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Speaking Habermas to Gramsci: implications for the vocational preparation of community educators

John Bamber and Jim Crowther

Abstract

Re-working the Gramscian idea of the 'organic' intellectual from the cultural-political sphere to Higher Education (HE), suggests the need to develop critical and questioning 'counter hegemonic' ideas and behaviour in community education students. Connecting this reworking to the Habermasian theory of communicative action, suggests that these students also need to learn how to be constructive in developing such knowledge. Working towards critical and constructive capacities is particularly relevant for students who learn through acting in practice settings where general principles and purposes acquired in the academy need to be interpreted in response to the unique demands of specific situations. From a Gramscian perspective, enabling students to develop the qualities of organic intellectuals means that lecturers have a duty to teach critical knowledges which the student will be unfamiliar with and unlikely to possess. If teaching is not to become simply didactic, however, there is also a need to acknowledge Habermas's contention that all knowledge is contingent. This does not mean that knowledge is merely relative, subjective, or essentially interest serving, as some postmodernists would have it. In Habermasian terms, knowledge is developed through a rigorous process of contesting validity claims according to procedures appropriate to discipline areas. In these procedures, contestation occurs to the point where there is general agreement about the best current understanding, until such time as this is overtaken by ideas with a better claim. The danger is that over commitment to contestation in the classroom undermines subject knowledge and ultimately the authority of the educator. Speaking Habermas to Gramsci, and vice versa, helps socially and politically committed educators to construct a space in which didactic and discursive moments purposefully alternate.

Opening caveat

Our focus on learning from the complementary interests of Habermas and Gramsci begins by acknowledging that, in many respects, these two people would have little to speak to each other about. In one corner, Habermas, the grand German intellectual and leading thinker of the Frankfurt School of critical theory developed a framework for societal critique which replaces the working class as an agent of progressive change; his ideas on communicative competence seem to be firmly located within a social democratic politics rather than a revolutionary one. In the other corner, the Sardinian hunchback Gramsci was a revolutionary Marxist and intellectual leader of the working class movement in Italy in the 1920s. The main focus of his life work is to explain the failure of the working class to make revolutionary change in the west and to advance this cause in the future by developing new forms of political strategy.

His university was fashioned from the prison cell and his incarceration there was, as Mussolini remarked, to stop him thinking. So initially they seem unlikely intellectual resources to consider what they could, in fact, speak about if the circumstances had been different.

In one respect, however, they have a great deal in common in that Habermas' ideas on communicative competence can be interpreted through the frame of education and the need to provide deliberative opportunities for arriving at reasoned courses of action (Welton 1995). For Gramsci too, education was an essential component for challenging the dominant hegemony of society in order to create a new and more progressive culture based on the aspirations and values of an exploited working class. Indeed, some of his political contemporaries were critical of what they saw as an excessive 'culturalism' in his analysis and politics (Davidson 1974). In the context of this common ground the task of speaking Habermas to Gramsci may not be as absurd as it at first may seem.

The academy today

Higher education today is facing difficult times not only in justifying public funding but also more fundamentally in relation to purpose. Whilst the University has, at its best, been a place for the generation and transmission of scientific, technical, and critical knowledge, and the 'best that has been thought and said' (as expressed by Matthew Arnold), there are distinct pressures today which seriously limit these broad institutional aims and even threaten to diminish them. Issues of concern include the dominance of technical rationality and the increasingly stifling effects of new public management, the construction of higher education as a competitive market place, the commodification of knowledge and research, and the vacuity of much fashionable postmodern theorising. Not least is the ubiquitous 'common sense' of individualised models and modes of learning and achievement. All of these issues, and more, deserve full attention but we confine ourselves here to the issue of mode of learning, concentrating in particular on how this is shaped by the educative relationship between lecturers and students in HE and the context in which community educators practice.

The lecturer-student relationship presents particular challenges for committed educators who seek to develop the knowledge and skills of students to work in socially purposeful ways in communities. This challenge can be usefully explored in the specific case of degree level, professional training courses in community education. In this kind of training students need to develop the knowledge and skills to work with people in communities in ways that strengthen democratic capacities and processes. The following quote is from the Scottish Executive's (2004: 1) guidance on community learning and development - the term used in Scotland for the practice of community education in the public sector:

Community learning and development is a way of listening and of working with people. We define this as informal learning and social development work with individuals and groups in their communities. The aim of this work is to strengthen communities by improving people's knowledge, skills and confidence, organisational ability and resources. Community learning and development makes an important contribution towards promoting lifelong learning, social inclusion and active citizenship.

Inherent in this work is the need to support people in voicing issues of concern, and in participating in policy and decision-making structures regardless of factors such as age, race, class or sex. In broad terms this may be described as supporting a social democratic tradition that emphasises the active involvement of citizens in decision-making in their social, economic and cultural life. Tett (2002: 96) describes this as:

...promoting their free and equal participation, in both defining the problems to be addressed and the solutions to be used, in ways that mitigate economic and social inequalities. It requires a public space in which different groups can come together to air their differences and build solidarity around common interests.

Both Habermas and Gramsci offer significant theoretical resources for developing the kind of educative practice required in community education degree level courses. Taken together, however, their contribution is greater as both complement the other in particular respects. With reference to our own work at the University of Edinburgh, we will argue that relating key concepts from Habermas and Gramsci can help committed academics simultaneously to enhance didactic and discursive forms of educative practice.

Habermas and teaching community education

Although the implications of Habermas's work for education are not explicit (Englund, 2006: 504); his work can be usefully applied to professional training in community education. This is because teaching and learning processes rest on presuppositions about the nature of reason and knowledge construction, both of which are of central concern to Habermas. He asks the question of how reliable knowledge is possible and answers that knowledge is only possible when science assumes its proper place as just one of the accomplishments of reason. In this larger concept of reason, knowledge is defined both by the objects of experience and by *a priori* categories and concepts that the knowing subject brings to every act of thought and perception. This means that ideas do not simply derive from experience but are constituents of it. Indeed, 'the validity of scientific knowledge, of hermeneutic understanding, and of mundane knowledge always depends as much on its "subjective", and inter-subjective, constituents as it does on any methodologically verifiable observation and experience of the

object-world' (Pusey, 1987: 22). For Habermas the power of reason is grounded in the process of reflection: 'In other words, the terms that we bring from within ourselves to the process of inquiry - in any and every domain, including science - are amenable to a reflection that is rational for the very reason that it carries the potential for a more inclusive conceptualisation that is better tuned to the common interest of the human condition' (1973: 161).

Habermas's account of reflection and reasoning speaks directly to what is required in a vocational degree like community education where theory is meant to underpin activity and where, crucially, the results of activity are meant to feed back into the theorising process. The premise is that no one theory fits every given eventuality and practitioners have to interpret the possibilities suggested in broad concepts and frameworks in new and unpredictable situations. As Barnett (2004: 259) has argued, this means that students now require the personal resources to be willing and able to deal with uncertainty in a 'super-complex' world: 'Learning for an unknown future cannot be accomplished by the acquisition of either knowledge or skills. There is always an epistemological gap between what is known and the exigencies of the moment as it invites responses, and this is particularly so in a changing world.' Habermas's ideas about communicative rationality can inform thinking about the practice knowledge needed by students in dealing with uncertain situations. For Habermas, rationality 'proper' is the ability to let action be guided by a common understanding of reality; the consensus established through linguistic dialogue (Eriksen and Weigard, 2004: 4).

Towards a discursive pedagogy

It cannot be assumed that the capacity for communicative rationality is automatic in higher education. It requires educators, in the first instance, to shape the learning environment in particular ways. These include individual activities such as writing essays, through to collective experiences in lectures or group tasks. In the context of our own work, communicative rationality can be enhanced by attempts to implement what may be termed a 'discursive pedagogy'. This concept posits an idealised state where learning and teaching environments are suffused with a generalised commitment to communicative rationality. For Habermas, discourse denotes a process of argumentation in which the rules implicit in ordinary speech are formalised. It is not to be associated with any one teaching approach such as a discussion or debate. Instead, in a discursive pedagogy attempts to approximate the ideal of discourse would pervade every aspect of the curriculum. Such attempts can be guided by four 'ordering' principles taken from the theory of communicative action (Bamber, 2007). These are:

- Learning depends upon acts of reciprocity
- Knowledge can be developed through redeeming validity claims
- It is necessary to safeguard rationality in processes of argumentation

- In essence, becoming critically competent can be understood as a constructive achievement.

The principle of learning through reciprocity derives from Habermas's view that action oriented toward reaching understanding is the fundamental type of social action. When people speak to one another in everyday processes of communication they are involved in a *reciprocal process* of making claims about, for example, proper conduct in social relations. Because speakers can be called upon to justify their claims, 'the burden of justification and the possibility of critique are built into the very structure of language and communication' (Fultner, in Habermas, 2003c: xv). With respect to teaching and learning in the featured programme, the point to note here is the connection between reciprocal acts of justification and the development of knowledge. As Pusey (1987: 23) states:

The distinctive feature of Habermas's work is that processes of knowing and understanding are grounded, not in philosophically dubious notions of a transcendental ego, but rather in the patterns of ordinary language usage that we share in everyday communicative interaction.

'Processes of knowing and understanding' can be taken as a proxy for learning. Seen in this way, the objectifying perspective provides a significant alternative to the idea that learning takes place only in the minds of individual students. It is a commonplace, of course, that learning is affected by environmental factors such as the way that teachers present materials or the influence of the peer group. These and other factors may be seen primarily, however, in terms of the way that they assist or hinder the individual learning that is considered to take place in the mind. In contrast, the concept of learning through reciprocity points to the educational potential of interactive and inter-subjective communicative processes.

The second principle emphasises the educational potential in reciprocity by foregrounding the idea that knowledge is constructed through 'redeeming' claims. This is because in communicative action one person tries rationally to motivate another to act or think in certain ways based on the implicit understanding that the speaker will, if necessary, produce reasons to back up their claims (Habermas, 2003b: 59). Interpreting Habermas's theory in simple terms, the claims deal with:

- the empirical world of objective reality
- the social world of shared norms and values
- the inner world of subjective attitudes.

Speech acts can be 'redeemed', i.e. accepted, or rejected in relation to each of these three worlds. All three claims are raised simultaneously although one might be explicit with the other two remaining implicit. This is highly significant in terms

of the development of knowledge because the process of redeeming claims through contestation eventually leads to a provisional understanding of what is considered to be valid. Over time, according to Habermas (2003b: 170), this process of validating empirical, social and subjective claims results in the development of knowledge in relation to four types of action: teleological, normative, dramaturgical and constative.

Teleological action embodies technically and strategically usable knowledge through rules of action. This kind of action can be improved through feedback about effectiveness. Normatively regulated action embodies moral-practical knowledge and like claims to truth. This would apply to actions undertaken in specific situations with moral and practical elements, for instance, being able to evaluate professional interventions and modify practice in the light of the findings. Dramaturgical action embodies knowledge of the actor's own subjectivity. This would apply to actions requiring self-awareness and emotional intelligence, such as being able to adopt a critical approach to one's own professional performance. Constative speech acts embody knowledge and explicitly represent it in order to make conversations possible. This would apply to the capacity to engage in discussion involving, for example, conceptual exploration of meanings.

A consequence of committing to learning through reciprocity and developing knowledge through redeeming claims is that all participants in discourse would share the same rights to contribute and have the same burden in terms of validating claims. In reality, however, this ideal is almost always prejudiced in terms of favouring opportunities according to privileged positions based on power differentials. In response to this danger, Habermas's (2003c: 97-98) posited an 'ideal speech situation' in which:

...communication is impeded neither by external contingent forces, or, more importantly, by constraints arising from the structure of communication itself. The ideal speech situation excludes systematic distortion of communication. Only then is the sole prevailing force the characteristic unforced force of the better argument, which allows assertions to be methodically verified in an expert manner and decisions about practical issues to be rationally motivated.

Some basic presuppositions or 'rules' in argumentation can be elaborated as follows (Habermas, 2003a: 89):

- Every subject with a competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse
- Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever
- Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse

- Everyone is allowed to express his or her attitudes, aspirations, and needs
- No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising the rights laid down above.

For Habermas, these rules are not mere conventions but inescapable presuppositions, and participants in argumentation must assume these conditions to be approximately realised. This understanding foregrounds the importance of the third principle: the need to safeguard participation and protect rationality. The key educational point, as Brookfield (2005) has argued at length, is that abiding by the 'rules' of argumentation helps students to develop their own ideas and understanding in the process of becoming critically competent. In turn, this point signals the fourth principle that becoming competent is a constructive achievement.

In Habermasian (2003a: 33-34) terms, competence can be understood as the capacity to produce knowledge leading to the resolution of empirical-analytic and moral-practical problems. The problem solving is measured objectively in terms of the truth claims of descriptive statements, including explanations and predictions, and in terms of the rightness of normative statements. Significantly for a vocationally oriented programme such as the degree in Community Education, it is also measured in terms of the justifications of actions and the norms governing them. Competence is developed as participants refine and develop ideas, behaviours and skills, through contesting what is or should be the case, and what they should or should not do in any given situation. Over time, according to this perspective, learners construct ever more dependable, in the sense of justifiable and tested, normative structures to underpin their work. In this notion of competence development, theory and practice are conditions for each other in that theory informs activity and the results of activity feed back into the theorising process. Practice knowledge is further developed through reflection as the concept is applied and reapplied as the situation develops. To the extent that they actively engage in processes of argumentation and reflection, students are constructing the kind of practice knowledge that is appropriate to the field of community education.

Habermas's (2003a: 33-34; 2003b: 170) ideas about teleological, normative, dramaturgical and constative action can be usefully reworked to classify four types of practice knowledge required by community educators:

Technical or strategic (teleological)

Knowledge involved, for example, in organising a structured, formal or informal learning experience in a youth club or adult education class, or setting up a community planning process.

Moral-Practical (normative)

Knowledge concerning the underpinning values and principles that enable practitioners to act appropriately in relation to professional standards and given norms. It is necessary, for instance, to be able to distinguish between personal and professional belief systems.

Personal (dramaturgical)

Knowledge enabling insight into a practitioner's own subjectivity and behaviour such as the ability to analyse the effects of one's interventions on others.

Theoretical (constative)

Knowledge that is impersonal, abstract and expressed in general terms, which enables practitioners to clarify and justify activity. For instance, arguing a principled case for or against policy initiatives, debating meanings and contesting understandings of purpose in this field.

The limits of reciprocity in the classroom

It can be seen from the discussion so far that Habermas's theory of communication has relevance to higher education in terms of the intersubjective nature of teaching and learning in the classroom. It also opens up a space in which learners are contributors to the development of knowledge through inescapable processes of contestation. The implication is that such processes need to be encouraged and promoted in classroom settings, and not only between students but also between students and teachers. In this case, however, it is probably safe to start from the assumption that as a general rule lecturers are deemed to be authorities. The tendency is not to challenge this position, at least openly. Failing to open up status to questioning, however, may involve lecturers in a 'performative contradiction' (Habermas, 2003a: 81). This condition occurs when someone says something contrary to a necessary or irreducible reality. For example, someone can say 'I don't exist' but this statement itself contains the assumption of existence. According to Habermas (2003c: 98) there are no constraints in communication when there is a symmetrical distribution of the opportunities for all possible participants to choose and perform speech acts, and adherence to the principle of learning as an act of reciprocity, would presuppose such a distribution of opportunities. In such a situation dialogue roles are universally interchangeable and there is an equality of opportunity to take on these roles.

Power is always present in any situation in more or less obvious ways, however, and its influence inevitably plays out in relationships between groups and between individuals. Tisdell (2001) alerts us to differences in power in the classroom based on social factors such as race or gender, and status based on position. In principle, adherence to a discursive pedagogy would confront such

differentials by, for example, subjecting the existence of competitive relationships between students and hierarchical relationships between lecturers and students to rational scrutiny. Nevertheless, even in situations where there is a deliberate attempt to approximate the conditions of the ideal speech situation the steering effects of power are operating. Lecturers need to make this knowledge available as a resource to community education students who are learning about power relations even as they are engaged in attempts to support people in communities to disrupt power in pursuit of social justice. This is not merely an abstract and theoretical discussion since it also calls for a recognition of the ways in which people may reproduce oppressive tendencies in their own behaviour. In this case it is important for lecturers to model critical thinking and open forms of communication in the classroom setting.

Moreover, in a profession where students are preparing for educational engagement with disadvantaged communities there are political and practice choices to be made so that the educator is aware that they can be 'part of the problem' for communities, in other words reinforcing patterns of discrimination and oppression, or 'part of the solution' in terms of developing education for autonomy and liberation. Establishing truth through contestation might suggest a neutral stance in relation to such choices. This presents difficulties for politically committed educators for whom such choices are not open to question in any fundamental sense, and who, in any case, have a duty to transmit core concepts that form the bedrock of a discipline area. It is in regard to this question of commitment that the thought of Antonio Gramsci can provide helpful guidance to lecturers regarding their own work as educators, and to students in their role as learners.

Gramsci: hegemony and the role of organic intellectuals

Whilst the Marxist theoretician and leader of the Italian Communist Party, Antonio Gramsci, was concerned with wider issues of social change during the first third of the 20th century, his ideas on the role of education in this process have a bearing on how we might respond to the dilemmas posed for the academy today. One of the fundamental tasks Gramsci set himself, on being imprisoned from 1926 to just before his death in 1937, was to explain why revolutions failed in the West but succeeded in Russia. This development seemed to run counter to Marxist ideas that socialism would be born in the womb of capitalism and its internal contradictions would be resolved by socialised means of production. His answer to this question was to identify the role of hegemony as the main arena of struggle, which was weak in feudal pre-revolutionary Russia but markedly stronger in advanced capitalist economies in the West. The site of struggle for revolutionary change moved away from the organisation of the relations of production to civil society where hegemony is made and, potentially, unmade.

Whilst Gramsci was never precise in his definition of civil society, its relationship with the state in his work is unique. He makes the distinction between two aspects of the superstructure of society (in contrast to the economic base) in

terms of civil society and the state/political society. These correspond to the exercise of two forms of power which reinforce class domination: hegemonic power (the directive ideas and values in society) and the state's monopoly on legitimate coercive power. Civil society is made up of so-called private organisations like churches, trades unions and voluntary bodies which are characterised by social relations based on autonomy and free association whereas the state is defined primarily in relation to its coercive potential exercised through the activities of the army, judiciary and courts. Gramsci was aware, of course, that the state was not merely coercive. More importantly, the boundaries between civil society and state are permeable, and organisations and practices can embody social relations belonging to both spheres. The connections between state and civil society in reproducing class rule are reflected in Gramsci's expanded view of the state as 'political society + civil society, in other words, hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' (1971 p. 263).

Civil society's apparent distance from the state means it can be a powerful medium for the diffusion of the dominant hegemony. Education, for example, is provided in many countries by the state and influenced by its policies and economic priorities but Gramsci locates education firmly in civil society. Education is an important means of social reproduction but for Gramsci, it is also a key resource for developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are the foundation for the intellectual work that is fundamental to creating a new social order. The contexts where adults learn, such as higher education, are voluntarily chosen to some extent and provide spaces for legitimate critical engagement. They are, therefore, important sites for challenging hegemony because education is potentially the Achilles heel of social control.

Gramsci's analysis is also well known for identifying the role of intellectuals in the struggle for revolutionary change. His definition of 'intellectual' stresses function rather than cerebral capacity and his distinction between traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals differentiates the two on this basis. Traditional intellectuals apply systematic bodies of knowledge across a range of social, educational, scientific and technical spheres without necessarily serving a clear hegemonic role – they may not be entirely 'free floating', in the sense of detachment from serving particular interests, but this function is not primary. It may occur incidentally or implicitly. Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, are more overtly directive in the sense that they articulate, disseminate and make explicit the culture, values and priorities of dominant or alternative social formations.

Although the apparently directive function of organic intellectuals seems to suggest an elite role of a set of leaders above the people, in Gramsci's analysis this function is expressed in terms of an ongoing dialectic. Intellectuals and people learn from each other while bringing qualitatively different kinds of experience to this relationship. Two points need noting. First, hegemony is an

affective process that saturates experience as well as a cognitive process. Second, thought and feeling have to be systematically linked and related to each other. Understanding the interests of the people is not simply a process of handing down intellectual conclusions for people to 'rubber stamp', but instead involves an iterative process of identifying interests, explaining them, connecting them with experience, amending and developing them – in short an educative process between people and intellectuals which influences both.

The education of 'common sense'

For Gramsci every social group has its 'common sense' and education has a key role in turning it into 'good sense'. Common sense is shaped by the dominant hegemony although its sources and composition amongst different social groups may involve accretions from a myriad of different influences. Nevertheless, it functions to reinforce the social position of subordinate groups. In making the distinction between common sense and good sense education has a critical role in interrogating the flaws, half-truths, contradictions and incoherence of everyday thinking that limits the capacity for informed and systematic social action towards liberation. In exploring this argument in Gramsci's work, Entwistle's (1979) account of 'Conservative schooling for radical politics' is helpful.

The publication of Entwistle's book was followed by a barrage of criticism by a number of influential critical pedagogues such as Henry Giroux, Douglas Holly and Quintin Hoare (1980). They were reacting to the apparent claim that Gramsci held views on schooling that seemed closer to the Black Papers on education, which had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, from leading Conservative ideologues on the theme of 'back to basics' in education. Entwistle also argued that Gramsci was dismissive of so-called progressive active learning, in his own era, which was supported by the Italian Fascist government in the late 1920s. Similarly, Entwistle drew attention to the varied references in Gramsci's thinking on the value of hard work, discipline, routine and even repetition as constitutive of character. Moreover, he concluded that for Gramsci the school was not a potential site for critical pedagogy whereas adult education was the appropriate place for political education.

There is no need to revisit the above debate but the hostile reception to Entwistle's book might also have led to a case of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. His main argument focused on Gramsci's commitment to the development of a broad and open education. Arguably, in terms of schooling at least the most relevant example of Gramsci's position is Don Milani's (see Borg et al 2009) school of Barbiana in Tuscany – made internationally famous in the 1960s by the publication of *Letter to a Teacher* – which explicitly drew on Gramsci's work.¹

¹ Our attention was drawn to this by Mario Cardona who is undertaking a PhD at the University of Edinburgh.

A persistent theme in Gramsci's writings is the need to learn from one's enemies, particularly when these enemies are dominant. Belittling their achievement, whilst being dominated by them, is not a good starting point for developing a strong and convincing hegemonic position. The commitment to an open and broad curriculum, to assimilate what has gone before and to critically evaluate it, requires an approach to knowledge which is not ideologically blinkered even if it derives from a principled and partisan politics. These two extremes may seem contradictory but they result from the necessity of developing an educationally robust hegemony that is fashioned from a subordinate social and cultural base.

As Entwistle points out, Gramsci makes an epistemological distinction between common sense and good sense which has pedagogical implications. Arriving at good sense requires sustained argument, rational deliberation, weighing of evidence, testing assumptions, discussion and so on in order to develop critical arguments that are convincing and capable of sustaining social change efforts. In the formation of organic intellectuals of the working class, where the habits of study were not developed, this created an immense and steep challenge. Moreover, it also has important implications for the role of the educator in that they have a key responsibility to use their authority as an educator – by introducing new knowledge, posing questions, challenging arguments and so on - with access to bodies of knowledge that students do not possess and pedagogical skills that guide the discussion. This does not protect bodies of knowledge from critical interrogation nor does it privilege a particular methodological approach. It is the educator's performance of this role which makes the process distinctly educational and the demands and expectations on students that make it a distinctly higher education in terms of depth of knowledge, coherence and so on. But this is a very difficult trick to pull off, and requires attention to the communicative processes at play if the meeting between intellectual and people is to counter, rather than reinforce, differences in status and social position.

Gramsci's articulation of the need to develop good sense is linked to his concern for praxis, by which he meant something quite distinct from the commonly used formulation of action, reflection and action. Praxis implies more than the uniting of theory and practice in the sense of applying ideas and skills in 'real life' contexts such as those occurring in work placements. Marxism, for Gramsci, was the 'philosophy of praxis'. Whilst this formulation was used as a code for Marxism as a way of deceiving prison censors, it also signalled the sense that praxis involves a principled and deeply held coherent set of ideas, values, vision and analytical understanding which shapes action (i.e. a philosophy). Entwistle, for example, draws on this in relation to schooling and refers to praxis as a philosophy of teaching that involves a contextual understanding of the vocational role of the teacher and the attitudes and commitment appropriate for that role. Vocation as a way of living rather than a means of earning a living is a critical distinction. This seems to be very close to the position elaborated by Collins

(1991) on adult education as vocation. Drawing on the sense of vocation as principled political and ethical commitment he argues that educators don't put theory into practice but rather that they put themselves into practice. In this formulation the role of theory, analysis, study and scholarship is transformative because it changes the educator who then changes how they practice. Reworking Gramsci's ideas in the HE setting would have a number of implications for lecturers in community education courses. It means addressing hegemony as a concept and as reality – although perhaps as a more complex and subtle phenomenon than the one put forward in Gramsci's original conception.

The idea that the autonomous aspects of civil society make it a potentially important site for challenging hegemony is important for those training to work in a wide range of public and voluntary organisations and agencies. The people in such communities, who are disadvantaged in multiple ways, are encapsulated in Gramsci's conception of the 'working class' and are therefore potentially agents for challenging hegemony and for building a new social order. As Gramsci argues, formal and informal education can play an important role in helping such agents become 'organic intellectuals' better able to understand the world and to direct their own efforts in bringing about change. With regard to training community educators, the formal sphere of HE can equip students to work in the informal sphere in ways that support progressive change.

A small example to illustrate the points just discussed is the first year course 'Community Education: Theory, Policy and Politics' for undergraduate students. The purpose of this course is to introduce students to sustained ideological analysis and the political arguments that shape policy problems and solutions. Many of our first year students have grown up under the neo-liberalism of Thatcherism and the Third Way of New Labour and have little knowledge and experience of alternatives. Broadly speaking, they rarely have the intellectual resources for evaluating the ideological underpinnings of arguments about, for example, the slippery concept of community and how it is constructed ideologically. In a context where it is used liberally in policy this is a major disadvantage and can lead to community educators assuming that their role as agents of the state, and as resources for communities, is unproblematic.

The pedagogy of the above course involves lectures on some of the major ideological perspectives (e.g. Conservatism, Liberalism etc) that are influential in policy terms as well as critical ideological perspectives on policy (e.g. Marxism, Environmentalism etc). Students are exposed to these perspectives in lectures and in smaller groups they are invited to 'think inside' the perspective and how policy problems and solutions are framed. Students are deliberately discouraged, initially, from being critical of the perspective until they understand it sufficiently. That is, they are asked to see how the ideas and values expressed in different ideological perspectives lead to different political arguments and policy stances which are developed over the length of the programme. After a series of seven

weeks looking at different ideological perspectives the focus is turned around. For four more weeks specific policy areas are examined in terms of the ideological influences that have shaped them at different points of time. To assess how well students have grasped the material at the end of the course they have to write an assessment of a policy area covered during the course from at least two ideological perspectives.

The above example is only a small one but illustrates the need for educational work that is essential for developing in community educators the resources and skills for developing a critical analysis of the politics of policy in communities. Of course, on its own, it may achieve very little but the aim is to highlight the need for an open and wide curriculum that is partisan without being ideologically rigid. It also embraces what is best in University life by exposing students to systematic bodies of knowledge which they are unlikely to have previously encountered but which they have to assimilate and digest before taking a position on. In developing awareness of ideological perspectives students are better equipped to understand how policy problems and solutions are formulated and where they stand, personally and politically, in relation to these as workers with a broad remit to serve the interests of communities.

There is also a legitimate argument that some differentials are themselves rational, for example where expertise is present and where those who have it are accorded appropriate status. Lecturers in the featured programme are appointed on the basis of their experience and expertise. They select and train future practitioners and, in effect, act as the gateway to the profession. Through their work as educators they have the important function of mediating the accumulated practice knowledge that characterises and distinguishes the profession, whilst at the same time actively participating in the development of this knowledge through research and other activities. They make this knowledge and their expertise available and accessible to successive generations of students. As educators they support students in learning through engaging with and acquiring this knowledge. In doing so they ensure that it does not have to be constantly rediscovered. On this basis, it is right to recognise and respect the expertise of the lecturers in the featured programme.

The preceding discussion refers mainly to the content of the curriculum, whereas attention to the process of teaching and learning is also required since, as we discussed above power is always already present in the classroom and can overwhelm and contradict content. This last point complements the one made by Collins about educators putting themselves into practice. In short, counter hegemonic educators must not be hegemonic – unless the problem with hegemony is simply that the ‘wrong’ ideas are valorised. Otherwise lecturers would be guilty of the sort of performative contradiction that we referred to earlier. This is important in terms of protecting the dialogue between intellectuals and people envisaged by Gramsci. The essential aspects of this dialogue need to be mirrored in the classroom otherwise students may acquire the idea of something

without developing the capacity to make it a reality. This is where recourse back to discourse theory can be helpful.

Lecturing and the interpretive function

In line with the notion that learning is an act of reciprocity, consideration could be given to engaging students in systematic and open forms of enquiry and emphasising their right to say what they believe is relevant to the subject at hand. Importantly it would mean encouraging students to question those ideas and beliefs held by their lecturers. In Bauman's (1987) terms lecturers are 'interpreters' who help students develop positions and arguments rather than 'legislators' who dictate what is worth knowing and prescribe how things have to be understood. Interpreters relinquish the superiority that legislators have by virtue of their privileged position, in that they themselves are drawn, at least potentially, into negotiations about the meaning and validity of utterances. By taking part in communicative action, they are accepting in principle the same status as those whose utterances they are trying to understand. This could be further considered by thinking through what it might mean to establish a "commons" or "public sphere" in the programme (Brookfield, 2005).

A public sphere would involve, as far as possible in this particular HE context, symmetrical obligations and entitlements between educators and students and students themselves. These would be important in countering the negative effects of "positionality" in an attempt to balance rational, affective and experiential modes of learning (Tisdell, 2001). In the first instance, educators need to provide appropriate training in the obligations and entitlements of discourse, such as turn taking in speech acts. It would mean involving students in debates with the intention of exposing weaknesses in arguments and propositions. Seminars or mini-conferences could be held featuring oppositional speakers. Evocative methods such as film, drama, artwork, and creative writing, can also be used to access emotions and imagination.

One example of teaching and learning that attempted to incorporate some of the elements just discussed can be seen in a course undertaken by work based, part-time students called: Community Education Work Based Learning 1: Professional Development. The defining feature of this course was the focus on real and live problems or issues of interest to and relevance for the students. Relating to the specifics of their work situation, students had the opportunity to test developing ideas in real situations and, in turn, bring the results of action back into the learning process. As task groups were established and reported back to one another, the participants were involved in a collective learning process as part of a deliberative attempt to construct knowledge in new ways. The students shared and debated differing views within and between learning clusters and attempted to bring the ideas of the whole student group together. This final section required the students to synthesise their ideas as each task group had to represent the essence of their learning to the other groups. Here the purpose was to surface fundamental attitudes, views and beliefs that the

students held about themselves as learners, and which influenced their engagement with the world, including approaches to work and education.

In order to summarise and draw together the overlaps and connections between the positions of Habermas and Gramsci we have attempted to present these schematically in the following table.

Table 1: Towards an educative space with instructive and discursive moments

Gramsci	Educative space	Habermas
Aim: Revolution		Aim: Democratic renewal
The need to counter hegemonic and coercive power	Education is strategic to countering oppression Approximating the ideal speech situation in teaching and learning processes settings could ground and promote societal democratization.	The basic structure of language itself contains norms to criticize domination and oppression.
Problem	Solution: education for critique	Problem
Hegemony is learned and protects sectional interests. It involves a process which can be undone – the learning has cognitive and affective dimensions.	Lecturers can articulate, disseminate and make explicit, the culture, values and priorities of dominant or emerging social formations. Lecturers can exploit the possibilities for critique that are built into the very structure of language and communication.	The steering effects of power and ‘positionality’ lead to distorted communication and understanding.
Resolution		Resolution
The politics of common sense has to be interrogated before good sense can be obtained.	Good sense – requires sustained argument and rational deliberation. New social relations between people need to be made. Testing validity claims through contestation, over time results in the development of reliable knowledge.	Observance of the ‘rules’ of argumentation is necessary to allow the ‘unforced force of the better argument’ to emerge.
Educational task	Role of the educator	Educational task
Lecturers have the authority and responsibility to transmit critical knowledge and provide opportunities for new ways of being. At the same time, they need to act as ‘interpreters’ helping students to develop positions and arguments.	Not simply a process of handing down intellectual conclusions for people to “rubber stamp”, but instead involves an iterative process of identifying interests, the values which they generate, connecting ideas with experience, amending	There is a need to suffuse learning and teaching environments with a commitment to communicative rationality.

	<p>and developing theory and values through new social practices</p> <p>Lecturers need to avoid a 'performative contradiction' by opening up status to questioning, and modelling critical thinking and open forms of communication in the classroom setting.</p>	
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Conclusion

This discussion introduced key concepts from Habermas's theory of communicative action, and indicated the strength of the intellectual resources that this theory provides, particularly in relation to knowledge production through what we have termed a discursive pedagogy. This discourse theory is strong from a socio-cultural perspective regarding the *nature* of learning, and its main object of concern is the transformation of participation. The theory can be questioned, however, in terms of the extent to which it accounts for the influence of social and economic factors in positioning participants in communicative processes in ways that privilege some over others. Gramsci's work is directly relevant to this issue, in particular his understanding of hegemony and the role of organic intellectuals in challenging common sense. In this kind of critical theory, transformative practice refers to a stance regarding the *aims* of teaching and learning, specifically the political, social, and economic empowerment of oppressed peoples. This redirects attention to legitimate concerns with the transmission of knowledge in the classroom. At the same time, Gramsci's ideas about the nature of the educative exchange between intellectuals and people can themselves be usefully complemented by a Habermasian emphasis on the dialogical processes at the heart of this kind of exchange. In short, Gramsci's understanding of hegemony could help educators to address the problem of positioning, while Habermas's attempts to approximate the conditions for 'ideal speech situations' could enhance the educative relationship envisaged by Gramsci. In relation to the case of community education training, therefore, speaking Habermas to Gramsci and vice-versa could help lecturers better to develop collaborative approaches to knowledge production in ways that strengthen essentially democratic and socially purposeful ways of thinking and acting.

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