SEMIOTICS AND THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines semiotic theory, the use of semiotics in the development of education theory and implications for best practice in adult education. As a guiding example of semiotic application in educational practice, the paper focuses on the classroom environment and, in particular, the meanings made by students of the teacher, his appearance and actions, and how these signs may influence student learning and teaching practices. The paper goes on to examine how the awareness of semiotics and teaching of semiotics in the classroom can help to create the engaged and egalitarian thinking environment that supports the principles of today’s adult education theory. This paper draws on semiotics, cultural studies and educational theories in order to support its conclusions.
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Semiotics and the Classroom Experience

“Brock was absolutely convinced that there are more beards among male teachers than in the population in general: ‘They do it for control!’ For Brock, beards were devices to create a persona, a symbolic ‘mask’” (McLaren, 1999, p. 112).

“When we try to change the classroom… students get scared that you are now not the captain working with them, but that you are after all just another crew member—and not a reliable one at that” (hooks, 1994, p. 144).

Introduction

The classroom environment is a central component of the adult education experience. When we enter the classroom as learners we immediately begin to draw conclusions about our surroundings and, from these conclusions, imagine what our experience in the space will be like. These initial impressions are only the beginning of the meanings we make as students, interacting with our classmates, teacher, and the environment itself as we engage in a learning experience that is, at all times, both familiar and new. This meaning making is a semiotic process that influences what and how we learn and, consequently, becomes a central component in understanding the education process. This paper explores how the semiotic approach can be used to understand the meanings students make of their classroom environment, in particular those of the teacher’s body, clothing and behaviour and how this information can be used to inform educational practice. After introducing the core theoretical components of semiotics, this paper examines current best practices in adult education and the role that semiotics can play in supporting these practices. From here, the paper brings together research from cultural studies, education, and semiotics to examine how knowledge of the meanings students make of their educational environments can support interactive, inclusive and egalitarian educational practices.
The work of several theorists has come together to provide a dynamic framework for understanding the process of meaning making that we go through as we encounter the world around us. Ferdinand de Saussure (2004) introduces the idea of “semiology” in 1960 with an interest in creating a science of “the life and signs within society” (p. 60) and a theory of language that was more than an understanding of a word as simply standing for something else. Saussure sees language as “a socially constructed system of signs” (Stables, 2010, p. 24). He separates the sign into two parts – the signifier (the physical sign, for example, the written word) and the signified (the mental concept referred to by the signifier) which creates a signification that results in the external reality or meaning (Fisk, 1991). This external reality is referred to by Roland Barthes as “myth” making as “cultural associations and social knowledge attach themselves to signifieds” (as cited in Turner, 1996, p. 15).

While Saussure, as a linguist, is most concerned with how signs related to other signs other researchers—most prominently Charles Sanders Peirce—have been interested in how a sign relates to the object (Fisk, 1991) and how humans make sense of the world through the interpretation of signs (Stables, 2010). Peirce’s model, not dyadic like Saussure’s, includes three components: the representamen or signifier, the object, and the interpretant (Stables, 2010; Smith 2010). For Peirce, while most semiotic activity occurs without any human involvement, the signifier and object lack meaning without a human interpreting the relationship between the two and making meaning of it (Stables, 2010; Fisk, 1991).

Howard Smith (2010) notes that, for Pierce, the sign is not a static entity but rather continues to change and develop. Pierce’s interpretant—the sign once it has been developed anew through the experience of the reader—becomes the new representamen on the next
interaction with the same object (Smith, 2010). In other words, our experience with an object alters our perception of the sign and the object so that when we next encounter either of them the foundation of our place of engagement has been moved and will again be moved with this new experience. “The dynamic and ever-changing properties of signs must be seen as essential features of semiotics and, therefore, of human cognition in all settings” (Smith, 2010, p. 39). Referencing Donald Cunningham, Smith writes, of the ongoing changing properties of signs, that “the meaning attached to the sign deepens, doubt is reduced or removed, and beliefs become established” (Smith, 2010).

Other researchers have also focused on this ever changing quality of the sign, and of its interpretation. Stuart Hall explores the changing meaning of signs, the process of coding and decoding signs, and the ability for signs to help us understand our world and each other. While he asserts that there is a “multiplicity of readings and discourses” (Grossberg, 2005, p. 137), he also holds that some codes appear to be natural but that this appearance is only the result of a reading being used almost universally in a given culture. When this occurs it is an indication that there is a “fundamental alignment and reciprocity… between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of meaning” (Hall, 2004, p. 511). The meaning that is intended by the sender of a message is, in these cases, usually received as intended by the receiver. But even the most universally (within a particular culture) understood codes are open to radically different readings. According to Hall (2004), “it is possible for a viewer to perfectly understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way.” The “viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but ‘reads’ every mention of the ‘national interests’ as ‘class interest’. He or she is operating with what we must call an oppositional code” (p. 517).
Paul Thibault (1991) also describes a social semiotic framework that acknowledges the importance of culture and context. According to Thibault, a social semiotic approach “is concerned with the systems of meaning making resources, their patterns of use in texts and social occasions of discourse, and the social practices of the social formations in and through which these textual meanings are made, remade, imposed, contested, and changed from one textual production or social occasion of discourse to another” (p. 6).

From this research there are several key assumptions that are important when applying semiotics to adult education and the learning environment. First, all interactions and observations involve the reading and interpreting of signs; second, signs are culturally dependent; third, individuals bring their own past experiences and their own unique reading to signs; and, finally, these readings are constantly in flux, influenced by countless variables and altered each time a sign is encountered.

**Best Practice in Adult Education**

Semiotics has been used in a variety of disciplines (Stables, 2010; Noth, 2010) to uncover the meaning making that impacts how we interact in our world, including the discipline of adult education. According to Smith (2010), the modification of beliefs, as described so succinctly by Thibault (1991), is a central component of semiotics, as well as the foundation of learning and, therefore, critical to effective adult education. Peirce too, sees learning as an ongoing process that is a sociocultural and community event rather than an “individual and private enterprises” (Smith, 2010, p. 42). A communal understanding of education, however, does not necessarily lead to an educational paradigm that favours change or that benefits our culture and its citizens. While early theorists like John Dewey (1929) saw education as “the fundamental method of social progress and reform” (p. 9) such progress and reform tended to support the existing social
structure, imparting knowledge that maintained and strengthened the status of the dominant classes (Francis, 1997) and worked to create a “unity of… thought” (Dewey, 1929, p. 4) and foundation of knowledge that, as early as the 1970s, educators were acknowledging there was probably little agreement on (Egan, 1978).

And yet, this focus on definable, static knowledge has persisted in educational practice with significantly negative implications. According to Derek Briton (1996b), there is an “intrinsically oppressive nature” to “traditional and rational representations of the truth” (p.109). He further contends that “if we are to avoid the bleak fate of cultural annihilation, we must embrace a pedagogy of engagement, an adult education … that can pursue and successfully realize distinctively postmodern conceptions of freedom, equality, and democracy: a pedagogy of practice that establishes that “human problems cannot be ‘thought through’. They must be ‘lived through’” (Lindeman, as cited in Briton, 1996b, p. 110).

Briton’s assertions are based on an examination of the development of thought beginning with the work of Rene Descartes. Briton (1996) cites William Lovitt as he asserts that through Descartes’ recognition that man’s consciousness is the very thing that defines his existence and the reality of the world around him, the human being as subject was born. Thinking, for Descartes, was defining and central to understanding and knowledge. From here, man becomes the “self-conscious shaper and guarantor of all that comes to him from beyond himself” (Briton, 1996a, p. 61). This trust in the power of the consciousness is later undermined by Sigmund Freud’s exploration of the subconscious. Freud demonstrates that there is a powerful process of understanding taking place beyond conscious thought—an unconscious process of equal importance that is actually determining conscious thought and actions. Jacques Lacan, too, building on Saussure’s work to further develop the role of unconscious thought, recognizes that
“the imaginary [enunciated] self… exists only on the basis of the misrecognition of its own conditions…, on its being the plaything of inaccessible unconscious forces” (Briton, 1996a, p. 63).

Our ability to know, as envisioned by Descartes, evaporates in the presence of the unconscious and the acknowledgment that much of what is occurring—the meaning making that we are grappling with on an ongoing basis, interpreting and reinterpreting—is beyond the static, traditional conception of knowledge. We are always using more signs than we are aware of and can never eliminate the “gap between knowing and not knowing” (Briton, 1996a, p. 64). Knowledge, then, “is not a substance but a structural dynamic that cannot be possessed by an individual. It is the result of a mutual exchange between interlocutors that both say more than they know” (p. 70). If we reject, as Lacan does, education as simply the transmission of knowledge, the “creation of conditions that make it possible to learn, the creation of an original learning disposition” (p. 67) become central to the process of education.

According to Briton (1996a), knowledge cannot be “possessed once and for all” because each text has its own interpretation—its own “peculiar meaning and demands” (p. 68). As a result, the “pedagogical stance” of the teacher “must be that of the one who learns, of the one who teaches nothing other than the way she learns, of a subject who is interminably a student, of a teaching whose promise lies in the inexhaustibility of its self-critical potential” (p. 70).

Robert Barr and John Tagg (1995), also supporting the importance of creating the conditions for learning, describe an educational paradigm in which the focus moves from instruction to learning. In this learning paradigm, instead of delivering knowledge to students education is seen as the creation of an environment in which students can “discover and construct knowledge for themselves” (Mission and Purposes section, para. 5). The environment
becomes a critical component and is judged in relation to how it impacts learning. Rather than the “chief agent” being the teacher, the learner is at the centre. Stephanie Springgay (2007), too, supports the idea that adult education must be about our lived experience. She desires a curriculum “that does not privilege mind and vision over the body and its other senses” (p. xxxv, xxvi).

It seems clear that what is needed is a curriculum that is more responsive and made up of the “inter-subjectivities and experiences of those involved” (Springgay, 2007, p. 200). This engaged pedagogical model, one in which students are seen as active participants and teachers as focused on bringing their knowledge of themselves, particularly in relation to their own learning, and on creating an environment that invites exploration through “activities of meaning making, dialogue and reflective understanding of a variety of texts” (Minnes Brades and Fels, 2006, p. 9) is an important foundation to understanding the value of semiotics in educational practice.

**Semiotics in Education**

If we accept that an engaged pedagogy is best practice in adult education, a semiotic framework becomes a central component of the curriculum. Education is a collective and individual process of meaning making, and meaning is dependent on culture and context, “established in every signway” (Smith, 2010, p. 44). Smith’s perspective de-emphasizes the “technocratic approach to learning and instruction” (p. 37) and provides a theoretical standpoint that recognizes that educational “practices are by their nature supremely semiotic even though schooling agents tend not to think of signs or to be consciously aware of semiotics” (p. 44). A semiotic methodology of pedagogy leads to a program allows for the mastery of the rules of the system as well as the freedom to “break the rules and to ‘see’ beyond the systems” (Imbert, 1980, p. 280).
According to Winfried Noth (2010), writing about the variety of ways semiotics has been studied and used as a way of informing teaching practice and as a subject in education, semiotics is relevant to education because teaching and learning are both semiotic processes. The “study of processes of learning and teaching are a part of… the study of the ontogeny of signs and communications” (p. 1). He cites Donald Cunningham’s argument that knowledge is not a “static structure”—something that can be learnt and remembered. Semiotics helps to open our perception of curriculum as a process. Instead of seeing education as a duality between the learner as an empty vessel to be filled and knowledge as a static entity to be provided and absorbed, education is “an interaction between the physical world and the cognizing organism.” A semiotic approach forces educators to view education in this context, taking into account the uniqueness of the specific learning environment and the individuals within it (Noth, 2010, p. 2-3).

Andrew Stables (2010), arguing that educational theory has wrongly privileged reason, thought and morality, notes that many educators have abandoned the idea of students as “disembodied rationalities” (p. 22) and see, as Peirce, the entire process of living as a semiotic one. For Stables, a “fully semiotic perspective is one that regards everything we do as response to signs and signals” (p. 21). Stables (2010) also makes note of the importance of context, seeing the context—both the present context and the historical context brought with the receiver—as “all-important” to the meaning being made in every individual experience. Each of us brings our own unique vantage point, “both in terms of physical location and personal orientation.” He further contents that at “a practical educational level, it means that no individual (including a teacher) can ever be fully certain of how another individual (including a student) has responded
to a particular situation.” Furthermore, according to Stables, most “educational theorists have tended to downplay this inevitable unpredictability including… Dewey” (p. 26).

Stables (2010) further argues that content-centred “education erroneously divorces content from process” and assumes that the student will hear what the teacher intends rather than acknowledging the semiotic reality that the student is actively engaged in a process of meaning making quite disconnected from the teacher’s intent. Stables also questions process-centred methods that tend to ignore context and learner-centred approaches that may see the learner as static rather than as a changing, “in flux,” involved entity. According to Stables, a fully semiotic approach to teaching might best be thought of as activity-centred and learner-aware. The “more teachers are aware of students’ personalities, backgrounds and present circumstances, the more likely they are to engage them in activities that will be motivating” (p. 29). Stables describes this semiotic approach as one that recognizes mind and body as inseparable, that student engagement is context dependent and engagement involves “environments as a whole,” and actions are both unpredictable and are “grounded in socially accepted patterns” (p. 35). Such an approach recognizes the dynamic nature of education and calls upon teachers to radically alter the classroom experience.

**The Semiotic Classroom**

The classroom environment is central to most educational experiences and the meanings made within this environment become the curriculum, whether intended or unintended. If we are going to create a learning environment that welcomes oppositional readings and prepares learners to engage in critical thinking, the classroom itself must be oppositional to the traditional. A true radical pedagogy, then, requires a reorganization of the classroom in such a way as to ensure participation of all, creating an egalitarian, inviting environment that allows students to
fully engage and, therefore, learn—learn through bringing in their own experiences, examining material for its relevance to their lives, and risking their own self identity in order to consider new, alternative world views that may disrupt and reorganize their own. If we are to come close to creating an environment where this becomes possible, understanding the meaning that is being made by the students when they enter the learning environment can help guide our practice. This is a significant approach that goes beyond what often happens in today’s classrooms, even when the teacher intends to create an engaged environment that offers the opportunity to critique the existing social structure and facilitate transformative learning.

In order for it to be fully realized, the environment in which we teach needs to be fully understood. Teachers have a social status and a professional status that tends to create an interaction characterized by inequality. The traditional classroom, with the teacher at the front of the room in an authoritative position parallels the inequities of society and mirrors the traditional view of knowledge as procurable, immutable, and simply there to be taken in and accepted (hooks, 1994). The classroom is a symbolic arena (McLaren, 1999) and the rituals that take place within it either put limitations on oppositional discourse or create an “alternative to hegemony” (hooks, 1994, p. 84).

Signs and codes are significant considerations for educational theory and have a direct impact on the school experience and, in particular, on the classroom experience. While “classrooms remain the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (hooks, 1994, p. 12), the classroom has never been a safe place for many students, particularly students of colour. The environment is not neutral. White male students, for example, are still the most vocal and students “of colour and some white women express fear that they will be judged as intellectually inadequate.” A transformative pedagogy creates a democratic environment where “everyone
feels a responsibility to contribute” (hooks, 1994, p. 39). Becoming aware of the impact of the classroom environment, the rituals and traditions that impact learning, and the parallels or contradictions between the setup of the physical classroom and the intended curriculum can help teachers to modify the educational experience and the “cultural rules that would otherwise dictate the hegemonic patterns of classroom interactions” (McLaren, 1999, p. 7).

**The Body**

An important aspect of the physical environment is the physical appearance and the behaviour of the teacher. If we accept that education is not simply a matter of imparting knowledge to students but rather is primarily the creation of an environment that is conducive to learning, the appearance and actions of the teacher become critically important. There has been some study in this area specifically directed at teachers (hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1999; Mitchell and Weber, 1999; O’Donoghue, 2007), and there is significant work that has been done on the body and clothing in general that can be drawn from in order to examine the value of this approach. Researchers in disability studies, for example, have seen the cultural meanings made of the body—the normal body and the disabled body—as central to an understanding of disability and identity in general (Snyder and Mitchell, 2006; Titchkosky, 2006). In cultural studies researchers have explored the power of clothing to convey particular messages (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Lurie, 1981; Maynard, 2004; Rubenstein, 2001; Turner, 1996). All of these studies point to the importance of clothing and the body as cultural markers that provide key information on status and power, and influence how we engage with each other in all aspects of our lives. While some of this work does not use the term semiotics, all clearly follow semiotic approaches to understanding human interactions.
The body is a “master symbol” (McLaren, 1999, p. 13). According to Tanya Titchkosky (2006), we “come into the world as subjects of others’ interpretations of our naked physical existence. The meaning and significance of our race, class, gender, and bodies are inscribed and reinscribed by others from the moment of our birth and forever onwards…Our physical existence is a social one” (p. 164). While we may try to hide particular aspects of ourselves, our bodies speak what we may not want to communicate (Mitchell and Weber, 1999). Given the power our bodies have to define us, it is surprising how little we talk about the body in educational practice. The physical appearance of the teacher can impact students a great deal and teachers are often very aware of the messages their body provides (McLaren, 1999). And yet, according to bell hooks (1994), while movement of the body can send powerful messages to students, we don’t talk about the body in relation to teaching. It has tended to be an ignored or taboo subject. To “call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professional elders” (hooks, 1994, p. 58). hooks places a great deal of importance on the messages the body of the teacher sends to students. hooks notices that educators “seem to be retreating away from a real, maybe radical consciousness of the body into a very conservative mind/body split” (p. 136). Male teachers, she writes, need to be aware of their physical presence in the classroom. Teachers “may insist that it doesn’t matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does” (p. 138).

hooks (1994) believes that where the teacher’s body is in the room can have a powerful impact on the educational experience and the readiness of all students to participate in learning, particularly those who have been marginalized. Teachers, she writes, need to move around the classroom in order to create an engaged pedagogical practice. hooks and Ron Scapp discuss how powerful it is to change seating so that students are in a circle, forcing students to “recognize one
another’s presence” (p. 146). These, according to hooks and Scapp, are important pedagogical shifts.

According to Donal O’Donoghue (2007), studies of schooling and masculinities have given very little attention to the teachers’ bodies, and male teachers’ bodies in particular” (p. 93). O’Donoghue undertook a study of elementary teacher training practices in Ireland during the 20s and 30s. Supporting Pierre Bourdieu’s view that the body is “an unfinished entity which develops in conjunction with various social forces” (O’Donoghue, 2007, p. 109), O’Donoghue concludes that the “body acted as a location for the constructions of multiple and conflicting identities, gendered, sexual, occupational, and so on” (p. 110). The Irish teacher’s college he studied actively taught students to develop the presentation of their bodies in a manner that mirrored an authoritative, masculine image and this focus appears to have been as important in emphasis as the intellectual development we normally would associate with the training of a teacher (O’Donoghue, 2007).

Claudia Mitchell and Sandra Weber (1999) examine the “cumulative cultural text of teachers,” noting that the examination is important to help us separate ourselves “from the conflicting images and stereotypes of teachers” (p. 166). In their exploration of the stereotypes associated with teachers and the meanings made of the image of teachers in popular texts, they note that while there is seldom a definitive reading of a cultural text (Mitchell & Weber, 1999), the popular images of teachers can set us up for “disappointment, encouraging expectations that teaching should fulfil a deeper desire to love and be loved, or a need to be needed or to save people” (p. 181). For Mitchell and Weber, teaching occurs through the body. “When a teacher enters a classroom for the first time, it is not necessarily her or his ideas that first attract students’ attention. It is the body and how it is adorned and clothed—how it looks, sounds, moves and
smells. Whether or not we realize it, the image we project precedes us, introduces us, and inserts us into the communication we have with students. This applies to most teaching situations, from kindergarten to university” (p. 124).

**Clothing**

Clothing, like the body, delivers messages to students that have an impact on the educational environment. Clothing has a language of its own, with a vocabulary and a grammar that is as clearly understood as spoken or written languages (Lurie, 1981). It speaks to us about our social structures, about status and roles (Rubinstein, 2001). Clothing reflects our cultural values, directs and informs social behaviour (Rubinstein, 2001) and, along with the body, is often the first information we receive about another person, available for interpretation before we even speak (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

Mitchell and Weber (1999) note that the “way the body and its various features are conceptualized, manifested, interpreted, and lived depends very much on prevailing cultural norms” (p. 125). They are also convinced that the clothing choices we make are clear decisions that establish a sense of self, communicating things like gender identity and social roles. “Clothing signs make visible the structure and organization of interactions within a specific social context.” Mitchell and Weber believe that, as a result, the teacher’s body and appearance need to be “taken seriously” (p. 127). Clothing allows us to concisely say something that would otherwise be awkward and time-consuming (Mitchell & Weber 1999). It conveys cultural categories, processes and individual meanings allowing wearers to construct a self-image through clothing that identifies him as part of a group and also convey individuality (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Clothes are used to “define, to present, to communicate, to deceive, to play with and so on. They are central to identity” (Maynard, 2004, p. 5). Pre-service teachers have a
subconscious understanding of this reality and are preoccupied with what to wear wondering who they should be trying to please and what should they be concealing or revealing with their attire. Mitchell and Weber call these concerns “identity uncertainties” (p. 126).

Students and teachers have expectations of how a teacher should look and behave (Mitchell & Weber 1999) and these expectations impact how we are seen by a student and our choices as teachers. Clothing also alters our own perceptions of ourselves. While it conveys information, it also has the power to create feelings in the wearer that can enhance role performance and increase one’s sense of importance (Mitchell & Weber 1999; Rubinstein, 2001). A teacher’s ability to manage the classroom environment is affected by the clothing she wears as well as such items as a pointer, glasses, and a briefcase. These items, while impacting the perception the students have of the power and identity of the teacher can also enhance the teacher’s “sense of power and identity” (Rubinstein, 2001, p. 151).

But, as semiotics tells us, the meanings made of the messages sent and received by our clothing, while culturally dependent, are not universal. There are always a “multiplicity of readings and discourses.” Art teacher Daniel Barney (2007), describing his students’ work in studying clothing and the “body as communication,” acknowledges that clothing is used to “communicate a hierarchy of power that sets one apart from others” (p. 79). But he sees clothing as more than that, communicating complex messages, appearing as an “ubiquitous signifier” in many areas of our cultural lives (p. 80). He concludes that clothing “is an ambiguous demarcation of boundaries” (p. 89). Since the messages embodied within are a “shared responsibility” created through a complex cultural dialogue, our understanding of the communication being transmitted and received is limited by a researcher’s ability to “experience the whole” (p. 92).
Clothing, then, has a powerful role to play in the classroom environment and the educational experience, whether acknowledged explicitly or consciously ignored. It forms part of our identity, communicating with students before a teacher opens his mouth to deliver any intended curriculum. It plays a role in determining the authority a teacher will have within a classroom, and, connected to that, plays a role in creating an egalitarian or authoritarian environment. Students and teachers alike will use the meanings made of clothing to determine where authority lies, what the culture of the classroom is expected to be, how similar or different the environment is from previous experiences, and what role they will have in the educational experience. And, while the messages are not universal, based on the above research, there are strong culturally based readings that many students and teachers will make of particular clothing choices. These readings need to be accounted for if educators are going to be able to create an engaged, egalitarian environment.

**Transparent Educational Practice**

Even with an understanding of semiotics and its influence on our interactions how can we make use of it to improve educational practice? As semiotics suggests, for example, when examining the readings made of the teacher’s body, clothing, and position in the classroom it is important to recognize that each student will read something slightly different. Even when the surface reading is the same, the deeper reading may be the opposite or have the opposite impact on the learning process. For one student, a teacher who wears a Hawaiian shirt, as I have often done, may read a casual atmosphere that invites her to share her own thoughts, beliefs and interpretations. Another student may read a casual atmosphere that removes the seriousness or validity of the material and therefore feel compelled to disengage from the experience.
Ensuring semiotics is part of the educational curriculum can help a teacher not only to manage these varying experiences but also to “create conditions that make it possible to learn” (Briton, 1996a, p. 67)—an environment that is understood and examined by everyone involved. The critical component may be awareness—an understanding that the meanings made by students of their educational environments are influencing their educational experience, are as important as the meanings they are making of the material presented and are influencing how they are taking in that material. For a teacher, for example, to initiate a discussion about education and about teaching, facilitating an exploration, by the students, of their own experiences, can help to “put on the table” any pre-conceived notions about how a classroom should be organized, what a teacher should do, what a student should do, and how a teacher should look. By examining where these assumptions come from, these assumptions may lose their power over the learning environment and, rather, become part of the learning experience. This metacognition can then be generalized to other environments and examinations of other assumptions that are related to not only teaching and learning but other areas of study as well. As this paper has pointed out, education is a process of meaning making, of discourse and the examination of discourse, of the examination of a variety of texts, and the application of this examination to a variety of social and cultural contexts. The classroom, then, becomes a microcosm of our broader social experience, no longer mirroring the existing dominant paradigms but challenging them through the creation of something different—a pedagogy of engagement and transparency.

A discussion of the expectations students have of their classroom experience and of the teacher is a semiotic discussion and leads students to examine other assumptions and expectations, other readings that impact their learning and their experience in the world. An
examination of how gender influences the teaching and learning relationship, for example, supports students to examine gender issues in the broader context. A classroom discussion on how clothing worn by teachers and students impacts meaning making can lead to a more thorough understanding of metaphors like “blue collar and white collar workers.” These examples support the idea that semiotics can be used to understand the learning environment, to help students engage more fully in their learning experience, and create opportunities to understand other areas of curriculum more thoroughly. Without this type of transparent educational practice any alteration of the classroom environment in order to increase participation and improve learning could have the opposite effect. As Smith (2010) insists, education, whether students and teachers are aware of it or not, is a highly semiotic activity (p. 44). Meanings are made and remade; identities are created, examined, and recreated. This is the educational process. Semiotics serves to reveal the “discourse patterns that sustain the inequities of our own society. Education and semiotics meet not only in the commons study of how we learn to make socially meaningful ‘signs,’ they meet also on the field of social responsibility, where we must learn together how to make meaningful social change” (Noth, 2010, p. 6).

If education remains focused on the intention of the educator the dynamic interplay of relationships, the role of the individual learner, and the impact of meanings being made beyond those intended by the prescribed curriculum will be ignored. Any barriers to learning and engagement will remain unexplored and yet will, of course, be present, influencing the environment non-the-less. The ongoing negotiation of meaning that is founded in our varied and unique cultural experiences is much more important than the intention of the sender of the message (Barney, 2007, p. 80-81).
Conclusion

If adult education is a “distinctively social endeavour” (Briton, 1996b, p. 5) that requires teachers to “create conditions that make it possible to learn” (Briton, 1996a, p. 67), the meanings made by students of their physical surroundings and of the physical presentation of the teacher, becomes critical to an engaged educational process. Whether they have spoken specifically about signs or codes or have simply explored the meaning making that is central to the process of teaching and learning, semiotics has been used by researchers and adult educators to understand the educational process and improve pedagogical theory and practice. While meanings are constantly changing and are individually, culturally, and environmentally specific, common interpretations are inevitable when particular signs permeate a society. The exploration of the meaning making by students and teachers can be a powerful component of educational practice. Each teaching gesture is a “challenge to the student’s self-identity” (Stables, 2010, p. 27). Teaching is a “disruptive activity” that hinges on how students respond to the disruption, whether students see “the teacher’s words as more inviting than threatening, and then whether they wish to accept the invitation” (Stables, 2010, p. 28). Creating an environment where the invitation to learn is accepted is a critical component of an engaged and radical pedagogy.
References


