Pragmatic Intersubjectivity, or, Just Using Teachers

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Pragmatism has long held great sway in educational thought. However, there is still a lack of pragmatist orientation when it comes to how students interact with teachers. For example, while Dewey and his followers advocate the pragmatist move of making educational ends into means for further educational ends, there is little said about how students might treat their teachers. Should a person change ends into means when it comes to other people? Might pragmatism suggest that students use teachers as means to further ends? Would a Deweyean orientation toward human relations go so far as to break from Kant's moral dictum that every rational creature must be treated as an end in him or herself? This move of making human beings into means to further ends we might call *pragmatic intersubjectivity*. In this paper I will argue *for* this sort pragmatic intersubjectivity on the part of the student. While I do not claim to know if Dewey would have embraced pragmatism all the way to the use of other human beings, I do claim that the practice of *using* human beings should be advocated in educational contexts. I will argue that education remains impoverished if we continue to follow Kant's dictum.

In order to make a case for using people in education, I will proceed as follows: First, I will offer a general overview of pragmatic intersubjectivity. Then, I will look at some of its theoretical underpinnings, particularly in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and D.W. Winnicott. I look briefly at their work, the aim being to present a conception of pragmatic intersubjectivity that is grounded in philosophical thought, while at the same time being highly relevant for education. After that, I will point out some of the limitations that educational thought runs into when it ignores pragmatic intersubjectivity. Finally, I will offer some specific recommendations that students, teachers, and schools might consider in order to realize the benefits of pragmatic intersubjectivity.

FOUNDATIONS OF PRAGMATIC INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Pragmatic intersubjectivity takes as a given the intersubjective assumption that subjectivity is lived at the borderline between oneself and another.[1] That is to say, one's self-constitution is always dependent upon social interaction. Pragmatic intersubjectivity weds to this intersubjective perspective the pragmatist notion that humans beings flourish only when social interaction serves as a means to further ends. So meeting an other is first necessary for becoming a subject. But, meeting an other is not an end in itself. One will only flourish as a subject if the other is put to good use. The other must serve as a means to another end, which, in turn, will become a means to a further end, and so on. In particular, this essay is concerned with the pragmatic intersubjectivity of students: when students use teachers as a means to further ends.

In a way, pragmatic intersubjectivity suggests that we actually "use" each other. Why? Because human beings are "constituted in conversation," to use Charles

Taylor's phrase, and thus we *need* others in order to flourish.[2] To the extent that a person wants to flourish, he or she will end up seeking other people, indeed "using" them as a means toward the end of flourishing. This notion of "using" other people is clearly anathema to modern sensibilities as even the connotation of the term "use" suggests. Phrases such as "I felt like I was being *used*," "She always *uses* other people to her own advantage," and "Don't use me!" indicate the deeply held aversion that many people have toward the use of other people.

This deep aversion has often been given philosophical voice. Modern conceptions of autonomy, of dignity, of morality, are, by and large, predicated on the notion that it is best *not* to use other people. The most famous of these anti-use voices is Immanuel Kant's. For Kant, "man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will."[3] Even freedom itself has to be limited if that freedom leads to the use of others. Writes Kant, "This principle…of every rational creature as an end in itself is the supreme limiting condition on freedom."[4] Kant's rejection of using others is clearly enmeshed with his understanding of autonomous selfhood and the dignity of such selfhood. Because the self is autonomous, the worst thing that could happen would be for one to be subjected to the will of another. For Kant, such subjection happens when one person uses another. When one person uses another, he or she impinges upon the other's autonomy and thereby lessens the dignity of the other.

However, there is another line of philosophical thought that questions this anti-use stance. I would like to trace the line that can be drawn from Nietzsche to Foucault, to Winnicott. Following this line, one can consider the use of others with much less aversion. Indeed, one can consider such use to be both necessary and healthy. By tracing this line, I intend to give philosophical grounding for the concept of pragmatic intersubjectivity, and also to set the stage for re-considering ways in which students might be encouraged to use their teachers in order to flourish in educational settings.

Friedrich Nietzsche, responding to Kant's use-aversion, turned the Kantian moral imperative on its head. He did so by showing how moral decisions are always imbedded in a moral calculus that is already intersubjective. For Nietzsche, a person's moral decision is not something that is decided upon by the autonomous individual, and then carried out in the fashion that the autonomous individual sees fit. A moral act is not carried out solely by the intention of the autonomous actor. One cannot actually choose what is right to do on one's own. Rather, what is "right" or "good" is always already involved in a moral calculus that has been begun before the human actor has even considered making a moral choice. For Nietzsche, moral goods are always saturated with significance because of human obligations and human power struggles that have taken place in the past. So in his famous example of early Christian morality, Nietzsche argues that some "moral" habits like abstinence and moderation were deemed "moral" not out of free choice. They were deemed "moral" only because they were forced on the early Christians by the ruling class. Under pressure from the Other, one makes a virtue out of necessity. Moral decisions derive from intersubjective experience rather than from the free intentions

of autonomous selves. Or as Nietzsche puts it, "'autonomous' and 'moral' are mutually exlusive."[5]

To put this in terms of means and ends, one might say that other people are *already* being used as means when we consider how to live well. Why? Because moral acts take place in the intersubjective realm. In stark contrast to Kant's aversion to using people, Nietzsche reminds us that somebody is going to be used in a certain way when we decide how best to act. Moral decisions are made possible precisely because somebody has been, or somebody will be, used.

Foucault is a primary inheritor of Nietzschean thought in this regard. Foucault pushes Nietzsche's thought along by demonstrating that it is not only the moral realm that is based on relations of power. More than that, all human subjectivity is born out of such relations. Human flourishing itself is a matter of subjection. For Foucault, the Kantian ideal of human autonomy is a mistaken one. The telos of human selfhood is not becoming autonomous and staying autonomous. Instead, human selfhood always owes its existence to various cultural practices of dependency upon others. The self is situated by bio-power, by the power of surveillance, by confessional techniques, by epistemic regimes, by governmental hierarchies, and so on. For Foucault, human selfhood lives and breathes through processes of subjection. It is not that the self arrives on the scene first, and is then fettered by power. Instead, power constitutes the self to begin with. Power creates the self *and* fetters the self, doing both at the same time. For Foucault, the self is "the product of the relation of power."[6] As such, the only way for the human being to flourish is to work *within* the various mechanisms of power.

To look ahead for a moment, we might say that the student's experience at school is one of those subjectifying processes that Foucault claims are central to human subjectivity. For Foucault, being a subject means being subjectified, and being a subject in school means being subjectified at school. Now, what this means for the student is that the only way to obtain agency in a place like school is to engage with the subjectifying processes already at work. It is only possible to flourish by means of using the power-laden tools at hand. What I want to suggest in this essay is that one of the subjectifying processes at school is the teacher-student relationship. The teacher is one of the educational sites where student subjectivity is constituted. As such, one way for student flourishing to occur is through the strategic use of that site. Using teachers is one way to attain agency within the subjectifying process of schooling.

Nietzsche is said to be the first depth psychologist. As such, psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott can be identified as another point on a line drawn between the anti-Kantian advocates of using other people.[7] Winnicott adds an important dimension to Foucault's work because Foucault tends to shy away from discussions of human subjects. Whereas Foucault might adamantly oppose the notion that there is such a thing as a stable self to be used, Winnicott helps to delineate the ways that selves use other selves from infancy all throughout life. Winnicott, who has inspired recent work by thinkers as diverse as political theorist Barbara Johnson, curriculum theorist Deborah Britzman, and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, provides a description of

using others that is ultimately very helpful for thinking about ways that students might gain agency through the use of their teachers.

For Winnicott, human agency is formed against the backdrop of other people. As the child develops a sense of self, he or she does so by experimenting with the absence and presence of a primary caregiver. The child needs the presence of a caregiver in order to have a space that is safe for experimentation, creativity, and acquisition of new skills. She needs someone to fall back on when things fail. Yet the child also needs the absence of a caregiver insofar that she must be able to experiment, to create, and to acquire new skills *on her own*. The child needs a space where the caregiver is both there and not there, a space that Winnicott calls the space of play. In this space of play, the other is "with" the child, at least in the child's imagination. "In playing," notes Winnicott, "and perhaps only in playing, is the child or adult free to be creative."[8] Playing is central to gaining human agency, but playing must be accompanied by the absence/presence of an other. Here, I want to underscore the connection between human agency and other people. Agency is not only about what one does on one's own. Agency is marked also by what one does with the absence and presence of other people.

Yet agency is not gained in a passive way. It is through the active "use" of others that one flourishes. When we "use" other people, we *call* them to our sides, both literally and imaginatively, to act as our guides. In fact, we must do so actively if there is to be agency. If the other seeps in and out of our presence on her own volition, then she has control over how I can gain agency. It is only through my own use of others that I can create the circumstances where I am both dependent on, yet independent of, another person who serves as my guide. Winnicott gives a human face to the more impersonal anti-Kantianisms of Nietzsche and Foucault, reminding us that we depend on the absence and presence of fleshly others in order to flourish. We need to use others in order to gain agency.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS: THAT TEACHERS MIGHT BE GOOD ENOUGH

With regard to education, I find it useful to put this Nietzschean/Foucaultian/Winnicottian line of thought to work by considering how students might use teachers. Unfortunately, the use of teachers by students is very much ignored as an educational theme. I suspect this is because modern educational thought is still steeped in a Kantian understanding of moral life. To be sure, as I have shared this conception of students-using-teachers with colleagues, one of the responses I often get is, "I hope you are not suggesting that students use teachers in an instrumental way." To respond, I prefer to make the following point: Actually, human subjectivity is always formed in ways that are already instrumental. There is no way for human beings to become autonomous enough that they might *not* use each other in instrumental ways. That is not to say that students should *harm* teachers by using them. Pragmatic intersubjectivity need not be a slippery slope to harming others; it is, though, how human beings gain agency.

Indeed, pragmatic intersubjectivity has been largely ignored, to the detriment of educational thought. A dire result of such ignoring has been the advent of pollyanna-esque narratives of educational progress. Take theories of teaching for

example. They tend to cling to the assumption that there is still a lot of progress to be made so that teachers might better facilitate student learning and student agency. While we try to squeeze the last drops out of teaching, there is little attention paid to the interhuman mechanisms that allow teaching to be successful. Student learning and student agency do not happen in schools unless students use other people in ways that facilitate such learning and agency. Pedagogical practices, progress as far as may, are of little use if students do not set the stage for their own flourishing through the use of educational others. Teaching may get better and better, but students will not put teaching to good use unless they are able to use the presence/absence of teachers in ways that enrich their educational experience.

Educators cling to such silly progress narratives precisely because they do not consider the *use* of teachers by students. When there is no conception of students using teachers, then it follows that educators must carry out whatever progress is to be made. But such user-phobic narratives of progress ignore the fact that teachers are not actually perfectible. There are many teachers who will not be super. From a Kantian perspective this seems like a dreadful fact. ("Our children will not all be able to have *the* best teacher, how awful.") In contrast, the perspective of pragmatic intersubjectivity suggests that many students will be able to flourish even if their teacher is not *the* best. Indeed, many students *do* flourish even when they do not have the best teacher. Surely we all know of students who have flourished in spite of mediocre teachers. Many students have had educational experiences that, while not being at all exemplary, were used by them in agentive ways. Students flourish in many unexpected circumstances. They often flourish precisely because they know how to use a given teacher in ways that address their own needs. It may often be the case that teachers need only be good enough rather than super.[9]

In fact, Winnicott has outlined the intersubjective dynamics that are at stake when a teacher is just "good enough." Drawing on Winnicott's concept of the "good enough mother," we might say that the "good enough teacher" is one who provides the circumstances for the student to *use* the teacher's presence and absence for her own flourishing. If the student is able to situate herself toward the teacher so that she learns, experiences, attains agency in ways that would not have been possible without the teacher, then the teacher has acted in a way that is good enough. The "good enough mother" is one who meets, but does not exceed, the needs and demands of her child. Likewise, the good enough teacher is one who meets but does not exceed the needs and demands of his or her student. Importantly, being good enough may have little to do with whether a teacher is perfect, super, or even just good. Being good enough may mean being perfect or super, but it may not. Because being good enough has more to do with the student's actions than with the teacher's abilities, it is wrong to say that the progress of pedagogy lies mainly in the hands of teachers. The good enough teacher is one who proves to be enough of a presence so that the student can be sure that she has a person to fall back on if needed, but also enough of an absence that the student can gain an educational agency that is all her own. What is clear about the role of the good enough teacher is that it cannot come to pass without the activity of the student. The good enough teacher, once she has taken on the present/absent role that is required by the student, cannot actually get any better.

In response to this anti-Kantian conception of student agency, one major objection might be raised right away. It might be said that this is nothing but a reformulated argument for educational merit, that pragmatic intersubjectivity is just another way of suggesting that education is really up to the individual aspirations of students. Is the notion of the good enough teacher simply a way of abdicating institutional responsibility for educating students? Does pragmatic intersubjectivity suggest that it is completely up to students to find ways to use teachers in an agentive way? Is this akin to the conservative argument that folks should pull themselves up by their bootstraps?

Not at all. By arguing that current narratives of educational progress are lopsided, I am not arguing that we should give up on making education better, and that it is up to students to flourish for themselves. I am not arguing that there is no more work to be done, but rather that the work that needs to be done should start focusing on the heretofore neglected issue of how students might be encouraged to use teachers. Far from offering a conservative solution, I want to suggest that the only way for progressive education to succeed is for us to take seriously Dewey's pragmatism. Let us take his pragmatism to the intersubjective realm. Educational theory should, at least for a while, stop thinking about what it means for teachers to be great, and start thinking more thoroughly about what teachers can do to set up a "good enough" platform so that students might become empowered to use teachers.

And another objection might be raised. It might be argued that students are already doing too much using, that many students slide through educational experiences, using schools and teachers as a means to get other things in life. Indeed, many students use other people in order to get a grade, get a diploma, and move on with life. This is not the sort of "use" that I am advocating. When students use teachers and schools in this way, there is a denigration of educational experience. In such cases, education is treated as if it is not a part of life, as if it can be *used* to enhance some "real life" which ultimately lies outside of educational experience. On the contrary, the use of others that I am advocating is one that makes educational experience itself part and parcel of "real life" self-flourishing. And please note, the "get a diploma and move on with life" type of use is already rife in our present Kantian environment; it will hardly be increased simply by introducing the notion of "use" into educational practice. If anything, the type of "use" that I am advocating may entice students to use education for purposes that are much more immediate than "getting ahead in life," for purposes that are more agentive.

I conclude with a few strategies to facilitate the use of teachers. First, it is important for educational institutions to stress the notion of student self-flourishing through the use of others. It is striking that most schools do not advocate such a basic concept. While education has long treated student flourishing as a central aim, there has been remarkably little advocacy for schools as places where students tend to their own empowerment. When student empowerment is advocated, such advocacy is usually focused on the ways that educators might empower students. It is not only educators who need to empower students; empowerment cannot be done all on the teacher's side. Students need to think of teachers and schools as loci of authority that they can use to increase their own agency.[10]

Second, students must be encouraged to find the right teacher, the one whom they can benefit from greatly. Such a situation is rare in educational institutions as they now exist. Students are not currently encouraged to think of teachers as people whom they choose based on the extent to which that teacher will help them flourish. Such choosing means more than getting the teacher that you really want for a particular class. It means more than listening to other students' opinions of a particular teacher or professor, and then choosing the instructor accordingly. It means that a student might find a teacher who is truly important to him or her, and then continue to go back to that teacher time and time again, whether in a classroom setting or for more informal conversation. In fact, it strikes me that educators really *do* know about this process of "using," but we do not think about it deeply enough nor do we theorize it in any sustained way. Educators know that those students who flourish as a result of their education are usually the ones who go out of their way to make extra contact with one or more of their instructors. Students should be encouraged to seek out instructors who are "good enough" for their own particular needs wherever they might find them. This may mean that students seek out teachers who are not their "official" teachers, and it may mean that they do so at times that are not "official" class times. The encouragement of students to use instructors should come both at the institutional level and at the classroom level: Students should be introduced early and often to the notion that they can use teachers in schools in order to gain agency, in order to flourish.

Third, there should be venues and times for students to link up with teachers whom they want to use. It is certainly not the case that all students, once introduced to the notion of using teachers, will avail themselves to this practice on their own. The asymmetry in the teacher-student relation is a great barrier to what I am suggesting. Students may avoid such a relation of use out of the hesitancy that comes when one is faced with authority. Therefore, institutional changes must be made to encourage students to use teachers. Certainly, the practices of keeping office hours and of connecting with students between classes and after school is already conducive to the use of teachers. Yet, it is presently the case that very few students avail themselves of their teachers during these times. These times are often taken up by more practical concerns like making up assignments that have been missed, or obtaining clarification about a concept that was not understood during class. The problem with office hours and in-between times is not that they are inappropriate times for students to use teachers, but that these times too easily float from the work of flourishing to the work of classroom catch-up. In order to encourage the use of teachers, it must be well-articulated by the educational institution that educational down-times are times when student-flourishing takes precedence over make-up coursework. Students should be encouraged to use these times, and these teachers, for their own purposes rather than for the purposes that have been laid out by the course syllabus.

Fourth, teachers might be oriented toward this perspective of "being used" early on in their training. At least two aspects of "being used" need to be considered, both of which go against the grain of much teacher preparation. To begin with, being willing to be used also means being willing not to be used, paradoxical as this might

sound. Teachers must understand that they will never be used by all of their students. Some students will choose to use someone else instead. In these cases, it is imperative that the teacher be willing to let go. From the Kantian perspective of teacherly perfectibility and educational progress, it may be very difficult to accept that I, as a teacher, may not be in a position to empower the very person I would most like to empower. However, from the anti-Kantian perspective of using others, it is quite possible that I, as a teacher, may have a favorite student who simply chooses to flourish with the help of another rather than with my help. As Winnicott notes, human beings cannot use many people at once.[11] Self-flourishing usually depends upon just a few significant others.

Finally, teachers will also need to be introduced to the concept of being "good enough." A teacher who knows how to help students flourish will know that student flourishing is ultimately something that must be enacted by the student. Once again, this is a paradoxical concept: In order to help a student flourish, the teacher must know that the student *must help herself to the help of the teacher*, and that this is better perfected by the student than by the teacher. Ultimately, this means that a teacher may never need to be "really good." To be "really good" can interfere with that which the student might do on her own. Instead, the teacher needs to know how to be just "good enough." It may be necessary to warn teachers that being just good enough may not be as fun as being super. As a good enough teacher, one may or may not get recognition for what one does. This is not an easy notion to accept in a profession that prides itself on the meager consolation that student gratitude offers to employees whose wages are embarrassingly low. To be sure, educators and students are most often caught up in a Kantian calculus of autonomous perfectibility. Pragmatic intersubjectivity goes against the grain, offering a healthy dose of self-moderation.

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1. Intersubjectivity holds that human beings "are constituted in conversation"; Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture,* ed. David Hiley, James Bohman, and Richard Shusterman (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 314.

2. Ibid.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and intro. Lewis White Beck (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1959), 47.

4. Ibid., 49.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 59.

6. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 74.

7. For a discussion on Winnicott's anti-Kantian stance, see Barbara Johnson, "Using People: Kant with Winnicott," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 47-63.

8. D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971), 53.

9. Here, I am alluding to the connection between Enlightenment notions of self-autonomy and the common narratives of self-perfectibility that follow. It would be a longer, and worthwhile, study to explicate the ways that Enlightenment thought on self-autonomy, such as Kant's, leads to teacher-perfectibility narratives. For the purposes of this paper, an allusion must suffice.

10. Certainly, it might be pointed out that this message is for a different audience than those who might read this article, that I am really speaking to students here. I'm afraid this paradox must stand: to talk about what educators can do in order to be used is ultimately to talk not about what educators can do but what students can do.

11. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 111 ff.