

Introduction

Semiotic Consciousness in Education

This issue consists of six essays and one book review. The essays follow Volume 3, No. 2 (2002) of the *International Journal of Applied Semiotics*. The entire collection developed from the symposium on Semiotic Consciousness, organized by François Tochon in Seattle (2001, American Educational Research Association) for the Semiotic in Education Special Interest Group. The dialogue that emerged from the sessions was a clear indication that participants and listeners were intrigued by the topic and wanted to extend that conversation. Tochon, in his introduction of that first issue characterized semiotic consciousness as the active “meaning-making processes that support the construction of reality in day-to-day learning, teaching, and educational environments” (Tochon, p. 3). His essay, which I urge you to read, articulated the range of approaches and research that have been developed by other semioticians with a special focus upon the work of Charles Peirce. Peirce’s work on consciousness is built upon the “dynamic of inference processes” (Tochon, p. 4). The papers in this issue, while maintaining the theme of Consciousness in Education move into yet another exploration of semiosis, or the activity of movement and exchange of meaning between signs and humans. These papers feature the researchers as opening a problematic stance between what education and educators attempt and say they do and the language, acts, and intention of educational practices.

The authors of the six papers in this issue begin to do what Dean MacCannell perceives as “de-territorializing” (MacCannell, 1992, p. 4) consciousnesses. I want to appropriate his discussion of thought as displaced, leading to what he sees as two modes of consciousness. The first mode of thought is open to what he calls, “neo-nomads” (p. 4) and is available to all who cross boundaries of both territory and imagination. The neo-nomads are socially-politically astute; meaning they are alert to the shifting nature of promises and meaning. They are conscious, or aware, of boundaries, such as definitions, custom, privilege, and material goods. The second mode of conscious mobility is to displace or subordinate people, places, creativity, and action in order to create “a currency” (MacCannell, 1992, p. 5), a grammar of being and knowing that shapes and controls not only what happens, but what can happen. It seeks out new or different arenas, seemingly for exploration, but actually in order to dominate. He argues for a dialectical model instead, one which recognizes contradiction, the creativity of speculation, and the stratagem of shifting between sites of meaning and perspectives. The first two papers, by Maria Mendel and Jennifer Rowsell, share a

concern that educational text books, public documents, and language around educational topics can be agents for political reification of educational practice. In their research they both interrogate educational texts and speech as being vulnerable to over determination and manipulation through the texts that are created around school practice. Mendel's paper examines the rhetoric of reform and notes that the language of "reform-knowers" can be used to disguise or distract the fact that what is being created is a new tribe of power brokers. She examines the political perfectedness of the reform-users language and advocates for the recognition of imperfection in order to uncover subordinated discourses. Mendel focuses upon the recognized need in Poland to have Polish parents more actively involved in schooling and yet this very need is effectively undercut either by providing space for that discussion or by not confronting actual practices, such as not allowing parents to "see the marks received by their child or their child's test."

Rowse's experience as a "former employee of an educational publishing company in Canada" enriches her research into how text books themselves are not only signs of social practices in schools but determine and shape the cultural knowing of the reader. The text becomes the cultural situation; it all too often presents an artificial world that it purports to have examined and provides so-called solutions for living. She probes the motivation of the construction of educational text books and how their contents always tend to match the social, political, and economically sanctioned ideas of the times.

Carolyn Gwyn-Paquette explores preservice teachers in Canada and their need to be conscious, literally bodily aware of themselves as having a presence in classrooms. Her research focuses us upon preservice teachers believing that they must be so careful about their actions that they are overly aware of self, or self-absorbed, so that they cannot be as conscious of the students as they need to be. It is a case of needing to lose oneself in order to gain one's professional acuity. But how does that happen? Where is the training in positioning, in appreciating that one can transcend and even extend the barriers of self when entering into a teaching modality? Experienced teachers utilize sound, motion, and previous experience sometimes seamlessly as an expert strategist locating a distracted child or a child having a problem. The teacher needs to learn to shift from the limited self into a signified teacher-self (Eco, 1990) so that the classroom project is the semiosis of meaning between child, teacher, and information rather than the limited project of surviving the lesson.

Nancy Stockall's paper is an interesting contrast to Gwyn-Paquette's discussion of preservice teachers. Stockall's experience in teaching a distance education course using compressed video explores what happens when communication, which has the potential for extending meaning and opening critical imagination and awareness of others, does not move into a mutuality of exchange. Stockall discovered that distance was not overcome simply by having students present on screen. Each group lacked the social ground, the contextual knowing, and subjectivity of the other. Relational knowledge of "the other" was needed to be constructed before reflections

could be exchanged. Stockall explains that as a “novice distance education teacher” she had spent much of her time on planning how her materials would fit the parameters of working with compressed video. However, as an experienced teacher, she became conscious of the students’ superficial responses and how perceptions of social and racial beliefs were mediating factors that did not lead to in-depth discourse. The personally held narratives of each student group were the texts that had to be interrogated as those were the limiting texts that the two groups carried as unexamined, unexplored, and overly determined narrative. It is interesting that one solution Stockall was able to initiate was to literally go into the territory of the other, or to the remote site so that consciousness did become de/territorialized.

The fifth paper, *The Exercise of Consciousness for Three Young Children* examines the dilemma of being present from the perspective of three troubled children. Children exist at school as if they can transcend their personal situations, as if they have the experience to imagine another self; the school successful self. These three children do not have the emotional energy or social repertoires to be able to shift from the narratives they encounter and developed at home to also become a school child. Teachers expect, indeed often presume, that children will engage in narrative shifting and enter into the behaviors “expected” in a classroom. For many teachers, the child self that the teacher expects is a predetermined, sterile characterization of a child. I wonder how many teachers base their expectations of children’s behavior and abilities upon text book renditions of appropriate child behaviors?

The final paper in this set is Francois Tochon’s. I believe this is appropriate that his round out the group as he framed the beginning of this conversation with the Semiotics in Education Special Interest Group. Tochon’s research agenda examines the differences in pedagogical discourse between sales personnel, student teachers, and expert teachers when all three were engaged in a seemingly straightforward task of teaching someone to use a telephone answering machine. Tochon focuses upon a teacher’s “interactional consciousness,” or the precise awareness-in-action that Schön (1987) described extensively. Tochon refers also to the Holmes Report (1986) that had as its mission the establishment of teaching as a profession. The teacher professional would operate as a signature of teacher behaviors, delineating a range of behaviors and responses that are recognizable and that are instrumental in guiding teachers to better recognize the need of learners. Four steps are identified in the sequencing of expert teacher discourse. Tochon’s article presents the expert teacher as successfully mediating between direct instruction and knowing when to initiate learning through dynamic activity. Although all three groups had a sense of what to do, the expert teachers were more often conscious of the learners’ needs.

Each of these papers opens the possibility that we regard our known world and spheres of action differently. They present consciousness as shifting, indeterminate, personal, political, motivated, social—indeed as an array of signs that have both the potential to become an over determined closed facet of ourselves and our society or as the agent of change and transformation. I look forward to the continuing conversation.

Finally, I recommend that you read the review of Howard Smith's new book, *Psychosemiotics* (2001). It is a thoughtful and well reflected text and significantly adds to the discussion on semiotics, psychology, and educational psychology.

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References

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