From Senge to Habermas: Reconceiving "Discourse" for Educational Learning Organizations

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With more than one million copies in print, Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* revised in 2006, remains highly influential in educational administration.[1] The extent of its influence can be gauged by its direct adaptation in *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Care About Education.*[2] Senge's main contribution to educational administration is his definition of learning organizations as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire" (*FD*, 3). Administrative interest in building educational learning organizations is often supported by statements such as Michael Fullan's identification of school development as "changes in schools as institutions that increase their capacity and performance for continuous improvements."[3] Whether or not one favors the learning organization model, the fact remains that Senge is routinely granted the status of "guru" in educational administration, ensuring his sway over current and future administrators. At issue in this essay is whether Senge's explanation and application of various modes of linguistic communication are sufficient within the context of public education; specifically, should Senge's conception of "discourse" be applied to administrative practice and policy without being reconceived from a moral and epistemic perspective? My stance is, "No." To support my position, I present both Jürgen Habermas's principle of universalization and his "discourse ethics" for consideration in the process of reconceiving the notion of discourse for educational learning organizations.

On Senge's Conception of Discourse

In his presentation of the learning organization, Senge draws attention to the kinds of communicative practices that commonly occur within organizations. While Senge considers discourse in specific relation to the discipline of team learning, his analysis of discourse is integral to developing a wider understanding of, and an improved capacity to build, learning organizations. Senge's analysis draws a clear distinction between "dialogue" and "discussion" and, based on the work of David Bohm with significant input from William Isaacs,[4] he begins by marking each as a distinct but mutually important aspect of discourse. Senge explains:

> discussion is the necessary counterpart of dialogue. In a discussion, different views are presented and defended, and as explained earlier this may provide a useful analysis of the whole situation. In dialogue, different views are presented as a means toward discovering a new view. In a discussion decisions are made. (*FD*, 230)

The difference between dialogue and discussion is primarily a matter of the function each can perform within the learning organization. Dialogue is a means of exploration and discovery — it provides members of the learning organization with a process for openly exploring their own and others' values, beliefs, and assumptions.

The communication that takes place during dialogue should be a free exploration that brings out "the full depth of people's experience and thought, and yet can move beyond their individual views" (*FD*, 224).

With this aim, Senge provides the following three necessary conditions of dialogue: "1. all participants must 'suspend' their assumptions, literally to hold them 'as if suspended before us'; 2. all participants must regard one another as colleagues; 3. there must be a 'facilitator' who 'holds the context' of dialogue" (*FD*, 226). When a dialogue meets these three conditions, the participants are reasonably assured that their values, beliefs, and assumptions may be freely expressed without being judged by others. In this way, defensive and protective attitudes can be diminished, facilitating the possible discovery of deeper insights into the workings of the organization. Moreover, gaining such insight into people's views of the organization through dialogue is essential to team learning and, in turn, the capacity for team learning is crucial to the development of learning organizations. As such, it is difficult to overstate the importance of dialogue in Senge's model.

Discussion, by contrast, is a means of team decision making — it provides members of an organization with a process for presenting, explaining, and defending their positions on particular issues. Discussion is the way that organizations converge on a conclusion or course of action; it is the means of reaching decisions. While Senge is clear on this point, he is all too brief in articulating possible decision-making procedures and conditions that would fit with the learning organization model. The analysis of decision making he does provide outlines an analogy between discussion and game playing: "the purpose of a game is normally 'to win' and in this case winning means to have one's views accepted by the group" (*FD*, 223). This analogy provides meaningful insight into the individually-oriented consensus that characterizes much decision making within organizations and, I suspect, resonates well with the experiences of many teachers and administrators. Senge's point is that this approach to decision making is unproductive, as it does not allow for reasoned evaluation of different positions; competing interests reduce communication to a game of strategy. Although this aspect of discourse "can be useful," Senge is quick to emphasize that learning organizations need "a different mode of communication" (*FD*, 223). This is because the patterns of communication that characterize discussion are focused on winning, and trying to win discussions through debate-style communication is incompatible with learning organizations. Senge argues this point by noting that when members of an organization approach communication with the attitude that there must be winners and losers, important norms of discovery such as coherence and truth are often sacrificed.

It is clear from this analysis that, for Senge, although both are essential components of discourse, the ground rules and goals of dialogue and discussion differ and, further, dialogue is the preferred mode of communication for learning organizations. Moreover, Senge gives considerably more attention to the development of dialogue as a key feature of the learning organization. One reason for focusing on dialogue may simply be that Senge's central concern is team learning,

as opposed to team decision making, in organizations. As such, his emphasis is on providing a new "dialogic" direction for organizational communication that can stand over and against traditional modes of communication, such as discussion, that do not encourage genuine discovery.[5] The deeper analysis of dialogue and the weighting of the case for dialogue over discussion results, therefore, from Senge's interest in enhancing the effectiveness of organizations by encouraging open inquiry among members. His effort to minimize confrontational approaches to communication ends, however, in a circular return from discussion back to dialogue, leaving the formal process of decision making largely unaddressed — a weakness in the model that has substantial implications from a moral perspective.

While Senge's analysis of discourse or, specifically, discussion as a means of decision making leads to this rather unsatisfying outcome (even from a strategic perspective it would be beneficial to know how participants in dialogue are to move from suspending their assumptions to making decisions), this outcome does not on its own provide cause for a moral reconception of educational learning organizations. The need for a morally grounded reconception is precipitated, in fact, by the normative assumptions and intuitions inherent in public education *in combination with* this current lack of discourse analysis around decision making in learning organizations. Reconceiving educational learning organizations therefore involves two issues rarely considered in systems thinking: what are the moral assumptions inherent in public education, and how can genuinely communicative approaches to decision making be developed?

It is not that discourse as presented by Senge has little to offer a moral view of public education. If the intention of dialogue is to reveal what members of an organization really believe and value, then this form of communicative practice comprises an important step toward morally valid decisions. Dialogue may indeed act as the initial or informal means of finding the varying and common interests of members of an organization. Its potential for public education is, therefore, important to explore. At key points, however, dialogues must progress or coalesce into communication aimed at formal decision-making. Decisions about policy and the organization's courses of action will need to be made and it is at this point, when governing prescriptions are formed, that the differing beliefs and values held by individual members of the organization — especially its leaders and administrators — are most likely to exert their influence.

Alongside the necessity of decision making is the reasonable assumption that public education is a vital institution carrying out a moral imperative to improve people's lives. Seen as the response to a state interest in meeting a general need, the assumption of the universal benefit of public education is consistent with other egalitarian concepts such as justice in law, democracy in governance, and universal health care. Public support for the benefit provided by each of these institutions presupposes the validity of a universal moral principle — that is, some guiding idea about the equality of all persons and an obligation for the equitable fulfillment of their needs. As such, the moral validity of decisions made in each of these public domains rests in whether the principle supporting universal interests is collectively

respected.[6] Maintaining the moral validity of decisions by acting in the interest of all persons is presupposed, therefore, in the administration of public education and should be a crucial consideration when adapting organizational models to this context.

On this premise, I argue that Senge's explanation of the role of discourse in learning organizations is insufficient for the context of public education in that, first, the decision-making aspect of discourse remains undeveloped by Senge (a simple matter of fact) and, second, that the incorporation of certain views and assumptions about public education add a moral dimension to the practices involved in making decisions. In public education, the moral imperative should not only shape the decisions made but also the decision-making process itself. This claim motivates the development of both moral and epistemic perspectives on educational learning organizations, compelling an exploration of possible moral imperatives and seeking a stronger sense of communication for mutual agreement on policy and decision making.

On Communication Within Habermasian Discourse Ethics

For Habermas, "The good that is relevant from the moral point of view shows itself in each particular case from the enlarged first person plural perspective of a community that does not exclude anybody."[7] Notwithstanding his central role in developing critical social theory, the study and application of Habermas's ideas remains nearly nonexistent within educational administration literature. Important but rare exceptions include work by William Foster and, through his influence, Margaret Johnson and Frank Pajares.[8] Their works refer to Habermas's "ideal speech situation" (a term dating back to an early formulation of discourse ethics) as presenting a sound philosophical foundation for educational administration practices concerned with both democratic reform and giving voice to people traditionally marginalized in public education. In keeping with the promise of formulating an ideal speech situation for educational administration, I argue that Habermas's project of discourse ethics offers important guidance and resources for revising Senge's influential work on educational learning organizations — guidance and resources for reconceiving the nature and practice of discourse that consideration of a learning organization in the educational context requires.

Discourse ethics is a synthesis of Habermas's work on the problem of validating moral (and, more generally, normative) judgments without appeals to metaphysical or religious foundations. For Habermas, "discourse" answers the epistemic question of how the justification of moral judgments is possible. "In raising claims to validity, speakers and hearers transcend the provincial standards of a merely particular community of interpreters and their spatiotemporally localized communicative practice."[9] This transcultural orientation displays a genealogical link to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative: "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle establishing universal law."[10] Kant's imperative, however, is reformulated by Habermas into a "dialogical" principle that does not assume that a person's private "monological" moral reasoning will lead them to the right decision or provide them with assurance of the rightness (that is, the

universalizability) of their decisions. Habermas, instead, offers an intersubjective framework for moral reasoning that posits discourse as an epistemic requirement for justifying moral decisions.[11] Thomas McCarthy (as Habermas notes)[12] renders this difference succinctly:

> From this point of view Habermas's discourse model represents a procedural reinterpretation of Kant's categorical imperative: rather than ascribing as valid to all others any maxim that I can will to be a universal law [as Kant would have us do], I must submit my maxim to all others for purposes of discursively testing its claim to universality. The emphasis shifts from what each can will without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm.[13]

For Habermas, the test for establishing morally valid norms is as follows: "A norm is valid when the foreseeable consequences and side effects of its general observance for the interests and value-orientations of *each individual* could be *jointly* accepted by *all* concerned without coercion" (*IO*, 42, emphasis in original).[14] Habermas uses this "principle of universalization" (U) to bridge the underlying idea of Kantian moral theory — that performative self-contradiction and self-exclusion signal moral impermissibility — and the practical necessity from a postmetaphysical perspective of testing the impartiality of individual judgment. By acknowledging the epistemic necessity of establishing moral validity intersubjectively, Habermas argues that the moral validity of judgments may be excised from forms of relativism and ethnocentrism. This is Habermas's response to what may be understood as the postmodern challenge to morality: moral judgments are valid insofar as they are mutually acceptable to all affected from a transsubjective perspective.

Habermas believes, moreover, that beyond abducting and articulating (U) as the criterion or test for *what* should be considered a morally valid norm, he also needs to argue *how* validation of a moral claim is to be achieved.[15] Consideration of this means of validation leads to a serious problem, however. The practical application of (U) requires a far more refined epistemic principle in order to ground the condition of the inclusion of all affected. That is, insofar as (U) may be interpreted as appealing to an implicit moral right of inclusion, it cannot be presupposed and applied as a justified epistemic principle aimed at establishing moral validity. The problem Habermas is compelled to address is that in arguing for a means of validating moral norms he cannot presuppose a moral norm, such as inclusion, without creating a circular, implicitly moral argument. Instead, Habermas must provide a means of validating moral claims that is itself free of moral assumptions. To make this refinement, he turns to the necessary conditions of argumentation or discourse as the only plausible means of establishing morally valid norms and policies. Habermas writes:

> The content of the universal presuppositions of argumentation is by no means "normative" in the moral sense [because this would lead to a circular justification of discourse ethics]. For inclusivity only signifies that access to discourse is unrestricted; it does not imply the universality of binding norms of action. The equal distribution of communicative freedoms and the requirement of truthfulness *in* discourse have the status of *argumentative* duties and rights, not of *moral* duties and rights. (*IO*, 44, emphasis in original)

While Habermas's epistemic commitment to the inclusion of all who may be affected by a decision is hereby retained in the practice of discourse, it is not

maintained by presupposing a moral right of inclusion, as is the case with most critical perspectives on policy and decision making in educational administration. This is an important strength of discourse ethics — inclusion independent of moral assumptions — that is often overlooked by those seeking means to promote greater equity, diversity, and social justice in public education.

Habermas's argument for discourse as a means of justifying moral claims that is not morally grounded leads to a specific formulation of a "principle of discourse" (D): "Only those norms can claim validity that could meet with the acceptance of all concerned in practical discourse" (*IO*, 41).[16] Inclusion is herein regarded by Habermas as a necessary epistemic condition because the communicative practice of argumentation presupposes this norm. His reasoning demonstrates the prioritization of *how* norms are to be validated over *what* norms come to be validated. Habermas even suggests that (U) is precisely the sort of moral principle — in the sense of appearing to retain "a residual normative substance" — that can and should be tested under the principle of discourse (*IO*, 45). This adds weight to his assertion that mutual agreement achieved under (D) is the source of moral validity as well as legal and political legitimacy within democratic societies. I suggest that Habermas's conception of discourse has similar relevance for educational governance in that (D) offers two important directions for thinking about administering public education: it articulates a universally valid, nonrelativistic perspective from which educational policy and decisions can be justifiably made and critiqued; and it offers a practical principle for policy and decision making that supports, without being dependent upon, the universalistic moral predisposition to inclusion at the core of an egalitarian conception of public education.

Of further interest, particularly in relation to Senge, is that beyond providing a principle of discourse, Habermas outlines four necessary epistemic conditions of discourse that are aimed at instantiating this principle in actual communicative practice:

> (i) that nobody who could make a relevant contribution may be excluded; (ii) that all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions; (iii) that the participants must mean what they say; and (iv) that communication must be freed from external and internal coercion so that the "yes" or "no" stances that participants adopt on criticizable validity claims are motivated solely by the rational force of the better reasons. (*IO*, 44)[17]

Note that, in the first condition, Habermas makes a reasonable assumption that all competent actors affected by a validity claim are in a position to make a relevant contribution and, additionally, that persons unaffected by resulting decisions could, nevertheless, still make a relevant contribution to the discourse. Clear specification of conditions necessary for the justifiability of morally valid policy and decision making is a promising facet of Habermas's project of discourse ethics as a universalist and cognitivist approach to moral theory. His identification of such conditions also marks discourse ethics as a rational, public form of communication whereby specific conditions of argumentation must be met in order that agreement may claim the moral validity of a norm or judgment. The provision of specific conditions presents an opportunity to compare the strategic rationality of Senge's

systems thinking with the communicative reason of Habermas's critical theory as applied to their respective conceptions of discourse. The stipulation of discursive conditions further invites examination of whose conception of discourse actually offers a regulative ideal attuned to judging imperatives and interpreting needs and ends within public education.

From Senge to Habermas

Initial comparison of Habermasian discourse ethics with Senge's conception of discourse as a practice inherent in learning organizations may imply differing purposes for each mode of communication. For Senge, the emphasis is on dialogue and the collective discovery of beliefs and values within the organization. For Habermas, discourse is necessary for the validation of moral claims; in other words, the validity of moral norms is discourse dependent. The differences should neither be exaggerated nor minimized. Yet, if discovery is understood as an important precursor to validation, then common ground may be seen to exist between the two frameworks. The contiguity of discovery and validation suggests a common intent whereby each mode of communication is undertaken in order to discover and assess the worldview of participants, allowing the rational force of the better reasons that are given to convince all participants of the rightness of their ensuing decisions.

There are also parallels between the respective sets of conditions under which discovery and assessment are to take place. There is a sense, for example, that discovery and assessment should be collective and cooperative undertakings within both frameworks. When Senge states that "all participants must 'suspend' their assumptions," the premise of this condition is that, by "being aware of our assumptions and holding them up for examination," collective agreement can be sought; the truth and coherence of the participants' assumptions can be explored collectively (*FD*, 226). Senge's second condition of dialogue then takes up the need for cooperation: "Dialogue can occur only when a group of people see each other as colleagues in mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity" (*FD*, 228). Colleagues must be willing to cooperate in the exploration and testing of assumptions, even when faced with differences between their views. In the same vein, Habermas claims, "The practice of argumentation sets in motion a *cooperative* competition for the better argument, where the orientation to the goal of a communicatively reached agreement unites the participants from the outset" (*IO*, 44, emphasis in original). This is why practical discourse must be free from deception and coercion and why Habermas's third and fourth conditions of discourse ethics address these concerns. Deception and coercion can steer the communication away from the cooperative exploration of what is equally in everyone's best interests. Only in the absence of these constraints can participants reach mutual agreement based solely on the giving of reasons.

Still, meaningful distinctions exist between the conceptions of discourse held by Habermas and Senge. From a moral perspective, it seems that the most significant difference between these two conceptions (or, specifically, the conceptions of discourse and dialogue) is captured in the single phrase, "relevant contribution," from Habermas's first condition of discourse ethics. For it is in the interpretation of

this phrase that much of the case for reconceiving educational learning organizations appears to rest. If educational learning organizations are to hold a moral imperative to respect all persons equally when interpreting their needs, then discourse — as the means by which the coordination of needs is established — must aim at full inclusion, and participation by all. While from this perspective the right to inclusion and participation effectively acknowledges a moral norm, from the epistemic perspective of discourse ethics this "right" is necessitated by the norms of argumentation. All who might be affected by a policy or decision have a right to participate in the consideration of its adoption or rejection because all affected persons, and possibly others as well, have a relevant contribution to make to the assessment of a generalizable interest.

As I have already stated, it is key, philosophically, to distinguish between grounding the conditions of discourse in presupposed moral norms and grounding the conditions of discourse in existent norms of argumentation. Habermas makes this distinction to avoid the appearance that discourse ethics is premised on a substantive moral principle, which would beg the question of its derivation. Of course, the degree to which Habermas successfully argues for a nonmoral grounding of discourse ethics is readily debated. At a practical level, however, the first condition of discourse ethics may be firmly grounded either in the moral norm of inclusion that is presupposed by critical perspectives on public education or in the epistemic norms of argumentation, without undermining its necessity. The condition stands as necessary from both a moral perspective representing the diversity of needs present in multicultural societies and an epistemic perspective that does not fall back on a moral intuition about inclusion.

Systems thinking and Senge's learning organization model hold no such necessary commitments to members of organizations, nor do they hold commitments to the epistemic conditions of decision making by way of discourse. Here, inclusion and participation in policy and decision making are instrumental considerations governed by strategic salience to the organization wherein the relevance of a person's contribution is measured against the optimization of the system, not by whether the decision is equally in the interests of all. Constraining participation in dialogue and discussion within the strategic norms of an organization, instead of within moral or dialogical norms, may not present a contradictory set of aims and assumptions within that individual organization. In public education, however, the norms of strategic communication ought to be superseded by both a moral imperative, such as (U), or an epistemic principle, such as (D), and communicative practices oriented towards justifiable moral decisions from both a critical and an epistemic perspective, such as discourse ethics.

As I have argued above, reconceiving "discourse" in the context of public education need not be taken as a sign of the incommensurability of Senge's and Habermas's respective positions. On the contrary: when, for example, Senge raises the importance of "guiding ideas" to the learning organization, the necessity of moral imperatives and communicative practices within educational learning organizations also can be raised. For Senge, "Guiding ideas constitute the governing

concepts and principles that define why an organization exists, what we seek to accomplish, and how we intend to operate" (*FD*, 285). The direction charted in this essay for reconceiving discourse merely highlights the moral imperative as a guiding idea of public education that needs strong representation in administrative practices. Once a moral underpinning of public education is acknowledged, this guiding idea can then be articulated in principle and criteria for operating in accord with this moral imperative can be presented. I argue that if a moral imperative were formulated and agreed to under the principle and conditions of discourse ethics, it could then be used to test the moral validity of administrative policy and practice. I submit Habermas's principle of universalization (U) as a possible moral imperative for administering public education and provide his principle of discourse (D) and his conditions of discourse ethics as potential ways to explore how discourse might be reconceived in the context of educational learning organizations.

1. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* rev. ed. (Toronto: Doubleday, 2006). This work will be cited as *FD* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Peter Senge, *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Care About Education* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2000).

3. Michael Fullan, *Successful School Improvement: The Implementation Perspective and Beyond* (Buckingham, Pa.: Open University Press, 1992), 103.

4. William Isaacs, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1999).

5. Ibid., 339.

6. Walter Okshevsky, "On the Epistemic Grounds of Moral Discourse and Moral Education: An Examination of Jürgen Habermas's 'Discourse Ethics,'" in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2004*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005).

7. Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, trans. and ed. Ciaran P. Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 30. This work will be cited as *IO* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. William Foster, *Paradigms and Promises: New Approaches to Educational Administration* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1986); Margaret Johnson and Frank Pajares, "When Shared Decision Making Works: A 3-Year Longitudinal Study," *American Educational Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (1996): 599–627.

9. Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 52.

10. *Immanuel Kant, Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, 3rd ed., trans. James W. Ellington (*Indianapolis, Ind.: *Hackett, 1993), 30.*

11. Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (London: Hutchinson, 1978).

12. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 67.

13. McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, 326.

14. See Habermas, *Justification and Application*, 32; and Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*, 65.

15. Andrew Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas* (Kingston, Ontario and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

16. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy,* trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 107 and 459; and Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*, 66.

17. See Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*, 89.