Activist Literacy and Jurgen Habermas: Identifying and Evaluating Validity Claims

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines activist literacy through the lens of Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. It proposes that Habermas's criteria used to evaluate validity claims in communicative action can be appropriated to supplement what is lacking in activist literacy. An analysis of both a written text and an oral text is presented to show how validity claims are identified and evaluated in relation to activist literacy. This paper ends with a discussion of the implications of Habermas's theory of communicative action for activist literacy.

Keywords: activist literacy, literacy education, text analysis, Jurgen Habermas, theory of communicative action

RESUMÉ: Dans cet article, nous examinons la littératie activiste par moyen de la théorie d'action communicative de Jurgen Habermas. Nous proposons que les critères de Habermas qui servent à évaluer les affirmations de validité dans l'action communicative peuvent servir aussi à informer ce qui manque dans la littératie activiste. Nous présentons une analyse d'un texte écrit ainsi que d'un texte oral pour montrer comment on identifie et évalue les affirmations de validité dans le domaine de la littératie activiste. L'article présente enfin une discussion des implications de la théorie de Habermas sur l'action communicative pour la littératie activiste.

Mots clés : la littératie activiste, l'éducation sur la littératie, l'analyse du texte, Jurgen Habermas, théorie de l'action communicative

Introduction

The term, activist literacy, is used to describe the theoretical perspectives and lived experiences of educators working at the intersection of activism and literacy to bring about social change in their schools and communities through literate practices and

counter-practices (Campano & Simon, 2010; Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012). For activist literacy educators, consciousness of inequality, though important, is only a starting point. They take a step further to challenge and resist social reproduction and develop literacy pedagogies to engage and transform communities. The literacy pedagogies, according to Humphrey (2013), "share an understanding of literacy that extends beyond school-sanctioned print media, a concern to create spaces for marginalized groups and a desire to expand the repertoire of students' resources for participating within and beyond schooling" (p. 115). In activist literacy projects, both educators and students collaborate critically and "agentively," a term borrowed from Hull and Stornaiulo (2010), to achieve their social and political goals.

An example of activist literacy can be found in Montero, Bice-Zaugg, Marsh, and Cummins' (2013) study where First Nations (Aboriginal) students' identities were validated through visual and literary texts. Specifically, two First Nations high school students in Canada used "identity texts," paintings and poems in this case, to express what it meant to be young First Nations adults living in an urban community (Cummins & Early, 2011). The identity texts helped the students "form concrete understandings of their life experiences as rooted in social, cultural, political understandings of their life stories… and verbalize important focal points for their present and future lives" (Montero et. al., 2013, p. 80). This study demonstrates how activist literacy educators collaborated with their students in developing a curriculum that tapped into the students' cultural resources. Both the educators and the students played an important role in the process of teaching and learning where the traditional top-down hierarchical instruction was replaced by the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and students. In addition, the definition of literacy was broadened to include not only written texts but also visual representations such as paintings.

Crisco (2009) agrees that activist literacy is action-oriented. She suggests that activist literacy "goes beyond the notion of 'practice' as an act or activity and takes up the values, habits of mind, and approaches activists take toward community contexts" (Crisco, 2009, p. 37). In other words, activist literacy is not simply doing activities in a school setting, but includes all the thinking, planning, decision-making, and reflection that involve all community stakeholders. For Crisco, "community" is a plural concept:

> I argue that 'community' is a metaphor for the variety of groups within a democratic society that represent particular values and

> ideas. Activists do not respond to individuals; they respond to groups of people who have similar ideas that are located within our social structures. Thus arguing for activist literacy in the 'community'—or taking action in the 'community'—allows for a broader understanding of the variety of spaces where activism can take place and it helps students recognize that values and ideas of individuals are located within social structures. (Crisco, 2009, p. 41)

While there are an increasing number of theoretical and practical accounts of activist literacy, a discourse on the criteria for activist literacy is still scanty in the literature. There is little scholarly discussion of the criteria used to identify and investigate ideologies[1] and injustices in order to justify action taken and change enacted on behalf of the disenfranchised through activist literacy. Therefore, this paper proposes that the criteria set forth by Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1987) in his theory of communicative action (TCA) provide viable grounds for activist literacy to examine validity claims made in texts (broadly defined in this paper to include print and non-print texts) as well as in sociocultural norms and practices.

In what follows, a brief review of Habermas's TCA will be presented first. The review is not meant to cover TCA in its entirety, but to explicate the concepts of validity claims and criteria in TCA that are applicable to activist literacy. Second, to demonstrate how validity claims and their corresponding criteria play out in communicative action, two types of text, i.e., a print text (a book) and a non-print text (a conversation), will be analyzed. The text analysis is also intended to show that Habermas's framework can be used to evaluate different kinds of text that activist literacy educators and learners employ to express their life experiences and stories. Finally, three implications for activist literacy viewed from the Habermasian perspective will be made. The implications include (1) identifying ideologies, (2) investigating cultural diversity, and (3) learning continuously as a community. Ideologies, cultural diversity, and communities are the themes brought up in the discussion of the definition of activist literacy in the beginning of this paper. They will be examined through a Habermasian lens to shed light on our understanding of activist literacy.

Validity Claims and Criteria

Habermas uses "validity," instead of "truth" to emphasize that truth should not be perceived monologically, but contested and validated dialogically or communicatively. A validity claim, according to Habermas (1984), is equivalent to "the assertion that

the conditions for the validity of an utterance are fulfilled" (p. 38). In other words, a validity claim is an assertion made by an actor that his/her utterance is of "truth, truthfulness, and rightness" (Habermas, 1998, p. 24). The actor's assertion or validity claim can be accepted, refuted, or abstained from, depending on the extent to which the interlocutor is convinced. In the case of each claim, support can be given only. Validity cannot be established once and for all. It is fallible.

The question is how the actors determine whether the validity claims are true, truthful (sincere), and right. That is, what are the criteria used to evaluate the claims? Habermas suggests that the claims made in each meaningful act can be divided into three categories and that each category has its own criterion for validating the claims. 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). (Habermas, 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 access and privileged access respectively. The criterion for the normative claims is shared interests.

Examples of Identifying and Evaluating Validity Claims: Print and Non-Print Texts

Now let us look at two examples to see how the validity claims and criteria play out in communicative action. The first example presents an analysis of a written text while a conversation is examined in the second example. Both of the examples show how Habermas's framework can be used to identify and evaluate validity claims made in different types of text.

Print Text: A Book

The first example is concerned with a written text. *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein (1992) will be discussed to illustrate how Habermas's framework can be used to examine a written text. *The Giving Tree* features a story about a tree and a boy. The tree is personified and has a dialogue with the boy. The

boy comes to the tree to eat her apples, swing from her branches, slide down her trunk… and the tree is happy. As the boy grows older, he begins to want more from the tree. The tree lets him cut off her branches to build a house and even cut down her trunk to make a boat. Finally, the tree ends up with nothing but an old stump on which the boy (now an old man) can sit and rest. Yet the tree is happy with all she has done for the boy.

The following is an excerpt from *The Giving Tree* that will be analyzed from the Habermasian perspective:

> "I don't need very much now," said the boy, "just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired." "Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, "an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." And the boy did. And the tree was happy.

The tree said, "Well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." There are at least two claims made by the tree in the above sentence. First, the tree claims that she is no longer a tall tree with branches and leaves, but an old stump. This is a claim made in the objective domain and open to repeated observations. The criterion for evaluating this objective claim is multiple access. The boy can take a look at the tree and see if she is a stump. The readers can also look at the illustration and find out if there is a picture of a stump presented in the book. In other words, the validity of the tree's claim as a stump can be assessed through objectively repeated observations.

A second claim made in the above sentence is a normative claim. Specifically, when the tree says that an old stump is good for sitting and resting, she makes a normative claim (i.e., an assertion that something is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, should or should not be, etc.). The tree invites the boy to sit on the stump (i.e., herself) to rest and expects the boy to agree with her because the boy says that he is very tired. Whether the tree's normative claim is valid or not is evaluated by the principle of shared interests. If the boy agrees that it meets his own interest to sit on the stump, he is likely to sit on the stump and confirm the validity of the tree's claim. It may also meet the tree's interest to have the boy sit on herself because she loves him and wants him to get some rest.

In response to the tree's invitation to sit on the stump, the boy did. The reaction of the tree at the end of the book is: "And the tree was happy." This concluding sentence features a subjective claim that the tree is happy. It is subjective because happiness is a personal feeling that varies from person to person. One can feel

happy whether he/she is rich or poor, healthy or sick, young or old, laughing or crying. It is a personal feeling that is neither visible through multiple observations nor based on mutual interests, but limited to privileged access. In this case, only the tree has privileged access to her own feeling and knows whether she is happy or not. The boy can speculate about the tree's feeling, but never knows for sure whether the tree is happy.

Suppose that, instead of being grateful, the boy does not appreciate what the tree has done for him. This makes the tree regret all the sacrifices (e.g., letting the boy cut down her branches and trunk to build a house and make a boat) she has made for the boy. Instead of being happy, she is upset. This is an example where the fallibility of a validity claim is demonstrated. Specifically, the claim that the tree is happy is replaced with a new claim that the tree is upset after more information is given about how the boy feels toward what the tree has done for him.

Non-Print Text: A Conversation

Habermas's framework can be also used to examine validity claims made in a non-print text, for example, a conversation. Suppose that I taught a critical reading class in college and you were one of my students. There was a group project for this class. You approached me and asked, "Can I work with Dan on the group project?" Your question thematized a claim made in the objective domain that there was another student named Dan in my class with whom you wanted to work on the group project. To find out whether your claim was true or not, I could look at my class roster to see if Dan was in my class. I could also ask you and Dan to meet with me face to face to make sure that he was in my class and wanted to work with you. The criterion used to evaluate the validity of your claim was multiple access. Specifically, the objective claim you made was open to multiple observations. I or more people, if available, could be asked to check if Dan was in my class.

With my permission, you and Dan began to work on the project and had a topic you were interested in exploring, but wanted to make sure that I liked it as well. Therefore, you and Dan made an appointment to meet with me in my office. You explained to me that both you and Dan enjoyed working with preschoolers and wanted to research how the preschoolers learned to read. "Is that something we can do for our group project?" you asked. Without hesitation, I said, "That's a great idea! I like it." In my response, a subjective claim was foregrounded. I claimed that I liked your idea. The criterion for evaluating a subjective claim was

privileged access. In this case, I was the only person that ultimately knew whether the subjective claim (i.e., whether I liked your idea) I made was truthful. I might tell you how smart you and Dan were and how interesting your group project would be. However, such an act could be performed without revealing the true state of my preference. My objectively observable behavior could not reflect my preference, which was not accessible to anyone but me. This was a claim about my personal preference to which only I had privileged access.

After a few days, you came to my office, "Professor, do you have a minute?" Seeing you standing at the door, I smiled, "Yes. Come in and have a seat." "How can I help you?" I inquired. "It is about the group project," you uttered slowly. You went on to explain that it was almost impossible for you and Dan to meet, much less work together on the project, due to the conflicts of your and Dan's work schedules. At the end, you said, "I probably should find a different partner for the group project." Your last statement consisted of a normative claim which suggested that you should find a different partner. Recall that "right," "wrong," "good," "bad," "appropriate," "inappropriate," "should," "should not," etc. are key words used in a normative claim. You believed that it was better for you and Dan as well to work with someone else because your schedules were so different that you and Dan could hardly find time to meet and work together. The criterion for evaluating a normative claim was shared interests. You believed that it met your and Dan's mutual interests not to work together on the project. A normative claim is contested by finding a consensus between the parties in dispute and then arguing from it toward the norm or value position in disagreement. For example, a possible consensus between you and Dan could be that meeting face to face was important to get the project done. Based on this consensus, you could then argue that since you and Dan could not meet face to face, it would be better for you and Dan not to work together as a group.

The above example also shows that validity claims are fallible when a new discovery is made. Specifically, you thought at first that it was a good idea to work with Dan on the group project because both of you shared the same interest in working with preschoolers on reading. Yet you found out later that you and Dan could hardly meet for the group project due to your work schedules. Therefore, you changed your mind and claimed that you probably should find a different partner.

Implications for Activist Literacy

After seeing examples of Habermas's validity claims and their respective criteria in action, we are ready to explore how Habermas's TCA informs activist literacy. In what follows, I will discuss three implications for activist literacy viewed from the Habermasian perspective.

Identifying Ideologies

As discussed in the beginning of this paper, activist literacy is characterized by its purpose to challenge ideologies and empower the disenfranchised to promote social justice through literate practices. Ideologies are distorted norms or values that create a misconception of, or misbelief about, an object or a certain group of people (Lee, 2009). Ideologies can be thought of as illegitimate validity claims, i.e., validity claims that are not supported with good reasons. Therefore, Habermas's TCA is instrumental in helping activist literacy educators/learners identify and investigate ideologies based on the criteria used to evaluate different types of validity claims.

In the United States, for example, whether a school is good or not is usually evaluated by its standardized test scores. The school test scores can be found on the website of the State Department of Education. The consequence of the test-driven ideology in defining a good school is a test-oriented curriculum imposed top down on all students, including culturally diverse students. While the test score is important, putting so much weight on this numerical indicator is likely to distort the definition of a good school. Other factors, such as teachers' genuine care for students, students' performance on non-tested subjects (e.g., art, music, and sports), and the school's commitment to the community like serving culturally diverse students or students in high poverty areas, are also important and should be taken into consideration. This is an example of an ideology or a misconception about a good school based in a reductionist way on students' performance on the standardized test. Recall that, according to Habermas, whether a school is good or not is a claim made in the normative domain. The criterion to evaluate a normative claim is shared interests. Therefore, to determine the validity of this claim calls for the contestation of all stakeholders (school administrators, teachers, parents, students, community members, etc.) until a consensus based on their shared interests is reached. This dialogical communicative action is crucial to the integration of a society, but often reduced to, if not replaced by, a systemic (non-

communicative) force that results in a distorted value judgment, in this case, a misconception about a good school.

Investigating Cultural Diversity

Another aspect of activist literacy is geared toward engaging the disenfranchised in projects that draw on their cultural knowledge base. This aspect is aligned with culturally responsive education (Ladson-Billings, 2000a, 2000b, 2005) where the cultural and linguistic resources of minority students are incorporated into the curriculum so that the students can "see" themselves in the curriculum and thus feel valued in the classroom. Instead of treating minority students negatively as corruptions of the White culture, participating in an oppositional, counter-productive culture, the culturally responsive approach, according to Ogbu (1987), views minority students positively as possessing a distinctive, valuable culture. Similarly, activist literacy educators' effort to incorporate minority students' culture into the curriculum helps the students see their role and prominence in education. Therefore, embracing diversity is crucial to the agenda of activist literacy.

Yet Nieto (2010) also warns us that because we are "concerned with equity and social justice, and because the basic values of different groups are often diametrically opposed, conflict is bound to occur" (p. 257). Specifically, activist literacy educators should understand that no culture, including that of minority students, is impeccable. Passively accepting the status quo of any culture takes the risk of perpetuating its ideologies. Therefore, it is important to assume an inclusive attitude toward a different culture. However, it is indisputably unreasonable to accept as legitimate, for example, the cultural view that women should not be as well educated as men. In this sense, Habermas's TCA helps to avoid the danger of romanticizing and embracing a culture blindly, but acknowledges that differences exist as different types of validity claims and should be examined critically according to their respective criteria. TCA does not look at whose culture it is, but what validity claims it makes, to determine its legitimacy.

Learning Continuously as a Community

Habermas proposes that validity claims are fallible and should be open to contestation among the participants in a democratic community. The fallibility of validity claims, instead of being viewed negatively, actually provides us with an opportunity to learn continuously. In parallel, Harste (2008) argues that we have to treat what we know carefully. He warns us that if we are

absolutely certain we are right, we will feel justified in everything we do. Then this sense of certitude can become an act of terrorism. We may, for example, mandate a particular reading program or assessment for everyone. Instead of relying on our past experience and believing that it is always right, we need to assume that at least one tenet in our existing theory is wrong. Harste (2008) argues that "knowing one tenet is wrong and not being sure of which tenet it is allows us to learn" (p. 35).

Similarly, educators, learners, and community stakeholders involved in activist literacy need to be constantly aware of the fallibility of their decisions as validity claims and remain open to different voices, suggestions, challenges, etc. to learn from one another and grow from what they are doing. All competent parties of activist literacy projects are entitled to participate on equal terms in discussion and motivated only by the force of the better argument. Each party should assume a co-researcher role, instead of an authoritative figure, and be ready to collaborate with one another on the common goal of advocating for the disfranchised.

Conclusion

Activist literacy foregrounds the importance of activism through literacy education. It suggests that literacy education should not be limited to skill-based instruction in school, but expanded to empower learners, especially the disfranchised group, to engage in action-oriented, culturally-responsive collaborative projects in the community. The goal is to promote social justice through literate practices and counter-practices. To achieve this goal, activist literacy participants have to be equipped with the ability to identify and resist/dismantle ideologies, i.e., illegitimate validity claims. In addition, the action taken to promote social justice should be justified according to the criteria agreed upon by all participants.

To accomplish the goal mentioned above, Habermas's TCA is argued in this paper to provide a viable framework to identify and evaluate validity claims and justify actions taken to promote social justice. TCA helps activist literacy eschew the danger of substituting one culture (e.g., the culture of the disfranchised) for another (e.g., the dominant culture) without critique. It also prevents activist literacy from falling into the fallacy that one culture is superior to the other. In addition, activist literacy educators/learners should be open to different voices and learn from one another continuously. This is because their decisions, like validity claims, are fallible and subject to on-going re-visitations.

Notes

1. Ideologies are distorted norms or values that create a misconception of, or misbelief about, an object or a certain group of people (Lee, 2009). For example, one ideology or misconception that many people have about the homeless is that they are homeless because they are lazy and do not want to work. Later in this paper, ideologies will be linked to Habermas's conception of validity claims. Specifically, ideologies are validity claims that are not supported with good reasons.

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