

# On Didactics, Subject Didactics and Teaching Methodology

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## Introduction

This text describes three central components of Swedish teacher education: didactics, subject didactics, and teaching methodology. It outlines the fundamental characteristics of these components and their interrelationships. The text concludes by specifying the didactic competence that teacher education aims to develop in students.

## Didactics

Didactics<sup>1</sup> is a tradition of thought with roots in *Didactica Magna* (1657) by Johan Amos Comenius (Hopmann & Riquarts, 2010). It was established as an academic discipline and field of research by Johann Friedrich Herbart in Germany in the early nineteenth century, and shortly thereafter also in Sweden, for example through Mathias Fremling's lectures at Lund University (Burman, 2015). The didactic science concerns teachers' teaching and the reciprocal relationship between teaching and students' learning. Didactics thus constitutes the primary scientific foundation of the teaching profession.

Didactics is grounded in the *primacy of practice* (Gundem, 2011). This means that the problems of teaching practice serve as the starting point for scientific inquiry, and that theoretical knowledge ultimately relates back to practice. The purpose of didactics is to deepen and develop teaching practice on a scientific basis. It therefore encompasses both research and theory as well as teaching practice.

Didactics is based on the fundamental premise that the teacher is an autonomous, reflective practitioner (Hopmann, 2007; Westbury, 2015). This means that teachers make a wide range of choices within the framework of the curriculum. The most important didactic choices concern the content of teaching; that is, *what* students are to learn. Didactics emphasises that this choice includes both knowledge and values. Based on the teaching content, choices are made regarding teaching methods and the organisation of teaching; that is, *how* students will encounter the content. Both the choice of content and its implementation are related to the motives, purposes, and goals of education; *why* these choices are made. In this way, didactics applies a critical perspective to instructional decisions.

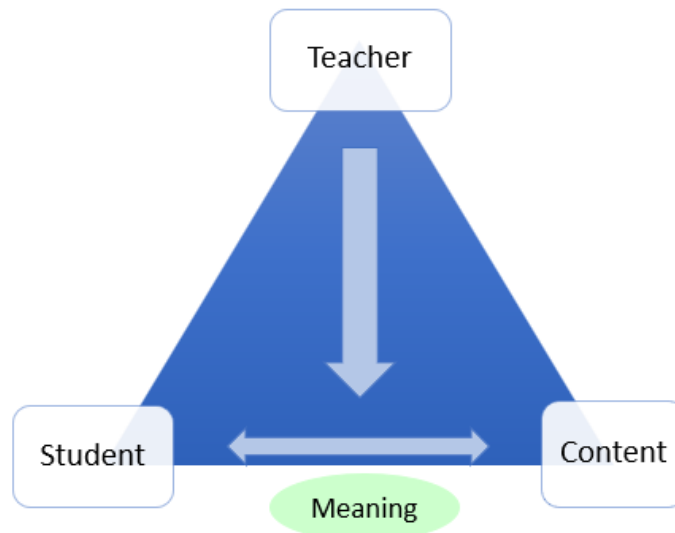
The central conceptual model in didactics is the *didactic triangle* (Hudson & Meyer, 2011). The triangle describes three relationships: between the teacher and the student, between the teacher and the content, and between the student and the content (figure 1). The base of the triangle consists of the student's encounter with the content. What students learn is not predetermined but emerges through an open communicative process. This process depends partly on the conditions created by the teacher's choices; what is selected, how it is presented, and which forms of work are used, and partly on students' prior experiences, knowledge, attitudes, perspectives, and interactions with one

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<sup>1</sup> "Didactics" should be understood here in the German and Nordic sense of the word. The German and Nordic concept of "Didaktik" refers to the art, theory, and practice of teaching, whereas the everyday English term "didactics" often conveys connotations of being overly instructive or moralising.

another. Students make the content their own through a process of meaning-making. This meaning-making includes both knowledge development, where students acquire new knowledge, and socialisation, where norms, attitudes, and values are formed.

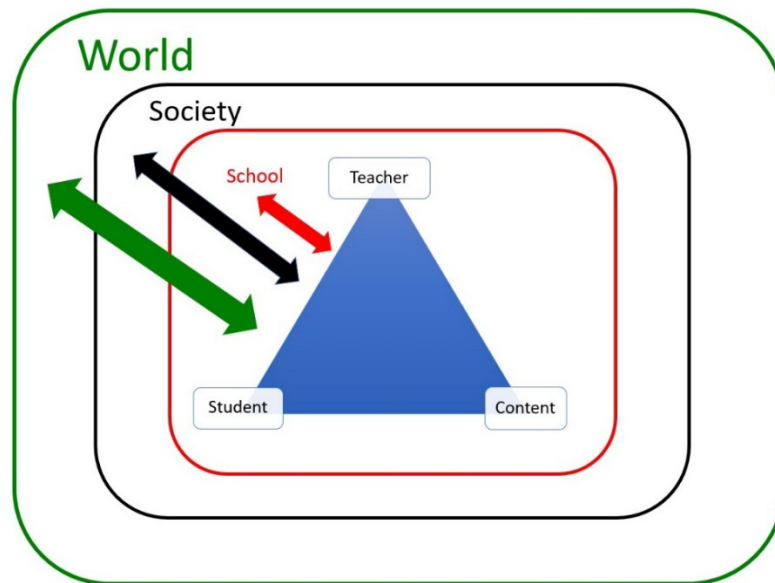
Figure 1. The didactic triangle.



Within the didactic tradition, *Bildung* is emphasized as an educational ideal and the ultimate purpose of education (Hopmann, 2007; Willbergh, 2021). The process of *Bildung* can be understood as intellectual and moral growth (Öhman et al., 2025). Intellectual growth involves developing a personal relationship to knowledge, where knowledge is given meaning and significance. The emphasis is on students understanding the world as a whole and shaping their role within it, rather than memorising isolated facts. Moral growth involves integrating knowledge with ethical values in order to develop sound judgment. *Bildung* is an open process that emphasises the student’s freedom to shape their own way of understanding, feeling, and relating to the world, and to develop their unique self. This can be contrasted with instrumental learning, in which knowledge is predefined and formulated as specific goals that all students are expected to achieve.

Didactics relates teachers’ choices and the relationships within the didactic triangle to broader contexts. By incorporating these contexts, one often speaks of the *extended didactic triangle* (Öhman, 2014; Öhman et al., 2025) (figure 2). The extended didactic triangle first highlights that teaching and learning take place within an *institutional context*—that is, within a school characterised by certain traditions and frameworks, where participants have developed habits and where interactions are regulated by norms. Teachers must relate to the frameworks established by curricula and syllabi.

Figure 2. The extended didactic triangle.



Second, didactics emphasizes the *societal context*. This contextualization makes visible the political and ethical dimensions of education (see Klafki, 1995). It draws attention both to the fact that what happens in the classroom is related to power relations and ideological currents in society, and to the fact that the democratic formation that takes place in school has consequences for societal development. This makes it possible to adopt a critical perspective on the relevance of educational content in relation to contemporary societal challenges.

In recent years, the *global context* of education has been increasingly emphasised within didactics (Sund & Öhman, 2026). Global challenges such as sustainability, climate change, and justice have come to influence teachers' choices and views on what content is most relevant and urgent in school.

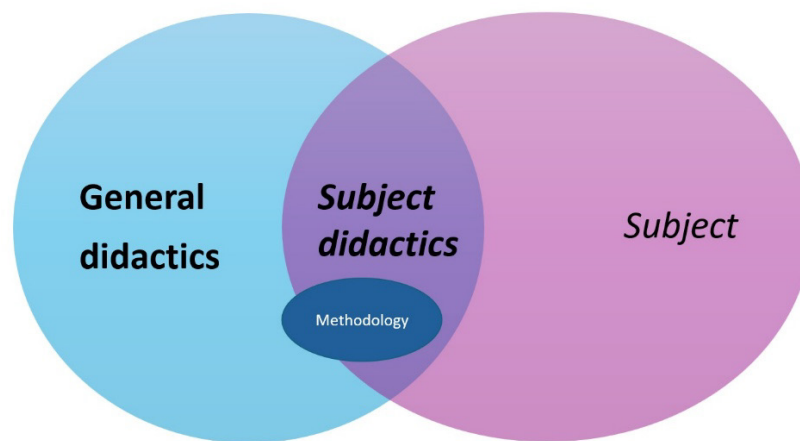
Didactics can be summarised by highlighting three *central tasks* of the teaching profession:

1. **The knowledge mission**: to create conditions for students to develop knowledge that qualifies them for future working life and for taking positions on societal issues.
2. **The values mission**: to create conditions for students to adopt the fundamental values on which our democratic society is based.
3. **The Bildung mission**: to create conditions for each student to develop into a unique individual with sound judgment.

## Subject Didactics

Didactics can be divided into *general didactics* and *subject didactics*, and in relation to these also *teaching methodology* (see figure 3). General didactics concerns the general questions about the relationship between teaching and learning, as well as the conditions for, and consequences of, this relationship. Within general didactics, the questions of *what*, *how* and *why* are often addressed in relation to the idea of *Bildung*. Subject didactics, on the other hand, concerns how different school subjects are transformed into teaching and how students' learning and socialisation take place within these subjects. It also includes thematic and interdisciplinary content, such as environmental and sustainability issues and health-related topics.

Figure 3. The relation between general didactics, subject, subject didactics and methodology.



Subject didactics takes as its point of departure the specific content and character of school subjects. This means that the didactic questions, *what?*, *how?*, and *why?*, are directed toward more or less clearly defined subject content. In this way, different subject didactics have developed, for example, history didactics and physical education didactics, which differ in many respects.

A central issue within subject didactics is how school subjects relate to corresponding academic disciplines. *Didactic transposition* is the process by which knowledge from an academic discipline is simplified and adapted to become teachable in educational contexts (Chevallard, 2007). This process requires strong subject knowledge so that teachers can select the essential content, transform it into forms that are understandable to students, organize it clearly, present it in an engaging way, and create a thoughtful progression.

When many teachers over time make similar didactic choices regarding content and methods within a subject or subject area, what is known as a *selective tradition* is formed (Englund, 2007). Selective traditions represent different answers to questions about the best way to organise teaching, what content is most important, and which teaching

methods are most appropriate. Such traditions can easily become conservative. It is therefore important that teachers are aware of them so they can make critical and informed didactic choices and develop their subject teaching in relation to current societal challenges.

It is of great importance that general didactics and subject didactics are clearly connected in teacher education. Without subject didactics, general didactics lacks concrete content and risks becoming too abstract. It may then become too distant from educational practice and difficult to apply.

Conversely, it is important that subject didactics are related to the critical questions of general didactics and thereby situated within a broader educational and societal context. In this way, subject didactics can develop while maintaining relevance for the challenges facing society. Likewise, subject didactic research needs to relate to knowledge, methodologies, and theories developed within general didactic research. It is also important for the quality of subject didactic research that there is an exchange of knowledge between different subject didactics, so that they do not become isolated within narrow subject perspectives.

## Teaching methodology

Teaching methodology specifically concerns the how-question of didactics—that is, the methods and forms of teaching. This includes how teaching content is presented to students, how it is structured, and how learning activities are organised. The how-question is therefore closely linked to the what-question, since the nature of the content is decisive for which methods are most appropriate and relevant.

Methodology encompasses the entire teaching process, from planning to implementation and evaluation. As with didactics, one can speak of general methodology and subject-specific methodology linked to different subject didactics. A central aspect of methodology is creating *progression* in forms of work so that students develop their learning, for example, in terms of analytical ability and collaborative skills. Teachers' methodological competence thus extends from individual lesson planning to broader units of work and entire school years.

Historically, methodology held a strong position in teacher training institutions in Sweden (Marton, 1986). Its knowledge base consisted of teachers' *tested experience*. Tested experience refers to collective knowledge that has been systematically tried and documented by several teachers over time (see Pihlgren, 2022). It should not be confused with the personal experience developed by an individual teacher in their own practice.

When didactics was reintroduced and revitalised in Swedish teacher education in the 1980s, it served to enrich methodology with knowledge about teaching practice generated through *didactic research* (Marton, 1986). By combining tested experience with didactic research, methodology gained a scientific foundation. This means that tested experience is linked to systematically and methodically produced knowledge, in which methods establish a reliable connection between data and conclusions, evidence supports those conclusions, and knowledge is reviewed and accepted by independent researchers.

Today, methodology can thus be regarded as a subset of didactics. As described above, questions about teaching methods and forms must be related to the broader questions of general didactics concerning the motives, purposes, and goals of education. In this way, a critical perspective can be applied to different choices in teaching practice, since teaching methods themselves shape students' ways of seeing themselves, their roles in different communities, and their place in society.

## Didactic Competence

Didactics, subject didactics, teaching methodology, and subject studies together constitute the fundamental components of teacher education. Together, these aim to fulfil the overall purpose of teacher education: to develop student teachers' *didactic competence*.

Didactic competence can be summarised in five points:

### 1. Knowledge of education

- knowledge of the role of education in a democratic society
- didactic knowledge of teaching, learning, and the relationship between them
- a critical approach to instructional choices and the ability to relate them to their conditions and consequences

### 2. Subject knowledge

- the ability to select, transform, organise, and present content, and to create progression

### 3. Methodological knowledge

- knowledge of different teaching methods and approaches, and the ability to apply them in practice

### 4. Teaching skill

- *didactic trust*: the ability to establish trusting relationships with students
- *didactic judgment*: the ability to adapt teaching to students with different conditions and experiences
- *didactic sensitivity*: the ability to perceive and respond to situations and contexts in interaction with students

### 5. Engagement

- commitment to one's subjects
- care for students

## Conclusion

In conclusion, didactics emerges as the central foundation of the teaching profession, where theory and practice are interwoven in a continuous interplay. By viewing teaching as a conscious and reflective activity in which the teacher makes choices based on content, purpose, and method, the complexity of educational practice becomes visible.

General didactics provides a critical framework for understanding the conditions of teaching, while subject didactics concretises these principles within specific subject areas and demonstrates how content can be made meaningful to students. Methodology, in turn, grounds this knowledge in practical implementation and highlights how teaching forms themselves influence students' learning and formation.

Together, these three components form a whole that equips teachers to act with both professional competence and ethical judgment. Didactic competence is therefore not only about teaching effectively, but also about contributing to students' Bildung, democratic development, and personal growth. In this lies the deepest meaning of the teaching profession – to unite knowledge, values, and human development in an ongoing process of learning.

### About the author

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