

A Critical Assessment of Education by Applying Habermas

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Paraphrasing Jurgen Habermas, Ruane and Todd state that 'the interpenetration of state and economy in advanced capitalism leads to new forms of social crisis [...] this leads to social and personal pathologies' (1988: 533-4). The realm of education, particularly during compulsory schooling age - the focus of this essay - is one such sector that is beleaguered by a multitude of pathologies. To assess some of these problems, the following main concepts of Habermas will be used: the "lifeworld", "system", "rationalisation", "colonisation", and to a lesser extent, the "universal presuppositions of speech". While looking at these concepts we will consider how some of the current problems within modern education can be overcome.

Habermas asked critical questions about the nature of modern society, the problems it faced, and the place morality, language, politics and the law played in it. In the same spirit, some concepts of Habermas's theory will be applied and analyzed to the field of education to see if certain conflicts can be resolved. It is through the quality of communication, a genuine appreciation of the ability of others to arrive at their own informed conclusions (with the appropriate education), and less interference by those who are not acquainted professionally with the learning and teaching process, that educational performance will be enhanced. If, on the other hand, policymakers, corporate interests and the education system take on the belief that the learner must be respected as the most important agency through which effective learning takes place, and should not be patronized or undermined to serve the interests of others, then the successful teaching as described by Habermas can be achieved.

The lifeworld, according to Habermas, is the interaction through a variety of skills by ordinary people to negotiate and sustain social interaction (Edgar 2006: 89). In contrast to the lifeworld, the system secures the material reproduction of society as a whole (Cook 2005: p.56). The conflict between lifeworld and system is central to Habermas' understanding of contemporary society. Colonization replaces communicative reason with instrumental reason. As the system colonises the lifeworld impoverished, instrumental forms of interaction proliferate, eroding and assimilating complex cultural meanings (Edgar 2006: 91). This erosion has led to a 'cultural impoverishment that threatens a lifeworld whose traditional substance has been devalued' (Ibid.:326).

The central idea in relation to Habermas' communicative theory is that understanding is considered to be a process of reaching agreement between speaking and acting subjects, achieved through sincere and normatively appropriate communication (Habermas 1996: 11). It cannot be imposed by either party, whether by coercion or direct intervention in the situation, or through strategic rationality by influencing the decisions of opponents (Habermas 1984a: 286-7). In accordance with the universal presuppositions of speech,

'everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion into the discourse and no speaker may be prevented from exercising his right to take part in a discourse and express his attitudes' (Ibid.: 88-89). Therefore, social action can be either success-oriented strategic action or understanding-oriented communicative action. In strategic action people are treated as objects to be used and manipulated by others (Huttunen 2006: unpaginated); communicative action, by contrast, entails interpersonal communication where participants are treated as individuals (Ibid.).

There is no doubt that system influences on the lifeworld, affect the educative experience. This effect directly impacts upon the quality of the learning experience. Lifeworld practices such as education that were traditionally co-ordinated by communicative reason have now been stifled by the colonisation of the instrumental rationality of the system (Blaug 1997: 102). The principles and the legitimacy of educational activity have all become the prerogative of a non-teaching supervisory class: policymakers, with their own motives and ends. The active reflection of teachers (and learners) on the meaning and significance of educational work is no longer solicited, leading to intellectual docility (Ibid.). Teachers have therefore become merely the lowest-level implementers of the policies they themselves do not determine (Misgeld 1985: 90). This is emblematic of the social crisis that ensues when the system colonises the lifeworld: as Habermas asserts, 'the rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible the emergence and growth of subsystems [of power and money] whose independent imperatives turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself' (1987: 186).

Contemporary education does not live up to the emancipatory potential conceived for it during the Enlightenment. A core feature of the Enlightenment concept of reason was the idea of 'one's sovereignty as a person' (Habermas 1996: 256). Indeed, postmodernism has strived to enhance the capacity for individual autonomy and rationality. In the present social order, however, this potential has not been realized (Ruane and Todd 1988: 534). The concept of autonomous inquiry is no longer foundational to the practise of education in the organized system of schooling (Misgeld 1985: 79). This struggle is well noted by Habermas: 'ethical obligations to one's calling give way to instrumental attitudes toward an occupational role that offers the opportunity for income and advancement, but no longer for fulfilling oneself in a secular sense' (i.e. by exercising rational autonomy) (Habermas 1987: 323). The government prescription of legally enforceable boundaries to school life limits what forms of education are possible, and 'individuality is suppressed by the monopoly of the management who make everything – time, space, texts and procedures – as uniform as possible' (Gatto 2002: 78-79). Tensions occur regularly; the instruction of the class must go on even if particular students fall behind. This further demonstrates the effects of the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system: cognition, the basis of liberating education, is subjugated to the transferral of information.

Government policies aim to shape the teachers' behaviour and attitude to become favourably disposed towards policies, without convincing them after consideration of significant alternatives (Misgeld 1985: 90). This is a typical example of strategic action at work. Children are seen purely as objects of instruction, even though they are very capable of

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co-creating the educational community and even assuming teaching roles in their own right (Green 2005: 375, 384)¹. In order, therefore, to revivify modern education, we need to go beyond superficialities and become involved with the student as an active subject perfectly capable of making the teacher a beneficiary of his independent rational insight.

A further crucial imperative of education is that it should be free from 'indoctrination', described by Kleinig as the presentation of a view to a student in such a way that it is not open to 'rational assessment' (Kleinig 1982: 62). Non-indoctrinatory education takes the form of communicative action, that is, the 'illocutionary expression of normative and expressive validity claims' (Young 1988a: 54). If it is true, as Habermas claims, that 'only those speech acts with which a speaker connects a criticisable validity claim can move a hearer to accept an offer independently of external forces' (Habermas, 1984: 289), then only those speech acts that are 'illocutionary' but not 'perlocutionary' can characterize the form of action we would want to call "educational" rather than merely indoctrinatory (Young 1988a: 54). When undisclosed ends are pursued and teaching becomes perlocutionary, the 'learner can take no position at all' on these acts (Ibid.). Thus, the students will not come to believe what is taught on the basis of understanding, resulting in shallow knowledge 'unconnected with students' deepest beliefs, which is soon forgotten after leaving school' (Ibid.: 57). Agreement reached, therefore, through coercion, fear, or factors other than willing assent to reason, is distinguished from the coordination of human action by agreement reached through communicative understanding.

While applying Habermas we see that it is not just that some 'universal presuppositions of speech' are absent in communications between teacher and pupil or that there is illegitimate use of 'perlocutionary' acts – indeed, for younger pupils some theorists, such as John Stuart Mill (Young 1988b: 392, quoting Mill 1910: 73), see the abridgement of children's liberty as legitimate – but what is more problematic is the schematic nature of dialogue when it infrequently occurs. Indeed, in some respects didactic aims in teaching, often of necessity, urge teachers to circumvent the simplified notion of communicative action against strategic action and favour the notion that teaching is not communicative at all.

Meaningful engagement is limited in classrooms and is eclipsed by pressure and an emphasis on the teacher's role to prepare children to pass exams. Chris Green advocates that 'teachers must make an intensified effort to break through the frames of custom and to touch the consciousness of those they teach' (Green 2005: 376). We need teachers who can think and reflect about the larger issues, but also for teachers to engage pupils in this significant learning process (Shah 2006: 25). Otherwise we will see a continuation of the fragmentation of the consciousness of pupils who are unable to think for themselves (Habermas 1996: 295). In contrast, education which is independent of the irrational climate that stifles critical consciousness will, as Paulo Freire argues, lead to cultural emancipation (Freire 1972: 46).

Although it can be difficult to imagine how to begin going about responding to

1. See also Gatto 2002: 89; Misgeld 1985: 90; Huttunen and Freire, P, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Britain, Sheed and Ward, 1972, p.45-6.

Habermas's stress on the importance of recovering the non-violent, consensus-forming practices embedded in communicative reason – over and against the coercive, instrumental practices so typical of the rationalized processes of the system – it is a necessary task. How we are meant to reach the state Habermas envisages remains unanswered. Presumably a tempering of the overall systemic influence is required – not just its influence in education.

The overcrowded classroom structure mandates a teaching methodology based on an almost monolithic teaching syllabus at the lower and intermediate levels of teaching. Reintroducing flexibility would allow for creative diversion from centralised, government-ordained programmes, and would permit individuals to focus more on their areas of interest and talent – the quintessential ingredients for an education that engages children. The energy generated by sincere enthusiasm could become a fertile basis for ingenuity and communicative action. We need to think of the level of moral care fostered for the self and others that results from phenomena like the colonization of the lifeworld that allow for little individuality, variety or creativity in our social relations and provide few opportunities for conversations of depth or the spontaneous pursuit of ideas, which may have infinite value to impressionable minds.

Since monopoly schooling is a natural adjunct to the commercial economy – an economy that requires permanently dissatisfied consumers – the introduction of 'critical communicative competence into a colonized lifeworld in which mind, self, and society have been brutalized' is of the utmost importance (O'Neil 1985: 60). We need to decolonise the lifeworld in a way that does not necessarily mean the disbandment of schools, but permits pupils the autonomy to be educated in a non-conventional way in schools where they themselves have a direct and creative impact on what they desire to learn. Alternative methods of education must be explored while giving more democracy to traditional schools and their communities. In all of these necessarily communicative processes where unanimity is not achievable, a rational compromise using non-dominative conditions could be arrived at (Blaug 1997: 115). Living dialectically – where people are their own masters – would bring out strong qualities of character and mind in individuals – another essential ingredient for a problem-posing education that would make children critical thinkers.

Education must cultivate the best in us, and it is the communicative fairness we employ today, along with a flexible and critical spirit to current education models, that can play an important role in a less colonised future. Such a future could be populated with ethically engaged individuals who would hopefully make the world a more understanding place. It is important to avoid merely palliative changes, however, and this will require that we substantially desist from subjugating our policies on schooling to capitalist interests and modes of operation. This trend needs to be reversed and education can certainly play a large role in this process. For now, the reintroduction and encouragement of regular autonomous discourse in schools based upon the universal presuppositions of speech, as proposed by Habermas, will improve children's ability to make meaningful contributions and to engage critically in what is important, which may well generate the political will for such change in the younger generation as a consequence. Perhaps, then, this autonomous approach will

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help raise a generation whose outlook and results are more productive than our own.

Finally, unavoidably significant questions need to be asked about the autonomy and depth of learning that takes place in our educational structures. We need a more organic and eclectic approach to education, so that we educate individuals who are capable and interested in helping to solve the complex array of problems we face in the modern world. Realising such improvements would require unhindered debate and an ethical pursuit to education, whereby we would be free to respond to the whole spectrum of human needs by promoting intellectual, social and emotional growth – free from the colonisation of the system. If we do not dare to engage in this debate now, at least our children should be free to do so, and perhaps their courage will teach us something from which we will draw much benefit.

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