Examining a First Grader's Writing through a Habermasian Lens: Implications for the Teaching and Learning of Writing

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This paper investigates the relationship between Habermas's theory of communicative action (TCA) and writing. It begins with a review of the features of Habermas's TCA: validity claims, their corresponding criteria, and the ideal speech situation. Then TCA is applied in analyzing a first grader's written notes. Finally, the implications for the teaching and learning of writing are discussed from a Habermasian perspective. This paper demonstrates the applicability of Habermas's TCA in examining writing. It also shows how TCA informs the teaching and learning of writing.

Introduction

Jurgen Habermas is considered one of the most influential sociologists and philosophers in Germany in the past few decades. Rooted in the tradition of German thought from Kant to Marx, "he has been associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theorists which pioneered in the study of the relationship of the ideas of Marx and Freud" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 3). Ewert (1991) argues that Habermas is concerned primarily with "the development of a comprehensive theory of rationality sufficient to encompass science, morality, and art…" (p. 346). According to Bohman and Rehg (2014), Habermas's work bridges continental and Anglo-American traditions of thought and addresses topics ranging from sociopolitical theory to aesthetics, and from epistemology and language to philosophy of religion. Moreover, his ideas have significantly influenced many disciplines such as philosophy, political science, sociology, communication studies, argumentation theory and rhetoric, developmental psychology, and theology.

Habermas is also one of the thinkers considered difficult to read. Thomassen (2010) attributes this to three mutually related reasons. First, Habermas writes as someone who knows the philosophical tradition and expects his readers to do the same. His work is teeming with terminologies and assumptions regarding philosophy, sociology, political theory, psychology, etc., thus making it difficult to read for those who are less familiar with these areas. Second, Habermas writes in an abstract and conceptual style. This is because he is engaged in grand theorizing. Specifically, he is theorizing about society, language, law, and democracy—all complex and somewhat abstract topics—rather than dealing with a particular social phenomenon. Finally, Habermas is difficult to read because he "uses long sentences, packed with theoretical concepts, and so his style is difficult to comprehend for first-time readers" (Thomassen, 2010, p. 1).

Although Habermas's work involves multiple disciplines and is presented in a style not easily accessible to untrained readers, its importance and applicability in education should not be overlooked. This paper explores the relationship between Habermas's (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action (TCA) and literacy education—the teaching and learning of writing in particular. Specifically, a first grader's writing samples will be analyzed from the perspective of

Habermas's TCA. The analysis has two interrelated purposes. First, it will demonstrate the practical applicability of TCA in analyzing everyday communicative action, in this case a first grader's written communication with her father. Second, implications in relation to the teaching and learning of writing will be made through a Habermasian lens. These two interrelated purposes form the backbone of the inquiry. In what follows, I will present the features of Habermas's TCA as well as the context where the written notes were collected as data for analysis. A few samples of the written notes will be analyzed in relation to the features of TCA. In addition, the implications for the teaching and learning of writing will be discussed from a Habermasian perspective.

Features of the Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas's TCA is a dialogical paradigm that features two or more sentient subjects communicating with each other. The subjects or actors in TCA assume a performative role in communicative action oriented toward understanding (Habermas, 1984). TCA is a broad social theory integrated through the concept of communicative action. Therefore, it is not my intention to review Habermas's theory in detail in this paper. What will be discussed below is centered on three features of TCA: validity claims, criteria used to validate validity claims, and the ideal speech situation. These features are singled out for discussion as they form the core of Habermas's theory and pertain closely to the analysis of written notes that will be presented later in this paper.

Validity Claims

Instead of "truth," Habermas uses "validity" to emphasize that truth should not be perceived monologically, but contested dialogically. A claim made in communicative action is a claim to validity, and Habermas argues that every meaningful act carries validity claims. A validity claim, according to Habermas (1984), is equivalent to "the assertion that the conditions for the validity of an utterance are fulfilled" (p. 38). In other words, a validity claim is an assertion made by an actor that his/her utterance is of "truth, truthfulness, and rightness" (Habermas, 1998, p. 24). The actor's assertion or validity claim can be accepted, refuted, or abstained from, depending on the extent to which the interlocutor is convinced.

Criteria for Validity Claims

The question is how the actors determine if the validity claims are true, truthful (sincere), and right. That is, what are the criteria used to evaluate the claims? Habermas suggests that the claims made in each meaningful act can be divided into three categories and that each category has its own criterion for validating the claims. The three categories 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, 1984, p. 100)

To the objective claims there is multiple access, whereas there is only privileged access to the subjective claims. Therefore, the criteria for the objective and the subjective claims are multiple access and privileged access respectively. The criterion for the normative claims is shared interests.

An objective claim is made about a person, an object, a fact, and so on, that can be observed or counted repeatedly. Therefore, it is open to multiple access. For example, when you say, "There is a person over there," you make an objective claim that you see a person over there. Whether your claim is valid or not can be verified by having a second or third person, or even more people, see if there is a person over there. Therefore, the criterion for evaluating an objective claim is multiple access. In contrast, the criterion for evaluating a subjective claim is privileged access. Suppose that you tell me that you like pizza. I can observe whether you eat pizza frequently. I can ask your family whether you like pizza. Yet you are the only person who knows whether you are telling the truth or not. That is, only you have privileged access to your personal preference about pizza no matter what outward behavior you display. A third kind of claim is a normative claim. It features such key words as "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad," "appropriate" or "inappropriate," "should" or "should not." For instance, you suggest that we should eat more vegetables in our daily diet to stay healthy. I concur that vegetables are good for our health. In other words, I agree with you that your suggestion satisfies our shared interests—the criterion used to evaluate a normative claim.

The Ideal Speech Situation

In her editorial introduction to Habermas's *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, Cooke (1998) states 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.

In illustration, take the previous example about eating more vegetables. Suppose that I disagree with you about eating more vegetables in the diet. I understand that vegetables are good for my health, but I simply do not like the taste of them. Eating vegetables actually makes me sick. You as my professor are not pleased with my comment about vegetables. In fact, you warn me that if I do not take back my comment, my course grade will be jeopardized. Hence, I apologize to you, withdraw my comment, and "agree" that people should eat more vegetables. In this case, the ideal speech situation is violated, and the "consensus" is reached due to the coercive power you use against me.

Context of Note Writing

Before TCA is put to use, let me provide a context for the written notes. The notes used for analysis in this paper come from the data collected in a previous study (Lee & Lee, 2015) where notes were written in a home setting for approximately one year between me as the researcher and my daughter, Penn, as the co-researcher/participant. Instead of a formally pre-planned research project, this previous study was a "by-product" of the writing Penn and I did almost daily at home for one year when she was in first grade. We discussed many topics in our notes, including trips we had taken, books we had read, movies we had watched, our religious beliefs, my work, and so on. She even gave me an "assignment" to complete while I was away at a conference (more on this later). At the end of note writing, Penn and I reread, discussed, and analyzed the notes together. We wrote up what we had learned from this writing experience and included these thoughts in the final paper.

Our note writing began with the topic of the St. Patrick's Day leprechaun. Penn learned about St. Patrick's Day in school. After that, she was very interested in the leprechaun, an Irish fairy dressed in head-to-toe green, spending his time either making shoes or searching for gold (Kidzworld, 2014). One day, Penn drew a picture of a leprechaun and a picture of herself on one side of a card she made. She wrote on this side, "For the leprechaun" and "From Cheu-Jeys dolter [daughter] Penn" (to authentically present Penn's perspective, her writing is not corrected for grammatical errors throughout this paper). Above her picture, she added a few words: "a pictuir of me." It appeared as if Penn thought she was only a child and had to introduce herself as "Cheu-Jeys dolter." On the other side of the card, she wrote:

> Dear leprechaun
> I love you and this pictuir I colord for you is for you and I always wanted to see how leprechauns look like. do you like green I bat you do and you like gold I know that. I love you leprechaun remember my name Penn.
> Your Friend
> Penn

She placed her card along with a few toy gold coins (as a gift for the leprechaun) on the floor close to the couch. She said that the leprechaun might come at night and write her back.

While Penn was sleeping, I read her card and felt compelled to respond to her—and I did. I wrote her back and signed my name as "Leprechaun." She was so excited to see the response the next morning and wrote another note to the "Leprechaun." After a week of back-and-forth writing, I told her honestly that I had written all the notes in the name of "Leprechaun" and apologized to her. She was disappointed and stopped writing to me for a few days, but forgave me at last. Hence, we continued writing to each other except that I changed my pen name from "Leprechaun" to "Leprechaun Dad." We discussed many topics in our notes and wrote almost every day. In line with Gee's (2012) sociolinguistic theory, we (2015) argued in this study that writing should be learned not only as an academic skill in school, but also as a social practice situated within, and informed by, multiple Discourses. Writing as a social practice oriented toward understanding, like what Penn and I did in our note writing, actually resembles Habermas's communicative action.

Therefore, building on the written notes obtained from our previous study, this paper will show how to analyze the notes with the features of TCA discussed above. The analysis is intended to explicate TCA with authentic writing samples to help us better understand the practical applicability of TCA. In addition, the analysis helps to shed light on the teaching and learning of writing through a Habermasian lens.

Analysis of Written Notes

Now let us look at how TCA discussed above plays out in Penn's writing. Three samples of Penn's written notes will be examined. The validity claims made explicitly as well as implicitly in her notes will be thematized and analyzed in relation to their corresponding criteria. I will also show how the context in which Penn wrote notes with me influenced her writing.

Sample 1

> Dear leprechaun dad
> I had a wonderful day today really like to write notes back to you and I saw you reading on the couch so what were you reading. I don't know what else to write so bye bye.
> From Penn to dad

In this note, at least two validity claims were made by Penn. First, she made a subjective claim in "I… really like to write notes back to you…." The subjective claim foregrounded in this statement is concerned with Penn's personal preference, i.e., whether she liked to write notes to me. I can observe her outward behavior to speculate as to whether she liked to write notes. For example, on one occasion, Penn wrote:

> Dear leprechaun dad,
> Sorry I didn't have time yesterday so I wrote one today and I don't have much time so bye bye.

Similarly, she wrote a note about having no time to write to me on another occasion:

> Dear leprechaun dad,
> I'm so so so so so so so so so so so sorry that I didn't write to you in a long time sorry I only have five minutes to write so bye bye.

I can present the above two notes to Penn or to someone else and argue that Penn did not like to write notes to me because she should have been able to find time for things she enjoyed doing. Nevertheless, despite all the evidence I have presented, only Penn knows whether she liked to write notes to me. This is because the criterion for evaluating the subjective claim is privileged access, and only Penn has access to her personal preference.

In addition, Penn also made an objective claim in the note as she wrote, "…I saw you reading on the couch…." She claimed that I was reading on the couch when she saw me. The criterion for evaluating the objective claim is multiple access. In other words, Penn can ask, for example, my wife or someone else if I was reading on the couch on that specific day. Unlike Penn's

preference about writing notes to me, my reading on the couch is an objectively observable behavior that is open to multiple or repeated observations. Therefore, the criterion of multiple access is in play if there is any question about her claim that I was reading on the couch.

Sample 2

> Dear leprechaun dad,
> I finished the movie blind side and it was a nice movie. I hope you get to check out the movie to and watch it so take a look at it later see you.
> Sincerely
> Penn

Foregrounded in Penn's first sentence of the above note is an objective claim that she watched a movie. This objective claim should be easy to identify. Whether she watched a movie or not could be observed objectively and thus was subject to the criterion of multiple access as discussed previously. I want to focus on the second sentence of the note and tease out an implicit claim made by Penn. Again, she wrote, "I hope you get to check out the movie to and watch it so take a look at it later see you." Implied in this sentence is a normative claim: "It is a good movie, and you should watch it, too." This is a normative claim as the key words "good" and "should" characteristic of a normative claim are implied. The claim is implied because Penn did not clearly state it in her note. One way to find it out is to ask Penn directly. Another possible claim made implicitly by Penn is: "I like the movie, and you should watch it, too." In this case, in addition to the normative claim discussed just now, a subjective claim that she liked the movie is also made covertly in Penn's statement. The analysis of this note shows that, in addition to the clearly-foregrounded claims, there can be other claims implied in communicative action.

Sample 3

> Dear leprechaun dad,
> It is almost my birthday can you please give me a birthday present and by the way my birthday is on 10-27 so please give me a birthday present on my birthday.
> Sincerely,
> Penn

In response to her note, I wrote:

> Dear Penn,
> Wow! You're growing up. I guess you will be 7 years old. Let me think about it. Please remind me again. I will find a present for you.
> Leprechaun Dad

The next day, I received another note from Penn:

> Dear leprechaun dad,
> When is your birthday when I know I can give you a gift So please tell me when and I really wan't you to know my dad his name is George whats your name you can answer all that tommorow bye.
> Sincerely,
> Penn

In Penn's first note above, she clearly asked for a birthday present. The claim she made can be paraphrased as "I should receive a present for my birthday." In this way, it becomes a normative claim as "should" is implied in her statement. I promised to give her a present for her birthday in my note to her. In response, Penn wrote that I could also receive a present from her for my birthday. This communicative episode is interesting because it looked as if Penn defended her claim based on the principle of shared interests. Specifically, after Penn asked for a birthday present, she also reminded me that I could receive a present for my birthday as well. In other words, she seemed to claim that giving her a birthday present would also meet my own interest. Recall that the criterion to evaluate a normative claim is shared interests. By giving her a present, I would also receive one. Therefore, our shared interests would be met.

The Ideal Speech Situation

Writing with Penn was a pleasant experience to have. She would not have opened up to me on many things if we had talked rather than written notes. It actually removed some communicative barriers we could have encountered had we not communicated in this way. The communicative barriers could be due to the power relation between me as a father and Penn as my daughter. Therefore, this writing experience, which mimicked the ideal speech situation where the power relation is equalized, gave Penn a safe environment in which she could write freely and creatively. For example, in one of Penn's notes, she bargained with me like a peer and wanted me to write to her first:

> Dear leprechaun dad,
> I have a new idea how about you write to me first then I write to you in your answering thing so next time you go first and you have to draw the answering thing like I did to you like this □ (answering note here) [the answering thing is a box, much bigger than the one presented here, where a note can be written] so I can write so see your notes later.

On another occasion, Penn seemed to take on the role of a teacher and asked me to read a book she gave me. The following are our notes on Christmas:

> Dear Penn,
> It is Christmas Eve. I'm so happy to know you slept by yourself last night [she moved to her room the night before and successfully slept there on her own]. You are a big girl now. Let me know if you will do anything to celebrate Christmas.
> Leprechaun Dad

In response, she wrote:

> Well I'm not exactly sure about that all I know is we put up our Christmas tree long time ago. So it is almost Christmas so I gave you a book called hibernation and you can read it and tell me if the book was good or bad and what animals were in it its right down there See that book on the floor over there take the book and you may read it.

Penn seemed to enjoy this "teacher" role and gave me another assignment to do while I was away at a conference in Chicago. This time, the assignment looked more formal. It had three pages. The cover page was titled "My Chicago Journal" with a subtitle "Cheu-Jey's Journal." At the bottom of the cover page, it read, "Directions: you can write or draw what you did every day. Please have fun." Then she attached two worksheets to the cover page. On each worksheet, there were a box on the top half of the sheet for me to draw pictures in and a few lines on the bottom half for me to write on. She explained to me the purposes of the box and lines with the instructions: "draw over in this box" and "write here." I did complete the assignment though I was not very artistic in drawing the pictures. After Penn read my journal, she gave me a "2/2" score (which means a full mark) and commented, "Fantastic! Great job!"

The above notes show that writing to "Leprechaun Dad" allowed Penn to take on different roles and, in those roles, act differently than she would have done normally. The note writing experience provided Penn with a context approximating the ideal speech situation where she could write more freely.

Implications for the Teaching and Learning of Writing

Up to this point, I have shown the applicability of TCA in analyzing written notes. In what follows, I will discuss how writing could be taught and learned from the Habermasian perspective. Specifically, three implications about the teaching and learning of writing will be presented.

Writing Is a Communicative Act

As shown previously, Penn communicated her interests, needs, feelings, etc. with me through note writing. Writing for Penn was a communicative act through which she attempted to understand (e.g., to understand whether I also liked the movie she watched and the book she read) and to be understood (e.g., to let me understand that she wanted to have a birthday gift). In parallel, Barry Lane (1993) argues that we need to discover that writing is not something a teacher tells us to do, but something real and as much a part of us as anything we have ever said and done. Writing is not simply putting words on paper and taught/learned as an academic skill, but serves as a communicative act to understand, and to be understood by, others and to express and formulate our identity. Instead of focusing primarily on the correction of grammatical/syntactic errors, or what Ballenger (2013) calls "policing student papers for mistakes," teachers should allow students to communicate authentically in writing (p. 74). Writing done in this communicative way not only gives students an opportunity to express their feelings, interests, needs, concerns, etc., but also helps teachers better understand and teach their students.

Dana Hubbard (2008), a fifth grade student teacher, provides a good example of how writing can be taught in a communicative way to help students make an impact on their community. Dana was informed by his supervising teacher that the district required fifth graders to study the legislative process and how laws are made. It would be his responsibility to teach the unit. Instead of relying solely on the explanation of the textbook, which was unfortunately both confusing and sleep-inducing, Dana took his students on a field trip to the Indiana Statehouse. On their way back, Dana noticed his students' conversation about what laws they would make if they were kings. He then told his students that they indeed could have an impact on the legislative process. Dana encouraged them to write letters to their senator about their concern with issues in their community such as gun violence, gambling, and unemployment. Stereotypically labeled as reluctant learners in an urban school, Dana's students, through their communicative action in writing, transformed themselves into writers who purposefully used literacy in an attempt to change their status quo. Dana's work demonstrated how writing can be taught as a communicative act, instead of an academic skill only, to make the students' voice heard.

Writing Is Risk Taking

Since writing as a communicative act is something real and a part of what we think, feel, say, and do, it can be personal and risky. In sharing what he/she writes, it exposes the writer in a susceptible position. Orfanella (1996) metaphorically compares sharing writing in English class to showering together after gym class. He argues that asking students to share their writing is like sharing "their feelings and vulnerabilities, and their innermost thoughts" (Orfanella, 1996, p. 53). This is especially true when the power relationship between teachers and students is not equalized, but usually tilted in favor of the former. Because teachers are given power to grade students' work, students tend to write to please their teachers in order to receive good grades. Writing done in this way shapes students into knowledge recipients instead of communicative actors and into rule conformers instead of risk takers. Therefore, teaching writing is not simply teaching neutral knowledge of using words, grammar, and literary techniques, but creating a learning environment where students feel safe to act communicatively and take risks.

Writing Should Be Done in a Safe Environment

If writing is analogous to risk taking, the teaching and learning of writing should be set in a safe environment. It should resemble Habermas's ideal speech situation where good reason instead of coercive power is utilized to justify validity claims. However, how do we create a classroom where students are willing to take risks—to write and share their writing? There are a few things we can do to make it happen.

First, we as teachers need to model for students before asking them to take risks. "If we expect our students to open up in our writing classes, then we cannot sit safely on the sidelines like educational voyeurs. We need to take risks, too" (Orfanella, 1996, p. 53). We can, for example, share with students our own writing and ask for their input on it. In addition, we should appreciate students' openness and honesty in their comments on our writing to let them know that there is something we can learn from them. When we are willing to put away the

authoritative role as teachers and become peers to our students in a classroom approximating the ideal speech situation, writing will be safe and enjoyable.

Second, we need to provide positive feedback on risk-taking endeavors. "Risk taking is often accompanied by queasiness and unsure feelings. If a teacher can provide encouragement or praise for a student's new direction it may be all that student needs to keep going" (Lane, 1993, p. 174). For example, after a few unsuccessful attempts by his student, Lane (1993) asked this student Rick, a prisoner, to write a "bad" poem about a moment in time. He told Rick that the poem had to be "bad" if he was to do the assignment correctly.

Rick was inspired to write "Snake Stew," a poem about how mad his mother was when he gave her a snake to put in the stew she was making. The poem was so funny that when Rick read it to the class, everyone loved it. Rick thought the poem was dumb and could not understand why people, including the teacher, liked it so much. Nonetheless, this experience made Rick like writing and motivated him to write more. Words of encouragement or praise can sometimes trigger a fondness for writing that will last a lifetime.

Finally, a safe environment where writing is encouraged can be created when the student is allowed to write as someone else. Specifically, when Penn wrote with me, she assumed a different role and did things she could not have done in reality (e.g., asking me to write notes to her first, to read a book and report to her about it, and to do an assignment that was then graded by her). Therefore, writing as someone else encouraged Penn to write in different genres and write creatively. This is in line with the findings of Harste, Leland, and Smith (1994); Leland, Harste, and Helt (2000); and Wolf (1993) that students respond positively to what they have learned through drama. Assuming the perspective of a character in a book, a student is allowed to act as someone else in writing his/her response to the book and does not have to worry about being embarrassed if mistakes are made. In dramatization, students can put aside the intimating power relation in the classroom and venture into the uncharted territory they would not trespass upon in reality.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the applicability of Habermas's TCA in analyzing written notes and, by extension, student writing. Three types of validity claims (subjective, objective, and normative claims), made or implied in Penn's notes, were discussed in relation to their respective criteria (privileged access, multiple access, and shared interests). In addition, Penn was allowed to assume different roles in her writing. Therefore, her writing experience resembled the ideal speech situation that let her write more freely than she could have done in reality. It is important to note that it is far from my intention to suggest that even a first grader, like Penn, can understand, and put into practice, the complexities of Habermas's theory. In fact, Penn did not know that she made any validity claims when she was writing the notes. What I suggest is that Habermas's theory makes explicit what we do daily in our communicative action, though we may not be aware of it. In other words, Habermas's theory is not created as a standard based on which practice is implemented. Instead, his theory is an *explication of the communicative action we practice on a daily basis*. It foregrounds such communicative features as validity claims, their corresponding criteria, and the ideal speech situation, which would otherwise remain oblivious to

an indiscreet eye. In addition, through the analysis of Penn's written notes, the implications for the teaching and learning of writing were also presented from the Habermasian perspective. Writing is not merely an academic skill to teach and learn, but a communicative act into which students are socialized. Writing is also about taking risks and should be set in a safe learning environment that resembles the ideal speech situation.

By showing the applicability of Habermas's TCA and its implications for the teaching and learning of writing, this paper is meant to provoke a critical dialogue about Habermas's theory in relation to education, especially literacy education. Through such an interdisciplinary dialogue, the nature and education of writing will be better understood and practiced in the classroom.

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