EXAMINING THE JANUS FACE OF POWER IN CRITICAL LITERACY THROUGH A HABERMASIAN LENS

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the connection between the problematic of power in critical literacy and Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. It begins with a literature review of critical literacy to show that power can be oppressive or resisting/liberating. It argues that certain communicative parameters of Habermas's theory of communicative action can be appropriated to address the oppressive and resisting/liberating aspects of power in critical literacy. This paper ends with a discussion of what power, relocated in Habermas's framework, implies for critical literacy education.

Keywords: power, critical literacy, literacy education, Jurgen Habermas, theory of communicative action

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Traditional literacy education places a substantial, if not exclusive, emphasis on the mastery of reading and writing. Whether one is literate is determined by how well he/she reads and writes. However, critical literacy assumes a much broader definition of literacy. Lankshear and McLaren (1993) suggest that "literacy is best understood as a shorthand for the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing" (p. xvii). Specifically, literacy goes beyond the ability to read and write and includes social practices and conceptions that are "already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as 'neutral' or merely 'technical'" (Street, 1984, p. 1). Therefore, literacy is not only social and ideological, but also plural and political (Giroux, 1993). It is also due to such diverse traits of literacy that literacy learners are suggested to harbor a critical attitude toward literacy or literacies (as there is more than one kind of literacy). Hence, critical literacy, according to Lankshear and McLaren (1993), uses

> texts and print skills in ways that enable students to examine the politics of daily life within contemporary society with a view to understanding what it means to locate contradictions within modes of life, theories, and substantive intellectual positions, and to actively seek out such contradictions. (p. 36)

In addition to examining the politics of our daily lives, critical literacy practices encourage literacy learners to "interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice" (Lewison et al., 2008, p. 3). Literacy, viewed from this critical slant, is no longer a set of neutral skills to master but consists of sociopolitical practices saturated in power relations. On the one hand, literacy serves as a placeholder for dominant values, ideologies, stereotypes, and so on, which unfortunately are seldom questioned. In this sense, literacy can be used to perpetuate the oppression of the marginalized. On the other hand, literacy is resisting and liberating. It can be used to help the marginalized examine the status quo critically and thus resist, and liberate

themselves from, oppression. Therefore, power in critical literacy has a Janus face and functions as a double-edged sword.

Freire (1984) also discusses oppression, or oppressive power, and resistance/liberation, or resisting/liberating power, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> [The pedagogy of the oppressed is] a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. (p. 33)

The oppressive and resisting/liberating aspects of power come to the fore in Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, to which critical literacy can be traced (e.g., see Anderson & Irvine, 1993; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Stevens & Bean, 2007). Freire points out clearly and repeatedly in his book that the solution to the oppressor-oppressed contradiction does not lie in a mere reversal of position or in "the replacement of the former oppressors with new ones who continue to subjugate the oppressed—all in the name of their liberation" (p. 43). Therefore, as oppression is antithetical to resistance/liberation, so is the power to oppress distinct from the power to resist/liberate. The power to oppress should not be used to resist oppression and liberate the oppressed. However, how does the oppressive power differ from the resisting/liberating power? Does there exist a framework that can account for these two distinct kinds of power? To answer these questions, I will argue that Jurgen Habermas's (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action can be appropriated as a viable framework to explain the intricate relationship between the oppressive and resisting/liberating aspects of power. Raymond Morrow and Carlos Torres are also interested in the link between Freire and Habermas. In their co-authored book, *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Social Change*, Morrow and Torres (2002) describe Habermas and Freire as complementary thinkers:

> [Morrow and Torres] view both as working within a shared critical theory of the dialogical and developmental subject. Their ap-

proach 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 Morrow and Torres's work and take their suggestion for a dialogical turn as a point of departure. My argument, which is not explicitly articulated in their work, is that Habermas's explication of communicative parameters in his theory of communicative action can shed light on the Janus face of power in critical literacy.

In what follows, I will first discuss the communicative parameters of Habermas's theory of communicative action. Then the oppressive and resisting/liberating aspects of power in critical literacy will be examined from the Habermasian perspective. Finally, I will present the implications for critical literacy education, especially on the problematic of power, relocated in Habermas's framework.

COMMUNICATIVE PARAMETERS OF THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Habermas's theory of communicative action (TCA) is a dialogical paradigm. It steps beyond the scene of a lone, passive subject/observer and replaces it with that of two or more sentient beings communicating with each other:

> The concept of communicative action refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. (Habermas, 1984, p. 86)

TCA is an action-based dialogical paradigm built on mutual understanding. One of the most salient features of TCA is that there is more than one subject involved. The subject assumes a performative role in communicative action oriented toward understanding (Habermas, 1984). The subject in the dialogical paradigm is no longer a sovereign, authoritative figure, but an actor who communicates with other

subjects and whose being as an actor requires other subjects and the internalization of other subject positions.

TCA is the core of Habermas's social theory. It is a broad theory integrated through the concept of communicative action. Therefore, it is not my intention to review it in detail in this paper. To gain a thorough discussion, interested readers can refer to Habermas's (1984, 1987) two-volume work, The Theory of Communicative Action. What will be presented below focuses on validity claims, criteria, and the ideal speech situation as they pertain to the problematic of power in critical literacy.

VALIDITY CLAIMS AND CRITERIA

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" (Habermas, 1984, p. 38). That is to say, a validity claim is an assertion made by an actor that his/her utterance is of "truth, truthfulness, and rightness" (Habermas, 1998, p. 24). However, the actor's assertion or validity claim can be received with a yes, no, or abstention, depending on the extent to which the other actor is convinced. In addition, 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), or right. That is, what are the criteria for evaluating the claims? Habermas (1984) 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. 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). (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 claims and the subjective claims are multiple access and privileged access respectively. The criterion for the normative claims is shared interests. Hence, each kind of claim is evaluated with a different criterion.

THE IDEAL SPEECH SITUATION

In her editorial introduction to Habermas's On the Pragmatics of Communication, Cooke (1998) 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" (p. 14). The ideal speech situation is ideal because it can never be reached empirically. However, as a necessarily presupposed standard, the ideal speech situation is approximated and referenced by every communicative act. Habermas recognizes that, in reality, not everyone desires to have the ideal speech situation. Yet this does not change the fact that it is necessarily presupposed, he argues, even though it is sometimes intentionally distorted. The ideal speech situation is not an empirical goal to attain; instead, it serves 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.

COMMUNICATIVE PARAMETERS IN ACTION

To see the communicative parameters of TCA, i.e., validity claims, their corresponding criteria, and the ideal speech situation, in action, let us look at an example. Suppose I taught a literacy 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 Megan on the group project?" Your question thematized a claim made in the objective domain that there was another student named Megan in my class

with whom you wanted to work on the group project. To find out whether your claim was true, I could look at my class roster to see if Megan was in my class. I could also ask you and Megan to meet with me face to face to make sure that she 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 Megan was in my class.

With my permission, you and Megan 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 Megan made an appointment to meet with me in my office. You explained to me that both you and Megan enjoyed working with first graders and wanted to research how first graders learned to read. "Is that something we can do for our group project?" you asked. Without hesitation, I replied, "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 Megan 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 asked. "It is about the group project," you uttered slowly. You went on to explain that it was almost impossible for you and Megan to meet, much less work together on the project, due to the conflict of your and Megan'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. Words such as "right," "wrong," "good," "bad," "appropriate," "inappropriate,"

"should," "should not," etc., are used in a normative claim. You believed that it was better for you and Megan to work with someone else because your schedules were so different that you and Megan 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 Megan'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 Megan could be that meeting face to face was important for you to get the project done. Based on this consensus, you could then argue that since you and Megan could not meet face to face, it would be better for you and Megan not to work together as a group.

The above example also shows that validity claims are fallible when a new discovery is made. You thought at first that it was a good idea to work with Megan on the group project because both of you shared the same interest in working with first graders on reading. Yet you found out later that you and Megan 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.

To see how the ideal speech situation comes into play, suppose I was displeased after knowing that you wanted to have a different partner for your project. "You cannot change a partner or you will fail this project," I insisted. You were shocked at my reaction and said, "OK. I will talk to Megan again to see if we can work it out." Instead of discussing the issue rationally with you, I threatened to fail you if you had a different partner for your project. In this case, reason no longer served as the medium to reach an understanding. Instead, I forced you to agree with me, or you would fail the project. Therefore, the ideal speech situation was violated. The "consensus" thus reached was not due to mutual understanding, but coercion.

THE JANUS FACE OF POWER
THROUGH A HABERMASIAN LENS

In this section, I will employ Habermas's framework discussed above to explore the Janus face of power. Specifically, how does the

oppressive power differ from the resisting/liberating power in relation to the communicative parameters of TCA?

OPPRESSIVE POWER

Power, relocated in Habermas's framework, resembles a validity claim subject to contestation in the ideal speech situation. Power becomes oppressive when it is not supported with reasons or when the ideal speech situation is violated. For example, we are willing to pay taxes because the government claims that the tax money will be used to provide such services as education and national security. The government is given power to levy taxes on us as long as it keeps what it claims to do. Power as a validity claim made by the government, in this case, is supported with reasons consented to by its people and thus is not oppressive. However, if the tax money is not used for its claimed purposes, the power for the government to tax is subject to contestation. Suppose instead of giving a good reason to persuade its people, the government resorts to policing and military forces to secure conformity. In this case, the ideal speech situation is violated, and the power excised is oppressive.

RESISTING/LIBERATING POWER

Unlike oppressive power, power can be resisting/liberating. Resisting/liberating power is given to people to resist oppression or illegitimate control. Habermas argues that any control carries a claim that conformity to it is valid. However, the legitimacy of the claim is subject to validation. If the claim is not validated, people will be at least aware of, or even take action against, the control. In the above tax example, the government claims that the tax money will be used to provide public goods. However, if its claim is proved problematic, those who are unjustly impacted will be at least aware of it or even resist it with action. Any form of control is not something unquestionable but equivalent to a validity claim that should be supported with reasons. When power is regarded as a validity claim, we are no longer passive objects under illegitimate control or oppression. We are entitled to question and resist it. In this sense, the concept of validity claims renders power in a positive manner and reveals the importance of the resisting/liberating aspect of power.

The exercise of power, through a Habermasian lens, unavoidably makes a validity claim that should be contested dialogically between those involved. The Janus face of power can be captured from this dialogical slant. On the one hand, power is oppressive if it is imposed without reasons or if the ideal speech situation is violated. Power, on the other hand, is resisting/liberating because people are able to identify their unjust conditions through communicative action and take action against them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CRITICAL LITERACY EDUCATION

Up to this point, I have shown how the oppressive and resisting/liberating aspects of power can be accounted for by the communicative parameters of Habermas's TCA. In what follows, I will discuss what critical literacy education would look like from the Habermasian perspective. Specifically, three implications for critical literacy education, especially on the problematic of power, will be presented.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Teachers should provide a safe learning environment that resembles Habermas's ideal speech situation where students are free from coercive power and allowed to take risks in their educational endeavor. This is important in that power relations between teachers and students are usually not equalized, but rather tilted in favor of the former. For example, students tend to complete their assignments in a way to please their teachers in order to receive good grades. The assignments done in this way shape learners into knowledge recipients instead of communicative actors and into rule conformers instead of risk takers. Therefore, a safe learning environment should be in place before any meaningful critical literacy projects can take place.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERACY EDUCATORS AND LEARNERS

As discussed above, the literacy classroom should be an environment where power relations are equalized as much as possible. Teachers are not knowledge transmitters or experts, but equal peers with literacy learners in the finding of knowledge. Learning literacy is not

passively receiving "knowledge" from teachers or information from texts, but communicating with them dialogically in order to understand whether the claims they make are valid.

When power relations are equalized in literacy education, it is not just students but also teachers that will benefit from this dialogical learning process. This is aligned with Freire's (1984) insight that "the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress" (p. 32). In other words, Freire argues that oppressive power affects or dehumanizes not only the oppressed, but also the oppressors. By sharing power with their students, teachers actually free themselves from the bondage of oppressive power and become more humanized as well.

CURRICULUM

In a learning environment where power relations are equalized, the literacy curriculum should be decided by both teachers and students. Teachers should not prescribe what students learn, but instead give students choice and provide guidance to help them achieve their learning goal. When students can choose what they are interested in, literacy education becomes meaningful. The purpose is to help students become independent learners who are given a say in, and are responsible for, their own learning. Boushey and Moser (2006) shared how they helped students become independent readers:

> Once children understand what is expected of them, have practiced strategies, and have built their stamina, it is time for us to put into place our next belief principle—which is to stay out of the way and let them read. This may sound counterintuitive, but we want students to make decisions on their own and to monitor themselves regarding their progress. How can they possibly do that if never given the chance to try it on their own in a safe, caring environment such as our classroom? (p. 25)

The curriculum, regarded as a validity claim, becomes contestable between teachers and students. It is no longer prescribed by teachers; it is decided communicatively between teachers and students. To empower students this way entails a paradigm shift where teachers need to reconsider the role they play. Literacy education cannot be empow-

ering if the curriculum is not negotiable. Instead of focusing on what to teach, teachers should make the learning environment safe for students to participate in the decision-making process of their own education.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the Janus face of power in critical literacy. Power can be oppressive or resisting/liberating. These two kinds of power are argued to be tied closely to validity claims subject to contestation with a presupposition of the ideal speech situation. If power as a validity claim cannot be supported with reasons or is used to coerce consensus in violation of the ideal speech situation, it is oppressive. In contrast, if power as a validity claim is exercised to challenge/resist illegitimate control/oppression, it becomes resisting/liberating. The Janus face of power, viewed from the Habermasian perspective, is no longer antithetical, but is instead interrelated. Whether power is oppressive or resisting/liberating depends on whether it is supported with reasons and contested in the ideal speech situation. Teachers and students in Habermas's dialogical paradigm are regarded as equal co-inquirers who understand that every validity claim they make is subject to criticism, should be supported with reasons, and, most importantly, is fallible. The fallibility of a validity claim is the driving force for an ongoing learning process.

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