Habermas, Educational Administration, and the Crisis of Legitimation

James M. Giarelli
Rutgers University

Darron Kelly uses Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* as an occasion to examine the differences between "discussion" and "discourse" and to consider the bearings that Jürgen Habermas's ideas of communicative reason and discursive ethics have on both this difference and the practice of administration in public educational systems.

There is a good bit of conceptual looseness in Kelly's introductory paragraphs. For example, he asks, "should Senge's conception of 'discourse' be applied to administrative practice and policy," while Senge does not use the term "discourse." As Kelly notes, Senge draws a crucial distinction between "dialogue" and "discussion." Senge writes that "in a discussion, different views are presented and defended.… In dialogue different views are presented as a means toward discovery of a new view. In a discussion decisions are made."[1] For Senge, then, dialogue is the free exchange of views, while discussion "is a means to team decision-making," a difference that thus requires one to offer a justification and legitimation when choosing between the two in a particular situation. Nowhere here does Kelly cite an instance of Senge using the term "discourse." Later, Kelly again uses the term "discourse" to refer to what Senge calls "discussion" and continues to make this substitution without textual support.

I do not think Kelly is engaging in mere word play here. First, there are important differences in meaning between discussion and discourse. Put simply, discussion is a more informal form of communication and debate, while discourse is a more formal exposition on a particular subject. We have a discussion "about" or "of" something; we discourse "on" or "upon" a particular topic. Second, Kelly needs to make this substitution for his theoretical move to Habermas, who, of course, writes about "discourse," not "discussion." If the substitution is loose, the theoretical move is problematic. Third, it is not at all clear that Habermas uses "discourse" at all times in the same way that Senge uses "discussion." Habermas distinguishes between theoretical and practical discourse. Theoretical discourse is appropriate in situations where a background consensus exists. In contrast, practical discourse is required in situations where the background consensus is lacking and a new consensus must be formed. In the latter case, discourse requires the suspension of action and claims to validity until a background consensus can be formed. Senge's idea of dialogue seems to be akin to Habermas's notion of practical discourse, while discussion has a meaning more like Habermas's idea of theoretical discourse.

These conceptual ambiguities are important because of the theoretical move Kelly makes to Habermas. For Kelly, Senge's advocacy for dialogue over discussion, and for discovery over decision making, is a "weakness in the model that has substantial implications from a moral perspective." This is the crux of Kelly's argument. The need to make decisions and judgments about one course of action over another entails a "moral reconception of educational learning organizations." For Kelly, this flows directly from the nature of the enterprise. He believes that there are "moral assumptions inherent in public education" and that there is a "reasonable assumption that public education is a vital institution carrying out a moral imperative to improve people's lives." Moreover, Kelly believes that this inherent moral purpose "presupposes the validity of a universal moral principle" and that this "moral imperative should not only shape the decisions made but also the decision-making process."

Thus, the turn to Habermas, who Kelly believes provides us with a "discourse ethics" that can validate moral judgments without appeal to foundationalist metaphysical or religious grounds, while simultaneously validating epistemological concerns about the discursive practices used to reach those judgments. In the core of the essay, Kelly presents a largely clear summary of this well-known part of Habermas's work.

Instead of using Senge as a foil to move to philosophy, I would like to use philosophy as a foil to move to the problems of practice faced by school administrators in late capitalist educational systems. Why would Senge, with his focus on dialogue and reticence about decision making, exercise an influence on school administrators at this particular point in our history? School administrators have long been trained to be decision makers. Good ones encourage their staffs and constituents to participate in conversations about educational ways and means, but administrators are executives — they "execute," make decisions, and get things done. Why has the preparation of administrators changed?

We remember that Habermas's work on discursive ethics grows out of the larger project of the legitimation crisis and the even larger concern to historicize systems theory. In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas develops the ideas of communication and discourse within the political and administrative spheres in response to changes in base economic systems and superstructure social and cultural systems. For Habermas, when liberal-capitalist formations are stable, the economic system is dominant, and the state functions to protect and shield commerce, to adapt civil law to protect accumulation, and to satisfy the prerequisites of the productive sphere through the support of social infrastructure mechanisms such as public education. In such situations, where a broad consensus is achieved and enforced, social systems "permit" the development of "universalistic value systems."[2] That is, universalistic value systems are not the *antecedents*, but rather the *consequents*, of legitimacy. However, in advanced capitalist system crisis, the state needs to protect conditions for the accumulation of capital by what are called "reform" efforts. Thus, the state acts to guide the flow of capital into private and public sectors, improve material and immaterial infrastructure, and mediate the effects of capital instability (*LC*, 34–36). In a crisis, legitimacy must be resecured. Given that the traditional universalistic value system has weakened, there is an emphasis on the importance of formalistic democratic mechanisms, and the state reinforces the system by an appeal to "an achievement ideology transferred to the educational system" (*LC*, 37).

For Habermas, in conditions of advanced capitalist system crisis, "the ultimate motive for readiness to follow is the citizen's conviction that he could be discursively convinced in case of doubt" (*LC*, 43). Given the need to maintain class relations and power, "the state apparatus must fulfill its tasks in the economic system under the limiting condition that mass loyalty be simultaneously secured within the framework of formal democracy and in accord with universalistic value systems" (*LC*, 58). Since "crisis tendencies shift…from the economic to the administrative system," administrators play a central role in periods of legitimation crisis (*LC*, 68). Habermas writes, "demanded or desired administrative action is justified…by…functionally controlled performances for *fictive* goal functions that — since none of the participants runs the system — *no one can fulfill*" (*LC*, 64, emphases added). Nonetheless, a failure of administration is a withdrawal of legitimation, not only for the particular institutions such as public education, but also for the capitalist system as a whole.

Habermas is very clear about this point in regard to school administration. He writes:

> The expansion of state activity produces the side effect of a disproportionate increase in the need for legitimation.… An example of such direct administrative processing of cultural tradition is educational planning, especially curricular planning. Whereas school administrators formerly had to codify a canon that had taken shape in an unplanned, nature-like manner, present curricular *planning* is based on the premise that traditional planning could as well be otherwise. Administrative planning produces a universal pressure for legitimation in a sphere that was once distinguished precisely for its powers of *self-legitimation*. (*LC*, 71, first emphasis in original, second emphasis added)

Additionally, Habermas writes, "in the final analysis, this *class structure* is the source of the legitimation deficit" (*LC*, 73, emphasis in original). The crisis of legitimation can only be resolved "if the dichotomy between in-group and out-group modality disappears.… Only at that stage, *at present a mere construct*, would morality become strictly universal" (*LC*, 87, emphasis added).

I am suggesting that the most fertile reading of the intersection of Senge and Habermas is not about the ways in which a discursive ethic could supply a way for school administrators to ground their decisions in a presumed universalistic moral imperative for education. Instead, I am suggesting that we could interpret Senge's influence on the preparation of school administrators as a response to a legitimation crisis in late capitalism, an administrative gambit that presents a simulacrum of rational, dialogic, and democratic planning, rendered futile by the constraints and conditions of class compromise. Habermas's discourse ethics is a response to the absence of a shared morality, not a form of communication that can ground a conception of public education as an inherently moral enterprise in anything more than a formalistic philosophical sense. Senge is a telling case of the task that public school administrators face in re-presenting consensus in the most public of contemporary institutions. And Habermas enables us to interpret this task as an urgent, though ultimately futile, need spawned by the crisis of legitimation in advanced late capitalism.

---

1. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* rev. ed. (Toronto: Doubleday, 2006), 230.

2. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 23. This work will be cited as *LC* in the text for all subsequent references.