



# Didactics as a School Discipline: A Study of General Didactics Textbooks

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**Abstract.** This study investigates elements of didactics as a higher education discipline, using as empirical reference didactics textbooks for teachers published in Brazil since 1980, these textbooks are understood as visible disciplinary elements Cuesta Fernández 1998 Qualitative research was developed in two stages: in the first stage, 18 textbooks of general didactics from the 1980, 1990 and 2000 decades were identified; in the second stage, 9 out of these 18 textbooks were selected, three from each decade. To carry out this analysis, the following topics were defined: categories related to the definition of didactics presented by the authors, classic and new topics that are the main part of the discipline, and didactic activities proposed to teach this discipline. As a result of this study, assuming textbooks are visible elements of the disciplinary elements, it is possible to say that didactics has been transformed in the last decades. The defended thesis presented here is that the disciplinary elements expressed in these textbooks show a reconnection between classroom contents and teaching methods, enhancing strategies and techniques without ignoring the other dimensions of teaching.

**Keywords:** General didactics · General didactics textbooks · Teacher training

## 1 Introduction

Teachers' didactics textbooks are exceptional materials that enable a deep research of school disciplines. General didactics textbooks also show different approaches and various conceptions of the elements that constitute didactics as a discipline dedicated to teacher training.

The analysis of general didactics textbooks allows, on the one hand, an understanding of how these materials have legitimized knowledge and teaching content and, on the other hand, how the textbooks marked practices and behavior of both teachers and students over the years. This chapter builds on conceptualizations from history (Cuesta Fernández 1998, Urban 2009, Schmidt 2011 that perceive textbooks as visible disciplinary elements.

The analysis of general didactics textbooks produced in 1980 opened a discussion on the configuration of didactics as a school discipline. General didactics textbook appear continuously and are suggested readings for both public service recruiting tests for teachers and in teacher training programs.

Studies by Chervel (1990) document discussions on school disciplines and their objectives in relation to the social context and indicate the need to better understand the trajectory and mechanisms that made these disciplines become what they are now.

Work on general didactics textbooks greatly contributed to comprehend not only the transformations general didactics experienced since the 1980s, but also the role of normative documents, such as the Brazilian National Curriculum Guidelines, for teacher training programs. Thereby, explored aspects were the elements involved in the description of general didactics along with its forms of organization and objectives in the curricula of tertiary level teacher training programs.

Overall, general didactics textbooks, specifically aimed at teacher training courses, are believed to discuss constitutive elements of teaching and learning and, therefore, specific elements of didactics. The textbooks are adapted based on their possible contribution to present content related to the Curriculum Guidelines, legislation, and research on didactic processes, such as methodology, content, teacher and student relationship, and evaluation.

The textbook content uncovered for each period different interests motivating the dissemination of specific pieces of knowledge to the detriment of others. As updated content and topics makes their way into textbooks, old content and topics may remain or be discarded. The conception of the discipline of general didactics allows us to understand that the presence of certain topics in the didactics textbooks and within the scope of the discipline is not random but stands under the influence of both academic discourse and curricular frameworks created to respond to school demands and to achieve the expected education of students.

Franco (2005) and Bardin (2009) indicated three important points for textbook research, namely the floating reading, the choice of documents, and the formulation of hypotheses. The present chapter uses the floating reading, as it provided preliminary information on the contents of general didactics textbooks. Subsequent development of analysis categories led to the following research questions:

- a) What definition of didactics appears in the general didactics textbooks?
- b) Which topics do the textbooks address?
- c) Considering that the structure of textbooks should be related to a specific teaching methodology of the discipline, do the general didactics textbooks feature suggested activities? If so, what is the nature of the activities proposed for teaching general didactics?

The historical analysis of general didactics textbooks aims to highlight how these educational media document the trajectory of general didactics as a school subjects in light of the disciplinary frameworks set by academic general didactics discourse. Of particular importance for the exploratory study presented in this chapter was to uncover the relationship between textbook production and the curricular organization that has defined the constitutive aspects of education in Brazil since the 1980s.

From the methodological point of view, the work presented in this chapter uses qualitative approaches that seek to understand the school culture by means of general didactics textbooks as its artifacts. Thereby, structurism (Lloyd 1995), which considers social life as a product of the tensions between the subjects' structures and actions, constitutes the main theoretical framework. As a result, the analysis not only considers

textbooks in their materiality as objects, but also in the meanings that result from their insertion in social processes, especially in schooling.

## 2 Textbooks as Visible Elements

Textbooks are considered visible disciplinary elements, and can be understood as expressions of the disciplinary elements or disciplinary code of general didactics as they suggest and legitimize content, rules, norms, ideals, and discourses related to teaching.

Cuesta Fernández (1997) states that textbooks are considered visible elements of the disciplinary code as content deemed necessary in each period contributing to the organization of disciplines. The books legitimize the educational function each school subject must fulfill through the regulation of the teaching practice. Therefore, according to Cuesta Fernández (1997), it is important to study textbooks both from their concept of disciplinary elements and as an essential part of school culture:

We define disciplinary elements as a set of ideas, values, assumptions, regulations, practices and routines (through both explicit and tacit means), which often translate into discourses of legitimacy and public languages about the educational value of history; these discourses guide the professional teaching practice. In short, it is a list of dominant ideas, discourses and practices in history teaching within the school environment.

The concept of disciplinary code bears the idea that the textbook content carries a specific intentionality that legitimizes interests and guides teaching practices. In essence, Cuesta Fernández (1997) points out that once a specific element is established, its influence continues until new educational tendencies or approaches emerge.

According to Cuesta Fernández (1997), textbook analysis shows the complex relationship and coexistence of elements, that is, of tendencies and approaches inherent to each time period. Consequently, he rejects the existence of a linear and evolutionary succession from one tendency to another, that is, from a new disciplinary element to another. However, he accepts the idea of attempts aimed at renewing ideas, methodologies, and power relations in textbooks. In this reading, the study of school disciplines can be based on visible disciplinary elements of the discipline of didactics.

The construction of the trajectory of didactics as a school discipline shows that general didactics textbooks assumed a central role as they contributed to organizing the discipline and the discipline contributed to organize the textbooks.

The research presented in this chapter prioritized textbooks produced for teacher training because they are specifically tailored to teach how to teach and were disseminated in Brazil throughout the twentieth century. The aim of these textbooks was to disseminate different ways of teaching, that is, they gave guidance to teachers on how to act in the classroom, which approach they should use, and on best practices and methodologies. In effect, the textbooks produced what Silva (2006) called the grammar of teaching. Silva (2008) also pointed out the necessity to carry out further studies on textbooks for teachers, a rather marginal area until present.

Bufrem et al. (2006) point out that most textbooks contain different pieces of knowledge that can belong to the specific knowledge and practices used in the

discipline of general didactics. The contents of these textbooks is a set of knowledge that fulfills the “[...] function of mediation between specific scientific knowledge and manners of classroom teaching” Bufrem et al. (2006).

Bufrem et al. (2006) as well as Garcia and Nascimento (2009) analyzed textbooks for teachers regarding the definition of disciplinary elements and found that, particularly in history education and general didactics, further research is required on the relations between textbooks and teacher training, using textbooks as sources to understand the configuration of didactics as a school discipline. Research on general didactics textbooks (Hegeto 2014) uncovered two types of textbooks: general didactics and specific or subject didactics textbooks.

The analysis of the analyzed Brazilian universities’ pedagogy major’s curriculum by Gatti and Nunes (2008) as well as by Gatti and Nunes (2009) showed that textbooks both remained part of teacher training courses and continued to be part of teacher training students’ reading. General didactics textbooks can still be found in bookstores, libraries, physical and virtual collections. Some of the textbooks continue to appear in new editions, as exemplified by Piletti’s (1982) *Textbook 1*—currently in its 34th edition.

Several authors discussed various aspects of the didactic knowledge production and the importance of general didactics both for research and for teacher training programs. Textbook analysis contributed to better understand what was the content of teacher training and which were the expectations of teachers at different times throughout the twenty-first century. Textbooks uncovered important issues related not only to the history of general didactics but also concerning the way it was presented to teachers (Hegeto 2014). Further research in this context is required concerning the purposes attributed to knowledge, the topics presented to teachers as essential to teaching, and the changes and continuities the textbooks present.

### 3 Methods and Sample

Textbook analysis aimed at understanding the characteristics of the discipline of general didactics. Content analysis rested on the following categories of analysis: definition and concept of didactics found in textbooks; issues addressed in textbooks that compose a relevant body of knowledge to be taught in the specific discipline of general didactics.

The historical analysis aimed at revealing the topics that have been present in general didactics textbooks over the last three decades. Thereby, two categories played a central role: classical topics that originated in previous periods but continued to be part of the textbooks, and, new topics that entered textbooks as a result of a variety of influences derived from curriculum guidelines, legislation, and the academic field of didactics. The analytical categories targeted to identify the elements of general didactics between 1980 and 2013 and rest on the following topics of learning and curriculum theories addressed in Brazil Cruz et al. (2011):

[...] theoretical aspects that support practices; the relationship between education and society; the school and the teacher's work; teaching approaches/theories (traditional, new-school, technicist and progressive, the latter with emphasis on the libertarian, liberating, and critical social pedagogies of the contents); curriculum theories; questions about identity, professionalism and teaching knowledge; and the components of pedagogical practice with special attention to pedagogical planning as well as the evaluation of teaching and learning.

The original question of the research presented in this chapter, namely how can Brazilian textbooks as visible disciplinary elements contribute to understanding the constitution of general didactics in recent decades. The sampling considered textbooks produced since the 1980s for two main reasons. On the one hand, teacher training courses continue to use many of these textbooks. Also, general didactics textbooks are the suggested reading for civil service recruitment tests for teachers. On the other hand, studies on general didactics textbooks for teacher training, especially in normal school, are outdated and can be considered of historical importance, which requires more recent studies on the topic.

This chapter focusses on the period between 1980–2013. The main reason for this temporal demarcation are the discussions in academic didactics during the first half of the 1980s, which promoted changes in the understanding of the meaning of didactics for teacher training, opposing the instrumental and technical perspective that characterized the discipline. Therefore, the sampling examines textbooks produced in the 1980s to understand whether they showed and continue on showing transformations and if they contributed to change the configuration of didactics as a school subject.

The sample contained textbooks published both by commercial and university publishing houses. Recently published textbooks and the substantial number of re-editions of books from the 1980s and 1990s indicates the demand for general didactics textbooks. The database of general didactics books combined different approaches, entailing database search (e.g., Scholar Google, Capes, Scielo, Eric), events in the field of general didactics, scientific journals, and library databases of Brazilian state and federal universities. The search was also extended to online second-hand bookstores, such as *Estante Virtual* and *Traça e Livronauta*. The result was a sample of 150 books and articles.

In addition to the generic search, the author also searched both the virtual and physical collection of the library of the *Universidade Federal do Paraná*, and of the *Núcleo de Pesquisa em Publicações Didáticas* (NPPD/UFPR). The latter unit has continuously acquired and expanded its collection of teacher's textbooks since 2002. The collection of roughly 50 titles consists of general didactics or teaching orientation textbooks, titles on subject didactics, history of education, and pedagogical compendia.

The sample consolidation led to two types of sources. On the one hand, the sample contained books on general didactics as a discipline or field of knowledge along with studies pursuing the primary purpose of disseminating academic literature on the subject. On the other hand, the sample also contained general didactics textbooks for teachers, whose main purpose is to guide the process of teaching, i.e., teaching how to teach.

The sample consolidation led to 48 materials, 18 of which were books teaching teachers how to teach. These 18 general didactics textbooks presented teaching orientations following different approaches. The remains 30 titles are studies dedicated to general didactics textbooks and discuss fundamentals of didactics, problematize the

relations between research and didactics, epistemology and didactics, or curriculum and didactics.

The next step consisted of a floating reading, or pre-analysis, of the 18 didactics textbooks. The author aimed to analyze nine textbooks (three per decade, cf. Table 1 spanning the period between 1980–2013). In addition, for each decade, one of the three textbooks had to be published at the beginning, the second towards the middle, and the third around the end of each decade. This distribution targeted the observation of transformations the textbooks underwent over the last three decades that documented the articulation of both debates in the academic discipline and questions derived from debates regarding the school discipline in a certain period.

**Table 1.** The sample of general didactics textbooks (source: author).

| Textbook   | Title   | Author   | Year of Publication | Publisher         |
|------------|---|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| Textbook 1 | Didática Geral  | Claudino Piletti                                     | 1982                | Ática             |
| Textbook 2 | Didática Geral: fundamentos planejamento, metodologia e avaliação | José do Prado Martins                                | 1985                | Atlas             |
| Textbook 3 | Didática teórica, didática prática                                | Pura Lucia O. Martins                                | 1989                | Loyola            |
| Textbook 4 | Didática  | Jose Libâneo   | 1992                | Cortez            |
| Textbook 5 | Curso de didática geral   | Regina Célia C. Haydt                                | 1994                | Ático             |
| Textbook 6 | Didática geral: um olhar para o future                            | Maria Raineldes Tosi                                 | 1996                | Alínea            |
| Textbook 7 | Ensinar a ensinar: didática para a escola fundamental e media     | Amélia D. de Castro and Ana Maria P. Carvalho (Eds.) | 2001                | Thompson Pioneira |
| Textbook 8 | Lições de didática  | Ilma Passos A. Veiga (Ed.)                           | 2006                | Papirus           |
| Textbook 9 | Didática e docência: aprendendo a profissão                       | Isabel Maria S. de Farias (Ed.)                      | 2009                | Liber Livros      |

#### 4 Selected Results and Discussion

The analysis enabled the identification of disciplinary elements. Given the spatial constraints of this chapter, this section introduces two of these elements.

#### 4.1 Definition of Didactics

The results revealed—based on the definitions—an attempt to (re-)set the function and role of the discipline of general didactics. The analysis also enabled the verification of some transformations that occurred in the educational and didactic contexts. These transformations reach beyond the diversity of ways in which the authors of the nine textbooks introduced the concept of didactics by replacing questions exploring new relationships between the discipline of didactics and other fields of knowledge.

The nine textbooks distinguished between general didactics as an academic field, on the one hand, and a school discipline following its own objectives, on the other hand. The results showed that general didactics must comprise the teaching process in its multiple determinations to intervene and transform it through concrete action, in view of a clear and defined political position. These findings reflect Martins' (1989) perspective, according to which general didactics is no longer a merely instrumental discipline.

Since 1980, general didactics textbooks addressed debates on teaching and explored the question how to teach in different ways. The attempt to overcome a technical perspective of teaching was crucial. The analyzed textbooks stand for a perspective according to which the teachers are required to view teaching as a multi-dimensional process.

#### 4.2 Topics

The analysis revealed both traditional and new topics in the general didactics textbooks. As visible disciplinary elements, textbooks showed the influence of research in the field of didactics field. Also, there was a process of exclusion and inclusion of selected topics during each decade.

The nine analyzed textbooks showed the continuity, with minor variations, of traditional topics related to elements, such as planning, objectives, methodology, teacher-student relationship, and evaluation. The results show that these topics appeared as an embodiment of the disciplinary elements of didactics of the analyzed time period.

New topics found in textbooks published since 1980 stand under the influence of social, educational, and curricular debates. Newly implemented topic highlight the challenges tied to expanding a given content element, diversification, and multiple topics.

Overall, content analysis identified the following topics in the nine textbooks: reflective teaching; teacher identification; cross-cutting issues; collective systematization of knowledge; technology; IT skills; digital society; ethics; didactic transposition; failure in school; discipline; inclusive education; sexuality; gender and race issues; textbooks. The analysis also showed the presence of topics related to new teaching conceptions. Generally, the results uncovered changes in both academic and social debates along with particularities of the disciplinary elements of general didactics during the analyzed period of time.

## 5 Final Considerations

This chapter aimed to explore the characteristics and components of the discipline of general didactics in the timeframe 1980–2013. The results showed that the transformations of general didactics as an academic field also induced transformations in textbooks, resulting in a clearer focus on the object of the discipline in the school. Concerning the elements of action and teaching practice, the transformations gave a new meaning to the objective of the discipline along three axes: teacher training courses must adopt a multidimensional perspective; the importance of reflection and research; and an improved understanding of the constituent elements of teaching, which include traditional topics, multidimensionality in teaching, and the implementation of new topics demanded by society.

Research on general didactics textbooks helped to stimulate a debate on the role of the discipline in understanding teaching processes, mainly regarding traditional topics that critically address the organization and development of teaching, but also regarding new topics presenting social and educational issues that are relevant at this historic moment in Brazil.

As a result, the disciplinary elements of general didactics show new ties between the didactic content and the classroom and teaching procedures since 1980. Further work in the field will contribute to a better understanding of how both the academic discipline and the school subject of general didactics developed.

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