

# Emancipatory Discourse and Liberation

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## **Abstract**

This paper takes up an important question that has puzzled learning theorists in the critical tradition, namely, are the dialogic practices of emancipatory discourse sufficient to change oppressive conditions in the power structure of modern organization? In other words, can critical dialogic processes change the social order to close the gap between a privileged class of managers and workers, or do we require class struggle and structural reform? By elaborating on such methods as dialogue, public reflection, and action science, the author attempts to make the case that marginalized groups in society might find their voice in projects that are intentionally contextualized and publicly reflective. These methods have found applications in some illustrated critical pedagogies, though not without strain induced from conventional institutions. The paper concludes with an enumeration of some conditions under which emancipatory discourse and liberationist struggle may coincide.

**Keywords:** emancipation, liberation, praxis, dialogue, public reflection, action science, critical action learning, critical discourse analysis, critical theory

## **Introduction**

Do we have to take on the power structure and engage in class struggle to be emancipatory, or is it just a matter of mutually engaging in and questioning the underlying assumptions of self, others, and text? I explore in this paper the process known as emancipatory discourse and its associated dialogic practices and whether they can produce emancipatory change in people and groups without having to resort to liberationist activities. The puzzle to learning theorists that I hope to illuminate is whether empowerment through emancipatory discourse can be legitimately conveyed through learning to produce a real freedom of consciousness among workers in organizations or whether it conceals a subtle coercion that impedes their voice (Fenwick, 2004; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996; Schied, Carter, and Howell, 2001).

I will begin by examining the critical prospects for emancipation that distinguish it from the processes of learning that are often decontextualized and disembodied. Two versions of emancipatory discourse are then presented, dialogue and public reflection, that may release its potential by activating the connection between individuals, their lifeworld challenges, and the social context within which they are embedded. A third variant, action science, is next considered because of its capability of surfacing tacit practices that block opportunities for sincere engagement between heretofore opposing parties, even in the political realm. With this background, I then consider whether emancipation in its dialogic form can expose and alter unjust power relations or whether it may just as readily be guilty of reproducing them, albeit unwittingly. The liberationist critique is shown to have common ground with the critical version of praxis in which managerialist values are exposed while otherwise disenfranchised workers are given every opportunity to find their voice. Ultimately, liberation may require structural change through separation and struggle rather than through regulated dialogue. Nevertheless, the two sides –

liberation and dialogue – need not be viewed as discontinuous since dialogue as the enactment of praxis can be the basis for worker consciousness and enlightenment. After attempting to illuminate both sides of the debate and drawing some pedagogical implications, I conclude with an exposition and a modest exemplification of some proposed conditions under which the agendas of emancipatory discourse and liberationist struggle may merge.

### **Discourse as the Carrier of Emancipation**

Discourse refers to the methods we use, typically language, to represent phenomena. It thus often frames the way we construct the reality of these phenomena (Watson, 1994; Fairclough, 2003). Emancipatory discourse represents a frame to free people from institutional forces that limit personal control and autonomy but that have been taken for granted as beyond our control (Fromm, 1976; Habermas, 1974; Marcuse, 1964). In its critical form, it also has the intent of freeing people in a work environment from unnecessarily restrictive traditions and power relations that inhibit opportunity for fulfillment of their needs and wants (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 435). It can't be reduced to social engineering carried out by a benevolent management. In some of his later work, Habermas, in recognizing the increasing dominance of economic and political institutions in the lifeworld of lived experience, called for enlarging emancipatory discourse to involve the passionate proponents of critical social movements (see, for example, Connelly, 1996; Habermas, 1987).

Discourse of this critical nature has the potential to empower people through a dialogic process of gradual enlightenment leading to the acquisition of a collective consciousness. Isaacs (1999), for example, talks about the dialogic process as an antidote to the “architecture of the invisible” – the unquestioned received wisdom and taken-for-granted processes that constrain genuine

interaction. It is empowerment through inquiry rather than through guidance. It questions quick-fix managerial strategies that entail tacit assumptions of control. It attempts to bring to the surface through progressive inquiry those governing socio-political values that may be blocking communications. However, instead of using the word, “freedom,” to characterize the process, many especially from the organizational learning domain refer to it and to the resulting personal and social consciousness as “learning” (Senge, 1990). Learning in this sense is unencumbered by formal institution, but rather is a natural intrinsic quality that, unless constrained, becomes part of one’s exploration and creativity (Erickson, 1963). However, emancipatory learning and discourse may presume an ample level of free choice in order to engage without coercion in open dialogue (Schwarz, 2006). Let’s see how practitioners of emancipatory discourse address the issues of learning and freedom.

### **Dialogue as the Modus Operandi**

The format most apt to place principals in any learning project into a mutually constructive exchange is dialogue. Dialogue as the manifestation of language in human interactions, or what Habermas (1984, 1987) refers to as communicative action, can be the basis to expand knowledge through intersubjective transformation. People join a dialogue provided they are interested in listening to one another, in reflecting upon perspectives different from their own, and in entertaining the prospect of being changed by what they learn. Consequently, dialogue can also be thought of as the DNA of democracy or the critical means by which intersubjective capacities essential to build a culture of democracy can be mobilized (Pruitt, and Thomas, 2007). It is often compared to deliberation, which refers to the process of collective reasoned reflection by political equals leading to improved decisions of common concern (Benhabib, 1996; Hicks, 2002; Klosko, 2000).

The foundation for dialogue as the connection between individual identity and community is associated with interactionist sociology and, in particular, with the work of George H. Mead (1934) who saw the relationship between the individual and society as a continual process of construction by the self as part of the social environment. Mead described the self as formed as much from how others respond to one as from what one does. The self, then, is linked to the social communities that give it definition.

Once a dialogue begins, any assumptions underlying even taken-for-granted constructions become “fair game” as long as the conversants, who are stakeholders to the problem, see their exposition as incurring serious scrutiny. A community in order to function may not require constant assessment of each of its organizing propositions, but its membership must be vigilant such that no single proposition become so sacrosanct as to be undiscussable. Nor should any mode of conversation necessarily take precedence. Dialogue is rather constituted of a creative interaction of contradictory and different voices (Lyotard, 1984).

When dialogue is transacted as an intervention, it serves as a form of deconstruction that can question so-called “truths” from the very conditions of their production (Derrida, 1992). It can thereby open up space for new perceptions that might lead to new ways of looking at the same phenomenon under scrutiny (Rorty, 1996). Using the concept of polyphony, Clegg et al. (2006) contend that actors in communicating dialogically are not concerned with their own language but with the difference between languages or between existing formulations. When practice is brought into this equation through a reflective process of inquiry, it is easy to see how new or transformative understanding can arise. People invited to dialogue can invent and co-create the

socio-political consciousness in which they live. New knowledge is thus an endpoint of a process of dialogue and engagement rather than the starting point.

In critical discourse members of the group are encouraged to challenge not only the statements they and others make, but also the assumptions they may be relying upon in producing the statements. Habermas referred to this kind of discourse as argumentation, an intersubjective exchange that can occur under an ideal speech situation – in which no single individual nor point of view would be privileged or free from challenge. Equal power is extended to all participants, and decisions are based upon mutual consent rather than on tradition, greed, dogma, or coercion.

Consider the four tests suggested by Habermas (1984) to comprise an ideal speech situation: comprehensibility, normative acceptance, sincerity, and interpretation. These can be converted into questions (Gregory and Romm; 2001; Raelin, 2006) that may be asked during the exchange, namely:

1. Do you understand what the speaker has said?
2. Do you agree with the speaker's point?
3. Do you believe the speaker is being sincere?
4. Do you agree with the speaker's interpretation of the facts and how his/her conclusions were arrived at?

These questions can lead to validity checking that ensures that groups build a forum for open exchange and mutual learning.

## **Emancipation as Public Reflection**

Another way to refer to emancipatory discourse is through what we might call social or public reflection (Raelin, 2001). Reflection is normally construed as a solitary, introspective event that ponders meaning by comparing phenomena against cognitive frames. However, most actors bring out their internal conversations with others once they become absorbed in practice (Archer, 2003). Their internal dialogue is enhanced by external dialogue that induces and then refines it (Wertsch, 1979). In other words, our experience with others informs us, pulls us, and even transforms us. Our collective framing of events infuses these events with meaning, allowing us to negotiate a shared understanding with other adherents (Benford and Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974; Musson, Cohen, and Tietze, 2007).

Public reflection, then, is a form of discourse that can be multi-semiotic (as opposed to merely linguistic) and that can regulate exchanges between our interior beliefs and feelings and our exterior social processes (Fairclough, 1995; Reddy, 1979). Surfacing the philosophical debate about the ultimate reification of discourse as the basis for converging ontology and epistemology, we can recall praxis as a potential link between subject and object that can serve to negotiate, confirm, and stabilize identities in the course of engagement with others in practice (Barad, 2003; Chia, 2003; Iedema, 2007; Reed, 2000).

Again invoking Mead and Habermas, we can realize ourselves and also reach agreement about disputed claims through civil discourse and intersubjective recognition. Doing so, however, requires some facilitating activities that have been addressed by Giddens (1991) in his articulation of two fundamental dilemmas underlying the very process of critical praxis. Giddens referred to the “unification versus fragmentation” of ourselves and our being in the world. In



unification, one protects one's self-identity from the seductive influences of modern society. In fragmentation, the self yields in conforming to the expectations of these outside influences.

Giddens' dilemma can be addressed by public reflection, especially in view of the two endpoints. Unification may be ameliorated if people show a willingness to confront themselves and ongoingly create alternative interpretations of their own constructed reality in the company of trusting others. They become receptive to what Alvin Gouldner (1970) once referred to as "hostile information," or data that run contrary to their comfortable stance. They submit to the critical gaze of others. As for fragmentation, public reflection encourages people to distinguish themselves from their social contexts. They learn to posit viewpoints that might not be accepted in their community. They become willing to face the utter isolation that may come from ostracism from the group.

Public reflection can help us understand how knowledge has been constructed and managed (Giroux, 1981). It is also concerned with how we consciously or unconsciously use power, privilege, and voice to exert influence and suppress dissent (Freire, 1989). We need to examine whose interests are served by the forms of knowing in popular use, be they instructional methods, curricula, or classroom technologies. Lectures and case studies provide the means for control to remain securely in the hands of the instructor. Public reflection, on the other hand, encourages learner voice because it attempts to develop consciousness by engaging learners in desocializing discovery and linking experience with text. It ensures that multiple points of view are heard, leading to new ways of thinking and ultimately of acting. Learners enter the conversation knowing that it will produce something totally new to each one of them. Questions are raised by both learners and instructor as a given theme is explored (Boyce, 1996; McMaster, 1996; Shor, 1992).

A publicly reflective approach to emancipation takes up the challenge posed by critical theorists and other neo-Marxists that human resource development methods are not only openly or subtly performative but at best engage learners in a ‘false consciousness’ about their presumed participation in a social structure. The arrangements between classes are naturally ordered and the ruling class takes the interests of the lower classes in mind. Those who are subjugated are given to believe that their mistreatment is natural and inevitable under an erroneous presumption that material goods satisfy their needs and lead to contentment (Jermier, 1998). The picture painted by critical theorists is one of a Brave New World à la Huxley (1969) in which deprived of historical and critical information, citizens become languid by the appearance of a constructed munificence that belies their subjugated state. The terms, “cultural doping,” have even been used to characterize how organizations use socialization techniques to dull workers’ consciousness (Johnson and Duberly, 2000; O’Donnell, Mcguire, and Cross, 2006). Even if workers become aware of their subjugated state, they may despair that their individualized social consciousness has no outlet for expression within the organization. Under this condition, critical learning remains ensconced at an individual level of change (Rigg and Trehan, 2004).

But public reflection invites the critical commentary of trusted other signifiers. Decision makers are encouraged to place their assumptions on the table to reveal their epistemological and political preferences (Kinchloe and McLaren, 1994). Further, individual self-knowledge can lead to team and organizational learning. Individuals, for example, may include in their personal learning goals the elucidation of barriers preventing them from finding their voice or reaching their potential in the world independent of prescriptive forces, be they corporate or radical. In finding their voice, participants learn to ‘speak up’ in ways not merely sanctioned by privileged

social authorities but because of their self-identified interests and commitment to their community

Critical consciousness enhanced through public reflection recognizes the connection between individual problems and the social and historical context within which they are embedded. Once this connection is made, learners can participate in educational projects that may transform their world by their very participation in it. Consider the case of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, who believed he was committing a moral sin because he was harboring a slave, his friend Jim (Twain, 1948). Huck eventually gave up on his morality because of his feelings for his friend. Most of us can agree that acting on his feelings was correct since turning in a slave who also happens to be your friend is dubious morality to begin with. However, Huck did make one error. He did not question the underlying values behind the morality of the day. In public reflection one learns to criticize even societal norms and values by surfacing one's own beliefs, and in Huck's case, one's own tacit wisdom.

Public reflection thus creates a real-time learning environment that permits and encourages learners to engage in a potential emancipatory discourse. What would be involved in such a discourse? First, it should become permissible to challenge not only the other's theories-in-use but those of oneself, the group, the text, and even the entire system's frame of reference. For many participants, and even for the system under scrutiny, such an intervention can be threatening – as it has the potential to cause an entire reframing of the practice world. Even participants in high-level positions may not have sufficient authority or independence of action to challenge their cultures at this level of exposure.

Is this level of public discourse sufficient to be referred to as “liberationist?” The dialogue may result in a critique of and even a change in the current power structure, but it may also result in a stabilization of the status quo. Yet, it is the former that would be the preferred outcome because public reflection examines and tries to upend the defensive routines that maintain hierarchical hegemony and stifle learning. It blurs the distinction between the moral and the political by disarming the powerful. Further, those who serve the ruling class, through such means as self-surveillance, self-censorship, and self-discipline, would come to recognize their complicity in an oppressive social structure and learn to replace it with a system that would better represent their interests (Gramsci, 1995; Brookfield, 2001). Using their mutual reflection, imagination, and intuition they would learn to co-create their reality through their participation in making that reality what it is (Heron, 1992; Wenger, 1998). They would engage in subject-subject dialogue, valuing the contribution of even the most indigent in any dialogue committed to improving their living conditions.

### **The Contribution of Action Science**

Based on the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1978), the approach known as action science focuses on how conversants handle mismatches between values and actions. When faced with this mismatch, most people attempt to narrow the gap using trial-and-error learning. They also prefer to maintain a sense of control over the situation, over themselves, and over others. In double-loop learning, participants are invited to subject even their governing values to critical reflection, resulting in free and informed choice, valid information, and high internal commitment to any new behavior attempted.

Action science is thus concerned with probing the deeper causal factors that lead people to interact as they do. In order to bring about fundamental and lasting improvement in the quality of discourse, it is thought that people need to reflect upon and alter the assumptions embedded in their behavior and reasoning patterns. While some of this can occur in the midst of practical conversation, action scientists believe that it more likely requires planned learning sessions.

Schön preferred the term "reflection-in-action" to characterize the rethinking process of action science that attempts to discover how what one did contributed to an unexpected or expected outcome. In order to engage in reflection-in-action, practitioners might start by offering a frame of the situation at hand. Then, if in a group situation, they might inquire as to how others see it. They would thereupon reflect upon these frames and subsequently begin to surface and test their underlying assumptions and reasoning processes. The ultimate aim is to narrow inconsistencies between one's espoused theories and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are those characterizing what we say we will do. Theories-in-use describe how we actually behave, and are often tacit and divergent from our espoused values. Unfortunately, most individuals are unaware of this divergence. The goal of action science is to uncover these divergences and exposure our theories-in-use, in particular, to distinguish between those which inhibit and those which promote learning.

Admittedly, there is not much talk of ideology in the work of Argyris and Schön. They do not tend to concentrate on questions about the means of production in modern industrial organizations nor do they tend to directly attack such organizations because they may be exploitative, racist, sexist, or ecologically destructive. Rather, they sustain a methodology that attacks mindless acceptance of organizational routines that can lead to power maintenance regardless of political point of view (Bokeno, 2003). Indeed, they see capitalist and noncapitalist

organizations as equally guilty in sustaining particularistic interaction pathologies, such as taking one's own reasoning for granted, asking leading questions, suppressing open inquiry, or keeping thoughts private. Their criticism can even be leveled against critical theorists who at times impose their own interpretations of organizational relationships without being willing to submit these criticisms to alternative inquiries nor to publicly expose the historical processes and social context underlying their own constructions.

### **The Liberationist Critique**

The term, "liberationist," used in this account refers to the revolutionary Marxist tradition in critical theory that sees emancipation from an oppressive social structure as requiring structural change through separation and struggle rather than through internal regulated dialogue.

Discourse projects are, often unwittingly, based on unitary or rationalist language that omits recognition of the marginalization of the working class. The liberationist camp, often associated with Third-World, especially Latin American, social movements, takes up the cause of liberation for exploited people everywhere, including the poor, overlooked by Marx as the hopeless "lumpenproletariat." The liberationist cause has been adopted by liberation theologians who revitalized church teachings by foregoing orthodoxy on behalf of the oppressed, demonstrating the links between faith and emancipation and between the gospel and social justice (Boff and Boff, 1987). Liberation movements nevertheless borrow such tenets from Marxism as the foundational nature of class struggle, the historical dialectic, and, ultimately, the unity of praxis and theory (Min, 1989).

Although there is not an automatic rift between discourse and ideology (Purvis and Hunt, 1993), the liberationist project sees the aims of emancipatory discourse, in which diverse community

members come together in a spirit of free inquiry within a safe elocutionary environment, affording political equality to all stakeholders, to be naïve at best (Valadez, 2001). Marginalized groups, especially within corporate organizations, do not necessarily find their voice in rational dialogue, especially one that is often decontextualized and depoliticized (Ellsworth, 1989). The content of such dialogue might skirt around issues of racism, sexism, patriarchy, labor exploitation, and violence, in which case the discourse may unwittingly reproduce the very power relations that it seeks to critique (Bierma and Cseh, 2003; Fenwick, 2004). Further, as pointed out by some deliberation theorists, prospective participants to dialogue may not have the skills and cultural habits or even the inclination to adopt liberal rhetorical practices (Bohman, 2001; Sanders, 1997).

Braverman (1974) warned in his labor process theory that managers might find an over-educated rank-and-file to become a liability, although classical Marxists, such as Adler (2007), might argue that the progressive development of the working class's capabilities through such means as skill upgrading could lead to a radical transformation of society without revolution. There is also the question of whether hegemonic struggle can apply to at least some managers who might see their interests tied to those of their more oppressed cousins (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Nevertheless, dialogue through praxis, which is intrinsically tied to learning, could threaten existing power structures (Rusaw, 2000). In action science terms, such dialogue would entail a public examination of personal inferences and organizational routines to expose inconsistencies between management's beliefs and their practices. Would not such an inquiry expose injustices, including any subtle attempts to enforce organizationally-sanctioned behavior, and provide meaningful avenues to redress oppression (Cole, 2005; Gioia and Manz, 1985)?

Liberationists mistrust managerial offers of open and rational discourse as window-dressing that merely rationalizes “irrationally,” in Giddens’ terms (1982), resulting in classic colonization. Discourse is accordingly co-opted in order to re-tread a more educated workforce to adapt to the post-industrial state of mobile capital (Contu, Grey, and Ortenblad, 2007). To sustain competitiveness, the new economy controls the means of production not through manual labor but through “immaterialization,” namely, through the appropriation of their knowledge, skills, and creativity (Hardt and Negri, 2001).

Borrowing from the work of French philosopher, Althusser (1971), Brookfield (2001) demonstrates how education perpetuates the dominant ideology not so much by teaching as by immersing learners in ideologically-based *practices*. Such practices as evaluating learning through standardized testing, moving students into streams or tracks, or being taught the rules of “good” behavior serve to sustain the sociotechnical division of labor and a resulting unjust social order. Of course, this learning of practices is seen as neutral. The logic of capitalism is so seeped into everyday life that its purveyors – even our teachers – are not meant to disentangle the ideological web into which they are caught.

Dialogue thus has a shadow side that can result in subtle compliance with an organizational ideology, resulting in the adoption of molded or scripted selves that come to be identified with the organization’s program or culture (Morgaine, 1994). The winners in this new game might be those who have superior communication skills, who can maintain a dispassionate demeanor rather than reveal raw uncivil emotions, who have profound insights, or who are undaunted by the need to reveal their innermost secrets within the company of strangers (Vince, 2002; Young, 2000). Yet, these same winners may be, like the factory workers of earlier times, falsely conscious of their freedom and autonomy and unaware of the historical processes through which



bourgeois society has been developed. Feminist and post-feminist writers further point out that depoliticized dialogues may conceal extrapolations of masculine values that may legitimize a dominantly masculine culture that fails to acknowledge the dynamics of subordination (Gore, 1993; Humphries and Martin, 2000; Lather, 1992; McNay, 1992).

Neo-Marxist critique, then, would have us recognize that attempts to domesticate the required struggle against capitalist exploitation through dialogue could only lead to further disillusionment and cynicism (Holst, 2003). No amount of engagement with workers will resolve the inherent dynamic in the capitalist firm of private appropriation of the social production of surplus value (Giddens, 1979) nor the ultimate subordination of use-value to exchange-value through commodification (Knights and Willmott, 2007). Accordingly, presumed egalitarian methods, such as worker empowerment, employee participation, or self-managed work groups, will be viewed along with dialogue as no more than sophisticated methods to engage the complicity of the workforce in the capitalist project (Mir and Mir, 2005; Shrivastava, 1985). As Scott (1985) noted, these methods often constitute no more than “catharses in management controlled situations.”

It should nevertheless be noted that the requirement of revolutionary action in Marxism is ambivalent, at least when it pertains to post-bureaucratic capitalist societies. The ascendancy of reformism in labor process theory, for example, has led former revolutionaries to admit that the best hope for changing capitalist organizations might be by appealing to the humanist instincts of management rather than by prompting anti-management resistance among workers (Rowlinson and Hassard, 2001; Wardell, 1990). Some might counter that so-called “managerialism,” a separation of a distinct managerial class from corporate ownership, would re-create conditions for class struggle (Berle and Means, 1932; Zeitlin, 1989). The managerial class, serving the

power elite dominating society's major economic and political institutions, would merely operate as agents to continue the mission of profit maximization while competing with each other to make it to the top of the corporate world (Baran and Sweezy, 1968; Mills, 1956; Pitelis, 1987). At the same time, these same managers have been given increasing autonomy to pursue their own interests independently of the requirement of capital, which in turn could lead to their consideration of worker rights.

### **Praxis as the Basis for Dialogue in Liberation Circles**

Dialogue has its place in liberation circles because worker consciousness is based on necessary learning and reflection, often associated with praxis. Praxis refers not only to what one does, but also to how one thinks about what one and others do. By thinking about what one does in practice, one does more than just accumulate knowledge. As Marx noted, praxis is an active and interdependent process which links the human mind with the external world through activity with others (see, e.g., Bernstein, 1971; Kitching, 1988).

Praxis has thus been associated with critical theory, not because it is interested in changing the social order per se, but because it is a dialectical method that can review and alter misconstrued meanings found in conventional wisdom or in power relationships. But for it to be truly critical, must it not stand outside the prevailing social and organizational context? Must it not at least start with the point of view that agency most comfortably resides within formal position and that managers, for example, are in privileged positions vis-à-vis the workforce and that their preference is to reproduce the current social order (Coopey, 1995)? Indeed, some critics, such as Deetz (1992), see a homogenization between the corporate ethos and social choices, recalling Marcuse's claim of "one-dimensionality" in Western society (Marcuse, 1964). Institutions are unlikely to

change or subject themselves to the risk of learning and innovation unless their models of action are understood to be discretionary or their social heterogeneity considered high (Carley, 1991; Clemens and Cook, 1999). Otherwise, they are susceptible to a reproduction that privileges those who have discretion and freedom of movement (Scaff, 1987; Zald and Ash, 1966).

Praxis has striking similarities to the liberationist project which seeks to separate itself from managerialist values which trivialize human diversity, depreciate human dignity, and widen the gap between a privileged class of managers and workers (Scott, 1985). It challenges power asymmetry and mistrusts learning unless it is an actionable process that rejects any form of fixed knowledge residing only in those who presume to construct it for others. In attempting to understand how knowledge has been transmitted to them, disenfranchised workers are given an opportunity to find their own voice, develop their own identity, and discover their human dignity as part of their search for livelihood and meaning. Dussel (2006), for example, in his “transformative praxis” calls for the victims of exploitation to “recognize their own condition” as a critical step in gaining liberation. Praxis is thus an inherently democratic process that is interested in unalienated freedom and autonomy, reversing the conditions of subordination.

So, some neo-Marxists make room for the exercise of discourse, first, as long as it does not become ritualized. So much of our discourse has been co-opted by consumer society that it becomes challenging at times to know which are our words – or texts - and which are the words of our “advertisements, movies, politicians, or best sellers” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 194). Second, some discourse needs to proceed not within the capitalist grasp but outside the corporate entity, which is intent on co-opting it on behalf of hegemonic control. From the outside and within its self-organizing community, dialogue can begin the slow process of exposing prevailing economic ideologies and power relations characterizing extant institutional structures.

Oppressed workers in these settings can learn through dialogue to construct their own knowledge and use it to liberate themselves. Indeed, Marcuse (1972), suspicious of the conformity of group behavior, called for periods of isolation, introspection, and meditation prior to societal engagement. Once liberated, workers and citizens can participate in setting the agenda for social action that can address the ills that plague society, such as disease, poverty, and racism. The data from which grass-roots knowledge may be acquired to shape this agenda are no more than the lived experience of people who engage in collective self-inquiry (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). The methods to access these data can be designed to bring out these lived conditions and also communicate, though in unconventional modalities, such as through the use of story-telling, art, dance, skits, sociodrama, and the like. The moderate Freire (1989) sees praxis as a means to release the oppressed from the bond that fuels the oppression, that being the people's lack of critical faculties. Without such critical inquiry, the subversion of consciousness is maintained as is any emergence of creative powers. What is needed is a problem-posing education that affirms each of us as being in the process of becoming.

Engaging with workers requires the acquisition of dialogic skills, on the part of both management and labor, which is inclusive of contested practice that has social, political, and psychological properties. However, since discourse is not unitary, it will need to be dynamic in its processes as well as its outcomes. For example, invoking Rawls (1989), one could argue that entrants to dialogue agree to base their claims on publicly available evidence and demonstrate reasonableness of purpose – meaning that they be willing to collaborate on fair terms and commit to acting on these terms, even if doing so may lead to accepting less than what was hoped for. However, as Hicks ((2002) points out, what if the Rawlsian condition forces a party to forsake her traditions or to translate them in ways that become indistinguishable from the dominant public idiom?

There have been a number of norms proposed to enact fair emancipatory discourse to counter the criticism of cultural hegemony. Marsh's research (2007) highlights the value of making the rules of engagement – including the norms of communication among stakeholders – explicit.

Mendoza (2001) proposes a dynamic equivalence model in which all stakeholders, not just those who live outside the dominant culture, fully engage to understand the others' frames of reference. On the other hand, liberationists might object that any meta-discursive formulation would result in a policy of exclusion especially of those dissidents who reject any form of neo-corporatist methodology (Mouffe, 2000). Such dissidents would contend that there is little point in searching for ameliorative devices to converge discourse and power. They are separate means to achieving egalitarian balance in society, and should remain so.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

If emancipatory discourse is to have any effect on transforming our society, its proponents will ultimately have to deal with the problem of capacity or readiness to intelligibly question the prevailing power and knowledge structures. Minimally, participants to discourse need to realize that the ultimate objective of education is to learn to think and engage in the critical dialectical questions of human organization (Billig et al., 1988). Otherwise, dissidents would have no choice but to express their pent-up anger through liberationist struggle, some of which may erupt into violence. Unfortunately, our educational system is built on answers, not on questions, and on teaching, not on learning. Teachers are seen as the fount of knowledge and their role, itself proscribed by published curricula disseminated by the knowledge production industry, is to transfer that knowledge into the minds of our children and young adults. How often do our

students learn from each other in a cooperative manner or learn from dissent against the received wisdom handed down from educational authorities?

Although not yet pervasively incorporated into practice, “critical action learning” has been seriously broached by a number of academics. This tradition derives from a criticism of conventional action learning in its presumed acceptance of current managerial orthodoxies that conceive of organizational actions and changes as largely depoliticized and accepting of current power relationships (Garrick and Clegg, 2001). Critical action learning thus encompasses a reflective, denaturalizing experience that can encourage participants to find their distinctive voice in tones separate from those of their teachers (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000; Tosey and Nugent, 1997; Willmott, 1997). They learn to reconstruct their taken-for-granted assumptions even in the moment so as to address the socio-cultural conditions that may constrain their self-insight (Habermas, 1971; O’Neil and Marsick, forthcoming; Raelin, 2001). They are also exposed to their own subjectivity, leading many to question whether workers can or should be controlled, and even whether instrumentality should be the prevailing basis for social relations to begin with (Grey, 2004). Participants in such a venue can search for individual and collective meaning and the multiple identities that may arise from a discourse among competing interests, one that goes after the tough questions, not the easy answers (Ford and Harding, 2007; Heifetz, 1994).

Rigg and Trehan (2004) in their ethnographic case study of several post-graduate programs in management development found that critical action learning could lead to perspective and personal transformation since it gives participants a language to frame how their long-held assumptions can be challenged when mapped against their professed values. Prasad and Cavanaugh (1997) earlier found that when given a chance to critically examine standard texts,

students were capable of identifying the potential contradictions in reified organizational routines and structures. Caron and Fisher (2006) in their report of an internship program in business administration that emphasized critical reflection found that enhanced self-awareness and political consciousness was an important achievement that could lead to behavioral change. Thus, action learning projects can focus as much on the meaning of their accomplishments as the accomplishments themselves. The ensuing dialogue can minimally raise such critical questions as: how are we relating to one another as humans, who has been excluded from our deliberations that ought to be included, why have we and our managers organized in the way we have, are there alternative ways to manage our work processes, what cultural or historical processes have led to our current state of being (Fenwick, 2004; Nash, 2001; Reason, 1994).

Unfortunately, the evidence as regards the value and effectiveness of action learning participants questioning the historical, cultural, and political conditions within their own organization is mixed (Lakes, 1994; Nash, 2001). Gutierrez (2002), in an experimental graduate course in critical analysis of both the corporate organization and the classroom, found it difficult to alter the traditional professor-student dependent relationship. In particular, emancipatory change requires students' capacity to engage in deep self-analysis at the individual level, to exhibit sensitivity and relinquishment of control at the interpersonal level, and to appreciate the constraints of deep enculturated social processes at the organizational level. Students who have achieved this level of critical awareness have at the same time reported both discomfort and dissonance when their newfound social awareness and political acuity were contraposed against the utter reality of their powerlessness to effect consistent and substantive change in their work environment (Brookfield, 1994; Buckingham, 1996; Reynolds, 1999; Rigg and Trahan, 2004).

Similarly, Antonacopoulou (2006) discovered in her own reflection on a course on critical thinking, introduced as part of an MBA curriculum that deconstructed the functionalist representation of management, was nearly impossible to achieve unless the critique lay at the core of the curriculum, was reinforced through each component of the program, and most importantly, engaged and questioned the lived experience of managing within the work environment.

### **Emancipation and Liberation**

If liberationist doctrine is interpreted as anti-pedagogical in the sense that most educational projects merely reproduce power relations and, thus, cannot socialize workers and students toward a free society, there can be little hope for dialogic emancipation. A revolutionary Marxist analysis would reject educational enlightenment in favor of class struggle and structural reform. On the other hand, if liberationist doctrine can be introduced using a critical pedagogy that would be not only emancipatory in both its content and method but faithfully adopted by management, then perhaps the liberationist project can enter the frame of discourse relations. Not that prevailing institutional authority structures, be they in the corporate or educational worlds, would warmly receive the liberationist critique (Reynolds, 1999). As was noted earlier, critical emancipatory consciousness when enacted in the workplace could lead to ruptures in one's social network; to alienation, anxiety, and de-motivation if not realized; or even to loss of employment (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Buckingham, 1996; Simon, 1992). Brookfield (1994) went as far as to place an early warning signal on the exposition of critical views, especially by neophytes, when done so within a conventional institutional setting. Such neophytes have reported such extreme reactions as feeling as if they were imposters, in light of their standard socialization;



pariahs, rejected for betraying their peer group; and scatterbrains, for not being able to square their new identity with prior roles.

Nevertheless, there can be a possible mingling of liberationist rhetoric with emancipatory discourse. First, whether as worker or student, people in downtrodden conditions need to be given voice in any dialogue focusing on their emancipation. It is not sufficient for their managers or teachers to speak on their behalf or presume to know what is best for them. Although a teacher or a researcher may try to place a learner's statements within a wider historical framework, such frameworks themselves need to be subjected to learner scrutiny. Otherwise, they become mere objectifications presented as received wisdom to learners located in either academic or work organizations.

Echoing Foley (2001), the everyday events of the workplace and how workers make sense of what happens to them can and should also become the basis for learning. We know all too well that our theories sometimes do not jibe with our practice and that critical perspectives brought into pedagogical practices can come across as ethnocentric (Grey, Knights, and Willmott, 1996). Further, without worker or student voice, we risk having emancipatory discourse represent no more than a literary affectation characterizing a language game among academics (Reynolds, 1999). At the same time, views from the field are not to be held as sacred. The rules of civil dialogue apply across the board such that we can all become guilty, barring the presence of critical reflection, of engaging in such unproductive routines as unwittingly suppressing open inquiry or even claiming supremacy by one's very oppression.

Presented below in Table 1, then, is a list of conditions and corollaries, which I invite readers to examine, as requisite for merging emancipatory discourse and liberationist ideology. Barring these conditions, the two approaches are hypothesized to remain as separate agendas:

Table 1

Proposed Conditions for Merging Emancipatory Discourse and Liberation

- Does the discourse focus on learning and self-discovery for all members of the affected entity, not just those at the top?
  - Does it provide a forum where all voices, even those heretofore unheard, can be recognized, understood, legitimized, and appreciated as equal?
  - Is it inclusive of a diversity of race, gender, age, class, rank, and point of view?
- Does the discourse incorporate coverage of social, political, and historical processes that underlie worker behavior?
  - It is genuine and not a guise for subjugation, control, or exploitation?
  - Does it encourage an examination of whether one's needs have been freely created and, if not, how to make free choices about meeting them?
- Does the discourse incorporate the legitimate and constructive voicing of emotions and other forms of expression?
  - Does it encourage artistic and creative expression as a means to liberate the senses?
  - Does it make room for expressions of disillusion and isolation?
  - Does it accommodate oppositional argument containing deeply held convictions?
- Does the discourse challenge moves to homogenize identities that may give a false impression of uniformity between workers and managers?
  - Does it focus on potentially oppressive practices?
  - Does it name the beneficiaries of the current power arrangement?
  - Does it shed light on resistance and dissent?
- Does the discourse conceive of knowledge as contestable and denaturalized from mainstream theory?

**Discussion**

Given the foregoing proposal to merge emancipatory discourse and liberationist struggle, there are potential implications for discourse and critical theories that might contribute to their body of work. First and foremost, the conciliation proposed suggests a discourse that is inherently political. From Horkheimer (1995) we acknowledge that the unit of analysis has to focus on the relationship between privileged, under-privileged, and unprivileged groups within a commodified economic structure, at least until the relationship has been changed. Emancipatory discourse's purpose is not only to diagnose this relationship but to advocate for its transformation through a provision of greater freedom for the disenfranchised.

A second implication is that liberationist rhetoric provides little comfort to any aspiration on the part of critical theory to become an established theory that would be subject to current empirical analysis in the positivist tradition. Since the ends of the point of view of critical theory have not yet been achieved – that being a just and democratic world order – the attention of researchers tends to focus on historical or emergent narratives that reflect reputed hegemonic practices (Fairclough, 2005) or egalitarian experiments in the making (Benhabib, 1986; Brookfield, 2001). Standard research procedures keeping the researcher detached from the “subject” would not apply. Rather, practices such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; McNiff and Whitehead, 2006), or critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989; Forester, 1992) would need to be relied upon to inductively develop theory from the data of experience or from practice interventions. These practices would be epistemologically emic in their privileging of the perceptions and world views of the members of the culture under study.

The liberationist critique also contributes to addressing the twin dilemmas of critical thinking that its focus on reason is unlikely to lead to emancipation – requiring a more holistic process

entailing subjective experience (Fay, 1987) – and that its serious application could lead to despair and even to self-loathing (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). In the first instance, the threat of liberationist action distanced from dialogic inquiry might induce the latter to be more inclusive and more appreciative of voices left behind (Meisenhelder, 1989). In the second instance, liberationist politics might offer a realistic alternative to critical dialogue due to its less grandiose but more grounded focus on the problems occurring in the real lives of people, and less on academic questions about linguistic usage.

Critical emancipatory discourse for its part continues the tradition, espoused by labor process theorists and critical realists, of broadening the deterministic account of historical materialism by incorporating the role of agency and discourse in transforming social structures. Liberationist struggles vary at the micro level due to discrepant firm-specific norms evolving from social relations across professional, occupational, and peer groups (Delbridge, 2007; Edwards, 1979). They also vary at the macro level due to wider historical, social, political, and cultural forces. Further, the liberationist project has expanded its focus beyond class to race and gender and, in particular, to third-world peasantry. The revolutionary impulse of the working class has been blunted by a consumer society offering a seductive array of images designed to represent the better life. If there is to be a class struggle, its locus has shifted from the West to the South and East, to disenfranchised populations fueled as much by religious zeal as by political promise.

Although the subtle distinction between agency and structure brought out by critical discourse theorists are beyond the scope of this paper, the liberationist project discussed here might provide some support to those interested in depicting the subtle ways that structure can mediate agency even beyond Bourdieu's (1990) conception of habitus. In particular, such practices as work or learning can be conditioned by tacit rules or codes that govern performance. According to

Bernstein (1990), a code regulates meanings and their realization. Mutch (2004) refers to recognition and realization rules. Recognition rules help actors recognize the context in which performances are to be produced. Realization rules address the means to produce a competent performance. While educational practices can shape the possession of realization rules, Morais, Foninhas, and Neves (1992) found that the possession of recognition rules was strongly related to race and class. Thus, in the face of such contextual factors as discrimination, there may be a limit to the potential of emancipatory discourse and the resources it provides on behalf of inexperienced entrants to dialogue (Archer, 1995).

## **Conclusion**

The agendas of emancipatory discourse and liberation have evolved from different traditions, one being more social and psychological, the other more political and economic. For social change to occur, we likely need them both although their respective priority can be debated. On one hand, what we can symbolically and interactively imagine and articulate may be fundamental to the ability to make structural change. On the other hand, our epistemology - what we know (and communicate) on the basis of our educational institutions and through socialization - is structurally dependent. There is room, nevertheless, for a degree of harmony of method, especially given a mutuality on goals. Both believe in the mutability of human nature. Since oppression and social injustice have come about through social and historical circumstances, these conditions can be undone. Through different means, both camps subscribe to a never-ending pursuit of a free and democratic social order.

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