

Listening to the Sound Deep Within Critique in Critical Literacy

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ABSTRACT: How far is a credible critique away from a playful rhetoric? Is there any distinguishable boundary between them? This paper is concerned with the problematic of critique in critical literacy. Critique plays a crucial role in arousing awareness of, and resistance against, social and political oppression. Therefore, its legitimacy should be subject to careful scrutiny. Although there is an extensive literature with regard to revealing oppressive practices and calling for transformative reforms, the legitimacy of critique is often backgrounded. Thus, the central question addressed in this paper is "Do we have any criteria for evaluating critique?" It is shown that certain communicative features appropriated from Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action provide a viable framework to ground critique.

RESUMÉ: Y-a-t'il un grand écart entre une critique plausible et une rhétorique ludique? Existe-t'il réellement une frontière entre les deux? Ce papier traite de la problématique de la critique en alphabétisation critique. La critique joue un rôle crucial dans la prise de conscience qui naît de l'oppression sociale et politique et dans la résistance contre celle-ci. De ce fait, cette légitimité doit faire l'objet d'une étude minutieuse. Quoiqu'il existe une vaste littérature révélant des pratiques oppressives et exigeant des réformes qui apportent des changements, la légitimité de la critique fait souvent office d'arrière-plan. Ainsi donc, la question essentielle qui émerge de cet article sera: "Possédons-nous des critères, quoiqu'ils soient, qui puissent mesurer la critique?" A partir de la théorie de Jurgen Habermas sur l'action en communication, il apparaît que certaines caractéristiques en matière de communication, fournissent un cadre viable pour établir les fondations de la critique.

Introduction

Critical literacy is a field in education that implicates numerous educators, researchers, and schools of thought. However, "if we are to associate it with any one individual thinker, it is clearly with the

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire" (Greene, 1993, pp. ix-x). Freire's view of literacy is duly captured by the title of one of his books – *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Literacy for Freire does not merely mean the ability to read words, but it also involves the capacity to interpret and transform the world. Influenced by Freire's conception of literacy, critical literacy theorists/pedagogues have taken a critical approach to literacy in an attempt to uncover and resist social injustice and oppression. According to Lankshear and McLaren (1993), critical literacy is:

Concerned with the extent to which, and the ways in which, actual and possible social practices and conceptions of reading and writing enable human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life in the quest for a more truly democratic social order. (p. xviii)

Consequently, in contrast to traditional literacy education which places a great, if not exclusive, emphasis on mastery of reading and writing, a critical approach to literacy focuses on challenging oppressive social and political relations.

Yet, Benjamin Endres argues "that a purely critical approach to literacy ignores the important role that reading and writing play in reaching understanding across social and cultural differences" (2001, p. 401). Specifically, the nonpolitical dimensions such as aesthetic and emotional aspects in reading and writing literary works are often overlooked in a purely critical approach. It is true that every text is embedded in a social context with political implications. In addition, it is almost impossible to separate, beyond doubt, political from non-political dimensions of literacy – their relationship is more like a continuum than a dichotomy. Nevertheless, overemphasizing the political dimensions runs the risk of forgetting other dimensions that literacy serves. There are texts that have aesthetic and emotional meaning, especially in literary and autobiographical works. These non-political dimensions are usually relativized, though not entirely eliminated, in an approach that focuses exclusively on critique. Endres suggests that the critical function of literacy should be located in a dialogical model whose primary purpose is reaching understanding. Reaching understanding is more fundamental than critique because in the process of reaching understanding, one may critique, agree, or abstain. In addition, there may even be other aspects of literacy that defy categorization. Endres's dialogical literacy is built on "a clarified and elaborated version of Freire's notion of dialogue in relation to texts

[that] can reconcile the process of reaching understanding with the act of critique" (p. 401). An important theoretical framework Endres draws on to elaborate Freire's notion of dialogue is Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action.

Like Endres, Raymond Morrow and Carlos Torres are also interested in the link between critical literacy and Habermas. In their co-authored book, *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Social Change*, Morrow and Torres (2002) argue that Habermas and Freire are complementary thinkers.

[They] view both as working within a shared critical theory of the dialogical and developmental subject. Their approach presumes a "dialogical subject" because it rejects a monological and transcendental theory of the subject, that is, one based on an abstract, metaphysical "I" that individualistically "knows" the world. (p. ix)

In this paper, I will expand on Endres's as well as Morrow and Torres's works and take their suggestion for a dialogical turn as a point of departure. My argument, which is not explicitly articulated in their works, is that Habermas's explication of communicative parameters (terms loosely defined for the purpose of this paper), that is, validity claims, formal-pragmatic worlds, and the ideal speech situation, sheds light on the intricate relationship between the act of critique and the communicative act of reaching understanding. More importantly, the communicative parameters, which are implicitly presupposed and quite often elusive of our awareness, have a close relevance to the grounds or criteria for evaluating critique.

Rethinking Critique

The issue about critique, upon a closer look, is at least twofold. On the one hand, a purely critical approach to literacy is criticized for a narrow focus on political and economic ends and fails to address other aspects one experiences in transaction with literacy (e.g., see Rosenblatt, 2005 for details on the transactional theory of reading). A shift from a critical to a dialogical literacy takes into account both critical and non-critical dimensions. Therefore, a dialogical literacy is broader in scope than a purely critical approach to literacy.

On the other hand, even if the act of critique is cast under the overarching act of reaching understanding in a dialogical model, still the fundamental question about critique is left unaddressed – how do we justify critique? Or how can we show that one critique is more credible

than another? The question is concerned with the criteria used for evaluating critique. This question, I believe, lies in the crux of the issue about critique. It is important because conscious liberation and social transformation are not likely to occur unless the critique against false ideologies and unjust social oppression is validated or believed to be true. Yet, simply subsuming critique under a dialogical model orientated toward reaching understanding does not resolve the basic problem of how to justify critique. At least, more articulation should be provided with regard to how critique is evaluated within a dialogical paradigm.

In the literature of critical literacy/pedagogy, it is not uncommon to see people divided, without much justification, into two distinct groups: the *dominant* and the *oppressed*. It is often taken for granted that these two groups somehow already exist. And what is often claimed is that literacy education should be geared toward empowering the oppressed to resist the dominant. It seems that once people are put into two distinct categories, the so-called oppressed group automatically assumes the name of victims and is entitled to resisting the injustice imposed by the dominant group. However, before we can claim that one group is oppressed by another, it is necessary to examine carefully who are dominating and who are oppressed.

In fact, separating people into two discrete groups is already a false dichotomy. There is always heterogeneity within a group. For example, a Latino male may be among the oppressed population in American society due to his ethnic background. However, this same male may also be a chauvinist husband at home. Thus he can be categorized as a victim for one thing and as an oppressor for another. Similarly, examples of nuanced experiences of oppression and struggle can happen within the dominant group. According to Carr and Lund (2007):

Francophones have historical differences with Anglophones in Canada, the Catholics and the Protestants have been at loggerheads for years in Northern Ireland, the Hungarian minority has not had a favorable experience with the majority Romanian population, and the Basque population has been involved in a separatist movement in Spain for generations. (p. 3)

Caucasians, as opposed to blacks and other minority groups, are often portrayed as the dominate group. Yet, there exists diversity in language, religion, and political orientations even in this seemingly homogenous group which is subject to further differentiation. As a result, being in a certain group does not automatically legitimate or negate one's critique because the grouping is usually simplistically done and fails to take into

account a complex web of relationships among race, culture, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, language, and so forth.

We should not simplistically categorize people into groups and then base the legitimacy of their critique on which group they belong to. To justify critique, our focus should switch from people to critique. We need a framework that allows us to evaluate critique. The credibility of critique itself should serve as the basis on which to determine who are truly marginalized and in what context, because we are in a complex society where we can be dominating in one occasion and oppressed in another. Also, we can be oppressors, or otherwise victims, in multiple occasions.

Though a dialogical literacy does not take a step further in suggesting the criteria for evaluating critique, it points to a promising direction, that is, a dialogical paradigm. I will argue that Habermas's theory of communicative action, a dialogical paradigm, does lay out communicative parameters that can be appropriated to evaluate critique. However, it is certainly not my purpose to develop an exegesis of Habermas's theory in this paper. To penetrate the intricate veils of it would require an essay of its own. Suffice it here to underscore some of its salient features, or what I call communicative parameters, that are related to the theme of our interest. In what follows, I will focus on Habermas's conceptions of validity claims, formal-pragmatic worlds, and the ideal speech situation as they are tied directly to critique.

Communicative Parameters

Habermas is a contemporary philosopher well known for his contribution to critical theory. The theory of communicative action is the core of his social theory which expands to include many diverse things such as a theory of the social system and historical change, a theory of the ontogenesis and phylogenesis of symbolic consciousness, and much more. It is a very broad social theory integrated through the concept of communicative action. To gain a thorough discussion, interested readers can refer to his two-volume work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987).

The theory of communicative action, or the action theory, is a dialogical paradigm where two or more sentient beings or subjects communicate with each other. The subject assumes a performative role in communicative action oriented toward understanding. The subject is not a sovereign, authoritative observer, but an actor who communicates

with other subjects and whose being, as an actor, requires other subjects and the internalization of other subject positions. Consequently, his theory is an action-based dialogical paradigm where two or more subjects try to understand the validity claims made in communicative action.

Validity Claims

Instead of "truth," Habermas uses "validity" to emphasize that truth should not be perceived monologically, but contested and validated communicatively. A claim made in communicative action is a claim to validity, and Habermas argues that every meaningful act carries validity claims. "A validity claim is equivalent to the assertion that the conditions for the validity of an utterance are fulfilled" (1984, p. 38). Specifically, a validity claim is an assertion made by a speaker that his or her utterance is of "truth, truthfulness, and rightness" (Habermas, 1998, p. 24). However, the speaker's assertion or validity claim can be received with a "yes," a "no," or abstention, depending on the extent to which the hearer is convinced. And, in the case of each claim, support can be given only: Validity cannot be established once and for all. It is fallible.

Formal-Pragmatic Worlds

The question is how the actors determine whether the validity claims are true, truthful (sincere), or right. What are the criteria for evaluating the claims? Habermas would respond that the claims made in each meaningful act can be divided into three categories, and that each category has its own criterion for validation or "vindication" in Habermas's term. The three categories, or what Habermas calls three formal-pragmatic worlds, consist of objective, subjective, and normative claims:

The objective world (as the totality of all entities about which true statements are possible); the social [normative] world (as the totality of all legitimately regulated interpersonal relations); [and] the subjective world (as the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access). (1984, p. 100)

To the objective claims there is multiple access, whereas there is only privileged access to the subjective claims. Therefore, the criteria for the objective and the subjective claims are multiple and privileged access respectively. The criterion for the normative claims is shared human

interests. Habermas argues that the formal-pragmatic worlds are presupposed and referenced by the actors in communicative action. Depending on which formal-pragmatic world a validity claim belongs to, it is evaluated by one of the three criteria.

Ideal Speech Situation

In addition, the ideal speech situation, according to Habermas, is presupposed by the actors. In her editorial introduction to Habermas's *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, Cooke states that the ideal speech situation includes the conditions "that participants are motivated only by the force of the better argument, that all competent parties are entitled to participate on equal terms in discussion, that no relevant argument is suppressed or excluded, and so on" (1998, p. 14). The ideal speech situation is an ideal state where undistorted communication takes place. In effect, all human speech acts, even in their systematically distorted forms, presuppose such a situation. It is ideal because it can never be reached empirically. Nevertheless, as a necessarily presupposed standard, the ideal speech situation is approximated and referenced by every communicative act.

It is true that in reality not everyone desires to have the ideal speech situation. However, the fact that it is necessarily presupposed does not change even though it is sometimes intentionally distorted. The conditions of the ideal speech situation are not an empirical goal to attain, but serve as an idealizing guideline for regulating rational argumentation. For those who distort communicative action intentionally, their intention can be recognized as it violates the ideal speech situation. Therefore, whether or not the ideal speech situation is wished for, it is a presupposed standard for argumentation in communicative action.

Fallibilism

One thing that needs to be noted is that validity claims are always fallible. This is because they are constituted under the presupposition of ideal conditions. These conditions would ultimately mean an eternal omniscient audience cognizant of all historical and cultural changes in human history (see Carspecken, 2003 for a detailed discussion). And these ideal conditions are presupposed in a way similar to the presupposition of the ideal speech situation and impossible to reach empirically within communicative situations. If they can be reached at

all, they would be a religious experience that by its very nature cannot be represented communicatively. Consequently, even if consensus is reached now, it may change as, for example, new discoveries are made in the future. Nevertheless, validity claims, though fallible, are oriented toward the ideal conditions, which serve as standards for evaluating the claims.

An Example of Communicative Action

With the basic parameters of communicative action being described, now let us look at an example to see how they all operate in action. Suppose you and I were discussing a research project in my office when a black male with a walkman passed by, rapping and dancing. Being disturbed, I grumbled, "Black students are all like that." To my comment, you might reply, "Is he a student?" It can be inferred that you disagreed with me on an objective claim. What looked like a student to me did not appear so to you. Since the criterion for evaluating an objective claim is multiple access, we could go and check whether the male was a student, whether he had a student ID, or whether he was taking any classes, and so on.

To the same comment, you might say, "You don't like black students, do you?" This time you were curious about whether or not I liked black students. What was thematized was no longer the identity of the passerby, but my personal opinion about black students. Your response foregrounded a subjective claim I made about my evaluation of black students. The criterion for evaluating a subjective claim is privileged access. As a result, I am the only person who ultimately knows whether or not the subjective claim I made is truthful, that is, whether or not I like black students.

Another possible response from you might be: "Oh, yeah? But shouldn't we focus on our project?" You seemed to argue that our attention should focus on the project rather than the passerby. Therefore, my normative claim (usually related to what is right or wrong, what is good or bad, or what should be or should not be) about the timing and setting for such a conversation was questioned. The criterion for evaluating a normative claim is shared interests, and you didn't think it met our mutual interests in diverging to a conversation about black students in the middle of the discussion of our research project.

Obviously, these three types of responses are purposely made up, though they can surely happen in reality, to emphasize the point that once disagreement or misunderstanding occurs, one or more validity claims are foregrounded and contested between actors. If my goal is to reach understanding, I should be ready to give reasons to support my validity claim. I will defend my argument if you disagree, or consent to your counter-argument if your reason makes more sense to me. This back-and-forth communicative action has to presuppose the three formal-pragmatic worlds in order for the actors to tell what type of claim the other party foregrounds and challenges. The actors also have to presuppose the ideal speech situation as an ideal case for communication to go on and for consensus to be reached.

How Does All This Relate to Critique?

Recall that the major questions this paper attempts to address are: What is the relationship between critique and reaching understanding? And how is critique evaluated? In this section, I will show that Habermas's communicative parameters discussed previously provide a promising framework for approaching these two questions.

What is the relationship between critique and reaching understanding? This question involves the concept of truth or validity directly. Critique cannot be made unless we can tell what is true from false, right from wrong, good from bad, and truthful from insincere. It is important that, to critique, the concept of truth be kept intact. In fact, the term validity, instead of truth, is used to emphasize the formal-pragmatic constitution of the truth, rightness, and sincerity concepts. Truth, or to be more general validity, in this sense is internal to meaning. And to understand meaning is to understand the claim to validity because every act of meaning is accompanied by validity claims. Now since critique involves understanding meaning – in order to critique what you say, for example, I have to understand what you mean in the first place – critique is thus connected to understanding the claim to validity. That is, one cannot critique without being able to understand and evaluate the validity claim underlying the critique. As a result, from the perspective of Habermas's action theory, the act of critique is equivalent to the act of reaching understanding in the sense that both involve the understanding and evaluation of validity claims. In addition, reaching understanding is broader than, and subsumes, critique for in

reaching understanding, we can critique, or otherwise agree, depending on whether or not the claim is well supported with reasons.

The second question "How is critique evaluated?" is closely related to the first question as the answer to the first question also throws light on the second question. Once the connection between reaching understanding and critique is established, the criteria for evaluating validity claims made in communicative action oriented toward reaching understanding are also applicable in evaluating validity claims embedded in the critique. Therefore, critique grounded in the action theory can now be evaluated by the criteria of multiple access, privileged access, and shared interests. For instance, "men are paid more than women in equivalent jobs" is a critique concerned with gender bias and foregrounds the objective domain. Whether men are paid more than women is something subject to multiple access. Data on men's and women's wages and salaries can be collected from multiple sources to confirm or negate the claim of the critique.

"I don't like canonical literature,"¹ on the other hand, is a critical comment directed primarily toward the subjective domain. Your personal taste of canonical literature is something to which only you have access. We may check how many canonical books you have in your bookcase. We may ask your students whether you use any canonical literature in the classroom. We may even look at your facial expression when you are reading a canonical book and try to tell if you like it or not. Despite all this, you are the only one who ultimately knows your taste about books. Examining multiple sources in evaluating your subjective claim still resists the understanding of your book taste as the criterion for evaluating a subjective claim is not multiple access, but privileged access.

A critique thematizing a normative domain can be: "We shouldn't talk about religious beliefs in school." When "should" or "shouldn't"; "ought to" or "ought not to"; "right" or "wrong"; or "good" or "bad" is used in a critical statement, normative claims are foregrounded. The criterion for evaluation is shared interests. In this case, we can discuss whether talking about religious beliefs in school meets our mutual interests. Of course, the "we" here is not limited to two people. It can consist of all who are involved and may include people from different cultures.

In addition, critique presupposes the ideal speech situation. The validity claim underlying a critique should be contested under the ideal conditions where all participants are not threatened by coercive power. In reality, the ideal speech situation may not be realized. However,

when it is violated, we are aware that the agreement reached does not represent true consensus. Suppose I mentioned in class that men are paid more than women in equivalent jobs. You raised your hand and questioned, "Do you mean every kind of job?" Showing little patience and without addressing your question, I replied, "Didn't you hear me? Should I say that again?" In a menacing tone, I continued, "I'm afraid you will fail this course if you continue to ask questions like that." Scared of failing my course, you stopped questioning. "I'm sorry," you said. "I apologize for my absent-mindedness." In this example, the ideal speech situation was violated and our communicative action was terminated not because consensus was reached but because coercive power was exercised. As a professor, I used my power to force you to agree with me. However, even though the ideal speech situation could not be achieved, you and even I were aware of that. We both knew that you were forced to agree with me and that the claim I made in my statement was not validated communicatively.

More on Critique

By relocating critique within Habermas's action theory, the focus is shifted from the people who make the critique to the critique itself. That is, we don't evaluate critique based on who makes it, but on the validity claim of the critique. This is a very important step forward for critical literacy/pedagogy in that it does not only provide a more critical view on critique, but it also suggests criteria for evaluating it. Critique is no longer taken for granted but subject to communicative argumentation with the ideal speech situation presupposed.

In addition, the concept of validity claims underlying a critique is intertwined with social or political oppression and resistance. When we critique, we make a validity claim. Similarly, social policy, for instance, inevitably carries a claim that conformity to it is valid. However, the legitimacy of the claim is subject to contestation. If the claim is not validated, people will be at least aware of it or even take concrete political action against it. Take the "No Child Left Behind Act" for example. It claims that its primary purpose is to help all children become literate. Funding is granted to schools that take due responsibility and action to make this happen. However, if its claim is proved problematic, or if funding is used as a means to distort communicative exchanges between policy makers and implementers, those who are unjustly impacted will be at least aware of it though they may not necessarily take progressive political action. In short,

Habermas's communicative parameters, especially the idea of validity claims, suggest a feasible way of evaluating critique as well as empowering us against social or political oppression.

Some critical literacy theorists, of course, are aware of and concerned about the problematic of critique. They believe that critique should not simply be a relativistic rhetoric, but a theoretically-based act that can be implemented to result in social or political reforms. For example, Peter McLaren, an adamant advocate of critical literacy/pedagogy, certainly understands the importance of providing a sound theoretical grounding for critique. He distinguishes a resistance postmodernism from a ludic postmodernism. McLaren argues that a ludic postmodernism's free-floating, relativistic critique of the dominant discourse does not justify the claim that literacy should be critical. Instead, a resistance postmodernism accounts for a shift from a simply textual play of signifiers to a serious attitude toward social reality (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). It is certainly not my intention here to comment on "postmodernism," a term that involves a great deal of debate and is elusive to pin down. I simply want to point out that critique without "a normative foundation (i.e., a basis for distinguishing between oppressive and liberatory social relations)" is vulnerable to inaction (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 458). Ungrounded critique is nothing but a rhetoric which is deprived of transformative power.

Similarly, James Gee recognizes the importance of taking a critical approach toward literacy. He is also concerned about the lack of a normative foundation to ground critique:

If no sign system can be validated as against any other, if all sign systems are rooted simply in historically derived social practices instantiating the desires and claims to power of various groups, then how can we morally condemn the school's (and society's) treatment of the black child whose story we have seen above? How, indeed, can this black child – and her group – come to form a viable theory and practice resistance? (1993, p. 291)

According to Gee, to morally condemn and resist social injustice, we need "something" to justify our critique. In face of such a dilemma, he has suggested two conceptual principles that serve as the basis of ethical human discourse:

[First,] that something would harm someone else (deprive them of what they or the society they are in view as "goods") is always a good reason not to do it. [Second,] one always has the ethical obligation to try to explicate (render overt and conscious) any social

practice that there is reason to believe advantages oneself or one's group over other people or other groups . (1993, pp. 292-293)

Gee's specification of the principles governing ethical human discourse should be applauded. The principles he suggests have a close relevance to the normative foundation McLaren points out. Both of them feel the urge to provide a normative grounding for critique. For Gee, the validity of critique is based on the criterion of not harming someone else. What we do should not advantage one individual/group over another. Does this ring a bell? Yes, it reminds us of the criterion for normative claims, that is, shared interests. Doing something not to harm someone else is showing concern about someone else's interests. Therefore, Gee and Habermas seem to converge in their view on the normative foundation.

In fact, the criteria Habermas suggests for evaluating the validity claims of a critique, or to be more general, of a communicative act, are more detailed than Gee's principles. As mentioned previously, validity claims can be classified into three categories: objective, subjective, and normative claims; and the criteria for them are multiple access, privileged access, and shared interests, respectively. Gee's principles are concerned with shared interests and thus cover only the normative claims while the objective and subjective claims are not addressed. As a result, a dialogical literacy grounded in Habermas's action theory presents a more comprehensive picture of how to justify critique.

Freire is also concerned about the problematic of critique. He has been mentioned in the beginning of this paper as a thinker/pedagogue who has a tremendous impact on critical literacy. Morrow and Torres (2002) did an extensive comparative study on Freire and Habermas and argued that they are similar in four respects. First, both work within a philosophy of social science that takes into account interpretive dimensions as well as structural contexts of social inquiry. Second, both "presuppose a critical theory of society that links education, social domination, and cultural reproduction" (p. 15). Third, their theories involve a dialogical paradigm where subjects engage in communicative action rather than a monological paradigm that features a lone, authoritative subject trying to conceptualize knowledge and truth. Finally, they share a concern with a dialogical and reflexive understanding of learning that has profound implications for individual autonomy, democratization processes, and social movements. Nevertheless, Freire and Habermas also differ in several respects. For example, there are considerable differences in their academic training and careers. In addition, Habermas is usually characterized as "a

mandarin, esoteric German philosopher" while Freire is often perceived as "a moralistic and rhetorical traditional Latin American *pensador*" (Morrow & Torres, 2002, p. 4). In comparing Freire and Habermas, I want to focus on the problematic of critique since it is the major interest of this paper. Specifically, I will briefly discuss Freire's view on critique and how his view can be elaborated and strengthened by Habermas's concept of validity claims.

Freire's view (1970) on critique is closely tied to how he divides consciousness into three stages: semi-intransitive consciousness, naïve transitive consciousness, and critical transitive consciousness (1970). Semi-intransitive can be loosely interpreted as false consciousness; critical transitive consciousness as critical consciousness; and naïve transitive consciousness as the stage in between. Freire believes that the end of critical literacy/pedagogy is to help learners escape from false consciousness and progress toward critical consciousness. And the means to this end is through conscientization "which is identified with cultural action for freedom" (Freire, 1985, p. 160). Conscientization involves demystifying false consciousness and furthering critical consciousness. In this sense, conscientization is equivalent to the ability to critique, that is, the ability to think critically.

Despite the fact that Freire points out the importance of conscientization, the question of how to ground critique is little touched on. He does not lay out specific criteria for justifying a critique. This is where Habermas's concept of validity claims can be appropriated to strengthen Freire's argument. As discussed previously, validity claims are differentiated and evaluated according to different criteria. Freire's conscientization relocated within Habermas's idea of validity claims can be interpreted as the ability to differentiate and justify validity claims. As a result, Freire's view on critique perceived from the slant of this reformulated conscientization is not only theoretically enhanced but practically applicable.

Conclusion

The primary concern of this paper was with the problematic of critique in critical literacy. I argued that the legitimacy of critique is usually backgrounded and is not given due thought. To justify it, critique should be grounded in a framework that addresses criteria for evaluating the claims of the critique. In an attempt to resolve this issue, a dialogical turn taken by some critical literacy theorists does point to a promising direction, but is not specific enough in providing a theoretical grounding

for evaluating critique. I argued that Habermas's communicative parameters adumbrate a viable and detailed framework that can be borrowed to address what is lacking in critique. By relocating the act of critique within a more general act of reaching understanding, the criteria used for evaluating the validity claims of a communicative act oriented toward reaching understanding can also be appropriated to evaluate the validity claims of a critique. Specifically, multiple access is the principle for evaluating objective claims, privileged access for subjective claims, and shared interests for normative claims. The need to ground critique is also echoed by Bernstein (1985) in his comment on Habermas's action theory: "The very intelligibility of emancipatory critique – if it is to escape the charge of being arbitrary and relativistic – requires a clarification and justification of its normative foundations. This is what the theory of communicative action seeks to establish" (p. 17).

The critique meant by Bernstein is more general and not limited particularly to the critique in critical literacy. However, he clearly points out the link between critique and Habermas's action theory, which is also the central argument of this paper.

As a final note, I did not mean to present Habermas's action theory as an impeccable framework that is superior to other theories. Instead, more critical conversations are welcome to better our understanding of critique in critical literacy. In fact, as validity claims are fallible, so is Habermas's action theory. His work is dense and difficult to understand as he continuously revises his theory in response to criticism. Interestingly, before any competing arguments can be understood and consented to, they have to be made with a presupposition of the communicative parameters acknowledged and articulated by Habermas's action theory. In this sense, what Habermas has done is not creating a brand new theory, but articulating and making explicit what we presuppose and do daily in our communicative action though, most of the times, we do it unwittingly. Consequently, as long as our research community remains as an open forum where the communicative parameters are presupposed, we let open a door to a learning process. The process is communicative, critical, and ongoing as it resembles the very nature of a dialogical communicative act.

NOTES

1. Canonical literature denotes "a group of literary works that are generally accepted as representing a field" (Wiktionary, 2008, English section, *para.* 4). For example, the works of Shakespeare that have been accepted as authentic are called the Shakespeare canon.

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