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Toward a ‘Democratic’ Vision of Pedagogy: Hermeneutic Interpretation Through Communicative Discourse in the Humanities Classroom

Philosophers of education writing on teaching for social justice and student empowerment have suggested various theories for enacting a ‘democratic’ learning environment within our schools. Strategies that have been suggested include classroom management stressing student-centered learning, peer-interaction, and the inclusion of diverse learning needs and styles grounded in a pedagogy composed of instructor-student initiated ‘discourse.’ Building on ‘social meliorist,’ or *Social Reconstruction* curriculum theory, I attempt to define the notion of authentic ‘critical pedagogy’ through the analysis of classroom instruction in the humanities, and literature in particular. There is the potential for the emergence in *praxis* of an authentic ‘democratic’ pedagogy if educators are attuned to a unique method of instruction that allows for an original and ontological form of knowledge that is traditionally excluded from the curriculum to emerge within a communal context of inclusive group discussion, which is constituted in such a way that appropriate social values manifest in its unfolding.

To this end, the theories of Gadamer and Habermas will contribute to the formalization of a notion of authentic democratic instruction, which will allow me to: (a) elucidate the notion of ‘philosophical’ hermeneutic interpretation and introducing a non-traditional theory of truth, which is irreducible to a technical epistemological framework, (b) explicate the context, or ‘horizon,’ of meaning from out of which our interpretations emerge by means of the dialogue between educators and students, and (c) analyze the ‘communicative ethics’ of reading that emerge from our participation in hermeneutic interpretation, which embodies in form and function authentic democratic ideals, i.e., it is possible to experience authentic democratic virtues, such as equality, equity, and justice within the classroom when engaged in the activity of interpreting great works of literature. In addition to providing themes that are intellectually, emotionally, and socially relevant, literature affords the opportunity for the original and unique experience of truth through hermeneutic interpretation as a participatory member of an egalitarian community of ‘democratic’ learners.

I. Hermeneutic Interpretation: *Original ‘Truth’ as Experiential*

According to Heidegger, it is through hermeneutic interpretation that our basic understanding of the world emerges. Heidegger’s influence on Gadamer, which we encounter in the latter’s *Truth and Method*, leads to a dramatic change in the way hermeneutic interpretation is perceived and enacted in the philosophical community. Beyond simply the art of interpreting a text, hermeneutic interpretation becomes understood as a basic and original way in which we are in the world, in terms of a primordial ‘experience’ of truth. Gadamer’s understanding of hermeneutics is explicitly

grounded in the notion that its function is not the equivalent of a scientific procedure in which categorical results are obtained through the proper implementation of a formal methodology to the problems and issues under consideration. Rather, through hermeneutic interpretation we seek to gradually and effectively broaden and deepen our understanding of things: Hermeneutic interpretation gives us insight as opposed to objective knowledge, understanding as opposed to truth with a capital 'T.' We must approach the hermeneutic method with the foreknowledge that there is no neutral, or objective, standpoint (*sub species aeternitatis*) from which to either begin or end our investigations that stands at a theoretical remove from *praxis*, from our immersion in time and history as the dynamic, and indeterminate, unfolding of our lives and world.

However, this is not to indicate that the knowledge, or 'truth,' which emerges from our interpretations is circular in the 'vicious' sense of representing a logical fallacy, as might be imagined since we always begin the process of interpretation from the perspective of one pre-existing interpretation or another. Indeed, the fact that we come to the context of interpretation always already immersed in a *perspectival* worldview allows us to enter the hermeneutic 'circle' in the right way in order to begin the process of *meaning-making* (Heidegger, 1962). Gadamer expresses this understanding in terms of our 'forehaving,' 'foreknowledge,' and 'foreconception' about the world, which we bring to the context of interpretation, or meaning. As related to the humanities classroom, when viewed through the lens of *social reconstruction*, this presupposes that students are privy to an archive of knowledge, which includes the background knowledge of both the text being read and the interpretation of said text along with the intellectual and emotional 'forehaving' of a personal and subjective nature. These aspects of our worldly understanding compose our original 'horizontal' (historical-temporal) contexts, and it is the 'fusion' of these various horizons that comprises the circle of our communal and interpretive dialogue within the classroom. Students are meaning-makers, knowledge is related to the individual's subjective reality as it relates to and is assimilated within the communal learning environment of the classroom.

"History does not belong to us, we belong to it" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 276). We are temporally and historically located, and beyond, our interpretations, and hence our understanding, are always contextual and communal, transpiring through various modes of social discourse. We are autonomous historical agents of change who freely create systems, institutions, and organizations, and conversely we are also worked on and influenced by the self-same social-political institutions we bring into existence. With this in mind, authentic education should embrace this notion of discourse as historically situated within the context of the curriculum between varying worldly interpretations. From the time we are born, we inherit a world-picture that is always in the process of developing, for we are constantly engaged in interpreting, reinterpreting and building upon this foundational understanding of things. It is our 'philosophical' goal to eventually formalize this tacit understanding, making explicit this implicit way of knowing the world, and this is accomplished through discourse in the common pursuit of understanding. Discourse thus conceived, as a process of hermeneutic interpretation, and this relates to Gadamer's conception of literature and philosophy as historical 'texts,' includes an undeniable temporal element, as we are always assessing and reassessing the past in light of the present in terms of our futural communal projection as an historical people.

This indicates that our understanding of the world is never at an end, and it is a form of 'knowledge' that is beyond the traditional conception of truth as timeless, objective, and 'pre-procedural.' Gadamer conceives of truth in terms of 'experience,' or 'disclosedness' (*aletheia*), in the midst of dialogic interpretation, and this view requires a reassessment of the primary and traditional way in which we judge and determine truth as it is understood and validated through the *correspondence model*, where truth represents the intersection and agreement of the subjective knower and that which is known objectively. Truth, in terms of traditional epistemology, is located at an objective remove from the individual, and this conception of truth as the connection between 'idea and thing,' grounds the *essentialist*, or *scholar-academic*, model for curriculum, which views knowledge as transferable, repeatable, and impersonal. With respect to the instruction of literature, the *scholar-academic* ideology embraces aspects of reading comprehension that are reducible to the *either/or* epistemological cluster, it favors summative over formative assessment, and holds the belief that standardized testing and assessment, which are grounded in explicit objectives represent the most accurate way of gauging and determining academic development and success (Finn, 1990).

Reading instruction, emerging from an *essentialist* curriculum model, focuses on the explicit aspects of literature that are measurable and quantifiable. Thus, curriculum goals and pedagogy are formed and guided by an understanding of literature instruction that transpires primarily through 'discovery,' or better, by means of the transmission of meaning to students. Since the final word on the text's meaning exists independent of the reader, it is beyond either the individual or the communal interpretations of the students. The interaction between reader and text is reduced to a process wherein the text's message is expressed in terms of a single, canonical and authoritative reading. Teaching transpires in a didactic manner and assessment consists in judging whether the reader's interpretations equates, or 'hooks up,' with the determinate and established meaning. Such a model for reading and subsequent conception of truth represents the antithesis of Gadamer's understanding of truth, for it devalues the aesthetic elements of literature, i.e., the ontological aspects of literature that are always beyond calculable interpretations of truth. This method of teaching devalues knowledge of a personal nature, emotional, and aesthetic nature, and "knowledge that cannot be communicated without losing its point, such as feelings of competence, power, self-esteem, or love, is not considered to be worthwhile curriculum knowledge" (Schiro, 2008, p. 40).

Gadamer interprets truth in terms of a unique, one of a kind, experience. In certain instances, the truth that emerges through our interpretive endeavors is at times resistant to formalization in language. Gadamer, much like Heidegger, envisions truth in terms of an experience that is primordial, or original, which represents an occurrence that is revelatory and non-systematic in nature. Truth, according to Gadamer, discloses insight into our lives, world, and Being, we might say that this primordial revelation of truth is ontological, in that it affords an authentic view into our *Being-in-the-world*. Truth as original 'experience' is not the same as 'correctness,' it is not thought of in terms of the subject attempting to assimilate itself to objective reality, for the human is always already immersed in the world in an intimate way and is therefore inseparable from it. Original truth is a revelation of the world and the system of relations and meanings of which we are a part, and this opens us to numerous perspectives, understandings, and 'horizons' of interpretation. This 'experience' fuels the evolution of our understanding, and because of

this experience, it deepens, grows, and changes, as we attempt to assimilate all that is unique and fresh to what is already known. This process of *meaning-making* constitutes the essence of hermeneutic interpretation as conceived by Gadamer. Importantly, this encounter with truth as ‘experience’ works to put in question all that we have heretofore given the name ‘knowledge.’

When truth emerges through hermeneutic interpretation, it appears as an intrusion of the ‘other,’ as something that is radically different from all that has gone before. Such a notion of truth opens us to the questionable aspects of life, to all that is unknown (concealed), opening us to those aspects of life that defy scientific explanation. As indicated, the truth of which Gadamer writes should also be understood in terms of an encounter with the ontological aspects of life, wherein we are united with others in the realization of our fragility, fallibility, and limited human capacity for and capability of explaining the world in its entirety (Gadamer, 1979). Literature, taught through hermeneutic discourse, holds the potential to open students to new and unique moments of personal and communal insight into their shared world, for it transfigures their existing interpretations by re-presenting them in new and imaginative ways, e.g., through the ‘poetic’ realm of the semiotic, through metaphor and metonymy. In addition to inspiring knowledge of a self-revelatory nature, literature affords students the opportunity to experience knowledge and meaning as developing through communal construction, a process within which they are integral participants.

Hermeneutic interpretation has an instrumental function, that of engendering, fostering, and nurturing legitimate democratic values that are embodied within the very organization of its method of argumentation, which is formed and sustained through the medium of discourse itself. Instruction of literature by means of hermeneutic interpretation might be envisioned in terms of a ‘democratic’ process of dialogue, which, as a product of communal power relations that is mediated by educators and students, represents a method of learning that expresses a *social reconstruction* philosophy, i. e., learning that is historically situated, socially constructed, and culturally moderated with the potential for inspiring in the curriculum the democratic virtues of equity, equality, justice, and freedom (Schiro, 2008). With this in mind, I turn to Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutic interpretation as a ‘fusion of horizons,’ or melting of world-perspectives, which produces our understanding of things through socially-instantiated and democratically inclusive dialogue. I relate the notions of learning and pedagogy to the practical activity of teaching literature in the humanities classroom, in terms of *meaning-making* and *group discussion*.

II. The Historical Context of Interpretation: A Confluence of ‘Horizons’

Social reconstruction philosophy stresses the ‘social’ and communal nature of education, and it defines truth and knowledge in terms of ‘experience,’ which occurs within a context that is structured by pedagogical methods and activities that stress authentic learning in terms of a mutual and interactive dialogue between students and educators who become participants in and facilitators of the processes of learning. Viewed from this perspective, there are two aspects in the curriculum that contribute to the genuine learning experience. First, teaching for social justice demands that educators embrace the understanding that important forms of knowledge exist within the curriculum that are

procedural, they cannot be given in advance and are constructed through a critical method of group discourse. Second, when considering the nature of *procedural* knowledge, the context where ‘meaning’ is made must be taken into consideration, i.e., we must analyze the structure comprising the space, or ‘horizon,’ of discourse that allows meaning to emerge in the first instance. Since the focus of this essay is on hermeneutic interpretation and the humanities classroom, pursuing the understanding of Gadamer’s notion of the ‘fusion of horizons’ through dialogue will elucidate the pertinence of this theory for our contemporary educational practices. If we are to remain true to the ontological elements of literature, i.e., aspects of literature that hold the ‘aesthetic’ power to transform our understanding of the world, our curriculum must be understood in relation to ‘original’ truth as experience and learning must be understood as occurring through the dual-phenomenon of revelation and knowledge construction, or *meaning-making*.

Gadamer introduces the notion of the ‘fusion of horizons’ within hermeneutic interpretation in order to indicate that all individuals possess unique views of the world, i.e., views, or perspectives, from out of which things make sense. The ‘horizon of interpretation,’ and the disclosure and limitations thereof, emerges from out of our immersion in the social-historical reality as it is shaped by our involvements with others, through various practices of discourse. “The concept of ‘horizon’ suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision the person is trying to understand must have” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 305). To avoid the charges of subjectivism or relativism, Gadamer suggests that our communal understanding of things is really a fusion, or a bringing together, of many horizons. These personal views, which are always the result of social construction, merge, interact, and eventually, through informed and critical dialogue, contribute to the formation of a transformed ecumenical vision of the world, producing a new social ‘horizon’ of meaning. Through the process of interpretation, we join together a multiplicity of perspectives to generate a new perspective on things, which would have been impossible if these perspectives had never come together. However, this is no to indicate that our ‘horizons’ merge in a completely harmonious manner, in a way that alleviates any an all tension between the various ‘horizons.’ Rather, there is a counter-striving activity at the heart of interpretation, which occurs within the overarching context of meaning, and this ‘fusion of horizons’ is constantly in the process of changing and developing as it occurs simultaneously across temporal, social, and personal lines, for the need for reassessing our knowledge is always necessary.

According to Gadamer, texts also contain ‘horizons,’ in that works of literature come to us always already possessing a variety of interpretations, which are grounded in a historical-social context that is unique to the text. For example, we might imagine Sophocles’ tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* possessing a horizon unique to ancient Athens, its history, beliefs, customs, as expressed through its social, religious, aesthetic, and political practices. The horizon of the tragic-drama contains within the “oppositions between legal and political thought on the one hand and the mythical and heroic traditions on the other,” which manifest at the heart of the tragedy, and here we experience what was unique to the Greeks, the sense of responsibility that “emerges when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate while still not being regarded as sufficiently autonomous to be fully self-sufficient” (Vernant, 1990, p. 27). The power of literature is clearly its ability to mean for us in the present, and further, to inspire our thinking on futural issues

as they concern us socially, and this occurs as new possibilities are opened to us when the horizon of meaning unique to the literature draws our contemporary horizon of meaning into the locus of meaning that is unique to the text, as a 'living' inscription of the past.

With this in mind, when the instruction of literature, as hermeneutic interpretation, brings together in dialogue a multiplicity of 'horizons,' and this activity should be considered in terms of a social, historical, and temporal, phenomenon, where the horizons of past and present merge, opening those involved in the work of interpretation to a communal view of our future. To study *Oedipus Rex* in the manner Gadamer suggests, holds the potential to open students and educators to the truth of literature as an aesthetic experience, as a disclosive moment of insight, which uncovers a truth about ourselves and our Being that is beyond the scope of the empirical or behavioral sciences. In this moment of aesthetic insight, the reader's world is transfigured and reinterpreted in light of the 'truth' of literature, when her 'present consciousness' is altered by meanings that resonate within the text's horizon. For example, when encountering the plight of King Oedipus, it is not the fact *that* he suffers that is significant, but rather what has ontological immediacy for readers, is the understanding that we too have the potential and propensity, as a basic constitution of our humanity, to suffer profusely in a similar manner. Importantly, as related to this notion of truth as 'experience,' the text's horizon is composed of a constellation of meanings, which are irreducible to a single, definitive interpretation. The elements of literature that hold the potential to inspire meaningful dialogue regarding our personal intellectual and emotional social, and ethical development, live at a level that is beyond traditional epistemological models for truth, they defy complete elucidation, and are recalcitrant to formalization in analytic or theoretical terms.

One of the lessons we take from Gadamer is that the meaning that emerges through textual analysis is never linked with the notion of objectively valid truisms that transcend, or are exterior to, the 'fusion of horizons' occurring within interpretation. Thus, the process of teaching literature, when working as a group in the process of *meaning-making*, which entails our working through interpretations in a critical and diplomatic manner, wherein they are assessed for their validity, and are either affirmed or denied through collective assessment, and, when necessary, are reassessed and amended accordingly. Gadamer's view of the verifiability of truth that emerges by means of hermeneutic methodology shares much in common with the *social constructionist* view of education, where knowledge is assessed in terms of the "meaning it has for its possessors," which expresses the philosophical position that "what society and people believe to be true and valuable is more important than what might be true or valuable in any absolute sense" (Schiro, 2008, p. 169). The implementation of the hermeneutic method, while not producing truths that are categorical in nature, works to secure through cooperation valid positions and perspectives, which begin as 'tacit' and unarticulated positions, and later become ordered, unified, and formalized 'horizons of meaning' within our experience, or established archives of knowledge.

This context for *making-meaning* is a context of inclusion, and as related to *social construction* philosophy, learning is grounded in dialogue, or meaningful *group discussion*, which always includes the knowledge, or perspective of interpretation that the student possesses and brings to the context of discussion, for learning takes place only in relation to what students already know, and further, their experiences only make sense

and are valuable when knowledge can be assimilated into the students' meaning structure. It is crucial to understand that what students already know about their worlds allows for the authentic contribution of the student to the construction of knowledge within the communal 'horizon,' which represents the collective vision of reality that takes shape through dialogue. As indicated, each student brings their own horizon of interpretation, which consists of forehaving, foreknowing, and foreconception of the issue or problem to be addressed, and these horizons form the overarching context of meaning that serves as the locus for the development of the lesson. Learning, thus conceived, draws on the "cultural resources that students bring with them to school, this suggests not only taking the language, histories, experiences, and voices of the students seriously, but also integrating what is taught in schools within the dynamics of everyday life" (Giroux, 2000, p. 6). Literature inspires students to rewrite their histories, their lives in relation to the insight they acquire from their involvement with the great works. Because of literature's *transhistorical* quality, it speaks to us uniquely on a higher intellectual and emotional level. It allows students to assimilate and relate what is given through the literature to their lives, in terms of visceral lived experience that transcends the bounds of the classroom, which indicates that two unique social settings for learning are instantiated: The 'local' social setting within the classroom and the protracted 'global' social setting of which students are a part of as citizens of the community, state, and nation (Schiro, 2008).

While the student's personal horizon of meaning is crucial to the process of interpretive discourse, there must also emerge a collective horizon, or ideal 'social' vision, toward which the group strives to achieve. Gadamer's philosophy offers insight into the necessity of forming a collective vision when attempting to solve our problems, it provides insight into the problems to be solved, allows us to examine the options that inform action, and provides us with a methodology for clarifying values and the subsequent adoption of appropriate values. Through the encounter with literature, perspectives arise that are different and unique from our own, in many ways represent an encounter with perspectives that are radically other in nature, which might inform our position in ways never imagined, showing us things unthought-of and unsaid, contributing to the formation of a better life. In *social constructivism*, learning occurs as the new and unique experiences of the lesson are incorporated into the students' archive of knowledge in such ways that these experiences broaden and depend the students' horizon of meaning, while at once challenging their knowledge claims. This process involves *group discussion* where teachers facilitate the construction of new knowledge from the various archives of knowledge that each individual student brings to the context of the discussion. Hermeneutic interpretation as described, has for its ultimate goal that construction of a new communal vision, which holds the potential for social empowerment and the collective overcoming of problems as related to the meanings that are made by the group, which always serve a greater, ecumenical purpose.

The processes of education, from the perspective of *social construction* philosophy, as related to Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic interpretation, enlists students as participatory and contributive members of a social collective of learners. As members of an ongoing dialogue, students from diverse social situations rise above the particular limitations of their perspectives, their particular circumstances, to envision the social situation as a whole of which they are integral members. One way in which this occurs is

through our encounter with literature in the humanities classroom, which represents an encounter with a social tradition, wherein there exists a tension between the text and our contemporary situations, on a personal and collective level, where we simultaneously encounter reality as it is with the concomitant vision of how it might be changed for the better, how it ought to be. Moving to the final section of this essay, I consider the notion of ‘understanding’ as emerging through a process of authentic dialogue, which is represented in terms of not only the construction of knowledge in the pursuit of problem-solving, but also in terms of a context, which embodies through its very functioning of democratic values of freedom, equity, equality and justice. This idea should be understood in terms of what has thus far been said about hermeneutic interpretation in the philosophy of Gadamer and potential for authentic social reform through the enactment of ‘communicative ethics,’ as found in Habermas' writings, which we might envision in the classroom in terms of an egalitarian community involved in learning as *transformative* discourse.

III. The ‘Communicative Ethics’ of Reading: *Dialogue and the Instantiation of Democratic Ideals*

In Shor (1992) we find an approach to English teaching that focuses specifically on the social, political, and ethical implications of literature and the manner in which it explores pressing issues of social injustice and subsequent reform. By meditating on themes that are intellectually, emotionally, and socially relevant, educators make room in the curriculum for instances where students directly encounter themes for social debate. Undoubtedly, the humanities represent a rich source for exploring the issues of social responsibility. Within the *social constructive* classroom, the thematic aspect of literature as described represents the ‘explicit’ aspects of teaching for social justice, where issues that emerge from literature, the subject-matter of the text, are debated with the expressed purpose of theorizing proposed group solutions.

Rather than reiterating the conclusions of scholars concerning the social relevance of literature, my focus is on analyzing the formal structure of the hermeneutic circle within which the interpretation of literature transpires. There exists a social aspect of *group discussion* that occurs on a second level, a ‘hidden’ level, where students are implicitly, or “subconsciously conditioned by group norms to have a particular social perspective and set of values” (Schiro, 2008, p. 165). Elucidating this ‘hidden’ level, where democratic ideals are embodied within the structure of the dialogue as it transpires in the classroom, will prove insightful for educators seeking to formalize a notion of ‘democratic pedagogy’ as it relates to learning through group discussion. Working toward this end, the philosophy of Habermas and his notion of ‘communicative ethics’ will provide valuable insight.

Habermas’ writings emerge from the Marxist tradition, but unlike Althusser, who focuses on the later Marx of *Capital*, Habermas finds inspiration in Marx’s earlier works, e.g., *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which are decidedly more *humanist* in tone. Habermas’ analyses demonstrate that oppressive systems of government survive because individuals fall into pre-determined ways of thinking and behaving, and, we might add, education is an integral part of this problem, for education represents a dominant form of indoctrination into the ways of the reigning state ideology,

reproducing through its curriculum, the social order, and thus indoctrinating students into a system that holds the power to reproduce oppressive and unequal conditions. Education, as an arm of the state, works in service of the ideology in maintaining the gap between what Habermas terms the 'public sphere' and the 'lived reality' of the oppressive social-political world. Habermas conceives of the public sphere as the origin of all authentic democratic ideals, which includes an understanding of the moral values that hold the potential to foster and inspire the social and civic virtues of equity, equality and justice. In order to bridge the gap between public sphere and lived reality, the goal of enlightened social reform (the goal of educators embracing *social constructivism*), Habermas suggests 'communicative discourse,' which works to redirect our failed courses of action. When valid claims to epistemological or ethical validity break down, there is a need to reevaluate our actions, conscious mind-sets, and knowledge practices that have been conditioned by prior processes of socialization. What is unique about Habermas' conception of authentic discourse is that it literally prefigures, within the participatory nature of its unfolding, the futural ideals for a just and improved society that we are in the process of forming, which are not yet immediately present to our social practices.

For Habermas, discourse is not the precise equivalent of language, this is because communicative discourse transpires and is understood through the same language that shapes the dominant ideology, i.e., the language of sexism, exploitation, racism, social elitism. Importantly, it is not the case that we can simply change the words we incorporate, or eliminate certain offensive hateful words from our speech, and achieve liberation on the social front, this amounts to a misinterpretation of what language is and how it functions. Language is always situated within a context where ideological relations of knowledge and power are occurring; the same language of the ideology moderates all human activities. However, what authentic discourse attempts to do is give a unique and new form to the language we employ by way of structuring our language around careful, informed, reflective, and rational speech that works toward a motivated consensus in the attempt to refine our ideals and notions of democratic values and virtues. Communicative discourse is more about the way we speak than the language we use, it's concerned with the way we structure the communication order to strengthen our relations with others in an equitable and just manner. This requires that we open democratic spaces from out of which a collective voice might emerge in an autonomous manner from the processes of carefully reflecting and debating social issues, where we are simultaneously diagnosing social disorders while offering prescriptive measures that might serve as 'cures' to these aforementioned social maladies.

Communicative discourse seeks to enact what Habermas terms the "ideal speech situation," and while he readily admits that this paradigmatic enactment of such discourse is and must remain an "ideal," it is a state that we should continually strive toward in the attempt to actualize, and "striving requires the ability to take up the perspective of people with whom we disagree" (Habermas, 1998, p. 247). In the classroom, when establishing the validity of either our claims to knowledge or value judgments, we are working together in order to arrive at an agreement through a consensus of conflicting views. "By directing ourselves toward the goal of a 'single right answer' even in moral controversies. We presuppose that a valid morality applies to a single social world that includes all claims and persons equally" (Ibid, p. 247). This notion of 'inclusive' dialogue runs counter the *scholar-academic* curriculum model, wherein the discussion is led, guided,

and directed by the educator, who assumes the role of an authority figure, and is therefore set above the students from the perspective of power and presumed expertise; this type of discourse, if it even deserves to be called discourse, is blatantly non-inclusive, elitist, dogmatic, and limited.

For example, although the students might have legitimate and reasonable arguments, a teacher is in a position to make his arguments look better, for she “can employ unfamiliar concepts, take advantage of students’ lack of advance preparation on the particular issue, and in other ways manipulate an unfair conclusion to the debate” (Lillegard, 2010, p. 260). This form of classroom interaction between teachers and students, in which the educator overrides and marginalizes the arguments offered by students regarding the issues being debated, is the very opposite of discourse as conceived by Habermas. For he envisions discourse as a form of communication in which we strive to eliminate all such unfair advantages so that the discussion proceeds along according to a criterion to which everyone in advance can subscribe. Importantly, the “ideal speech situation” as envisioned by Habermas, as related to teaching for social justice, should be, above all, composed and enacted by means of an ‘inclusive’ context that is structured according to equitable “rules for discussion, the desired social perspective and values, and the model for the modes of thinking in which students are to engage” (Schiro, 2008, p. 165).

As I have suggested, the basic components of Habermas’ communicative discourse are related to an understanding of teaching for social justice, and they are present to the pedagogy of the humanities classroom, wherein hermeneutic interpretation of literature transpires as earlier described as a mediated and structured confluence of ‘horizons,’ or world perspectives. If a ‘democratic pedagogy’ is conceivable, it should function in the classroom in the following manner: First, educators and students would be involved in evaluating ends toward which the discourse is directed, which includes educators considering the good of the student’s life and history as related to the life and history of the community of students within the classroom. Secondly, there would be the understanding that communal discourse, in terms of *making meaning*, is a process, and is therefore always *on-the-way* toward the realization of its visions, always evolving and developing through activities that encourage the self-development of the student through the immersion in the larger social context of the curriculum (Habermas, 1989). It is possible to envision the humanities classroom, as the foregoing analysis attempts to elucidate, in terms of a developing and legitimate democratic community wherein students and educators are involved in the process of interpreting works of literature through a process of hermeneutic knowledge construction while structured and guided by a pedagogical method that engenders an environment for *making-meaning* that resists oppression, prejudice, and dogmatism, by means of providing an equitable space within which to engage others in a respectful, yet highly critical and informed, manner. In this type of classroom, the democratic notions of equality, equity and justice are represented, or better, embodied in discourse that is all-inclusive, non-coercive and ecumenical in nature, for authentic discourse is never based on the participant’s social position but on the legitimacy of the argument. Within communicative discourse as envisioned by Habermas, it is not the “force of the argument prevails, not ‘might,’ threats, coercion” (Ibid, p. 89).

In view of the analysis of both Gadamer and Habermas, it is possible to envision a form of democratic pedagogy and curriculum that serves to connect teachers and students through discourse, which against *essentialist* models for curriculum, seeks to overcome the student's alienation from the content of the curriculum, other students who might be from diverse social backgrounds, and educators, when conceived as authoritarian figures. For example, a notion of democratic pedagogy includes envisioning teachers as colleagues, participants, and facilitators of the learning process, who are engaged as co-learners in classroom activities. In teaching for social justice and student empowerment, "There are no teachers and students, but teacher-students, and student-teachers" (Friere, 1990, p. 67). To conceive of the interpretation of literature as suggested it is clear that each and every student's subjective, personal horizon of disclosure represents a critical component in the process of *making-meaning*. Thus, learning through discussion, should include ample opportunities for peer-centered activities, which empower students in their ability to think critically, which allows for an authentic sense of autonomy to develop. To think critically in an effort to elicit change, is a crucial attribute to any democratic citizen, who would challenge the asymmetrical and hierarchical power relations between students and educators that resides at the core of our traditional educational practices. Students, who learn to adopt a skeptical and critical attitude toward established views of knowledge, will eventually be prepared to challenge the reigning power-knowledge relations that structure or society (Shor, 1992).

The encounter with literature, understood in terms of a confluence of 'horizons,' is never the esoteric experience of an interiorized closed-off subject. Due to literature's unique formal structure, characterization, and narrative movement, it establishes an immediate sympathetic, emotional relationship with readers, which draws them into communication with others. By enlisting readers as participants in the imaginative experience, the novel is a far-reaching expression of human possibility and potential, where readers are open to forming a new understanding of their situations. When teaching literature, educators are engendering the context of interpretation wherein students not only assume responsibility for their own learning, but also contribute to and benefit from the knowledge and contributions of others. The instruction unfolding as inclusive communicative discourse encourages the active involvement in and contribution to the developing interpretations of the class, and this establishes a sense of ownership, or personalization, of the knowledge. The process of interpretation that evolves through the reciprocal actions between students and educators demands a mode of teaching, a 'democratic vision' of pedagogy, which allows students to reconstruct their archival knowledge through the examination of the interpretations that arise through group discussion. Interpretations emerge that are composed of clusters of interpretations, and in such activity, an individual's interpretation develops along with, and indeed because of, those with whom the individual participates in the process of *making-meaning*.

In relation to this notion of 'democratic' *group discussion*, as outlined in terms of Habermas' notion of communicative discourse, a sense of social justice is present, and emerges through the learning process when educators, who are explicitly aware of the effects this type of activity has on students, adopt a pedagogy that consciously structures the formal elements of the modes of argumentation that ground the discourse. For example, if it is the educator's desire to stress the importance of approaching others with

an attitude of charity and respect, these ideals will be conditioned into the students as the discussion embodies the values in its unfolding (Schiro, 2008). With respect to the interpretation of literature, these values manifest in a two-fold fashion: First, in the way that readers approach the text in an open, non-prejudicial manner, and secondly, in the way in which students interact with each other, as they attempt to foster equitable interpersonal relationships while engaged in debate. In this way, behaviors that exemplify democratic virtues “become forces that mold students. Here it is the medium (the discussion itself) more than the message (the topic of discussion) that is designed to provide the teaching” (Ibid, p. 165). Not that the instructor is literally teaching explicit tenets of social justice to the students in such instances, but rather the atmosphere of cooperation embodies such virtues, communal mode of problem solving in the classroom allow for the democratic virtues to presence, as they are enacted and instantiated in praxis as the issues at hand are debated in meaningful and respectful ways. On this point, Habermas concurs, for he is clear that although the ideals emerging through discourse are “regulative,” they are nevertheless “real insofar as the process of argumentation in which they are inscribed is real” (Ibid, p. 89).

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