

# Habermas, Critical Theory and Education

*Edited by*  
**Mark Murphy and Ted Fleming**



Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education

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Edited by  
Mark Murphy and Ted Fleming

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It gives us great pleasure to introduce the work of Jürgen Habermas for an education audience and an equal pleasure to bring together in one space so many who have been working on these ideas in such diverse backgrounds and in so many countries.

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Our hope is that the wide field of education practice and theory will continue to borrow, steal, apply and rework the stimulating and challenging ideas that we know as those of Jürgen Habermas.

Mark Murphy and Ted Fleming



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Section I

# Introduction



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# 1 Communication, Deliberation, Reason

## An Introduction to Habermas

*Mark Murphy and Ted Fleming*

### INTRODUCTION

The German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas has had a wide-ranging and significant impact on understandings of social change and social conflict. His influence on ideas generated in the fields of sociology, political science, philosophy, law, and other areas such as media and communication studies, has been immense. From his early studies of the public sphere, through the development of his communicative action theory, and up to his more recent focus on law and forms of democracy, Habermas has consistently defended the project of modernity and the enlightenment tradition. It is for good reason that Bernstein called Habermas the ‘philosopher of democracy’ (1991, 207).

However, compared to other well-known continental theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, his uptake in the field of education has not been as wide-ranging. This may be because, as Young points out (2000, 531), Habermas has provided little commentary on the topic of education, preferring instead to refer to the possibility of broader social learning processes becoming institutionalized. As a result, his work was always going to be at a disadvantage compared to someone like Bourdieu, who focused specifically on educational processes and outcomes, something reflected in his enduring popularity among theoretically minded educational researchers.

Certainly, Habermas has proven appeal over the past few decades among some sectors of education, particularly adult education of the North American variety (Collins 1991; Connelly 1996; Mezirow and Associates 2000; Welton 1995), but also other corners of the education profession.<sup>1</sup> There has, however, been no concerted and focused attempt to introduce his ideas to the field of education broadly. The main purpose of this collection is to rectify this omission from theoretical debates in education, and deliver a significant contribution to the understanding of Habermas’ oeuvre as it applies to the field. Central to fulfilling this objective is an examination of the contribution Habermas’ theory can make in areas such as: pedagogy, learning and classroom interaction; the relation between education, civil society and the state;

forms of democracy, reason and critical thinking; and performativity, audit cultures and accountability.

These contributions are explored in some detail in the content of this edited collection, which brings together a range of academics who have utilized Habermas' ideas in their own intellectual endeavors. It is customary in collections such as this, however, to first of all provide a summary overview of Habermas' work. Given the enormous scope and depth of his work, this task is inevitably fraught with challenges. What follows should be read purely as a brief introduction to what amounts to a complex interweaving of ideas, ideas whose context has shifted with movement between theoretical paradigms and historical developments. A number of different strands of his work are outlined in the following section, identifying key aspects of Habermas' work that have both the greatest relevance for educators and also for the subsequent chapters in this volume.

## HABERMAS: INTELLECTUAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Habermas' work can be placed definitively within the Critical Theory tradition of sociology and philosophy. Critical Theory, a product of The Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, had as its background the intellectual context of Marxism and the challenges faced by Germany in the face of changing economic conditions and the concerted rise of Fascism (Kellner 1989).

While not exclusively, the trajectory and content of Habermas' intellectual journey should be understood alongside and against the traditional Marxist orientation of the Frankfurt School. The shadow of historical materialism hung over the work of Critical Theory, whether in relation to aesthetics, political economy, social psychology or cultural studies. A core objective of his work over the years has been to reconstruct historical materialism in order to reflect more accurately the concerns of the present day and the shifting sands of Western politics and economics (Rockmore 1989).

Nevertheless, the focus of his work has remained broadly faithful to his intellectual origins in the Frankfurt School, with the desire to develop a Critical Theory of society with emancipatory intent evident in his first major work *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1962, English translation 1989a), as well as taking center stage in more recent publications such as *The inclusion of the other* (1998) and *The post-national constellation* (2001). Arguably the most significant manifestation of Critical Theory in his work, however, lies in his quest to construct an overarching 'grand' theory of capitalist modernization and colonization, combined with an ongoing defense of modernity and a desire to further the aims of democracy – manifested in book form in *The theory of communicative action* (1984, 1987a) and *Between facts and norms* (1996).

To further these aims, Habermas has both utilized and contributed to a wide range of knowledge bases. His own theories range across contributions to traditional sociological debates (forms of societal integration, structure/agency, historical materialism), considerations of post-national forms of identity, to explorations in pragmatist philosophy. Specifically, it may be said that Habermas has made his most significant contributions in the areas of: sociology and social theory; linguistics and communication theory; and political philosophy.

### Sociology and Social Theory

Some of the challenges readers face when confronted with Habermas' work arguably stem from the fact that he is as much a sociologist as a philosopher—the possibility of social order is as important a question to his oeuvre as those related to ontology or epistemology. This may be evidenced by the manner in which Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons and George Herbert Mead form important building blocks for his overarching sociological theory of communicative action. Earlier sociological interventions, however, could be witnessed in works such as *The structural transformation of the public sphere* and also *Legitimation crisis* (1976). It is only in *The theory of communicative action* that Habermas lays out his overarching theory of society and social change, combined with his analysis of the problems facing late capitalist society.

One of Habermas' core objectives in developing his social theory has been to rescue reason and what he considered the unfinished project of modernity from the clutches of postmodern theory, which in a curious turn of events parallels to some extent the 'totally administered world' view of reason adopted by Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), a view of reason itself as the core problem facing modern Western societies. This turn is curious, given the central position of Adorno and Horkheimer to the Frankfurt School itself. Habermas, however, witnessed what he called a performative self-contradiction (Dubiel 1992, 6) in Adorno's championing of 'mimesis' as a way of resisting the loss of freedom and meaning in society, relying on what Habermas calls a "reason that is before reason" (1984, 382). This performative contradiction lay in the fact that, because they viewed reason as impelled by a need to dominate, "Horkheimer and Adorno were at a loss to account for the rationality of their own emancipatory critique" (Ingram 1987, 67). As Hohendhal (1985, 8) put it, their radical critique of reason "ultimately undermines the possibility of critical reflection itself."

To move away from such aporetic pitfalls, and from the Weberian-inspired totally administered world of first-generation critical theory, Habermas argues instead that a change of paradigm to the theory of communicative action "makes it possible to return to the undertaking that was interrupted with the critique of instrumental reason" (1984, 386)—that is, offering up a

critical theory of society with emancipatory intent. In so doing, Habermas has arguably staked out a middle ground between the “essentialist formulations of the modern philosophical and sociological tradition and the radically deconstructive and relativistic aspects of postmodern theory” (Best 1995, 149).

This shift to a theory of communicative rationality, alongside a substantial restructuring of Weberian sociology (a source of inspiration for Adorno and Horkheimer—Murphy and Fleming 2006), allows Habermas to explore the core issue at the heart of the *Theory of communicative action*—namely, “the question of whether, and if so, how, capitalist modernization can be conceived as a process of one-sided rationalization” (Habermas 1984, 140). His answer to his own question is that, yes, capitalism has ushered in a process of one-sided (instrumental) rationalization, and has done so via the state and the market overstepping their own functional boundaries and ‘colonizing’ the lifeworld. Political and economic imperatives, the two main manifestations of instrumental rationality in Habermasian terms, have more and more reduced the potential of communicative rationality to guide and shape decisions and actions that affect the core activities of the lifeworld, namely socialization, cultural reproduction and child-rearing. Put a different way, the pursuit and maintenance of state political agendas, alongside the ability of capitalism to exploit new avenues for wealth creation, have resulted in more and more decisions affecting the lives of citizens being based on the ‘bottom line’ of power/money.

### Linguistics and Communication Theory

Throughout his career, Habermas has been all too aware of the need for some kind of normative grounding for the social critique outlined above, something that became all the more pressing with the rejection of historical materialism (and its claim to grounding in alienated labor) both from within the ranks of critical theory alongside its outright disappearance in the slipstream of postmodernism and post-structural theory. In order to facilitate such a critique, however, Habermas needed what he considered an adequate theoretical position—as Antonio and Kellner (1992, 282) put it, an Archimedean point “from which to attack the threats to rationality, pluralism and democracy.”

In order to achieve this grounding, and in line with other continental thinkers (Best 1995, 145), Habermas drew on the resources of the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy and social theory, a turn that reinterpreted the traditional problems of consciousness as problems of language (Best 1995, 145). This emphasis on the primacy of language over consciousness meant for Habermas a decisive shift away from the notion of the monological self in isolated interaction with other isolated selves, to a focus on the intersubjective dimension of self-development and social interaction. According to Habermas, following Mead, significant others are “always already there” in

the sense that our sense of self-identity is intimately tied into relationships with others.

This turn to a linguistic intersubjectivity allowed Habermas to ground his theory in a “standard of procedural reason” (Sciulli 1992, 300), sometimes in the literature referred to as *universal* or *formal* pragmatics. By doing so, Habermas “proposes that the sovereignty of subjective interests may be challenged on the basis of a set of intersubjective interests that is irreducible” (Sciulli 1992, 300). The development of this formal pragmatics via a turn to a linguistically constituted intersubjectivity permits the discussion of “claims to truth, truthfulness, and right independently of their cultural context” (Steele 1992, 435). At the same time, the shift to universal pragmatics provided Habermas with a more solid basis for developing an “optimistic orientation to critical theory” (Calhoun 1995, 32) than, say, his critique of transformations of the public sphere or the crises of legitimation facing late capitalist societies.

The construction of a universal pragmatics delivered to Habermas a theory of communicative competence—i.e., “the speaker’s ability to communicate ... derived from a pre-theoretical knowledge that is universal to all speakers” (Braaten 1991, 58). By engaging in the act of linguistic communication, speakers commit themselves to the conditions that facilitate the possibility of what Habermas calls the *ideal speech situation*. Possibly his most famous concept, the ideal speech situation “offers the possibility of a rational consensual basis for interaction free of force, open or latent” (Braaten 1991, 64).

His theory of discourse ethics is Habermas’ attempt to “justify a normative basis for social criticism” (Blaug 1999, 3), with the ideal speech situation “anticipated in every act of actual argumentation” (Blaug 1999, 9). According to this theory, all communication is open to being tested as to whether it is comprehensible, sincere, truthful and appropriately expressed. Habermas calls these *validity claims* and they are redeemed in what he calls discourse or communicative action. In fact, in any communicative action, in performing any speech action, we raise universal validity claims and assume that these claims can be vindicated (Habermas 1979, 2). Validity claims are the assumptions that we always already make in an unquestioning manner concerning the truth and sincerity of another’s communications. This questioning of assumptions underpins not only the traditional sciences but also the social sciences.

Not only can validity claims be redeemed but two more important dimensions flow from this. First, in being able to engage in this kind of discourse our real needs can be identified, agreed on and the process begun of transmitting these needs (discursive will-formation) to the political sphere for inclusion in public policy, law and hopefully realized. Second, there is a set of rules for this discourse. These mean that all are heard, no one is excluded, all have equal power to question the ideas and justifications of others, to ask questions, all are equal in making a decision and reaching a conclusion,

coercion is excluded and the only power exercised is the power of the most reasonable argument. Not only are validity claims redeemed in this rule-led discourse but these are the conditions for a democratic society.

### **Habermas and Political Philosophy**

As a philosopher of democracy, Habermas views the unfinished project of modernity as one that should concentrate on the furtherance of democratic principles—the extension and strengthening of actually existing democracy. This is why he has been referred to as a radical democrat (Cohen and Arato 1992), and also illustrates how his political philosophy is distinct from both Marxists and postmodernists, both of which are inherently suspicious of what might be called ‘liberal’ democracy, for different reasons.

At the heart of his theory, nevertheless, lies a distinct Marxist residue; a belief that, as McCarthy (1991, 126) puts it, an “irresolvable tension” exists between capitalism and democracy—two forms of societal integration. His analysis of one-sided rationalization alongside the process of capitalist modernization certainly testifies to this marked ambivalence towards market forces. However, he is also avowedly post-Marxist, particularly when he talks about a ‘self-limiting’ public sphere. His buried neo-functionalism comes out in his attitude towards the limits to democratic freedom. Blaug (1999, 152) paraphrases Habermas when he states that attempts to democratically control the market are to “use the wrong kind of coordinating activity, the result of which can only be a grotesque loss of efficiency and the growth of bureaucratic power.” But this self-limitation also reflects his inter-subjectively oriented emphasis on deliberative democracy, an emphasis exemplified in Habermas’ statement that the “utopian content of a society based on communication is limited to the formal aspects of an undamaged intersubjectivity” (Habermas 1989b, 49).

The political aim for Habermas is not to re-embed the state and the market into the lifeworld, but instead to inoculate lifeworld values of caring, ethical concerns and democratic principles into the system, and so resist and reverse processes of colonization. The role of civil society is crucial in this regard, defined by Habermas as “composed of more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private public sphere, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public” (Habermas 1996, 367). Civil society, by actively sustaining a public sphere for discourse, can insert moments of democratic accountability into the system world. The public sphere is an important pedagogical site for democratic learning, where democracy as a social movement is embedded in an ongoing effort of individuals to produce a social discourse and to ponder the implications of such a discourse for social or political action.

It is important to note here that Habermas wishes to avoid any form of social re-embedding, and his championing of ‘new’ social movements over

the years reflects this self-limiting tendency. Civil society for him “can directly transform only itself, and it can have at most an indirect effect on the self-transformation of the political system” (Habermas 1996, 372). Notwithstanding this self-limiting acknowledgment of the fallibility of intellectual positions, Habermas was also avowedly anti-functionalist, at least to the extent that traditional functionalist sociology could in his eyes paper over the cracks of social pathologies via some internal theoretical need to posit social harmony. For example, he took exception to Talcott Parsons’ assumption that modern societies have produced an “incomparable increase in freedom for the great mass of their populations” (Habermas 1987a, 291).

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In developing the format of the book, one of the key objectives was to incorporate the work of a range of academics that could represent as wide a range of sectors, subjects and issues in education as possible. At the same time, it was essential to ensure that the range of interests and theories covered by Habermas was sufficiently represented. The authors included in this collection reflect these twin objectives, with contributions from academics/practitioners in, for example, adult, nursing and social work education, as well as more general chapters like Tomas Englund’s on the implications of deliberative democracy for education.

These objectives are also reflected in the book’s structure, which divides the contributions into those that engage more with key issues and debates in Habermas and Education (Section II), and those contributions that, for want of a better term, are concerned with ‘applying’ Habermas to particular forms of provision (Section III). In reality, all chapters ‘apply’ Habermas to education; the value of Section III resides in its presentation of a range of valuable case studies in educational provision. Section IV provides a concluding chapter that brings together some of the core issues raised across all contributions to this collection.

The first contribution is by Tomas Englund (Chapter 2), who attempts to draw out the educational implications of Habermas’ take on deliberative democracy. As he states, the implications of the model of deliberative democracy for education are not explicit—what can be said is that he places the realization of deliberative policy in the institutionalization of procedures, where an intersubjectivity on a higher level is expected to emerge; public discourses find a good response only under circumstances of broad participation. This in turn requires a background political culture that is egalitarian, divested of all educational privileges, and thoroughly intellectual, according to Habermas. Political autonomy, he says, cannot be realized by a person who fulfils his or her own private interests, but only as a joint enterprise in an intersubjective, shared practice. On this account, the deliberative project could be regarded as the continuation of the project of modernity.

Englund argues that a possible way of strengthening deliberative democracy might be to use the educational system for deliberative communication, which is understood as communication in which different opinions and values can be brought face to face with an endeavor to ensure that each individual takes a stand by listening, deliberating, seeking arguments and evaluating, while at the same time there is a collective effort to find values and norms that everyone can agree upon.

Marianna Papastephanou (Chapter 3) also focuses on Habermas' political philosophy. She explores the possible contribution of Habermas' communicative discourse, specifically the ideal speech act, to critical and emancipatory pedagogies. Papastephanou directs her critical comments towards those who are doubtful of the critical intent/content in communication theory, and instead she attempts to reconstruct a version of a communicative utopia (within limits) that has significance for the field of education. She articulates her own criticisms of the limits to utopianism that are established by Habermas' prioritizing of the right over the good. Specifically, she argues that the development of what she considers a critical and emancipatory education does not just demand a version of discourse ethics—a communicative rationality based on mutual *agreement with* the Other of the type Habermas favors; it also needs another form of utopia based on *treatment of* the Other. This form of utopian thinking demands an equal focus on the kinds of structural inequalities that can in effect block the “development of the force of the better argument”, as she puts it.

Also in a sympathetic but critical vein, Sigmund Ongstad (Chapter 4) considers the relevance for pedagogy of two major aspects of Habermas' conceptual framework, *communication* and *modernity*, highlighting what he considers possible potentials and pitfalls when relating these aspects of his work to teaching and learning. Ongstad argues that such a critical appraisal implies a search for strong ideas to build upon, but nevertheless also focusing on important shortcomings of his work. His conclusion suggests that Habermas' work on communication is both inevitable and insufficient for schooling. Ongstad argues that his main ideas are on the one hand crucial for understanding how general theories of knowledge could and should be related to disciplinarity in the educational system within the post-/modern. On the other hand, they need to be combined with a complementary understanding of how micro (utterances) systemically is related to macro (genres, discourses and discursive contexts) when analyzing educational texts and contexts.

While the ideal speech situation and other aspects of his communication theory have borne the brunt of criticism over the years, Raymond Morrow (Chapter 5) deals with another controversial topic—the alleged “Eurocentrism” of Habermas' social theory. Linking into debates in the sociology of knowledge, he examines this issue in relation to the debates in educational research around the issue of “indigenous knowledge,” both in the narrower sense of indigenous peoples and the broader sense of marginalized

and/or traditional societies. According to Morrow, efforts have been made to charge Habermas with contributing to “Eurocentric” views of education and knowledge: with neglecting the mythical foundations of all thinking as highlighted in Afrocentric critiques; by colluding with the Eurocentric colonization of indigenous peoples and contributing to environmental crisis; or problematically extending “critical pedagogy” to highly generalized and insufficiently critical defenses of indigenous knowledge in education.

Morrow’s contribution centers on the charges brought against Habermas and his alleged “Eurocentric” approach to epistemological issues, alongside other factors. Morrow uses his chapter to defend Habermas from critics who take his approach as a reproach to indigenous forms of knowledge. Morrow effectively problematizes the concept of ‘indigenous’ knowledge, instead asserting the hybridity of local forms of knowledge, and uses Habermas to construct a dialogue between local and translocal forms of knowledge.

Mark Murphy’s contribution (Chapter 6) takes the discussion of Habermas and education and places it in the context of social policy generally. Critical Theory has a long and distinguished history of interrogating public policy agendas and their impact on social reform, and a cross-disciplinary approach was central to the development of materialist social theory as a vehicle for ideology critique. This critique necessitated, for example, intellectual cross-over between psychology and sociology. Murphy argues that this type of cross-over should be extended to forms of public sector professionalism in order to better understand the implications of Habermas’ diagnosis of the times for education policy.

Specifically the chapter explores the fields of education, health and social work, and how the theory of communicative action has been applied to identify concerns in public sector reform agendas. Two core themes are addressed: the necessary *limits to bureaucracy* in public sector professions, which operate as dual-aspect activities but with an ethic of care at their center; and the impact of colonization on the core relations in these professions.

Moving on to Section III, John Bamber (Chapter 7) explores professional development issues in Scottish community education. He argues that the overall effect of government steering mechanisms has been to narrow the range of strategic choices in community education. This has curtailed opportunities for learning and development as practitioners find themselves diverted from face-to-face work with service users, a similar scenario to that envisaged in Murphy’s chapter. To redeem this situation, Bamber argues that there is a need to create appropriate work environments, so that community educators can concentrate effectively on their core educational tasks and also develop their competence through purposeful interaction with colleagues.

The argument about the benefits of purposeful interaction, according to Bamber, can be supported by recourse to Habermas’ understanding of *competence*. Bamber considers the ways in which this understanding can

illuminate how practice competence is constructed incrementally in Scottish community education. It highlights the necessarily discursive process through which practitioners continuously test the worth of their ideas and actions in relation to specific work-related problems and issues. Competence in this sense may be seen as a socially constructive achievement, which firmly locates professional development in communities of practice. The argument concludes by affirming the need to create and support collegial spaces in the workplace.

Higher education is the focus of Ted Fleming's contribution (Chapter 8), which uses Critical Theory to articulate an agenda for the sector beyond the reductionist vision of economics. To further this aim, Fleming uses Habermas' ideas on the relationship between the state, economy and civil society, the colonization of the lifeworld, the demise of the public sphere and the learning potential associated with his theory of communicative action. This chapter moves towards rethinking the aims of higher education as a community of rational and democratic discourses within which democracy is learned, practiced and supported. Importantly, Fleming redefines democracy as a learning society, and draws out a number of implications of this redefinition for higher education. In particular, the current concrete situation of higher education in Ireland is used as an example of how broader and global issues are experienced at national level.

One sector that has certainly taken to Habermas' take on Critical Theory over the years is adult education—the focus of Stephen Brookfield's contribution (Chapter 9). The first part of the chapter examines the three crises Habermas believes Western societies are facing—the collapse of the public sphere (the informal arenas in which citizens meet to talk through societal crises and issues), the decline of civil society (the organizations and associations, not directly controlled by the state or corporations, in which we live our lives) and the invasion of the lifeworld (the clusters of pre-conscious understandings that structure how we see the world and communicate our understandings to others). These three crises represent a massive learning challenge in Habermas' judgment. Brookfield's unique take on Habermas is that communicative action and deliberative democracy can be the way we can learn our way out of these crises—Habermas' projects are effectively adult learning projects. According to Brookfield, Habermas expresses great faith in adults' innate capacity to learn those communicative behaviors and dispositions that are central to the creation and maintenance of democracy. The particular learning process stressed by adult education theorists—critical reflection—is conceived by Habermas as the possibility of adults reflecting back on ideological norms and behaviors internalized uncritically in childhood. As critical reflection becomes internalized and then applied to dialogical processes, Habermas argues that standards of conversation derived from communicative action can provide a methodological ideal against which adult educators can gauge their effectiveness. Learning democratic reason for Brookfield is a lifelong process involving learning to live

with contingency and contradiction as much as learning a set of procedural arrangements.

Discourse ethics provides the crucial link between Habermas' communication theory and his political philosophy. Joldersma and Deakin Crick (Chapter 10) take this ethical agenda and link it to the significant area of citizenship education. Arguing that discourse is central to a broader and more effective approach to citizenship, education is required in the area of communicative competence—essential if learners are to participate well in discourse. In a similar fashion to Englund, they make the claim that educational environments can fulfil a critical function for delivering a competent citizenry; they outline seven dimensions of *learning power*—dimensions they consider essential in developing citizenship competence. The final part of the chapter details several key pedagogical themes that impact on the development of this learning power.

Carola Conle (Chapter 11) examines the practice and theory of narrative inquiry in education. She begins with an overview of narrative inquiry as both a method of educational research and a curricular practice. She describes narrative inquiry as a rhetorical practice in the study of experience with particular aims and limitations, one that also requires certain attitudes with regard to epistemological issues. She argues that narrative inquiry has curricular dimensions with outcomes that differ from those of other instructional practices.

Drawing on Habermas and her work in teacher education, Conle defines and describes the moral/ethical qualities of experiential narratives and how these may be appraised. Linking narrative inquiry to Habermas' concept of ethical discourse, she explains how narrative inquiry may be seen as a rational practice within the social sciences. She focuses in particular on the rhetorical qualities of narrative inquiry and its enabling principles, and by reconstructing qualities of symbolic expression referred to by Habermas and a possible "aesthetic discourse" she points to discourse qualities of narrative inquiry and suggests the term "narrative discourse."

Last but certainly not least, the final two chapters examine the application of Habermas to education in two other professional sectors: social work and nursing. Barry Cooper (Chapter 12) draws upon key ideas from Habermas' early writings to develop a critique of some of the current problems besetting both social work practice and social work education. According to Cooper, Habermas' pivotal 'work/social interaction' distinction has significant critical application within social work. Given that the 'work' of social work is of course social interaction, Habermas' distinction becomes intriguingly conflated, a fact that Cooper argues is both a strength and a weakness. All industrialized nations have needed to create a social work service to work across the system and lifeworld boundaries. However, this dual location renders social work both ambiguous and hugely contestable. This contestability offers potential to explore and understand ways in which the social work profession is changing.

Social work, through the 'efficiency and effectiveness' measures of marketization and managerialism, is driven by systems of targets and outcomes through a search for uniformity, consistency and certainty. These same processes have transformed the nature of social work education, which has suffered from colonization by strategic instrumentalism. Despite the resilient rhetoric proclaiming the centrality of professional 'values', social work remains in danger of losing focus upon its primary *raison d'être* of people-centered practices through continued regulatory attempts to define educational outcomes as a way of ensuring 'good practice' standards. According to Cooper, while arguments can be made for a minimum threshold standard of qualificatory entry to social work, from a continuing education point of view an instrumental regulatory approach to practice and education is at best irrelevant and at worst undermining of authentic professional learning for practice.

Jane Sumner (Chapter 13) provides numerous parallels to Cooper's chapter, with the focus this time shifting to questions of competence in relation to 'caring.' She makes the convincing argument that nurses are under a moral obligation to 'care' yet, given the difficulty in articulating what 'caring' means in nursing, one cannot be certain that this is being taught, or how it is being taught and whether it is in fact 'teachable.' Nursing is a demanding profession which requires skill and knowledge as well as the involvement of the personal self of the nurse, who is caring intimately for another human when he or she is in the most vulnerable state. For the patient, not uncommonly he or she is confronting life-altering issues while at the same time having had to cede much of his or her independence and control to another as he or she struggles to cope.

Sumner argues that Habermas' theory of communicative action is particularly relevant to nursing practice and nursing education because it provides insights into the elements of communication as well as recognizing the vulnerability of both participants. The hierarchical nature of the healthcare delivery system and its power ignores or overlooks vulnerability and the need for considerateness for both nurse and patient, and this can constrain their unique relationship. The nursing profession's history and tradition is one of female nurses working within bureaucratic healthcare delivery systems which tend to undervalue the unique caring work of nurses. According to Sumner, this makes Habermas' theory particularly helpful and the application of a critical social theory lens appropriate.

## NOTE

1. There have certainly been plenty of other examples of Habermas applied to education. Areas covered by authors not included in the current collection include the use of technology in education (Boyd 1987), assessment (Gosling 2000), teaching (Han 2002; Heslep 2001), and education policy (Aper 2002; Kochan 2002). Special mention must go to Robert Young, whose *Critical theory and*

*classroom talk* (1992) is a valuable exploration of the role of communicative action in schools.

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