

Examining the Plurality of Literacies through the Habermasian Lens

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IN CONTRAST TO THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF LITERACY as academic skills such as reading and writing, two of the breakthroughs in our understanding of literacy, according to Harste (2003), are “multiple literacies and literacy as social practice” (p. 8). Specifically, the concept of multiple literacies intertwined with different social practices is proposed by Harste (2003), who, in turn, bases his proposition on the findings of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g., Gee, 1994; Street, 1984, 1993). Harste (2003) argues,

Instead of thinking about literacy as an entity (something you either have or don't have), thinking about literacy as social practice can be revolutionary. When coupled with the notion of multiple literacies, literacy can be thought of as a particular set of social practices that a particular set of people value. In order to change anyone's definition of literacy, the social practices that keep a particular (and often older) definition of literacy in place have to change. (p. 8)

The NLS has not only opened our eyes to literacy as social practice, but also ushered in an era of plural literacies along with their social practices. There is no single literacy or social practice that is superior to others, but different literacies and their corresponding social practices that are applicable to different groups of people and sociocultural contexts. Nevertheless, the plurality of literacies coupled with social practices also arouses a disconcerted feeling, a feeling that is reminiscent of the Cartesian Anxiety.

With a chilling clarity Descartes leads us with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. *Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos. (Bernstein, 1983, p. 18, italics in original)

The Cartesian Anxiety results from the dilemma of having to choose between objectivism and relativism. Either there is an objectivist or “fixed foundation for our knowledge,” or we cannot

escape the relativist forces of darkness where anything goes. Similarly, in the context of literacy education and research, it seems that the ideology of a singular metanarrative/literacy has been deconstructed. However, what is baffling us now is whether the plurality of literacies has trapped us, knowingly or not, in the “forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos.” In other words, have we been brought to the other extreme where the acceptance of every literacy/social practice comes at the expense of what is right and wrong, i.e., social justice?

Therefore, this paper is concerned with how to avoid being trapped in relativism while advocating multiple literacies in the classroom. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is two-fold. On the one hand, it acknowledges the importance of including multiple literacies in a classroom. On the other hand, it argues that all literacies should be examined critically rather than being embraced blindly. In what follows, I will present a brief history of how the definition of literacy is broadened to include multiple literacies along with their social practices. This is followed by a discussion of how to assess different literacies critically. Jurgen Habermas’s (1981/1984, 1981/1987) theory of communicative action is then put forth as a viable framework within which to examine the validity claims made in multiple literacies. This paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for literacy education relocated within Habermas’s framework.

From Literacy to Literacies

Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1963), in their classic essay, “The Consequences of Literacy,” proposed what was called by Halverson (1992) “the literacy thesis” that claimed the superiority of alphabetic literacy over non-alphabetic or restricted literacy. Goody and Watt’s literacy thesis argued that the advance from pre-modern to modern society was attributed considerably to its change in the form of literacy, from orality to writing. Implicit in their argument was an assumption “that literacy with a big ‘L’ and a single ‘y’ was a single autonomous thing that had consequences for personal and social development. The autonomous model has been a dominant feature of educational and development theory” (Street, 1995, pp. 132-133).

Goody and Watt’s “Literacy” or autonomous model, however, provoked much controversy and criticism. One of the most powerful counterarguments was made by Finnegan (1988), who conducted an ethnographic study of the Limba, a tribal society located in the north of the West African nation of Sierra Leone. The Limba are, by and large, non-literate (i.e., not able to read and write) and live in contact with many neighboring peoples who speak different languages. Therefore, many Limba “are often bilingual, or at least able to understand a considerable amount of the neighboring language or languages” (Finnegan, 1988, p. 46). Finnegan (1988) showed that the Limba are aware of and able to discuss the differences among dialects of Limba and other neighboring languages as well. The Limba can also engage in abstract thinking through their language and understand that their language unites them as a people and distinguishes themselves from others. Finnegan’s ethnographic evidence, consequently, “demonstrates the dangers of employing literacy as a diagnostic category for making generalizations about types of societies or, more perniciously, using it to rank them in some evolutionary schema” (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 49).

In her work to dismantle the distinction between the oral and the written, Finnegan (1978) also analyzed oral poetry (unwritten poetry) and written texts.

Most oral poetry in this century is likely to be produced by people who have at least some contact, however indirect, with the wider world in general—and with writing and its products in particular. The result is a continual and fruitful interplay between oral and written forms of literary expression. (Finnegan, 1978, p. 2)

Finnegan's work has shown that it is untenable to use the written and the oral as mutually exclusive categories in distinguishing literate from non-literate societies. Similarly, Bauman (1996) and Herzfeld (1996) have found that mixed forms of the oral and the written exist in literary works in societies throughout the world. Therefore, the distinction between written and oral literacy is not clear-cut, and there is a continual interplay between them.

Shirley Brice Heath also took issue with the argument implied in Goody and Watt's view that one form of literacy, written literacy, is superior to another, oral literacy. In *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, Heath (1983) studied three communities in a city of the Southeastern United States: Roadville, a White working-class community of families steeped for generations in the life of textile mills; Trackton, an African-American working-class community whose older generations grew up farming the land, but whose existing members work in the mills; and Townspeople, a composite portrait of middle-class town residents of both ethnicities. In tracing the children's language development, Heath (1983) showed deep cultural differences between Roadville and Trackton, whose ways with words differed as strikingly from each other as either did from the pattern of the townspeople, the mainstream Blacks and Whites who held power in the schools and workplaces of the region. Employing the combined skills of ethnographer, social historian, and teacher, Heath (1983) raised fundamental questions about the nature of language development, the effects of literacy on oral language habits, and the sources of communication problems in schools and workplaces. For example, the teachers in Heath's (1983) study reported that students from Trackton did not or could not respond appropriately to even the simplest questions or instructions. Heath (1983) found that children in Trackton learned very early that it was not appropriate to report on the behavior of their intimates to strangers. Therefore, the teachers were likely to receive no answer if they asked a child anything related to the child's family like how many brothers and sisters he/she had. With little knowledge of the child's cultural influence on his/her school behavior, the child was usually misjudged as slow or at-risk. Heath's (1983) work teaches us that there is no universality to literacy. There are many literacies such as home literacy, school literacy, work literacy, etc. Prioritizing one type of literacy over another is ignoring the impact that social and cultural aspects have on the literacy development.

In parallel, Brian Street (1984, 1993, 1995) contended that the meaning of literacy depends on the sociocultural context in which it is imbedded. Street (1984) studied the fruit-growing villages, especially Cheshmeh, around Mashad in North East Iran. The villagers in Cheshmeh attended a Koranic religious school and learned the Koran, which is supposed to be "the Word of God" and fixed in nature (Street, 1984, p. 135). Yet the villagers in Cheshmeh adapted the literacy they learned from the religious school to commercial purposes to help them do business with people in the surrounding villages. Consequently, Street (1984) argued that literacy is multiple and subject to individual interpretation regardless of the fact that it may be first acquired in a textually invariant context.

What we can learn from Street's insight is that literacy is not singular and is closely tied to a social practice. The notion of multiple literacies implies that different cultural groups have different ways of making meaning. There are terms/concepts unique in a culture that are difficult for people in another culture to grasp. For example, the term/concept "Wal-Mart" (an American corporation that runs a chain of large discount department stores and warehouse stores) is so familiar to people in the United States that it has become part of their lives. Implied in "Wal-Mart" is a social practice, i.e., shopping for general merchandise and groceries in a large retail store. Yet in a country where there are no such huge retail stores, it is a term/concept hard to understand, and there is no direct translation for it. Therefore, it is the social practice that keeps the literate terms, such as Wal-Mart, in place and makes them meaningful. To change the literate meaning, the corresponding social practice has to change as well.

The ethnographic approaches to literacy taken by Finnegan, Heath, and Street discussed above have provided alternative ways of understanding literacy to Goody and Watt's oral/written dichotomy. They show that it is not literacy itself, but literate practices situated in social contexts that play an important role in deciding whether one is literate or not. One is considered literate when his/her literate practice is aligned with that defined to be literate. The shift from the autonomous model to plural approaches has come to be called the "New Literacy Studies" (NLS).

[NLS] attempt[s] to grapple with the power relations that pervade literacy practices; to find new ways of linking the linguistic, the cognitive, and the social; and to confront the meanings of schooling and literacy in circumstances of worldwide economic downturn. (Collins, 1995, p. 80)

Not only did the NLS advance a theory of multiple literacies, but it also replaced the autonomous model with an ideological model where situated approaches to literacy are emphasized (Collins & Blot, 2003). Specifically, literacies are situated in social contexts and power relations.

The NLS approach to literacy has broadened our view of the definition of literacy and the potentiality of literacy education. Instead of one metanarrative, diverse literacies along with their social practices should be understood and respected. Harste (2003) proposes that literacy educators should know what kind of social practice is in place and, as a result, how literacy is being defined in their classroom. In addition, literacy educators need to understand who benefits from this definition of literacy and who is marginalized. To make the classroom a place where students feel their home literacies are honored, literacy educators should also reflect on what social practice they have to put in place to make the everyday literacy that students bring with them to school legitimate. The goal is to foster a learning environment where students are not alienated from the school literacy and its corresponding social practice. For example, citing Ogbu, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000a) reminds us that "African American learners often are treated as if they are corruptions of White culture, participating in an oppositional, counter-productive culture" (p. 206). As a result, their language (e.g., Ebonics/African American English), prior knowledge, and values are looked upon as deviant and worthless in the school setting. In fact, some teachers even presume that their job is to "rid African American students of any vestiges of their own culture" while, to the contrary, the African American culture should be considered distinct and valued as an asset in the school curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2000a, p. 206).

To create a classroom that encourages multiple literacies, Van Sluys (2005) suggested that we should include texts that reflect linguistic and cultural diversity; represent a variety of

genres, purposes, and authorial perspectives; and move beyond words and encourage many ways of knowing. Such texts will help students, according to Van Sluys (2005), “see themselves as active and valued participants and become more than readers of words” (pp. 69-70).

Concern about the Plurality of Literacies

The NLS has led us away from the myth of one metanarrative and emphasized the importance of including and respecting diverse literacies along with their social practices. However, Nieto (2010) warned us that, because we are “concerned with equity and social justice, and because the basic values of different groups are often diametrically opposed, conflict is bound to occur” (p. 257). Therefore, teaching literacies as multiple social practices should be based on the understanding that no social practices are fixed or unchangeable and, thus, are subject to critique. Passively accepting the status quo of any set of social practices runs the risk of perpetuating the ideologies embedded in the practices. Yet substituting one type of literacy for another without critique contradicts the fact that no literacy, along with its social practice, is superior to any other. Therefore, to include multiple literacies along with their social practices is not to romanticize and embrace them blindly, but to acknowledge that differences exist and should be examined critically.

Similarly, Gee (1993) recognized the importance of assuming an inclusive attitude toward multiple literacies, but he also pointed out a problem with this pluralistic view.

If no sign system can be validated as against any other, if all sign systems are rooted simply in historically derived social practices instantiating the desires and claims to power of various groups, then how can we morally condemn the school’s (and society’s) treatment of the black child whose story we have seen above? How, indeed, can this black child—and her group—come to form a viable theory and practice resistance? (Gee, 1993, p. 291)

To tackle the problem—to morally condemn and resist social injustice—he suggested two conceptual principles that serve as the basis of ethical human discourse:

[First,] that something would harm someone else (deprive them of what they or the society they are in view as “goods”) is always a good reason not to do it. [Second,] one always has the ethical obligation to try to explicate (render overt and conscious) any social practice that there is reason to believe advantages oneself or one’s group over other people or other groups. (Gee, 1993, pp. 292-293)

Gee’s proposal of the principles governing ethical human discourse should be applauded. Without such guiding principles, we are likely to fall into the trap of relativism where anything goes. I expand on Gee’s work, taking his proposal as a point of departure. My argument, which is not explicitly articulated in Gee’s work, is that certain communicative features of Habermas’s (1981/1984, 1981/1987) theory of communicative action can be appropriated to articulate and supplement Gee’s principles for ethical human discourse in a world of multiple literacies.

Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas's theory of communicative action (TCA) steps beyond the scene of a lone, passive subject/observer and replaces it with that of two or more sentient beings communicating with each other.

The concept of *communicative action* refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. (Habermas, 1981/1984, p. 86, italics in original)

Therefore, TCA is an action-based dialogical paradigm built on mutual understanding. One of the most salient features of TCA is that there is more than one subject involved. The subject assumes a performative role in communicative action oriented toward understanding (Habermas, 1981/1984). The subject in the dialogical paradigm is no longer a sovereign, authoritative figure, but an actor who communicates with other subjects and whose being as an actor requires other subjects and the internalization of other subject positions.

TCA is the core of Habermas's social theory. It is a broad theory integrated through the concept of communicative action. Therefore, it is not my intention to review it in detail in this paper. To gain a thorough grounding, interested readers can refer to Habermas's (1981/1984, 1981/1987) two-volume work *The Theory of Communicative Action*. What will be presented below focuses primarily on certain communicative features of TCA that can be appropriated to articulate and supplement Gee's principles for ethical human discourse.

Validity Claims and Criteria

Instead of "truth," Habermas uses "validity" to emphasize that truth should not be perceived monologically, but contested and validated communicatively. A claim made in communicative action is a claim to validity, and Habermas argues that every meaningful act carries validity claims. "A validity claim is equivalent to the assertion that the conditions for the validity of an utterance are fulfilled" (Habermas, 1981/1984, p. 38). That is to say, a validity claim is an assertion made by an actor that his/her utterance is of "truth, truthfulness, and rightness" (Habermas, 1998, p. 24). However, the actor's assertion or validity claim can be received with a yes, no, or abstention, depending on the extent to which the other actor is convinced. In addition, in the case of each claim, support can be given only; validity cannot be established once and for all. It is fallible.

The question is how the actors determine whether the validity claims are true, truthful (sincere), or right. That is, what are the criteria for evaluating the claims? Habermas would respond that the claims made in each meaningful act can be divided into three categories and that each category has its own criterion for validation. The three categories, or what Habermas calls three formal-pragmatic worlds, consist of objective, subjective, and normative claims:

The objective world (as the totality of all entities about which true statements are possible); the social [normative] world (as the totality of all legitimately regulated

interpersonal relations); [and] the subjective world (as the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access). (Habermas, 1981/1984, p. 100)

To objective claims there is multiple access, whereas there is only privileged access to subjective claims. Therefore, the criteria for objective claims and subjective claims are multiple access and privileged access respectively. The criterion for normative claims is shared interest. Hence, each kind of claim is evaluated by a different criterion.

The Ideal Speech Situation

In her editorial introduction to Habermas's (1998) *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, Cooke stated that the ideal speech situation includes the conditions "that participants are motivated only by the force of the better argument, that all competent parties are entitled to participate on equal terms in discussion, that no relevant argument is suppressed or excluded, and so on" (p. 14). The ideal speech situation is ideal because it can never be reached empirically. However, as a necessarily presupposed standard, the ideal speech situation is approximated and referenced by every communicative act. Habermas recognizes that, in reality, not everyone desires to have the ideal speech situation. Yet this does not change the fact that it is necessarily presupposed, he argues, even though it is sometimes intentionally distorted. The ideal speech situation is not an empirical goal to attain, but serves as an idealizing guideline for regulating rational argumentation. For those who distort communicative action intentionally, their intention can be recognized as it violates the ideal speech situation. Therefore, whether or not the ideal speech situation is wished for, it is a presupposed standard for argumentation in communicative action.

Habermas and Gee

The communicative features of Habermas's TCA discussed above have a close relevance to Gee's principles for ethical human discourse. Specifically, both Habermas and Gee felt it necessary to provide criteria or principles to evaluate validity claims or discourse. For Gee, the validity of discourse is evaluated against the principles of not harming someone else and not advantaging oneself or one's group over other people or other groups. These principles are similar to Habermas's criterion for assessing normative claims—shared interest. Doing something not to harm someone else or not to advantage oneself or one's group over other people or other groups is showing concern about someone else's interests. Therefore, Gee and Habermas converge in their view on how to evaluate what Habermas calls normative claims. In fact, the criteria Habermas suggested for evaluating the validity claims are broader than Gee's principles. While Habermas classified validity claims into three categories—objective, subjective, and normative claims with corresponding criteria of multiple access, privileged access, and shared interest, respectively—Gee's principles are concerned only with shared interest and, thus, cover only normative claims while objective and subjective claims are not addressed. As a result, Habermas's TCA presents a more comprehensive picture of how to evaluate validity claims.

Implications for Literacy Education

Now let us look at what insights we can gain about literacy education from the perspective of Habermas's TCA. Specifically, I will discuss the implications for literacy education relocated within Habermas's TCA.

Literacy Education Is Communicative Action Oriented toward Understanding

Recall that Habermas argues for a dialogical paradigm of communicative action oriented toward understanding to replace a subject-centered model where the subject plays an authoritative role of making sense of the world. Therefore, literacy education recast in Habermas's TCA should be conceptualized differently. Literacy learners are not supposed to passively receive "knowledge" from teachers, but interact with their teachers dialogically. The purpose of the interaction is to understand not only the text (or the intentions of the author of the text), but also the viewpoints of learners and teachers. While understanding what the author means is important, it does not necessarily mean that the learners have to agree with the author. As in communicative action, the learners, as actors but not passive knowledge recipients, can question the validity claims of the author and give reasons to support their argument. Likewise, the teachers, as actors but not authoritative figures, have to give reasons to support their interpretations of the text or, otherwise, respect the interpretation of the learners. In this way, literacy education as communicative action repositions the learners and teachers as peers in their effort to understand the text.

Understanding Texts Is Examining Their Validity Claims

Communicative action is oriented toward reaching an understanding. The understanding is broadly interpreted to include at least three kinds: agreement, disagreement, and abstention. Similarly, in understanding a text, literacy learners can agree or disagree with the author or abstain. In this sense, understanding the text is no longer trying to grasp what the author means and take it for granted, but examining the author's validity claims in the text. This is an important reconceptualization of understanding the text, especially when literacy is regarded as political and can be used to position the readers (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015).

To see how to examine the validity claims of a text in a Habermasian way, let us look at the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* as an example. Because there are several versions of the story, I will briefly present Leanne Guenther's (2015) online version to avoid confusion. The story revolves around a little girl called Little Red Riding Hood. She walks through the forest to bring food to her grandmother. Despite her mother's reminder, the girl dawdles along the way to pick some flowers for her grandmother and even talks to a stranger (a wolf). She tells the wolf she is on her way to see her grandmother, who lives through the forest, near the brook. While the girl is picking the flowers, the wolf goes to the grandmother's house and gains entry by pretending to be the girl. He swallows the grandmother whole and disguises himself as the grandmother, waiting for the girl. A few minutes later when the girl arrives, she notices that her grandmother is very strange. When the wolf jumps out of bed and is about to eat her, Little Red Riding Hood realizes the person in the bed is not her grandmother, but a wolf. Her cry for help is heard by a

woodsman who is chopping logs nearby. He grabs the wolf and makes him spit out the poor grandmother who is a bit frazzled by the whole experience. The woodsman knocks out the wolf and carries him deep into the forest where he will not bother people any longer. Then Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother have a nice lunch and a long chat.

Examples of each kind of validity claim (i.e., objective, subjective, and normative claims) may be found in the text above, and we can examine the claims according to their corresponding criteria (multiple access, privileged access, and shared interest) proposed by Habermas. One of the objective claims made in the text is that there is a little girl called Little Red Riding Hood. It is an objective claim because repeated observations can be made to see if Little Red Riding Hood is mentioned in the text. The criterion to evaluate the claim is multiple access. Specifically, one, two, or more people can be invited to read the text and check if there is a girl called Little Red Riding Hood in the text.

Implied in the text is also a subjective claim that Little Red Riding Hood likes her grandmother. This claim is implied because it is not clearly stated in the text. In one place in the text, we find that Little Red Riding Hood brings food to her grandmother. In another place, she picks flowers for her grandmother. Therefore, it is implied in the text that Little Red Riding Hood seems to like her grandmother. However, we cannot know for sure whether Little Red Riding Hood truly likes her grandmother because the criterion to evaluate this subjective claim is privileged access. In other words, only Little Red Riding Hood herself knows the answer. We can only guess from the objectively observable facts, such as what Little Red Riding Hood says and how she acts, but we can never know for sure what she feels about her grandmother due to the nature of this claim.

A normative claim is also made in the text where Little Red Riding Hood is told by her mother that she should not talk to strangers. A normative claim is an assertion that something is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, should or should not be, etc. The criterion for evaluating a normative claim is shared interest. A normative claim is contested by finding a consensus between the parties in dispute and then arguing from it toward the norm or value position in disagreement. For example, a possible consensus between Little Red Riding Hood and her mother could be that being safe is important. Based on this consensus, her mother could then move on to arguing that, since talking to a stranger is considered unsafe, it would be better for Little Red Riding Hood not to talk to a stranger.

In sum, when understanding texts is considered examining their validity claims based on the Habermasian criteria, we can avoid the risk of embracing texts blindly. In addition, false validity claims embedded in the text can be identified according to the Habermasian criteria. This is quite important when texts are multiple and vary from culture to culture.

What Literacies Should Be Taught and How?

Recall that one of the NLS's influences on literacy education is that literacies are considered plural and connected to social practices. While the NLS rightly dismantles the myth of one metanarrative, there remains a question to be answered—what literacies should we teach? We want to promote diverse literacies of the students. However, does this mean that the dominant literacy should not be taught in the classroom? Janks (2000) warns us that “diversity without access ghettoizes students” (p. 178). In other words, if we deny students access to the dominant literacy, we will perpetuate their marginalization in a society that continues to

recognize the value and importance of the dominant literacy. Therefore, we should provide students with access to the dominant literacy while at the same time valuing and promoting the diverse literacies of our students. This, however, comes with other questions: Will the teaching of the dominant literacy contribute to maintaining its dominance? If so, “how” do we bring in the dominant literacy without perpetuating its dominance? This is where I believe the communicative features of Habermas’s TCA can play a part.

Before I address the “how” question above, it is important to note that all kinds of literacy, dominant or not, along with their social practices are enmeshed in power. The power differentials do not only exist between the dominant group and the non-dominant group, but they are also prevalent within each of the groups. For example, a Latino male may be among the oppressed population in American society due to his ethnic background. However, this same male may also be a chauvinist husband at home. Thus, he can be categorized as a victim in one context and as an oppressor in another. Similarly, examples of nuanced experiences of oppression and struggle can happen within the dominant group. According to Carr and Lund (2007),

Francophones have historical differences with Anglophones in Canada, the Catholics and the Protestants have been at loggerheads for years in Northern Ireland, the Hungarian minority has not had a favorable experience with the majority Romanian population, and the Basque population has been involved in a separatist movement in Spain for generations. (p. 3)

Whites, as opposed to Blacks and other minority groups, are often portrayed as the dominant group. Yet, there exists diversity in language, religion, and political orientations even in this seemingly homogenous group that is subject to further differentiation. As a result, being in a certain group does not automatically legitimate or negate one’s validity claims because the grouping is usually simplistically done and fails to take into account a complex web of relationships among race, culture, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, language, and so forth.

We should not simplistically categorize people into groups and then base the legitimacy of their validity claims on the group to which they belong. Instead, our focus should switch from people to validity claims themselves. This is where Habermas’s TCA comes into play. It allows us to evaluate the validity claims of all literacies, dominant or not, according to the Habermasian criteria. The credibility of the validity claims should serve as the basis on which to determine whose literacies and social practices are legitimate, because we are in a complex society where we can be dominating or oppressors on one occasion and oppressed or victims on another. In a classroom where multiple literacies are taught, TCA helps us identify and take action against ideologies or illegitimate validity claims. This is “how” literacies, whether dominant or non-dominant, should be taught in a classroom.

In addition, the ideal speech situation also serves as a contextual standard for “how” literacies should be taught. Specifically, it ensures that the participants in contestation are motivated by the force of the better argument and free from coercive power. To see the ideal speech situation in action, suppose that I taught a course on American history in college, and you were one of my students. There was a discussion in class after an article on Native Americans was read. Close to the end of the discussion, I commented, “I agree with the author of the article that Native Americans chose to live on reservations.” At this, you raised your hand and said, “Professor, but that is not what I got from the article.” Feeling humiliated by the comment you made before the entire class, I rebutted, “I’ve taught this class for years, and I am pretty sure I

am right.” Before allowing you to respond, I continued, “You should read the article more carefully, or I am afraid you will fail the exam.” Instead of discussing the issue rationally with you, I suggested that, if you did not agree with me, you would fail the exam. In this case, reason no longer served as the medium to reach an understanding. Instead, I used my power as a professor to force you to agree with me, or, otherwise, you would fail the exam. Therefore, the ideal speech situation was violated. The consensus thus reached was not due to mutual understanding, but coercion. However, even if you were coerced to agree with me due to the unequal power relations between us, both you and I knew that the ideal speech situation was violated. This violation, thus, served as grounds for continuous contestation or resistance.

Habermas’s framework can be also helpful in guiding us on “how” to teach when “what” we want to teach is compromised. For example, if we are provided with a scripted curriculum to follow in our instruction of literacy, which is not uncommon in many P-12 school districts, we can still apply Habermas’s communicative features in analyzing what we are required to teach. Specifically, the validity claims in the scripted text can be evaluated by the teacher and students according to the criteria (i.e., multiple access, privileged access, and shared interest) in a learning environment that resembles the ideal speech situation. Teaching the scripted text in this way will help the students not only have a good understanding of the text itself so that they can pass the test and/or meet the standards, but also identify what is lacking or biased in the text. This is similar to what Ladson-Billings (2000b) calls “reading between the lines and beyond the pages;”

In both classrooms, the content of the curriculum is viewed critically and examined by both teachers and students. Ann and Julia [the teachers] constantly ask their students to examine the validity, reliability, and logic of what they read. The students are asked to compare their own experiences with what they read and to make assessments about the value of their readings. For these teachers, being literate assumes being able to evaluate critically and make decisions about what you read. (p. 149)

Conclusion

The link between literacy and success is often taken for granted and used as a reason to justify what we do in literacy education, including imposing on students the dominant literacy along with its values and ideologies as if they were neutral and desirable. While the dominant literacy is important and should be taught and learned, teaching it uncritically and as the only kind of literacy ignores the fact that literacies are plural and associated with social practices. The NLS helps us see that learning literacy is not simply mastering literate skills cognitively, but is concerned closely with our social practices. However, there also arises a problem of how to evaluate the plurality of literacies and keep our literacy classroom from turning into the “Tower of Babel.” This paper has shown that Habermas’s TCA is a viable framework that helps us eschew the aporias of going back to the metanarrative mindset, on the one hand, and provides criteria for us to evaluate validity claims made in multiple literacies along with their social practices, on the other hand. Literacy education reformulated within the Habermasian framework assumes an inclusive attitude toward various literacies/social practices. However, it does not embrace them blindly, but holds them accountable for the validity claims they make. In addition, literacies should be taught and examined in a learning environment that resembles the ideal

speech situation where the participants are driven by the best argument and free from coercive power in their contestation of validity claims.

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