Approximating the ideal: from communicative action to a discursive pedagogy in training community educators

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Introduction

Given that the current confluence of political, socio-cultural and economic factors, such as ‘massification’, managerialism, bureaucratisation, marketisation, and globalisation, poses serious threats to the achievement of democracy, equality and social justice, at all levels of society, and in all parts of the world, this paper considers what it means to promote socially critical forms of pedagogy in higher education. Specifically, it discusses the educational potential inherent in discursive processes of contestation and argumentation in the BA in Community Education at the University of Edinburgh. According to the Scottish Executive’s (2004, pp.1) report - Working and Learning Together to Build Stronger Communities (WALT) – community education, as a field of practice, encompasses the following aims:

- **Empowerment** - increasing the ability of individuals and groups to influence community circumstances.
- **Participation** - supporting people to take part in decision-making.
- **Inclusion, equal opportunity and anti-discrimination**, recognising that some people have more restricted opportunities and influence so should be given particular attention.
- **Self-determination** - supporting the right of people to make their own choices.
- **Partnership** - recognising that many agencies can contribute to community learning and development, and should work together to make the most of the resources available and to be as effective as possible.

In setting the parameters for the work, WALT informs understandings of practice knowledge because it influences the sorts of problems and issues that professional community educators identify and address. WALT is only partly helpful, however, in explaining practice knowledge. Another important factor is that there are different conceptions of competence in the academic and professional frameworks that govern CLD training in Scotland: the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF, 2007) and the Community Education Validation and Endorsement (CeVe, 1995) group. Broadly speaking, the former stresses intellectual capacities whilst including the need for appropriate skills, while the latter emphasises practical skills and processes that clearly depend on high levels of analysis.

Ideas about practice knowledge are also influenced by continuing debates about the purpose of community education in Scotland. Tett (2002, pp.1-2), for example, argues that two contesting traditions emerged in the 19th Century. The first of these was the ‘radical’ tradition, ‘…committed to progressive social and political change, that tried to forge links between education and social action’. The second ‘reformist or conformist’ tradition was concerned to help people solve their problems but was not committed to challenging dominant ways of thinking. The BA in Community Education programme presents a range of views about purposes, while leaning towards a critical approach to policy and practice.
that is consistent with the radical tradition identified by Tett. The approach can be broadly described as a social democratic perspective, which points to the importance of citizens being able to question and scrutinise the decisions of experts as a fundamental prerequisite for a healthy democracy. As Tett (ibid, pp.112) explains:

> What is essential is to engage the critical intellect of people in a way that creates more rounded human beings and enables people to engage with public issues. Community education is about the development of skills, human relationships and the engagement of people in understanding the wider social forces that impact both locally and globally.

These academic-professional conceptions of competence, and understandings of the purpose of the work, are brought together to shape curriculum in the featured programme. Its stated learning objectives include, for example, the requirement to:

- Develop the student’s critical understanding of the nature and purpose of community education practice in a range of settings
- Enable students to locate their work as educators in the context of community, policy and society
- Enable students to engage effectively with individuals, groups and communities and to select, justify and develop appropriate learning and educational opportunities

Since professional community educators are required to engage in the sorts of empowering, participative and inclusive processes implied by WALT, and to exercise critical judgement about their practice, they must learn why this is important and how to do so in their qualifying studies. This means learning about and being committed to the underpinning values, understanding the theoretical basis for the associated educational tasks, and developing the technical skills to operate in such a way.

Habermas’s (1986; 1989) work on communicative action can usefully inform thinking about developing teaching and learning strategies in ways that would be congruent with such learning objectives. One major reason for this is that he aims to support the development of the conditions under which the distorting influences of irrationality, domination, and oppression can be overcome and transformed through deliberative, collective action. This means that his project to enhance social justice resonates closely with the social democratic purposes of community education.

**Habermas and teaching community education**

Although the implications of his work for education are not explicit (Englund, 2006, pp.504), it can be 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 can only be said to be 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, pp.22). For Habermas then, 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, pp.161).

Habermas’s account of reflection and reasoning speaks directly to what is required in the BA in Community Education. This is because it is a vocational degree in which 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 Barnet (2004, pp.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, pp.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 apparently individual activities such as writing essays, through to collective experiences in lectures or group tasks. In the BA in Community Education, communicative rationality could be enhanced by attempts to implement what I have termed a ‘discursive pedagogy’. This concept signals 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 practice 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 could be guided by four ‘ordering’ principles that I have taken from the theory of communicative action. 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, pp.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, pp.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, pp.59). Interpreting Habermas’s theory in simple terms, the claims deal respectively with the empirical world of objective reality, the social world of shared norms and values, and 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, pp.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 a 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 personal 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 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 arranging opportunities according to privileged positions based on power differentials. Habermas’s (2003c, pp.97-98) answer to this danger, is the ‘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, pp.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 point, as Brookfield (2005) has argued at length, is that abiding by the ‘rules’ of argumentation would help students to develop their own ideas and understanding in the process of becoming critically competent community educators. In turn, this point signals the fourth principle, that competence is a constructive achievement.

In Habermasian (2003a, pp.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 BA 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 in the featured programme would be constructing the kind of practice knowledge that is appropriate to the field of community education.

**Practice knowledge in community education**

Habermas's (2003a, pp.33-34; 2003b, pp.170) ideas about teleological, normative, dramaturgical and constative action can be usefully reworked to clarify 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 a given norm. It is necessary, for instance, to be able to distinguish between personal and professional belief systems.

*Personal (dramaturgical)*

Knowledge that enables 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 justify activity. For instance, arguing a principled case for or against policy initiatives, debating meanings and contesting understandings of purpose in CLD.

To the above it is necessary to add two more that are implied in the first four and are prerequisites for professional practice. One is the ability to engage in discourse with one’s colleagues and peers in order to continue developing one’s own competence at the same time as contributing to the development of knowledge in specific work situations, and across the profession. The other is the ability to read, write and converse to a given standard so that these professionals can communicate effectively with peers, colleagues, other professionals and stakeholders such as users, funding bodies and policy makers. These fifth and sixth types of practice knowledge can be elaborated as:

*Discursive*

Knowledge required engaging in reciprocal and co-operative discussion with colleagues in order to identify and justify appropriate courses of action, and to develop understanding within and across the community of practice.

*Expressive*

Knowledge needed to use written and oral language effectively to communicate with others.

The above understanding of practice knowledge is consistent with the aims of the featured programme because it subsumes higher order learning objectives such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation that feature prominently in the BA in Community Education. It also encompasses the key elements set out in the SCQF and CeVe frameworks. It adds to both of these, however, by highlighting the agency of the individual and the role of the collective in developing knowledge. It includes ethical qualities that are understated in the featured programme’s objectives and the SCQF framework, such as ethical commitments to fairness and impartiality and to doing one’s best. This broader notion of competence is a dynamic and active concept in that it necessitates learning through justifying one’s ideas, actions and commitments. In relation to the featured programme, this means redeeming claims through mutual processes of justification and critique with one’s peers, lecturers, colleagues and placement supervisors. The ability to produce the sorts of practice knowledge required in the resolution of the often complex and ambiguous empirical-analytic and moral-practical problems that typify the field can be characterised as ‘critical competence’.
Conclusion

The theory of communicative action provides useful insights into teaching and learning processes. The essence of the argument is that increasing controlled contestation in a learning environment can enhance, individually and collectively, the capacity for rational thought and purposeful behaviour. This is because participants in communication are called upon to justify the validity claims inherent in their thoughts and actions, and justification involves giving convincing reasons in support of claims. In a situation where participants are seeking understanding, convincing others cannot mean coercing people into submission through threats or manipulation. Acceptance of the reasons depends on cooperative behaviour seeking agreement about what, in the end, constitutes the better argument. Cooperative activity does not eradicate disagreement, however, because in giving reasons to support claims people will often fail to agree. The point is that in order to resolve disagreements over the resolution of practice problems and issues, in other words to ‘redeem’ their respective validity claims, they must resort to a more rigorous process of argumentation known as discourse. It is important, therefore, to appreciate the value of discourse in developing practice knowledge as participants collectively and collaboratively refine ideas and commitments through contesting what is or should be the case.

References

Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) (2007) Guidelines for the


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