

JÜRGEN HABERMAS (1929 -):

THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY¹

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Introduction

On a recent early morning television programme a panel discussed whether universities were accurate in their advertising aimed at recruiting students. Universities call themselves “world-class”, “world-leader” or “top 100” without being clear about the precise meaning of these descriptions. These statements, though possibly true, are not clear to the customers. In this television moment many current issues facing universities are crystalized – competition for students, university rankings, research and teaching priorities and the gap between highly technical ways of measuring performance versus the priorities of students who have become customers of education. Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher and critical theorist helps us understand these issues and is useful in plotting a way forward for universities and higher education in general.

Jürgen Habermas

Jürgen Habermas has had a major impact on social and political theory for over fifty years and is generally regarded as the contemporary embodiment of the critical theory tradition of the Frankfurt School. His work involves a constant search to make sense of democracy and its as yet unfinished possibilities (Müller-Doohm, 2014, p. 361).

¹ Fleming, T. (in press, 2018). Jürgen Habermas (1929-): The importance of higher education for democracy. In R. Barnett & A. Fulford (Eds.), *Debating Higher Education: Philosophers on the University*. Heidelberg: Springer.

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He was born in Düsseldorf in 1929 to a right-wing conservative father who was a Nazi party supporter. As a result of World War 2 and later listening to the Nuremberg trials on radio he developed a deep commitment to a Europe of constitutional laws historically rooted in an imperative to avoid another devastating war.

When the war ended in 1945, Habermas was sixteen and the question of fascism became a priority. He was one of the earliest critics of Heidegger (whose work he admired) who remained an unrepentant advocate of Nazi politics into the 1950s (Muller-Doohm, 2014). He studied in Göttingen, Bonn and Zurich before becoming assistant to Adorno at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) led to his appointment as professor at Heidelberg. This work in particular anticipated the current emergence of authoritarian populism in many countries. He later published *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1978), *The Theory of Communicative Action* in two volumes (1984, 1987), *Between Facts and Norms* (1996) and numerous collections of papers. He is involved in public debates about immigration, German integration, democratisation, as well as controversies about the remnants of National Socialist ideology in Germany (Kershaw, 2018, pp. 227, 351). His concern with fascism underpins the emancipatory concerns of all his work (Müller-Doohm, 2014). He reconstructs Marxism for the modern age and identifies a learning project at the center of democratic society.

Habermas' defence of European integration and unification and an integrated world order are his preferred ways to transcend present economic difficulties including debt and the threat posed by current waves of populism and nationalism. He proposes a democratization of European institutions that can fulfil the promise of the European

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Union and bring rampant market capitalism under political and democratic control. He critiques the inappropriate use of technical reason. His writings continue today with *The Crisis of the European Union* (2012) and more recently *The Lure of Technocracy* (2015). His quest is to ensure that the emancipatory possibility of critical theory is reasonable, well-grounded and on a firm foundation in order to sustain the political struggle for a more just form of life. He is the foremost European philosopher of his age (Müller-Doohm, 2014, p. 352).

Habermas has developed and extended the ideas of Marx and Weber as well as Horkheimer and Adorno in his attempt to understand social change and conflict (Müller-Doohm, 2014). His version of critical theory incorporates psychoanalysis in its social critique. The dominant social delusions and thoughtless conformity to positions held uncritically are a social neurosis grounded in social repression of basic instincts. He sees psychoanalysis as a form of ideology critique (Ingram, 2010). His strength lies in his ability to eclectically borrow, interact with, contradict and integrate a wide diversity of ideas. He has engaged with, critiqued and frequently incorporated the ideas of a wide range of thinkers into his work including the sociology of G.H. Mead and Weber, the linguistics of Austin and Searle, the developmental psychology of Piaget, Dewey's pragmatism and the social systems theory of Parsons and Luhmann. The recent dialogues with theologian Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) led to a series of publications studying the importance of religion as a cohesive force in society (Ratzinger & Habermas, 2007). This approach makes him difficult to study and limits access by a wider audience.

Underpinning his ideas is the assertion that learning how to reason has become distorted under capitalism and reclaiming reason is a learning project. One of his earliest works is the 1967 paper “The university in a democracy: The democratization of universities” (Habermas, 1967) in which he outlines a set of guiding ideas for universities. Most recent, in typical Habermas style, in his acceptance speech at the German-French Media Awards he launched a scathing critique on the bad faith that underpins current German understandings of loyalty and solidarity in the EU. They are a shallow disguise for German self-interest that masquerade as a benevolent approach to Greek debt relief (Habermas, 2018).

This chapter articulates the key ideas of Jürgen Habermas and identifies implications for universities and higher education that transcend the reductionist vision of economic priorities by imagining new possibilities (Barnett, 2013) that sees higher education as having a critical role in the life of a nation. This involves restoring the idea that higher education is a public good (Kelderman, 2015). The state and the economy make demands on higher education to change governance, increase access and identify new courses. The ideas of Jürgen Habermas will be crucial in reconstructing a critical agenda for universities and higher education.

This paper:

1. Identifies the main ideas of Jürgen Habermas - the demise of the *public sphere*; the capacity of *civil society* to be a location for *de-colonising the lifeworld* and the learning potential associated with the *theory of communicative action* and *discursive democracy*.
2. Identify the way these ideas have implications for universities.

Higher Education

Higher education worldwide is facing unprecedented demands to make significant changes. Biesta (2010) and others (Sutton, 2016) lament the disappearance of debate about the purposes of education from public discussions so this is an opportune time to ask how Habermas might assist in addressing questions about the purposes of universities and higher education. How might universities articulate a vision that includes responding to the demands of the economy for well-educated workers, as well as to the state's demands for cost effective teaching and accountability?

National governments, the EU and the OECD (2014) demand standardised qualification frameworks and quality assurance. There is constant pressure to enhance the research and teaching profiles of universities, to diversify the student population and to recruit students in a global market. Society looks to higher education to underpin economic growth, train graduates for the job market and improve the quality of life. Universities face rising costs, problematic completion rates, challenges of inclusive teaching methods and there are debates about universities as locations for free speech and civility. If we add tenure, contract staff and shifting priorities towards research the list may be perceived as endless – or at least becoming a more frequent topic for general discussion in society.

There is also an active discourse that analyses the dangers of allowing unregulated free-market capitalism to set the agenda for higher education and to argue that “public purposes” go beyond the narrow definitions of the economy (Newman, Couturier & Scurie, 2014). Such educators point to the way reduced government funding for

universities is part of the neo-liberal agenda that supports the withdrawal of public institutions from the active pursuit of social purposes, unless that social purpose is economic. These authors bring to the debate a vision of higher education and its role in society as a critical participant in addressing inequality (by widening participation) and enhancing social inclusion but not achieving this only through economic and individual development but through addressing the needs of society for critical and active citizens (Murphy, 2001).

Key Ideas

The Demise of the Public Sphere

The public sphere is a community of discourse that involves rational discussion about matters of public concern. It refers to conversations in corridors, on the stairs or on social media. Overtime, the location of the public sphere changes. The public sphere was traditionally to be found in coffee houses but today (in spite of Starbucks!) it is more likely through social media (YouTube). Such spaces tend to offer an atmosphere free of coercion and inequalities that would otherwise incline individuals to be silent. Informal discussions in the public sphere can influence the priorities of politicians as the public sphere acts as an intermediary between the private sectors of society and political systems (Habermas, 1996). But under capitalism something has happened to our ability to engage in these discourses and we are reduced to observers and voters disconnected from decision making processes that lack transparency.

These are useful ideas for creating an expanded vision of universities which might, for example, create in their teaching classrooms where knowledge can be created and tested in a commons; in a space of openness and equality. I mean by commons

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resource to which all have equal access. This is important as the media have become colonized by powerful wealthy elites and serve their interests. This demise of the public sphere along with the proposed reclaiming of these spaces may be vital in understanding the potential role of universities and a way of linking them with sustaining and developing democracy.

Civil Society and Colonisation of the Lifeworld

Civil society is a sphere of interaction between the economy and the state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (the family), the sphere of associations (voluntary organizations), social movements, and forms of public communication. Civil society is attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private sphere, and distils and transmits such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere (Habermas, 1996, p. 367). Revitalizing civil society and sustaining a critical public sphere are tasks for a critical education that fosters the creation of spaces where citizens can debate publicly and adopt the methodologies of discourse in pursuit of consensual agreements. But civil society can also be a location for conservatism or a place in which appalling violence is perpetrated – on women, on children, by men against men and against all by para-military forces (Fleming, 2002). It can be a location for racism, sexism and non-inclusive and unequal practices. Civil society needs constant renewal.

Habermas (2018), in diagnosing the issues of our times, locates problems in the relationship between the state and economy (system world) on the one hand and civil society on the other. He identifies two problems. Firstly, the state is in an unhealthy relationship with the economy and secondly, the functional imperatives of the state and economy combined have invaded civil society. The economy plays a crucial role

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by creating wealth and providing jobs. When the state and the economy combine they are a formidable coalition ensuring that the interests of the economy are achieved through lifeworld colonization. Higher education is influenced by this reality. If one can locate universities in civil society (or at least outside the system world of the state and the economy), the probability of understanding the demise of universities and the difficulty of proposing solutions is enhanced. In broad terms, if the economic and political-legal systems have become insensitive to the imperatives of mutual understanding on which solidarity and legitimacy of social orders depend, the solution, according to Habermas, is to revitalize autonomous, self-organized public spheres that are capable of asserting themselves against the media of money and power. By implication, higher education might join in taming the economy rather than merely supporting it. Educators argue that grassroots movements, many self-help groups as well as classrooms where participatory research is conducted and collaborative inquiry is pursued, are examples of such public spheres.

Lifeworld Colonisation

The lifeworld is a vast stock of taken-for-granted understandings of the world that give our lives meaning and direction (Habermas, 1987, p. 131). Habermas develops the concept of colonization to describe the relationship between system and lifeworld in capitalist society. Problems arise when the system invades the lifeworld and intervenes in the everyday processes of making meaning among individuals and communities.

The lifeworld is the set of assumptions on which we base our conversations about what our real needs may be and how we want to live together. The lifeworld is our

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entire set of socially and culturally sedimented linguistic meanings. It acts as our worldview. If our needs are controlled by money and power, then other needs and wishes are not identifiable. The system's steering media of money and power have become so effective that individuals become invisible, are seen by the economy as consumers, and by the political system as voters or clients. These systems appear to us as natural *things*, and as common sense, indifferent and beyond our control. This reification is what Habermas means by the uncoupling of system and lifeworld. Both lifeworld and system need transformation. Here we can begin a Habermas-inspired argument and critique of the consumerization of education in which students become customers. The dilemma is whether we wish to be defined as consumers and shoppers (important though this maybe) as well as active and critical citizens in a democracy.

We can see here the beginning of a radical understanding of how the discourses of higher education can be colonised by the functional imperatives of the state and the economy. This is probably the most far-reaching insight from Habermas and informs our understanding higher education. The demands for change in governance and management frequently come from the economy where a different set of imperatives (to those of higher education) holds sway. The challenge for higher education is to identify its role in the context of this analysis and Habermas is an important ally.

By a modest extrapolation of Habermas, education can be seen as a space where invasions of the lifeworld by functional imperatives and steering mechanism of money and power can be brought to the forefront of awareness and examined, challenged, and transformed. We need the system. It has a function and purpose. It is

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possible to insert lifeworld values, caring behaviours, ethical concerns and principles into the system and so resist and reverse a functional colonization of the system.

Communicative Action

It is reasonable to ask whether all is lost? No. The response is democracy – and lots of it! This is how Habermas proposes rescuing reason from being co-opted by money and power and how we can use reason to build a more participatory democracy. The learning project of Habermas involves the hope that we can resist the decline in social solidarity by becoming aware of and develop democratic processes that are already inherent in interpersonal communication. The next (or third) generation of critical theorists have developed this project in the struggle for recognition, especially in the work of Axel Honneth (Fleming, 2016b).

Habermas (1962) has always emphasised the crucial role of public debate in identifying people's needs, interests and aspirations. Democratic debates are the means by which these needs are shared and clarified. In a complex modern society, the quality of democracy ultimately depends not on politicians but on the existence of this public sphere, on people's intelligent involvement in politics and in organisations that help form opinion through discourse. The conviction that free, open, public discussion has a transformative function is central to Habermas's thinking. It is developmental and emancipatory.

In his vision, the goal of a free democracy resides in free communications rather than unalienated labour. To be more provocative: freedom to go shopping and become

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consumers do not define freedom. Freedom involves an intersubjective communication where needs are defined, agreed and placed into the political arena for implementation. This raises questions for management so that organizations and universities might be appropriate places for more democratic leadership.

Habermas's presents his *Theory of Communicative Action* as a learning project. Two dimensions of the theory are of interest here. First, in discussion, participants aim to reach agreements that can be evaluated or redeemed against criteria that Habermas calls validity claims. Second, there are rules that govern participation in these discourses. All communication is capable of being tested as to whether it is comprehensible, sincere, truthful and appropriately expressed. These validity claims are redeemed in communicative action (Habermas, 1979, p. 50). Validity claims are assumptions that we make in an unquestioning manner concerning the truth and sincerity of another's communications. Habermas' suggestion is that the academic disciplines of the university are proper places for these discussions whether in the sciences, humanities or social sciences.

Educators who have appropriated the ideas of Habermas have emphasized that redeeming validity claims involves a highly significant kind of learning. The best prospects for democracy are tied to a learning that exhibits these kinds of conversations in which validity claims are redeemed. These conversations are expressions of our interest in emancipation. Emancipation from what? Habermas says that they free us from the power of false ideas and ideologies that act as unquestioned assumptions. We gather these unquestioned assumptions from our individual history and culture and they have the appearance of common sense. This is the most

important kind of conversations higher education can have. Discussion, debates, seminars are mini-democracies and these teaching moments bring about a learning society when they are involved in communicative action. Communicative action refers to normal communications between people in search of mutual understanding and is usually based on the assumption that the speaker is truthful, trustworthy, etc. When these assumptions are questioned the conversation becomes a discourse in which these assumptions are questioned (Habermas, 1984, p. 99). The best preparation for involvement in democratic life is to become expert in realizing validity claims. Communicative competence is then an important task for teaching in higher education.

The second aspect of Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* concerns the rules that govern these conversations. Habermas outlines a concept of discourse where proposals are critically tested, information is shared in an inclusive and public way, where no one is excluded, and all have equal opportunity to take part. There are no external coercions and all can suggest and criticize proposals and arrive at decisions motivated solely by the unforced force of the better argument. There must be, in addition, a sense of solidarity among participants involving a concern for the well-being of others and the community at large. These are also the necessary conditions for a democratic society. These discourses are models of the discourses of the university as it pursues knowledge. The university is being re-understood here as a mini-democracy where validity claims and forms of free and open speech are taught and practised.

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This discourse of Habermas also has the unfortunate title of an ideal speech situation indicating that we only approximate to it in reality. In an ideal speech situation participants are able to evaluate each other's assertions using only reason exercised in an environment of free and un-coerced rational discussion and in pursuit of rational consensus (Habermas, 1990, p. 88). However, it is useful to indicate that this is the kind of discourse that universities ought to encourage and see as central to their activity of creating and testing knowledge. It involves the constant search for a consensus as to what is true in contested areas of knowledge but with the condition that in the meantime decisions have to be made about action. We cannot always suspend action until a consensus is reached and this attempts to balance political pragmatism against the never to be reached consensus of the ideal speech situation. Though agreement is sometimes reached and consensus achieved, it is always provisional and open to further exploration as new contexts and knowledge emerges to prompt further questions.

Habermas: Teaching and Learning

It is now well established in education theory that these conversations are the foundation for critical adult learning and in particular transformative learning (Mezirow, 1995, p. 67). Democratic participation and discourse are essential elements of the teaching and learning process.

I am suggesting that civil society, democracy and higher education have in common the ambition to create opportunities for discourse. The commitment is to a form of living together in which we attempt to reach agreement about difficult matters in a discussion that is free from domination. A teacher in this mode attempts to create the

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identical process, that is for the classroom to become a learning society. In order to have full free participation in discourse there must be freedom, equality, tolerance, justice and a valuing of rationality.

In this, the role of the teacher becomes one of creating situations and classrooms involving the fullest participation in discourse, assisting students critically to assess the validity of their ways of making meaning and exploring perspectives that are more permeable and open to change. Too much teaching has been about work, skills, instrumental learning and how to do things. Higher education has been preoccupied with defining learning tasks and outcomes, behavioural objectives, measurable competence and quality assurance. Too much has been about the economy and training. These are important areas for teaching and learning but a different kind of learning is possible. In this way democracy and a civil society are possible and the full potential of a learning society may be realised. It connects higher education with a more caring, just, and democratic world. Highlander College is one of the notable examples of a higher education institution that has taken these ideas on board. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King were students there and the college was central in the development of literacy programmes. “We Shall Overcome” – the civil rights anthem - was adapted by Zilphia Horton, wife of Myles Horton at Highlander.

Good teaching helps students inquire into the reasons for their interests and the assumptions that underpin them and take action to change society. It is a characteristic of adult learning that childhood knowledge comes under the scrutiny of an intelligence that deconstructs interests embedded in previous learning. This is a

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defining characteristic of adulthood and of a higher education that has a responsibility to support critical learning in adulthood.

In this vision, it is the lifeworld that gets transformed and the task is to de-colonize the lifeworld. Effective learners in an emancipatory, democratic society - a learning society - become a community of cultural critics and social activists (Mezirow, 1995, pp. 68-70). This is not the radicalism of Marx but a self-limiting radicalism where change is brought about by creating autonomous public spheres of debate and discussion, while allowing for the continuing functioning of the economic and administrative systems. This may give teachers a clear mandate to work in the seams and at the boundaries of systems to humanize and transform them so that they operate in the interests of all.

Higher education is involved in the professional development of students and this means that teachers be skilled not only in their own area of practice, but also in recognising when one's activities are being put at the service of the system.

Professional development, according to Habermas (1970, p. 47) involves;

the combination of competence and learning ability to permit the scrupulous handling of tentative technical knowledge and the context-sensitive, well informed willingness to resist politically the dubious functional application or control of the knowledge that one practices.

The system world has adopted as public policy the discourse of lifelong learning and that almost always involves the adaptation by individual learners to the corporate-determined status quo of the economy. Education is both part of the apparatus of the

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state (by engaging in policy making, delivering programmes and services) and highly critical of it. The relationship between the state and education is complex and frequently includes elements of resistance and contestation as well as reproduction.

Teachers find themselves working very often in the state sector (state funded institutions), many others in the economy (job skills training, organizational change, vocational courses), or civil society (community education). The challenge is how to effect a decolonization of the lifeworld. Part of the problem is that some teachers may systematically distort public communication (education debate) by narrowing discussions to issues of technical problem solving and denying the very conditions for communicatively rational collective will-formation. This is a danger for higher education.

In outlining a crucial and critical role for journalists in society, Habermas (1996, p. 378) refers to their important role in the construction and support of a critical public sphere. It might be a useful starting point for defining the role of higher education as located in the same public space, and teachers helping students both to decolonize the lifeworld through democratic, critical discourses and also to transform systems (workplaces, organizations and bureaucracies). In this way, the emerging idea - around the world - of universities having 'impact' can be interpreted and implemented in quite new ways.

The influence of Habermas's arguments can be seen most forcefully in the work of Mezirow whose earliest work on Perspective Transformation drew on *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Habermas, 1978). Knowledge constitutive interests suggested to Mezirow three domains of instrumental, interpersonal and emancipatory learning

(Habermas, 1978; Mezirow, 1978). According to Mezirow, the conditions or rules of rational discourse are also ideal conditions for effective adult learning. Participants must have accurate and complete information; freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception; openness to alternative points of view; empathy with and concern for the thoughts and feelings of others; the ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments; awareness of ideas and being critically reflective of assumptions; equal opportunity to participate in the various forms of discourse, a willingness to understand and accept best judgments as provisional until new outcomes from discourse are identified and agreed (Mezirow, 2000, p. 13).

Mezirow's reliance on Habermas suggests that it is the function of teachers to create communities of collaborative discourse in which distortions in communication due to differences in power are minimized. As a consequence, teaching becomes a form of rational social action. Mezirow adds:

...the nature of adult learning itself mandates participatory democracy as both the means and social goal. Following Habermas, this view identifies critical reflection, rational discourse, and praxis as central to significant adult learning and the *sine qua non* of emancipatory participation.

(Mezirow, 1995, p. 66)

Praxis refers to a reconfigured relationship between thought and action so as not to dichotomise them but to associate them - as in thoughtful action and active thinking. This transformational theory grounds its argument for an emancipatory participative democracy in the very nature of adult learning (Mezirow, 1995, p. 68). Higher

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education privileges the realm of the lifeworld - the realm of autonomous personal and social engagement - in which citizens and workers have been disempowered. The role of teaching is to work in solidarity with workers and citizens here becomes that of inserting democratic imperatives into the system world. People may well have exchanged an active participatory role in the market place and in politics for greater comfort and occupational security offered by capitalism, which legitimates the social order. This is a form of socially constructed silence and what is needed is a new ideology critique addressing this systematically distorted communication. That the political and economic elites believe that these issues are beyond the understanding of citizens and workers is part of the process that produces a civil silence. The loss of opportunities for dialogue and their accompanying collaborative impoverishment are close to what Paulo Freire calls the culture of silence.

The very foundation of democracy is under threat from the monopoly of technical reason in education. Educators have found in Habermas a social critique with which to analyse the dominance in education of technique and instrumental rationality. The preoccupation, as a result of such critique, shifts from prioritising how to get things done to realising genuine democracy. The psychologization of education as an individual subjective learning process is a danger and Habermas offers a theoretical base for concepts of learning that are intersubjective, political and social (Fleming, 2016a, 2016b).

Habermas prompts us to see the university as a site of discursive reason or communicative praxis and we are most rational when we participate in communities characterised by free and unconstrained - and democratic - discourse. He prompts us

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to see higher education communities as part of the lifeworld. The critical reflection about assumptions and practices in various disciplines is central to this. For self-understanding to be reached in dialogue democracy is necessary. To do its work (of critique) higher education creates the very conditions necessary for a democratic society. For example, students exploring Shakespeare's King Lear may engage in a study of a range of issues from old age, parent-child relationships, power and so on. These discussions can quickly transcend the conventional boundaries of academic disciplines and calls for and prompts questions about how knowledge in universities and indeed in higher education generally is organized and compartmentalized.

Rather than seeing universities as a collection of disparate academic departments Habermas is suggesting the unifying theme of a lifeworld. Universities, according to Habermas, carry out the functions of socialization, critical transmission of culture, political consciousness, and social integration. The danger is that too many courses and teaching will focus on utilitarian vocational courses to the detriment of courses that may be of benefit to one's self and society rather than the economy. Too often courses may focus on instrumental learning rather than on communicative praxis. Too much emphasis on career and not enough on one's role in society. It is in danger of becoming training rather than education, instrumental in focus rather than communicative praxis.

Conclusion

In a higher education re-imagined in the wake of the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, there would be less emphasis on hierarchical authority and more on participatory decision making; more on dialogue than dictat; the elimination of corporate culture and the

nourishing of self-government and a clear priority given to social justice by the institution. Teaching too should match this set of priorities to include social analysis, critical reflection, and reconstructing the teacher-student relationship where both become co-investigators. Students and teachers would be involved in all aspects of institutional life. And above all of higher education would be redefined as an exercise in democracy, that teaches democracy and aims to reproduce more democracy in classrooms, communities, workplaces and society.

This reconstruction of higher education is intended to lift the agenda beyond the instrumental and utilitarian and functional and present a more critical and democratic experience that would address the real needs of students and society. This would give higher education a reimagined public good and critical agenda. I can imagine a different kind of early morning television programme that broadens the possibilities for higher education beyond the economy and world of work towards a more critical mandate and so realise the democratic impulse of Jürgen Habermas.

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