The University and Democracy: Habermas, Adult Learning and Learning Society

Ted Fleming

Introduction

Universities worldwide are faced with demands to change. Quality assurance is required. Improvements in research and teaching are necessary. Performance appraisal is on the horizon and the reform and restructuring of governance is underway. This is undertaken in the Irish university sector where state funding has been reduced and alternative funding is sought.

This is an opportune time to ask questions. What is a university for? What is it against? How might the university articulate a vision that includes responding to the demands of the economy for well-educated workers, responding to the demands of the state for more cost effective teaching and also responding to the need for citizens? The contemporary dominance of the argument for work-related learning needs to be balanced by the essential requirement that a democratic society has for critical, active citizens.

This paper will attempt to articulate an agenda for the university that transcends the reductionist vision of the economic agenda. I write this from the perspective of an adult educator in the university. Adult education as a field of practice provides access routes for 2,000 mature students each year who enrol in modular, credit-bearing courses outside the College. But adult education is also an academic discipline with its philosophy, sociology and psychology, articulated and tested in the world of practice. It borrows from other disciplines and creates its own epistemologies, theories of learning and pedagogical practices. It has answers (even if, like all disciplines,these are provisional and contested) to such questions as, what is an adult? What is adult learning? What is adult education? And what is a university for?

The ideas of Jürgen Habermas will be the starting-point for the discussion of the role of a university, and this paper will attempt to reawaken the notion that the university has a critical role in the life of the Republic.

The language of the state and the economy and their imperatives are invading the halls of the academy with demands to change governance, increase access and identify new courses and priorities. It is this phenomenon that I want to examine through the ideas of Jürgen Habermas who has had a profound impact on our understanding of adult education and education in general. In the process I want to reconstruct a critical agenda for the university in the modern world.

This paper will:

1. Briefly outline some current issues in the Irish university system;
2. Identify the main ideas of Jürgen Habermas that are useful in understanding the adult learning project of modern society—the demise of the *public sphere*; the capacity of *civil society* to be a location for *de-colonising 'the lifeworld'*, and the learning potential

associated with the *theory of communicative action* and *discursive democracy*;

3. Identify the way these ideas have been appropriated by education and the implications for higher education.

The Irish University

Though the EU and the Irish government have adopted lifelong learning as their educational policy, it is now widely acknowledged that the Irish university system is under-funded. In addition, the university system in Ireland is now suffering from report fatigue.

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, EU and the OECD to standardise qualification frameworks and quality assurance. There is constant pressure to enhance the research and teaching profile of the university, to diversify the student population and to take advantage of a global student market. There is pressure to ensure access for non-traditional, i.e. working-class and mature, students. International reports by Skilbeck and the OECD ensure that the role of the university is constantly in public discourse.[1]

Though Skilbeck understands how societies look to higher education to 'underpin economic growth, improve the quality of life and strengthen the social fabric', it is clear that the economy and its needs are the primary driver for bringing about change in the university.[2] His report underlines other agendas besides the 'utility function of developing human capital in part through technology and other applications of knowledge, in part through continuous upgrading of skills and competences'.[3] And according to Skilbeck,

> the university 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.[4]

Skilbeck is correct when he asserts that 'cultural criticism, intellectual leadership and moral leadership tend to run counter to the predominance of economic concerns'.[5]

The EU White Paper on lifelong learning also espouses the economic and individualistic agenda.[6] Lifelong learning as it informs adult education and indeed higher education policy discourse is predominantly concerned with personal development, upskilling for the workplace and support for learners as they take their place in the knowledge society.[7] The idea that the university should serve not only the 'knowledge economy' but also the 'knowledge society' is frequently missed, for example by the OECD review of higher education.

There is a still a demographic deficit in the student population. Mature students, according to the OECD, do not yet account for the targeted 15 percent of intake and this institutional and financial barrier remains across the developmental path of the Irish economy and society. NUI Maynooth has met these targets. New entrants to university aged 26 and over account for only 2.3 percent of intake compared to an average of 19.3 per cent in the OECD as a whole.[8] Expenditure on education is 4.5 per

cent of GDP—the OECD mean is 5.6 per cent.[9] The same OECD report goes on to identify a role for the universities in attracting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and integrating part-time students into the funding for higher education.[10] The Government continues the unequal treatment of part-time adult students, who in general must pay their own fees.

This report does have interesting recommendations and confirms the under-funding of Irish higher education in comparison with other EU and OECD countries. The support for increasing students from disadvantaged backgrounds is welcome, as are comments about fees for part-time students. But in contrast to the overall emphasis of the report these are the minor plots. The predominant message is that the role of higher education is to service the needs of the economy.

This paper takes a counter position: that the university has a mission to decolonise the lifeworld from invasion by the economy and in turn insert democratic imperatives into the economy and state, and in addition, to assist civil society to become more just and caring. The university has indeed a vocational agenda, but in addition it has the aim of making society a better place, and not to do that only through economic development. Universities have the task of researching, teaching and creating a society of critical, just and caring citizens. The monopoly position of the economic agenda and the imposition of this on the university by the state prevent the university doing this. It is in reaching this conclusion that I will need the not inconsiderable weight of the arguments of Jürgen Habermas.

Adult Educators and Higher Education

There is a higher education discourse that analyses the dangers of allowing unregulated free-market capitalism to set the agenda for higher education and to convince people both within and without the university that 'public purposes' go beyond the narrow definitions of the economy.[11] These authors warn about the dangers of universities becoming, through corporate-university partnerships, pawns in a corporate war for profits. They also identify significant deficits in pedagogical practices and the resulting inability of the teaching staff to engage non-traditional students. Furthermore, the vision of what a university ought to be is optimistic and the commitment to supporting low-income students gives the university a worthwhile social agenda.[12]

Adult educators have also turned their attention to higher education. Taylor, Barr and Steele state that the university 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.[13] These adult educators point to the way the lifelong learning agenda has involved a shift towards handing responsibility for learning to the individual and 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 universities is part of the same neo-liberal agenda that suggests the withdrawal of public institutions from the active pursuit of social purposes, unless that social purpose is economic.

What these authors bring to the debate is a commitment to the vision of the university and its role in society as a critical participant in addressing inequality (by widening participation) and enhancing social inclusion, but not achieving this only through

economic and individual development, but through addressing the needs of society for critical and active citizens.[14]

Jürgen Habermas

Why have I chosen Jürgen Habermas as the informant for this discussion? Because for so many in adult education and in education the work of Habermas is seen as foundational for the tradition that sees education as concerned with developing in learners the kind of critical reasoning that is required for a democracy.

Jürgen Habermas has had a major impact on the development of social and political theory for fifty years and is generally regarded as the contemporary embodiment of the critical theory tradition of the Frankfurt School. He is a vocal public intellectual recovering the progressive traditions from Kant and the Enlightenment and is, according to Bernstein, 'the philosopher of democracy'.[15]

He was sixteen when the war ended in 1945 and, like many Central Europeans, he had to deal with the question of fascism in Europe and in particular with his own disappointment that Heidegger remained an unrepentant advocate of Nazi politics into the 1950s. He studied in Göttingen, Bonn and Zurich before becoming assistant to Adorno (1956-1959) at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* published in 1962 prompted his appointment as Professor at Heidelberg and underpinned his subsequent philosophy.[16] Later, while at Frankfurt, he published *Knowledge and Human Interests*. He published *The Theory of Communicative Action* (two volumes), *Between Facts and Norms*, a critique of French poststructuralism, and numerous collections of papers.[17] He has been involved in public debate about immigration, German integration, democratisation and equality of access to higher education, as well as controversies about the remnants of National Socialist ideology in Germany.[18] This concern with fascism underpins the emancipatory concerns of all his work. He chose to be 'the person who is engaged in the public political struggles for a more just social form of life'.[19] His academic background is firmly located in the radical tradition of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. But Habermas reconstructs Marxism for the modern age and identifies a learning project at the center of democratic society. This learning project will be interpreted later as a defining project for the university. In a tribute to Marcuse, he asserted, 'I know wherein our most basic values are rooted—in compassion, in our sense for the suffering of others'.[20] Habermas in his critical social theory outlines the reason for this moral position. 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'.[21]

An increasing number of educators with a critical intent have looked to his critical theory that can be used as grounding for a critical pedagogy that would underpin adult education.[22] The essential idea gleaned from Habermas by adult educators is that both he and adult education are co-workers for democracy. If we could discover the conditions under which people would be able to participate in open, free and egalitarian debate about what they really needed, then we would have a theory of communication that would be a guide for the operation of democracy.[23] In adult education theory the realisation of the conditions for democracy are the same conditions necessary for adult learning.[24] In this paper, I am suggesting that these

ideas that have been so influential in critical social theory and in adult education will illuminate the role of the university as a force for democracy.

Habermas is widely viewed, sometimes disparagingly, as a theorist of the 'grand narrative', in that he has developed a broad and comprehensive analytical framework within which to understand processes of social change. In this way, he can be placed in the tradition of sociological thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber and Parsons. He should also be associated with the other sociological tradition of Marx, who, while also an unashamed grand theorist, sought to develop a class-based theory of society to challenge the conventional 'bourgeois' sociology of the time. Habermas has sought to develop and extend the ideas of Marx and Weber as well as Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in his attempt to understand social change and conflict. The strength of Habermas has been his ability to borrow, interact with, contradict and integrate a wide diversity of ideas. On occasion, he relies heavily on the work of the American pragmatist Pierce who wrote about radical democratic humanism and the philosophy of praxis.[25] At another time he is a socialist. The liberalism of his more recent work is disorienting, even if it is a radical liberalism. This eclectic approach and ability to engage with a wide range of the most complex ideas make Habermas particularly difficult to study and limits access to his ideas by a wider audience. Underpinning his ideas is the assertion that learning how to reason has become distorted under capitalism and the reclaiming of reason from this distortion is an adult learning project. This is in contrast to his colleagues Horkheimer and Adorno who believed reason was so reduced to instrumental reason by capitalism that it was beyond redemption. For Habermas, critique is alive and not dead and is assumed in all communication. He launches the project of reclaiming reason to serve the democratic project which is about making society the kind of place in which a more human life is possible. The redemption of reason is essential for democracy and freedom.

What follows is a brief account of his key ideas that will later assist in clarifying a role for the university. These ideas include:

- the demise of the *public sphere*;
- *civil society* as a location for de-colonising the lifeworld;
- the learning potential associated with Habermas's notion of *communicative action* and *discursive democracy*.

For Habermas the main adult learning project is to study how a democratic society might organize itself so that the most complete and free form of communication and discussion is possible, and in this ideal speech situation 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 of matters of public concern and importance takes place, and which in turn influences the formation of public policy. Coffee houses, salons and table society of Europe were examples of inclusive literary public spaces because of their potential for equality, critique, accessibility, reflexivity and problematising the unquestioned. The public sphere refers to those conversations that people have in corridors, on the stairs, over the water cooler and on the internet and through texting. The ideal of a public sphere asserts itself as a bulwark against the systematizing effects of the state and the

economy. The public sphere is located in civil society and is where people can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers, and learn about facts, events, and the opinions, interests, and perspectives of others in an atmosphere free of coercion and inequalities that would incline individuals to acquiesce or be silent. Matters discussed in the public sphere in informal terms can come to affect the discussions of politicians and legislators and so this public sphere acts as an intermediary between the political system, on the one hand, and the private sectors of the lifeworld on the other.[26]

Adults have to learn how to engage in this kind of discussion and communication. The more free the discussion and debate, the greater the likelihood that a democracy will evolve. However, the problem is that under capitalism something happens to our ability to engage in this kind of discourse.

The custom of being involved in public debate is in danger of being lost and controlled and as a result ordinary people become depoliticised. The result is a public disconnected from decision-making and reduced to the level of observers of politics able only to be private, passive and occasionally to vote. In this way the opposition to the ruling elite is eliminated and Habermas concludes that we may have lost the ability to make political decisions on matters that concern us. The public sphere is under threat, and the lifeworld and civil society are colonized by the imperatives of the system world of the state and economy.

In order to build on our understanding of Habermas's work we also need to understand how he views civil society, the system and lifeworld.

Civil Society and Colonisation of the Lifeworld

There has been a renewed interest in civil society, particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Block. Civil society has recently become the central focus of the debates regarding the perceived decline of American society, and it is argued 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.[27]

Civil society is 'a sphere of interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary organizations), social movements, and forms of public communication'.[28] Civil society is frequently seen as a locus for limiting the power of the state.

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.[29]

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 are 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.[30]

He links the concept of a public sphere with that of civil society 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. There is a democratic deficit, a gap between actual democratic practices and the ideal. 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 and of transforming the system to regenerate more democratic practices. 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 organizations 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.

The system world is a constant threat to civil society. 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. The revitalizing 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 and adopt the methodologies of discourse in pursuit of consensual agreements. We will return to this when we discuss his Theory of Communicative Action.

But civil society can also be a location for conservatism. It is often the place in which appalling violence is perpetrated—on women, on children, by men against men and boys against boys; against all by paramilitary forces.[31] The public sphere can be a location for racism, sexism and non-inclusive and unequal practice and ideas. So there is also a need to constantly renew civil society. A number of adult educators have developed the idea that deliberative democracy, the lifeworld, civil society and the public sphere are the core concepts for a critical adult education.[32]

Habermas, in outlining a diagnosis of our times, names the problem in terms of the relationship between the state and economy (the system world) on the one hand and civil society on the other. Two things have happened, according to Habermas. Firstly, the state is in an unhealthy relationship with the economy, and secondly, the functional imperatives of the state and economy combined 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 lifeworld.

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

What is the lifeworld? 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.[33] 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'.[34] The lifeworld is 'the reservoir of implicitly known traditions, the background assumptions that are embedded in language and culture and drawn upon by individuals in everyday life'.[35]

Habermas 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'.[36]

Habermas develops the concept of colonization to describe the relationship between system and lifeworld in capitalist society. Problems arise when the system, constructed to serve our technical interests, 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 imperative over those of the lifeworld.

Modern conditions, shaped by efficiency and instrumental reason distort community values. They make it appear as if this is natural and as a result there is a loss of humanity. This is the crisis of late capitalism. Why is this a crisis? 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, those of the system prevail and our debates are compromised and distorted. The lifeworld, he says, is colonized by the functional imperatives of the state and the economy, characterized by the cult of efficiency and the inappropriate deployment of technology.[37] As a result the symbolic reproduction process of the lifeworld (cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization) incorporates a discourse of functionality and individuals and groups increasingly define themselves and their aspirations in system terms and see themselves as consumers and clients.[38]

The system's steering media of money and power have become so effective that they have begun to operate on their own terms, so 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 regulated by policies and laws.[39] These discourses are 'indifferent to the dynamics of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization necessary for the development and reproduction of lifeworlds'.[40] When these systems function according to their own rationale, they seem to the individual to be natural and common sense, indifferent and beyond their control, and not subject to communicative action. The lifeworld that has been colonised sees as

common sense those things that are supportive of and consistent with the imperatives of the economy. This reification is what Habermas means by the uncoupling of system and lifeworld. Both lifeworld and system are in need of transformation.

The university and the discourse of the academy are based on the same lifeworld. Here we see the beginning of a radical understanding of how the discourse of the university 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 our understanding of the university. The values and practices of the economy, expressed both in the demand for changes in governance and management, frequently come from the economy where a different set of imperatives (to those of the university) holds sway. The problem is compounded because of the demise of the modern state which has become a cheerleader for the economy and in the process sees itself as running the economy rather than running society. The challenge for the university is to identify its role in the context of this analysis.

The uncritical acceptance of the effectiveness of technology and technical rationality are ways of perceiving all problems as amenable to technical solutions. This epistemological fallacy makes all problems appear as technical problems, as if by analogy all learning were a skill! The attempts to control behaviour either through behaviour modification or genetic engineering are current examples of how technical rationality has become the dominant paradigm. In the university also, the same dominance is sedimented in the priority given to research funding for the physical sciences. Useful knowledge is too often seen as technical and instrumental.

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

An example might help. At the level of ordinary speech it is worth exploring how the university in its architecture creates new spaces for learning and uses existing space. New buildings on campus announce and sediment the primacy of teaching in formal lecture theatres while leaving other possible spaces sidelined. New buildings create wonderful space for students to gather in class and staff to teach. At the same time minimal space or useless space is created outside class halls for conversations, discussions and meetings that are potentially spontaneous, informal and which contribute to the social glue of interaction (Habermas would call this solidarity). In contrast, the potential space is occupied by commercial ventures, coffee shops and mini-supermarkets. Shopping does not oil the wheels of interaction. Instead of being members of a public sphere, students (and staff) 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 opposition brief for design might ask: what kind of space might be created so that the most interesting, provocative and critical questioning might commence and continue in the public spaces around the campus?

Philosophy, according to Habermas, and adult education according to the radical tradition, are locations where the invasion of the lifeworld by the functional imperatives and steering mechanism of money and power can be brought to the forefront of awareness and there examined, challenged, and transformed. For example, the idea that the market value of competition should inform the activities of funding or recruitment are ways in which the economy has come to impose its imperatives on the educational system. There are other ways of working which are more collaborative and democratic.

The language and pedagogic practices of the university have not escaped this colonisation. The scrutiny and level of control offered by e-learning for example, and 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 the dangers of the system imperatives invading pedagogic practices. We are in danger of training counsellors by e-learning and teachers by distance learning.

What can be done about this? We cannot ignore, abandon or destroy the system; after all it has a function and use. A case can be made even for non-discursive practices. But it is possible to insert lifeworld values, caring behaviours, ethical concerns and principles into the system and so resist and reverse colonization. Habermas provides this critique and theoretical support for those who continue to hope for, and work for, a more rational society. Higher education and adult education have a role to play in this.[41]

> The social goal towards which adult 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.[42]

Habermas's concept of the public sphere implies the possibility of creating a discourse that would protect the lifeworld from the system, preserve democracy and reconstruct civil society in a capitalist society.

Communicative Action

What action is required as a response to colonization? In response to the collapse of the public sphere, the decline of civil society and the invasion of the lifeworld, is all lost? No. The response is democracy. This is the way Habermas proposes to rescue reason from being co-opted by money and power and how adults can use reason to build a more participatory democracy. The adult learning project underpinning Habermas involves the hope that we can resist the decline in social solidarity outlined above, by becoming aware of, and developing, democratic processes that are inherent in interpersonal communication.

As early as 1962, Habermas had been emphasising the crucial role of public discussion and debate in the formation of the needs, interests and aspirations of individuals.[43] 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. The core of Habermas's critique of capitalism is that this public sphere or public discussion has been reduced by the activities of politicians, advertisers, public relations and the media in general. This theme has emerged again in his more recent work where he links the concept of a public sphere with that of civil society to

provide an account of how control can be exercised over markets and bureaucracies.[44] In a complex modern society, the quality of democracy ultimately depends not on politicians but on the existence of this public sphere, on people's intelligent involvement in politics and on organisations and associations which help form opinion through discourse. A vibrant civil society (and I suggest a vibrant university) is essential for democracy. The conviction that free, open, public discussion has a transformative function is central to Habermas's thinking.

Part of the critique of Habermas is that the impact of the political and economic systems, including their steering mechanisms of power and money, is an attempt to close down the possibility of learning that may challenge system priorities. '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.'[45] But as Habermas asserts, adults have 'an automatic inability not to learn'.[46] In proposing a form of reflexive learning, Habermas is talking about the ability to question and challenge everyday practices and the way society is organised, in discussion with others.

In the context of colonization, Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action offers a way forward that 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. They are instead interested in co-coordinating their plans of actions on the basis of a common understanding of situations. How to do this needs to be learned.

There are two dimensions to the theory of communicative action that are of interest here. Firstly, in the discussions among the participants they aim to reach agreements that can be evaluated or redeemed against criteria that Habermas calls validity claims. Secondly, 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'.[47] Validity claims are the assumptions that we always already make in an unquestioning manner concerning the truth and sincerity of another person's communications.

Educators who have appropriated the ideas of Habermas have emphasized that redeeming validity claims involves a highly significant kind of adult leaning. Its significance and importance rest 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. Unfortunately, in our society, dominated by money and power, there are too many opportunities for, and experiences of, discourses and communications that are the opposite of communicative action. Adult educators who appropriate these ideas in pursuit of a grounding for the discipline are involved in the learning project of reviving civil society and protecting its democratic impulses from colonization by the system. The best prospects for democracy are tied into learning to hold these kinds of

conversations in which validity claims are redeemed. This is the most important kind of conversation a university can have.

Discussion, debates, seminars are mini-democracies, and educators, whether adult or university, 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 adults learning how to do this. Communicative action provides a kind of quality assurance that we can use 'for evaluation of systematically distorted forms of communication and of life', because if those in power do not act in a way that is understandable, sincere, truthful and appropriate, they are in danger of being instruments of domination and manipulation.[48] The best preparation for involvement in democratic life is to become expert in redeeming validity claims. Is not communicative competence then, an important task for university teaching?

The second aspect of Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action concerns the rules that govern these conversations. Habermas outlines a concept of discourse where proposals are critically tested, 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 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 criticize proposals and arrive at decisions motivated solely by the unforced force of the better argument. All decisions are for now 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 well-being of others and the community at large. These are also the necessary conditions for a democratic society. In this discourse we anticipate a form of life characterised by 'pure' (unconstrained and undistorted) intersubjectivity.[49] This kind of solidarity is at risk in our society. Habermas is suggesting that this solidarity is the object of communication, discourse and indeed of life.

Discourse requires freedom and justice—freedom to reach agreement on the basis of the better argument alone and justice based on mutual respect. This discourse is both rational and emancipatory in its intention because the process of reaching agreement is accompanied by revealing the ideological, coercive and non-democratic structures which hinder a genuinely democratic process.[50] This kind of discourse is the foundation for a democratic society as it points to freedom, equality and care. It is also now well established in adult education theory that it is the foundation for adult learning and in particular a kind of learning called transformative learning.[51] Democratic participation and discourse are essential elements of the learning process. This discourse is also being proposed here as a foundation for the learning processes in a university.

The theory of communicative action aims to offer a vision that allows the effects of colonization to come into perspective. It allows us to

> become conscious of the *difference between steering problems* and *problems of mutual understanding*. We can see the difference between systemic disequilibria and lifeworld pathologies, between disturbances of material reproduction and deficiencies in symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld....Money and power can neither buy nor compel solidarity and

meaning. In brief, the result of the process of disillusionment is a new state of consciousness in which the social-welfare project becomes reflexive to a certain extent and aims at taming not just the capitalist economy, but also the state itself.[52]

If the economic and political-legal systems have become insensitive to the imperatives of mutual understanding on which the solidarity and legitimacy of social orders depend, the solution, according to Habermas, is to revitalize autonomous, self-organized public spheres that are capable of asserting themselves against the media of money and power. By implication, the university might join in taming the economy rather than supporting it.

Adult educators will argue that grassroots movements, many self-help groups as well as classrooms where participatory research is conducted and collaborative inquiry is pursued, are examples of such public spheres. Programmes of transformative learning in organizations attempt the same goal by alerting the system world to issues and problems of motivation and legitimation that are a symptom and consequence of the colonisation of the lifeworld.

On this basis, I am suggesting that civil society, democracy and higher education have in common the ambition to create opportunities and places 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, tolerance, justice and a valuing of rationality. The learning community implied in discourse is precisely that required for transformative learning; 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 the university.

The role of the educator is therefore one of encouraging and creating situations and classrooms which encourage the fullest participation in discourse, assisting adults critically to assess the validity of their ways of making meaning and to explore perspectives that are more open to change. Too much education has been about work, skills, instrumental learning and how to do things. It has been preoccupied with defining learning tasks and outcomes, behavioural objectives and measurable competence. Too much has been about the system, the formal state sector, the economy and training. These are important and need support, but a different kind of learning is being proposed. It involves a critical reflection on assumptions that underpin our beliefs, a discourse to justify what we believe and taking action on the basis of new agreed understandings. Then needs assessment, learning objectives, teaching methods, research methodologies and evaluation are defined and identified in a different way.[53] They are formed in the discourse.

The task of the educator is to create, practice and teach how to create spaces for discourse. In this way democracy, transformative learning and a civil society are possible and the full potential of a learning society may be realised.

Such a philosophy 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 lifeworld 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 the failure of interventions.[54]

Being socialized into adulthood involves necessarily acquiring distorted understandings of self and others. This impedes development, but through critical self-reflection these can be recognised and changed. The aim for education is to help adults inquire into the reasons for their interests and the assumptions that underpin them and take action to change society. As children we of necessity acquire knowledge that is constructed for us. However, it is also a characteristic of learning that at some stage this knowledge may come under the critical scrutiny of an adult and autonomous intelligence that will deconstruct the interests embedded in the childhood learning. This is a defining characteristic of adult learning and of adulthood. The university has, as an adult learning institution, the responsibility to valorise, prioritise and support this critical learning of adulthood.

In this vision of education, it is the lifeworld that gets transformed. The task of the Left, and of a democratic civil society and of education, is one of de-colonizing the lifeworld. Welton, as an adult educator, writes about the defence of the lifeworld as reappropriating the learning processes in 'the family, the public sphere, community life, and cultural expressions' from the grasp and control of technical reason, and putting them back in the hands of citizens engaged in democratic consensual dialogue.[55] Effective learners in an emancipatory, participative, democratic society—a learning society—become a community of cultural critics and social activists, and the dichotomy of individual and society is transcended by an epistemology of intersubjectivity.[56] By intersubjective here I refer to communication theory's version of the orthodox Kantian principle of universalisability. Benhabib and Dallmayr put it this way:

> Instead of asking what an individual moral agent could or would will, without contradiction, to be a universal maxim for all, one asks: what norms or institutions would the members of an ideal or real communication community agree to as representing their common interests after engaging in a special kind of argumentation or conversation? The procedural model of an argumentative praxis replaces the silent thought-experiment enjoined by the Kantian universalisability test.[57]

In this redefining by Habermas of the meaning of universal from an individual base to a communally followed procedure of redeeming normative validity claims discursively, the emphasis shifts from what each can will without contradiction to be a universal law to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm. Habermas proceeds to examine the possibilities of revitalising a public political sphere which has sidelined mutual understanding in favour of system self-regulation through the steering media of money and power, and which is now paying a high price in terms of

the withdrawal of motivation and legitimacy from these systems. Resistance to colonization has, according to Habermas, taken on new forms, and class conflicts have been replaced by conflict at the seams or boundaries between system and lifeworld.[58]

Education, community development, and grassroots movements can bring about change, as can self-organized groups conducting participatory research and collaborative action research in system settings—all examples of autonomous public spheres. In these groups an

> alternative practice is directed against the profit-dependent instrumentalisation of work in one's vocation, the market-dependent mobilization of labour power, against the extension of pressures of competition and performance all the way down into elementary school. It also takes aim at the monetarisation of services, relationships, and time, at the consumerist redefinition of private spheres of life and personal life-styles.[59]

New social movements are concerned with overcoming the effects of the colonization of the lifeworld. This is not the radicalism of Marx, but a self-limiting radicalism, where change is brought about by creating autonomous public spheres of debate and discussion, while allowing for the continuing functioning of the 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 humanize and transform them so that they operate in the interests of all. A task for the university is suggested by this.

Will the university serve the system or the lifeworld? The increased role of the system in education, family life, and community activities leads one to see that a deskilling of the lifeworld has been facilitated, at least partially, by education and its persistent involvement with the system. In education, too, the needs of the economy are strongly felt. Education is seen by the state as predominantly a matter of supporting the economy. But an education policy based solely on the needs of the market is deeply flawed.

The university is involved in the professional development of students and indeed its own staff. This kind of critical professional development now means being skilled not only in one's area of practice, but also in recognising when one's activities are being 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. [60]

The emphasis on reflective practice, in this interpretation, becomes a critique of ideology. It would indeed be exciting if the university defined its professional and vocational activities involving reflective practice as a critique of ideology.

Frequently, education allies itself with the system rather than the lifeworld. The system has, however, 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.

Like many educators, e.g. Paulo Freire, one can be for system or lifeworld. Educators find themselves working very often in the state sector (in schools), in the economy (job skills training, organizational change, vocational courses), or civil society (community education). The challenge is how to be for decolonization of the lifeworld. Part of the problem is that some people systematically distort public communication (education debate) 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 the university also.

Critical and transformative education has as its normative mandate the preservation of a critically reflective lifeworld.[61] Critical theory holds out the promise of enabling us to think of all society as a vast school. Habermas addressed a multiple audience of potential transformative agents working in social movements and other institutional sectors of society.[62] In identifying actors, such as journalists, who emerge from the public with a critical mandate, he summarizes the tasks they *ought* to fulfil in the role of central and systemic players in the construction and support of a critical public sphere. He says that 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'.[63] It might be a useful starting-point for defining the role of an educator as located in the same public space, helping adults both decolonize the lifeworld through democratic, critical discourses and transform systems (organizations, bureaucracies and workplaces).

Adult Education and Habermas

In terms of adult learning theory, the influence of Habermas's arguments concerning rationalization and colonization can be seen most forcefully in the work of Jack Mezirow. In his earlier work on Perspective Transformation, Mezirow drew on *Knowledge and Human Interests*, where knowledge-constitutive interests suggested to him three domains of instrumental, interpersonal and emancipatory learning.[64] However, in keeping with Habermas's own move away from this earlier conceptual apparatus, he has recently examined both instrumental and communicative learning and redefines emancipatory learning as pertaining to both instrumental and communicative learning.[65]

> Transformative learning refers to 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.[66]

Frames of reference are the socially and individually constructed paradigms in which we each think, feel, act, intuit and make meaning. In further linking with Habermas,

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. Mezirow identifies this as the process of transformative learning.[67]

According to Mezirow, the conditions or rules of rational discourse are also ideal conditions for effective adult learning. 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 critical reflectivity with regard to assumptions; equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse and a willingness to understand and accept agreement and accept agreed best judgments as a test of validity until new outcomes from discourse are identified.[68]

Community organizations, 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 institutionalized 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.[69]

This reliance on Habermas leads to stating that it is the particular function of adult educators to create communities of collaborative discourse in which distortions in communication due to differences in power and influence are minimized. As a consequence, for Ewert, 'Education is the form of rational social action'.[70] 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.[71]

Basically, an adult learning group engaging in transformative learning is a democratic society, so a democratic society is a learning society. This is a different understanding of both learning and democracy than is usually proposed in the literature of lifelong learning. Transformation theory grounds its argument for an emancipatory participative democracy in the very nature of adult learning.[72] If the ideas of Habermas are of significance for the university, then the way these ideas have been appropriated by adult education will provide 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 higher education too.

A critical higher education privileges the realm of the lifeworld in which citizen and worker 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 marketplace and in politics for greater comfort and occupational security offered by capitalism, which legitimates the social order in this way. This is a form of socially constructed silence, and what is needed is a new ideology critique addressing this systematically distorted communication.[73] That the political and economic elite believes that these issues are beyond the understanding of citizens and workers is part of the process of requiring silence. The loss of dialogue opportunities and this silence are close to Freire's culture of silence.

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 have found 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.

The psychologisation of education as an individual subjective learning process is a danger, and the reliance on Habermas is mostly about securing a theoretical base for concepts such as adult learning, that are intersubjective, political and social.

Habermas prompts us to see the university as a community of discursive reason or communicative praxis, and 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 university community as lifeworld. The 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) the university is creating the very conditions necessary for a democratic society. Communicative action is more properly called communicative praxis as adapted from Aristotle, and Habermas reorients Aristotle in the direction of the primacy of praxis as a rational human activity.[74]

Rather than see the university as a collection of disparate departments and faculties and schools and centres, there is a unifying theme suggested by Habermas as a lifeworld. The university according to Habermas carries out the functions of socialization, critical transmission of culture, political consciousness, and social integration. As Ostovich summarises, 'the university is a rational society, then, where reason is understood as communicative praxis and society is understood as lifeworld'.[75] The role of the university is to be a community of communicative action, a community of communicative praxis.

The danger is that too many courses will focus on the utilitarian, that there will be too many vocational courses to the detriment of courses and programmes that may be of benefit to oneself and society rather than the economy. Too often courses may focus on instrumental learning rather than communicative praxis, with too much emphasis on career and not enough on one's role in society. It is in danger of becoming training rather than education.

How might such a communicative university look? 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 to social justice by the institution. Consultation would be seen as a step removed from discursive democracy. Pedagogy too should match this set of priorities. Social analysis, critical reflection, reconstructing the teacher-student relationship where both 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, that teaches democracy and aims to reproduce more democracy in classrooms, communities, society and the workplace.

The aim of the university is to develop and respond to the needs of a democratic society. The university ought to attempt to create a community of reason—critical reason at that. This reason is communicative praxis, is discursive, and we are most rational as we participate in communities characterised by free and unconstrained democratic discourse.[76] For Habermas the university is a lifeworld, colonised now by the economy and state, in need of decolonisation by having particular kinds of free, critical conversations. The Strategic Plan of the University would be infused by the vision, ideals and political actions of critical reflection on unquestioned assumptions. Such a university would create a democracy and in the process teach democracy and create a democratic society. It would in the process redefine lifelong learning.

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