
BOOK REVIEW

A review of *Semiotics Education Experience* by Inna Semetsky (Ed.), 2010. Rotterdam: Sense Publications. 287pp. ISBN: 978-94-6091-223-8 (paperback).

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A working understanding of key concepts in semiotics – including their practical application – can be seen as essential for everyone who wants to understand the complex and dynamic communication ecologies within which we live. As the American pragmatic philosopher and founder of modern semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce put it, “the universe...is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (Peirce 1934, 302). There is no escape from signs. Those who cannot understand them and the systems of which they are a part are in the greatest danger of being manipulated by those who can. In short, semiotics cannot be left to semioticians. But can it be left in the hands of educators?

If anyone is capable of bringing such a radical collection of papers in the field of semiotics into conversation with the discipline of education, it is the editor of this book, Inna Semetsky. Semetsky is currently a Research Academic in the University of Newcastle, Australia. In addition to numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters, she has authored/edited four books including *Deleuze, Education and Becoming* (2006) and *Re-Symbolization of the Self: Human Development and Tarot Hermeneutic* (2011). She is also on the editorial boards of several academic journals including *Educational Philosophy and Theory*; and *The Semiotic Review of Books* and among her current projects is the edited volume on *Deleuze and Education* to be published by Edinburgh University Press.

Semetsky’s edited collection provides us with an invaluable assortment of papers that aims to provide readers with a set of perspectives and analytical techniques for understanding the range of practices which are labeled ‘semiotics’. Whilst it is acknowledged that contemporary semiotics is a much contested term, Semetsky interprets it as broadly as possible, expanding upon the crucial elements of the work C.S

Peirce, to move us away from the notion of communication as an exclusively intentional form of signaling, to the idea of communication as an exercise in the production and negotiation of signs. Everything we do, every activity and move we perform, can be produced as a sign, as meaningful – that is to say, can communicate something to someone. Semiotics, in essence, becomes a theory of peoples' practice. It is such a version of semiotics that creates a most useful definition in helping us understand the importance of using semiotics in relation to education

Theories on 'peoples practice' hold a position tantamount in educational discourse. Semetsky's book offers those of us in education with another approach to 'peoples practice' that is yet to be adequately addressed. Studying semiotics, she suggests, can assist us to become more aware of the mediating role of signs and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing our social realities. It can make us less likely to take reality for granted as something which is wholly independent of human interpretation. By exploring semiotic perspectives, we come to realize that information or meaning is not 'contained' in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us – we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware. Semetsky shows us that becoming aware of such codes is both inherently fascinating and intellectually empowering.

It is, then, something of an event to read *Semiotics Education Experience* published by Sense Publications as part of their Educational Futures book series. As Marcel Danesi comments in his foreword on 'Edusemiotics', "The ultimate purpose of this volume is to show how learning unfolds in accordance with novel principles, unorthodox laws, and implicit and explicit properties of semiosis" (2010, x) and it is here that such an approach appeals to readers and users of 'Complicity'. Concepts such as emergent patterning, agent-based modeling, self-referencing and self-organization, potentiality, recursion, synchronicity, unpredictability, multiplicity, neg-entropy and most importantly systems-environment interaction, a position that is at the heart of Peirce's semiotics, are all put to work to make more explicit the codes by which signs are interpreted. Semetsky's complex approach to semiotics helps us to perform the valuable semiotic function of denaturalizing signs. Deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. Sign systems help reinforce particular framings of 'the way things are' and moves us a step further in understanding the "hermeneutic social science that contributes to the description and explanation of the emergence, sustenance and change of social systems understood not least in terms of information and communication, with the latter's corollaries of feedback, adaptation, self-organisation and evolution" (Mason 2008, 13).

She has chosen a variety of thinkers for *Semiotics Education Experience*, each of whom illustrates the importance of theorizing for education. The diversity of viewpoints presented by all authors may seem to be contrasting, yet it is the opinion of the Reviewer, that in fact they complement each other powerfully, crossing over the imaginary lines that appears to separate their perspectives. *Semiotics Education Experience* does not build disciplinary or anti-disciplinary fences within the interdisciplinary space of education. It allows semiotics, textual studies and philosophy,

linguistics, social and critical theory, and complexity, to talk to one another and shows how useful it might be to let them and to participate in the emerging dialogue.

The present volume contains fifteen chapters written by a range of specialists in the field of semiotics. The opening five chapters provide edusemiotics with; a history, epistemological and ethical orientation, and a theoretical framing. Winfried Noth, identifies two agendas for forging an edusemiotics, firstly, for exploring pedagogy as a process of semiotics in practice and secondly, exploring competencies associate with sign making and communicative activity. This theme is provided an epistemological foundation by Andrew Stables, who examines the possibilities for an edusemiotics based on a rejection of the Cartesian mind-body dualism. A Peircian model for edusemiotics is outlined by Howard Smith, as a foundational model for edusemiotics, capable of providing a framework sufficiently integrative enough to capture learning as a truly mind – body – experience, whilst Semetsky's first chapter confronts the ethical implications raised when we discard the Cogito. She synthesizes the work of Peirce and Dewey to conceptualize an ethics sensitive enough to complement of a theory of learning grounded in experience. Torjus Midtgarden's chapter 'Toward a Semiotic Theory of Learning', then turns the discussion toward a "Peircian version of education" (2010, 78) where learning becomes reconceptualised using speculative grammar to draw our attention to the truly inter-subjective nature of learning experiences.

In the following chapters by James Anthony Whitson, Sebastien Pesce, Ronald Bogue and Inna Semetsky, Michael H.G. Hoffman and Wolff-Michael Roth we see semiotics come into full conversation with education. This is where 'edusemiotics' takes full flight. The nexus between semiotics and education is visited in depth as they pertain to curriculum, innovative pedagogical practice, and interdisciplinary sign functioning. The conceptual basis of education systems are radically reworked to provide a place for the new, the innovative, the counter-intuitive and always dynamic so it becomes possible to view our education systems with new eyes. When all is said, the fundamental problem for 'edusemiotics' has little to do with developing more effective strategies for the transmission of knowledge. Nor does it have much to do with teaching children more effective strategies for the discovery of knowledge. These chapters work towards discovering a cultural mind-set that unites relations within complex systems, or 'web', and sees "educators as healers and caretakers of complexity, spirituality, chaos, primal urges, and differences" (Slattery and Rapp 2003, 227).

For researchers of complexity, the final five chapters, including works by Louis H. Kauffman, Inna Semetsky, James Anthony Whitson, Deborah L. Smith-Shank and Tomasz Szkundlarek push the boundaries of traditional semiotic analysis by challenging existing suppositions, whether it be, systems of logic, the unconscious nature of human experience, tensions between agency and meaning, or the legacy of an educational system which still focuses almost exclusively on the acquisition of one kind of symbolic literacy (that of verbal language) at the expense of other semiotic modes. To decline the study of signs, Szkundlarek argues in the final chapter 'Meaning and Power', is to leave others to the control of the world of meanings which we inhabit.

Semetsky and her contributors call to attention and encourage the reader to ponder for herself – a number of basic and general issues concerning the vast field of study currently designated by the term ‘semiotics’. No one with an interest in how things are represented or practiced in education can afford to ignore an approach which focuses on, and problematizes, these very complex processes. Let us hope that Semetsky’s book is read widely and thereby contributes to providing directions for such matters.

References

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