

# The Ontology of Adult Learning: Reading Habermas' Knowledge and Human Interests

Michael Welton, Athabasca University, Canada

## ABSTRACT

Jurgen Habermas offered a revolutionary way of thinking about the relationship between knowledge, learning, and the human condition in knowledge and human interests. He provided us with a powerful means of understanding the unity in diversity of human learning. The article presents a philosophical framework that enables vocational and adult educators to situate the orientation of their own educational practice within the three foundational cognitive interests that form irreducible orientations to the world.

## KEYWORDS

Critical Theory, Critically-Oriented Social Science, Empirical-Analytical Science, Epistemology, Historical-Hermeneutical Sciences, Knowledge-Constitutive Interests, Objectivism

## INTRODUCTION

Habermas' theory of knowledge-constitutive interests has captured the imagination of many adult learning theorists and social thinkers. In this celebrated text, translated into English in the early 1970s (the 1971 version was published by Beacon Press, and the 1972 translation by Heinemann Press), Habermas offered a revolutionary way of thinking about the relationship between knowledge, learning and the human condition. It provided a powerful means of understanding the unity in the diversity of human learning processes and outcomes. Adult educators and learning theorists who were doing theoretical work in the decades following the 1970s responded to the capacious idea that not all human learning could be pressed into a single mold.

This spoke to them in a world in which technical control over things and people seemed all-pervasive; their own discipline consumed by technocratic impulses (see Collins, 1991; Hart, 1991; Mezirow, 1981, 1991; Plumb, 1989, 1995, 2001,

DOI: 10.4018/IJAET.2021010102

2014; Simon, 1992; Gouthro, 1999, 2002; Welton, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2001, 2005, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Doughty, 2014; Brookfield, 2005). This article will explicate Habermas's *Knowledge and human interests*, arguing that this text may still serve as a foundational document for adult learning theory. But many criticisms of this seminal text have been raised, and I will try to engage Habermas's critics to clarify our understanding of the importance of the idea of anthropologically deep-seated cognitive interests.

Leading Habermas scholar Thomas McCarthy (1979) thinks that *Knowledge and human interests* is "perhaps the most intrinsically difficult [book] for Anglo-American readers to comprehend" (p. 53). One reason is the pragmatic bent of Anglo-Americans who don't have much time to give to epistemological reflection: they want to just get on with it! Another reason is simply the difficulty of understanding intricate German modes of doing philosophy. In this first attempt at a systematic presentation of his ideas (which were crystallizing in the 1960s), Habermas sensed that epistemology itself had dissolved, leaving him to make his "way over abandoned stages of reflection" (p. 53) in order to "radicalize epistemology by unearthing the roots of knowledge in life" (p. 55). And Habermas makes his way through the dense jungle of German thought from Kant to Hegel, Marx to Freud without thinking too much about how complex and difficult these ideas are for many of us. This way of proceeding—it is called immanent theorizing—is foreign to most in North American universities. But rooting "knowledge" in life—that is, our embeddedness in and engagement with nature, others and forms of domination has the "form of a 'learning process'" (p. 55)—certainly captivated some adult learning theorists and critically oriented practitioners. It ought to goad us to dig into this intricate text.

Thus, the "interests" that we will be examining closely are "anthropologically deep-seated interest[s]" (p. 55). They cannot be avoided; they form our irreducible orientations to the world we inhabit; they are inescapable; they are built-in to our evolutionary species life. Habermas' inaugural lecture delivered at Frankfurt University in 1965 was a major event (It is included in the "Appendix to KHI (1971) and entitled, "Knowledge and human interests: A general perspective"). Now age 36, enmeshed in support and critique of the student movement (see Specter, 2010), Habermas was profoundly aware that critical theory was standing on shaky epistemological ground. During his boyhood in the 1940s and 1950s, hopes for a proletarian revolution had been decisively dimmed by the darkness of fascism, Stalinism and the "culture industry" (coined by Adorno and Horkheimer, this latter phrase refers to the marketing of culture products).

He also knew that classical philosophy had sought to purge itself of grubby interests in order to present pure and objective truth. And that positivism (knowledge based on the properties and relations of natural phenomena) was now ruling the day in the social sciences. The brilliant intuition, which he elaborated theoretically, was that the irreducible cognitive interests of the human species produced knowledge for thousands of years that enabled it to survive. And Habermas then linked our elemental cognitive interests to three distinct modes of inquiry that emerge historically: the

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