Developing understanding of pupil feedback using Habermas' notion of communicative action

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The focus of this article is to explore the notion of pupil feedback and the possible ways in which it can be understood and developed using Jürgen Habermas' theory of Communicative Action. The theoretical position adopted is framed within the concept of assessment for learning, and is particularly related to the notion of assessment as learning within AfL. Furthermore, the paper is located within a social constructivist perspective. Jürgen Habermas' theory of Communicative Action enables us to recognise that feedback, and more importantly the interpretation of feedback, cannot be a one-way process. Without recognition of pupil interpretation, its very purpose (to alter the learning gap) is compromised. This paper offers new ways of exploring feedback, which recognise complexity and the importance of interpretation and relationships in shared negotiated communicative contexts. It further contributes to the ways in which assessment and learning are understood and intersect.

Keywords: feedback; communicative-action; assessment-as-learning; learning gap

Context and introduction

The importance of feedback to pupils as part of the interconnection of teaching, learning and assessment is well identified and documented in the research literature. Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Shute (2008) perhaps offer the most detailed accounts offering a synthesis and critique of feedback processes and types. The notion of feedback explored in this paper falls clearly within the conceptualisation of Assessment for Learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1998) as well as being related to Assessment as Learning (AaL) (Dann, 2002, 2014), highlighting the ways in which feedback enables learning to advance as part of the learning process. The notion of AaL advanced here relates to possible ways in which processes of engaging in assessment and thinking about assessment may also become dimensions of learning. Dann states that AaL is 'the complex interplay of assessment, teaching and learning which holds at its core the notion that pupils must understand their own learning progress and goals through a range of processes which are in themselves cognitive events' (2014, p. 151). This contrasts with the use of AaL in the 'deformative' sense, in which assessment takes over and dominates the curriculum so that what is assessed is mainly what is learnt (Torrance, 2007, 2012).

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Black and Wiliam (2009, p. 10) highlight the importance of AFl as being concerned with the creation of and capitalization upon 'moments of contingency'. The focus here is with influencing and shaping the future. Indeed, Hattie and Timperley (2007) promote three key feedback questions: 'Where am I going? How am I going? Where next?' But the evidence also shows that feedback can often yield no improvement in learning or, in the worst case, decrease learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Establishing the parameters of effective feedback has featured in the literature over several decades and is worthy of brief attention as a prelude to exploring the possible application of Habermas' (1984, 1987) notion of Communicative Action. After considering what we know about feedback and its limitations, some examination will be given to Habermas' notion of Communicative Action so that its possible role in facilitating new thinking will be explored. Although CA will be considered more fully subsequently in the paper, in its crudest sense, it is a speech act between at least two individuals, in which interpretation is genuinely sought from each participant so that agreement can be reached through negotiated agreement. (Habermas, 1984). In considering what CA means and how it might be applied, discussion includes some brief consideration of the political UK education context with particular reference to the school as an example of a colonised space with a dominant performance agenda (Habermas, 1987). Discussion related to how ideas for feedback practices may be distilled from Habermas' notion of CA form an alternative discourse. The final section of the paper suggests some of the opportunities that adopting some of Habermas' thinking may have for development of the practices of feedback.

What do we know about the process of feedback within the teaching and learning encounter?

Sadler has offered considerable groundwork for our understanding of feedback. His original contribution (1989) suggests that feedback is a mechanism for helping to close the learning gap. Its purpose is to reduce the gap between what is known and what needs to be known. Its success, therefore, is dependent on it being able to 'alter the gap' (p. 121) and so helping learning to progress. Sadler promotes three typical teacher acts, which, he claims, define feedback (1998). Firstly, that 'the teacher must attend to the learners' production' (p. 80). Secondly, that the teacher makes some kind of evaluation against a background or framework reference which involves identifying pupils' strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the teacher makes an explicit response, mark, grade or verbal/written statement about the quality and the shortcomings that can be remedied. Sadler suggests that these acts require that teachers bring a particular set of experiential and intellectual resources, including: superior knowledge; a disposition that drives their intentions to help learners; knowledge of how to gain pupils' responses that show their learning, understanding of expected standards, skills in making evaluative judgements and framing feedback statements. Although Sadler recognises that perhaps these processes may seem 'unidirectional', he welcomes pupil involvement. He promotes the view that 'a strong case can be made that students should be taught how to change their pattern of thinking so that they know not only how to respond to and solve (externally sourced) problems but also how to frame problems themselves' (p. 81). Furthermore, he argues for consideration of the language, which teachers use for feedback ensuring that terminology is already known and understood by the learners (p. 82). He suggests that

perhaps learners should be inducted into the feedback processes used by the teachers so that they can more fully participate. Accordingly, the importance of pupil self and peer assessment features as a possibility.

What Sadler stops short of recognising are that pupils may need to engage with feedback quite differently. Indeed, Sadler makes claims to the contrary offering his view that 'any tendency on the part of the teacher to provide differential levels of feedback for learners of different levels of performance (especially at the lower end) treats students inequitably' (p. 82). His view of feedback offers a picture which begins to explore purpose and processes. His view seems to only acknowledge pupils as recipients or as participants who need greater skills in understanding pre-stated processes of expertise that teachers might like to more deliberately share with learners. Even though pupil self and peer assessment is brought into consideration, it is done so in a fairly predetermined way.

When feedback is focused on altering a learning gap, the way in which this is gap is both constructed and managed seems critical. More critical than perhaps Sadler acknowledges. It may well be that pupils try to alter their own learning gaps in unintended ways, possibly by even disengaging with the goals set (Steinberg, 1996). This may call for the need to explore, rather than close the learning gap (Dann, 2014; Torrance, 2012).

It is perhaps Torrance and Pryor (1998) and Pryor and Crossouard (2008), who give the clearest insight into possible categorisations, in which feedback, as part of formative assessment, may be regarded. Torrance and Pryor (1998) identify feedback as convergent or divergent. Convergent assessment being reflected by

> the teacher giving closed or pseudo-open questions and tasks where there was a clear idea (at least for the teacher) of what constituted a correct response. They then gave authoritative, judgmental or quantitative feedback on what the learners said or did where errors were contrasted with correct responses. This feedback focused on the successful completion of the task in hand. (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008, p. 4).

It can be seen in similar terms to Black and Wiliam's (1998) notion of feedback directed to pupils' objective needs (p. 17); directive feedback and in keeping with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) 'ask-focused' feedback (p. 91).

Divergent assessment, on the other hand, is seen as more open, looking for what pupils understand or can do. Feedback, within divergent assessment, is identified as 'exploratory, provisional and provocative' (p. 4). Such distinctions can also be linked to typologies of feedback which are well illustrated by Tunstall and Gipps (1996),who identified feedback as being evaluative or descriptive in either positive or negative ways. Adding to attempts at clarification and definition, Hattie & Timperley seek to identify four levels of feedback: feedback on the task (FT); on the process to complete the task (FP); feedback on the process of self-regulation (FR); feedback on the self as a person (FS). They claim that FS, which is usually in the form of praise, is least effective.

Significant attention has been given in recent years to explore aspects of class-room practice in terms of, 'what works'. Trying to understand feedback and its role in promoting learning, seems closely linked to such attempts. Clearly, what works may be constructed in a variety of ways. Meta-analysis has been a significant factor in recent years in establishing how practices might be taken forward. Hattie's work (2009 and 2012) has helped frame how research evidence might be interpreted and used as an evidence base for practice in schools. Some of the meta-analysis put

forward by Hattie features in the Educational Endowment Fund/Sutton Trust toolkit (2014). Here, the 'effect size' of feedback is ranked as the highest (along with self-regulation and metacognition) for advancing learning by about eight months. It is considered to have low cost, high impact and be based on medium levels of evidence. It is clearly promoted as a classroom practice worth pursuing. However, when looking more closely at Hattie's commentary and to some extent the notes in the toolkit, understanding feedback and putting it into practice is far more complex. Even when the focus is exclusively on analysis of quantitative research data (Hattie, 2009 preface ix) and success is measured mainly in terms of gains in academic achievement, feedback as a simple act which can easily be framed in order to promote learning lies far beyond the scope of most studies. Studies which are more classroom-bound and qualitative illustrate how what happens in classrooms is often based on quite formal and prescribed notions of feedback. Murtagh (2014) examines the practices of two primary school teachers, who despite being clear of their own intentions of using feedback to enhance learning, seem to fall short of what they aim to achieve. Similarly, Hargreaves (2013) gleans information from the children about how they experience teacher feedback in order to try and ascertain its impact on their learning. What emerges in classrooms is that feedback is understood to be powerful and has the potential to impact significantly on learning. However, the role of the teacher in giving feedback is all too often naively constructed as a one-way process, which will lead to closing a learning gap which is predetermined by the teacher in a tightly focused externally measured objectives-driven context (Nicol & Macfarane-Dick, 2006). The many facets of feedback emerging from the literature seem to identify both possibilities and limitations. Some difficulties that limit our understanding of feedback also need to be highlighted before attention is turned to what Habermas may have to offer. Consideration is now given to recognising some of these current difficulties.

Identifying the limits of our understanding of feedback

Children for whom feedback may be less useful are often those, as Bourdieu (1990, p. 66) identifies as being without a 'feel for the game'. From Bourdieu's perspective, the school is the 'field' in which the game is played. Participants will use their capital, strategies, beliefs, priorities to play this game. There is a presumption that all will invest in the game. It may be, however, that a 'sense of good investment … dictates a withdrawal from outmoded, or simply devalued, objects, places or practices' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 249). If Bourdieu's thinking helps us here, some pupils may choose to be highly selective in the aspects of schooling in which they chose to invest. Thus, focused feedback from the teacher may often be seen as irrelevant. Black, McCormick, James, and Peddar (2006) highlight a similar train of thought as they claim 'intentional learners' gain most from feedback. By implication, there are those who are not intent on learning or who are less intentional in their approach to learning. In order to benefit from feedback, there must be some desire for the pupil to want to move forward with his/her learning. There may be pupils, such as those Fisher recognises (2011, 2014), who are shy and on the margins of the classroom, often girls, who hide behind a veil of compliance feeling that they should not indicate if they think differently or are dissatisfied. Research also points to particular learning dispositions. Perkins (1995) suggests that these are the 'proclivities that lead us in one direction rather than another, within the freedom of action that we

have' (p. 275). Carr and Claxton (2002) suggest that they include curiosity, opportunism, resilience, playfulness and reciprocity. 'These are neither unique to a specific situation nor generally manifested across all situations' (p. 12). However, they argue that such dispositions influence the ways in which we learn how to learn. Feedback may therefore provide a useful tool, enabling pupils to develop their own learning. However, accompanying learning dispositions, their nature and employment, may be of particular significance and require some attention.

It is perhaps Dweck's (2012) work that offers both a synthesis and reduction of some of the ideas inherent in learner dispositions. Her suggestions, summarised in her more popular text, suggest there are two mindsets (growth and fixed) which give a glimpse of how learners chose to embrace the development of their own learning. Those with a fixed mindset tend to see themselves as limited to a particular set of abilities which may serve them well until they experience failure or diminished success. Often lack of success, in the individual with a fixed mindset, results in a reluctance to take on board the necessary steps to overcome the failure and move forwards. They may blame themselves or others but struggle to see how they can move themselves forward. The growth mindset, on the other hand, refers to the way in which individuals rise to the challenge of failure or reduced success and draw on whatever resources they can to change the situation. Clearly, this has strong implications for the way that individuals use the feedback on offer to them. Part of Dweck's analysis also reveals how a mindset can change individuals so that they can begin to see their own learning differently. This is also echoed in Carr & Claxton's work (2002) and Claxton (2008). It thus leaves open ways of using learning and assessment resources more strategically to promote learning and learning dispositions. Feedback could be considered as a resource, which is partly determined through assessment, for the purposes of learning. It is, therefore, clearly part of Assessment for Learning and may be usefully developed to both understand and enhance learner dispositions. Furthermore, through drawing on a particular process of using feedback through communicative action, it may also enable learners to develop their learning skills and thus be considered within the notion of AaL (Dann, 2014).

The main purpose of this paper is to offer an additional conceptual basis for how we might move forwards with feedback, addressing the possibilities and the limitations of the role and practice of classroom feedback. In addition to the points made about children's' reluctance to engage with feedback and learning, there are also difficulties establishing the best types of feedback. Currently, the research evidence suggests that feedback is not uniformly successful in terms of the effectiveness of the types of feedback used. Furthermore, evidence indicates that feedback focused on specific description information given to pupils on their work is more effective than feedback which is linked to personal effort, praise or reward (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Also of importance is that feedback is contextual, recognising that learning takes place in a learning environment in which pupils interpret their experiences (Hargreaves, 2013), and draws on their own self-regulatory devices and learning dispositions (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Carr & Claxton, 2002).

When the research on feedback is synthesised, it reveals a complex picture. This seems quite different from the practices in classrooms. Within teaching and learning contexts, which are increasingly objective with prescribed goal orientations, feedback seems tightly focused and often fairly unproblematic (Murtagh, 2014). Teachers frequently offer targeted feedback on which pupils should act. Often

opportunities for pupils to engage with such feedback is apportioned particular time, timetabled daily or weekly and given labels such as 'fix it time'. Sometimes scope is given to pupils to respond to feedback given by the teacher so that a dialogue can emerge. Nevertheless, this can lead to little more than a 'forced dialogue' which is explicitly linked to teaching and the teachers priorities (Leganger-Krogstad, 2014). Alexander (2008), in pointing towards possibilities for dialogic assessment, indicates that dialogic assessment 'informs the teacher and the pupil precisely how that learning is progressing and what needs to be done to accelerate and consolidate it' (p. 33). The use of the word 'precisely' seems to suggest that even a dialogic dimension to feedback is tightly focused and specifically targeted. Notions of developing dialogue for formative assessment which may help us move forwards in terms understanding pupil autonomy and interpretation are still unclear and underresearched (Hargreaves, 2013). Lefstein (2010) claims that 'the institution of schooling constrains the ways in which dialogue can be conducted within its domain' (p. 171). Lefstein identifies a tension between the rules and relationships which may beset meaningful dialogue to enable learning. This seems particularly pertinent as feedback is explored. The imperative to focus learning on objective measurables and to be accountable for aspects of pupil progress may add to the tensions on the teacher/pupil relationships which feedback seeks to foster. It is in an attempt to explore feedback more fully so that the process of feedback itself can enhance learning in a broader sense that the focus of this paper will turn. What currently seems lacking in conceptualising feedback is a sense in which processes of feedback are reciprocally linked in order to facilitate learning and illuminate how feedback and the feedback relationship can be enhanced. It is at this point that Habermas may offer some useful insights that can help conceptualise feedback in a way that will further frame our understanding.

Some foundations for understanding Habermas

Habermas' extensive writings are not focused on assessment, and their consideration in this paper may be considered an application of his thinking. Although Habermas offers a philosophical exposition of a meta-theory for how social, political and economic systems may be explored and explained, this paper is not seeking to espouse his meta-level thinking and apply it at a macro level. Indeed, Habermas has been the subject of considerable critique, not least by those who advocate a more postmodern perspective. For example, his attempt to be the mediating answer between the positivist and the postmodern falls flat in the eyes of many philosophers (e.g. Lyotard, 1994; Ricoeur, 2008). Rather, Habermas' theory is explored in terms of its application at a micro level within the school system. It is more specifically focused through the practices of Communicative Action, which draw on a more pragmatic dimension to Habermas' thinking, which is grounded in the way in which he perceives the importance of linking the objective, the social and the personal.

Building on the previous discussion of feedback and locating feedback within a formative context which promotes AaL, this paper seeks to explore ways in which the notion of CA may offer new insights to further developing feedback practices. Habermas draws from both pragmatism and hermeneutics, recognising that knowledge is socially constructed and understood and enacted through communication (speech acts). The process of communication is central for Habermas. Hence, the potential usefulness of his ideas in relation to feedback, which is essentially a

communicative mechanism, seems well founded. Additionally, this paper draws on Habermas' thinking around deliberative democracy. Here, Habermas' democratic ideas are reconsidered and applied to pupils in an institutional context. His original principles of ('discursive') deliberative democracy relate to a form of government in society which recognises equality and the importance of avenues for moral disagreement and discussion, which ultimately aim towards mutual conclusions yet perpetually leave opportunities further challenge and discussion (Habermas, 1998). Application here is brief as this paper is not focusing at a macro level and centres on relationships between teachers and pupils which may limit how democratic processes are practised. However, there are some useful threads to be teased out from Habermas' writings.

To set the scene, it is noted that Habermas defines CA as

> the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech acts and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach understanding about the action situation and their plans for action in order to coordinate actions by way of agreement. The central concept of interpretation refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit [of] consensus. (Habermas, 1984, p. 86)

Habermas makes a clear distinction between strategic action and communicative action. The former, may generally describe much of what feedback seeks to achieve. That is, for someone with a particular view (teacher) to influence the actions of another (pupil). Significantly different to strategic action, Habermas claims, communicative action requires 'communicatively achieved agreement [*which*] has a rational basis; it cannot be imposed by either party, whether instrumentally through intervention in the situation directly or strategically through influencing the decisions of opponents' (1984, p. 287). Any attempt to gain agreement in a forced or strategic way, Habermas claims, is unlikely to be successful. Obviously, a clear argument can be levied here that the teachers' role is to direct and focus learning. Indeed, in England, teachers are directly accountable, through performance management, for their pupil's progress. What Habermas allows us to consider is that learning is not fully controlled by teachers, although they hopefully significantly influence it. This requires us to shift the focus to recognising that pupils have a role in controlling and regulating their learning. Agreeing actions through communicative processes such as feedback should be considered to help align intentions and consequences, through negotiated meanings.

The fundamental concepts underpinning the ways in which Habermas conceptualises his contribution require further attention. This is important for considering the possibilities and the limitations of his ideas related to pupil feedback. Firstly, his concern is with rationality and knowledge. Habermas offers a detailed exposition of the ways in which he understands knowledge, offering his views on how it is constructed. His position has been explored and critiqued within philosophy. In-depth analysis of his philosophical position has been afforded by many philosophers and formed the subject of considerable debate and contention (see Lyotard, 1994; McCarthy, 1981; Ricoeur, 2008 for such accounts).

As with any philosophical position, it is framed by certain values beliefs and insights. Highlighting what these are is the important purpose of this section so that some justification of the relevance of Habermas' position can be deliberated for application to understanding notions of feedback. Habermas identifies a close link

between rationality and knowledge. He claims that rationality is not about possession of knowledge but about how speaking acting people acquire and use it (1984, p. 9). It is related to the ways 'truths' are expressed and argued for in their particular contexts. Therefore, whether they are grounded in the objective world or whether they are propositional and related to a proposed objective world, which could be criticised and contested, both are relevant. For Habermas, understanding rationality draws together propositional knowledge (what might be for the individual subject) together with the objective, which, may be used in different ways for different purposes. He distinguishes goal-orientated purposes from phenomenological ones, in which rational expressions 'have character of meaningful actions intelligible in their context, through which the actor relates to something in the objective world' (1984, p. 13).

Habermas promotes his position on knowledge, which incorporates both the objective goal-orientated world as well as the subjective phenomenological world. Moran and Murphy (2012) discuss Habermas' perspective as being a 'philosophy of between'. Of course, embracing such opposites and sitting 'between' transitionally opposing perspectives could be considered impossible for those at either end of this particular philosophical debate. Yet his attempt to bring these two sides together offers an attractive one for teachers and researchers who desperately seek to hold, in some kind of tension, the objective realities of our goal-orientated test-driven education system with the uniqueness of each child in a learning encounter. For Habermas, the tension (between the objective and the subjective) is maintained by reasoned argument. Thus, for Habermas, each participant, in communicative activity, needs to take a position in which each can offer explanation and reason for their view. As part of this process, argumentation is also a feature in which the basis for a perspective is developed through discourse. Here validity claims may be defended or criticised. Thus argumentation is important as part of the process of learning and, by extension, formative feedback in the classroom. Through argumentation, mistakes can be corrected, and failed interventions amended. It allows other positions to be considered as part of the learning process. For Habermas, the focus of argumentation will have both normative and moral dimensions. Norms would be themes with particular domains that have relevance to all, clearly deserving recognition. 'Valid norms must be capable in principle of meeting with the rationally motivated approach of everyone affected under conditions that neutralise all motives except that of cooperatively seeking the truth' (1984, p. 19).

Thus, within our school system, the national curriculum could be presented as a norm as part of the focus of learning. It can, therefore, have a legitimate place in communicative acts between the teacher and learner (obviously a vital consideration). However, each participant will engage with such norms differently, which would form the focus of rational discussion. Argumentation is therefore the process of reflective continuation, with different means of action orientated to reaching understanding. Although argumentation may be normatively regulated, through existing external agreed knowledge, it should be discussed, redeemed or rejected by participants (p. 25). If we are to draw from Habermas' insights here we will need to consider whether, and if so in what ways, the process of feedback should include elements of argumentation.

In addition to the way in which norms are rationalised and argued, there is an additional assumption which is central to Habermas' thinking. This is the notion of lifeworld (*Lebenswelf*). This pervades his thinking, in that all attempts to develop

knowledge and understanding must take notice of each individual's own beliefs and convictions. 'The structures of the lifeworld lay down the forms of intersubjectivity of possible understanding' (1987, p. 126). Habermas therefore recognises that in each learning encounter, acknowledgement must be given to the objective world; the shared community (social world); and the individuals own lifeworld (subjective world). This will include previously successful and unsuccessful encounters with assessment and feedback, with all the hopes, fears and expectations that these call forth. Each has validity claims, for its significance, that require some consideration as interpretation of new meanings emerge through arguments and communication. The relative proportions or weightings of each may alter in different contexts, yet the importance of all three worlds remains a priority (p. 100).

The underpinning notions which Habermas discusses here offer interesting insights into how feedback can be further conceptualised. Some of the limitations in current practices and inconsistencies in effectiveness can be usefully explored by reference to Habermas' thinking. The focus for feedback, whether it is positive, negative, descriptive or evaluative, task-focused or person-focused, may be usefully explored in terms of rational and argumentative processes, which are used to interpret the next steps for learning. Feedback may be interpreted differently by 'actors'. Accordingly, the assumption that it can offer a stable and unambiguous way of influencing learning may be contested. Another way of understanding the potential of feedback in Habermas' terms would be as a form of communication in which 'participants rely on problematic and unclarified presuppositions and feel their way from one occasional commonality to the next'. (Habermas, 1984, p. 101). As each actor draws on the 'three worlds' differently, even if there is agreement in the way that feedback is interpreted, this still leaves unresolved the way in which action is subsequently implemented. Through communicative action, the processes of communication are seen as a way of co-coordinating future action. Thus, communication acts as a vehicle for sharing judgements about what has been achieved, for interpretation of what is needed next and for negotiation of possible actions to move forwards. These need to be drawn from the perspectives of each actor. There are assumptions in the classroom context that all actors will choose to engage fully in this process. Recognition of research by Dweck (2012) and Carr and Claxton (2002) indicate that those children who may be less inclined to develop their learning may benefit from more specific communication which helps change their disposition and understanding of their own agency. This leads to a further area of clarification in applying Habermas' theory. Since the feedback being considered relates to communication between a teacher and a pupil, further justification is needed as to whether children are able to participate in this power dynamic. Additionally, whether children are developmentally competent to engage in the processes of communication and thinking, which Habermas promotes, requires exploration.

Habermas does not give much consideration to how his ideas might be developed in school contexts. However, his work adequately indicates that institutions, such as schools, fit into his ideas of communities and domains in society and that he relates some of his ideas to learning. Habermas seems to take on Dewey's notion of schools being a 'weak public' (Dewey, 1927). There are two further factors to be teased out in this paper with important relevance to applying Habermas' thinking to the pupils' role and relationships within feedback. Firstly, children's developmental position and secondly, their power status.

Understanding the pupil/teacher relationship in feedback using Habermasian perspectives

If Habermas' thinking on communicative action is to be relevant for considering how feedback might be better understood and utilised in classrooms, attempts to better understand the teacher/pupil relationship are important. A particular dimension of understanding feedback practices must be the extent to which a recipient is able to consider next steps in learning which they have hitherto not yet understood or grasped. If the recipient is a child, does his/her more limited conceptual framework limit his/her capacity to engage with feedback? Does he draw on what adults would consider to be irrational and does his/her previous experience frighten him/her? Such issues have been raised in the literature (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1989, 1998) and relate to the importance of pupils gaining feedback that they can link to their own existing capabilities and achievements purposefully. What needs further probing as we explore what Habermas offers is not only whether the pupil can respond to the content messages in feedback, but also to the moral and rational skills required. If we are to take on Habermas' principles that require pupils to enter into a communicative exchange, in which each actor presents and justifies his/her own views and meaningfully negotiates a way forward with agreed action, then a range of additional skills are needed. Habermas (1990) has already devoted attention to issues of both cognitive and moral development. He recognised that learners' moral consciousness has a significant role in the learning process. Habermas argues that beneath cognitive strands of learning and knowledge lies a moral consciousness which will shape learners' identity, judgements, interpretations and skills in reciprocity. He draws on Kohlberg's theory, highlighting that moral judgements have cognitive content, some universalistic principles and are dependent on discourse. Kohlberg's theory, which Habermas positions as his starting point, outlines a developmental model for the formation of reversibility, universality and reciprocity. Transition through the stages in this model is part of the learning process in which learners become more skilled at using their moral judgement through argumentation. They become more skilled at recognising competing perspectives, and deciding how they will move from discourse to action in their own learning. Habermas, in recognising that Kohlberg's theory may not fully explain all the he needs, also draws on Robert Selman's work on perspective taking (1990). Habermas considers that Selman's work offers some important insights into understanding the extent to which children are able to engage with others reciprocally. Habermas concludes that from as young an age as 5 children, are increasingly able to recognise the differentiated roles of others and increasingly, from the age of 7, form reciprocal relationships (from Habermas, 1990, pp. 142–143). Habermas also indicates the capacity for a child to communicate is fully possible by the ages of 5–9 when the processes of acquiring language is complete. Accordingly, there are no specific developmental barriers to the processes of communicative action being increasingly developed with children from the age of about 7. Indeed, it could be argued that being more specific in trying to engage with such processes may enable and enhance these inherent skills as well as the specific learning targeted in feedback (This will be further developed later in this paper).

Having argued that the dimension of developmental capacity is not a significant limiting factor in further developing Habermas' ideas, a dimension that may create more of an issue needs to be tackled. This concerns the power dynamic between the

teacher and the pupil. A significant strand of Habermas' writing links to the nature of the relationships between individuals. So, in addition to the way knowledge is understood, shared and interpreted, and alongside moral consciousness and judgement, are issues related to power and democracy in the process of communicative action. How does the power dynamic function within feedback, and in what ways does what is visible (written) actually reflect feedback processes? The literature highlights that often feedback is seen as one way teachers give feedback and pupils are supposed to receive and act on it. Recognition that the pupils' role may be more complex, and that closing the learning gap is not a unidirectional simplistic process has prompted a search for a different theoretical position. However, pursuing Habermas' theory requires a very different power dynamic. It is important that in exploring a different position, there are legitimate grounds for doing so both theoretically and practically. This is a considerable area for discussion, but will have adequate if limited attention in this paper.

An important consideration for Habermas, and one that gives purpose to his notion of communicative action, is deliberative democracy. Habermas is not alone in promoting deliberative democracy. Conceptually, it is given considerable attention in sociology and politics (see Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Gutmann and Thompson (2004) summarise deliberative democracy by explaining that it 'affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representations …. In deliberative democracy an important way these agents (persons) take part is by presenting and responding to reasons, or by demanding that their representatives do so …. These reasons are meant to produce a justifiable decision and to express the value of mutual respect' (p. 3). The problematic issue for consideration in the context of this paper, which includes children, is the extent to which children are seen as part of the democratic process, with particular reference to the inherent power differences between teachers and pupils. Our social and political systems exclude children from their formal democratic processes. In line with Selman's model (Habermas, 1990), children are still developing their skills in mutual respect from the ages of 10–15. Without these abilities, democratic encounters may not be fully possible. Although democratic processes may be exclusive in many ways, Habermas may be considered to regard democracy as part of the legitimising collective for groups in society … perhaps at the expense of individual freedoms and human rights. There is no doubt, that within schools, teachers and pupils are not equals and thus we must question whether democracy can be used as a driving force underpinning communicative encounters.

Although Habermas presents deliberative democracy as an important foundation for communication, it does not necessarily need to be all encompassing. His recognition that there may be three worlds (objective, social and subjective) which should feature in communicative interactions, agreements for decisions about actions made between individuals may differ. Within the school system, there is clearly an imposed 'objective world' which looms large in every teacher's view of what needs to be learnt and how pupils must demonstrate their learning, yet there are different ways in which the social context and learners' views can be shared and negotiated in relation to this objective world. Even though schooling as a whole forms part of the political system which is governed through democracy in the western world, democratic principles remain more loosely articulated within the school system. Part of the function of the school is to prepare pupils to become citizens within our democratic society. What is particularly of interest in this paper is the way in which

agreements are reached through the feedback process. This may be part of a process of leading towards democracy, rather than being fully democratic. Kreisberg's notion of *power with* rather than *power over* (Torrance & Pryor, 1998, p. 82) offers a useful alternative for articulating the power distinction being suggested. Hence, what is most valuable to draw from Habermas is his notion of deliberation. The use of the term deliberative as distinct from participatory democracy highlights the importance of the procedural. It emphasises the responsibility and consequences as a processes of being part of a social dimension to citizenship. Consideration in terms of 'participation' is rather more confined to being merely involved, rather than how the individual becomes involved and sustains engagement. Englund (2006) suggests deliberation is 'mutual and carefully-balanced consideration of different alternatives' (p. 506). This is certainly something that should be an aspiration for schooling to include. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) promote the idea that education systems need to ensure that pupils are enabled to be deliberative. They claim 'schools should aim to develop their student's capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate their understandings to other people and engage in the give-and-take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions' (p. 359).

Englund (2006) considers Habermas' notion of deliberative democracy to be less useful in schools. He recognises (from Dewey, 1927) that schools are 'weak publics', in which the distinctions between the public and the private are more blurred (Englund, 2006, p. 514). Schools, he contends, have a pluralism in which different views of knowledge and values need, to some extent, to co-exist. Hence, he suggests that drawing Habermas' ideas of deliberative democracy and communicative action together could prove more relevant in the school context through consideration of the notion of 'deliberative communication'. This offers an interesting synthesis of the Habermasian stance on the centrality of purposeful communication and the coming together of different perspectives for a classroom context. Englund offers five characteristics of deliberative communication within school contexts. These seem to have a potential application to how we may move forward our understanding of feedback practices.

(1) Different views are confronted with one another along with arguments for these views.
(2) There is tolerance and respect for these other perspectives.
(3) Elements of collective will formation are present (i.e. trying to reach consensus).
(4) Authorities or traditional views can be questioned and challenged (recognising the relationships between the private and the public).
(5) There is scope for students to communicate and deliberate without teacher control (summarised from Englund, 2006, p. 512).

What Englund offers is a useful application of aspects of Habermas' thinking, yet it seems lacking. Englund's synthesis seems to give insufficient scope for pragmatics, and the recognition of social action, which is implicit in Habermas' original notion of communicative action. Englund's idea for 'deliberative communication' might be further strengthened by recognising and incorporating the importance of consequences. Hence, the phrase 'deliberative communicative action' may more fully embrace Habermas' ideas. Perhaps it is a liberty to connect these two aspects of Habermas' thinking. Yet they seem to reflect the essence of his thinking as it

might be applied to a school context involving pupils. It is from this theoretical position the paper moves forward to considering a more specific application to feedback processes.

How does Habermas' notion of (deliberative) communicative action enable us to further understand feedback?

As a starting point for teasing out some more specific points for application for Habermas' theory, there is a warning, and a stern one. It is drawn from Habermas himself, who recognises that the views he offers may sit in tension with increasing colonisation of institutions such as schools. This might be seen in terms of education being colonised by an economic agenda so that the purposes of schooling become more influenced by measurable economic currency and outcomes than they are by teaching and learning relationships. Habermas' comments on colonisation as being characterised by the 'bureaucratization of decisions, duties and rights, responsibilities and dependencies' and redefines 'goals, relations and services, life-spaces and life-times' (Habermas, 1987, p. 322). This results in teaching, learning and knowledge being detached from lifeworlds and colonised by particular reproducing traditions which promote a particular performativity discourse. For us to benefit from Habermas' thinking, as applied to feedback, there needs to be openness for learners to offer their perspectives and for teachers to recognise that a unidirectional focused feedback statement aimed at closing the learning gap may be limiting. In recognising that there is scope for other ways, some suggestions for developing feedback using (deliberative) communicative action are offered.

Making teaching intentions and learning targets explicit

Feedback may be focused on specific aspects of teaching and focused lesson objectives. The 'objective world', as part of the performivity discourse, in which there are prescribed norms and expectations for the curriculum and achievement is very real for schools. Indeed, they seem to pervade the learning environment in the UK. These cannot be ignored. However, they need to be simply justified and related to the school, classroom and community contexts, and learners need the space to link them to their own understandings and aspirations. Making teaching intentions and learning goals specific is an important dimension of classroom practice and one which helps to make transparent the prescribed curriculum for both teacher and pupil. Furthermore, ways in which pupils need to make their learning 'visible' (Hattie, 2009), whether through classroom tasks, tests, assessments and examinations, should be espoused. These form part of the feedback context.

Recognising that feedback is able to link the past, present and future

Recognising that feedback is able to link the past, present and future in relation to what is learnt, how it is learnt and what might happen next. Careful consideration should be given to the balance of each of these so that neither the teacher nor the learner overly prioritises one over the others. An important dimension of developing feedback drawing on Habermas' principles highlights the importance of all participants being able to draw on their previous experiences. For the pupils, this may include previous fears, anxieties, failures or successes. It may involve articulating

their own self-referenced perceptions of the learning journey. It could also include their perceptions of peer pressures or external influences, entrenched or emerging. Their aspirations and motivations for their next steps of learning are, therefore, not disconnected from the journey that proceeds. The teacher should also share his/her own understanding of each child and the unique ways in which she/he regards the learners progress and how the past, present and future might look and could be altered.

Giving genuine space to the learners' and teachers' own priorities

Giving genuine space to the learners' and teachers' own priorities for learning in terms of content, process and disposition. It may well be that the priorities of the teacher and learner differ and do not closely relate to normative requirements. As part of the experience of engaging with feedback, pupils and teachers need scope for justifying their perspectives. This need not be on a one-to-one basis at every moment of feedback. It could be part of small group discussion and occasional one-to-one encounters. It could also be with teaching assistants and learning support workers who are appropriately trained.

Opportunities for learners to articulate their own interests, priorities, barriers, opposition, aspirations need to form part of the communication of feedback. This is perhaps where Habermas' ideas are more difficult to relate to the realities of classrooms without careful consideration and purposeful planning. If feedback is merely conceived of as being a mechanism for closing a learning gap between what is known and what is unknown, there is no account given to the ways in which the pupil owns and regulates that learning gap. It may be that for some children, with particular learning dispositions, a tightly focused system of focused feedback may work well and be an important part of the way in which they manage and regulate their learning so that it is well aligned to the intentions of teaching. For other pupils, there may be little alignment of teacher intention to pupils' learning aspirations. Tightly focused feedback, which may have all the positive effect characteristics, summarised by Hattie and Timperley (2007), Shute (2008) and Black and Wiliam (1998), may yield little benefit. Where pupils clearly take little regard of the feedback given, entering into a process of communicative action may be a way forward. Here, the pupil would be invited to talk about three distinct 'worlds' from his or her own perspective: the content of learning (objective world), the classroom and lesson context (social world), his/her own personal priorities and aspirations (lifeworld). There would also be an expectation that the pupil would argue for his/her views. The views and priorities of the teacher (or support worker) would also be shared and argued as part of the collaborative communication. This process would allow space for the pupil to air his/her own views which may have three key advantages. Firstly, it exposes rather than suppresses the pupils' views, illustrating that someone wants to hear. Secondly, the process of articulating your views, achievements, aspirations and difficulties can sometimes enable these to be more clearly crystallised. Thirdly, it gives the teacher useful insight into how learning and teaching may need to be adjusted to better align curriculum priorities with the pupils own learning agenda. Furthermore, it offers a practical context for Kreisberg's notion of *power with* (op cit).

Developing the role of argument in the process of communicative action needs careful consideration

Habermas is clear to promote the role of offering reasoned justification for the perspectives advanced. This would hold equally for teachers and pupils, and could form the basis from which agreement emerges. The level of abstract thinking which pupils might be able (or willing) to apply to their thinking will vary to some extent with the child's age. It will also vary in terms of the relative positioning the pupil choses to take in balancing his/her 'three worlds'. The teacher (or adult) role in the process of communicative action may need to be aimed at helping to offer a justifiable reason for the pupil to consider rebalancing or repositioning these three worlds. Even though the content of the subject-specific feedback may remain the same, the mode of communication, the appeal to reason and the recognition of pupil priorities, each has a place in the pupils choosing to engage with the feedback. Pupils, therefore, need to be helped to think through their reasoning and justification. For younger children, this may involve some structured questions or prompts which can aid their thinking. These higher level thinking skills themselves form part of their learning and are a feature of engaging with the assessment and feedback process. The metacognitive requirements implicit here should be seen as developmental and part of formative assessment demonstrated through 'assessment as learning' (Dann, 2014). There is an interesting juxtaposition here between assessment and learning. This illustrates that the process of being engaged in understanding and interpreting feedback becomes part of pupils' own learning processes (AaL).

Recognising the age of the child in developing feedback through communicative action

Recognising the age of the child in developing feedback through communicative action requires adapting processes. Planning appropriate support for enabling the pupil to articulate a reasoned justification for his/her engagement with learning and with feedback should be considered. Younger children, whose metacognitive skills are more limited, may bring less rational and reasoned arguments. The process of communicative action as a forum to help develop metacognive skills is an important dimension and locates this form of feedback as part of AaL. Additionally, for those under age 10, drawing on Selman's theory (op cit), the adult needs to acknowledge that relationships are not fully mutual, and that the children's perspective is based on a more limited sense of the 'other'. Nevertheless, part of the discussion about perspectives and sharing views can be useful to help the learner become more able to see other views. Such processes could usefully enable them to develop the skills to begin to step outside themselves as their maturity increases. The way in which feedback is shared for those children using communicative action will therefore have to be developed in age-appropriate ways. At the initial phase of introduction, it is suggested that feedback using communicative action should be one to one and outside a particular lesson context.

Consideration timing and context

Consideration timing and context will form the basis of the feasibility of developing feedback practices. Unless the ideas suggested in this paper can be related to the

realities of classrooms, there is little likelihood that feedback using communicative action can move beyond the theoretical foundation that this paper offers. In the beginning, to ground the ideas into the realities of classrooms, there needs to be a sense in which pupils, who struggle to progress adequately, and for whom conventional feedback strategies seems to offer little relevance, can be offered an alternative feedback approach. The number of pupils selected in any classroom context would need to be small and one-to-one discussions developed within timetabled 'correction time', 'fix it time', 'finishing off time' as part of a differentiated approach. The idea that this is deliberative, valued and planned is an important dimension of this approach. At the start, the deliberative approach may be one-sided, initiated by the teacher. However, clearly it is important to help the pupil to be deliberative in his/her engagement through genuine open involvement.

Balancing written and spoken communication in the process of giving feedback

Much of the feedback given by teachers, considered by research, relates to written feedback. It is more tangible in nature and thus far more easily analysed. Written feedback becomes part of the documentary evidence often used in schools for 'making practice visible' (Plum, 2012, p. 496). Furthermore, and more importantly, it can be composed outside the classroom context and thus not compete for time in the teaching and learning classroom encounters. Any attempt to incorporate aspects of Communicative Action into the processes of making feedback more successful requires creating space for dialogue. This is currently particularly contentious in the UK educational arena, in which spoken language has been given little status in the new National Curriculum. Such a position sits alongside a political ideology claiming, with the words of Texan President Lyndon B. Johnson, 'you aren't learning anything when you're talking'. (Gove, 2013). If Habermas' theory is to have value in the feedback process, it requires language, dialogue and communication to be deliberate, meaningful and genuine. Feedback using CA can be linked to what is written, it can also be given visibility as a process, quite a different visibility from that which seems to have become the currency, to be measured in our school accountability systems.

Seeking genuine agreement which sets out agreed actions

Seeking genuine agreement which sets out agreed actions which are followed up and discussed in the future. The process of communicative action should be ongoing and developmental. Part of the discussion between participants should be about time frames and be part of ongoing discussions about how actions will move forward. As actions develop, they may be perceived differently by participants. Unless communication is deliberative and ongoing if will be fairly futile as a component of enabling learning to progress.

Education for adults involved in feedback using Communicative Action will be essential

A key component of educating staff in schools would be ensuring that adults/teachers understand the difference between giving 'strategic' feedback aimed at changing the pupils' actions to be in line with teachers' intentions, and feedback using CA.

Furthermore, children who struggle to respond to more conventional feedback are more likely to be chosen for strategies using CA. Skills in listening and giving the child his/her voice as well as facilitating him/her to offer reasoned arguments, in an age appropriate way, will need to feature in the education programme.

Testing theory

This paper has attempted to consider Habermas' theory of Communicative Action in relation to research evidence, possibilities and limitations of what we know about pupil feedback. The links forged illuminate how Habermas considered communication as essential to giving meaning to action as well as recognising that each individual should have the opportunity to reason, argue and present his/her views so that an agreed way forward is reached. The ideas elicited from Habermas offer an additional layer of thinking that has hitherto not been part of the way in which feedback has been considered. This paper is theoretical and needs to be followed by some careful application and development in classroom contexts. The theoretical foundations offered in this paper are already part of a small-scale empirical study in primary school settings and offer rich opportunities for further research and investigation.

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Notes on contributor

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