Communicative action

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Habermas and communicative action

Reflection is often allied to another term: critical thinking. This was defined by Scriven & Paul (1987):

"The intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness."

What is interesting is the way in which this notion of 'critical thinking' has become institutionalised, to some degree branded, and sold as a technique for both educators and other professionals. Therefore it is essential we look at some of the intellectual roots of this notion of critical thinking particularly through the work of Jurgen Habermas.

The generation of knowledge

While Dewey looks at reflection as a thinking process by which an individual comes to a greater understanding of a particular experience, Habermas approaches the notion of reflection from a slightly different angle. He was concerned with the generation of knowledge from experience. Groups and individuals who are disenfranchised by the dominant social and political order can, by reflecting on and examining their experiences of this social order, begin to generate ideas and propositions that are outside the accepted canon of knowledge.

Placing reflection as a means of developing not just an individual's understanding but creating a body of knowledge to challenge accepted ideas is, for Habermas, transformative and liberatory.

There are many contemporary examples of the ways in which groups in western society have, by exploring their experiences collectively, been able to develop new understandings that challenge the existing power relations. The consciousness raising groups (CR groups) that were characteristic of the Women's Movement in the early 1970s are the classic example of reflection on experience being used to generate radical ideas that challenged the status quo. Women worked collectively to explore and analyse what it meant to be a woman in a society where men occupied the dominant public roles while women were expected to concentrate on domestic and familial matters. It is from such reflections that ideas such as patriarchy took on new meanings of inequality and oppression. Similar processes are evident in the development of ideas by Gay Liberation or by Afro-Americans in their struggles for civil rights during this same period.

In the academic sphere as well, Habermas sought to establish the validity of reflection which could act as a challenge to the dominance of positivism. Habermas stresses the importance of this critical dimension which has been taken on in education, for example, by Carr and Kemmis (1986), in their influential book *Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and action research*. We need to examine some of the key aspects of the theoretical ideas put forward by Habermas.

Critical theory and communicative action

Habermas' theory of communication is developed within the broader context of critical theory. Habermas gives us two key ideas that can be useful in reflective practice: communicative action and emancipatory knowledge.

We will examine firstly a description of the main elements of Habermas' theory and in the next section relate these ideas to reflective practice.

What is critical theory?

Critical theory originally derived from Marxist perspectives, but has moved away from Marxism to develop a particular set of viewpoints on culture and society. Critical Theory dates back well over fifty years with Horkheimer's 1946 text, Traditional and Critical Theory. Originally, critical theory referred to the work of those within what was known as the 'Frankfurt School' (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse). Subsequently, critical theory has influenced a range of sociologists and philosophers, not least of all Habermas. Within the field of education, critical theory has influenced many writers who work within the area of critical pedagogy: Michael Apple, Paulo Freire, and Henry Giroux, Bell Hooks, Jonathan Kozol.

Critical theory is interdisciplinary: it draws its theoretical influences from disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, history, linguistics and economics. Critical theory was originally conceived to move away from the over-rationalisation found in the scientific method, with its attempts at objectivity and valued emphasis on neutral findings. Instead, critical theory accepts subjectivity and the personal perspective, concentrating on how people are disempowered politically, socially and culturally and how best they can be empowered. However, we will see that Habermas' theory of communicative action, while emphasising the individual's role in communication, does move somewhat away from the relevance of subjectivity towards an attempt to define rules of communication that will allow us to judge truthfulness and validity in what is said.

The concept of individual empowerment is central to critical theory. Empowerment comes through the individual's critical reflection on social and cultural relations. Social systems serve the interests of specific power groups or institutions: without an understanding of

how these power relations work, and how they subjugate the individual, people will remain disempowered. Through critical thought, and action, individuals can challenge dominant power relations.

Communicative action

Habermas details his theory of communication in his essay 'What is universal pragmatics?' His theory rests on the idea that through self-reflection and analysis of what we say during discussion we can develop a more objective theory of communication. His main concern is that human communication is prone to distortions and that these distortions arise from systems of domination. Any communication process will be shaped by the dominant ideologies within the particular socio-political system. Added to this source of distortion is the personal level of distortion: involuntarily we all make assumptions when speaking and listening. What we take from the message being transmitted will be shaped by our previous experiences, by our own assumptions about the person communicating and by own beliefs about the person and the topic.

If communication seems to be so shaped by the context and by our beliefs it raises a significant question about objectivity. How do we understand what someone says to us? How do we judge its validity? If we misunderstand social discourses then conflicts of meaning can arise. Through communicative action we can aim at mutual understanding.

Communicative action then becomes concerned with conflict resolution within our social world. Habermas' basic premise is that we are all actors within our own social worlds, yet we share social skills and knowledge with others who also belong to that social world. Our social world is therefore governed by norms of behaviour, speech, and knowledge. In theory, because we share such norms, we should be able to communicate - but those very norms can themselves lead to distortions because, as individuals, they lead us towards certain assumptions about what things count as acceptable and valid.

Habermas proposes a system of universal pragmatics that will help us to better understand communication. He believes that participation in dialogue allows for re-interpreting and re-perceiving situations. But in order to move towards re-interpretation we have to move away from distorted communication:

"communicative action stands in correspondence to the suppression of man's own nature. The institutional framework determines the extent of repression by the unreflected, 'natural' force of social dependence and political power, which is rooted in prior history and tradition Emancipation for the compulsion of internal nature succeeds to the degree that institutions based on force are replaced by an organisation of social relations that is bound only to communication free from domination."

(Habermas: 1986).

Habermas contends that we are all influenced by the social, cultural and historical traditions of our society: these influences are inescapable, however, they can be recognised and analysed. By so doing we can step outside these influences to reach a more objective understanding of modes of communication. Habermas argues that there are three aspects of our social world:

- Objective (facts independent of our thoughts);

- social (interpersonal relations);

- private (subjective world, private experience).

We can explore moral and ethical dilemmas by recognising three aspects that shape our views and understanding. The aim is to recognise these influences, and distance yourself from them so that you can view a communicative situation more objectively.

Yet Habermas is not concerned with all or any communicative situations. He is specifically concerned with forms of argumentation where a pair or group discuss whether a certain practice is acceptable or not. He is not concerned as much with discussions centred on abstract concepts. It is here that Habermas' theories begin to be useful for teachers: we can discuss aspects of our practice, particularly those that concern ethical or moral dimensions, using his concepts of communicative action and emancipatory knowledge. The first stage is, then, to recognise the three aspects of our social world and to be aware of their influences upon us.

In essence Habermas' theory has the potential to prompt us to look at how we construct our own realities, particularly within our professional identity. Construction of identity, and construction of our own notions of professional truth, are perhaps central to how we view our own professionalism as well as our professional interactions. And yet these constructions will inevitably be based on many assumptions and values that we may not always question.

On the pragmatics of communication

So far we have explored the notion of communicative action developed by Habermas in which the tension between recognising the importance and the influence of the subjective perspective within a sociopolitical context where some level of shared understandings exists, is vital.

Habermas (1986:35) claims an overtly political position in relation to communicative action:

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(Habermas: 1986).

The next stage of exploring the ideas put forward by Habermas is to think carefully about why any communication should be considered to have validity or truth. In this section we will look at some of the details found within Habermas' theory of communication. Here you will come across a number of specific terms that Habermas uses to describe communication.

Aspects of communicative action:

- the functions

- the elements

- the aims

- validity claims.

Elements of communication

In his work on the pragmatics of communication, Habermas (1968) states that what is spoken, that is our utterances, have what he describes as pragmatic functions. These functions are:

- to represent something;

- to express the speaker's intentions;

- to establish legitimate interpersonal relations (that is, relations not based on power or domination), (54).

Habermas also outlines four elements in the communication process the purpose of which is to ensure that these pragmatic functions can be achieved. These elements should be in place before communication can take place in a way that avoids distortions:

- saying something intelligibly;

- giving the listener something to understand;

- making yourself understandable;

- achieving understanding with the other person (24).

The aim of communication, in Habermas' view, is agreement. However, this must be worked towards. Habermas argues for four validity claims that we can bring to bear on any discursive communication:

- comprehensibility;

- truth;

- truthfulness;

- rightness (23).

In any communication the speaker and listener must comprehend one another. However, the credibility of the speaker rests on the extent to which the listener judges what is said to be true. But what is said needs to be stated within acceptable norms and values. Without a shared normative context, the speaker and the listener can fall into misunderstanding. If any of the validity claims are in doubt then communicative action will not be achieved.

What is spoken - the utterance - must, Habermas argues (1968:49) therefore be true for the participants and it must represent something 'in the world' be truthful in that it 'expresses something intended' (by the speaker) be right (that is, conform to recognisable social expectations).

We can therefore challenge whether what is said:

- is true;

- is socially or morally appropriate;

- truthfully reflects the speaker's feelings and motives;

- is clear and can be understood.

Ideologically bound communication

Habermas is concerned that we move away from communication that is ideologically dominated and/or bound. We must remember the other dimension of Habermas' discussion, that of emancipatory knowledge and the concept of empowerment.

Undoubtedly, as professionals involved in education, we encounter multiple official discourses that frame ideologies. These discourses and ideologies in turn can affect not just how we work, but also how we construct our professional ideas and concepts and to some degree, our professional identities.

An example of this is the use of official language and we need to be aware of its effects on our practice and thought:

In teacher education we mythologise certain expressions, points of references which become socially constructed phenomenologies which serve as anchorages for given communities (e.g. 'levels of attainment', 'failing schools', 'reflective practice'). Official languages become an imposed form of anchorage which taints the space people see themselves working in. Developmental practitioner research is thus always conditioned by the discourses, which surround it (658).

A key idea in the work of Habermas is that of emancipatory knowledge and as practitioners there are a number of questions that we can ask:

- is emancipatory knowledge a useful concept?

- is emancipatory knowledge possible?

- can we as practitioner create new ideas or are our ideas bounded by the political and professional contexts in which we work?

References

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