

## **KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN ADULT EDUCATION: BEYOND FREIRE AND HABERMAS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The incorporation of work by Freire and Habermas into adult education theory has contributed to the development of concepts such as “communicative competence” and “transformative education.” This contribution has generated a lively and spirited debate within the field of adult education. My purpose is to extend the debate to include an analysis of the role of power and knowledge in educational theory. By examining the contribution of postmodern social and cultural theories to adult education, I argue that (a) adult educators not lose sight of the connection between knowledge and power, (b) all individuals in educational settings occupy multiple subject positions through which they construct a complex and often contradictory understanding of their lifeworld, and (c) that adult educators be attuned to the various ways in which power is deployed through their own discourse about particular discipline-specific knowledge.

We must know the limits of the narratives, rather than establish the narratives as solutions for the future, for the arrival of social justice, so that to an extent they're working within an understanding of what they cannot do...(Spivak, 1990, pp. 18-19).

The incorporation of work by Freire and Habermas into adult education theory has contributed such concepts as “communicative competence” and “transformative education.” This contribution has generated a lively and spirited debate within the field of adult education centered around Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning. The purpose of this paper is to extend the debate to include a postmodern analysis of the role of power and knowledge in educational practice in order to signal the limits of the modernist narrative in adult education.

First, I sketch out those components of Freire’s and Habermas’ writings which appear to have had the most influence on Mezirow. Specifically, I will offer a critique of Mezirow’s humanistic interpretation of Habermas’ theory of communicative action and the goal of creating the conditions for ideal speech and learning. I suggest the affinities between Habermas and Freire which inform Mezirow’s theory of learning types and the transformation of meaning perspective. I suggest that we redirect our attention away from a praxis aimed at creating the conditions for a fully emancipatory educational process and toward an understanding of the forms of power that are attached to the creation and dissemination of specific knowledges. This leads to a consideration of Foucault’s depiction of a knowledge-power axis

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inherent in everyday life. I argue that the humanist project of Habermas and Freire rests on a flawed notion of subject-centered knowledge which has significant consequences for adult education.

An alternative reading of Freire can uncover the postmodern moments within his work. This reading has been undertaken by theorists in the field of critical pedagogy (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Giroux, 1994; Giroux & McLaren, 1991; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; McLaren & Hammer, 1989). However, critical pedagogy eschews aspects of postmodernism characterized both by political indeterminacy and a skepticism regarding the transformative power of grand narratives. By offering an assessment of Mezirow's theory from the standpoint of postmodernism, I wish to highlight some of the limitations of the modernist project in adult education. Finally, I will identify some of the issues raised by a postmodern turn in adult education.

### Critical Theory and Adult Education: Freire and Habermas

The works of Paulo Freire on education and praxis and Jurgen Habermas on philosophy and critical social theory can be interpreted as complementary dimensions of a humanistic, modernist project oriented to the concrete goal of human emancipation from forms of material, cultural, and psychological oppression. Both Freire and Habermas conceive of people as moral and practical beings with the inherent capacity to make ethical judgments and to justify them rationally in open discussion. Yet, both Freire and Habermas are fully cognizant of the coercive power of hegemonic ideas to thwart democratic discourse and political action. Coercion is employed at the material, cultural, and psychological levels of human existence. At different historical conjunctures the strategic urgency to combat domination at these various levels shifts. This is but one of a multiplicity of possible readings of the work of Freire and Habermas.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is the reading adopted by Mezirow in developing an educational theory of perspective transformation.

Freire's work seeks to practically extend a humanist agenda immanent in the very nature of our being human. He assesses the conditions of concrete reality in terms of the vocation of becoming more fully human (Freire, 1994, p. 98). Yet, Freire is aware of the brutal oppression evinced by both cultural and material deprivation (1972, p. 28). Freire proffers an emancipatory agenda to be implemented through the co-intentional pedagogy of educators (teacher-students) and the oppressed (student-teachers).

This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade. (Freire, 1972, p. 37)

For Freire, this is not to be just any introspective reflection. Rather, it is a reflection oriented to change and rooted in a contradictory reality; a reflection which is immanently critical. Critical reflection is an intersubjective, communicative pro-

cess (Freire, 1973, p. 136). But it is not communication of any sort which fosters liberation. Directives and deceptions communicate a shared linguistic symbolization yet they surely do not liberate. Rather, Freire reserves this liberating sphere for dialogue.

Freire cites a fundamental constituent of both communication and dialogue: comprehensibility (Freire, 1973, pp. 138-139). Dialogue refers to communication with the intent to reach mutual understanding and acts as meta-communication to uncover the problems in communication. It can be as simple as saying: "Could you say that again in different words?" or "What do you mean?" Of course, dialogue need not always be sought. Technical jargon, obscure references, and ambiguous phrasing are all forms, intentional or not, of asserting domination and reproducing a culture of silence in educational settings. However, dialogue aimed at confronting incomprehensibility is the potential of all human beings.

Comprehensibility is not the only constituent of dialogue for Freire. Dialogue also rests on trust. Dialogue which fosters distrust is oppressive, and by definition was never dialogue in the first place. This formulation cannot account for those instances where dialogue is thwarted for reasons indirectly related to the intentions of the subjects. To be able to explain instances of *systematically distorted communication* Freire's account needs to be clearer about the very structure of communication. We need to see that specific claims are raised and either reproduced or challenged every time we communicate. The status of these claims is tied to the existing class structure, system of gender relations, and other forms of domination. Freire, by focusing attention on the constituents of liberating praxis, fails to give a full account of the constraints inherent in the politics of communication itself. He falls back on an overly simplistic model based on the explicit intentions of the oppressors. He assumes that the oppressors are self-conscious and self-centered—oppressors are described in terms of a *centered* subjectivity (Freire, 1972). Language is subverted to meet the needs of the oppressors. Myths are deposited by the oppressors. How do these myths come to be accepted in the day-to-day life of the oppressed so as to reproduce their own oppression? Freire leaves us without a clear answer.

In order to illuminate the dynamics of oppression, an oppression which can be reproduced without the explicit intervention of the oppressors, an oppression which is systematically (subtly, unconsciously) reproduced, I would like to sketch out parts of Habermas' theory of communicative action. I do not pretend to do justice to the whole of Habermas' project. Much will necessarily be omitted. Nevertheless, much can be gained from focusing on Habermas' communication theory including the concepts of the *ideal speech situation* and *systematically distorted communication*.

Whenever we speak, whether we know it or not, we offer claims about the validity of what we say and who we are when we say what we say. The listener agrees, at least temporarily, to accept the intent of the speaker to abide by these

claims. This initial situation is necessary in order for communication to take place. It reflects a rational desire to understand one another and it represents the pre-communicative ideal speech situation in which claims are accepted and the goal of understanding, rather than manipulation or deception, is paramount. These communicative claims are comprehensibility, truth, sincerity, and legitimacy (Habermas, 1979, pp. 2-3).

After communication has taken place, the goal of understanding is joined by the instrumental goal of achieving money, power, and status. Communicative claims, and the speakers who raise them, are now open to challenges. But not everyone is capable of challenging communicative claims. What is crucial to the Freire-Habermas connection is the realization that the ability to challenge claims is unevenly distributed in practice. Oppression is a reality structured into the communicative process itself. When reasons *could be produced* to argue against a claim to comprehensibility, truth, sincerity, or legitimacy, yet are not so produced, then communication is distorted. Freire recognizes a distortion in the case of manipulation whereby oppressors implant myths and “steal” words so as to dominate the oppressed.

In addition to manipulation, communication may also be systematically distorted. Systematic distortions function largely as a result of class antagonism, patriarchal oppression, or other structural sources of power. The issue that is most problematic for Habermas is how one devises a response to systematically distorted communication. This, I believe, is one of his major weaknesses. At best he is able to cite Freudian psychoanalytic techniques as a heuristic model. In the psychoanalytic procedure, the analyst enters into dialogue with the patient whereby fragmentary information about the patient’s life is drawn out. The analyst then reconstructs these fragments and re-presents them to the patient. This re-presentation “can be verified in fact only if the patient adopts them and tells his own story with their aid” (Habermas, 1971, p. 260). This then leads to a process of self-formation whereby “the subject must be able to relate his own history and have comprehended the inhibitions that blocked the path of self-reflection” (p. 260). The parallels to Freirean pedagogy are several. There is a process of a codification and recodification based on themes supplied by the patient. The object of this psychoanalytic technique is to allow the patient to, in essence, name in public language that which found voice only in a distorted or private form of language. Freire’s explicit politicization and democratization of this model goes one step further in defining and implementing a praxis of radical pedagogy. For Freire this is achieved by way of a problem-posing pedagogy. “Problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality...[it] strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* [original emphasis] in reality” (Freire, 1972, p. 68). Essentially, “people begin to single out elements of their ‘background consensus’ and to reflect upon them. These elements are now objects of people’s consideration, and, as such, objects of action and cognition” (p. 70).

### Mezirow's Application of Habermas and Freire for Transformative Learning

The structure of communicative action and pedagogical praxis described by Habermas and Freire has been operationalized by Mezirow into a practical strategy of adult education. Mezirow (1985, 1990a) suggests that learning takes place in three dimensions: instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective. These three dimensions appear to correspond to Habermas' communicative claims in the following ways.

First, instrumental learning involves testing the validity of statements against the real world of facts and established knowledge. This follows Habermas' description of instrumental action as action oriented to results. We wish to check the statement, "Members of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve Board are appointed by the President to a single 14 year term." To do so we rely on reference books and appeals to authority. These fact-checking strategies have worked in the past and so we are confident. Indeed we do not even give it a second thought that they will work today and in the future.

Dialogic learning requires an act of interpretation and judgement. For instance, engaging the statement, "The Federal Reserve Board is one of the most powerful groups of un-elected officials in Washington, D.C.," involves a dialogic process.

In the absence of empirical tests, we learn what is valid in the assertions of others, and we gain credence for the validity of our own ideas by relying on as broad a consensus as possible of those whom we accept as informed, objective, and rational. (Mezirow, 1985, p. 19)

It is with dialogic learning that individuals engage in communicative action requiring that claims to truth, sincerity, and legitimacy be accepted as part of the learning process.

Finally, self-reflective learning is achieved when the individual is able to identify those disabling or disempowering psychological barriers to personal achievement and fulfillment. Psychoanalytic therapy is the model Mezirow suggests for self-reflective learning (1985, p. 21). The result of this learning process is liberation or emancipation.

My primary criticism of Mezirow's formulation of adult learning processes rests on (a) the artificial separation between instrumental learning or action, dialogic learning-action and self-reflective learning (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Hart, 1990), and (b) the identification of adult education with the goal of creating emancipated learners engaged in communication free of distortions (Habermas' ideal speech situation). Both of these objections can be located within the broader methodological concern over modern and postmodern approaches to adult education.

### Discourse and Power in Adult Education

#### Instrumental and Communicative Action: A Critique

Although Mezirow acknowledges that meaning structures can change at each

of the three levels of learning, he maintains their separation. As Hart (1990) points out, instrumental learning takes place within a specific socio-cultural context. The rationale for keeping separate the spheres of instrumental learning and communicative or dialogic learning is to be found in Habermas' dichotomization of action domains in critical social theory.<sup>2</sup>

Habermas borrows heavily from two contentious strands of sociological theory. On the one hand, he incorporates Max Weber's notion of action oriented to interpretive understanding by which individuals, acting within a social setting, engage in the construction of meaning. The daily stock of meanings which remain unquestioned and form the backdrop for our actions is referred to as the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987; Pietrykowski, in press; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). The lifeworld contains within it a shared cultural and linguistic knowledge which allows us to engage in communication with an Other. Action here is oriented toward understanding (communicative action). On the other hand, Habermas embraces the systems theory of Talcott Parsons. The systems perspective holds that individual actions are oriented to success (instrumental action). The primary standards of success in the system are measured by money and power. Therefore, the main spheres of system maintenance are the economy and politics.

Habermas (1987, p. 355) goes on to describe society as comprised of both system and lifeworld. He also describes the tendency in capitalist societies for system imperatives (characterized by increasing complexity, increased reliance on authority, and increased specialization of labor) to invade the lifeworld. Habermas argues that there are two system imperatives threatening the educational lifeworld: (a) the economic imperative linking education to the demands of business, and (b) the increasing use of legal mechanisms to mediate social conflicts concerning schooling. Both economic and legal discourse enable system requirements to dominate the lifeworld.

When system imperatives invade the lifeworld, communication becomes increasingly susceptible to manipulation and distortion. Recovering the ideal conditions for speech is one way of combatting the destruction of the lifeworld. Therefore, we can construct the following homology:

<u>Action Sphere in Habermas</u>	<u>Learning Type in Mezirow</u>
System	Instrumental
Lifeworld	Communicative/Dialogic
Ideal Speech Situation	Self-Reflective

Learning types correspond to system or lifeworld maintenance. For example, most job training programs are aimed at making workers more productive in the specific tasks they perform. Michael Piore and colleagues report that most training programs devote little attention to personal learning or critical thinking (Piore, Christensen, Flynn, Hall, Katz, Keefe, Ruhm, Sum, & Useem, 1991, p. 187). While these programs further the goals of system maintenance they are also an-

chored in the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987, p. 154). Instrumental learning is inherently social, intersubjective, and contextual. Job training programs often need to be justified to workers on the basis of more than the fear of job loss (power) or the promise of higher wages (money). For example, in unionized industries the interests of the workers are institutionalized and concretized in a non-instrumental language of solidarity and group rewards (Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980).

Self-reflective learning (Mezirow, 1985, 1990a, 1994a) is also rooted within a particular social context. While reflection appears to be a private matter internal to the individual, the act of reflection is a process whereby meaning is given to experiences and that meaning then gets communicated through a particular social discourse (Usher, 1989, p. 30). The notion that self-reflective learning is internal to an individual and that this learning is necessarily emancipatory reflects a particular theory of subjectivity and of power. It reflects a modernist and humanist approach to adult education in which the subject/learner strives for undistorted discourse, true knowledge, and emancipation from systems of power and domination.

### Power and Postmodern Subjectivity

In addition to Mezirow, a growing number of education theorists are attempting to combine critical social theory with Freire's pedagogical theory (Aronowitz, 1993; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993; Peters & Lankshear, 1994). Much of this research has sought to incorporate insights and criticisms from postmodern theory in order to produce a critical pedagogy which combines the humanist spirit and hope of modernism with the critique of reason put forth by postmodernists. Both postmodernism and poststructuralism have destabilized the traditional Western system of knowledge and understanding which undergirds educational theory and practice.<sup>3</sup> Elements of postmodernism are to be found in the rapid transformation of the world economy, from a system predicated on the mass production of goods and services to a system in which production is as much concerned with signs and style than with the material goods being assembled (Baudrillard, 1988). In a postmodern world, individual identity is increasingly represented through multiple acts of consumption rather than through engagement in a production process (Pietrykowski, 1994). Since consumption activity is more loosely attached to the logic of instrumental rationality and technical efficiency, individuals may be able to express forms of creative power in the construction of their identity through the selective and idiosyncratic use of commodities in ways which may differ from the uses intended by the producer (McCracken, 1988). For example, the use of clothing (e.g., uniforms, business suits, underwear) intended for one activity or gender can be re-appropriated and imbued with a different set of meanings altogether; meanings which may destabilize existing gender or racial stereotypes (Bordo, 1993; Kelley, 1995). But this process of destabilization is never pre-determined. The process of creating meaning always involves the creation of knowledge, the shifting of attention, and the exercise of power. The process of destabilization comes about through a radical redeployment of images in ways which result in either the resis-

tance to taken-for-granted knowledge or the ironic reinforcement of such taken-for-granted knowledge. In this respect I take issue with the separation of a ludic postmodernism from a resistance postmodernism. Ludic postmodernism is said to emphasize the “mere” pastiche of experiences, the juxtaposition of incongruent styles and surface images characteristic of a playfulness and irony of a theory without politics. Resistance postmodernism is open to difference and the open-ended nature of texts and experiences characteristic of a general democratic tolerance and pluralism which retains the goal of universal emancipation from systems of power and domination (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994).

Freire’s work has been described as a “border pedagogy,” straddling both the modern and postmodern worlds (Giroux, 1994). According to this reading, systems of oppression and domination are redressed through a pedagogical discourse that retains the goal of politicization by unmasking systems of power while simultaneously acknowledging a multiplicity of voices and experiences of oppression. Therefore, rather than situating Freire in relation to modernism *or* postmodernism, I argue that Mezirow attends to the modernist impulses in Freire’s work.

Postmodern aspects of Freire’s work suggest that the educational process is fluid—the roles of student and teacher switch back and forth—and characterized by goals which cannot be articulated before the oppressed have posed questions (Giroux & McLaren, 1991). “The problem which the teacher is really faced with is how in practice progressively to create with the students the habit, the virtue, of asking questions, of being surprised” (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 37). Here Freire characterizes education as open-ended, uncertain, and capable of thwarting the expectations of the educator. Yet, immediately following this description of the use of questions in progressive educational practice Freire evaluates the types of questions asked. For example, some questions may be insincere or simply improperly formulated. “In such cases, the role of educators, far from ridiculing the student, is to help the student to rephrase the question” (p. 37). These statements illustrate both the degree to which a democratic humanist discourse can accommodate concerns about the proper objects of knowledge and the inherent limits of such an approach to destabilize both the subject and the object of knowledge. While Freire acknowledges that there are multiple readings of the world (p. 112) he also privileges readings and renderings which have as their goal the emancipation or liberation of the oppressed. In a recent interview with Donald Macedo, Freire comments on oppression rooted in male domination over women:

I think that, whenever possible, the pessimists need to rectify the sexist behavior of men who are also oppressed by making them assume their position as oppressed so that, in the process, these men will also recognize their role as oppressors of women as well. And in turn, these oppressed men, by maintaining certain coherence in their struggle of liberation, will have to renounce their role as oppressors of women. I believe that through this process the struggle for liberation would envelop a collective war against all oppression. If the oppressed women choose to fight exclusively against the op-



pressed men when they are both in the category of oppressed, they may rupture the oppressor-oppressed relations specific to both men and women. If this is done, the struggle will only be partial and perhaps tactically incorrect. (Freire & Macedo, 1993, p. 174)

Not only is difference depicted as an obstacle on the road to liberation, but the knowledge generated from difference is not allowed to influence the rational model of liberatory practice set forth by Freire (Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 1992, 1993). Advocates of a “resistance postmodernism” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; McLaren, 1994; McLaren & Hammer, 1989) suggest that we can retain the attention given to uncertainty and undecidability and link it to a praxis that strives to unleash emancipatory impulses. They maintain that (a) there are multiple meanings attached to texts, (b) these meanings or interpretations enter a contested terrain of signification, wherein (c) there is a particular set of meanings, adherence to which will lead to emancipation. I would argue that (a) and (b) are crucial for a critical postmodern approach to adult education but that we must sever the link to (c) because it privileges a particular emancipatory logic and does not tolerate difference in the social construction of diverse communities of knowledge and educational practice. The process of education for liberation with the intent of overcoming systems of oppression implicitly accepts a unitary conception of power and, as important, leaves unquestioned the disciplinary matrix within which education takes place.

### Postmodernism Unmodified: Implications for Adult Education

The contribution of postmodernism and poststructuralism<sup>4</sup> to adult education lies, in part, in attempts to highlight the constant interplay between words (signifier) and meaning (signified). Open-ended textual interpretation is not an invitation to triviality, narrow specialization, or mere play. The postmodern theoretical gaze<sup>5</sup> embraces the uncertainty, uneasiness, and discomfort associated with a radical juxtaposition and repositioning of texts. The lack of a specific goal-orientation leaves wide open the possibility that new alliances or collective subjects will emerge. The modernist goal of emancipation may foreclose these possibilities by its very conception of itself in opposition to a knowable, definable, objective form of oppression. Power becomes monolithic and ceases to be understood as fluid and existing as a multiplicity of institutional and psychological forces. The postmodern perspective recognizes that one can resist power. In doing so, however, one creates a set of discourses which, by articulating a particular subject position, also engages its own matrix of power relations.

In order to extend the ideas of Habermas, Freire, and Mezirow without the expectation of complete human emancipation, we must investigate the multiple sources and manifestations of power in culture and society. Foucault (1980, 1990) suggests that power is inextricably bound up with knowledge. Speaking truths presupposes a system of power which confers the status of truth on various statements and claims. This is important for a theory of adult education to recognize. If education is about transforming meaning structures (Mezirow, 1990a, 1990b, 1991,

1994a), then the creation of alternative meaning structures is itself the outcome of a system of power. For example, in his discussion of perspective transformation, Mezirow (1990a) describes three sources of distorted meaning perspectives: (a) epistemic distortions which arise from the use of flawed logic (which can also be the result of viewing social relationships as natural and immutable); (b) sociocultural distortions which arise from the implementation of mistaken belief systems; and (c) psychic distortions that are related to childhood trauma and that, in effect, replay themselves in adulthood thereby precluding effective critical reflection. While Mezirow (1990b) acknowledges that the three types of meaning distortion are interrelated, the elimination of distortions should enable the learner to proceed to critical reflection and meaning transformation. The learning process reaches a successful conclusion only when individuals translate their knowledge into individual or collective action. The problem with this framework is the teleological nature of learning and meaning transformation posited by Mezirow. Not only will adult learners occupy different stages of development, but learners' meaning perspectives may be transformed in radically different ways.

For example, in corporate or union-based educational settings, suppose the problem of unemployment and the concept of the unemployment rate is introduced and discussed. The biases underlying the official government unemployment statistic—for example, part-time workers are counted as fully employed—are presented in order to provide adult workers with an understanding of a statistic (e.g., a 10% unemployment rate) encountered in their daily lives. The result may be to transform meaning structures by providing workers with a new understanding of a taken-for-granted piece of data. But the direction of change in meaning perspectives may be quite different. One worker may now understand unemployment to be a much more pervasive and threatening condition for the national economy as well as for the individual worker who gets sacked. Another worker may experience an altered meaning perspective by which they formerly believed in the government reports and are now more cynical about government statistics in general. While this worker could be said to have gained critical perspective on the issue of unemployment, it is equally likely that she gained a cynical attitude toward the role of government. This attitude might correspond more closely to meanings offered by local talk radio hosts, editorial columnists, or church ministers than to the meaning intended by the adult educator. This is not to deny a role to educators in helping to foster critical attitudes on the part of adult learners. Rather, it suggests the need to examine the range of meanings, both “emancipatory” and “reactionary,” that emanate from the system of power and knowledge at work in those processes (Gore, 1992).

The postmodern turn in social theory, I argue, requires that theorists themselves be more engaged in understanding the multiple realities that constitute the lived worlds of adult learners and educators. In addition, the emphasis in postmodern thought on indeterminacy and the creative force of power suggests that the

educational dynamic be deconstructed in ways different from the dialectical process suggested by Freire and Mezirow. This point is best illustrated by reference to Foucault's remarkable exploration of the history of sexuality.

Foucault examined whether the Victorian disdain for matters sexual might have actually reflected a rather profound interest in sexuality. He develops a history of sexuality around the history of the *corporeal body* and the study and creation of a *body of knowledge* about the subject. The creation of a body of knowledge was a means of both expressing interest and exerting control. The development and deployment of a detailed Victorian discourse of sex was itself a technique of control. The body was both fascinating and frightening; uncontrolled bodies had the potential for catastrophe both through the spread of disease *and* the spread of infectious and disruptive ideas. Thus, Foucault attempts to dissolve the split between mind and body and to reconstruct a knowledge hidden from view.

Foucault (1990, p. 157), however obliquely, does not end his account by simply documenting the inevitability of power and control, but suggests that a countermove toward an eroticism that was more de-centered, less genital-focused, and more diffuse would be an alternative source of power within which people could broaden the range of their experiences and understandings. Such resistant behavior, aimed at the scientification of sexuality, could create the conditions for increased empathy, respect, and understanding of difference.

This is not to hold that all attempts to disrupt dominant regimes of truth are emblematic of a creative liberatory power. Indeed, rather than seeing power as a property to be distributed (Gore, 1992) or as something that is held by individuals or groups (Bordo, 1993), one may alternatively understand power as a process in which people participate and within which people are positioned. Adult education can then be understood as a manifestation of power that generates its own set of resistances and forms of accommodation (Giroux & McLaren, 1991). However, the shape and form of such resistance may or may not achieve the goals of democratic self-determination or personal liberty.

Power is immanent in the act of knowing. This is one of Foucault's leading contributions to social theory and has direct implications for a theory of adult education. The act of learning is simultaneously an act of naming power rather than overcoming power. Actions aimed at overcoming power may result in the creation of new forms of power. For example, recall that both Habermas and Mezirow appeal to psychoanalysis as a model for the development of the emancipatory potential in society. For Foucault (1980), psychoanalysis represents a liberating movement away from a science of the body rooted in heredity and degeneracy.

But the fact remains that in our societies the career of psychoanalysis has taken other directions and has been the object of different investments. Certain of its activities have effects which fall within the function of control and normalization. (p. 61)

Foucault does not stop with this critique. While psychoanalysis displays an

interest in control and discipline, it also contains the potential to deploy a countervailing power which resists the power of the state and other institutions of domination and regulation (p. 61). Thus, Foucault's work encourages the study and understanding of the deep sources of power and their effects. The emphasis of postmodernism on (a) the de-centered subject, and (b) the knowledge-power relationship has important implications for theories of education. In addition to allowing for multiple subject positions in relation to, for example, race, class, ethnicity, gender, and age, there is also the suggestion that the very subject-matter or disciplinary boundaries within which learning is to take place be deconstructed. De-centering the subject also means investigating how a body of knowledge produces a specific set of power relations. Zavarzadeh and Morton (1991) refer to this deconstruction as "transdisciplinarity," which

is aware of the status of knowledge as one of the modes of the ideological construction of reality in any given discipline... Thus the dominant notion of the "interdisciplinary" as the space of liberal, pluralistic negotiations among knowledges is radically different from the "transdisciplinary" as the locus of a politics of knowing and the site of the power/knowledge relations of culture. (p. 10)

Adult education is particularly well-suited to engage in this process of deconstruction to the extent that adult learners can use their stock of lived experiences as a counter-text with which to understand the construction of particular types of knowledge (Brookfield, 1990a).<sup>6</sup> Critical incidents based upon an individual's stock of lived experience can then be the basis for critical reflection upon the assumptions which inform meaning structures associated with other texts. This would allow one to re-direct Mezirow's emphasis on meaning transformation to include the socially-constructed meanings which educators themselves attach to fields of inquiry. Understanding a discipline of knowledge as a set of contested discourses (Amariglio, Resnick & Wolff, 1990; Giroux, 1994; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993) would help to reposition adult participants in education in relation to the power immanent in such a discourse. No doubt there are dangers associated with losing touch with a fixed narrative structure that characterizes one's disciplinary knowledge. These are the dangers inherent in a postmodern approach to education which sees meaning transformation oriented to democratic political transformation and emancipation as but one of a set of fluid discourses structured in relation to forms of knowledge and the power generated by them.

### Conclusion

Both Freire and Habermas emphasize that theory and practice must be linked to an analysis of people's experience and the unproblematic claims and world views that they hold. The task presented is one of problematizing those claims thereby revealing the contradictions in our everyday life and the words we use to describe and defend it.

Mezirow constructs an approach to adult education which seeks to situate educators in relation to types of learning (instrumental, communicative, and reflective) and the meaning perspectives that learning either maintains or helps to challenge. Mezirow suggests that by creating the conditions for discourse free from distortions (epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic) we are best able to develop the capacities for critical self-reflection on the part of adult learners. Impediments to full participation in discursive communities necessarily constrain adult learning (Mezirow, 1994b). In presenting the theory of transformative learning Mezirow advances the humanist vision of education and human development associated with Freire and Habermas.

By offering a theory of meaning transformation, Mezirow argues for the overcoming of all forms of distorted communication. It is only after distortions are effectively disabled that the conditions for full emancipatory learning can come about. Foucault and postmodern theorists contend that grand narratives which promise an emancipatory end-state cannot account for the multiple sources of power embedded in discourse itself. Rather than viewing Habermas' ideal speech community as a goal to be achieved in some future society, I propose that we focus on the diverse sources of power woven through our everyday discourse. Postmodern social theory recognizes that knowledges are produced in the classroom, in training seminars, on television, in local bars and churches, and through acts such as shopping at the local mall. Educators can help to identify the multiple sources of power that are linked to knowledge construction, suggest alternative meanings and help develop critical competencies oriented at these diverse micro-technologies of power. Critical media literacy and consumer literacy (Brookfield, 1990b; Graham, 1989; Grahame, 1985; Kellner, 1991; Sholle & Denski, 1993) are examples of the types of symbolic spaces open to a postmodern analysis. Postmodern adult education can help to dissipate power and extend the visible use of power but cannot exist outside of relations of power. Attention paid to the pervasive role of power in adult learning processes need not lead to nihilism and a politics of despair so often attributed to postmodern theory. Rather, it requires that we turn our gaze away from some ultimate goal of creating ideal speech conditions and toward the undeniably political task of understanding the deep structures of power that govern our lives.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Collard and Law (1990) argue that Mezirow does not explicitly address the political goals of adult education and thereby mitigates the influence of the more radical educational practice promoted by Freire. I claim that both Habermas and Freire embrace the Enlightenment goal of human emancipation that also informs Mezirow's approach to adult education. I do not analyze the particular strategic political differences which exist between them. For a brief overview of the role played by transformation theory in the evolution of the field of adult education, see Long (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Collard and Law (1990) argue that Habermas' theory of communicative action represents a fundamental

abandonment of the theory that knowledge is grounded in human interest. Rather, I suggest that the communicative turn taken by Habermas represents an understanding that interests are socially constructed and not given a priori (Habermas, 1984). This represents a revision and elaboration of the theory of human interest, which is now constituted on the basis intersubjectivity rather than through a process of transcendental reflection (McCarthy, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> While I acknowledge a distinction between poststructuralism and postmodernism I will not draw out those differences in this article. Note that poststructuralism emerged out of a concern within literary theory to radically reconstruct the relationship between the text and its meaning. From the perspective of poststructuralism, there is no longer a single intended meaning embedded in the text. Rather, meanings are constantly produced through the placement of a text in relation to the reader (Eagleton, 1983). Postmodernism emerged out of fields as diverse as architecture, anthropology, and social theory. The issues relevant to postmodernism involve a critical stance toward modernist conceptions of universal truth, objective reality, and a critique of grand, totalizing narratives (Best & Kellner, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> I do not wish to collude in the construction of a binary opposition between modernism and postmodernism. Postmodernism—variously referred to as flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1989) and neo-Fordism (Sabel, 1982), post-Fordism (Hall, 1991) and flexible specialization (Hirst & Zeitlin, 1991)—represents a particular form of experience which has come to the foreground as a result of transformations in economy and culture. The point is that postmodern attitudes and experiences have existed prior to the advent of a supposed age of postmodernity (Pietrykowski, 1994). Modernity and postmodernity co-exist and inform both our discourse and politics.

<sup>5</sup> I do not wish to argue that postmodernism is a coherent theory which can be applied in order to describe the “objective reality” facing adult learners. Rather, I deliberately use terms such as the postmodern perspective, gaze, and attitude to denote the fragility of the approach and the inability of postmodern theories to offer complete analyses.

<sup>6</sup> Mezirow (1991) cites evidence to support the claim that adults reach a level of cognitive maturity which allows them to integrate disparate and seemingly contradictory ideas across paradigms. However, not all adults can be represented by reference to this type of “development” (Clark & Wilson, 1991). Also, care must be taken to place theories of cognitive development within a socio-cultural context. For example, a theory which identifies progress with the ability to develop a consistent sense of individuality normalizes paradigms based on notions of a centered subject.

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