

# THE NATURE AND ESSENCE OF SPECIAL DIDACTICS AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE DIDACTIC SITUATION\*

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## 1. Introduction

Some teachers contend that in their teaching there is no place for theory and methods. They rely on the spur of the moment, a creative personality, intuitive feelings and schemes of anticipation sharpened by experience. However, a closer investigation shows that they make use of fixed methods and teaching principles that are followed unconsciously or mechanically. It is good to realize that such a way of teaching necessarily is deficient as far as pedagogic-didactic schooling, organized insights and well-thought-out actions are concerned. It also runs the risk of leading to a schematization and rigidity of approach by which the blame for all failures is sought solely in the pupils.

On the other hand, we are faced with the problem that there is not much uniformity in the language used among theoreticians in their discourse about didactic problems/questions. The great variety of meanings of the root word "didaskein", as found in the Greek language, makes it clear why the concept "didactic" is so diversely interpreted and defined in the history of pedagogic-didactic thinking.

### What is didactics?

Didactics is a theory that reflects on the scope and meaning of the event between persons known as teaching. It shows a dualism in that, on the one hand, it thinks purely theoretically about the phenomenon of teaching but, on the other hand, at the same time there also is a more practical aspect regarding the art of teaching.

However, teaching can only be such an art in which the presenter shows his own style when it no longer is suffocated by the force of a dead tradition or is repetitions without insight but when it springs from the interiority of the teaching person.

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## **2. Further demarcation of concepts: Becoming a person, becoming an adult and teaching:**

To allow teaching as one of the ways of educating to occur properly it is necessary to disclose the connections among becoming a person (human), becoming adult and teaching.

Pedagogics reflects on the primordial phenomenon of educating that is given with being human and is actualized in an educative event between adult and child. Our pedagogic aims point to the child's becoming an adult under the guidance of an adult and in terms of certain norms.

The field of study of didactics, as a theory of teaching, however, is not discontinued with becoming adult but it embraces learning in all forms and teaching on all levels of becoming a person. Thus, the educative event is completed in the teaching activity when adulthood is reached while the didactic event continues. Becoming a person, of which educating is the first part, is not thinkable without teaching. Teaching (as distinguished from pure instruction) is responsible for bringing to consciousness every relationship between a person's own world (which includes his inner world) and the reality around him. Teaching serves becoming a person and offers the possibilities for actualizing being a person. To compare becoming a person with forming gives it a one-sided character. Because completeness cannot be striven for in a short article such as this, for our purpose the following schematic divisions of didactics are expanded on further:

- (a) General didactics.
- (b) Special didactics.
- (c) Subject didactics or methodology.

To better illuminate the nature and essence of special didactics it is necessary to clearly describe its position as woven between the more theoretical and practical aspects of didactics.

## **3. The field of study of special didactics**

The above division clearly places special didactics closer to practice than is general didactics. This requires that there be a search for a set of categories in terms of which the systematic design of a didactic situation is made possible. A person continually finds himself in a situation, i.e., in a totality of circumstances according

to which he must act. In the branching off of special didactics to a specific didactic situation and a search for valid data, activities must be carried out that allow teaching in its learning as well as instructional aspects to be done justice. Then special didactics remains anchored in general didactics because both are co-determinants for harmoniously becoming a person. Related to this, special didactics also must find points of contact for its deliberations in general pedagogical and methodological findings. Later these aspects are dealt with separately.

A task of special didactics is to plan the didactic situation such that it is not given by prescriptions. In order to meaningfully unlock reality for a learner he must be helped to understand this reality and make discoveries himself that will allow him to master additional distinctions. For an orientation to reality, content relations between theory and practice must be disclosed to the learning person.

To build a bridge between thought structures and question asking from the theory, on the one hand, and the aims, demands and idiosyncrasies of the practice, on the other hand, conscious methods must be used to bring about a convergence of current findings that possibly occur in the course of the planned didactic situation for methodology to be put into perspective and show a favorable form.

(a) **Disciplines that serve as points of contact for special didactics.**

(i) **Pedagogics:**

Where pedagogics is concerned with thinking through and describing the event that occurs when an adult intervenes with a child, the pronouncements of any didactic theory must necessarily acknowledge this and more particularly in its pronouncements about the preschool's and school's periods of educating. Any contradictions between pedagogical aims and didactic conceptions can lead to insurmountable misunderstandings as soon as they are applied in practice. Within the limits of the child's educating to adulthood the design of the didactic situation always offers the possibilities that the adult can purposefully intervene with the aim of the child's firmer grasp of the acknowledged, valid pedagogical values and norms. Therefore, educating may not be merely a haphazard event: it is purposefully dynamic and is directed to

practice. In order to provide for the full unfolding of the child, he can never be viewed as a blank slate that only must be written on. Each person is potentiality and didactic actions cannot be directed only to the intellectual dimension of being a person but also must address his life of feelings. To be able to provide help for this it is necessary that the pedagogical categories of freedom, responsibility, etc. be exposed in harmony with the cultural systems in the school because it is in terms of such life contents that a child acquires the beacons for constituting his life world. In mastering reality one arrives at an unlocking of it and acquires more flexibility and mobility in his judging and choosing.

Modern views of teaching and learning activities give them an ontological status that offers special didactics a firm point of contact for designing teaching situations that provide a child with the possibility to become a person. With the mastery of life realities a particular relation and disposition is built up in a child that enables him to manifest a firmer form of living and to hold particular standpoints. It is important for special didactics to know that learning is primary regarding educating because a person's way of being-in-the-world is a way of learning. The didactician cannot give a final pronouncement about what learning is for designing didactic situations from learning psychology. Rather, there must be a linking up with particular categories about learning that have ontological validity. The didactic task is to provide help with respect to learning as a human way of being. Consequently, it is more than merely a conscious occurrence, i.e., a constituting that directs the learning activity(ies) by a particular attunement (intentionality). Hence, the didactic and educative moments of learning are described as closely interacting with each other and as undeniably supporting each other. Therefore, it is a task for special didactics to ascertain for itself pedagogical findings regarding an adult's providing formal and systematic help to a child in a specific situation. By its nature, the educative event is not limited to the relationship between parent and child but also between adults and children in general. The teacher also purposefully must intervene in the life of a

child through his planning and radical alterations in the didactic situation. There must be an elimination of the fixed, traditional instructional situations and in their place a “freer” space created that offers a child more satisfaction and happiness.

**(ii) General didactics:**

It was indicated that the task of special didactics does not stop with the attainment of adulthood but also includes university and adult teaching. Particular didactics searches for points of contact and makes decisions from views discovered by general didactics:

**(a) Fundamental didactic forms:**

To make the pronouncements of special didactics more practical an attempt must be made to evaluate particular aims in terms of certain fundamental forms. By penetrating the teaching event it is clear that a person teaches in terms of certain fundamental structures (play, conversation, example, assignment) and that the particular forms of teaching (principles) provide the foundation for various ways of presenting or teaching, e.g, the exemplary (using examples). From history we find a number of so-called teaching plans or systems (Dalton Plan, Jena Plan, Montessori system) each of which, in a certain sense, is founded on a philosophical and/or psychological theory or particular worldview. It is important to note that these teaching forms have had a profound and lasting influence on teaching. Also, from a number of independent systems there are designs that have not hesitated to try to break through the formal, class offerings and bring about a looser class context. Here, as with any planned teaching renovation, it must always be kept in view that there are traditional opinions held about school, class and other organizational matters that make it necessary to search for the use of fundamental forms as possibilities within the framework of such an accepted class context.

For the implementation of such fundamental forms in designing a didactic situation a thorough

distinction must be made between fundamental forms for learning such as conversation, play, imitation, asking questions, etc. and fundamental forms for presenting (teaching) such as assigning, programming, dramatizing, etc. The fundamental forms provide the basis for structures according to which the learning person's activities and intentionality must be directed, but, at the same time, they also are the foundation for the presenter's choice of methods. When special didactics draws from its knowledge of the various fundamental forms in preparing a particular situation, this will be a contribution to a more conscious teaching achievement with a deeper foundation. The fundamental didactic forms provide the beginning for building up a structure of teaching activities in terms of which the learning person becomes more intensely involved in reality because his wondering and interest are stimulated.

Special didactics, then, can search for connections with play, as a category of learning, and its planning of the didactic situation can be so prepared that the child's "playful activity" is transformed into a more formal way of learning by making certain demands as expected achievements. Thus, a child first "plays" in the natural science laboratory with an increasing directedness to mastering reality with the aim of better achievement. Still later this becomes his place of work.

Special didactics arrives at decisions in terms of the fundamental forms and the insights that thereby are thrown open and that make valid his design of the didactic situation since the forms of being hold true in each phase of teaching because, as a didactic category, they are not anchored in other phenomena although in the more formal situation they sometimes will be almost unrecognizable. However, an admirable fundamental form must not be unconditionally adhered to simply because it includes a specific

usefulness or benefit. Also the integration and varied implementation of fundamental forms in the teaching situation still guarantee no absolute success but only help to act with more awareness and clarity.

**(b) The part the presenter (teacher) plays:**

It must always be remembered that the presenter is the initiator of the didactic event and determines its direction and course, presents the learning person with demands, and selects and orders the learning contents. Briefly, he controls the climate of the didactic situation that can be defining for the actualization of an encounter and the forming of dispositions. Each presenter's personality, attunement and ability give an individual "style" to his teaching, irrespective of the methods and aids with which he involves himself. It is the task of special didactics to design the practice in such a way that the didactics of various subjects, each following its specific aims, can adopt this design without being forced into a fixed routine.

In each didactic situation there must be mention of unquestionable values and norms that must be acquired and therefore the teacher cannot follow a natural course. There must be a push through from sporadic intervention and later to meaningful guidance by the presenter by which an essential change in the learning person is brought about. Knowledge of the theoretical findings of general didactics provides the presenter with the preparation and motivation for planning his teaching practice.

From the above it can be deduced that the learning person, to a great extent, can constitute his life world out of the image that the presenter (of reality) holds before him. It is the disclosure of the categories of reality, as they are announced by the presenter, that enable the child to order, to change and eventually to exceed himself by establishing new realities.

**(c) Forms of arranging the learning material:**

One of the most essential tasks of special didactics is to make an accountable selection from and obtain an ordering of the cultural systems that must be presented as life contents when it very soon is clear that it would be an impossible task to be involved with the entirety of reality. Connected with this, the newer views of concepts such as forming, formative contents and categorical forming no longer allow a place for “encyclopedic knowing” and “overloaded curricula” as aims. With the introduction of the concept categorical forming, the independent existence of material and formal forming are neutralized with a far-reaching change of what can be viewed as formative contents with formative value. In the first place, a striving for a static completeness must be relinquished regarding the learning material; with exemplary principles of ordering a clear objection is shown to such suffocation by the abundance of learning material. The unlocking of the general must be acquired in terms of the simple, the original or elemental, as core points of the didactic deliberations. By such an exemplary ordering of the learning material each theme must be stripped to its essentials so that the learning person can discover the general in terms of the particular, typical, fundamental, etc.

To the general principles for constructing lesson plans (concentric, symbiotic, linear, chronological, etc.) special didactics now must add forms of curricula such as a maximum, minimum and skeleton plan that each opens new possibilities for certain subject areas. Special didactics has to consider the fact that complex learning materials show stratified structures that the essentials build up but also that concern their level of difficulty and understandability. Thus, a spiral form used to design a didactic situation acquires meaning as a possibility to arrange bit-by-bit the non-surveyable content and present it in an understandable way. Similarly, a teaching principle such as programming largely is a linear ordering of learning contents—i.e., a sequence from the more simple to the most complex learning contents. To allow didactic principles such as individualization and differentiation to occur properly, a



minimum curriculum plan can be implemented as form of ordering that only delimits the core learning material and leaves things open for inserting supplementary programs according to the interest and ability of the learning person.

The ordering of learning material also must keep in mind what learning contents, as means for educating and becoming a person, form those firm beacons of the area of knowledge in terms of which the learner can determine his own position in reality. Only such original lived experiencing, stemming from a meaningful ordering of contents, can verify the deeper relations of the formative event.

Designing a didactic situation must try to bring about a synthesis between form and content by selecting and ordering learning contents so that, as a stated problem, they demand the active participation of the learning person.

**(d) The principle of perception (observation):** Pestalozzi had indicated that all knowledge is fundamentally rooted in a perceptual image. In his involvement with reality a child constructs a diffuse life world for himself of global representations that gradually are analyzed by educating and teaching and are made insightful. Perceiving that originates in a primordial wonder and astonishment as a result of the appealing character of a perceived object creates an “open” attitude and readiness in the learning person that, as a fruitful moment in teaching, must not go unused. As a consequence of his more intense attentiveness and correlated more refined perceiving, certain actual questions now arise in the learning person to which he seeks answers. At the same time, on the one hand, particular directions of interest, talents and proficiencies of the pupils are laid bare, while, on the other hand, specific gaps in knowledge and incorrect insights and concepts in his equipment are shown. However, when the course of the didactic event does not speak to the interiority of the learning person, the

teaching offers food to someone who is not hungry for it and this can result in him mistakenly being judged as “dumb” simply because he has not yet discovered what the contents are all about.

In designing the didactic situation it must be taken into account that perceiving cannot merely be a physical or psychological “process” because where it manifests itself as a way of being-in-the-world it not only helps define conscious [cognitive] activities but also the life of feelings. Consequently, each person lived experiences each learning situation differently.

Hence, now the task of special didactics is to reflect on the help that can be given to bring reality “closer” to the learning person. The nearness of an object that is related to at a physical distance is no guarantee of real perception. Rather the disclosure of the essentials can be made possible by a fundamental question that is presented as a problem. This indicates that in teaching answers should not be given to questions that were not even asked.

Sometimes it is necessary that certain teaching aids (learning as well as instructional aids) be used where they can contribute to helping bring reality “closer” to the learning child. The design and structure of the teaching event must never be determined by the teaching aids. Special didactics especially should provide general guidelines for subject didactics because the nature and essence of some aids lend themselves to taking the teaching form of a particular subject out of context. For example, here we think of the use of pictures in teaching social studies.

**(iii) Methodology:**

In discussing the forms of ordering or arranging learning material reference was made to the close relation between the “what” (contents) and the “how” (methods). Therefore, it is necessary that special didactics also search for points of contact with general pronouncements of methodology and reflect on their

structuring relations, scope and limits of their validity and significance.

Methodology cannot limit all of its deliberations to revealing a best way of mastering learning material but it also must make pronouncements about concepts such as “maturing”, “forming”, “educating” as part of its methodological work. Where special didactics focuses itself on a specific situation it cannot provide watertight indications from the broad field of methodology but only can point to possible ways by which certain aims can be realized. Once special didactics has made the fundamental principles of all of the methods understandable the presenter can contrast the “newer” with the “older” or allow one to be linked up to another. In doing this, his methodology acquires flexibility and a personal style. By finding direct links with fundamental methodological axioms, the methodological work acquires a more artistic and resourceful character, and malpractice is eliminated such as that in which all learning material is forced under one methodological scheme or that of blindly following certain methods. Methodology gives overarching insights into matters such as experimenting, stating problems, drill work, etc. that for special didactics can be of motivational and discriminative value in describing guidelines for practice. Here we think of the appeal emanating from the “gestalt” of a teaching principle that relies on a globally experienced perception from which the narrow and one-sided view of teaching following fixed stages of learning can be shown to be invalid.

Fundamental insight into the principle of exemplary teaching, perforce, has the consequence that contemporary views of the inductive method must be qualified. Here indeed, this does not involve the amount of distinct “cases” that must be recognized and in terms of which, through generalizing, the law or rule must be found but rather the offering of a **few** examples that include the **essentials** of the general.

Thus, it also is clear that the pronouncements of special didactics must not be bound to specific areas of learning

material although methodological principles that are offered will be found to be more easily applied to particular subject areas. Thus, in the strongest sense of the word, a method only is a way to a particular aim. Special and subject didactics only can select a particular teaching form when the aims are clearly in view.

#### **4. General:**

Just because special didactics must obtain its points of support for its pronouncements from an inner circle of disciplines, it cannot disconnect itself from truths beyond what can make valuable contributions to successfully design a particular teaching situation. Here we think of sciences that have humans [persons] as a common foundation for various fields of study such as psychology, philosophy, sociology and physiology.

However, there must be a vigorous watch for an actual danger that didactics and didactic views are not used as a plaything by a **psychologistic** view or as a field of experimentation for one or another [philosophical] anthropological theory. A purely ontological truth in which didactic norms and values are rooted is that didactics finds its origin and foundation in educating and in the world of the child. Even so, didactics must always have knowledge of the facts of developmental psychology in order to be able to make accountable pronouncements about the questions of progress in life development. Basic knowledge about phenomena of nature such as light and sound is indispensable for full insight into a concept such as perceiving and the proper use and adaptation of technical aids. Deliberations from sociology and other social sciences are fundamental for preparing and planning forms of teaching such as group work.

Thus, it appears that the task of special didactics is a more important matter than was realized up to now. That the success of any teacher's (presenter's) preparation and the planning and design of practice no longer can be a casual matter and that the aims of pedagogics, general didactics and methodological theories continually must be kept in view.

### **AUTHOR'S ENGLISH SUMMARY\***

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\* Slightly edited by G.D.Y. and American English added.

## THE NATURE OF SPECIAL DIDACTICS AS APPLIED TO THE DIDACTIC SITUATION

### **1. Introduction:**

We still find some teachers, especially among those of the “old guard” who in their teaching only rely on their creative personality and intuitive sense while rejecting the possibility of benefiting in any way from theory and a theoretical approach. However, closer investigation reveals that, without realizing it, they apply fixed methods and principles that in a way constitutes a theory although they often lead to a rigid and even barren approach. As a result of this rigidity all failures, nevertheless, are blamed on the pupils and not on the inadequate theory.

On the other hand, the variety of interpretations and meanings attributed to the term “didactics” and its derivatives (e.g., didactician) have led to confusion in pedagogical didactic thought and pronouncements. Therefore, it is necessary to attempt to define didactics. Didactics is the theory that is concerned with the scope and meaning of teaching. As such, it has a purely theoretical aspect but also a more practical one. Both aspects must contribute to any considerations regarding a particular didactic situation.

### **2. Clarification of the concepts of achieving humanity, achieving adulthood and teaching:**

Achieving true humanity, of which achieving adulthood (the aim of educating/upbringing) is the first phase, is inconceivable without teaching. Teaching (as distinguished from mere instructing) is responsible for making conscious every relationship between a person’s own world (which includes his inner world) and the reality around him. Under the guidance of the adult the child (i.e., the learning person) learns and acquires certain norms. This is a pedagogical occurrence. However, didactics comprises much more and includes learning in all of its forms and teaching at all levels and stages of one’s striving to achieve humanity and not only within the adult-child relationship subdivided under at least the three headings of General Didactics, Special Didactics and Subject Didactics (also called the method(s) of teaching a specific subject). Special Didactics occupies a central position between General and Subject Didactics.

### 3. The field of study of special didactics:

The above subdivision implies that Special Didactics is somewhat closer to practice than is General Didactics. This means that a new search must be made for a set of categories that will make a systematic design of a didactic situation possible. The fact that Special Didactics is directed at specific didactic situations and at a search for data holding good in such situations requires that action be taken that will do justice to teaching in its learning as well as presentational aspects. In addition to acknowledging that Special Didactics is embedded in General Didactics it also is necessary to realize that in its pronouncements, points of contact must be found with general pedagogical and methodological insights. The following disciplines serve as points of contact for Special Didactics:

- (i) **Pedagogics:** Any contradictions between pedagogical aims and didactic conceptions can lead to insurmountable misunderstandings when the conceptions are applied in practice. Special Didactics must always take cognizance of the pedagogical views concerning the adult's help to a child in a particular situation.
- (ii) **General Didactics:** Special didactics also is able to make pronouncements in the light of notions and principles revealed in general didactic theory, some of which are the following:
  - (a) *Fundamental didactic principles:* These are the basis of structures that direct the learning person's intentionality and activities but at the same time suggest the choice of method the teacher should make. It is clear that the application of such fundamental principles does not automatically guarantee absolute success.
  - (b) *The part played by the teacher* in the didactic situation must not be underestimated. Through preparation and planning on his part as catalyst and initiator of the didactic situation he bestows on it an individual "style" without sacrificing too much mobility and adaptability.

- (c) Different ways of systematizing and arranging the subject matter to be learned are among the most essential tasks of Special Didactics. Here special attention must be paid to newer insights concerning educative forming as well as to factors such as the way the learner encounters and experiences the subject matter. This will shed light on such principles of arrangement as the selection of representative exemplars, linear ordering, a concentric approach, etc. In Special Didactics attention also has to be paid to the educative value of any particular curriculum content.
- (d) Points of contact also must be found with contemporary views on observation [perceiving] and “Anschauung”. In his contact and encounter with reality the learner often creates a diffuse world for himself. It is the task of Special Didactics to inquire into the possibilities of bringing reality “closer” to the learner so the world will become clearer and less diffuse. In its turn, this will lead to more refined concept formation on his part which not only has a bearing on his cognitive but also on his affective life. The use of correct teaching aids can be a vital factor in introducing reality as it is presented to the learner.

- (iii) **Methodology:** Finally, Special Didactics also must take into account general principles of methodology with a view to applying them to the method(s) of teaching specific subjects. This will enhance the effectiveness of the methods used. However, prior to specific methods being decided upon, the aims envisioned must be clearly formulated.

#### 4. General:

Special didactics, in formulating principles for the preparation of a specific didactic situation, will have to link up with a number of other disciplines that all have the study of persons as a common denominator in their varying fields of inquiry. Philosophy,

Psychology, Sociology and Physiology are a few that spring to mind here. One admonishment seems, however, to be relevant in this respect, namely, that great care must be taken to prevent what are essentially didactic matters from losing this didactic character and be reduced purely to concepts and subjects for experimentation in these disciplines.

In conclusion it seems as if the task of Special Didactics is rather more important than has generally been realized up to now. It is becoming clearer that successful preparation by any teacher and his planning of the practical teaching and learning situation cannot be a merely casual affair but that he must consistently bear in mind pedagogical, general didactical and methodological theories and considerations.

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