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Ted Fleming

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We are condemned to learn Towards higher education as a learning society

Dr Ted Fleming
National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Abstract

As higher education faces challenges to adapt to changing social, political, and labour-force contexts this is an opportune time to examine these influences. Demands come from the economy, mediated by the neo-liberal state, to reform, attend to the interests of the job market, become less dependent on the state and have more inclusive access policies. The language and values of the economy insert themselves into the discourse, management and pedagogic practices of the university. The ideas of Jürgen Habermas are useful for understanding this dynamic and for plotting a way forward. His ideas on the relationship between the state, economy and civil society are utilised, as are his ideas on colonisation of the lifeworld, the demise of the public sphere and his ‘Theory of Communicative Action’. This paper moves towards rethinking the aims of higher education as a community of rational and democratic discourses within which democracy is learned and practised. It redefines democracy (and higher education) as a learning society.

Key Words: Habermas, democracy, higher education

Introduction

Higher education (HE) worldwide is facing demands to change. Quality assurance is required. Restructuring, performance appraisal and the reform of governance are underway. In Ireland, state funding is being reduced and alternative funding is sought from research, links with industry and fees from foreign students.

This is an opportune time to ask: How might higher education articulate a vision that includes responding to the demands of the economy for well-educated workers, and to the demands of the state for cost-effective teaching while also responding to the learning needs of citizens? How can the demand for work-related learning be balanced by the requirements that a democratic society has for critical, active citizens?

This paper attempts to articulate an agenda for higher education beyond the reductionist vision of the economic agenda. Jürgen Habermas is the starting point for the discussion and this paper argues that HE has a critical role in a democratic society. Habermas has a profound impact on our understanding of both society and education and this paper reconstructs a critical agenda for HE in the modern world.

This paper:

- 1 Briefly outlines current issues in Irish HE.
- 2 Identifies the ideas of Jürgen Habermas that are useful in understanding the learning project of a modern society – the demise of the *public sphere*; the importance of *civil society* as a location for *de-*

colonising the lifeworld and the learning potential of the *theory of communicative action* and *discursive democracy*.

3 Identifies the implications for HE.

Irish higher education

Though the European Union (EU) and the Irish government have adopted lifelong learning as their educational policy, it is now widely acknowledged that HE is underfunded. There are increasing demands to engage with the world of work by ensuring that graduates are appropriately trained for the job market. There are demands from national government, the EU and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to standardise qualification frameworks and quality assurance. There is constant pressure to enhance the research and teaching profile of HE, to diversify the student population and to take advantage of a global student market. There is pressure to ensure access for non-traditional students. International reports by Skilbeck (2001) and the OECD (2004) ensure that the role of the university is constantly in public discourse.

Though Skilbeck (2001: 9) understands how societies look to HE to ‘underpin economic growth, improve the quality of life and strengthen the social fabric’ it is clear that the economy is the primary driver for bringing about change in HE. Skilbeck underlines other agendas besides the OECD driven ‘utility function, of developing human capital in part through technology and other applications of knowledge, in part through continuous upgrading of skills and competences’ (2001: 37). According to Skilbeck universities

may not be adequately performing the roles of intellectual leader and moral critic in the public domain and framework of general culture. There is a sense in the community that too often they remain preoccupied with their own needs, especially for public funds, and their specialist interests.

(Skilbeck 2001: 36)

Skilbeck is correct when he asserts that ‘cultural criticism, intellectual leadership and moral leadership tend to run counter to the predominance of economic concerns’ (2001: 37).

The EU White Paper on Lifelong Learning espouses the economic agenda (European Commission 2000). Lifelong learning discourse is predominantly concerned with personal development, upskilling for the workplace and supporting learners as they take their place in the knowledge society (Walters and Watters 2001). The idea that HE serves not only the ‘knowledge economy’ but also the ‘knowledge society’ is frequently missed, for example by the OECD (2004) review of HE.

The traditional student is still the dominant participant in HE. Mature students do not yet account for the targeted 15 per cent of intake. New entrants to university aged 26 and over account for only 2.3 per cent of intake compared to an average of 19.3 per cent in the OECD (2004: 11) as a whole. Expenditure on education is 4.5 per cent of GDP – the OECD mean is 5.6 per cent (OECD 2004: 13). The same OECD report (2004: 32–33) identifies a role for the universities in attracting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and integrating part-time students into the funding for

HE. The Government continues the unequal treatment of part-time adult students who in general must pay fees. This report confirms the under-funding of Irish HE. The support for increasing students from disadvantaged backgrounds is welcome as are comments about fees for part-time students. The dominant message is that HE serve the economy.

Higher education has indeed a vocational agenda but it also has the aim of making society a more just and caring place and to do that not through economic development alone. HE has the task of researching, teaching and creating a society of critical, just and caring citizens. This paper takes the position that HE has a mission to make the economy and state more democratically accountable. In reaching this conclusion reference will be made to the work of Jürgen Habermas.

Higher education discourse

There is a HE discourse (Newman *et al.* 2004: xii; Giroux 2007) that analyses the dangers of allowing unregulated free-market capitalism to set the agenda for HE and to convince people both within and without HE that ‘public purposes’ go beyond narrow economic needs. These discourses warn about the dangers of HE becoming a pawn in a corporate war for profits, identify significant deficits in pedagogical practices and the inability of teaching staff to engage non-traditional students. Furthermore, their vision of HE is optimistic and their commitment to supporting low-income students gives HE a worthwhile social agenda (Newman *et al.* 2004: 176–177).

Taylor *et al.* (2002: vii) state that HE should retain its open and vigorous contestation of knowledge and values by presenting critical sceptical courses and programmes that relate to the reality of current global capitalism. These educators point to the way the lifelong learning agenda has involved a shift towards handing responsibility for learning to the individual. This allied with the demise of the welfare state and the retraction of the neo-liberal state leads to the realisation that reduced government funding for HE is part of the same neo-liberal agenda that suggests the withdrawal of public institutions from the active pursuit of social purposes, unless those social purposes are economic.

These authors are committed to HE as a critical participant in addressing inequality in society (by widening participation) and enhancing social inclusion but not achieving this solely through economic development (Murphy 2001).

Jürgen Habermas

The work of Habermas is foundational for the tradition that sees education as concerned with developing in learners the kind of critical reasoning that is required for a democracy. For fifty years he has had a major impact on the development of social and political theory and is the contemporary embodiment of the critical theory tradition of the Frankfurt School. He is a vocal public intellectual and, according to Bernstein, is ‘the philosopher of democracy’ (1991: 207).

As well as more academic debates (1984; 1987; 1996) he is involved in public debate about immigration, German integration, democratisation and equality of access

to HE. His concern with fascism underpins the emancipatory focus of his work. He has chosen to be ‘the person who is engaged in the public political struggles for a more just social form of life’ (Matušík 2001: xix). He reconstructs Marxism for the modern age and identifies a learning project at the centre of democratic society. This paper interprets this learning project as a defining mission for HE. His quest is to ensure that the emancipatory possibility of critical theory is reasonable, well grounded and a firm foundation for ‘the public political struggles for a more just social form of life’ (Matušík 2001: xix).

Educators with a critical intent look to him to give a grounding for a critical pedagogy to underpin education (Murphy and Fleming 2006). The essential idea gleaned from Habermas by educators is that both he and educators are co-workers for democracy. In adult education theory the realisation of the conditions for democracy are the same conditions necessary for adult learning (Mezirow 1999). In this paper it is suggested that these ideas support the view that HE is a force for democracy.

Underpinning Habermas’s ideas is the assertion that learning how to reason has become distorted under capitalism and reclaiming reason from this distortion is a learning project. For Habermas, critique is alive and not dead and reclaiming reason serves the democratic project of making society the kind of place in which a more human life is possible. The redemption of reason is essential for democracy and freedom and this is a key task for HE.

We now turn to a brief account of his key ideas that will assist in clarifying a role for HE:

- the demise of the *public sphere*;
- *civil society* as a location for de-colonising the lifeworld;
- the learning potential associated with *communicative action*.

For Habermas the main adult learning project is to learn how a democratic society might organise itself so that the most free form of discussion is possible and in this discourse the real needs of people may be identified.

The demise of the public sphere

The public sphere is a community of discourse in which rational discussion on matters of public concern takes place. It refers to those informal conversations that people have, where they can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers, and learn about facts, events, opinions, interests, and perspectives of others in an atmosphere free of coercion and inequalities that would otherwise incline individuals to acquiesce or be silent. Matters discussed in the public sphere can affect the discussions of politicians and so the public sphere acts as an intermediary between the political system and the private sectors of the lifeworld (Habermas 1996: 373). The public sphere asserts itself as a defence against the systematising effects of the state and the economy. How to engage in this kind of discussion has to be learned and the more free the discussion and debate the greater the likelihood that a democracy will evolve.

However, under capitalism something happens to our ability to engage in this kind of discourse that results in the public becoming disconnected from decision-

making. We are reduced to being observers of politics able only to be private or passive and occasionally vote. This is how opposition to the ruling elite is eliminated. Habermas argues that we may have lost the ability to make political decisions on matters that really concern us. The public sphere is under threat and the lifeworld and civil society are colonised by the imperatives of the system world of the state and economy. These ideas about civil society and colonisation of the lifeworld are important for our argument.

Civil society and colonisation of the lifeworld

Some argue that civil society is in decline and that civil society must be strong for democracy to prevail, the economy to grow, and social problems to be resolved in a post-industrial global society (Hall *et al.*: 1999). Civil society is ‘a sphere of interaction between the economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary organisations), social movements, and forms of public communication’ (Cohen and Arato 1992: ix). Habermas defines civil society as ‘composed of more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private public sphere, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere’ (Habermas 1996: 367).

Voluntary organisations in civil society are made up of citizens who seek acceptable interpretations for their social interests and experiences and who want to influence institutionalised opinion and will-formation. These organisations

that intervene in the formation of public opinion, push topics of general interest, and act as advocates for neglected issues and under represented groups; for groups that are difficult to organize or that pursue cultural, religious or humanitarian aims; and for ethical communities, religious denominations, and so on.

(Habermas 1996: 368)

Habermas links the concept of a public sphere with that of civil society in order to provide an account of how control can be exercised over markets and bureaucracies. Civil society operates on the basis that the government is not fully representative of the people. The agenda of civil society is influenced strongly by this analysis of undemocratic or partial democratic achievements and by a certain conception of what democracy might mean. Civil society has the dual function of ensuring that those who exercise power do not abuse it but work to make it more democratic. In a complex modern society the quality of democracy ultimately depends on the existence of the public sphere, on people’s intelligent involvement in politics and on organisations and associations that help form opinion through discourse. A vibrant civil society is essential for democracy. The conviction that free, open, public discussion has a transformative function is central to Habermas’s thinking. The way to reach a true understanding of people’s needs and interests is to engage in a democratic debate in which these needs are shared and in the discourse, clarified and transformed.

Civil society, by being energetic, critical and actively sustaining a public sphere for discourse, can insert moments of democratic accountability into the system world of the state and economy, both of which pose a threat to civil society. The revitalising of civil society and the sustaining of a critical public sphere are tasks for a critical education. Such an education fosters the creation of spaces where citizens can debate publicly in pursuit of consensual agreements.

However, civil society is often a place in which appalling violence is perpetrated – on women, on children, by men against men and boys against boys; against all by para-military forces (Fleming 2002). The public sphere can be a location for racism, sexism and non-inclusive and unequal practice and ideas. There is also a need to constantly renew civil society. Adult educators have developed the idea that democracy, civil society and the public sphere are core concepts for a critical adult education (Welton 1995a).

Habermas, in outlining a diagnosis of our times, suggests that two things have happened. First, the state is in an unhealthy relationship with the economy and second, the functional imperatives of the state and economy have invaded civil society. The economy plays a crucial role in our society, creating wealth and providing jobs. But its agenda and values dominate public discourse. Society is willing to go to great lengths to implement the requirements of the economy. When the state and the economy combine, as they do frequently, they are a formidable coalition ensuring that the interests of the economy are served. The system is not an ally of the life-world. The conceptual tool Habermas uses to shed light on this invasion is to talk of the colonisation of the lifeworld. The public sphere is the primary locus of the struggle to protect the lifeworld.

Lifeworld colonisation

The lifeworld is the background consensus of our everyday lives, the vast stock of taken-for-granted definitions and understandings of the world that give coherence and direction to our lives (Habermas 1987: 131). It is ‘a storehouse of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed-upon patterns of interpretation for use in interpretive efforts’ (Habermas 1990: 135). He defines the lifeworld as ‘the intuitively present, in this sense familiar and transparent, and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, i.e. valid or invalid’ (Habermas 1987: 131).

Problems arise when the system invades the practical domain of the lifeworld and intervenes in the processes of meaning-making among individuals and communities in everyday life. The system world of the state administrative apparatus (steered by power) and the economy (steered by money) set their own imperatives over those of the lifeworld. Habermas develops the concept of colonisation to describe the relationship between system and lifeworld in capitalist society. It is reminiscent of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony where everyday practices (culture, recreation and interpersonal relations) are impregnated with the logic of the dominant ideology.

This is the crisis of late capitalism because if the lifeworld exists as a prereflectively, always already there set of assumptions on which we base our conversations about what we really need and how we want to live together in society, and if this is controlled by money and power, then our real needs and wishes are not identifiable. Instead, the needs of the system prevail and our public debates are compromised and distorted. The lifeworld is colonised by the functional imperatives of the state and economy, characterised by the cult of efficiency and the inappropriate deployment of technology (Habermas 1984: 12). As a result individuals and groups increasingly define themselves and their aspirations in system terms and see themselves as consumers and clients (Habermas 1987: 356).

The steering media of money and power have become so effective that individuals 'become invisible,' are seen by the economy as consumers and human resources, and by the political–legal system as voters or clients of bureaucracies (Kemmis 1998: 279). When systems function in this way, they are perceived to be natural and common sense, indifferent and beyond one's control, and not subject to democratic accountability. The colonised lifeworld sees those things that are supportive of and consistent with the imperatives of the economy as common sense. Habermas calls this the uncoupling of system and lifeworld and both the lifeworld and the system are in need of transformation.

Here we can see the beginning of a radical understanding of how the discourse of HE is colonised by the functional imperatives of the state and the economy. This is probably the most far-reaching insight from Habermas of interest to this paper. The commercialisation of HE is one example of how the functional imperatives of the management model have come to hold a dominant position in HE. The values and practices of the economy, expressed both in the demand for changes in governance and management, come from the economy where a different set of imperatives (to those of HE) holds sway. The problem is compounded by the demise of the state which has become a cheerleader for the economy and sees itself as running the economy rather than running society. The challenge for HE is both to resist the colonising forces of the system and to identify a critical role in the light of this analysis.

Under this threat from the impact of the economy, HE is in danger for becoming uncritical in its acceptance of technology and technical rationality as ways of perceiving all problems as amenable to technical solutions. The same technological dominance is sedimented in the priority given to research funding for the physical sciences. Useful knowledge is often framed exclusively as technical and instrumental.

In the neo-liberal Celtic Tiger where there is only an economy and no society, where there are consumers and clients rather than citizens, the danger is that HE will see students as customers and teachers as service providers. This colonisation by the neo-liberal economy is the crisis facing HE. Everything is judged by money. The price of everything is measured and students become unit costs and FTEs. Power and money are not the imperatives of the lifeworld. Its solidarities can neither be coerced nor bought.

Colonisation is everywhere and is visible even at the level of architecture and campus design. For instance universities and colleges design and create spaces for

learning. New campus buildings sediment the primacy of teaching in formal lecture theatres. New buildings create wonderful spaces for students to gather and for staff to lecture. But minimal space or even ‘useless space’ is created outside class halls for those conversations and discussions that are spontaneous, informal and which contribute to the social glue of interaction. In such spaces the most important learning might take place – if these spaces existed. In contrast, space is frequently occupied by commercial ventures, banks, coffee shops and mini-supermarkets. Shopping does not oil the wheels of interaction or learning. Instead of being members of a public sphere, students (and staff too) are invited to consume, to become – even between classes – contributors to the economy! The physical structures give important messages about how one might act. An alternative brief for campus design might ask this question. What kind of space would support the most interesting interactions, the most provocative debates and the most critical questioning among students?

E-learning offers another example of how the system imperatives can invade pedagogical practices. The constant ability of the tutor through the computer system to monitor, measure and mark the interactions of students on-line are good examples of these dangers. While public debates argue about ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders) for young people, HE is quietly electronically tagging staff and students using electronic card systems for doors, e-learning monitoring and library access. All learning and work is minutely scrutinisable in an electronic panopticon.

What can be done? We cannot ignore or destroy the system. It has functions. But it is possible to insert lifeworld values, caring behaviours, ethical concerns and principles into the system and so resist and reverse colonisation. Habermas provides critique and theoretical support for those who continue to hope and work for a more rational society. Higher education has a role to play in this (Collins 1991: 7). The social goal toward which education strives is ‘one in which all members of society may engage freely and fully in rational discourse and action without this process being subverted by the system’ (Welton 1995b: 57). Habermas’s concept of the public sphere implies the possibility of creating a discourse that will protect the lifeworld from the system, preserve democracy and reconstruct civil society.

Communicative action

Is it all a lost cause? Not at all. Habermas proposes rescuing reason from being co-opted by money and power and shows how adults can use reason to build a more participatory democracy. The learning project of Habermas involves the hope that we can resist and also develop democratic processes that are already inherent in interpersonal communication.

Habermas has always emphasised the role of public debate in the formation of needs, interests and aspirations of individuals (Habermas 1962). The way to reach a true understanding of needs and interests is to engage in a democratic debate in which peoples’ real needs are identified, shared and clarified. The core of Habermas’s critique of capitalism is that capitalism prevents this identification of real needs, because the public sphere has been reduced by the activities of politicians, advertisers, public relations and the media in general. In his more recent work he links the concept of a public sphere with that of civil society to provide an account of how control can be retrieved and exercised over markets and bureaucracies (Habermas 1996: 266–

368). In a complex modern society the quality of democracy ultimately depends not on politicians but on the existence of this public sphere, on the people's intelligent involvement in politics and on organisations and associations that help form opinion through discourse. It is in fact a learning project and an educational imperative. A vibrant civil society (and I suggest a vibrant HE) is essential for democracy. The conviction that free, open, public discussion has a transformative function is central to Habermas's thinking.

The political and economic systems, their steering mechanisms of power and money attempt to close down the possibility of learning that challenges the priorities of the system. 'If critical learning cannot be blocked at the outset, then these systems try to divert its energy into channels that confirm the legitimacy of the existing order' (Brookfield 2005: 1148). But we have 'an automatic inability not to learn' (Habermas 1975: 15). We are in fact condemned to learn. Habermas is talking about learning how to question, challenge everyday practices and critique the way society is organised in discussion with others.

Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984; 1987) is presented as a learning project. Communicative action happens when the actions of people are coordinated in order to reach interpersonal understanding in situations where the participants are not dominated by their own interest in being successful. Instead, they are interested in co-coordinating their plans of actions on the basis of common understanding of situations. How to do this has to be learned.

Two aspects of the theory of communicative action are of interest here. First, in the discussions among the participants, they aim to reach agreements that can be evaluated or redeemed against criteria that Habermas calls validity claims. Second, there are rules that govern participation in these discourses.

All communication is capable of being tested as to whether it is comprehensible, sincere, truthful and appropriately expressed. These four validity claims are redeemed in communicative action. In fact, anyone 'acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated' (Habermas 1979: 2). Validity claims are the assumptions that we always already make in an unquestioning manner concerning the truth and sincerity of another's communications.

Educators who have borrowed from Habermas emphasise that redeeming validity claims involves highly significant learning. Its importance rests on the redemption of validity claims as well as on the possibility of identifying and understanding one's real needs and taking action arrived at in agreement, i.e. discursive will-formation. In our society, dominated by money and power, there are too many opportunities for and experiences of discourses that are the opposite of communicative action. The best prospects for democracy are linked to learning how to hold conversations in which validity claims are redeemed. These are the most important conversations that can occur in universities.

Discussion, debates, seminars are mini-democracies and educators, especially in HE, are involved in the creation of a learning society when involved in redeeming validity claims in communicative action. The very existence of democratic society

depends on learning how to do this. The best preparation for involvement in democratic life is to become expert in redeeming validity claims.

The second aspect of Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* concerns the rules that govern these conversations. He outlines the rules for discourse where proposals are critically tested as a space where information is shared in an inclusive and public way, where no one is excluded, and all have equal opportunity to take part. There is no external coercion as all are bound only by the criteria of what is reasonable, and all are free of internal coercion in that each has equal opportunity to be heard, introduce topics, make contributions, suggest and criticise proposals and arrive at decisions motivated solely by the unforced force of the better argument. All decisions are provisional and can be returned to at any time. There must be, in addition, a sense of solidarity among participants involving a concern for the wellbeing of others and the community at large. In this discourse we anticipate a form of life characterised by 'pure' (unconstrained and undistorted) intersubjectivity (McCarthy 1978: 325). These are also the necessary conditions for a democratic society. This kind of solidarity is at risk in our society.

Discourse requires freedom and justice, freedom to reach agreement on the basis of the better argument and justice based on mutual respect. This discourse is both rational and emancipatory in its intent because the process of reaching agreement is accompanied by revealing the ideological, coercive and non-democratic structures that hinder a genuinely democratic process (Collins 1991: 12). This kind of discourse is foundational for a democratic society as it points to freedom, equality and care. Democratic participation and discourse are essential elements of learning and this discourse is being proposed here as a foundation for the learning processes in HE. The theory of communicative action aims to offer a vision that allows the effects of colonisation to come into perspective.

If the economic and political–legal systems have become insensitive to the imperatives of mutual understanding on which solidarity and legitimacy of social orders depend, the solution, according to Habermas, is to revitalise autonomous, self-organised public spheres that are capable of asserting themselves against the media of money and power. By implication, HE might join in taming the economy rather than supporting it. Many will argue that grassroots movements, self-help groups as well as classrooms where participatory research is conducted and collaborative inquiry is pursued, are examples of such public spheres.

I am suggesting that civil society, democracy and HE have in common the ambition to create spaces for discourse. The commitment is to a form of living together in which we attempt to reach agreement about difficult matters in a discussion that is free from domination. A teacher in this mode attempts to create the identical process, i.e. a learning society. In order to have full free participation in discourse there must be freedom, equality, justice and a valuing of rationality. The learning community implied in discourse is precisely that required for the recreation of the lifeworld, the development of civil society and the emergence of truly democratic systems and society. A democratised civil society *is* a learning society, and so too is higher education.

The role of the educator is one of creating classrooms that encourage the fullest participation in discourse, assisting students to assess critically the validity of their ways of making meaning and seeking perspectives that are more open to change. Too much education is about work, skills, how to do things. It is preoccupied with defining learning tasks, outcomes, behavioural objectives and measurable competence. Too much is about the system, the economy and training. A different kind of learning is being proposed. It involves critical reflection on assumptions that underpin beliefs, a discourse to justify what we believe and taking action on the basis of new agreed understandings. The task of the educator is to create spaces for discourse. In this way democracy, critical learning and a civil society are possible and the full potential of a learning society may be realised.

This helps locate education in the arena of the state and the economy. But more importantly, this vision of education locates the task of education in the community, in the life-world and in civil society. It connects education with the radical possibility of a more caring, just, and democratic world.

The concept of *grounding* is interwoven with that of *learning*. Argumentation plays an important role in learning processes as well. Thus we can call a person rational who, in the cognitive-instrumental sphere, expresses reasonable opinions and acts efficiently; but this rationality remains accidental if it is not coupled with the ability to learn from mistakes, from the refutation of hypotheses and their failure of interventions.

(Habermas 1984: 18)

Becoming an adult involves, of necessity, acquiring distorted understandings of self and others but through critical self-reflection these can be recognised and changed. It is a characteristic of adulthood that knowledge gained as a child may come under the critical scrutiny of an adult and autonomous intelligence that deconstructs the interests embedded in the childhood learning. The aim of education is to help adults inquire into the reasons for their interests and the assumptions that underpin them and take action to change society. This is a defining characteristic of adult learning. HE has, as an adult learning institution, the responsibility to valorise, prioritise and support this critical learning. Community education, community development, grassroots movements, self-organised groups conducting participatory research as well as collaborative action research in system settings can bring about such learning and change. These are all examples of autonomous public spheres.

Many new social movements are concerned with overcoming the effects of the colonisation of the lifeworld. This may not be the radicalism of Marx but the facilitating of change by creating autonomous public spheres for debate and discussion, while still allowing for the continuing functioning of economic and administrative systems. This may give educators interested in transformative change a clear mandate to work in the seams and at the boundaries of systems to humanise and transform them so that they operate in the interests of all. This suggests a task for HE.

In education the needs of the economy are strongly felt. The state sees education as a way of supporting the economy. But an education policy based solely on the needs of the market is deeply flawed.

Higher education is rightly involved in the professional development of students and also of its own staff. Continuing professional development (CPD) is a well-established tradition in HE. But CPD can now be reinterpreted to mean being skilled not only in one's area of practice, such as biology or architecture, but also in recognising when one's activities may be put at the service of the system and against the interests of others who are less powerful. Habermas says that professional development involves 'the combination of competence and learning ability to permit the scrupulous handling of tentative technical knowledge and the context-sensitive, well informed willingness to resist politically the dubious functional application or control of the knowledge that one practices' (Habermas 1970: 47). Reflective practice, according to this interpretation, becomes a critique of ideology. It would be exciting indeed if HE defined its professional and vocational activities involving reflective practice as a critique of ideology.

Too often, however, education allies itself with the system rather than the lifeworld. In addition, the system has adopted the discourse of lifelong learning that almost always involves the adaptation of isolated, individual learners to the corporate-determined status quo of the economy. Education is both part of the apparatus of the state (by engaging in policy making, delivering programmes and services) and highly critical of it. The relationship between the state and education is complex and frequently includes elements of resistance and contestation as well as reproduction.

One can be for system or for the lifeworld. Educators find themselves working very often in the state sector (in schools and colleges), in the economy (job skills training, organisational change, vocational courses), or civil society (community education). The challenge is how to be for decolonisation of the lifeworld, whether one works in the system or not. Part of the problem is that some people systematically distort public communication (for example education debates) by narrowing discussions to issues of technical problem solving and denying the very conditions for communicatively rational collective will-formation. This is a danger for all of higher education.

Critical education has as its normative mandate the preservation of a critically reflective lifeworld (Welton 1995b: 5). This holds out the promise of enabling us to think of all society as a vast school. Habermas addresses a multiple audience of potential transformative agents working in social movements and other institutional sectors of society (Welton 1995b: 25). In identifying actors, such as journalists, as having a critical mandate, he summarises the tasks they *ought* to fulfil as being central and systemic players in the construction and support of a critical public sphere. Journalists and the media ought to 'understand themselves as the mandatary of an enlightened public whose willingness to learn and capacity for criticism they at once presuppose, demand, and reinforce' (Habermas 1996: 378). It might be a useful starting point for defining the role of an educator in higher education as located in that same public space, helping students both decolonise the lifeworld through democratic critical discourses as well as transforming systems (organisations, bureaucracies and workplaces).

Education and Habermas

Habermas's arguments concerning rationalisation and colonisation influence the work of the adult educator Jack Mezirow (2007) for whom transformative learning is

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

(Mezirow 2000: 7–8)

These frames of reference are the socially and individually constructed paradigms in which we think, feel, act and make meaning. Borrowing from Habermas again, Mezirow appropriates the idea that justification of beliefs is done through collaborative discourse in which validity claims, tacitly accepted in conversations, become subject to explicit argumentation. This process of debate Mezirow (2000: 8) calls transformative learning.

According to Mezirow (2000: 13), the conditions or rules of this rational discourse are also the ideal conditions for adult learning. The rules are that participants must have accurate and complete information; freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception; openness to alternative points of view; empathy with and concern for the thoughts and feelings of others; the ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments; awareness of ideas and be critically reflective of assumptions; equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse; a willingness to understand and accept agreement and also to accept agreed best judgments as a test of validity until new outcomes from discourse are identified.

Community organisations, as understood by Habermas, can serve as vehicles for critical debate and discourse.

As learners in a democracy become aware of how taken-for-granted, oppressive, social norms and practices and institutionalised cultural ideologies have restrained or distorted their own beliefs, they become understandably motivated toward taking collective action to make social institutions and systems more responsive to the needs of those they serve.

(Mezirow 2007: 16)

This reliance on Habermas suggests that it is a particular function of educators to create communities of collaborative discourse in which distortions in communication due to differences in power and influence are minimised. As a consequence 'education is a form of rational social action' (Ewert 1991: 362). Mezirow adds:

the nature of adult learning itself mandates participatory democracy as both the means and social goal. Following Habermas, this view identifies critical reflection, rational discourse, and praxis as central to significant adult learning and the *sine qua non* of emancipatory participation.

(Mezirow 1995: 66)

A learning group engaged in transformative learning is a democratic society in micro, and a democratic society is a learning society. Transformation theory grounds its argument for an emancipatory participative democracy in the very nature of adult learning (Mezirow 1995: 68). This is a different understanding of both learning and democracy than usually proposed in the literature of lifelong learning. If the ideas of Habermas are significant for higher education then the way these ideas are appropriated by education provides a useful model for their implementation.

We learn from Habermas that there is a rational justification for seeking the means for reaching decisions in a genuinely participatory democratic manner. And for educators the quest for emancipation is rationally justified and the basis for this resides in Habermas's account of those innate learning capacities that enable us to understand each other and the world. The need to develop communicative competence becomes a task for HE too.

A critical higher education privileges the realm of the lifeworld in which citizen and workers have been disempowered. So who will decolonise the lifeworld and change the system? The critical role of education is to work in solidarity with workers and citizens to insert democratic imperatives into the system world. People may well have exchanged an active participatory role in the market place or in politics for greater comfort and occupational security offered by capitalism, that legitimates the social order in this way.

The very foundation of democracy is under threat from the monopoly of technical reason in our society. The forces of technical control must be made subject to the consensus of acting citizens who in dialogue redeem the power of reflection. Educators find in Habermas a social critique with which to analyse the dominance in education of technique and instrumental rationality. The preoccupation, as a result of such critique, shifts from prioritising how to get things done to realising genuine democracy.

Habermas prompts us to see HE as a community of communicative praxis or discursive reason and he argues that we are most rational when we participate in communities characterised by free and unconstrained discourse, i.e. democratic discourse. He prompts us to see the HE community as a lifeworld. Critical reflection about assumptions and practices in various disciplines is central to this. For self-understanding to be reached in dialogue, democracy is necessary. To do its work (of critique) HE creates the very conditions necessary for a democratic society.

Rather than see a university as a collection of disparate departments, faculties, schools and centres there is a unifying theme and Habermas suggests we call it a lifeworld. Higher education, according to Habermas, carries out the functions of socialisation, critical transmission of culture, political consciousness, and social integration. As Ostovich (1995: 476) summarises, a higher education institution is 'a rational society, then, where reason is understood as communicative praxis and society is understood as lifeworld'. The role of HE is to be a community of communicative action, of communicative praxis.

The danger is that too many courses focus on utilitarian knowledge, there are too many vocational courses to the detriment of courses and programmes that are of

benefit to oneself and society rather than the economy. Too often courses focus on instrumental learning rather than communicative praxis. Too many emphasise career and not enough one's role in society. HE is in danger of becoming training rather than education.

What might such a communicative HE system look like? There would be less emphasis on hierarchical authority and more on participatory decision-making; more dialogue than dictat; the elimination of corporate culture and the nourishing of self-government and a clear priority given by the institution to social justice. Consultation would be seen as a lesser form of democracy. Pedagogy too would match these priorities. Social analysis, critical reflection, reconstructing the teacher–student relationship would become activities where teacher and learner become co-investigators of reality. Students would be involved in all aspects of college life. And above all, education would be redefined as an exercise in democracy, teaching democracy and aiming to instil democracy in classrooms, communities, the workplace and in society.

The aim of HE is to develop and respond to the needs of a democratic society. The university ought to attempt to create a community of critical reason. This reason is discursive. When we are most rational we participate in communities characterised by free and unconstrained democratic discourse (Ostovich 1995: 467). For Habermas, the university is colonised by the economy and the state and is in need of decolonisation by having particular kinds of free, critical conversations. Ideally, the strategic plan of the institution would be infused by the vision, ideals and political actions of critical reflection on unquestioned assumptions. Such a university would not only teach about democracy, but teach democratically and in the process create and support a democratic society. Higher education would, in the process, become a learning society.

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