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Rethinking the modernist curriculum with Habermas's concept of self-critical appropriation

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this paper is to discuss the implications of applying Habermas's concept of self-critical appropriation for rethinking the structure of the modernist curriculum, specifically the organization of school subjects and instruction time devoted to each of them. To this end, the paper examines Habermas's differentiation between the three expert cultures of science, morality and art in modernity as well as the role that Habermas envisions for education in modern societies. On the basis of the above differentiation, this paper briefly reviews three national curriculums (England, France, Finland) in order to substantiate the dominant scientific-objectivating orientation underlying the structure of current national curriculums. The review provides the contextual-factual background for rethinking the curriculum. Responding to the challenges facing curriculums in the postmodern era (both theoretical and practical), this paper presents two principles stemming from the application of the concept of self-critical appropriation: balancing the curriculum and the introduction of an integrator-subject for the development and exercise of communicative competences.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum; appropriation; Habermas; school subjects; instruction time

The postmodernist critique of the modernist curriculum has had considerable effect on educational literature ever since the early 1990's. Influential publications such as Usher and Edwards' *Postmodernism and Education*, Doll's *A Postmodern Perspective on Curriculum*, and various publications by Giroux (1988, 1991, 1992) and collaborators (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991), set down the groundwork for a radical critique of modernist education, specifically repudiating the strict (and false) division between disciplinary boundaries, the prioritization of scientific methods and objectivating knowledge, and the absence of a context-sensitive political perspective for recognizing individual, social and cultural *differences* in their various manifestations.

A key feature of the postmodern curriculum is that of 'crossing borders' (Giroux, 1992; Slattery, 2013). Combatting the compartmentalization of knowledge in modernity and its marginalization of cultures, 'crossing the border necessitates a commitment to postmodern democratic reform where subject-area disciplinary boundaries are traversed.' (Slattery, 2013, p. 28). Giroux (1991) employs the term 'border pedagogy' in order to blur conceptual and academic boundaries between subjects which rather than being grounded on logic, are

simply the result of historical struggles for hegemony and power (Goodson, 1993) or regimes of truth. One of the main characteristics of postmodernism is its de-differentiation of cultural production, and in educational terms this means 'blurring the genres and boundaries, which, from a modernist perspective, demarcate the aesthetic, theoretical, ethical, etc.' (Goodson, 1993, p. 27). Macdonald (2003) speaks of the death of the subject and calls for investigating 'new ways of prioritizing and organizing interdisciplinary learning that move beyond the subject' (p. 144). Additionally, it has also been noted that the modernist curriculum increases the gap between the content and process of learning to the everyday life of individuals: 'If curriculum reform continues to focus upon subjects, teachers, school-based lessons, and other modernist structures of schools that obfuscate difference, meaningful learning ... the reform movement will become more irrelevant to the lives of young people' (Goodson, 1993, p. 147).

Jurgen Habermas's communicative theory has been applied by educational theorists in order to respond to the postmodernist radical critique of reason and for grounding a pragmatic-critical reorganization of education that is consistent with a deep commitment to a deliberative democratic culture (Biesta, 1994; Englund, 2006; Murphy & Fleming, 2010). Habermas's notion of communicative competences has been applied generally as a philosophical basis upon which to develop dialogical educational practices (Sarid, 2012; Huttunen, 2007; Mezirow, 2003; Wegerif, 2008) and to defend the modernist curriculum (Carr, 2003; Englund, 2006; Harkin, 1998). However, curriculum theorists applying Habermas's thought have not sufficiently explored the precise implications of applying Habermas's communicative theory on the *structure* of the curriculum, specifically the reorganization of disciplinary boundaries and school subjects. Moreover, in most cases in which Habermas's theory has been applied by curriculum theorists, reference has been made to a generalized notion of 'discourse' that is grounded on several universalized characteristics such as tolerance, respect, and collective will-formation. Such applications of Habermasian-inspired 'discursive communications' in curricular contexts have been largely used to promote the development of a deliberative democratic school culture: by enhancing participation and institutionalizing critical-pluralistic discursive encounters, schools may serve as 'weak publics' in the public sphere (Englund, 2006). However, while in Habermas's work the notion of 'discourse' is envisioned in generalized terms as the exercise of *practical reason*, Habermas also distinguished between *different types* of discourses, each addressing different types of questions and involving different kinds of participant perspectives and motivation (Habermas, 1994, 1998). Self-critical appropriation is viewed by Habermas as a central principle of *existential-clinical discourses*, which rather than pointing 'outward', namely, to the development of the school's public autonomy and deliberative democratic culture, turn 'inward', namely, to the relation of the self to itself via hermeneutic processes of self-development and ethical self-understanding. I argue that this dimension of Habermas's work has been largely overlooked and offers curriculum theorists important insights for rethinking the structure of the curriculum, the organization of school subjects and disciplinary boundaries. It is the above shortcoming that I wish to address in this paper.

In terms of educational practice, the postmodern critique of modernist schooling, while having considerable impact on educational theory, has yet to make a significant mark on formal (national) educational policies and practices. True, some national educational systems have undergone reforms, including changes in their educational orientation and curriculum in the past few years by incorporating within them what can be viewed as 'postmodernist

features' such as cross-curriculum processes promoting creativity, active learning, expanding student choice and accountability. A case in point is Finland's recent school reform, which (reservedly) considers replacing school subjects with broader cross-cutting 'topics' (Sahlberg, 2015). However, as I shall attempt to substantiate in what follows, most national curriculums in the democratic world, including Finland's, are still predominantly modernist in their basic orientation and structure. All this begs the following question: given the real challenges facing the modernist curriculum (both theoretical and practical), how is it possible to rethink the *structure* of the modernist curriculum in a way that maintains modernist principles and, at the same time, aptly addresses the challenges brought against it?

I shall respond to the above question, first, by presenting Habermas's (1997) differentiation between three expert-cultures in modernity. This differentiation will serve as a theoretical basis for briefly reviewing the structure of three current national curriculums (UK, France and Finland), each representing three different curricular models. While it has become almost a cliché to claim that the nature of the school curriculum is predominantly scientific-instrumentalist, I believe it is productive, especially in light of recent curriculum reforms, to review current curriculums by examining the organization of school subjects and instruction time devoted to each of them. The above review will provide a contextual background for discussing Habermas's notion of *self-critical appropriation*, which has been largely overlooked by educational theorists applying Habermas' thought to educational contexts. I shall then explicate the implications of making use of this notion for rethinking the structure of the curriculum, particularly with regards the reorganization of school subjects and instruction time.

The differentiation of value-spheres or three expert-cultures

Modernity is regularly depicted as a form of life or consciousness solely committed to the liberating force of reason and the progressive attainment of objective knowledge. By viewing individuals as essentially rational, modernity places in the hands of autonomous subjects the capacity to make the *right* decisions by *transcending* the (social) context in which they have undergone processes of socialization. This is more or less the representation of modernity that postmodernist thought seeks to contest. Without reiterating well-known arguments, postmodernist thought refutes objectifying reason, which in the name of universal (objective) truth disregards *difference* in its various manifestations and rejects the illusion of an a-historical a-social knowledge and autonomous subjectivity. All forms of knowledge (and the self) are contingent upon hegemonic power-relations played out in the multiple arenas of social and political life. Of course, the above depiction is a simplification, but it is fair to say that this is more or less how the dividing lines between modernists and postmodernists have been portrayed in the literature.

Habermas can be said to present a halfway position that takes into account the postmodernist critique of the socially and historically detached subject (Habermas, 1992) but simultaneously and unreservedly defends modernity's central principles (through his theory of communicative reason) against what he claims to be self-defeating and pessimistic attitudes undermining the very possibility of social justice and a truly democratic culture and politics. Habermas believes that 'authentic modernity' not only entails disruption of previously held traditions and norms (in educational contexts this has been the main undercurrent of the view of pedagogy as an experiential and experimental *science* ever since

Dewey), but has always been inherently *self*-subversive (Habermas, 1997). Especially from the mid nineteenth century, modernity provoked self-critical attitudes and this can be seen most vividly, but not exclusively, in the aesthetic medium of modern art. As such, modernity contains within itself an unsettling dual-impulse—an inner-conflict between self-criticism, on the one hand, and a propensity towards universals and stable foundations on the other. This dual-impulse has been highlighted and given structure in more recent thinking with the introduction of notions such as *reflexive modernity* (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994), characterized by a circular, continuous and unresolved process of deconstruction and critical reconstruction. Beck (1992), for example, states that the ‘risk society’ propels reflexivity—given individuals’ vulnerability in the current cultural and socioeconomic climate, and it is on this basis that social reconstruction and cultural reproduction are made possible, time and time again. Characterized by this dual-impulse, Habermas claims that modernity is essentially an unfinished project. This is one aspect of Habermas’ view of modernity. A second aspect concerns the differentiation of the three expert cultures of science, morality and art.

Following Kant and Weber, Habermas (1997) characterizes modernity as the separation of substantive reason into the three distinct and autonomous value-spheres of truth, normative rightness and authenticity. These three spheres clearly differentiate science (objectivating knowledge), morality (justice) and art (taste). Each sphere focuses on different questions addressed by professionalized treatment by experts. Habermas detects two complementary processes of cultural modernity: the separation of reason into the three value spheres or expert-cultures, each with its own *internal or immanent logic*, and the increased distance between these expert cultures and the general public or everyday practices.

The separation of reason into three autonomous expert-cultures is characteristically ‘modern’ in the sense that attaining modernity’s central objectives (objective knowledge, universalized morality, and subversive art) would be impossible if each sphere were not divorced from the logic of the other two spheres. For example, the objectivity of scientific knowledge is dependent upon bracketing and disassociating from questions of the good life (ethics) and questions of aesthetic beauty (and personal expression). Conversely, modern art is supposed to free itself from factual knowledge or normative commitments in order to stay true to its defiant nature and for opening up a space for authentic individual expression.

Habermas claims that the separation of expert-cultures, crucial for upholding modernity, has been recently under attack from various directions. To begin with, in light of the growing distance between expert cultures and the general public (and thus from the natural ‘current of tradition’), the social community is left impoverished and thus vulnerable to instrumentalist forces, specifically, the administrative and economic systems. The value-spheres compete among themselves, so to speak, to regain prominence as *the* leading perspective from which to reform everyday life. In current culture, the terms scientism, moralism and aestheticism are used to refer to excessive views which overstep their so-called logical boundaries. Moreover, due to the pervasiveness of postmodern thought in present-day societies, the value-spheres are increasingly ‘mutated’ into instrumental rationality (knowledge based on the principles of functionality or viability rather than objective truth), moral relativism (the normative claim that ethics is a matter of personal taste or simply representative of a certain hegemonic regime), and a populist *anti*-objectivist aesthetic culture. All these developments combined constitute a fruitful bedrock for many of the malaises of current societies, namely, radical-consumerism, hyper-capitalism and the instrumentalism of social life on the one hand, and a reactive *conservatism* that is uncritical of social tradition and values, on the other.

In light of the above cultural processes, Habermas states that we are faced with a profound dilemma: 'should we continue to hold fast to the intentions of the Enlightenment, however fractured they may be, or should we relinquish the entire project of modernity?' (Habermas, 1997, pp. 45, 46). Accordingly, the *curriculum dilemma* can be portrayed as the choice between two problematic alternatives: On the one hand, traversing or breaking down disciplinary boundaries reduces the gap between knowledge and everyday life but undermines the autonomous logic of each expert culture (and thus the very notion of the project of modernity as portrayed by Habermas); On the other hand, preserving the strict separation of disciplinary boundaries upholds modernist culture but since it increases the distance between knowledge and social life, it makes societies evermore vulnerable to various forms of domination. Habermas responds to the dilemma by claiming the following:

... a differentiated reconnection of modern culture with an everyday sphere of praxis ... will admittedly only prove successful if the process of social modernization can *also* be turned into *other* non-capitalistic directions, if the lifeworld can develop institutions of its own in a way currently inhibited by the autonomous systemic dynamics of the economic and administrative systems. (Habermas, 1997, pp. 52–53)

Fully deciphering this passage entails a separate discussion. For present purposes, what Habermas is saying is that modern culture (and each of the expert cultures) must be 'brought down' to the realm of social and political life, and this is possible only if the social community develops institutions—principally education (Habermas, 1990)—that function as mediators between expert cultures and everyday life. Since Habermas does not specify the precise nature of such a mediation, educational theorists applying Habermas's thought have focused on how the development and exercise of communicative competences in school practice reorganizes the curriculum in a way that enhances its practical and normative implications on social and personal life. This pragmatic outlook is reflected, in part, by its promoting critical attitudes towards knowledge acquisition and reconfiguration of school hierarchies to afford more deliberative-participatory practices supporting greater individual voice and personal growth. However, the implications of incorporating communicative principles on school structure (along with its strict division between disciplines and school subjects) have not been sufficiently addressed. I argue that the notion of self-critical appropriation provides important insights for explicating the mediating role of education and for further clarifying the nature of the curriculum structure.

Before turning to discuss the notion of self-critical appropriation, let us briefly review three national curriculums in order to gain an account of the manner in which the differentiation between the three expert cultures is currently reflected in educational realities. This brief consideration will provide the factual background for presenting the contributions of the notion of self-critical appropriation for a reorganization of the curriculum.

The dominance of scientific-objectivating modernism: UK, France and Finland

In the past few years, national curriculums in the democratic world have been reformed to incorporate certain elements that may be viewed as supporting postmodern educational sentiments, for example, PBL learning processes, cross-curriculum contents, greater school and student choice and greater sensitivity to the political or social context of learning. But not only are these developments marginal in relation to the basic educational orientation of current national curriculums, it is possible to claim that the structure of the curriculum,

particularly the arrangement of school subjects and the proportion of instruction time devoted to each of them, reflects even a greater commitment to a modernist-instrumentalist outlook. I am not necessarily referring to the growing impact of the standardization movement on school policy, leadership and practice (Shields, 2011; Taubman, 2010) (which is certainly relevant), but more specifically to the kind of knowledge that is prioritized. To substantiate the above claim, I shall offer a brief review of three central national curriculums, UK, France and Finland, each reflecting a different approach to curriculum modeling.

UK—England

In England the national curriculum (NC) was introduced following the Education Reform Act of 1988 in order to standardize subjects taught in public schools. Since its first implementation the NC has evolved till its most recent modification in 2014. In the UK, the NC does not recommend or specify the precise amount of instruction time for each of the subjects included in the curriculum, but rather works according to *flexible time* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015): schools have the authority to determine for themselves what is the precise amount of instruction time that is needed in order to reach national objectives specified for each subject. Still, a number of important insights may be drawn simply from structure of the NC (Figure 1).

First, the three *core* subjects of the curriculum are English, Mathematics and Science. The fact that these subjects constitute the *core* of the curriculum already implies, at least declaratively, a modernist orientation which prioritizes an objectivating-scientific outlook. While the precise proportion of instruction time is not explicitly stated, it is reasonable to assume that schools will invest more instruction time to the study of core subjects. It should be noted that the study of language (particularly first or native languages) does not neatly correspond to any specific expert-culture. However, it is safe to say, based on the objectives appearing

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	Key stage 4
Age	5 – 7	7 – 11	11 – 14	14 – 16
Year groups	1 – 2	3 – 6	7 – 9	10 – 11
Core subjects				
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foundation subjects				
Art and design	✓	✓	✓	
Citizenship			✓	✓
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design and technology	✓	✓	✓	
Languages ⁴		✓	✓	
Geography	✓	✓	✓	
History	✓	✓	✓	
Music	✓	✓	✓	
Physical education	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 1. Structure of the national curriculum in England. Source: DfE (2014, p. 7).

in the curriculum of the English language, that in non-academic contexts and in particularly in key stages 1 and 2, English studies involve the acquisition of basic reading, writing and oral skills. The core subjects are simply a manifestation of the Three R's model, but with the additional inclination towards scientific-instrumental knowledge.

Second, it is possible to see that in Key stage 4, six out of the nine foundation subjects cease to be compulsory: the instruction time of these subjects is transformed into either *optional* compulsory subjects (again in flexible time) or as optional school subjects. Looking at the six subjects absent from Key stage 4 it is possible to see that subjects (arguably) representative of the expert-culture of art (Art and design, Design and technology, Music) are no longer compulsory. It may be argued that the above foundational subjects were removed from the NC at Key stage 4 since pupils are expected to learn towards a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in each specified subject of choice. However, given that Math, English and Science are core subjects virtually all pupils take GCSE in these subjects (Gill, 2016). The amount of instruction time in other non-compulsory GCSE courses are therefore relatively minor to the above core subjects (Gill, 2016). The remaining compulsory foundation subjects in key stage 4 are Computing, PE, Citizenship, which do not perfectly correspond to any expert-culture. Yet, it is possible to claim that while Computing does not fall into any of the above expert cultures categories, the computing programme (DfE, 2014) explicitly states that: 'The core of computing is computer science'. The NC also requires to teach religious education at all key stages, but it is questionable whether the kind of learning processes taking place correspond to the value sphere of morality, and even if so, instruction time is certainly negligible when compared to core and foundational subjects.

This brief review, I believe, corroborates that the NC in England clearly favors a scientific-objectifying orientation. Gaining a more precise (perhaps, numeric) account of the relations between the three expert culture in the NC requires reviewing a representative sample of the actual instruction time in various public schools; an endeavor that is beyond the limits of this present discussion.

France

Compared to the more flexible curriculum in the UK, the national curriculum in France is highly centralized and rigid, determining the precise amount of instruction time for each compulsory subject (Figure 2). Some reforms have been introduced recently (May, 2015) which slightly moderate the rigidity of the French curriculum, including the introduction of a new common core of knowledge, skills and culture which will enter into force in 2016 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). School reforms also introduce a reorganization of instruction time allowing schools greater autonomy and the use of personalized and inter-disciplinary teaching methods across the various subject taught as part of the curriculum. Nevertheless, the French curriculum remains highly centralized and does not significantly change its basic modernist orientation. This can be seen by comparing instruction time of various subjects (representative of the three expert cultures) in both primary and secondary education.

First, comparing instruction time at the primary level (grade 5), instruction time of subjects representing the scientific-objectivating expert culture (mathematics and natural sciences combined) amounts to 258 instruction hours, compared to 78 instruction hours for Arts education. Determining to which expert culture one can associate Social Sciences subjects (78 instruction hours) is a complex affair that demands a more laborious review of how these

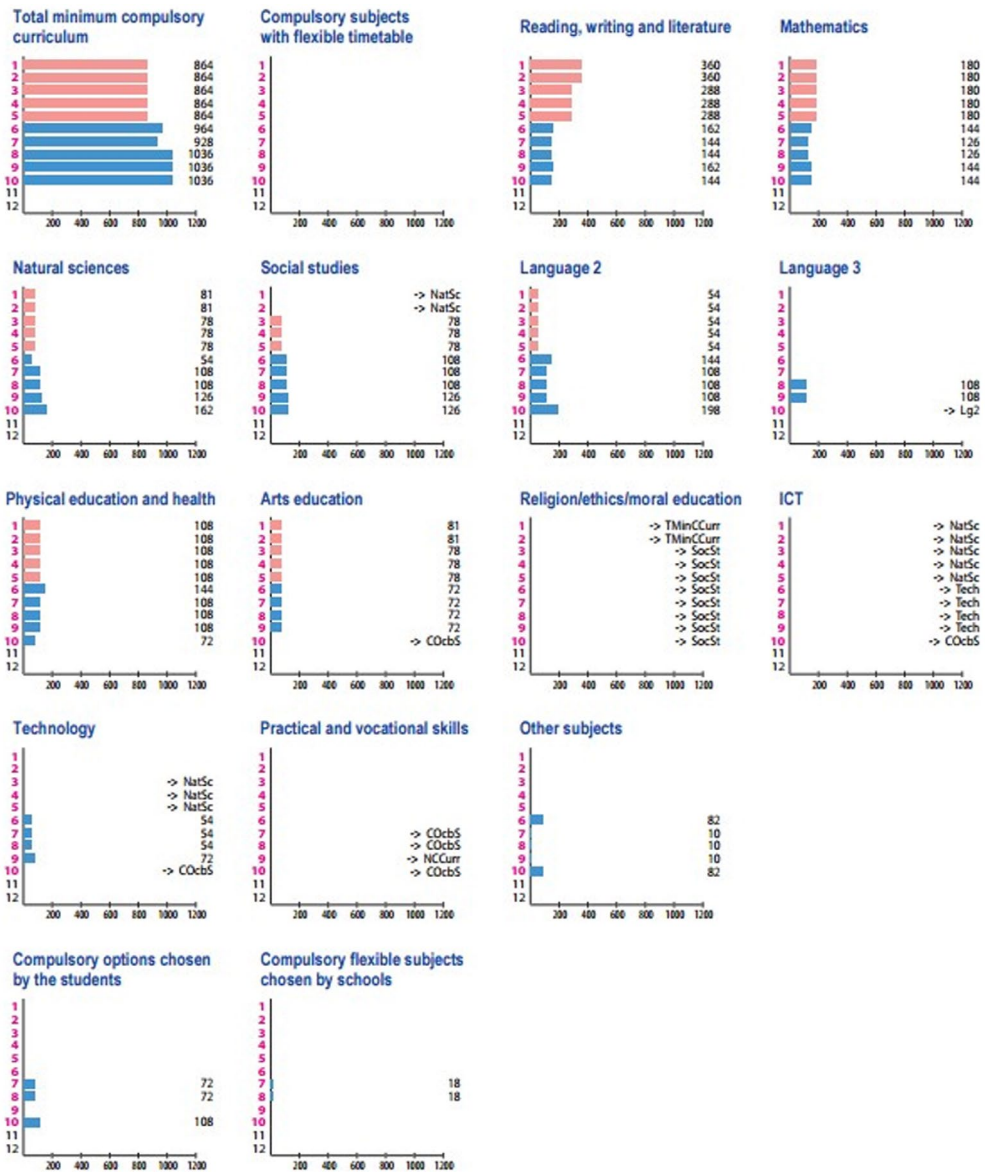


Figure 2. Recommended annual instruction time in full-time compulsory education in France (2014–2015). Source: European Commission (2015, p. 38).

subjects are taught in schools. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that most learning processes in the Social Sciences stimulate scientific reasoning and questioning. Furthermore, in light of its deep commitment to secular values, reflected for example in its policy to eliminate from public education any religious or ethnic affiliation, no instruction time is devoted in the curriculum to subjects representing the expert culture of morality. This is not to say that the French curriculum entirely excludes moral education (certainly in the hidden curriculum), yet, nonetheless, no explicit instruction time is dedicated to the sphere of morality *as such*. Even a ‘sympathetic’ interpretation, for which, for example, health education as well as other

subjects or courses taught in the Social Sciences can be viewed as promoting values education, scientific reasoning and questioning is clearly prioritized in the curriculum. A very similar picture unfolds by examining instruction time in higher grades (grade 9): 170 instruction hours are devoted to the study of Natural sciences and mathematics, compared to 126 instruction hours to the Social Sciences, and 72 instruction hours to the arts and the same to physical education and health. The lean towards scientific reasoning seems to even intensify in grade 10, as Arts education is no longer compulsory.

Finland

For quite some time, the Finish educational system has been praised as an exemplar of progressive educational curricular development. The Finish curriculum of basic education, confirmed in 2004 and recently reformed in 2014, can be viewed here as conceptually positioned in between the English and French national curriculums in terms of centralization and rigidity: instruction time is on the one hand fixed since instruction time is indicted for each compulsory subject, but still remains flexible since only accumulative instruction time is indicated for grade clusters (Figure 3). Thus, the Finish curriculum introduces an 'intermediate' model that is both fixed yet allows for flexibility. It also should be noted that, similar to the UK, local schools enjoy considerable autonomy in the construction of the school curriculum, including pupils' choice of preferred learning subjects. Moreover, one of the features of the Finish curriculum that has caught the attention of educational theorists, practitioners and policy makers, is its emphasis on teacher autonomy, enhancing pupil motivation, and the promotion of innovative and diverse teaching methods (including community of learners) that will support authentic and more engaged student-learning and interdisciplinary processes of 'personal growth' (Finish National Board of Education, 2004, p. 36). The new curriculum specifies several transversal competences such as multi-literacy and thinking and learning to learn, which are then promoted in different and innovative ways by local schools.

The Finish curriculum presents several divergences from both the English and French curriculums from the perspective of the differentiation of expert cultures. First, while nearly 1000 instruction hours are specified for scientific-objectivating subjects (Math and Natural Sciences) in grades 5 through 9, and thus are certainly favored in the curriculum over subjects representative of the other two expert cultures, a considerable amount of instruction time is recommended for Arts education (399 instruction hours from grades 5–9). Additionally, the Finish curriculum stipulates 142 instruction hours of religion and ethics in grades 6–9. It is noteworthy to mention that 'ethics' in the Finish context specifically focuses on promoting the development of democratic will-formation and ethical self-understanding: 'Instruction in ethics is guided by a sense of the pupils' opportunities to grow into free, equal, and critical creators of a good life' (Finish National Board of Education, 2004, p. 214). I shall return to this in what follows. Thus, in relation to English and French curriculums, the Finish curriculum offers a more balanced and proportionate representation of the three expert cultures as well as heightened emphasis on individual learners' autonomy and choice, including the needed skills for integrating knowledge for self-development and growth.

To conclude this brief overview, it is possible to claim—despite certain variances, that the above national curriculums are predominantly modernist. This is evident in the clear differentiation of subject boundaries, more or less corresponding to the differentiation of the three expert-cultures, as well as the privileged status of scientific instrumentalist subjects

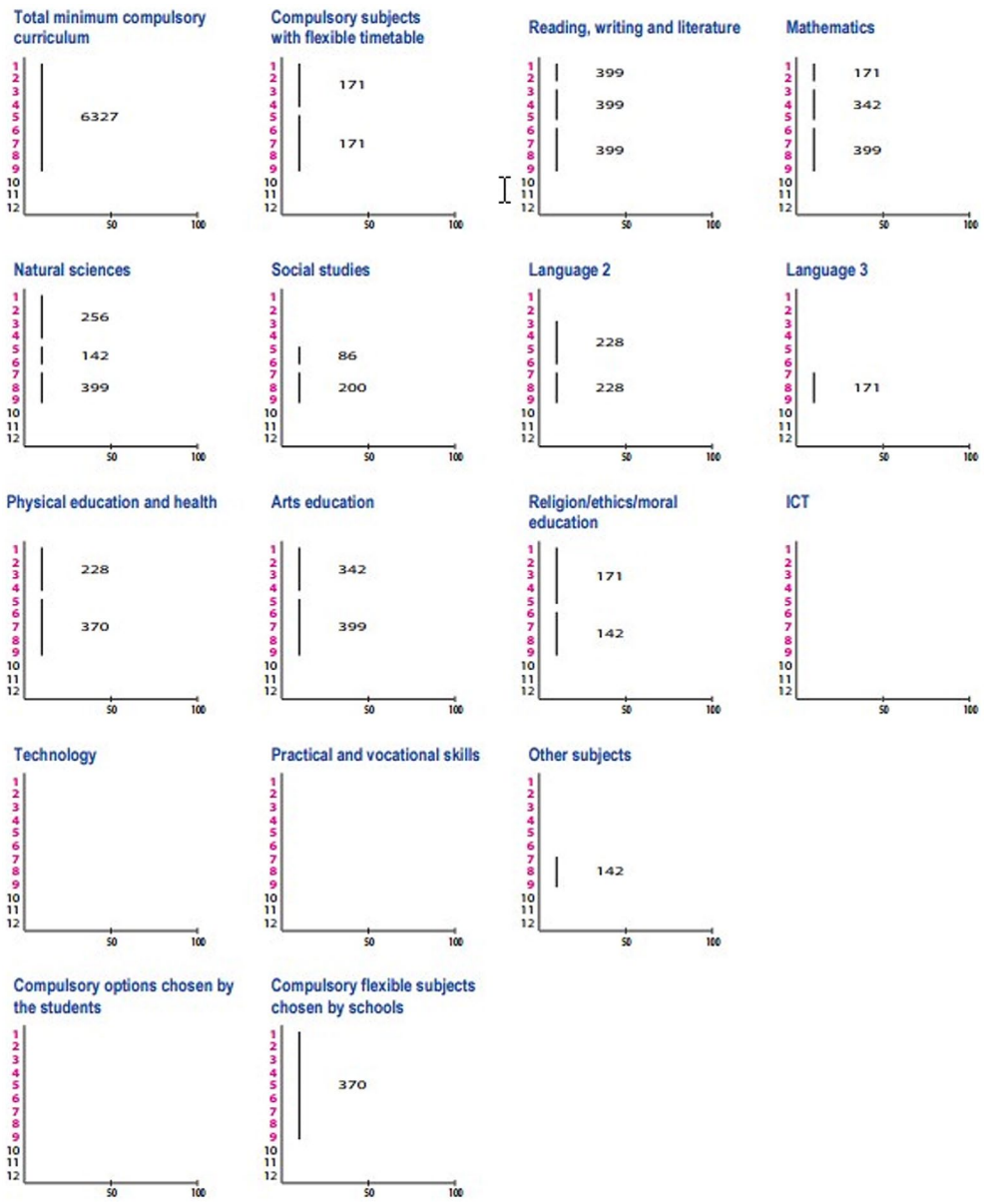


Figure 3. Recommended annual instruction time in full-time compulsory education in Finland (2014–2015). Source: European Commission (2015, p. 58).

certainly in relation to the other two expert cultures. To be sure, several reservations must be noted. First, the above depiction may be inaccurate since it merely ‘skims the surface’, namely, it does not delve more deeply into the specific curricular objectives of each subject. It is also plausible to assume important divergences between policy and *practice*: there may be significant differences in the way different teachers instruct classes, and that in certain contexts (including language studies) scientific, moral and aesthetic perspectives are interwoven into the learning processes. One must also be aware that a different picture may

result from a consideration of the curriculum's *practical* implementation in various school settings as well as possible differences between national and (specific) school curriculums. Nonetheless, since the structure of the curriculum has important implications on instruction styles (in the same way that form informs content), the mere consideration of the arrangement of subjects and the instruction time invested to each of them, already reveals valuable insights.

In light of the above overview of national curriculums, it is clear that national curriculums must undergo serious reforms. Some even argue that the very idea of school-centered education in the present cultural and social climate must be reconsidered (Bauman, 2005, 2011). I claim that the notion of self-critical appropriation can serve as a central principle for rethinking the modernist curriculum and for responding to the curriculum dilemma presented above.

Self-critical appropriation and the modernist curriculum

If the modernist curriculum is to properly address the challenges facing it, it must strike a balance between two seemingly opposing curricular orientations: on the one hand, it must in some way maintain the boundaries between subjects representative of the three expert cultures of science, morality and art, and, on the other hand, reconnect learning to everyday life so that individuals can critically engage with the knowledge they either acquire or construct, enhance their sense of responsibility, and become aware of the possible social and political (ideological) transgressions to personal freedom that are generated, in part, by the very demarcation between the three expert cultures. Thus, it would seem that what we have here is an impenetrable impasse. I believe that Habermas's notion of *self-critical appropriation*, which involves the more personal-existential endeavor of self-clarification, provides the grounds for bringing the above two (seemingly) contradictory perspectives into a single curricular framework. It should be noted that I am not claiming that previous thinkers applying Habermas's thought to educational contexts have misinterpreted his theory or that I am critical of the manner in which proposals to develop a deliberative democratic culture in schools have been put forward. I am simply claiming that by addressing the particular kind of existential discourse grounded on self-critical appropriation offers a fruitful vantage point for dealing with the above impasse and thus with the curriculum dilemma presented above.

Habermas employs the term self-critical appropriation occasionally to elucidate the intersubjective processes of ethical self-understanding and self-clarification. This process differs from other types of discourses individuals are engaged in for the sake of reaching an understanding (as are all communicative acts according to Habermas) since it concerns a specific—*appropriative*—form of understanding: 'the appropriation of one's own life history and the traditions and circumstances of life that have shaped one's process of development' (Habermas, 1994, p. 5). And, for Habermas, these processes of appropriation are construed from an intersubjective standpoint:

Taking up a relationship to a projected form of society is what first makes it possible for me to take my own life history seriously as a principle of individuation—to regard it as if it were the product of decisions for which I am responsible. The self-critical appropriation and reflexive continuation of my life history would have to remain a non-binding or even indeterminate idea as long as I could not encounter myself before the eyes of all, i.e., before the forum of an unlimited communication community. (Habermas, 1992, p. 186)

Unpacking the various terminologies in this passage will certainly take us off track. The main point for our present purposes is that the notion of self-critical appropriation refers to the process by which a person becomes aware and takes *responsibility* for the person he or she is and wants to be in the future. And this self-reflective undertaking of self-choice and self-discovery entails that individuals acknowledge the fundamental historical and social nature of their own personal development. Selfhood is not static, but rather an ongoing *relation* of a person to himself or herself through the encounter with others. As opposed to subjectivist existential accounts of authentic self-clarification, Habermas depicts the process of self-critical appropriation as follows: ‘Radicalized interiority is burdened with the task of achieving self-understanding in which self-knowledge and existential decision interpenetrate’ (Habermas, 1998, p. 96). Stated otherwise, both *descriptive* and *normative* components are interwoven within ethical-existential discourses of self-understanding (Habermas, 1994, p. 5). This means that knowledge acquisition is very much a part of the process of self-understanding. Much has been written about Habermas’s intersubjective theory of individuation and identity-formation (Sarid, 2015), including discussions about whether Habermas’s notion of ethical self-understanding and self-fulfillment undermines authentic individuality and privacy (e.g. Sarid, 2015; Cooke, 1997; Rossler, 2005). What concerns me here is how self-critical appropriation pertains to education in general and to the rethinking of the modernist curriculum in particular.

Habermas claims that it is through the ‘heroic efforts’ of *appropriation* that individuals are able to become accountable for who they are and reconstruct unique identities in a state of fragmented existence in which expert cultures have been divorced from real-life practices. Appropriation means, in this context, adapting expert knowledge into the context of *everyday life* for the purpose of personal development and self-fulfillment. While Habermas advocates the separation of expert cultures, it is from the *perspective of individuals* (or collectives) engaged in processes of appropriation that the boundaries begin to dissolve. Providing an example from the sphere of art, Habermas writes:

Artistic production will inevitably degenerate semantically if it is not pursued as the specialized treatment of its own immanent problems, as an object of expert concern This sharply defined separation and exclusive concentration on a single dimension breaks down, however, as soon as aesthetic experience is incorporated into the context of an individual life history or collective form of life. (Habermas, 1997, p. 51)

A few paragraphs later, referring to the work of Peter Weiss, Habermas continues to portray the notion of appropriation as a desired *model of learning*:

He depicts a group of young people in Berlin in 1937, politically motivated workers who are eager to learn, who are acquiring the means of inwardly understanding the history, including the social history, of European painting through night school classes. Out of the obdurate stone of objective spirit they hew the fragments they are able to appropriate, drawing them into the experiential horizon of their own environment, one which is as remote from traditional education as it is from the existing regime (Habermas, 1997, p. 52)

In both passages above Habermas refers to the exploratory mode of appropriation and learning through aesthetic experience. However, he explicitly states that ‘similar observations can be made concerning the spheres of science and morality’ (p. 52) in cases when the expert culture is appropriated from the perspective of everyday life.

Self-critical appropriation not only concerns breaking down the boundaries between expert cultures for the sake of reflexive self-development. ‘Heroic’ efforts of appropriation

counter hegemonic domination by giving individuals a voice and ownership of the various forms of knowledge and relationships in a given social context: 'To appropriate another's words is to take those words and to inject one's own meaning into them, to take ownership of those words for one's own purposes' (Tardy, 2006, p. 60). The prefix *self-critical* before appropriation is meant to accentuate that the *interpretative and creative* process of injecting meaning and taking ownership is not merely made up of playful acts of self-expression (as it is for some postmodernists), but rather consists of serious contemplation (or 'strong evaluations') about the ethical implications and validity of the meanings produced (and Habermas would add intersubjective recognition).¹

As noted above, Habermas claims that the role of education is to serve as a kind of a mediator between a formalistic universalistic morality and everyday life practices. Habermas writes: 'There has to be a modicum of congruence between morality and the practices of socialization and education. The latter must promote the requisite internalization of super-ego controls and the abstractness of ego identities' (Habermas, 1990, p. 207). What Habermas means is that education must create 'institutionalized procedures' for the development of communicative competences (Englund, 2006) that control the individual, i.e., that communicatively acting individuals commit themselves to various normative principles so that a vibrant deliberate democratic polity can be sustained, but also, *at the same time*, allow freely-acting individuals to form their own identities through processes of ethical self-understanding.

So, what then are the practical implications of grounding a modernist curriculum on the notion of self-critical appropriation? Here I shall address two central insights or practical principles: *balancing the curriculum* and introducing an *integrative core subject*. First, it has become clear by now that a modernist curriculum adopting the notion of self-critical appropriation must be committed to the separation of disciplinary subjects more or less according to the division between the three expert cultures of science, morality and art—as autonomous spheres of knowledge acquisition and construction. This is clearly seen, for example, in Habermas's passage above where he speaks of the degeneration of artistic production, which, of course, implicates the other two expert cultures as well. However, if education is to serve the role that Habermas envisioned, namely, as a lifeworld institution promoting both control and emancipation, it must promote a more balanced proportion between subjects representing the three expert cultures. This is needed in order to confront the privileging of scientific knowledge and modes of reasoning in most educational curriculums (certainly those we have reviewed above) and for allowing pupils to encounter themselves through engagement with *different* modes of reasoning and knowledge construction. A similar claim is made by Harkin:

It may be the case that a more balanced human understanding is necessary, not least in education theory, policy and practice, that includes what Taylor ... referred to as theoretical, symbolic and expressive understanding; or what Habermas refers to as cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive domains of human reason. Such a balance is not achieved by a swing from the hubristic idea that everything can be known, to the weakness of individual language games and parody. (Harkin, 1998, p. 433)

It is clear that the balance Harkin speaks of is desirable precisely in order to allow different forms of reasoning and knowledge to circulate and develop within the curriculum. And this more balanced reorganization of the curriculum is favorable not only for human understanding, but also for promoting *creativity* (Craft, 2003)—a central educational goal of current

societies. To be sure, developing and exercising communicative competences is certainly in line with the way Habermas envisions human understanding, but balancing the curriculum pertains also to the way the curriculum is structured and organized. While Harkin does not say this explicitly, it is implied by him that the separation of subjects and different types of knowledge is to be reexamined within the curriculum. Harkin is correct that human agency (intersubjectively envisioned) is one of the keys for closing the gap between expert cultures and everyday life practices, but closing the gap between expert-cultures and everyday life is not the same as breaking the boundaries *between* expert-cultures themselves.

A possible way of balancing the curriculum can be grounded on the principle of historicity. Consider the following passage by Habermas: 'From now on there will be internal histories of science and knowledge, of moral and legal theory, and of art. And although these do not represent linear developments, they none the less constitute learning processes' (Habermas, 1997, p. 45). From a strictly pedagogical perspective, 'historicity' involves acknowledgment of the sociocultural evolution of ideas, values and practices and the understanding that knowledge originates and is shaped against the background of a specific social context. Historical accounts, by definition, take into consideration various disciplinary perspectives (geography, economy, culture) and thus provide a proper educational space for the meeting of different expert-culture knowledge and types of reasoning. While 'historicity' has clear pedagogical and curricular advantages (we have seen that 'life-history' serves for Habermas the organizing principle of ethical self-understanding), it is important to note that Habermas speaks of 'internal histories' which are themselves discipline-specific. As such, they do not provide the needed balance at least in terms of the modes of reasoning and kinds of knowledge that are supposed to circulate within the curriculum. While 'historicity' must be further incorporated into the curriculum (the history of mathematics is a good example), once viewed as a foundational cross-curricular principle, it either poses a threat to the very idea of attaining *objective* knowledge (since, for example, scientific facts are viewed merely from the perspective of contingent 'regimes' of knowledge), or, conversely, transforms learning into a linear consideration of historical *facts* (in cases in which History is viewed as a quasi-scientific discipline concerned with learning about what truly occurred in the past).

Additionally, while the life-history of a person constitutes the prime source for ethical-existential self-understanding, making the principle of historicity the major context for curricular development raises concerns with regards the impoverishment and limitation of the knowledge base needed for individuals' process of self-critical appropriation. Habermas's apprehension of the degeneration of expert cultures is one indication of the above concerns.

Thus, balancing the curriculum involves not only striking a proper balance between (expert culture) subjects but also between disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning processes. Since the separation of disciplinary boundaries is currently enacted in current national curriculums, I shall now turn to discuss the latter two types of learning processes. Whereas *multi*-disciplinarity refers to learning processes in which a specific topic is dealt with from different disciplinary perspectives but does not lead to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, *inter*-disciplinarity refers to learning processes in which the meeting of different disciplinary perspectives leads to a convergence into a single (integrative) disciplinary perspective (Youngblood, 2007). To clarify the above differentiation consider the contribution of learning topics which are not limited to a specific disciplinary perspective

and thus are inherently *non-disciplinary* (Klein, 1996) or bridge disciplines (Youngblood, 2007).

A good example of a non-disciplinary topic is environmental education for sustainability (EEfS) which requires the consideration of issues and questions arising from various disciplinary perspectives, including knowledge and modes of reasoning from scientific, moral and aesthetic perspectives (Tilbury, 1995). Such learning processes require multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary learning processes. There is something very wrong (and anti-modernist) in arguing that scientific knowledge regarding global warming, carbon-dioxide emissions rates, or socio-economic gaps, should be treated on the basis of either normative (moral or legal) or expressive judgements. I am not saying that scientific methods of enquiry and knowledge should not be critically questioned; certainly, scientific knowledge might be ideologically tainted or strongly influenced by economic interests. But whether global warming, rising emission levels or widening socio-economic gaps are indeed empirical facts or not is not a matter that can be dealt with from either of the other expert-culture perspectives. Normative and expressive judgments are indispensable for *making sense* of scientific facts and for reframing the kinds of scientific investigations that are needed for addressing sustainability issues. It is certainly desirable—in any field or topic of study—that more and more perspectives be taken into consideration, not only for the sake of getting a deeper and more complex understanding of the topics or subjects at hand but also for expanding the range of possibilities for *personal development* ensuing from the encounter with widening perspectives (Tilbury, 1995). Thus, curriculums incorporating non-disciplinary subjects or bridging disciplines provide learners a rich multidisciplinary learning environment that is 'elastic' yet does not entirely collapse disciplinary boundaries. The learning of separate subjects (such as science, math, ethics and aesthetics) serves as a necessary resource for addressing complex issues such those confronted in EEfS.

Interestingly, a multidisciplinary approach to sustainability education can also be grounded on anti-modernist (pluralistic) arguments. For example, Stables and Scott (2002) are critical of holistic approaches to sustainability education, defined as a singular disciplinary perspective, since it muffles the plurality of different environmental literacies and voices. Rather than viewing EEfS as a holistic and singular-structured discipline, Stables and Scott call for incorporating within specific disciplinary boundaries (such as Literature and Arts) multi-disciplinary perspectives in which sustainability issues are dealt with and are acknowledged as a *con-text* in already institutionalized curriculum subjects. In this case, the appeal to a multidisciplinary approach is grounded on the principles of pluralism rather than on the need to maintain a modernist separation of disciplinary boundaries (a separation that is ironically maintained).

However, a pluralistic approach to sustainability education has also been put forward by an appeal to Habermas's deliberative-communicative theory. Englund, Öhman, and Östman (2008), use Habermas's theory of communication and deliberative democracy as a basis upon which to view schools as part of the *public sphere*; as 'weak publics' in which multiplicity of voices critically deliberate on societal issues and contexts. Through such processes of communicative deliberation, pupils do not merely develop personal autonomy—by exercising communicative competences based on universalized principles of intersubjective argumentation—but also, simultaneously, public autonomy: 'knowledge, perspectives and values must be public in the sense that they can be challenged by other forms of knowledge and other perspectives and values' (Englund et al., 2008, p. 40). Consequently, the authors

claim, the *principle of pluralism* becomes a crucial element of deliberative communication. While not explicitly stated by the authors, deliberative communication encompasses elements of the three expert cultures (knowledge, values and perspectives). However, the above proposal concerns the learning of a specific topic—sustainability education. And, as in most cases in which Habermas's thought is applied to educational contexts, we are left with a recurring vagueness with respect to whether the different elements (knowledge, values and perspectives) should be distinguished from each other in terms of the organization of school subjects within the curriculum as a whole.

In any case, strictly disciplinary subjects, such as mathematics, may also incorporate within them different disciplinary perspectives from which pupils may consider, for example, the aesthetic beauty of certain geometric shapes and even algebraic equations or deal with moral issues addressed through mathematical investigations (the learning of Maltus in mathematical contexts is a case in point). Such perspective-taking processes *within* specific subject or expert culture disciplines is congenial to processes of self-critical appropriation similar to those illustrated in Habermas's work in that they close the gaps between each respective expert culture and real life practices (and individuals' processes of self-clarification).

Having said that, I am not claiming that inter-disciplinarity should not be part of the curriculum. It is at this point that a second implication of applying the concept of self-critical appropriation is introduced. We have already seen in Harkin (1998) and Englund (2006) that promoting communicative competences and institutionalizing them in school practice are central to the defense of a modernist curriculum grounded on Habermas's theory. I propose that the institutionalization of communicative competences should be implemented by incorporating into the core curriculum an integrator-subject for the development of communicative competences and their practical implementation in schools. Some might argue that such skills are developed—or are at least supposed to be developed—as part of language classes in which pupils develop oral, written, and communication skills. But given current school culture in which standardization processes are intensified coupled by growing pressures to succeed in international exams and indexes, a greater part of instruction time is devoted to more technical language acquisition skills. Thus, at least as a first stage of implementation, I propose to introduce a specific core subject (with specified instruction time) that will be devoted to the learning of communicative competences through personal and team projects addressing *real life problems* of the community and individuals' lives. This resembles the deliberative kind of sustainability educational processes proposed by Englund et al. (2008), but with an important difference in focus with regards the kinds of motivations and participant perspectives that are involved: problem solving processes and engagement with real life issues constitute the content and context (i.e., the means) for the development of the necessary competences to engage in existential processes of self-critical appropriation. These learning processes are interdisciplinary in nature since their objective is to integrate knowledge, values and perspectives—reflecting the three expert cultures—for the sake of processes of existential self-clarification. Habermas writes that the three value-spheres are 'now capable of being connected only formally with one another (through the form of argumentative justification)' (Habermas, 1997, p. 45). I argue that the proper educational environment allowing such processes of argumentative justification to flourish opens up when individuals not only adopt a holistic perspective towards the social world surrounding them, but also when these discourses are directed inward: to their own personal processes of self-understanding and self-realization. In such cases, pupils appropriate various forms

of knowledge, values and preferences not merely for the sake of solving practical problems but for gaining an understanding of who they are and want to be. It is possible to assume that such processes do take place in schools (the subject of 'ethics' in the Finish curriculum is one good example), but they are either infrequent or not sufficiently institutionalized or structured in current curriculums.

To conclude, I have argued that Habermas's notion of self-critical appropriation may serve as a fruitful foundation for rethinking the modernist curriculum. More specifically, I believe the insights offered here facilitate a suitable response to the abovementioned *curriculum dilemma* and accommodate education to the present sociocultural climate. It should be noted, however, that the notion of self-critical appropriation, which constitutes the underlying principle of existential discourses, is certainly not central to Habermas's communicative project in general and to his notion of deliberative politics and public policy in particular. The question as to whether existential discourses may constitute a proper basis for current social organization and institutions—particularly education—remains open for further discussion and clarification. It might be argued, for instance, that the acquisition of knowledge and the learning process as a whole may be envisioned from the perspective of existential discourses merely as means for personal development and self-realization, leading to a restricted or even reductionist view of education. More practical considerations of the insights presented here concern the advanced skills and enhanced knowledge necessary for the kind of multidisciplinary processes envisioned here, which have clear ramifications on teacher training and processes of professional development. Balancing the curriculum in the manner proposed here is not only taxing in terms of the skills and knowledge it requires of teaching staffs, but evidently introduces further complexity to curricular development; balancing acts are always a risky endeavor even when such curricular changes are gradually and mindfully implemented.

Having said that, the insights presented here are not merely theoretical devices for intellectual contemplation but reflect a growing pressure to transform education in light of changing social realities. If education is to accommodate the values, commitments and needs of real individuals it must be reconstructed accordingly; and what I have attempted to show is that the kind of existential discourses prompted by processes of self-critical appropriation satisfy the increasing need of individuals today to critically form and shape their own identities in a way that does not create 'an illusion of freedom and a frantic psychology' (Lee, 2011), to which various proposals of a postmodernist curriculum, I believe, ultimately lead especially in today's hyper-consumerist culture. The kind of existential discourses presented here support the mediating role that education must play between expert knowledge cultures, social expectations and individuals' needs and wants. It is for this reason that I believe that existential discourses should find a more central place in Habermas's own thinking not only for understanding ethical processes of individualization and ego-identity formation, arguably the ultimate aim of current education (Sarid, 2016), but also for further understanding social coordination and public policy in today's reality.

To be sure, the precise nature of a curriculum structured upon the above two principles can certainly vary in different socio-cultural contexts. Another consideration is the proper relation between theory and practice in a curriculum which endorses communicative principles. Wraga (2002), for instance, claims in favor of 'curriculum enactment' in which teachers and students collaborate on the conception and realization of educational purposes. At any rate, I claim that the insights provided here may be useful for educational decision-makers,

researchers and practitioners to rethink the curriculum so that it, on the one hand, may be accommodated to the needs and values of the shifting sociocultural reality, and on the other hand, preserves modernist principles indispensable for safeguarding individuals from the ill-effects of the present culture as well as for facilitating meaningful processes of personal development.

Note

1. This echoes Taylor's (1991) bi-dimensional view of authenticity which he adumbrates in his *Ethics of Authenticity*, consisting of both (a) creative (deconstructive) processes of self-expression and at the same time (b) self-definition in dialogue through openness to horizons of significance. Both dimensions are necessary in order to fully account for authentic existence. Whereas postmodernists neglect (b), ardent modernists neglect (a).

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Notes on contributor

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