Habermas and Education: knowledge, communication, discourse

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ABSTRACT In this article, the author examines the inherent potential of the critical social theory suggested by the Institute for Social Research (the so-called 'Frankfurt School') as a means of conceptualising the problems of education at the present time. In particular, the author concentrates on the work of critical theory's most important contemporary exponent, Jürgen Habermas, with particular regard to ideas of knowledge and of the importance of linguistic communication as a means to reach agreement on significant issues, such as education, through informed discourse in a revitalised sphere of public debate. Such a progression from absolute knowledge by way of communication to political will-formation seems to the author to indicate the means by which critical theory may become praxis.

Since Habermas belongs to the second generation of critical theorists, being born in 1929, he was not obliged to leave Germany during the era of National Socialism, as the founder members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research had been. Nevertheless, the impact of that period in German history is evident in much of his work, in particular his concern to rescue all that he can from the German Enlightenment project. In this, the grounding of much of the Frankfurt School's thought on the work of Marx and Freud, both of whom were suppressed during the Nazi years, was clearly a way of side-stepping the doubts which had been expressed in many quarters regarding German culture, by virtue of its appropriation as a means of legitimation by Nazi ideologists. In addition, Habermas's experience of Fascism did not lead him to adopt a negative, pessimistic view, such as that of Adorno & Horkheimer (1979), and exemplified in particular by the book which they wrote during their exile in the United States *The Dialectic of Enlightenment.*

This is not to say that Habermas was not affected by the events taking place around him: indeed, I would argue that their effect was crucial, albeit when viewed retrospectively, as the full enormity of what had transpired slowly dawned upon the young man. Habermas grew up in

a period in which human rights and freedoms were suppressed by the state on a routine basis, and in which propaganda was employed on an unprecedented level to spread lies, distortions and half-truths. At the end of this era, the surviving members of the Nazi leadership were placed on trial at Nuremberg, charged with conspiracy to wage aggressive war and with crimes against humanity. Habermas has recounted how the radio relays of the Tribunal proceedings made a great impact on him and, in view of these factors. I believe that we can trace the origins of his concern with notions of freedom, of truth, and of justice back to the oppression and propaganda of 1933-1945, and to the exacting of justice on the part of the international community, an event in itself without parallel in history.

Other aspects of life in post-war Germany were significant in Habermas's development. These include the re-education policy pursued by the four-power occupation administration, which, certainly in the American sector, may have been responsible for Habermas's acquaintance with pragmatism or the social theories of Talcott Parsons, as well as the opportunity to discover the work of significant thinkers banned during the Nazi years, such as Marx and Freud. His work as a journalist in the mid-1950s enabled him to intervene in debates on issues of immediate concern, a practice of engagement with current affairs which he has continued to the present day through his many contributions to German newspapers and periodicals, providing a useful corrective to the perception of his work, even on the part of otherwise sympathetic commentators, as unduly theoretical or systematic, but which is largely unrecognised outside German-speaking countries. In addition, the opportunity for a new beginning in the immediate post-war years seemed to have been lost: a number of 'fellow-travellers' for whom the Nazi years had been a case of 'business as usual' were amongst his teachers at Göttingen and Bonn (these included Gehlen and Schelsky), whilst the economic success of the new Federal Republic and its American-influenced capitalist system, seemed to render the Frankfurt School and its Marxist orientation wholly irrelevant in the face of Adenauer's 'economic miracle'. The influence of the United States (for example over the question of the stationing of nuclear weapons on German soil) led to policy decisions being forced through without recourse to a fully democratic process, thus raising the issue of the nature of political debate in a country where the potential for such debate had so recently been non-existent.

In his earlier work, as is well-known, Habermas explored concepts of knowledge, identifying three areas (analytical, hermeneutic and critical), a model which, though hardly original in itself, being reminiscent in some ways of the three Kantian spheres of science, aesthetics and morality, is however related, in what appears to me to be a unique way, to corresponding types of human interest, so that, for example, an empirical interest can best be served through some aspect of science or technology which falls under the rubric of analytical knowledge, interests which relate to placing ourselves within an historical or cultural context are best

addressed by hermeneutically-derived knowledge, and our interest in freedom (the emancipatory interest) corresponds to the critical element of our knowledge-base (Habermas, 1971).

Examples of these three areas of knowledge would thus be the natural sciences or mathematics in the analytical-empirical sphere, the social sciences or humanities in terms of hermeneutic-historical aspects, and political theory or psycho-analysis as a means of conceptualising our critical-emancipatory aspirations. In this last area, Habermas's interest in the work of Marx and Freud gives a clear indication of his debt to his predecessors in the Frankfurt Institute. We may perhaps see the first two of these types of knowledge as corresponding approximately to Ryle's distinction (Ryle, 1949, Chapter 2) between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' (which seem to me to relate to Habermas's analytical and hermeneutic knowledge respectively), whilst it seems to do no violence to Ryle's model if we extend it by analogy to include a third category of 'knowing why', which would correspond to the critical sphere. These relationships are shown in Table I.

Knowledge	Interests	Types of knowing (Ryle)	Examples
Critical	Emancipatory	'knowing why'	Marx/Freud
Hermeneutic	Historical	'knowing how'	Humanities/social sciences
Analytical	Empirical	'knowing that'	Natural sciences

Table I. Summary of Habermas's concept of knowledge and interests.

In terms of theorising education, I see these three types of knowledge as providing us with a key to examining education structures, in which analytical knowledge comprises the content of education (the curriculum), hermeneutics inform educational methodologies (praxis) and critical modes of thought are brought to bear upon questions of policy. This might be broken down further by placing one element of education (curriculum, methodology or policy) alongside Habermas's model of knowledge in turn. The curriculum, for example, can be related to analytical knowledge (the natural sciences) and to hermeneutics (the humanities), but the exercise quickly highlights the absence of a component corresponding to the critical sphere. Literally, this would comprise some form of theory with a practical intent, a necessary corrective to the unduly empirical nature of the content of our education system, which needs to embrace a theorising of praxis or search for general principles. This is not to say that factual knowledge of a utilitarian nature or aesthetic experiences touching upon the affective side of learning are in any way less important: the emotions have an equally valid use where cognitive ends are concerned (Geertz). Just as Habermas regards knowledge as a cumulative phenomenon, in which the data assimilated at each level forms the basis of the next, so that, for example,

factual knowledge is examined for what it reveals in terms of our understanding and is then subject to an in-depth critique, so the learning process in our institutions of education should lead our students through a similarly staged progression. Similarly, the methodology of teaching can be seen as having an analytical element (the so-called 'traditional' approach), as well as a hermeneutic side (the 'progressive' philosophy), but once again the comparative lack of a critical element is conspicuous. These relationships are presented diagrammatically in Table II, which should be read upwards.

Knowledge/interests	Structures	Curriculum	Methodology
Critical–emancipatory	Policy	?	Fusion
Hermeneutic–historical	Methodology (praxis)	Social sciences/humanities	'Progressive'
Analytical–empirical	Curriculum (content)	Natural sciences/mathematics	'Traditional'

Table II. Application of Habermas's theory of knowledge and interests to education.

However, teaching methods must have regard to the level of psychological development attained by each student, a factor which leads back to the critical social theory of Habermas and of his predecessors in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. The acquisition of knowledge, whether it be analytical, hermeneutic or critical, presupposes a learning process, and it is these psychological processes which provide the link between Habermas's earlier work on knowledge and his decision to shift the emphasis of his enquiry to the interaction of individuals within their social context.

Unlike the earlier critical theorists, whose psychological models derive from the analytical insights of Freud, Habermas is less concerned with the psychological condition of the individual subject than with theories which display a more formal developmertal logic, such as those of Piaget or Kohlberg, in which a supra-subjective process of stages is mapped out. Again, this may be related to Habermas's own perception of the Nazi era: he is deeply troubled by the ease with which Germany descended into mass barbarism during the years 1933-1945, and the extent to which a large proportion of its people managed to convince themselves that such atrocities could somehow be justified. Since the learning process of a society comprises those of the individuals who make up that society, such processes are obviously of the most crucial importance if such regressions are to be avoided. The cognitive model advanced by Piaget (pre-operational, concrete-operational and formal-operational) is refracted, as it were, through the theories of social interaction advanced by Mead, in which reciprocity plays an important role. Our abilities to interact with one another in the realm of social interaction depend on the acquisition of knowledge, and pave the way for an appreciation of our

growing awareness of our moral consciousness, which Kohlberg characterises (along similar lines to Piaget) in terms of transitions from pre-conventional, through conventional, to post-conventional modes of thought.

Habermas sees the reproduction of the social sphere in terms of a struggle between social systems (administrative, economic, bureaucratic) and the life-world in which we live out our daily lives. He characterises the goal of the system as the colonisation of the life-world, and sees language, the means of achieving rational consensus, as the primary mode of social interaction by which this process of colonisation may be resisted. However, although he draws on the speech-act theories of Austin and Searle, which are themselves influenced by the later Wittgenstein, Habermas is at pains to stress the differences between his theories in this sphere and the idea of the language-game. Similarly, following de Saussure's distinction between language (langue) and speech (parole), we can see that Habermas is concerned less with linguistic competence than with the practical, performative aspects of speech-acts, thus emphasising the direction taken by his own work as opposed to Chomsky's generative grammar. Assertions regarding facts which can be verified by reference to the objective world are acceptable not merely within the local culture at the present time, but by all rational persons throughout the world and at every moment in time.

Habermas sees no distinction between such practical issues and questions of morality or ethics, a position which naturally leads cultural relativists to raise the spectre of universalism. He believes that when such issues are raised, they must be supported by statements which when examined critically, are found to be comprehensible, true, truthful and appropriate. Since comprehensibility is a necessary component of language itself, the remaining three claims can be verified by reference to the way in which facts and knowledge are brought into play in the case of their truth, by studying linguistic expressions as to the speaker's intent with regard to their truthfulness, and by examining illocutionary speech-acts and the way in which they establish interpersonal relations as to their appropriateness. In any discussion, therefore, all participants must employ the same level of language, refer to facts and knowledge with which all are familiar, contribute to the discussion in an open, honest way and be prepared to place themselves in the position of others in order to understand the latter's point of view. They must not use influence or coercion in order to pursue a personal agenda or act on behalf of outside interests, nor sit on the side-lines as observers rather than participants. Only if all these conditions are fulfilled can an 'ideal speech-situation' take place, in which ethical issues can be openly debated and agreement reached on norms which are acceptable to everyone under ideal conditions. In his concept of the public sphere, the state is neither independent, nor only responsive to the interests of particular individuals or groups. It must be counter-balanced by a public sphere which provides a forum within which citizens can voice their concerns. He sees a need for

channels of communication between civil society and such a public sphere these might include a wide range of informal associations, a responsible mass media, and avenues through which an agenda comprising broad social concerns can receive formal consideration within the political system. Questions of education policy seem to me to be precisely the kind of issue which must be addressed through this kind of public debate, rather than left to the temporary incumbents of ministerial office or to the non-elected civil servants who advise them.

Habermas sees the goal of modernity as the attainment of a fully democratic society. Modernity is to him, therefore, an 'unfinished project' which must be pursued if that potential is to be released, whilst recent trends in postmodern thought are both illusory and distracting, obscuring what he sees as the real issues, and coming dangerously close to precisely the sort of conservative complacency which preceded the rise of totalitarianism earlier in this century. Habermas sees postmodern thought as obsessed with power as wielded through language, the latter being to him, on the contrary, the medium of positive discourse. Those in postmodernity's thrall take flight from language as the medium of power relationships, as the expression of grand theories and their universal concepts, into parochial literary analyses and the egotistical self-absorption of autobiographical narrative, abandoning any notion of resistance in favour of the intellectually undemanding marginal pursuits of fashion, style or chic advocated by Baudrillard. Their notions of diversity, fragmentation or innovation, and their rejection of discourse or argumentation in favour of intuition are advocated with precisely the kind of a dogmatism which they disdainfully ascribe to modernity.

Just as Habermas's own work is often seen as overly-theoretical or systematic (incorrectly, in my view), so my own derivations from his thinking are not intended to provide a ready-made, inflexible system of educational theory which might then be imposed on institutional practice, but rather seek to approach contemporary problems from a different perspective, using Habermas's proposed modes of thought and of communication to re-conceptualise both the theory and practice of education and address these problems in a new light.

Such an approach is not in itself completely new, since such old initiatives as the Schools Council Humanities Project or the work of Laurence Stenhouse were intended equally to introduce a discursive element into the classroom, with many close analogies to Habermas's ideal speech-situation. As we have seen (above), this would entail all participants having equal access to facts and knowledge, contributing to discussion openly and honestly, having the capacity to see an argument from other perspectives, and abandoning the interests of both themselves and of others. In the Schools Council Humanities Project, teachers became 'neutral chairs', facilitating the discussions of their students by providing them with access to information, thus indicating that the ideal speech situation is immanent in any classroom.

Education is traditionally seen in many quarters as a means of societal reproduction, and of cultural preservation, achieved by the imparting of the latter to each successive generation. However, a culture is a living thing which constantly changes and educators must respond to the new circumstances created by those changes by encouraging our students to reflect on the cultural circumstances as they exist, and from that process of reflection to evolve their own refinements or developments which will make the culture relevant to them, rather than to us. The pace of change in both culture and society has now reached bewildering speed, and the last 25 years have marked an unprecedented shift from full-time labour in the sphere of material production and distribution to an emphasis on flexible working practices, with information technology allowing those with the necessary resources to work from home, and moves towards part-time, casual staffing and the provision of services, rather than of goods, these changes being characterised as, for example, 'turbo-capitalism', to use Edward N. Luttwak's description. The possibility of full employment has now receded to a point where it is hard to imagine such a situation ever returning, but our education system (at least here in Britain) still emphasises education as a way to impart practical, technical knowledge which will give our young people the competences necessary to obtain work, despite the ever-diminishing possibilities in today's job-market of finding full-time, permanent employment. Surely, it is time to acknowledge the realities of these new circumstances and evolve programmes which will prepare our young people for the enforced leisure which they will encounter on leaving full-time compulsory education. The lack of correlation between, on the one hand, the economic system and its job-market and, on the other, the education system is also indicative of the way in which (according to Claus Offe's analysis) the welfare state (which I take to represent the latter's attempts to humanise capitalism by intervening in the economic sphere) offers benefits to the electorate in exchange for the latter's loyalty and acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the state. However, the provision of education (and, in particular, higher education) inevitably increases our knowledge and understanding of the power of both the economic and political systems, creating a tension between the need of the state to attain legitimacy, and the need of education to provide enlightenment (Offe, 1984, pp. 53 and 256). Offe goes on to suggest that the provision of pre-school education, and the emphasis on flexibility and 'key skills' in vocational training are symptomatic of a process of rationalisation on the part of the state which is intended to direct attention from the issue of legitimacy (Offe, 1984, p. 109).

The cumulative acquisition of both knowledge and of the modes of thinking associated with its respective spheres (analytic, hermeneutic and critical) suggested by Habermas offers a fusion of both the natural and human sciences (McCarthy, 1984, pp. 137-140). The possibilities for a critical social science of education derived from his notion of technical, practical and emancipatory interests would thus offer the possibility for

an attack on ideology and on the sources of power which employ it as a non-coercive way of exerting its influence, the evolving of educational processes aimed at enlightenment and the encouragement of actions intended to bring about global improvements to society in the areas of both justice and freedom. Seen in this light, education is as much about collective social change, as about individual enlightenment (Kemmis, Prologue to Carr, 1995, pp. 12-13), a perspective which highlights the parallels between the critical social theory of Habermas and the notion of education advanced by R. S. Peters: both draw on the idea of language as the primary mode for the inter-subjective examination of claims to rationality (Peters) and validity (Habermas), thereby defending a democratic tradition which finds its origins in the Enlightenment. By adopting a Habermasian critical theory which escapes the confines of empiricism, we can examine education from a critical and scientific stand-point, a process which is also of itself educational, in that it involves the encouragement of rational/democratic perspectives (see Carr, 1995, pp. 115-117). Additionally, Habermas's model of the reconstructive sciences, wherein practice forms the basis of theory, as in Freud's psycho-analytic work, which Habermas characterises as 'depth hermeneutics', seems eminently suitable to the much-derided sphere of educational research. In broad terms, I conceive theory and practice as two facets of the same structure: were either to be removed, the structure would collapse. They are separate aspects of the same phenomenon, which must be linked by their forming the subject of discussion on the part of the education community as a whole, rather than of either academic specialists or isolated practitioners alone (Carr, 1995, pp. 118-119).

As I have indicated, Habermas's model of empirical-analytical and historical-hermeneutic spheres, with their corresponding interests (technical and practical, respectively) can be seen as corresponding (in curriculum terms) to the sciences and to the humanities, but this leaves little room for the critical orientation of the emancipatory interest. Although this is nominally covered by personal and social development strands (which usually tend to occupy the lowest priority in timetabling), and by compulsory acts of Christian worship, the reality is that the education system is pre-occupied with the age-old requirement to reproduce society through the transmission of both factual knowledge and of a cultural tradition. In the first instance, this is reasonable, since we cannot expect each new generation to re-discover the sum total of human knowledge, but the case of cultural tradition brings with it the problem of legitimation, ideology and, the systems of power which use the latter to sustain their covert influence. Traditions are not fossilised, to be accepted without question in a spirit of reverence, but subject to constant re-evaluation and, if necessary, rejection. To this end, the mental asset of hermeneutic understanding is essential for young people if they are not to succumb to ideology and, whilst this has formed an important aspect of the teaching of the humanities over the last three decades or so, its

development into a fully-fledged critical theory is long overdue. With the advent of postmodern thought, the humanities are increasingly concerned with the interpretation of culturally-received traditions and the rejection of grand theories by which the human species may progress towards emancipation. However, the predilection of thinkers such as Foucault or Derrida to concentrate on a third-person perspective towards those *about whom* we are writing, or a second-person relationship to those *for whom* we are writing seems to preclude a genuinely critical-emancipatory, first-person perspective which those who seek to transform both system and life-world must surely share (Kemmis, 1995, pp. 143, 150-151).

Ideology in its negative sense arises from, and, indeed, often creates distortions in patterns of communication. It follows that education programmes designed to enhance forms of life free from ideology must emphasise communication (both linguistic and symbolic) which is safeguarded from manipulation for strategic ends (such as all forms and degrees of mis-information) on the part of those power-complexes which use ideology to influence a general population which cannot see any alternative. Since politics (at all levels), economics, social institutions, culture and belief-systems (such as metaphysical or religious world-views) are often prone to such ideological excesses, we must seek to both exclude them from the education process as a precaution, whilst simultaneously alerting young people to the risks which may result from the colonisation of education by narrow forms of nationalism, market forces which reduce education from a fundamental right to a commodity, conformity to supposed norms of social behaviour or of cultural expression, or belief-systems which challenge the autonomy of the individual and the latter's self-formative processes, whilst clinging to an outmoded metaphysics of the spiritual.

The concept of the latter is often yoked to that of the moral, an assumption which seems to me false. The notion of a human spirit from which it derives has become increasingly difficult to sustain (other than as a poetic metaphor) in an age where the sophisticated topographies of the mind offered by psycho-analytic theory offer a plausible schematic for further development. This is not to say that psychology is the *only* alternative to religion, being equally resistant to empirical verification. The reason for this shift in perspective is not hard to discern: the learning process of an society results in the sufficient explanation of phenomena in one historical text being reviewed and reformulated as those circumstances change, so that concept of spirit which pertained throughout many cultures over several millennia is gradually giving way to that of a human psyche. Moral development is a combination of the autonomous development of the individual, but one which takes place within a social context (the perhaps unduly strong emphasis upon autonomous development being one of the limitations of Kohlberg's theories), a question of social protocols learnt on an individual basis, rather than of external, imposed from without. The role of culture as a 'third force' which both constitutes the shared understandings of

individuals, and provides the mechanisms for social change (as in the transition from kinship to class as the structural basis of neolithic societies, kinship creating problems of land availability and over-population which led to the development of new ideas concerning crop-growing, stock-farming and irrigation, which, once learnt through the mechanism of a collectively shared culture, then resulted in a transition to a new type of social system) should not be underestimated, providing as it does a super-structural link, between, on the one hand, individual personalities in the lifeworld, and, on the other, social systems (Habermas, 1979, p. 151). Since there seems little point in making an arbitrary connection to spirit, so that our educational institutions could quite reasonably dispense with actual religious observances (whilst retaining the comparative study of belief systems in their historico-social context) along the lines already operative in the United States and France, where the secular status of education and respect for individual conscience are embodied in law (although the option of parents to take up alternative educational opportunities offered by specific organisations to which they might feel some lingering sense of loyalty, such as the Christian churches or the Islamic faith, would, of course, still need to be available). Having broken the moral-spiritual mould, we can now concentrate on the strategies by which education can enhance the moral development of students. In the first instance, teachers can act as exemplars of moral attitudes by the way in which they teach. In this sense, all teaching has a moral dimension, as teachers set and maintain the highest standards in their own behaviour. Secondly, the content of each subject has a moral dimension which can be examined critically, for example the actions of actual figures in world history, those of fictional characters in literature, or those of the scientific community, particularly in contentious fields such as nuclear physics or the environment.

Learning, as it takes place in a linear, cumulative sense within formal institutions, increases our knowledge quantitatively, but there is also another type of learning, by which individuals (and, indeed, groups and societies as a whole) formulate new ways of understanding reality, of interacting with others and of perceiving their own identities. The crises which have beset the world during this century have caused us to question the validity of linear models, whilst the recognition of cultural pluralities within the postmodern world-view has called the idea of individual identity itself into question: certainly, the postmodern equation of knowledge with power seems to have led systematic education to doubt its very purpose, and thus contribute to a sense of identity crisis in our society. The work of the Frankfurt School was born out of just such a socio-cultural crisis, and Habermas's reconstruction of this first generation of critical theory offers an insight into a possible reformulation of education itself (Peukert, 1993). The foundation of modern, post-Enlightenment societies lies in their commitment to the ideals of truth, justice, emancipation, rights and virtues. These moral aspects can best be addressed through a discursive ethics grounded upon

self-reflective communication, that is on developmental processes in both the individual and in society which can only come about through the general processes of learning, and assisted by the institutional form of education system. From Rousseau and Kant to Dewey, the connection between education and democracy is implicit: *Emile* and the *Social Contract* were published simultaneously, whilst Kant saw education as the path to both the humanisation of the individual and the formation of a democratic will, from which would ultimately arise a world republic dedicated to perpetual peace. I believe that the continuation and development of the individual and societal learning processes which will transform our culture and enable it to overcome the current crisis without loosing sight of what has already been achieved by modernity can only be accomplished by utilising the concept of discourse ethics and of communicative action outlined by Habermas.

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