

On the Possibility of Novelty: Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Teaching

Moira von Wright

Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden

ABSTRACT. Different conceptions of the subjectivity and selfhood of students scant little attention in teacher education today, yet they are central in any educational situation. The understanding of the condition of human subjectivity makes some educational perspectives and practices more intelligible than others. Still, neither teaching nor learning can be reduced to an anthropology or theory of human growth; education is always a “here and now situation” in a threefold relation between the educator, the student and the world (e.g. a subject). This article discusses the role of different conceptions of subjectivity, and shows how intersubjectivity plays a role in the experiences that students have in school. It also deepens the question of teacher authority and novelty in teaching. First, three different aspects of human subjectivity are pointed out, and with these in mind, teacher influence and the possibility of novelty in the educational situation is discussed. It is argued that the self, the ego-organism of each student, should not be a target for teacher authority, and that novelty appears in an intersubjective sphere. An understanding of subjectivity as manifold shows how an open and creative environment of teaching and learning with novelty and surprises can come about.

Keywords: subjectivity, intersubjectivity, teaching, novelty, authority, the pedagogical rule

On the Possibility of Novelty: Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Teaching

An important but still somewhat overlooked part of the work of teachers relates to those aspects of teaching that deal with novelty; with enabling situations that allow for experiences, surprises, and new knowledge. For education to come alive, there has to be more to it than mere “teaching” or mere “learning”. Tradition, repetition, compliance and habit may be important parts of education, but they do not enable newness. Many teachers somehow acknowledge this, and work towards enabling widening perspectives and classroom situations where surprises, new ideas, and knowledge can arise. However, most theories and discussions within teacher education tend to stick to rigid models and theories about development and the human self that inform the teachers about what to expect and how to act if expectations are not fulfilled. This way, few teacher-students learn to reflect upon how they as teachers influence the situation and how they encourage – or discourage – novelty in the educational realm. In this presentation, I try to shed light on some aspects of that important discussion. I hold that novelty is an integral part of education – that novelty is not “added” or brought into educational situations from the outside by the teacher or someone else, but rather that it grows out of the very situation itself. With the help of a widened understanding of subjectivity and teacher authority, I unfold this question. I suggest that a widened understanding of subjectivity and self makes it possible to speak about novelty in education in a way that a traditional, closed view of subjectivity does not allow.

Theory, subjectivity and educational relations

As already mentioned, in this article I deepen one of the most important and integral aspects of the educational relation, namely *subjectivity*, and I hold that subjectivity appears in (at least) three different

forms or dimensions in education. The common, closed view of subjectivity as a whole and inner part of the human stands in the way of an open and more complex but educationally relevant understanding. The ideas about human subjectivity presented here derive mainly from the works of George Herbert Mead (1922, 1967) and Hannah Arendt (1998). In addition, I turn to Lars Løvlie's (2007) conception of education in classrooms as a "pedagogy of place", because it allows one to think about intersubjectivity, shared meaning, and common action in education from the viewpoint of the situation itself, rather than from the subjective standpoint of one participant or another. I will also discuss how teacher authority and influence works. My thoughts on teacher influence and on the threefold pedagogical relation between teacher, student and world are mainly inspired by Mead, but here I also turn to the "pedagogical rule" presented by Rudolf Steiner (1924) in his lectures on curative education. Waldorf teachers commonly refer to this pedagogical rule, and therefore I find it proper for this occasion.¹ It is based on his multidimensional phenomenological understanding of the living human being, in which the human individual is understood from the perspective of four different aspects or "sheets": the physical, the living, the intellectual-emotional and the self, and they are connected in a structural hierarchy.

From the viewpoint of the teacher, it is important to understand how the teacher affects the students, and to recognize that in a regular educational interaction the teacher is also affected, as the "pedagogical rule" shows. From the viewpoint of the students, it is important that the educational situation allows the creation of new, shared meaning. For both, it is valuable to appreciate that there are moments in education when the asymmetry is set out of play, and these moments, though they may be brief, can contain both surprises and novel turns.

The educator's view on human subjectivity and educational relations needs to include several different aspects of subjectivity, and thereby to transcend the traditional idea of subjectivity as (merely) part of a single human self. This way, teachers can appreciate a wider spectrum of classroom communication, and they can better see how their authority works, and how they themselves are part of the educational relation.

Speaking of the possibility of novelty

It can be risky for the teacher to let educational situations grow or develop in unanticipated directions. Even in a well-orchestrated situation, a discussion can go astray and a teacher may risk losing the grip. Therefore many teachers prepare the situations so narrowly that there is no opportunity for a surprising turn or novel idea. But, as Løvlie (2007) has pointed out, all teaching needs a framing and all learning is tied to situations, "to places where experiences come about and leave their traces". The possibility of pedagogy, he holds, lies in its "places of experience". Within these possibilities lays the possibility of novelty.

To speak about education in terms of situations where pedagogical moments and novelty may appear and where love and goodness can be qualities calls for a vocabulary that differs from the discourse of methods of training, self-development, and skills. Our language of education echoes our view of the human being, with limitations and possibilities – and hence subjectivity. It also echoes our pedagogical ideas and traditions - which may originate as far back as from e.g. Socrates, Rudolf Steiner, Ellen Key or John Dewey. How we speak of our students, how we conceive of their subjectivity and their interrelations has an impact on how we plan education and on how it turns out. It has an impact on the work of the teachers, on educational practice here and now, and on the lived experience of the students.

When something new and unexpected happens in the educational situation, it happens in the intersubjective sphere of relations. Novelty is not introduced from the outside by a teacher or by a student, or by anyone else. Novelty originates in the educational situation itself, in a here and now. This possibility of novelty is the "possibility of pedagogy" that Løvlie (2007, p 32-33) speaks of.

Our language of education needs to be constantly updated and revised. And therefore we need to look closely at the relationship between teachers and students and at how teacher authority works. Nonetheless, teacher's actions cannot be guided instrumentally with the help of a pedagogical theory or an elaborated

1. This article is based on an invited key note speech at the Congress *The Educator's View of the Human Being – Consequences for Schools and Teacher Education*, Vienna, May 1-3, 2013, for researchers and Waldorf school teacher educators.

language, because in a creative situation there is always a possibility for something new, beyond the anticipated. As teachers, we must not only care about the goal-oriented effects of education (those with reference in the future) but also about the situation itself and the possibilities of each individual student in that very moment. The classroom is a “place where experiences come about and leave their traces (Løvlie, 2007, p 32)”- in every participant, including the teacher. Teacher authority needs to be handled with care, and established differently in different situations. Many aspects of what it means to be human and involved in educational relations are shared and common. The “pedagogical rule” (Steiner, 1924) focuses on these shared aspects in the teacher-student relationship. It illustrates the asymmetry of the relationship, and shows a systematic hierarchy of how they influence one another and how, mainly, teacher authority works. It can therefore be a fruitful tool for reflection.

Three dimensions of subjectivity

There are several dimension of subjectivity in education, and some are easier to grasp than others. First, we have the unique person *Who* I appear to be when I act and speak with others (Arendt, 1998); second there is the well-known inner and private subjectivity and *ego*; third the intersubjective dimension where we act together and new and shared meaning comes about (Arendt, 1998, von Wright 2000). In this intersubjective sphere of subjectivity, not the participants, but the educational situation itself is “the subject” (Løvlie, 2007, p 34-35).

The unique person, the Who beyond categories

Let me illustrate the dimension of subjectivity that emphasizes the uniqueness of each human being with the help of a story about a situation that could happen practically anywhere, in any school. I overheard this conversation many years ago in a Swedish school (compare Wright, 2000, p 156). At the collegium meeting, one of the teachers told about a new boy student who would begin in her class soon.

- Nice. *Who* is he? One of the colleagues asked.
- His name is Pekka. He is a boy from Finland. He is nine years old, speaks Finnish fluently but only a little Swedish. Fortunately, he seems bright and and is no troublemaker, so he will certainly pick up the language easily. Pekka plays the guitar and dreams of playing in a band. His parents have divorced recently and the mother and the children are now moving back to Sweden, where she comes from. He has a little sister who will come to our school next year, the teacher replied.

This way, the teacher informed her colleagues about the new student, but did she answer the question *Who* the new boy, Pekka, is? No, she told the others *what* Pekka shares with thousands of other students: name, language, family situation, interests etc. It is difficult – if not impossible – to capture the uniqueness of a person in ordinary language. Whatever it is that makes Pekka unique, and in that sense different from everybody else, cannot be defined in terms of age, temperament, constitution, family structure, hobbies, etc. *Who* Pekka is can only be disclosed when he is speaking and acting with others in concert. This implies that he speaks and acts with the others who inhabit the same educational space. In such situations *Who* Pekka is appears (only) to those who are participating in the situation. So if the teacher – or anyone else – is there simply as an onlooker or watcher, she does not share the experience. (Arendt, 1998, p. 181)

There is basically nothing wrong in using categories when we speak of human beings in general; categories make up most of our theories and scientific knowledge. But if we want to get a rich understanding of a specific person, and if we want to encounter another human being as a *unique subject* and as someone different from everybody else, we cannot come close to this person with the help of categories. They can only tell us the history of someone or how the person in question “ticks certain boxes” like age, temperament, constitution, gender, skills, family situation, etc. A language of categories risks dimming the attention of the teacher so that she cannot appreciate and see the child or student as *Who* he is. “*Who* one is” can thus only be seen and experienced in human action, together with others (Arendt, 1998). Therefore, the question of *who* I am, or who you are, is a question of appearance and not a question of inner traits or outer capabilities

or experiences. If the teacher does not appreciate this distinction between *what* people share in terms of descriptions, and *who* one might be, she might easily slip into reasoning as if they were the same thing, which would be unfortunate.

The inner self; the ego

Let us now turn to another aspect of subjectivity, the inner self, or the *Ego*, as we tend to call it. I pointed out in the previous section that we must not mistake the idea of a unique *Who* of a person with *what* categories a person can be identified with. Neither should we equate our private inner self, the *Ego*, with *Who* we are when we disclose ourselves to others. As human selves we all have inner lives and a sense of who we are, but this inner private is not revealed to others – and should not be so in education. I will return to this when I discuss the “pedagogical rule” of Steiner.

The uniqueness of each human self is not “inner”; it is *Who* we are with others in an intersubjective space that makes me different from you. This uniqueness cannot be pinned down and settled, but is always temporary, situated. In this important detail – in *Who* as an active performing aspect of the self - lies the possibility of education and the key to novelty.

When humans act and speak together and disclose who they are, their attention is directed towards the mutual situation and not towards their egos. Conversely, the self as inner and private is occupied with itself and it turns its attention towards itself, and its presentation is a self-presentation - often with the aim to find similarities. This, again, is different from acting in concert: Acting in concert means acting in performance, together in a public now (Arendt, 1998, Disch 1996, 34). It is shared experience in the moment.

Intersubjectivity in situ

The third dimension of subjectivity that I want to present is the situation of communication in which we all, as participating selves, are continually re-constructed. It is a situation where new and shared meaning can be created and where novelty may appear. In intersubjective communication we as *selves* are continually re-constructed (Mead, 1967).

In every teaching and learning situation, there is a possibility for something new to come about, and these moments of newness are of great importance for the well-being and flourishing of the students, but also for the development of knowledge. The wonder of the educational situation is the fact that it, at its best, turns out to be “more” than what is actually put into it. Education is not about transmission and repetition; true education always contains moments and parts of surprise and novelty. There is a risk that the teacher holds back these situations of potential novelty. The reasons may be varied: lack of understanding of how learning comes about, fear of chaos and loss of control, etc. An intersubjective understanding of subjectivity adds to a base for understanding the conditions for an open and creative environment of teaching and learning, where these rare moments of surprise and openness may come about. In intersubjective communication, when the situation is common and shared, everyone - including the teacher - is a participator. In these moments, the ever so important and dominant asymmetry of the teacher-student relationship is set out of play, and everybody is acting together, in concert (Disch, 1996). In this situation, individuality and each individual’s sense of self manifests itself, and nobody is an outside spectator - not even the teacher. This means that the teacher is neither evaluating nor interfering or interrupting from an outside perspective or expert point of view; not displaying authority and not demanding compliance.

The pedagogical rule: teacher authority at work

Let us now turn from subjectivity to another aspect of the educational relationships, namely to teacher authority and influence. The “pedagogical rule” (Steiner, 1924), illustrates how teacher authority works, and it can also show the mutual relationship between students and teachers, and thus show when moments can appear when the asymmetry is set out of play. In these moments, novelty may appear.

We tend to view teaching and learning in terms of an asymmetrical relationship where the teacher has the position of authority, knowledge, and responsibility, and the students have the position of the recipient: the growing and learning person. This is often very true, but if we reduce our understanding to merely this, we miss the point of education that transcends given knowledge, the possibility of pedagogy: novelty. There are educational situations where the asymmetry of the relationship between teachers and students is set out of play. These pedagogical moments can be of utmost importance, though sometimes almost unnoticed, and they can be complicated, because they are inherently unpredictable. They demand tact and serenity from the teacher.

If we look at a teaching and learning situations, and have a close look at the relationship between the teacher and the student, and want to understand how the teacher's communication affects the student, Steiner's "pedagogical rule" can be quite helpful. (The pedagogical rule is also referred to as the "curative educational law".) Here, Steiner captures the asymmetry of educational relationships. He recognizes the fact that the teacher does not have an impact on the "same" aspect as that from which he or she communicates. Steiner's point is that the asymmetry is that the teacher systematically addresses the student from another *aspect* than where the response of the student can be found, in accordance with the structural hierarchy of the human being. The self should be left free and untouched, basically because it is not a question for education or for the teacher. The pedagogical rule should be understood as normative. It illustrates how the teacher turns to, or speaks to the student in a way where the upper organisational aspect of the teacher addresses the following lower aspect in the student, in accordance with the hierarchy.

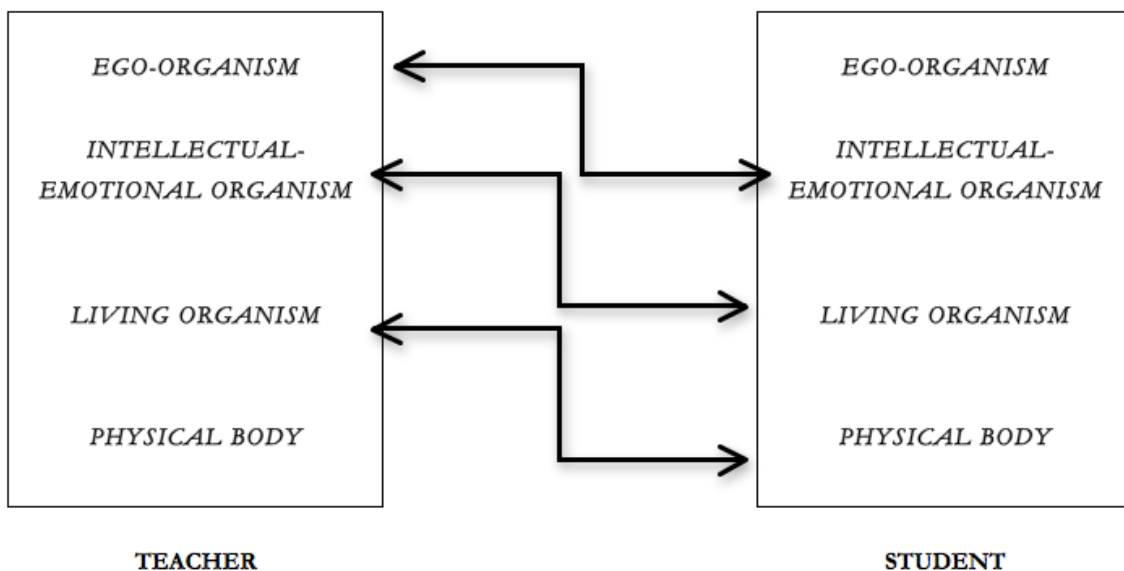


Figure 1. Mutual teacher-student influence, according to the pedagogical rule of Steiner 1924 in accordance with a lecture by Erik van Mansvelt (2003).

Figure 1 shows that the self, the ego-organism of the teacher speaks to the intellectual-emotional aspect of the student, and the intellectual-emotional aspect of the teacher speaks to the living organism of the student. The teacher is, however, easily tempted to turn directly to the ego-organism of the student and ask for compliance. But if the teacher does this, it blocks the possibility of novelty. So, according to Steiner, the self of the student must be left outside of the sphere of deliberate teacher authority and influence, because otherwise the teacher blocks the possibility for the student to have direct access to the new: The ego, the self, is a question for the student him or herself, because the self plays an important role in novelty and freedom. When we understand subjectivity in the open way that I have suggested, we can, with the help of the rule, understand why the teacher should not deliberately address the self, the emerging ego-organism of the young student.²

2. The ego-organism of Steiner is not fully compatible with any of the forms of subjectivity that I have suggested, but it contains aspects of both the inner *Ego* and the *Who* I am.

The important point here is that the pedagogical rule shows in what way the ego-organism - the self - of the student can stand outside of teacher authority and deliberate influence, whereas the other aspects of the student and subjectivity may still be engaged.

Novelty in educational situations

The rare creative moments where the pedagogical rule and the asymmetry of the situation is set out of play can be still and pass by unnoticed. In order to illustrate this point on novelty, I will tell about a situation that I witnessed in fourth grade in primary school (von Wright, 2011, p 140): It is Monday morning. The whole class is gathered in a ring, on a carpet, in a corner of the classroom, together with the teacher. They have a habit of sitting together, discussing what happened over the weekend. A girl has just talked about the dog she misses so much – it was recently put to sleep by the veterinarian. When she has finished speaking, this discussion followed:

One of the boys said: I had a rabbit called Daniel.

Another boy exclaimed: But that's what I am called!

What a lovely name, said the teacher.

How can we understand this situation? One boy remembers his dear pet; the other boy is surprised that a rabbit had the same name as he has. There are numerous ways, in which the teacher could have reacted – with numerous consequences. But in a light and serene voice she said: “What a lovely name!”

From the spectators point of view I suggest that the teacher directs the attention of the students by the way she communicates with them and through what she says. And they hear her say something positive: a *lovely* name!

As a spectator I might, however, also suspect that the teacher is dealing with anticipation and avoidance: Is the teacher perhaps anticipating a complicated situation and an unwanted continuation that might follow from these remarks? Is she trying to avoid misconceptions or harassment?

Yet another way of understanding what the teacher did is to hold that she confirmed what was said, but without affirming or encouraging it, and without making any moralizing or didactic “points”. After all, she could have said something about relevance. However, she said: “What a lovely *name*.” By saying this, the teacher confirms that there are different perspectives, many versions. She holds back judgments and possible new explanations or lessening interpretations (after all she does not say: “...all dear creatures and humans have names...”) To sum up: the teacher leaves her authority behind and allows intersubjectivity to take over. She speaks and acts in the common sphere.

What then is in the name that the teacher brings into the situation? She brings in the aspect of love in the name: the beloved pet, the beloved boy. She does not pick up the expected problems of categories or consistency. She neutralizes the possible problem of combining nature and humanity, and she releases a possible tension by showing that *the boys share something beautiful through the name, Daniel*.

What did the teacher not do? The teacher did *not* produce shame or guilt; not take sides; not fill in missing parts; not present a conclusion or value; not interrupt or quiet; not judge or evaluate; not give them other tasks. She did not produce confusion. She did not turn her attention to the individuals and address their egos, nor did she address their morals.

The teacher may quickly have turned several different possibilities through her mind before responding, but she did not say them out loud. She was both spontaneous and serene – and so was the situation. Somehow the teacher managed to shift the mode of awareness in the educational situation: A shared moment of open wonder and stillness came about.

Concluding remarks

In my presentation, I have deepened the question in what way an intersubjective understanding of subjectivity makes a difference for the students as growing, unique human beings. I have pointed at the relation between intersubjectivity and novelty in education. I have argued that an intersubjective understanding is essential for an open and creative environment of teaching and learning where new meaning and perspectives can come about.

An appreciation of human subjectivity as having many dimensions opens the way for a relational understanding of education that includes both teachers and students. This way, we can see how teachers affect students, and vice versa, and we can also see that subjectivity appears differently in different situations. A consequence is that in common classroom situations, when the educational situation aims to exceed the given and already known, the teacher must not attend to and control each individual student, but instead the teacher must attend to the situation itself, and so enable unexpected events and novelty.

I have suggested that we separate between the following dimensions of subjectivity in educational relations:

- The uniqueness of each person – which can be seen through a glimpse when one discloses *Who* one is, but cannot be known through categories or stories.
- The inner subjectivity and sense of self, *Ego*, that each person has is not a subject for deliberate education. We must keep this private inner self outside of education if we want to create a space for novelty.
- The intersubjective communication in which we as *selves* are continually re-constructed. This is where new and shared meaning is created and where pedagogical moments of surprise and novelty may appear.

In this article I have argued that our perspectives and attitudes as educators make a difference for the educational situation and the traces they leave in the students. I have not delved into different theories or anthropologies, because I do not believe that there is a single theory or anthropology that could ever serve as “the” pedagogical answer to any educational situation. The practice of education, the very situation, exceeds any pre-given idea, which is why we may speak of pedagogy as an art, and of experience and novelty as integral parts of education. Nonetheless, I have turned to an open understanding of human subjectivity with three aspects of subjectivity, and I have taken the Waldorf educational perspective on the student as a whole human being, understood as four sheets. These conceptions can inform our educational language and help us see if we let the “possibility of pedagogy” come about. A fixed view on subjectivity as merely an inner self points towards a closing of relationships, whereas an understanding of subjectivity as manifold points towards an opening of educational relations, with space for novelty and newness. I hold this latter perspective to be preferable, because it contains the possibility of embracing difference and newness, including not only the teacher but also every participant in the classroom.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Erik van Mansvelt for generously sharing his immense and thorough knowledge on the work of Rudolf Steiner, and for commenting on the drafts of this paper.

References

- Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. Second Edition. Introduction by Margaret Canovan. Chicago & London: The Chicago University Press.
- Dish, L. J. (1996). *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press
- Løvlie, L. (2007). The Pedagogy of Place. *Nordisk pedagogik, Vol. 27*, 32-37.
- Mead, G. H. (1922). A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol, *Journal of Philosophy* 19, 157-163.
- Mead, G. H. (1967). *Mind, Self, and Society. From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Edited by Charles W. Morris. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Steiner, R. (1924). *Curative Education: Lecture 1-12*, Dornach. Available at: <http://www.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA/?ga=GA0317> [Retrieved March 10, 2014]
- von Wright, M. (2000). *Vad eller vem? En pedagogisk rekonstruktion av G H Meads teori om människors intersubjektivitet*. Göteborg: Daidalos.
- von Wright M. (2011). Platsens pedagogik. In M. Jensen (Ed.), *Lärandets grunder. Teorier och perspektiv*, (pp. 137-142). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Unpublished notes:

- van Mansvelt, E. (2003). *Life processes and human interaction*. Lecture, Ekenäs.