

A Habermasian perspective on joint meaning making-online: what does it offer and what are the difficulties?

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Abstract This paper is an exploration of the relevance of Habermas's social theory for understanding meaning making in the context of shared online interaction. It describes some of the key ideas within Habermas's work, noting the central importance it gives to the idea of communicative action - a special kind of discourse in which there is 'no other force than that of the better argument' and no other motive other than 'the cooperative search for truth'. The paper then turns to the referencing of Habermas by educationalists in general and by supporters of online discussion in particular. It argues that a Habermasian perspective on meaning making is one in which participants strive for 'genuine consensus' by interrogating their own beliefs while actively engaging with opposing points of view. The value of this approach is that it introduces a concern for validity or truth into discussion of knowledge building and discriminates between emancipatory and strategic goals. While critics would argue that genuine consensus is not achievable, from Habermas we can better understand the importance of striving for such consensus.

Keywords Intersubjectivity · Habermas · Critical theory · CSCL

Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the relevance of Habermas's social theory for understanding meaning making online. It describes some of the key ideas within Habermas's work, noting the central importance it gives to the idea of communicative action. The paper then describes the importance Habermas has had for educationalists and for those promoting a more discursive approach to joint meaning making in both formal and informal contexts. Finally, the

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implications of a Habermasian approach are explained, highlighting value and difficulties. The paper draws on a range of literature within both formal and informal learning contexts; most of this literature concerns text based communication, often, but not always, in asynchronous contexts.

Background to Habermas

Habermas is much celebrated as a social theorist, though his interdisciplinary commitment and range of interests means that his work defies easy categorisation. His intellectual roots lie in Critical Theory (Habermas and Dews 1992: 211–222) and as such Habermas is concerned with contrasting social and political realities with missed opportunities for democratic / emancipatory action. As with Critical Theory in general, Habermas is a critic of positivism, and a taken for granted ‘scientism’ in which problems are addressed with purely technical solutions (see, for example, Habermas 1972: 65–186). However his work is often contrasted to other critical theorists due to its underlying optimism about human development and, in particular, about the possibilities that language provides for communicative discourse.

Habermas’s concern for discourse is closely tied to his early exploration of the concept of the public sphere. For Habermas this was a:

realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body (Habermas 1974 [1964]: 49).

Habermas saw the material basis for a public sphere in the emergence of a literate bourgeoisie in 18th century Europe. Of particular significance was the rise of a free press and, in spite of the restrictions and outright manipulation faced by the media, he has continued to acknowledge and value the existence of a public sphere – one which allows open debate, including the expression of counter cultural voices, distinct from ‘public opinion’ (Habermas 2006).

Habermas has contributed significantly to academic and public debate and his later work has covered a very broad range of topics including German history, European integration and multiculturalism (for example Habermas and Dews 1992; Habermas 1998). However of most concern to education theorists has been his concept of communicative action and his notion of an ideal speech community.

Habermas shared with interpretivist social theory a rejection of the idea that what we know and validate as knowledge represents a correspondence to an objective reality. Rather he drew on the pragmatist tradition, in particular the work of Pierce, to see knowledge as emerging through intersubjective agreements on social problems (Habermas 1972: 112). However he departed from neo-pragmatists such as Rorty by raising the possibility that valid claims to knowledge could be reached. It is a risky move to associate truth or validity with agreement and Habermas was cautious. However he held out the belief that, at least *in principle*, consensus could lead to ‘truth’ or rather something we should recognise as true. This was a position that Habermas contrasted with post modernism, for post modernism tended to throw doubt upon the possibility of reaching rationally derived consensus (see, for example, Habermas 1987).

Central to Habermas's work was communicative action. This was not straightforward as a concept and was refined over time, but at heart was the idea that:

...I call interactions 'communicative' when the participants coordinate their plans of action consensually, with the agreement reached at any point being evaluated in terms of the intersubjective recognition of validity claims.... Those claims are claims to truth, claims to rightness, and claims to truthfulness, depending on whether the speaker refers to something in the objective world (as the totality of existing states of affairs), to something in the shared social world (as the totality of the legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships of a social group), or to something in his own subjective world (as the totality of experiences to which one has privileged access) (Habermas 1990: 58).

Here for Habermas there was the possibility of establishing truth through rational consensus albeit establishing different kinds of truth would require the marshaling of different types of evidence. Habermas spent much time and intellectual effort in considering the different purposes for using language, for example drawing a distinction between illocutionary and other acts and describing their consequences for communication, but he also recognised that there were claims to truth or rightness which needed to go beyond textual analysis. For example claims to truthfulness needed to be consistent with behavior: 'a person can convince someone that he means what he says through his actions, not by giving reasons' (Habermas 1990: 58).

Habermas throughout his work wanted to identify communicative action as a special kind of discourse in which there was 'no other force than that of the better argument' and no other motive other than 'the cooperative search for truth'. Communicative action, with its emancipatory potential, could be contrasted with strategic action in which interaction was manipulated by the 'threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification' to gain an advantage over another individual or group. This cooperative search for truth, or what might be more easily described as a search for genuine consensus, needed to take place in a kind of ideal speech situation in which those with competence were allowed to speak, no one was constrained in speaking, all were allowed to question the grounds for any assertion and new assertions could be put forward. The ideal speech situation belonged in the Weberian tradition of 'ideal types', an abstraction to throw light on the key features of a case. Not all speech endlessly recreated the conditions for ideal speech: indeed these conditions were 'improbable'. Rather for communication to take place it was assumed that we could revisit ideal speech conditions and we could distinguish between a genuine and false consensus.

Habermas's view of communicative action was process oriented; he had much less to say as to what we would reach consensus about and it could be assumed that we would find it difficult to reach consensus on many issues. However striving for consensus remained central to Habermas as it offered a way of marrying individual subjectivity and individual rights with a universalist moral ethic based on mutual recognition. The search for consensus required an active attempt to see the world through the eyes of the 'other' and to recognise ways in which one's own understanding of a situation may be distorted by one's own subjectivity and the social roles one was expected to play. Indeed Habermas, drawing in particular on Kohlberg's work on child development (Habermas 1979: 69–94), associated maturity both in individuals and societies with the exercise of reflexivity, a commitment to moral and individual freedom and recognition of the rights of others. Thus while continuing to recognise intellectual freedom as a legacy of the Enlightenment, his concern with mutual recognition led him to criticise

classical liberalism for reducing ethical liberty to a 'possessive-individualist reading of
 subjective rights, misunderstood in instrumentalist terms' (Habermas 2005: 2).

The strength of Habermas's work lies in its attempt to address tensions inherent in complex,
 democratic societies such as 'How can we be concerned both with consensus and with
 recognising counter-cultural voices?' 'How can we think about knowledge both as socially
 constructed and valid?' 'How can we have a social theory that is both sociological and raises
 questions of ethics and morality?' Only his most uncritical supporters would say that he holds
 all the answers but he has consistently and imaginatively addressed the right questions, using a
 range of sources from classical philosophy, Marxist theory, and empirical sociology.

What has Habermas got to do with education?

The implications of Habermas's work for education are not explicit: Indeed the implications
 for the conduct of social investigation in general are much more at the level of underlying
 assumptions about epistemology and ontology rather than frameworks for action. However,
 Habermas has, by virtue of the range and depth of writing, stimulated thinking about
 educational practice both directly (for example Brookfield 2005; Englund 2006; Ewert
 1991; Murphy and Bamber 2012) and indirectly (for example Barnett 2004; Van Manen
 1977). He is best known to practitioner-researchers through Carr and Kemmis's (1986) attempt
 to define the concept of *critical* action research and to adult educators via Mezirow's concept
 of transformative learning (Mezirow 1997).

Habermas's work is referenced too in the context of online learning. Indeed his theory of
 communicative action seems to fit very well with the idea of a discursive approach to learning
 for which communication technology offers valuable affordances. Add to the mix Habermas's
 focus on discourse and his appreciation of a democratic public sphere and it is not difficult to
 see why many online innovations, particularly civic networks, claim to be grounded on
 Habermasian foundations (see, for example Neuman et al. 2011). However, Habermas's
 influence is not confined to open forums and his work was an early point of reference in
 more formal settings. For example Boyd (1996: 180) linked computer-mediated conferencing
 (CMC) in higher education with Habermas's notion of 'practical discourse' in which 'the only
 determinants of the outcome of the discussion are the solidity of facts and the logicity and
 comprehensiveness of the arguments'. Boshier (1990) identified possibilities for a kind of
 'ideal speech situation' through electronic networks and Rheingold took his enthusiasm for
 informal networking into the classroom and wanted new electronic networks to serve as a
 rehearsal for the 'open, rational, critical debate proposed by Habermas and others' (Rheingold
 2008: 101). Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000) saw online collaborative learning as requiring
 a Habermasian ideal speech situation offering 'equal access by all participants to the
 learning process, equal opportunity and unrestricted contributions to collaborative learning, at
 least from a technical point of view' (2000: 2). Wegerif (1998) was rather more tentative and
 while he put forward the idea that CMC might be a suitable medium for 'establishing what
 Habermas calls an ideal speech situation' he was sceptical that this would happen in practice.
 More optimistically McConnell (1994) felt that aspects of online group work were aligned
 with Habermas's knowledge-constitutive interests.

While it is not difficult to find enthusiasm for Habermas amongst those proposing forms of
 online discussion, Habermas himself has not written in any depth on this topic and what he has
 written about 'the Internet' is at best lukewarm. More specifically he recognised the opportu-
 nity which technology offered to circumvent controls in undemocratic regimes but expressed

concerns over the ‘fragmented nature’ of online networks (Habermas 2006: 423). He also attached importance to face-to-face discussion when discussing modern mass media (Jeffries 2010) and indeed for Habermas the public sphere was constituted by face-to-face discussion of texts not the texts themselves. Limited as these contributions have been, they imply some scepticism in regard to the emancipatory potential of online interaction based, it would seem, on a perception that technology might limit a genuinely public discussion. Hence the purpose of this paper is to ask what, if anything, can we really learn from Habermas, which might be important or relevant in understanding the educational potential of online interaction?

The value of a Habermasian perspective on joint meaning making online

In answering the above question our argument is that a Habermasian perspective offers a way of thinking about joint meaning making online by providing a rationale for consensus; a distinction between strategic and emancipatory purposes; and a questioning of technoromantic thinking. Each is considered below.

Habermas, firstly, provides an ontological rationale for consensus (knowledge is fallible and the best foundation we have for validity is rational intersubjective agreement) and an epistemology for assessing the validity of a claim to knowledge (the force of the stronger argument). Learners need to construct their own understandings as there are no guarantees concerning the validity or transferability of pre-existing knowledge. On the other hand, something other than a purely subjective perspective is needed for there has to be a rigorous and ethical process for discriminating between different arguments /courses of action and this requires the kind of rational critical discourse captured by communicative action. As Bamber and Crowther put it, this in the context of f2f professional learning, it is through communicative discourse that learners ‘construct ever more dependable, in the sense of justifiable and tested, normative structures on which action can be based’ (Bamber and Crowther 2012: 188).

Habermas is placed between post modernism, which he accused of ‘performative contradiction’ by employing concepts that only modern reason can provide only to undermine these very concepts (Habermas 1987: 337–341), and an out-dated positivism, which claimed that there was an objective truth. Of course Habermas’s position is far from unusual in regard to social theory or investigation of online spaces. Indeed it is often argued by those promoting online interaction that it is through the effort of explaining and defending positions that new knowledge can be generated (e.g., Scardamalia and Bereiter 2006; Schrire 2006). Furthermore, central to many conceptions of online knowledge building is the idea of searching for consensus, as seen, for example, in problem based learning (PBL) (e.g., Derry et al. 2006); virtual mathematics teams (e.g., Stahl 2005; Wee and Looi 2009); the generation of ‘just in time knowledge’ (e.g., Bonamy and Haugluslaine-Charlier 1995) and of ‘joint artefacts’ (e.g., Murphy 2004); models of community of inquiry (e.g., Garrison 2007); the practice of peer assessment (e.g., McConnell 2000) etc. Less ambitiously, collaboration and sharing of perspectives are also seen as providing opportunities for individual learning in the context of community participation (e.g., Salmon et al. 2010).

A Habermasian perspective on consensus, however, brings a distinctive perspective on joint meaning making as it recalibrates how we think about knowledge building and the kind of evidence that we can provide to show that knowledge building has taken place. For Habermas communicative action was concerned with the coordination of activity and, to the extent that it was reflexive and critical, communication could be considered communicative and to serve

emancipatory purposes. Searching for consensus was important but only if claims to knowledge were intensely interrogated. For example, in recognition of Habermas's interest in language (Habermas 2001), suppose a proposal were put forward to make English a common second language to be taught in all schools, either globally or, more realistically, within a particular geographical / political region, on the grounds that this would facilitate cross national communication. Following Habermas's discussion of communicative action (see Habermas 1990 and discussion in Beemer 2006: 91–93) this proposal might be considered in terms of its *objectivity* (for example 'Is there, say, a case for thinking that a common language facilitates communication?'; 'Is the proposed second language comparatively difficult to learn?'); *sincerity* ('Is the proposal consistent with other statements that the proposer has put forward?'; 'Has the proposer some special interest in promoting a common second language?'); and *rightness* ('Will a common second language advantage those for whom it also their first language?', 'Will it disadvantage those who have little facility for language learning?'). As the proposal is debated similar questions will be asked of other propositions and special focus given to the process by which any consensus was achieved, for example 'Did some participants defer to those with superior class or social positions?', 'Was the evidence available to everyone?', 'Were all able to contribute?' and so on. In practice, of course, there are restrictions on all discussions, subjective understandings will not disappear and, indeed, an important point to bear in mind is that *insincerity* in Habermas encompassed more than a deliberate attempt to mislead, it took in our own distorted understanding of our intentions. Nonetheless, through a commitment to communicative action, participants may move from subjectively held positions towards a reflexive understanding of their own position and, in the process, generate more reliable knowledge.

This argument for sustained debate is not of course ignored in the field of educational technology, but the research can often seem to be dominated by instrumental concerns (whether learning outcomes can be improved with the use of technology, (e.g., Hiltz, et al. 2000); the fit of technology-supported collaboration with 'twenty first century skills (e.g., Harasim 1996); and a search for technological affordances (e.g., Boyd 1996; Conole and Dyke 2004). Problematic too has been an over reliance on analysing meaning making through content analysis of messages, as picked up, for example, in Wee and Looi (2009: 476–479). This interest in content analysis was triggered by Henri's (1992) initial use of *interactive*, *cognitive*, and *metacognitive* categories of content though frameworks that were later refined (see De Wever et al. 2006 for an overview). For example Gunawardena et al.'s (1997) scheme included several categories, including *sharing/compared of information*; *discovery of dissonance and inconsistency*; and *negotiation of meaning/co-construction of knowledge*, which more directly address the process of knowledge building. These and other frameworks throw useful light on what is being discussed, and often by whom it is being discussed, but a Habermasian perspective asks a different, and often neglected question, 'Is what is being discussed 'true' and, if it is, how would we know?'

Thus a Habermasian perspective reminds us that a fundamental purpose for inquiry is to uncover 'truth' and here, Habermas introduced a distinction between genuine and false consensus. Genuine consensus requires unconstrained debate within an ideal speech situation and involves the interrogation of power among participants. What this means in practice is that the grounds for a claim need to be explored critically and with an underlying principle that all should show uncertainty and open up the possibility that they may be mistaken irrespective of their role or the positions they may seek to protect. As Dunn and Lantolf (1998: 431) argued, this in the context of academic discourse, when interpretations diverged, the task was not to

‘engage in strategic or teleological discourse to convince an interlocutor to see things one’s own way or to gain an advantage for one’s own interests’ but ‘nothing less than active and intense dialogic engagement with these different discourses and world views’.

Key to a genuine consensus is an ideal speech situation. Habermas’s concept can be and has been criticised for being idealised (for Lukes 1982, it is infeasible), but unlike major works of Critical Theory Habermas is not easily dismissed as utopian, anti-technology in intent or, in spite of his grounding in historical materialism, narrowly class based. Ideal speech was, at least for Habermas, something that could be experienced by all in part and in principle was understood by all those who commit to communication. However it was offered as a counterfactual and as such its purpose was to consider the gap (or a missed opportunity) between ‘is’ (what does happen) with ‘ought’ (communicative action). How can this critical perspective be applied to joint meaning making online? Perhaps the key insight it offers is that learning through online interaction is not and cannot be in itself ‘learning by participation’ in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger being a key point of reference for Gunawardena et al. 2009; Gray 2004; Nett 2008; Thomas 2005 and many others). Instead learning is rather a particular form of participation in which we give reasons and make explicit claims to validity in full knowledge that we may have got it wrong, that our positions are distorting our understanding and that others will, in good faith, see things differently.

A critical approach is important as so many of the contexts in which online interaction is presented are benign – for example the formal learning environments cited earlier but also informal communities for support groups (e.g., Lasker et al. 2005), interest groups (e.g., Barton 2012) and professional networks (e.g., Gray 2004). It is easy to be sanguine about the affective and motivational gains from participation in these contexts and to identify a process of ‘knowledge building’ without asking difficult questions as to the status of that knowledge. However there are plenty of less benign online contexts. These are often associated with informal participation, for example ‘far right’ groups in Belgium (e.g., Cammaerts 2009) and race hate groups in USA (e.g., McNamee et al. 2010), but they also include formal learning contexts as in Eve and Brabazon’s (2008) discussion of highly ‘gendered and sexualised’ online discourse in the unexpected context of first-year university students in a physical classroom. These are all cases of participation through which members might too feel a sense of connection, of empowerment and, if participation is learning, then learning is taking place. A critical perspective is needed to underline these claims for these three cases were ones of distorted communication, contexts in which strategic rather than communicative action was being promoted and in which sectional advantage not ‘mutual recognition’ was sought. In short members were concerned to gain at the expense of others.

It is now clear that a third contribution of a Habermasian perspective is that it critiques a techno-romantic view of technology. Here the earlier literature tended to see online settings, and asynchronous interaction in particular, as having advantages over f2f ones as a form of communication. In particular learners could easily initiate many-to-many discussions for themselves and they could respond as and when they saw fit. Many felt that power differentials were less obvious online (for example Hiltz and Turoff 1978 and later, and subtly, Matsuda 2002). Online interaction seemed to create new patterns of turn taking and to overcome the dominance of particular individuals. The archiving of messages was seen as allowing for more reflective argumentation and a ‘rhythm’, which better supported deliberative consensus (see, for example, Anderson 2004; Boyd 1996; Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb 2000; Harasim 2000; Mason and Kaye 1989; McConnell 2000). There were features of online environments, for example a removed audience and an absence of immediate feedback, which could lead to

lessened inhibition but these could also support intimacy and group bonding as, for example Barak et al. (2008) argue in the context of online support groups.

Some of these, often earlier, claims about online affordances have become seen as overstated and it is recognised that participants in both formal and informal environments are differentiated in their behaviour. For example, as Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000) identify, learners will have different orientations to learning; achieving an end; and self-presentation. Only some members of forums appear willing or able to engage in exploratory talk (Littleton and Whitelock 2005), only some will lead discussion in open settings (e.g., Butler et al. 2002) and significant numbers prefer to act the role of so-called 'lurker' (e.g., Takahashi, et al. 2003). Participants are differentiated in their attitudes, self-confidence, self-esteem, cultural background and linguistic ability. As Coco and Short (2004) put it, in the context of civic networks but of wider significance, online communities are 'social constructions' and reflect existing patterns of power and cultural constraints as well as habits and history. Thus technology really might allow new environments for, and new forms of, interaction, but the attempt to draw conclusions from particular technological affordances is 'putting the cart before the horse'. A Habermasian perspective, in contrast, would start by asking how can genuine consensus be reached before considering the media, which could be employed to support the participants in reaching a consensus.

Problems with a Habermasian perspective

A Habermasian perspective, it is argued, enables a critical view of online interaction, one that is focused on the process of deliberative discourse not on the 'affordances' of the technology. Such a perspective would support members in their attempts to reach genuine consensus, at least consensus concerning what should count as evidence when promoting and critiquing their respective positions. A Habermasian perspective provides, too, a rigorous and more defensible ontological and epistemological basis for knowledge building. Should we all then be Habermasian? There are problems with Habermas and three have particular relevance in the context of online meaning making: a perceived privileging of discourse over action, a lack of practical detail; and the infeasibility of consensus.

Privileging of discourse over action

A general complaint made about Habermas is that he was privileging a kind of white, middle class discourse (e.g., Chermela 1997) and idealising language (e.g., Susen 2013). In fact these criticisms, alongside a greater concern for the sociological constraints on emancipatory action, were to some extent at least addressed by Habermas in his later work. For example, in discussing feminism and the politics of equality he argued that it was not enough to provide legal basis for equality without touching the 'fundamental levels of a society's cultural self-understanding' (Habermas 1998: 209). Perhaps the more telling criticism of Habermas's communicative action was that it privileged discourse over action, and a very wordy abstract style of discourse at that. To his critics Habermas was envisaging an almost endless revisiting of the conditions for consensus that had little appeal in practical contexts. It is, therefore no surprise that, say, Garrison et al. (2001) aligned their community of inquiry model with Dewey rather than Habermas. For while Dewey and Habermas both held largely 'pragmatic' positions on knowledge building and consensus, and both drew on the earlier work of Peirce, Dewey offered a more action oriented approach, though note not one based on

trial and error (Dewey 1922 [2007]:190). Dewey, however, offered a less nuanced and less sociological description of inter-subjective agreement and Habermas, rather than Dewey might have greater relevance for the specifically discursive dimension of meaning making in the field of CSCL.

Lack of practical detail

Habermas's work is often seen as particularly abstract and not translatable into a framework of analysis. In part this is because there is not one single version of Habermas to work from – though a communicative reason has been a common concern throughout his work - and in part it is because Habermas has carried out few empirical studies, and of course relevant to our case, none pertains to online worlds. However, he does provide some principles from which educators can work, including key questions related to the *design, leadership and research* of online interaction.

Turning first to the *design of online interaction*, Habermas can help frame the right question ('How can discussion be generated and a sense of reciprocity be best maintained?') rather than say which strategies should be adopted. Thus approaches such as PBL, inquiry learning, reciprocal teaching, co-mentoring and so on may be valued as providing triggers for, and motivations to sustain, discussion but they need to be evaluated critically. For example, from a Habermasian perspective, designers will want to ask whether strategies lead participants to adopt surface or instrumental strategies as often seems to happen in practice and whether small-group working would lead to the generation of strategic groups interests at the expense of a wider more public discussion.

In respect to the *leading of discussion*, Habermas can help direct attention as to whether the performance of the role of a tutor in formal learning settings (or moderator role in informal ones) contributes to, or constrains, open debate. On one hand having a tutor might introduce too high a degree of asymmetry within groups, after all a tutor has a power and prestige denied to others (see McConnell 2000). On the other hand, the tutor might help maintain a sense of reciprocity by, for example, identifying asymmetries and patterns of deference; reminding participants that all points of view need to be considered; and modelling a reflexivity which might be new for some and difficult to embrace. In considering their interventions, tutors are faced with two possible 'performative contradictions'. The first is that they act in the belief that it is only through their own efforts and direction that emancipatory learning can be 'delivered'. This is a contradiction as it views the learner as strategically compliant. The second, rather different, contradiction is that tutors show a lack of sincerity by pretending they do not have specialised knowledge to offer, or do not notice things which are noteworthy, when in fact they do (a point well made in Bamber and Crowther 2012). Faced with these challenges tutors might need to accept that learning is invitational, but that they have the responsibility to help support discussion while seeking to reduce asymmetry by showing uncertainty and exercising reflexivity. This is a stance well modelled in the particular circumstance of mentoring in Yukawa (2006: 220–221).

A wider responsibility for those leading discussion, though one going beyond the scope of an individual tutor, is to offer support to those lacking confidence and communicative competence to take part. This is to recognise that open communication is not simply secured by giving everyone the 'de jure' right to participate but that 'de facto' there are those who feel less powerful, either for personal reasons and / or because of 'distorted classification roles'. Reducing asymmetry is a challenge for those exploring the implications of Habermas's

thinking in f2f settings (e.g., Gillespie et al. 2014) and a general focus for those seeking to establish more democratic civic online networks (e.g., Pinkett 2003); experiences in both cases point to the size of the challenge and the resources needed to address it.

Finally, in relation to *research*, Habermas's concern for validity claims and the moral purpose of communication can be adopted as a lens on activity rather than a particular method or methodology. Three cases illustrate this. In the first Hansen et al. (2009) used a Habermasian perspective to understand collaborative activity to produce entries in the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. In this study Wikipedia could be regarded as an environment for rational discourse to the extent to which:

- (1) actors sincerely intend to engage in a cooperative search for truth; (2) through a formalized structure; (3) by excluding the use of force; (4) by meeting the rules of the ideal speech situation; (5) while engaging in a discourse that is open and continued for an extended period. (Hansen et al. 2009: 42)

The authors were cautiously optimistic that Wikipedia conformed to these requirements, but this is not the key point. Rather, the study showed that judgements about the quality of online interaction hinged on the process of communication and the ethical purposes which communication served. In a second example, Schwarz and De Groot (2007), with a nod towards Habermas, sought to evaluate an innovation in the history classroom by showing that autonomy, collaboration, commitment to reasoning, ethical communication and procedural mediation were important foci for evaluation of an online environment. In a third example, Yukawa's (2006) interest in intersubjective understanding led to a concern for 'truth, sincerity and rightness' as evidence of the co-construction of knowledge. This led to the marshalling of evidence within a narrative inquiry of two graduate students' projects related to telementoring of school students.

These three studies took different approaches but all treated knowledge building as a process rather than 'a thing'; and drew on different sources of data including online texts, student assignments, journal entries and interviews. The relationships between researcher and those being researched went beyond surface reading of online texts and evaluation of learning outcomes went beyond the instrumental.

However, the three examples all concerned indeterminate contexts or at least ones in which there was an easily perceived normative dimension. Introducing such a dimension may be less intuitively obvious in more abstract fields of inquiry, for example the learning of mathematics - a frequently reported context in the field of CSCL (e.g., Stahl 2011; Wee and Looi 2009). One way to show the relevance of a Habermasian perspective here is to draw on accounts such as Morselli and Boero's (2009) study of students' understanding of mathematical proof, albeit a study undertaken in a f2f context. In this paper the authors accepted that there were objective grounds by which the 'rightness' (or 'objective epistemic rationality') of an argument could be judged but they drew on Habermas to show that mathematical knowledge could not be reduced to the realm of instrumental reasoning ('Does procedure X give the right answer?'), arguing instead that questions of mathematical proof necessarily involved intersubjective understanding for which communication was essential. Habermas's work has further been helpful in analysing group work in the teaching and learning of mathematics not just to provide insight into how meaning is negotiated in a classroom but how communication and collaboration can break down into strategic positioning (e.g., Kent 2013). Neither Kent nor Morselli and Boero, however, drew on the ethnomethodological approach associated with CSCL research into Virtual Math Teams (see for example Koschmann et al. 2004). This leaves open

the question as to whether there can be some overlap between Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and Habermas and the work carried out in these respective traditions. Beemer (2006), amongst others, thought there could be in that both Garfinkel and Habermas are concerned with fine-grained analysis of language and exploring patterns and sequencing, both are concerned too with how order is established in conversation and with what consequences. However, an important difference is that Habermas explored intentionality (not least due to a concern for 'sincerity') and work carried out within the Habermasian tradition has sought to directly address structural limits on agency in distinctive ways.

The infeasibility of consensus

The third criticism, and the one that goes right to the heart of Habermas, is that genuine consensus is not achievable or even desirable. This is taken up in the context of online collaboration by Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) – though note that their paper is not an argument with Habermas and there is much in its critique of a technological reductionist approach to learning which fits easily into Habermas's 'anti scientism'. Hodgson & Reynolds, however, in contrast to Habermas saw consensus as coercive:

To be a member of a community usually entails subjugation to its core values and norms of behaviour, and to deviate from these in resisting assimilation is to run the risk of becoming marginalised in order that the integrity of the community is preserved (Hodgson and Reynolds 2005: 16).

Thus striving for consensus may be felt oppressively particularly by those holding minority or counter cultural views and the authors argue instead for looser networks of online learners and recognition that our sense of identity shifts as we move in and out of groups and communities. In short the authors saw value in pluralism and the acceptance of difference as both welcome and democratic. In fact their perspective on online interaction ends up resembling a kind of networked individualism proposed by Wellman et al. (2002) more than a Habermasian discourse community, though they took the metaphor of 'city life' to capture their proposal for a tolerant, 'live and let live' online cosmopolitanism.

There is much here that is attractive but there are objections to embracing online 'city life'. For example, from a Habermasian perspective consensus is an aspiration, rather than a literal outcome of discussion. In practice the best we can do is to strive towards consensus, while recognising the unstable nature of that consensus and being transparent with our claims to validity. Discussion can finish with an agreement to disagree but in the process participants may gain a reflexive understanding as to why they disagree and a move towards intersubjective understanding and mutual recognition. It is the attempt to reach consensus that is both a moral and genuinely educational one and if rational consensus were to be dismissed as a possibility then the scope of any discussion would be diminished along with its emancipatory potential.

Furthermore, while the evidence is mixed, there is at least a realistic prospect that, under the right conditions, reaching greater intersubjective understanding is possible. Habermas, himself, cited several empirical studies to show this was the case or, in his own words, that 'the process of group deliberation resulted in a unidirectional change and not in a polarization of opinions' (Habermas 2006: 414). There is further cautiously optimistic support in research on an Internet enabled public sphere. For example Price (2009) found that in two citizen panels in the USA in

which political discussion took place over an extended period some open exchanges of controversial ideas took place and a 'more nuanced understanding of issues' reached. In the online classroom collaboration has been seen as fostering understanding of other viewpoints and Austin (2006), in work involving schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland, argued that structured pedagogic interventions across cultural divides could 'widen perspectives' and provide knowledge about the 'outgroup'. Of course conditions are important and not all evidence points the same way. The 'Internet', particularly in anonymised, unmoderated spaces, can provide a stage for political extremism, strategic intransience, bullying and intimidation. As Austin (2006) also discussed forum members, faced with points of view, which threaten their status, may end up holding on to their existing positions with greater certainty. However while context is everything, it is not difficult to imagine that participants committed to 'the cooperative search for truth' might come closer to understanding each other and move towards agreement based on rationale grounds. They may be able to see such movement as 'emancipatory' as well as take advantage of more instrumental benefits, almost, as in Lewin's early work on groups, irrespective of the decisions that are taken (Lewin 1997 [1951]). At least a case can be made that it is worthwhile to make the effort.

Perhaps a more subtle response to Hodgson and Reynolds is to accept that consensus is in practice unlikely but to throw out striving for consensus as *one* aim of online interaction is perverse. Outhwaite (2013) teasingly suggested that for Habermas to think about language primarily in terms of communicative rationality was to hold as fundamentalist position as catholic doctrine which considered sex solely in terms of procreation. Thus if looking *only* to celebrate, in online or off line contexts, the diversity of communication, the creativity and playfulness of performance, the opportunities for shuffling between various versions of self as well as the sheer utilitarian value of exchange of information we can give Habermas a miss. If we want to imagine how one purpose of online interaction might be to promote intersubjective, reflexive understanding then it is to Habermas we might turn.

Conclusion

Habermas offered a perspective on language: how we use language and with what consequences. He did this from a critical theory tradition and presented a picture of communicative action that was optimistic, but in its exploration of the different realms to communication was demanding. We have suggested that a Habermasian perspective on joint meaning making online is possible and such a perspective will be concerned with the striving for genuine consensus through unconstrained dialogue, a process in which participants interrogate their own beliefs and actively engage with opposing points of view. Habermas offers a corrective to the overly literal accounts of knowledge building in the educational technology literature. A Habermasian perspective asks us to view participation critically and not to reduce learning to participation. Criticisms of our Habermasian perspective include a lack of practical detail and a sense that it is not sufficiently action focused. While critics would argue that genuine consensus is not achievable, from Habermas we can better understand the importance of striving for such consensus. Habermas reminds us that at heart it is though language that we understand the world and coordinate our action in the world.

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534 Q4

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