Reason, Communicative Learning, and Civil Society: The Use of Habermasian Theory in Adult Education

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the use of Habermasian theory in adult education, looking at Habermas' focus on reason and rationality, his theory of communicative action, and his recent work on civil society. Despite criticisms of his work, the depth and breadth of his theory has been useful in developing critical education discourses and in encouraging educators to place their work in broader social contexts, and to engage in reflective and critical analyses of their educational practices.

Résumé: Ce papier explore l'approche habermasienne sur l'enseignement chez l'adulte. L'accent de Habermas y est mis sur la raison, la nationalité, sa théorie sur l'action communicative et sur sa dernière étude concernant le respect dans la société. Malgré toutes les critiques que son travail a suscité, des discours critiques sur l'enseignement ont été prononcés et on a encouragé les éducateurs à recadrer leur travail dans un contexte social plus grand et à ce qu'ils réalisent leur auto-analyse pour ainsi repenser leurs méthodes personnelles de pédagogie. Tout cela a pu se faire grâce à la profondeur et à l'ampleur de la théorie de Habermas.

Adult education is a field that tends to have a very pragmatic orientation. Adult educators work with business people learning on-the-job training, in health care teaching patients to manage their illnesses, in literacy teaching basic numeracy and writing skills, in communities with fishers, farmers, and homemakers. Despite this, the abstract writing of the German theorist and philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, has been influential in developing critical adult education discourses. Despite some significant criticisms of Habermas' work, the breadth of his vision of the potentiality of human learning serves an important purpose by encouraging educators to place their own work in a larger socio-cultural context and to engage in critical analysis of their thoughts,

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motives, and actions as educators. This paper examines how three aspects of Habermas' work; his analysis of reason, the notion of communicative learning, and the importance of civil society have been taken up by adult educators to inform educational practice.

Reason and Rationality

The European critical theoretical tradition emerged from the Frankfurt School, a school of thinkers from the Institute for Social Research who fled to the United States when World War II loomed in Germany. Well known members of the Frankfurt School included such prominent intellectuals as Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and Max Horheimer. The term critical theory, according to Bronner and Kellner, was coined as "a type of code" that served to "veil their radical commitments in an environment that was hostile to anything remotely associated with Marxism" (1989, p. 1). Ideas generated by these thinkers still impact upon the work of education theorists today, as can be seen in recent papers on Horkheimer (Brookfield, 2001) and Fromm (Weiner, 2003).

Early critical theorists studied how modern society evolved. The development of Enlightenment thought "set itself against 'magical' thinking", challenged traditional ways of looking at the world, and in the process, decoupled culture from nature (Fleming, 1997, p. 17). There was a belief in progress, the idea "that society has changed and will continue to change in a desirable manner" (Hearn, 1985, p. 13). The industrial revolution was matched by a corresponding development in scientific approaches to knowledge that privileged technical rational reasoning, so that the "the social progress promised by the Enlightenment project required that reason be transformed into an instrument of production" (Hearn, 1985, p. 14). Scientific reason and technology was glorified by social scientists such as Comte and St. Simon, who believed positivism could establish a new progressive social order, where society was guided by social laws, similar to the laws of nature. Once these laws were identified and understood, this information could be used to predict and control how people would behave. Optimistically, early Enlightenment thinkers believed this approach to knowledge would advance humanity, rather than oppress it. The onset of the 20th century, and in particular, the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany, gave rise to a critical exploration of the detrimental usages of a positivistic approach to reason.

In their dispirited text, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) argue that in modern society, reason has been eclipsed by an instrumentalized orientation. The initial euphoria over scientific and technological developments dimmed as early critical theorists probed the problems created by the narrowly constructed, "one-dimensional thought" identified by Marcuse (1964), where humans accept the status quo and fail to recognize human potentiality as a form of resistance to repressive changes brought about through modernity.

While insights from early critical theorists exposed the dark underside of Enlightenment, Habermas was unwilling "to accept the brooding pessimism of his mentors" (Welton, 1993, p. 82). Fleming (1997) writes that Habermas argued early critical thinkers would not be capable of posing their criticisms of the narrowness of technical-rational thought if they weren't capable of a different kind of reasoning. "In Habermas' view, they cannot describe the dialectic of the enlightenment without making use of the critical capacity that according to them, has been lost in the unbounded spread of instrumental reason" (Fleming, 1997, p. 18).

Habermas argues the initial conception of rationality outlined by early critical thinkers was too limited. White states, a "central problem of Habermas' thought has been how to demonstrate that an exclusively instrumental or strategic understanding of rationality is somehow inadequate" (1988, p. 25).

> The real problem, Habermas argues, is not technical reason as such but its universalization, the forfeiture of a more comprehensive concept of reason in favor of the exclusive validity of scientific and technological thought, the reduction of *praxis* to *techne*, and the extension of purposive-rational action to all spheres in life. (McCarthy, 1978, p. 22)

The Frankfurt School was remiss in acknowledging theoretical contributions of social sciences and analytic philosophy, their critique of instrumental reason was too abstract to contribute to an effective analysis of the complexities of modern society, and "it failed to give an unambiguous account of its own normative foundations" (Habermas, 1986, p. 49).

From the early stages in his academic career, Habermas (1970) has been preoccupied with understanding rationality in a broader sense. "It is only in comprehending the emancipatory interest behind critical reflective knowledge, Habermas maintains, that the correlation between knowledge and human interests in general can be adequately grasped"

(McCarthy, 1978, p 88). By focussing on language and action, Habermas demonstrates that linguistic interaction has "a sense of rationality which is not reducible to strategic or contextual dimensions" (White, 1988, p. 28). His life's work has involved developing an alternative theory of communicative rationality.

Habermas' focus on reason encourages educators to carefully think through what we mean when we argue about a rational or practical point of view. His theoretical framework reveals that reason is a complex concept, that can be used to justify many different approaches towards learning. These insights help us to develop a critical social analysis that reveals some of the problems with the way the notion of "reason" is employed to justify particular approaches towards learning. For example, Hart (1992) uses Habermas' categorizations of rationality to explore learning in the workplace. Instrumental rationality uses particular means to attain a desired end result, while strategic rationality allows for an informed decision making process consistent with values ie. obtaining the best fit between a program and client. In both cases, rationality is characterized by objectivity, unlike "communicative action [that] is characterized by a relationship of complementarity and mutuality among the participants" (1992, p. 142). It is only when communicative rationality is used that the validity of social norms can be critiqued. Instead of only asking how to make the most profit, critical questions can be raised that take up underlying value concerns. How much profit needs to be made? What are the social and environmental costs? Why is unpaid labour not valued? By opening up the parameters for discussion, communicative action provides mechanisms that can be utilized to develop more critical, participatory, and democratic approaches towards learning.

Communicative Learning

In two complex volumes, Habermas (1981, 1987) outlines a comprehensive theory of communicative action. Drawing upon psychological, sociological, linguistic, and philosophical theory, his work has a scope and depth equalled by few other contemporary thinkers. Habermas argues for the central importance of language to facilitate understanding, stating that:

> In contemporary philosophy ... interest is directed to the formal conditions of rationality in knowing, in reaching understanding through language, and in acting, both in everyday contexts and at

> the level of methodologically organized experience or systematically organized discourse. (1981, p. 2)

To develop a *theory of rationality*, Habermas argues that philosophy must make explicit connections to the empirical sciences, such as sociology. Habermas' capacity for theoretical synthesis is revealed in his ability draw upon the work of both grand theorists such as Durkheim (1897/1951) or Parsons (1964) to examine the evolution of social structures (*system*), as well as interpretive theorists who use a phenonomological or ethnomethodological perspective such as Schutz (1967) or Goffman (1959) to explore our understanding of the world as emerging from daily human experience (*lifeworld*). Within a communicative theory of rationality, Habermas argues that we must "conceive of societies *simultaneously* as systems and lifeworlds" (1987, p. 118). He traces the emergence of the system and lifeworld, assesses the problematic disjuncture between them created by increasing social complexity and rationalization of the lifeworld, and explores the potential of communicative theory to address these challenges.

Welton describes the system as "organizations of purely strategic actions; that is people in command positions in systems use forms of reason that represses human norms or values" (1993, p. 87). The system (social/political/economic) structures coordinate many functions of everyday life through the *media* of money and power. Habermas explains:

> The transfer of action coordination from language over to steering media means an uncoupling of interaction from lifeworld contexts. Media such as money and power attach to empirical ties; they encode a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amounts of value and make it possible to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while bypassing processes of consensus-oriented communication. (1987, p. 183)

The system is characterized by instrumental rationality that ensures the smooth functioning of the system, but increasingly threatens the viability of the *lifeworld.*

The lifeworld is a term drawn from phenomenology, linked with the work of Schutz (1967) and Husserl, (1970) "which conceives of society as a social construction of the everyday world that issues from the interpretive construction of acting subjects" (Habermas, 1981, p. 79). Within the lifeworld, assumptions of how the world operates are examined to construct a theory that emerges from grounded experience. The lifeworld is a place where people interact in the everyday, sharing

ideas and communicatively shaping values and beliefs. Habermas explains that:

> The lifeworld is constituted from network of communicative actions that branch out through social space and historical time, and these live off sources of cultural traditions and legitimate orders no less than they depend on the identities of socialized individuals. (1996, p. 80)

The lifeworld is situated in the homeplace, local community, and civil society. According to Habermas "we can think of the lifeworld as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns" (1987, p. 124) It is in this sphere of the taken-for-granted, everyday acceptance of how the world should be, that the underlying values and premises of a society are revealed. Phenomenologists believe that this can be done by bracketing out (distancing ourselves) from the natural attitude (the underlying premises we hold about our world) in order to gain insights and to question our underlying assumptions of how the world is constituted. At the same time, as Brookfield (2003) points out, Habermas believes that since we are each completely immersed in the lifeworld, it is difficult to fully comprehend it.

McCarthy argues that Habermas finds the phenomenological conceptualization of the lifeworld inadequate as "not only culture but also institutional orders and personality structures should be seen as basic components of the lifeworld" (1981, p. xxiv). As Benhabib writes, Habermas believes that within the phenomenological perspective, "the 'cultural abridgement' of the lifeworld neglects both the structural conditions of the formation of group identities (solidarity) and the development of individual competencies (personality)" (1986, p. 238). Habermas expands his conceptualization of the lifeworld to include not only cultural reproduction, but also Durkheim's (1897/1951) emphasis on social integration, and Mead's (1967) work on socialization (Fleming, 1997). Habermas' discussion of the lifeworld includes an assessment of the importance of social interaction and identity formation.

Habermas (1987) argues that historically the lifeworld and system were more closely integrated because societies had simpler structures. With the rise of modernity, the system has grown in size and complexity. Increasingly, the system has "colonized the lifeworld", causing a breakdown in traditional communicative linkages. As Giddens notes:

> The colonization of the lifeworld has destroyed traditional bases of communicative action, without replacing them with the forms of

> postconventional rationality that are required to couple the lifeworld to the range of activities controlled by the expanding economic and political steering mechanisms. (1985, p. 110)

The decoupling of the lifeworld and the system threatens to pathologize the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). Habermas draws upon Durkheim's (1897/1951) work to explain detrimental consequences of colonization of the lifeworld. As previously accepted traditions for making sense of the world are ruptured and not replaced, individuals in society will experience anomie – a loss of a sense of meaning or regulation, that creates a feeling of normlessness. In addition, a legitimation crisis emerges which affects the potential stability of the political and economic order in society (Giddens, 1985). Within "the sphere of cultural reproduction, the consequence is a loss of meaning; in the sphere of social integration, anomie emerges; and as regards personality, we are faced with psycho-pathologies" (Benhabib, 1986, p. 249).

To explain how the system emerges as such a potent and overarching force, Habermas uses Durkheim's (1915/1965) and Weber's (1921/1968) work, to explain how worldviews evolve which "offer a potential for grounding that can be used to justify a political order or the institutional framework of a society in general" (1987, p. 56). Worldviews are broadly encompassing. They provide a basis for a normative consensus of what is acceptable behavior, beliefs, and goals within the context of each society, so that the status quo is maintained. "Thus they lend support to the moral authority of validity of basic norms" (Habermas, 1987, p. 56).

Educators often work in contexts where they do not have much control over the circumstances in which they are teaching. Critical theoretical analysis can provide some insights into some of the dilemmas that they might be experiencing, but which they have difficulty in fully comprehending. For instance, in an earlier paper (Gouthro, 2002), I examine the ways in which the marketplace is shaping the context for lifelong learning from a critical feminist perspective. As global capitalism has gained momentum, a pervasive worldview has developed so that the logic of the marketplace is the logic of the world. This can be seen increasingly in adult and higher education contexts. When adult education is defined as "consumer-driven and client-responsive" (Cooper, Velde, & Gerber, 1995, p. 79), and universities are advised to work towards ensuring "customer satisfaction" (Hill, 1997, p. 212), it should not be too surprising (although rather distressing) to have a university administrator argue that "there is a strong sense in both Canada and the United States that we have for too long been too concerned about the

bottom rung and not enough about the bottom line" (Downey, 1996, p. 81). The emphasis on ensuring that learners are satisfied consumers may result in powerful groups, such as corporations, gaining additional authority over educational contexts (Bagnell, 1994). Challenges to academic freedom are increasing because of corporate influence on academic institutions and research (White & Hauck, 2000). Emphasis on the marketplace diminishes respect for learning not immediately connected with the paid workplace, that is, learning in the homeplace (Gouthro, 2005). Increasingly, system structures impact on educational contexts, undermining democratic concerns of inclusion, equality, and social justice. Lifelong learning is deemed an individual responsibility, framed as a valuable commodity for those who wish to remain competitive in the marketplace.

To disrupt or challenge repressive system structures, (such as questioning the reason why learning always needs to equal profit) people have to develop their capacity to communicate as rational human beings to explore alternative viewpoints and perspectives. Habermas (1987) argues that communicative forms of action can serve to challenge the dominance of system imperatives that diminish the effectiveness of the lifeworld by questioning the validity of worldviews that create a limited vision for societal change: "What is of primary interest in analyzing the interaction between normative consensus, worldview, and institutional system, however, is that the connection is established through channels of linguistic communication" (1987, p. 56).

Through examining these channels of linguistic communication Habermas believes we can learn about how society is organized and how it can be changed. Through communicative rationality, or discourse, people suspend their apriori assumptions and engage in meaningful and open discussions to make explicit the underlying assumptions that guide human behaviour and communication. Habermas argues that "rationality has less to do with the possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects *acquire and use knowledge*" (1981, p. 8). Our linguistic capacities as human beings enable us to use communicative action to resolve conflict and expand our understanding of the world.

Educators are challenged to create a dialogical environment where students can learn to conceptualize their world in different ways. As hooks (2003) notes, there is never a truly "safe" place where people can learn, since power always intrudes upon relationships. Yet if we believe that educators can "think the practice" as Freire (1998) argues, then we

have to imaginatively conceive of the characteristics of a learning context that we ideally would like to create. What guidelines can we use to develop the capacities for our students to communicate effectively with others? Habermas' theory of communicative action sets out criteria for developing a context where ideas can be shared, contested, and mediated.

According to Welton, "communicative action is based on the idea that human communication involves validity claims, and that an ideal speech situation is presupposed every time we use language" (1993, p. 84). Habermas develops the notion of ideal speech as a model along the lines of Weber's ideal type concept. An ideal type is a theoretical construct, a model of something that does not exist in reality, but is compared against real life situations.

Ideal speech is characterized by a communicative relationship where through discourse, people can exchange ideas and debate issues, striving to achieve consensus based upon rational agreement. Validity claims are the basis for accepting or rejecting what a speaker is saying. People enter into discourse and will challenge one another's competing validity claims (Habermas, 1987). The four types of validity claims are comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness (referring to a sense of sincerity), and normative rightness. As Bernstein points out, "these are not always thematic but they are implicit in every speech act" (1985, p. 18). White states: "Only if a speaker is able to convince his hearers that his claims are rational and thus worthy of recognition can there develop a 'rationally motivated agreement' or consensus on how to coordinate future actions" (1988, p. 28).

Flyvbjerg explains "the only 'force' which is active in the ideal speech situation and in communicative rationality is thus this 'force' of the better argument" (2000, p. 213). Speakers who are open to one another can reach consensus about future actions. "Coming to an understanding [*Verständingung*] means that participants in communication reach an agreement [*Einingung*] concerning the validity of an utterance; agreement [*Einverständnis*] is the intersubjective recognition of the validity claim the speaker raises for it" (Habermas, 1987, p. 120).

Communicative action is important for the socialization and development of each individual and serves as "the medium for reproduction of lifeworlds" (Habermas, 1981, p. 337). To attain communicative competency, individuals must become autonomous individuals, capable of reflection.

> Communicative action turns out to be a switching station for energies of social solidarity, but this time we viewed the switch point not under the aspect of coordination but of socialization, in order to discover how the collective consciousness is communicated, via illocutionary forces, not to institutions but to individuals. (Habermas, 1987, p. 60)

In Mead's (1967) theory of socialization, the "I" is the unsocialized, instinctive part of self, while the "Me" is socialized and responsive to the reactions of others. As individuals mature, they develop an understanding of how others would view them. Individuals learn to assess their own behaviour and modify their actions accordingly in response to the perceived judgement of the average person or generalized other. Habermas (1987) draws upon Kohlberg's (1981) work, to argue that people who reach higher levels of moral development are better able to develop communicative competencies, while in looking at Piaget's (1977) research, he notes that people who attain cognitive competence can think in abstract ways. White explains that Habermas also draws upon Chomsky's work in linguistics to discuss the notion of speech competence. This involves the mastery of linguistic rules (i.e., grammar) or universal or formal pragmatic rules (which produce well-formed utterances) to best attain the capacity for shared linguistic comprehension. Finally, he discusses "interactive competence" which is the mastery of rules for taking part in increasingly complex forms of interaction (White, 1988, p. 29).

According to Habermas, communicative action is required to reproduce the lifeworld from generation to generation and to maintain a healthy and productive society. As Benhabib notes "communicative action serves the transmission of cultural knowledge, of action coordination and identity formation" (1986, p. 239). By fostering communicative action, adult educators can help to sustain or defend the lifeworld (Welton, 1995).

Jack Mezirow (1981) first helped to achieve widespread recognition of Habermas' theory of communicative action in adult education (Connelly, 1996). Although he has been critiqued for offering a more "*psychological* theory of adult learning" rather than a critical social theory of learning (Plumb, 1995), Mezirow's work introduced Habermas' distinction between instrumental and communicative forms of learning, and drew upon Habermas' concept of ideal speech situations to develop his own theory of transformative learning that:

> Seeks to elucidate universal conditions and rules that are implicit in linguistic competence of human development. Specifically, it seeks to explain the way adult learning is structured and to determine by what processes the frames of reference through which we view and interpret our experience (meaning perspectives) are changed or transformed. (Mezirow, 1991, pp. xxi-xiii)

Habermas' influence encouraged Mezirow to carefully analyse the role of dialogue and how it shapes perception. Dialogue is an important means by which individuals become aware of other ways of making sense of the world. Mezirow argues that meaning structures will change when adults are challenged by disorienting dilemmas that force them to examine alternative approaches. Perspective transformation may occur as either a sudden, radical shift, or as a gradual and cumulative change. Mezirow gives the example of consciousness raising, where "women come to recognize that what they thought was their personal problem is in fact a widely shared problem of sex stereotyping" (1991, p. 209). Through dialogue new meanings and interpretations of the world emerge, leading to a transformation of individual perspectives.

Michael Collins (1998) argues that adult educators needs to be cognizant of the oppressive influences of the system, but at the same time he draws upon Habermas' cautious optimism to argue that communicative action can be used to effect change:

> Thus, within our conventional institutions (our schools, colleges, and places of employment) which best exemplify the deployment of system world imperatives in the quest for efficiency, greater productivity, and higher profits, there are reasonable prospects for emancipatory discourse. And such a discourse does not take it for granted that the instrumental rationality upholding the institution's aims should be automatically accorded priority. Bureaucratic institutional aims should neither steer the discourse nor necessarily avoid critical review along with other relevant concerns. In this way, the system comes under the purview of lifeworld considerations. (Collins, 1998, p. 169)

Even within institutional spheres that are dominated by system imperatives, Collins believes that there are fissures that can be expanded by bringing in democratic initiatives for change through discourse. Collins (1998) does not advocate that educators become lone rebels, as this might lead to either their expulsion or treatment whereby these individuals become symbols of institutional tolerance of idiosyncrasies. Rather, he encourages the evolution of pressures from

within, as people negotiate strategic alliances with others to work collectively towards change.

Civil Society

Other critical adult educators have drawn on Habermas' (1996) recent work on civil society as a means for utilizing communicative action to facilitate social change. In a world beleaguered by violence, poverty, civil strife, and destruction, Habermas' focus on communicative forms of action and the advancement of civil society offers a resolutely steadfast and hopeful analysis that asserts human potentiality for learning, problem solving, and advancement. While there is some debate over what constitutes civil society, most would agree "that civil society has an institutional core constituted by voluntary associations outside the sphere of the state and the economy" (Flyvbjerg, 2000, p. 210). The notion of civil society challenges educators to examine connections between formal learning and learning that occurs in the broader society while raising issues of social justice (Gouthro, 2000). Habermas (1996) explores how the renewal of civil society may help to foster communicative action and work to sustain the lifeworld. Welton notes that "although Habermas writes out of the European experience, his thinking about civil society and the public sphere offers helpful ways of thinking about these matters in a global context" (2001, p. 20). Michael Newman (1999) discusses how civil society may be viewed "as providing an alternative means of representation and action to the 'system' " (1999, p. 153). Civil society stands apart from government and economic organizations within the marketplace. It includes grass roots organizations which may mobilize for social change such as environmental groups, peace activists, anti-poverty coalitions, and feminist organizations. DeOliveira and Tandon argue that civil society is characterized by "the values of diversity, of tolerance and pluralism, of peace and justice, of solidarity and responsibility" (1994, p. 11). It provides a forum for communicative forms of action and the development of active citizenship. Welton holds that "socially responsible adult education is not simply about 'social change' " (1998, p. 368). He asks us to assess the following learning challenges engendered by globalization: the deprivation of meaning (which confronts consumerism as surrogate god), the depletion of solidarity (which confronts possessive individualism and social fragmentation), and the de-stabilization of the personality (which confronts many pathologizing tendencies in society).

Considering the destabilizing aspects of a world characterized by the speed of change, he argues that in some ways civil society must preserve essential communicative values that help to conserve the lifeworld. Welton argues that the institutions of civil society "have the task of enabling us to learn what it means to be competent, active persons in our particular world" (1998, p. 369). This is an essential aspect of adult learning for active citizenship, a means through which education can foster democratic forms of societal change.

Criticisms

Of course there are frequent disparities between the way people really communicate in various learning contexts, and Habermas' theoretical model. In understanding the impact of Habermas' work on developing critical adult education discourses, it is also important to note those who have challenged or who have not taken up his work. Postmodernists (Flyvbjerg, 2000; Peitrykowski, 1996), post-colonialists (Said, 1993), and feminists (Fleming, 1997; Meehan, 1995) raise serious questions about issues of inclusion and power, challenging Habermas' universalistic assumptions and the European modernist tradition that informs his work. Critics of Habermas are leery of his attempt to construct a universalistic theory in a world that seems to be increasingly fractured and characterized by difference. His analysis of the system, lifeworld divide has tended to emphasize social class and power differences linked with the development of the market economy, but has been challenged for not addressing adequately other axes of power linked with gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, and ability. Feminist scholar Seyla Benhabib (1996) points out the difficulties of Habermas' assertion that everyone should be free to enter into discourse in the public sphere, noting that there are gendered imbalances in power that often serve to silence women. Nancy Fraser worries that "Habermas' categorical divide between system and lifeworld institutions faithfully mirrors the institutional separation in male-dominated, capitalist societies of family and official economy, household and paid workplace" (1995, p. 27). As Ellsworth (1989) points out, critical theorists have to be read critically as well. These are essential issues to be addressed if critical theory is to be useful in informing inclusive learning environments.

Implications for Adult Education

Despite the seriousness of these criticisms, Habermasian theory provides a comprehensive and provocative analysis of modern society that has served to inform critical discourses in adult education. His insightful efforts to synthesize and analyse Western social theory has been matched by few, if any other scholars. As Brian Connelly states, current adult education theory within the Western world is "increasingly influenced by the writings of Jurgen Habermas" (1996, p. 241). In assessing his work, Cohen argues that "even Habermas' most determined feminist critics are unwilling to dispense with key categories of his thought: they make use of the concepts of communicative action, public space, democratic legitimacy, dialogic ethics, discourse, and critical social theory" (1995, p. 57).

Throughout his academic career, Habermas has engaged with and responded to his critics in his writing, thus demonstrating his own commitment to communicative forms of learning.

Since Habermas' work is very complex, it requires a commitment of in-depth and sustained reflection from educators who wish to develop a full appreciation for the contributions of his work. A serious investigation of Habermasian theory is generally beyond the scope of interest of the average practitioner, as it would require not only reading Habermas' own works, but also some of the secondary sources and the preliminary sources (i.e., Durkheim, Mead, Marcuse), not to mention his critics. Feminists and other marginalized groups are often reluctant to commit much energy towards studying the traditional Western cannon, feeling that they have already committed sufficient time to studying within that sphere. Yet Habermas' work is extremely useful for assessing and raising for debate some of the central issues and questions about how our societies are structured and organized. It can provide insights for educators trying to understand the global structures that impact upon their daily practices, and help them to assess strategies to enact social action.

The scope of Habermas' theory is both daunting and intriguing. Whether or not one agrees fully with his analyses, his work challenges us to conceptualize theory in a different way. While acknowledging serious criticisms that need to be addressed in his work, Habermas' theory has served to advance a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of some of the complex social processes at work in our

world, key to informing the direction of future critical adult education discourses.

NOTES

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