The Intersection of Rousseau's Participatory Democracy and Habermas' Communicative Action: a transformation in geography education

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Article Info	ABSTRACT

In the contemporary world, education is recognized as a fundamental tool for fostering active, responsible, and capable citizens who require processes that strengthen participation, mutual understanding, and rational dialogue. The present study aims to examine the application of Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas' communicative action in the teaching of spatial sciences, with a particular focus on geography. The research adopts an action research design with an applied orientation. The study population consisted of 24 undergraduate geography students enrolled in the course Urban Geography of Iran. Data were collected and analyzed across 14 instructional sessions through observation, evaluation, and the interpretation of lived experiences within an interpretive framework. The research process followed a cyclical pattern, including problem identification, theoretical review, formation of focus groups, and dialogue-oriented consensus building. Findings indicate that democratic, participatory, and communicative approaches to spatial education emerge gradually and require a process-oriented foundation. Accordingly, the integration of Rousseau's participatory democracy with Habermas' communicative action demands active facilitation by instructors and the reinforcement of intra- and inter-group interactions. The results further reveal that combining these two approaches in geography education—particularly in spatially oriented courses—creates a pathway for transitioning from teacher-centered learning to participatory–discursive learning. This shift enhances skills of spatial analysis, critique, collaboration, and debate, thereby deepening learning and understanding of spatial concepts. Ultimately, the study proposes a practical framework for democratic, interactive, and active education, serving as an illustrative example of implementing these philosophical approaches in higher education.

Introduction

Participation and collaborative learning are central themes in modern educational theory and practice, gaining attention among scholars and practitioners worldwide (Daviran, 2025). Democratic and communicative approaches to education emphasize reciprocal understanding and consensus-building among actors and participants (Jamshidi Rad & Jafarian, 2023). Collaborative learning grounded in democratic principles and communicative learning based on consensus-driven interaction are constructivist approaches with historical roots in the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and John Locke (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2022). These approaches are further enriched through Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas' communicative action.

Although Rousseau and Habermas differ historically, conceptually, and methodologically, both emphasize participation in education and underscore the link between democracy and freedom. In Rousseau's view, participation manifests as the formation of the general will, while in Habermas' framework, it is realized through rational, non-coercive dialogue (Rousseau, 1762/1979; Habermas, 1996). Collective reasoning plays a central role in both theories: Rousseau locates it in the "general will," whereas Habermas situates it in "communicative action" and "rational discourse" (Dryzek, 2000).

Despite Rousseau's focus on outcomes of participation (influencing decision-making and the psychological effects on participants) and Habermas' emphasis on process (discussion and acceptance of rules within free dialogue) (Biswas, 2022; Pateman, 2014; Sobhani Nejad, 2021), both frameworks highlight the importance of freedom and equal participation. Multi-directional involvement in program planning, guided by transparency and mutual understanding, is central to these approaches (Istegeldi et al., 2015).

In educational practice, Rousseau advocates providing opportunities for learners to develop autonomy, responsibility, and civic virtue, enabling them to make independent decisions and participate in collective choices (Pateman, 1970). Habermas, meanwhile, emphasizes collective understanding, exchange of perspectives, and cognitive synergy, wherein learners engage in reasoning and dialogue to reach shared understanding and collective decisions.

Integrating these perspectives enables educators and instructional designers to create participatory and democratic learning environments in schools and universities, fostering both individual and social development. This constructivist approach contrasts with traditional knowledge transmission by integrating learning, understanding, and creation. Teachers implement flexible, adaptive, and exploratory pedagogy, promoting continuous improvement in classroom practices (Hong et al., 2019).

Geographical concepts are inherently spatial, forming the foundation of spatial sciences and presenting information in spatial formats (Daviran, 2025). Place-based courses demand instructional strategies that integrate theoretical and practical dimensions. Evidence suggests that synergistic, structured approaches involving active participation of both instructors and learners are the most effective for spatial learning. Active and collaborative

learning enhances knowledge retention, deepens understanding, and increases learner engagement (Alton-Lee, 2012).

This study aims to operationalize a combined pedagogical framework integrating Rousseau's participatory democracy with Habermas' communicative action in university-level geography education. As an innovative approach, it examines how this integrative model enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of spatial sciences learning in students' cognitive and social development.

1. Democratic and Communicative Philosophy Approaches in Geography Education

From a historical perspective, the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in The Social Contract can be considered a foundational basis for participatory democracy. Rousseau, emphasizing freedom, natural development, and the education of responsible citizens, established the theoretical and philosophical foundations of this approach (Shahbazi, 2022). He argued that the "general will" should be directly formed by the people themselves, who act as lawmakers. In this framework, political participation is not only a fundamental right but also a means of cultivating civic virtues and strengthening social cohesion (Rousseau, 1762; Barber, 1984).

Undoubtedly, Rousseau's ideas also hold a prominent place in practical education and can serve as an effective foundation for educational processes (Moradi & Ramezani, 2023). For Rousseau, the starting point of education is understanding the student and the stages of their cognitive development. He emphasized that aligning the curriculum with the developmental needs of learners plays a critical role in the teaching-learning process (Rousseau, 2010). Accordingly, the teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but serves as a guide and facilitator, providing a safe and supportive learning environment and acting as a practical and trustworthy role model for students.

Rousseau also stressed the necessity of employing modern teaching methods and argued that adherence to traditional approaches would hinder students' intellectual development. He maintained that curricula should be problem-based to guide learners toward critical thinking, deep reflection, and real-life experiences (Gutek, 2005). From this perspective, democratic learning is defined as a natural and self-driven process that originates within the individual rather than being externally imposed. Education should prepare individuals not only for personal life but also to act as aware, responsible, and participatory citizens in society.

Educational research indicates that the fundamental principles of Rousseau's philosophy, including freedom in learning, natural education, and personal and moral development, have the potential to challenge contemporary educational models and foster their development (Trohler, 2023). In line with this, Rousseau's "education according to nature" emphasizes harmonizing education with the natural course of development and avoiding direct and authoritarian intervention by the teacher. In this view, the teacher's role is to provide a space where learners can grow freely and autonomously. Such a horizontal relationship between teacher and student constitutes a core element of democratic education (Bui & Bui, 2021).

Rousseau's theory has influenced thinkers such as Daniel Defoe, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Piaget, while he himself was influenced by earlier philosophers. It is suggested that Émile was shaped by Hayy ibn Yaqzan by Avicenna and Ibn Tufail (Önder, 2018). Later, this theory was expanded by various thinkers, particularly in social and educational contexts, and connected with contemporary theories, including Jürgen Habermas's communicative discourse.

Habermas, influenced by Karl Marx and Max Weber, introduced the concept of "communicative understanding," referring to mutual comprehension and agreement among agents and actors (Jamshidi-Rad & Jafarian, 2025, 28). In this process, communications are disseminated in ways that integrate them into public spheres and shape them through communicative action (Habermas, 1996, 360). Consequently, the discursive process, within the framework of recognizing democratic structures, legitimizes existing policies in line with public interests (Tarahani & Partovi, 2017, 3).

According to Habermas, in education, the application of reasoning and intellectual exchange is of particular importance. This approach transforms the learning environment from passive to active, encouraging learners to participate proactively (Gholami, 2018, 54). It is based on tolerance and the avoidance of imposing beliefs, facilitating democratic consensus, inquiry, exploration, communication skills, active listening, attention, fair critique, and the reduction of hasty judgments, thereby preventing dogmatism and suppression (Habermas, 1991).

The educational structure based on this approach integrates teachers and learners in a bidirectional interaction, where course content is discussed and agreed upon in a deliberative space. Core components of communicative-action education include the public sphere, lifeworld, system elimination, and rational action (Daviran, 2026). Within this framework, introverted and extroverted educational perspectives are understood in the context of the lifeworld, and any top-down interpretation is complemented by bottom-up understanding within the structural context of the lifeworld (Siavoshi, 2016).

Rousseau argues that the general will is genuinely "general" only when the law originates from all members of society and applies equally to them. However, in societies marked by extensive economic or cultural diversity, the effects of legislation cannot be distributed uniformly, and minority groups may therefore experience harm or marginalization (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). In a similar vein, Bertram (2012) observes that Rousseau at times treats the general will as a reality that transcends existing laws; when this ideal comes into conflict with the actual decisions of citizens, it can give rise to inequality, social tension, and the neglect of minority perspectives. Consistent with this interpretation, Pouwels (2023), in a study of *Émile*, shows that Rousseau's educational approach tends toward "controlling conflict," "delaying confrontations," and "guiding social experience." While such strategies may serve the goal of preserving unity and collective harmony, they also risk creating a relatively conflict-free environment in which dissenting voices or minority viewpoints are less likely to be heard. By contrast, Habermas's theory of communicative action insists that all participants—including minorities—must have equal

opportunities to present arguments and engage in dialogue (Habermas, 1984). This fundamental divergence clearly highlights the theoretical tension between Rousseau's and Habermas's approaches.

In the educational context, this tension is managed in a practical and tangible manner. To achieve this, learners are organized into small, diverse groups to prevent any single majority from dominating the flow of discussion. Additionally, brief, intensive, and rotating sessions are implemented to ensure that all participants—especially those with less experience or belonging to minority groups—have the opportunity to express their perspectives. The gradual application of these approaches has led to increased active participation and the documentation of a wide range of viewpoints. This process demonstrates the practical realization of Habermasian principles of equal communicative participation in the classroom, while simultaneously observing certain Rousseauian considerations to foster collective engagement. As a result, a balance between collective unity and the plurality of voices is established, significantly enhancing both the critical richness and the educational legitimacy of classroom activities.

However, Rousseau's concept of the general will and direct participation aligns with Habermas's communicative-action theory. Despite methodological differences, both aim to realize a democratic, ethical, and participatory society. Education, in both frameworks, serves to cultivate citizens capable of active and responsible social engagement. This conceptual link can guide the design of participatory educational systems today, offering a model of governance and education in which equality, free dialogue, and shared responsibility are fundamental values.

In geography courses, much of the content is based on spatial data, with assessment indicators derived directly from spatial characteristics. Place, as the core of geography, plays a fundamental role in organizing human experiences and judgments about the world (Shakoei, 2011). Scholars in human geography argue that place is not merely a mental reflection; it emerges from everyday life and lived experiences and becomes part of individuals' identity (Sajjadian & Damanbagh, 2021).

Learning place-based concepts requires deep conceptual understanding, precise spatial knowledge, and mental visualization of places and their meanings (Daviran, 2023). Traditional educational methods are often ineffective and fail to ensure lasting learning. Therefore, the teaching of spatially-based courses should be reconsidered through active teacher-learner interaction, employing participatory, democratic, and communicative-action approaches. According to the philosophical principles derived from Rousseau and Habermas, this approach in geography education can be implemented through dialogue, debate, collective reasoning, active learner participation, shared responsibility, rational action, exploration, interactive communication, connection with the living environment, and active engagement of both teacher and learners.

Evaluating the outcomes of implementing democratic and communicative educational approaches requires a qualitative framework capable of systematically presenting the resulting outputs. Action research is a participatory and democratic method in which the

researcher is both an observer and an agent of change within the phenomenon under study (Baskerville, 1999; Khashaei & Farsi, 2024). This approach is designed to bridge action and reflection, theory and practice, and is grounded in four key principles: emphasis on practical action and change, focus on the problem, systematic and organic processes, and collaboration based on mutual trust (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

The present study employs an action research framework to evaluate and explore the process of implementing a democratic, participatory, and communicative educational model in place-based geography courses (Urban Geography and Spatial Analysis).

2.Methodology

The present study was conducted using a qualitative approach based on the action research method. In this process, the researcher acted as a facilitator of activities, while undergraduate geography students served as the target group of the study. The research population consisted of 24 undergraduate students enrolled in the course "Urban Geography of Iran" during one academic semester.

The action research process was designed and implemented in several stages. In the first stage, students were divided into class groups to facilitate collective and participatory activities, inspired by Rousseau's concept of participatory democracy. Subsequently, the learning environment was structured with an emphasis on dialogical discourse and the free exchange of ideas, drawing on Habermas' approach and his Theory of Communicative Action. Throughout the semester, the researcher guided the learning process as a facilitator, recorded observations, and provided continuous feedback to enable the improvement and refinement of the educational process.

Data were collected using participant observation, feedback on behaviors, the extent of dialogue and student interactions, field notes, and researcher feedback. Participant observation, as an innovative method in action research, involves the researcher immersing themselves in the environment, listening, observing, and experiencing reality alongside participants, functioning as an action research facilitator within educational settings (Marshal & Rossman, 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2009; Mertler, 2024; Khashaei & Farsi, 2024).

Data analysis and reporting were conducted based on an action research framework, wherein the findings from participant observation were analyzed through reflective cycles, including problem identification, planning, action, observation, and reflection. The primary focus of the analysis was on continuous improvement, active student participation, and transformation in their educational behaviors and attitudes. Outputs were interpreted not independently, but within the context of the action research process and based on observed changes in student behavior, interactions, and learning. Examples of direct evidence and researcher insights were presented.

To examine the validity and reliability of the action research design, aligned with its stages (problem identification, formation of a focus group, design of participatory activities, implementation, facilitation, and reflection), the process was reviewed by 25 experts,

including 10 geography faculty members and 15 educational sciences faculty members (specializing in curriculum planning, philosophy, and educational management). All experts agreed with the proposed principles and stages and confirmed the content validity of the model.

3. Findings and Discussion

The first step in action research is the identification and definition of the problem. In the present study, the main challenge in place-based geography education was an overreliance on information transmission and a teacher-centered approach, which limited active student participation and hindered the development of critical dialogue. This highlighted the need for reconsidering and implementing an alternative instructional approach.

Drawing on Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas's communicative action, a combined framework was employed to foster active engagement, enhance critical dialogue, and cultivate students who are responsible, participatory, and capable of spatial analysis. Accordingly, the action research was designed and implemented.

Students were initially organized into six focal groups of four, and learning activities were structured according to the course syllabus in a participatory format. Students collaboratively studied session materials and presented key concepts within their groups. Two-hour sessions facilitated group discussions on session topics in an interactive, deliberative environment. The instructor acted as a facilitator, guiding discussions based on mutual respect, rational argumentation, and consensus-building. This transformed the classroom from a passive, transmission-based model into a participatory–deliberative learning environment that strengthened students' analytical and critical thinking skills.

During the group discussions, the researcher participated actively with the students, facilitating the flow of dialogue and systematically documenting observations and feedback in comprehensive field notes. The action research unfolded gradually across six key stages problem identification, design of participatory–dialogic activities, implementation, observation, reflection, and refinement. These stages were conducted over 13 instructional sessions, continually promoting change and ongoing enhancement of teaching practices.

3-1. Session One (Initial Phase of Engagement)

Drawing on Rousseau's principles of participatory democracy and Habermas's theory of communicative action—which provide the foundational conditions for fostering participation and dialogue—the first session aimed to establish a welcoming and familiar environment. The session introduced the overall course syllabus and outlined the instructional process to the students.

Students were then invited to form focal groups to discuss course topics, task allocation, and intra-group participation strategies, and to present the outcomes of their discussions. Opportunities for inter-group guidance and discussion were also provided.

Although the main focus of the session was to familiarize students with the course, introduce the project, and clarify the organization of the focal groups, initial engagement was limited. This was attributed to students' prior experiences with traditional classroom

routines and conventional learning practices. Nevertheless, providing autonomy and signaling additional opportunities for participation in subsequent sessions fostered optimism for more active engagement. Students also requested additional time for in-class discussions regarding task distribution and group activities.

The session lasted approximately 70 minutes, with most of the time devoted to student introductions, an overview of the course content, reviewing the syllabus, and explaining the formation and expected participation of the focal groups. Throughout the session, the researcher played a facilitative role by allocating time for questions and discussions, thereby promoting a participatory learning environment.

3.2. Session 2 (Participatory Group Learning)

In the second session, students attended with relative preparedness and formed groups through consultation and mutual deliberation, considering factors such as friendship, roommate relationships, and residence. Course content was distributed among group members, and temporary, accountable representatives were appointed to facilitate inter-group communication. In line with Rousseau's critique of representative democracy, these representatives acted solely as spokespersons and conduits for group opinions, without independent decision-making authority.

Based on the syllabus of *Urban Geography of Iran*, the session focused on understanding the concept, history, influence, and geographical characteristics of Iranian cities. Within their focal groups, students organized their time, engaged in study, and participated in collaborative discussions in both workshop and electronic classroom settings. By collective agreement, the groups first examined the concept of the city and urban geography and consolidated their findings internally. Using laptops and computers, members researched and reviewed foundational concepts to select key points for final presentation. The activity lasted approximately 75 minutes.

3-3. An Example of a Participatory Process in Action Research: Analyzing the Spatial Role of Urban Geography

In the third focus group discussion, themed "The Role of Place in Urban Geography," students presented diverse perspectives as follows:

Student 1 (the initiator), initially somewhat anxious, stated: "Urban geography primarily examines the spatial patterns of city formation and development, with cities being shaped according to their geographical location."

Student 2, looking at the facilitator, added: "Student 1's perspective is valid; however, urban geography extends beyond physical space and also considers human lived space, rather than focusing solely on the physical environment."

Student 3, referring to their notes, observed: "My research, drawing on sources such as the late Hossein Shokouhi, indicates that urban geography is a product of social relations within space, and urban analysis is incomplete without accounting for human interactions in the spatial context."

Student 4, glancing at peers, remarked: "All previous perspectives are valid, yet in my view, urban geography investigates a complex system of spatial relations that encompasses multiple interrelated factors and elements."

Student 1, having calmed down, added: "I also believe that urban phenomena occur within a physical spatial context, and every event is connected to this space. Human behavior manifests within this spatial framework."

Student 2 clarified: "Space is merely a structuring element, not an absolute determinant of human behavior. It provides the context in which humans operate through relational dynamics."

Student 4 intervened: "The perspectives of Students 1 and 2 are correct; thus, human relations and interactions within spatial contexts jointly shape urban geography."

Student 3 added: "Student 4 has accurately summarized my findings. As my peers noted, urban geography examines spatial relations and their interactions across three dimensions: place, humans, and the relationships between them."

The facilitator (researcher) concluded: "Based on your insights, it can be stated that urban geography simultaneously addresses the spatial patterns and social processes of cities. This field not only studies the physical formation and expansion of cities but also analyzes human lived space, social relations, and the interactions among urban elements within a complex, integrated system."

The students looked at each other and briefly referred to their notes while reflecting on the points that had been raised. The facilitator, by observing the students' expressions and smiling, tried to ensure that there was no pressure to accept the statement. At this point, Student 1 stated, "In my opinion, the instructor's sentence encompasses all of our discussions." Student 4 also nodded in agreement, signaling acceptance of the view. Students 2 and 3 shared a similar feeling but mentioned that with further study, they could reach a deeper understanding of the concepts. Nevertheless, they considered this definition to be the most comprehensive summary of the topics discussed in the session. Ultimately, by accepting this comprehensive perspective, which incorporated their considerations, the group reached a consensus regarding the spatial position in urban geography.

Observations indicated that students actively engaged in collaborative research, discussed findings, and identified significant content to form a structured summary. The instructor's role was primarily facilitative, guiding discussions among the groups. Although some students initially displayed hesitation and limited participation, facilitation by the instructor gradually increased their engagement in the collaborative process.

3-4. Sessions 3 to 5 (Intra-Group Collaborative Debate)

In Sessions Three to Five, a portion of the class was dedicated to group-based presentations of consolidated concepts related to urban studies and geography, followed by inter-group discussions. The facilitator (researcher/instructor) asked the focal groups to present the summarized concepts orally, which required active participation from all group members. Despite internal disagreements, students attempted to deliver coherent, unified presentations. However, some difficulties emerged regarding acceptance of reasons for

urban formation and related geographic features, which improved through deeper discussion.

Each group then selected a temporary representative to facilitate inter-group discussion and consensus-building. Other group members observed the discussions and, with facilitator coordination, could contribute to the debate. The group representatives acted solely as intermediaries for conveying consolidated concepts and did not have independent decision-making authority. Final synthesis of discussions was guided by the facilitator, with group members receiving necessary information through their representatives.

3-5. A Sample of Group-Based Action Research: Analyzing the Spatial Role of Urban Geography

During the intergroup focus session, representatives shared their perspectives on the concept of urban geography.

The representative of Group 2 initiated the discussion, stating: "Urban geography analyzes the relationships between humans and space, focusing on their interactions."

The representative of Group 1, looking at their teammates, responded: "Urban geography studies human behavior within spatial contexts, giving it a spatial dimension. Space forms the fundamental structure of urban geography."

The representative of Group 3, critiquing the prior statement, commented: "Space in urban geography only becomes meaningful when considered in relation to human contexts. Urban geography emphasizes the rationale behind city formation, patterns of expansion, internal differences, and interactions among urban elements, considering humans, space, and dependent elements within this framework."

The representative of Group 1, somewhat irritated by Group 3's comment, countered: "Your perspective is superficial. The foundation of geography is space, and geography is a spatial science; humans cannot exist independently of space."

At this point, **the representative of Group 3** responded with a challenging tone: "What is the source of your claim? Who confirms that humans come after space?"

The representative of Group 4 then intervened: "Urban geography is the science of reciprocal relations between humans and the urban environment. Space forms the basis, but it gains meaning through its interaction with humans."

The representative of Group 3, asserting authority, added: "While space is fundamental, it is not sufficient. Other elements such as humans, behavior, and time also play a role."

The representative of Group 1 rejoined: "Time shapes the spatial history and works alongside it. Furthermore, your discussion reflects social studies more than urban geography."

The representative of Group 5, interrupting Group 3, said: "Urban geography focuses on the spatial relationships between humans and the urban environment. The city is not merely a physical space; it is an integration of humans, space, and society."

The representative of Group 3, with a self-assured expression, stated: "All your points are valid, but our extensive research indicates that urban geography adopts a systemic

perspective. It is not confined to a single element like physical space or the urban environment; it derives meaning from the interdependence of all elements. If you wish, you can expand your own studies to reach this understanding."

The representative of Group 1, slightly frustrated, said briefly: "Yes, you are correct." The other groups remained silent.

The **facilitator**, observing the discussion, recognized that continued debate could escalate into conflict. The facilitator intervened: "Students, each group views urban geography from a different perspective. I suggest that for the next session, you document and compare each other's ideas."

Following the facilitator's suggestion, it was decided that in the next round of sessions, the focus groups would record and note each other's key concepts to allow for more precise analysis and a comprehensive synthesis. The facilitator also emphasized that students should maintain mutual respect and actively listen to one another, as their perspectives may not differ as much as they assume. Documenting each other's viewpoints can aid in achieving this understanding.

Findings indicated that selecting representatives initially posed challenges; all members were willing to serve as representatives. Some groups adopted a rotating representation model, while others maintained a fixed representative with active intra-group engagement. A key challenge was the variation in communicative skills and cognitive levels among students, which affected the quality of inter-group discussions. Observations showed that concept transfer within groups was more effective, democratic, and participatory, whereas inter-group discussions were initially competitive, with tendencies toward dominance, power assertion, and limited acceptance of differing viewpoints—contradicting Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas's communicative action principles. Nonetheless, continued practice and active facilitation were expected to improve inter-group participation and align interactions more closely with the principles of participatory democracy and deliberative action. Overall, the findings indicate that intra-group discussions were free, democratic, and constructive, and the facilitator's role was crucial in guiding debates and enhancing the quality of concept transfer among groups.

3-6. Sessions 6 to 8 (Participatory Spatial Analysis)

To strengthen participatory democracy and deliberative skills, the instructional process continued with the topic *"Analysis of the Geographical Features of Iranian Cities Across Historical Periods."* At this stage, the facilitator adopted a more active presence among students, aiming to enhance communication skills and design participatory structures that fostered deeper and more effective classroom and group discourse.

During discussions, principles such as turn-taking, refraining from interrupting others, encouraging minority viewpoints, supporting intellectual diversity, allocating equal participation time, preventing dominance in discourse through reflection, informal voting to gauge group opinion, managing speaking time, and creating a safe environment for open and judgment-free expression were consistently applied.

Students devoted more time than in previous sessions to examining the historical formation of Iranian cities. By analyzing the spatial and structural organization of cities, they identified similarities and differences in urban morphology. This process facilitated inter-group discussions and the achievement of collective understanding within a participatory framework. Sessions were conducted on the technological platform, and students utilized library resources, geography workshops, maps, and historical documents. The focus was on research, study, and information sharing in a collaborative environment.

Findings indicate that intra-group activities aligned well with Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas's communicative action. Active facilitation encouraged students to respect turns and mutual views, reducing one-sidedness and enhancing group interaction while also enabling inter-group engagement. Active participation strengthened students' research and inquiry skills and provided opportunities for healthy competition, fostering analytical and comparative thinking in the study of spatial structures of Iranian cities. Communicative action further facilitated knowledge transfer, alignment of individual and collective perspectives, and consensus-building in urban geography analysis.

Overall, these sessions demonstrate that the combination of Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas's communicative action provides an effective model for teaching urban geography, enhancing not only disciplinary knowledge but also participatory skills, collective discourse, and critical analysis among students.

3-7. Sessions 9 to 12(Intergroup Collaborative Synthesis)

During Sessions Nine to Twelve, the need for participation and consensus among focal groups became evident for conceptual integration in the teaching of urban geography in Iran. Based on Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas's communicative action, a space for equal, rational, and interactive dialogue was established, serving as the primary environment for participatory learning. Experiences from earlier sessions highlighted that fundamental challenges in inter-group discussions emphasized the facilitator's role in guiding free, non-competitive discourse. At this stage, the facilitator aimed to create synergistic interactions among group representatives, fostering effective participation and communicative action.

3-8. A Sample of Intergroup Action Research: Factors in the Formation and Expansion of Cities

In sessions conducted among focus groups, participants presented their perspectives on the factors influencing the formation of cities. It was decided that group representatives would take notes on each other's statements, align them with their own views, and, at the same time, maintain a respectful environment to avoid any tension during discussions.

Representative of Group 3 initiated the discussion and, after a brief pause, stated: According to Dr. Nozarian's Urban Geography of Iran, the primary basis for the formation of cities in historical periods of Iran was access to water sources such as rivers, and it was this access to water that fundamentally led to the emergence of cities.

Representative of Group 2, looking seriously at Group 3, added: Yes, it is correct; access to water is indeed important for city formation. However, it primarily led to the

creation of settlements, which eventually developed into cities. Nevertheless, the role of defensive and security considerations in the expansion of cities should not be overlooked. Many cities were established in mountainous regions due to defensive factors, or large fortresses were constructed.

Representative of Group 1, affirming the statements of Groups 3 and 2, noted: In addition to these two factors, there was another factor that led to the formation of cities away from water sources and mountainous areas. Trade and commerce, especially in Iran's desert cities, significantly influenced the formation and expansion of cities.

Representative of Group 4, reviewing their notes, stated: In recording the opinions of my peers, I observed mentions of water, defense, and trade. Therefore, I would like to add another factor to provide a more complete picture. Beyond the importance of water, some cities were established based on religious patterns and developed in relation to religious elements.

Representative of Group 5, after a brief reflection, said: Yes, religious factors are also important, and our group considers religious and spiritual considerations essential in the formation of certain cities. This representative provided examples such as Mashhad, Karbala, Najaf, and Mecca, explaining that these cities were predominantly formed around religious elements.

Representative of Group 6, scrutinizing their notes, acknowledged the importance of water and said: In most of the studied sources, the initial emphasis was on water access, with city formation often attributed to it. However, I believe water is a foundational factor rather than a driver of urban development. In our view, city expansion also depends on other factors such as industrial and technological advancement.

Representative of Group 3, who had presented the theory of city formation based on water resources, paused after observing the other participants and said: I agree with your points; other factors have also played a role in city formation. Although initially they may have depended on water, they have nonetheless been influential. Overall, we can conclude that city formation and expansion result from multiple factors.

At this point, Representative of Group 4, with a cheerful yet serious demeanor, thanked the other groups and suggested: It would be best to collate our concepts and see what conclusions we can extract from them.

Immediately, Representative of Group 6, smiling at the other members, said: Since I was the last to speak in the first round, I took the opportunity to record your concepts on this sheet. Water, rivers, defense, security, trade, religion, and spirituality were the main factors you mentioned, and our group also identified some of these concepts, such as water and trade.

As the discussion continued, the participants recorded and organized the key concepts summarized by Group 6 to reach a shared understanding.

The facilitator intervened, saying: Dear students, I thank you for conducting the discussion thoughtfully and logically, by listening, critiquing, and accepting each other's perspectives. To consolidate the discussion and reach a common point, it is recommended

that group representatives, in order to deepen the concepts and develop a structured conceptual framework for the formation and expansion of Iranian cities, collaboratively transform the key concepts into a shared statement.

The groups welcomed the facilitator's suggestion and each attempted to construct a sentence based on the key concepts, involving other members in the process. Consequently, the following shared statement was formulated:

"Despite the influence of water resources in the formation of Iranian cities, their expansion was not solely dependent on water; multiple factors—including defensive, religious, commercial, and political factors, sometimes simultaneously or independently—have played a role in the formation and expansion of cities in Iran."

During the second phase of intergroup interactions, although some representatives expressed critiques, overall, the process progressed in a scientific and collaborative atmosphere. Findings indicated that participants came prepared to the sessions and there was little qualitative variation in the presentation of concepts, although occasionally individual characteristics of some participants led to relative advantages in conveying information. This issue was balanced as discussions deepened and continued.

Ultimately, intergroup dialogues led to a consensus among participants, integrating key course concepts and deepening their understanding. This process not only enhanced the academic value of the class but also produced an organized and accepted collective output. The classroom functioned as a collaborative seminar, where participation and communicative interactions reinforced learning and the retention of concepts in students' minds.

In subsequent sessions (Session 13), the topic continued, and further discussions on Iranian urban geography were shared among the groups. The intervals between sessions and breaks provided opportunities for focus groups to review the materials and, if necessary, change their representatives. Findings indicated that students' willingness to participate in shared sessions led to changes in group representatives across sessions, highlighting the engagement of most students in the communicative process.

The findings indicate that, in line with Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas's communicative action, the teaching of urban geography in Iran requires participation and consensus among focus groups, fostering collaborative interaction and rational dialogue. Students had equal opportunities to express their views, while communicative action facilitated idea exchange, collective understanding, and conflict management. The facilitator played a key role in guiding interactions and creating a scholarly, non-competitive environment, enabling agreement and synthesis of key concepts. Rotating representatives and mid-course review sessions further enhanced active participation, making learning a dynamic, participatory, and rational experience

3-9. Sessions 13 and 14(Collaborative Knowledge Consolidation)

Considering the previous sessions, it was necessary to organize the explained content into a collective summary. To this end, group representatives, through mutual consultation and collaboration, divided responsibilities and undertook the task of compiling and integrating

the materials. Consequently, each focal group summarized a portion of Iran's geographical features in terms of form and content and ultimately presented them in class to the instructor and other students. In accordance with the approved course syllabus, the groups endeavored to present their findings within the framework of participatory democracy and communicative action. This process led to a consensual discussion, in which the summarized materials clearly illustrated the characteristics of urban geography in Iran. Such a process demonstrated a deepening of learning and the internalization of concepts among the students.

The instructor, aiming to assess the quality of group work, posed questions regarding the compiled materials to evaluate students' learning. The results indicated that most students were able to respond adequately and provide sufficient explanations. Furthermore, sessions thirteen and fourteen were held as feedback sessions to review previous discussions and identify and correct any gaps or shortcomings. In this stage, the facilitator's role was crucial, guiding the groups in revising and completing their findings. The outcomes of these sessions showed that, through democratic participation and communicative discourse, students had transitioned from passive recipients of knowledge to active producers of concepts. This transformation not only increased their motivation to learn but also enhanced their collaborative and democratic skills.

Overall, the classroom environment reflected a research-oriented model, akin to an academic seminar, where rational discourse and group interaction provided an appropriate setting for exploring spatial concepts. Thus, geography instruction shifted from a static, one-way transmission of knowledge to a dynamic, interactive, and investigative process, enabling students to achieve a deeper understanding of spatial characteristics and relationships.

The action research examining Rousseau's philosophy of participatory democracy and Habermas's theory of communicative action in geography education revealed that students progressed from passive consumers of knowledge about Iran's urban geography to active producers, interpreters, and analysts of spatial concepts. Initially, due to prior educational experiences and traditional learning habits, some students were passive and displayed limited interest in group work. However, with the establishment of focal groups, facilitation of intra-group discussions, and assignment of representatives to convey group perspectives, active participation gradually developed.

Intra-group interactions were characterized by freedom of expression, equal participation, and constructive dialogue, whereas inter-group interactions initially exhibited competitiveness and a tendency toward dominance. Nevertheless, the facilitator's guidance and adherence to the principles of participatory democracy and rational discourse fostered collective consensus. Students, utilizing various resources, analyzed and compared the spatial and structural characteristics of Iranian cities across historical periods, which contributed to deepening their specialized knowledge, enhancing research skills, cultivating critical thinking, and understanding structural similarities and differences among cities.

In the final sessions, collective summarization and presentation consolidated learning and internalized the concepts, allowing students to present their findings within the framework of participatory democracy and communicative action. Overall, the classroom environment evolved into a research-oriented and interactive model similar to an academic seminar, strengthening rational discourse, equal participation, and group interaction. This transformation moved geography education away from static, one-way knowledge transmission toward a dynamic, participatory, and exploratory process (Table 1).

Table 1. *Phase-based Findings of Action Research (Rousseau & Habermas)*

Phase	Process Elaboration
Problem Identification	Geography education follows a traditional, teacher-centered approach; students lack active participation, and democratic group discussions do not emerge. Consequently, inter-group interactions are often competitive and dominated by power dynamics.
Design of Participatory and Communicative Activities	Formation of focal groups; selection of representatives to convey group perspectives; division of content and responsibilities; design of research and analytical activities using diverse resources; planning for intra- and inter-group discussions adhering to the principles of participatory democracy and communicative action.
Implementation	- Sessions 1–2: Orientation, group formation, syllabus introduction, appointment of representatives. - Sessions 3–5: Presentation of summarized concepts, intra- and inter-group discussions, information exchange via representatives. - Sessions 6–8: Analysis of urban geography features of Iran, group and inter-group interaction, turn-taking, and mutual respect. - Sessions 9–12: Sharing findings via representatives, consensual summarization, resolution of differing viewpoints. - Sessions 13–14: Presentation of final outputs, instructor feedback, and review of findings.
Observation	- Intra-group participation was democratic and active. - Initial inter-group interactions were competitive, with tendencies to dominate. - Some students displayed initial passivity. - Representatives played a key role in concept transmission. - Students' research, analytical, and critical thinking skills improved.
Reflection and Revision	- Facilitator guidance promoted rational dialogue and collective consensus. - Selection of representatives improved, allowing rotation or fixed roles. - Review and consolidation in final sessions reinforced learning and internalization of concepts. - Students successfully presented concepts collaboratively and democratically, enhancing participatory and discourse skills.

The alignment of the findings from the action research on place-based education with Rousseau's participatory democracy and Habermas's communicative action theory indicates that the process of urban geography instruction, relying on active facilitation by the instructor, democratic student participation, and rational, consensus-oriented communicative action, has moved away from traditional teacher-centered methods toward a more active, participatory, and analytical approach.

The theoretical alignment suggests that by providing an environment conducive to interactive and democratic dialogue, learners gradually become more engaged and develop democratic interaction skills. Creating a safe and participatory space has facilitated broad participation and deepened students' understanding of geographic knowledge. Feedback

from the designed set of activities demonstrates the effective alignment of the instructional model with the theories of Rousseau and Habermas (Table 2).

Table 2. *Alignment of Iran's Urban Geography Curriculum with Rousseau and Habermas*

Stage (Session)	Activities	Student Role	Instructor/Facilitator Role	Alignment with Rousseau & Habermas
Initial Session	Course introduction, syllabus overview, formation of core groups	Get acquainted with peers, participate in discussions	Create a supportive, participatory environment, guide initial interaction	Establish a democratic discussion framework and initial participation
Preparation & Research	Content division, group research, preliminary summary	Analyze materials, review, present concepts	Guide group interaction, support active participation	Enhance group dialogue and equal participation
Presentation & Intergroup Discussion	Oral presentation of concepts, intergroup debate	Present group findings, actively engage in discussions	Facilitate discussions, manage competition and dominance	Democratic interaction, rational dialogue, and communicative action
In-depth City Analysis	Examine urban physical and spatial features	Active analysis, group research, healthy competition	Ensure safe environment, support diverse perspectives, manage time	Consistent with participatory democracy and communicative action principles
Sharing Findings & Review	Present group agreements, rotate representatives	Analyze, present, review collectively	Facilitate collective agreement, guide rational dialogue	Achieve broad participation, collective understanding, and communicative interaction
Final Summary & Feedback	Organize and present final results, review and revise	Group presentation, active participation	Facilitate summary, provide feedback, guide revisions	Enhance learning, deepen knowledge, and develop participatory and democratic skills

Conclusion

The findings indicate that traditional teaching methods impose limitations on students' deep understanding of concepts and the development of critical and participatory skills. In contrast, active and participatory learning has emerged as an innovative approach capable of transforming educational structures. A philosophical framework grounded in Rousseau's participatory democracy, emphasizing direct participation, and Habermas' communicative action theory, highlighting rational dialogue and collective understanding, provides a foundation for designing research- and participation-oriented educational systems.

This study, employing the action research method, examined and evaluated the process of active and interactive learning among students in the Urban Geography course of Iran, based on Rousseau's and Habermas' theories. The instructional process began with the introduction of the course and the formation of focal groups; students became acquainted with their peers and engaged in initial discussions. Subsequently, through lesson division, group research, concept analysis, and presentation, the instructor guided group interactions,

fostering equitable and active dialogue. Oral presentations and inter-group discussions created opportunities for democratic engagement and rational discourse, while in-depth analysis of cities through collaborative research and diverse perspectives enhanced knowledge acquisition and participatory skills.

In subsequent stages, group findings were presented, revised, and collectively agreed upon. Ultimately, students delivered and reviewed final outputs, while the instructor, through feedback and summation, enhanced learning and democratic participation. Education based on participatory democracy and communicative action creates a dynamic, interactive, and exploratory environment, where students assume an active and responsible role in the learning process. Consequently, geography instruction transforms from a static, one-way knowledge transfer to a participatory and rational learning process.

This approach can serve as a strategic model for designing participation-oriented educational systems and fostering social and research skills among students in the humanities and social sciences. Utilizing diverse resources, analyzing and comparing spatial and structural features of cities, and engaging in research-based activities not only deepen specialized knowledge but also enhance research skills, critical thinking, and the ability to understand structural similarities and differences. Final collective presentations reinforce learning, internalize concepts, and promote participatory and democratic skills.

The Rousseau–Habermas hybrid model facilitates the transition from teacher-centered to participatory-discursive education, which is particularly significant in spatially-oriented courses such as geography due to the necessity of spatial exploration. Effective implementation of this approach requires instructors' active engagement, management of time constraints, continuous facilitation, integration of interactions between instructors and students, alignment of curriculum content with instructional materials, and enhancement of teaching skills. Nevertheless, the impact of this method on the educational system is substantial, fostering scientific literacy as well as participatory, debate, critical, and analytical skills in students.

As with many studies, this research has certain limitations. The results come from specific educational settings, so they may not fully apply to every context. Limited time and resources also influenced how deeply the action research could be carried out. In addition, the views and experiences of the researchers and instructors involved may have shaped the findings. Finally, because social, cultural, and organizational conditions vary across educational environments, applying this approach everywhere may face some challenges.

Given the limitations of this study, including its small sample size and experimental scale, the education system based on participatory democracy and communicative action is presented as a practical example and proposed framework. This approach fosters deep learning, knowledge exploration, logical conceptualization, shared understanding, consensus-based action, and the enhancement of dialogue and collaborative skills. For broader application, it is recommended that action research be expanded to larger samples and diverse disciplines, with initial instructor training and collective discussion of

implementation and feedback. Such processes facilitate the identification of challenges and opportunities, refinement of practices, and improvement of educational quality.

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