process of recontextualisation, that regulates the selection, the organization and the sequencing of the selected material.

Therefore, when we select cultural products of science, we take them from a context where they bear full meaning. When we place them in a teaching environment we must, in some way, reconstruct knowledge and meaning; this is a necessity and a possibility of realization that should be present in didactic thought. If this is not taken into consideration or if it is not achieved, it may result in effects contrary to any educational intention: boredom, indifference, lack of motivation or even rejection toward the knowledge thus offered. In didactic interactions we must avoid lack of meaning in the processes of knowledge construction. We have to couple it with some need or motivation to know –which can be found in a number of experiences: curiosity, wish, solidarity, amusement, need, usefulness, etc.

The construction of meaning by way of educational action requires that that meaning be present in the whole course of action. Meaning is related to features of action because it is in some way associated with intentions that interest me or awaken my curiosity; or because, although I may not be

interested in them, I consider them necessary for me, for my surroundings or for both; or because it allows me to see a process that goes beyond this moment and enables me to associate these intentions with previous and future actions, placing me in a process that becomes clear to me; or because I place that action in the world of life –mine and the others’– because it makes me enter into something unknown that helps me discover or get a better grasp of the world of present life, but also of the past and the future.

Didactic thought relates to the ability to generate actions linked to certain educational intentions; every educational action implies a proposal in this line that is realised in certain interactions between teacher, knowledge, and student. As described in Monarca (2006, 2009, 2011), we can say that these actions – the aforementioned interactions– are meaningful when:

- They are inserted in some meaning of the world of life –that is, that they transcend the school environment– and this world is shared, or at least known, by the student.
- They manage to become an integral part of the students’ everyday life; they become familiar to them.
- They are placed in unfragmented units of meaning; namely, when students are able to perceive relations with previous and following tasks.
- They show the meaning of concrete action within a greater unity of meaning: topic, subject, abilities developed, values, etc.
- They foster the development of the most varied cognitive, emotional, and existential processes associated with knowledge.

These aspects are general to any educational action with specific effects in the teaching of each content. In this sense, what has been said hitherto bears consequences for the teaching proposals of all subjects, with specific features related to the contents of each field of knowledge or discipline, but also with general features regarding the other aspects of educational action. Therefore it is also imperative to recover the purpose of the discipline: to recognise why a problem is typical of a certain field of knowledge, how and why certain things are the object of research and not others. Students approach knowledge in different ways: they have different interests, previous knowledge or experiences, different styles, etc. Consequently we have to generate different entry points –among which is didactic thought, that places us before this type of inquiries typical of the educational task; it guides us in the reflections about the type of questions or problems that open the door to knowledge; it helps us look for the already existing answers within students as well as, of course, within science. At any rate, the fields of knowledge constitute an interpretation of the world of life represented in descriptive and analytical plots; and the curriculum, insofar as it is an explicit and implicit proposal of educational intentions and of the cultural elements linked to them, also implies a reinterpretation that, in turn, will materialise in a long and complex process of reinterpretation with a number of elements implied: documents, publishing houses, educational centres, teachers, students, etc. It is a process centred, in any case, in the construction of knowledge, in the generation of proposals to make this happen.

But we should not forget, in line with what has been argued above, that the global construction of meaning, of the significance of the world of life,

cannot be limited to the specific and fragmented requests of each discipline; these always define a sector of reality as its area of interest (Heidegger, 2003); moreover, there are no guarantees that this meaning will come from the sum total of the subjects defined for certain courses of a certain educational level. The required unity will not appear spontaneously; therefore, the rationality typical of didactic thought is characterised by going beyond the concrete topic and positioning itself as part of a global educational proposal, in a permanent interaction between the individual subject and society. As Eisner claims (1982:27), “schools as institutions and education as a process ought to foster the student’s ability to understand the world, to deal efficiently with problems, and to acquire varieties of meaning from interactions with it”. The rationality characteristic of didactic thought provides this interpretative framework, knowing that the answer is to be found in the specific contexts and with singular subjects, and always remembering that this rationality will have to generate ways of doing, educational actions that will provide the possible answer in a specific here and now, with the aim of transcending the subject and enlarging the contexts of significance and interpretation.

Therefore, the question arises as to how these general curriculum representations –thought for me and for anyone else– relate to the students’ specific circumstances, which define their world of life. As representations placed in the curriculum, they imply an ethical and political option in the construction of the world of life –but they have to interact with my circumstances and those of the other. And we cannot ignore that all forms of representation deny aspects of the world, because they are not mirrors of the world but ways of interpreting it (Cassirer, 1982); they cannot contain all the features that make themselves present through the senses and cognition.

In any case, when we transfer the idea discussed by Husserl (1962) about knowledge and the act of knowing, we see that the value of educational action lies in the contents which it intends to convey and in the ways of doing it. We cannot separate both –not in educational action, although, outside this field, both can lend themselves separately to analytical objectivation. As already discussed, knowledge, particularly in its most explicit forms, is externally demarcated; it is in its realization, in its translation to the object of teaching, in its position in space-time coordinates, where the teachers’ didactic thought enters the picture. Didactic thought is the knowledge required to form part of the contextualised process of transformation and construction of knowledge, which, as a cultural product, appears either as objectivations, as processes of subjectivation –of the subject’s appropriation– and as manifestation of an appropriated, interiorised knowledge. Thus, the externalization-internalization or objectivation-subjectivation typical of the processes of knowledge construction, are, in the educational action, a unique dialectical process of comings and goings. From this point, didactic thought is involved in the complex curricular logic in the form of comprehension, interpretation, criticism, and of the generation of proposals. The representations that teachers make with regard to the educational intentions, what to teach, how and why to do it, must transform into actions resulting in a number of experiences of teaching and learning.

5. CONCLUSION

In this new, revised version, translated to English, of the article 'El pensamiento didáctico' (Monarca, 2011), efforts have been made to go beyond the existing theoretical developments about technical, hermeneutical and critical rationality in educational practice, without ignoring the importance of their interpretative contributions to the field. In this case, as a unique form of rationality, I have developed the concept of didactic thought which, constructed by an individual subject, should be seen as the unity (organism)-thought-knowledge-action-(existence) that allows teachers to interpret, criticise and operate in the context of educational action, and to give it meaning beyond specific curricular subjects. It is a meaning that can be found in the ethical-teleological background of every educational action and that is part of didactic thought itself –knowledge, the constant questioning of the possible consequences of my teaching performance, the repercussions of educational action on the student and on the world.

In this way, the concept of didactic thought can be seen as the rationality of teaching action, considered beyond specific curricular subjects, inserted in the explicit and implicit meanings assigned to the task of teaching; it can be seen as the rationality typical of the phenomena of the construction of knowledge and meaning, a rationality that relates the processes of the knowledge objectivation and subjectivation. It is featured by its unfolding in the intersection between the objective world, the intersubjective world and the subjective world; in the action-being that takes place in contexts and with individual subjects. It is constructed from existing theoretical knowledge, but in a new interpretative structure, open to interaction and completion in its very unfolding.

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