Intersections of Semiotics and Visual Pedagogy

SMITH–SHANK, Deborah

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on intersection of semiotics and art education and the signs and symbols in culture(s) that make up the substance(s) of art education. These include “fine” art and artifacts; the cultures that created them, the values that surround them, and their relevance. Art has always been one of several ways in which culture is learned, transmitted, maintained and modified, and it has the advantage over written language in not being textually limited. Studying the sign systems within a cultural group’s artworks and artifacts helps to make the concepts of culture explicit, facilitates critical response, and assists learners to understand the multiple ways people organize and make meanings about their significant worlds.

Introduction

To paraphrase Carl Sagan, the universe is filled with billions of visual signs that serve as natural and constructed messages. Individuals and groups use signs to advocate, persuade, communicate, and defend their beliefs and ideas through visual signifiers. These sign systems are the visual and conceptual playground for semioticians and art educators. With so many visual systems of signs competing for our attention, the issue becomes what to consider and how to understand the artifacts and embedded ideologies and discourses competing for our attention. Institutions of art including museums, galleries, and schools where children learn art have to make choices to include or exclude certain objects, ideologies, genders, races, sexualities, and/or classes as part of their professional practices. While semiotics can’t provide any simple answers to this dilemma, it can facilitate discourse about selection of content, options for engagement with objects that are often considered unrelated to professional art institutional practices. Semiotics helps arts professionals to focus on the ways meanings are constructed within networks of

1 Northern Illinois University. DeKalb, Illinois, USA. Visiting Professor, The Ohio State University. Columbus, Ohio, USA
signs and helps generate rhizomatic reasoning from sign to sign in a process called semiosis.

**Semiotics**

Semioticians work in disciplines as different as education, neuroscience, biology, mathematics, psychology, ecology, music, and art. They come from all over the world and inevitably acknowledge their links to the past; to those semioticians who blazed trails of significance. The earliest semioticians are said to have been the Greek physicians (and particularly Galen) who looked to signs of illness to identify particular diseases. Most semiotic theory development and research conducted today, is based on work of the American logician and mathematician, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), or the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1867-1913). However, while building upon the work of Peirce (1959) and Saussure (1916/1966), many contemporary semioticians have refined their own theories to help solve puzzles about meaning. What all of them have in common is the belief that meaning is firmly linked to sign functions and cognition.

Sign systems ground the ways people think, learn, remember, and participate in life experiences. In fact, Peirce pointed out (Houser, 1987) that their intersection with sign systems create humans as much as humans create sign systems. As an art educator, I was hooked on semiotics from my first encounter with semiotic ideas even before I retuned to Indiana University to pursue a doctoral degree, and it was my curiosity about semiotics that actually moved me into higher education. As the visual coordinator of a small town arts commission, I was especially interested in finding out why some people participated in gallery events and some avoided it and I believed that semiotics had the potential to help me work through these issues, gain more audience for my exhibitions, and become a better art teacher. Over time, and as my own modernist tendencies gave way to the post-modern, I felt more and more that it was especially important for me to investigate the ways children and adults participate in visual cultures and make sense of the overt and covert ideological systems of visual signs that influence their attitudes and learning. Within a feminist
framework, this is what I've been doing for the past 15 years.

**Art Education**

Visual pedagogy and content in art education has reluctantly evolved from the modernist positionality of child-centered self-expression toward a more complex disciplinary trajectory involved with the study of both fine art and artifacts, the cultures that created them, the values that surround them, and their relevance to student lives. This complicates an art professional's life, but it makes sense because art and artifacts have always been tools through which culture is learned, transmitted, maintained and modified. Considering the sign systems of a cultural group facilitates critical response and assists learners in understanding the multiple ways cultures are alike and different. It helps students see how small and large cultural groups organize their significant worlds. Cultural artifacts are objects that we see, process, code, and interpret within the contexts of our memories, knowledge bases, and belief systems.

The development of new visual genres and technological innovations for creating and accessing them, have multiplied the forms of available textual and visual information. Today, a particular culture's visual and inevitably ideological messages can easily cross borders that once were tightly controlled by geography, wealth, and language. Whether the exponential increase and globalization of signifiers is good or bad is debatable, but it is a fact of post-modern, or perhaps even post-post modern life, and it is my opinion that we are fortunate to be part of a paradigm shift as significant as the European Renaissance or the Enlightenment.

Children encounter sophisticated ideological images everywhere: television, videos, comic books, illustrations, advertising, on tee shirts, and in classrooms. The natures of the images children see influences the kind of the art we can expect them to understand and make in art education classrooms. The images with which they interact also influence their perceptions of the world. The richness of the postmodern plethora of images is a blessing, which must be tempered with criticality. Conflating Donatello, the Renaissance sculptor with Donatello the Ninja Turtle is either
wondrously funny or tragic depending upon your point of view.

Although access to a rhizomatic mixture of images is a rich cornucopia filled with wonders, it is also filled with metaphorical monsters. Systems of visual signs can be catalysts for learning and practicing intolerance. For example, Makolkin (2001) conducted a semiotic analysis of national, and other politically constructed flags and pointed to the numbers of agendas and passions, including violence, that are a result of flag waving, or as she calls it, "flagomania." One ongoing example of the significance of the flag symbol in the United States is the ongoing debate about adding an amendment to our Constitution forbidding the U.S. flag to be set afire as a signifier of protest against government policy. The symbolic act of burning a piece of cloth covered with stars and stripes is considered by some legislators as akin to a direct attack on the United States and its people. Many artists have worked with flag symbolism from their own points of view including Faith Ringgold whose work juxtaposes words and images to confront notions of racism, sexism, and patriotism. Wayne Eagleboy, an Oneida American Indian uses the flag to symbolically imprison portraits of two Indian men behind a screen of barbed wire framed with buffalo fur. Studying these and other visual sign symbolic systems helps students to articulate cultural concepts, facilitates critical responses, and highlights the multiple ways people organize and understand their significant worlds.

The field of art education has always been influenced by its relationships with curriculum development trends. Policy makers and school boards struggle to find the right place for art education within the general school curriculum (and balance budgets) as art teachers struggle to understand the field’s relationship to contemporary art practices. Art education in most schools still function within social and historical parameters that have given rise to the contradictory notions that every child is an artist, while at the same time privileging gallery-represented artists and those (primarily European male) artists included within the art history cannon who have been labeled "genius." All of these very practical and conceptual issues affect art education from elementary through university art teacher education programs. While I have no answers about budgets, I do have some ideas about content for art education.
I certainly believe that there is an important place for high art in art education. Good art historical classroom practices that get beyond dark rooms and rote answers on a test, add to the richness of a student’s collateral experience. At the same time, a consideration of other culture works including crafts, design, and techno-culture can add to the richness of any art education curriculum. Places, objects, and events are visually loaded aesthetic signifiers, and they have the power to inform, modify desires, and visually educate, at least as well as high art, and in some cases, maybe better. With a semiotic point of view, all types of signifiers (the functional and dysfunctional alike) are potentially rich sites for cognition, and sites of reference for reflective creation of visual culture by students and artists. I firmly believe that no creative production will happen without loads of interactions with stimulating visual images from multiple genres, places, eras, and especially points of view.

**Intersections of Semiotics and Visual Pedagogy**

Marcel Danesi (1993) explained that semiotics “studies virtually anything we do and use to represent the world around us and to make messages about it” (p. 1). Those things we use to carry messages are signs – written and spoken words, gestures, objects, clothing, as well as traditional art -- anything that stands for something to someone. Anything can be a sign, and most things are, most of the time.

It is the semiotician’s job to put on a detective hat and search for clues, apparent and hidden in visual artifacts. For example, what does a person’s body adornments say about cultural affiliations, class, gender, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, and/or belief systems? We can learn about particular ideologies, geographical differences, and shifts of habits through histories and cultures. It is the semiotician's job to look at any artifact from multiple points of view, while also knowing that we cannot ever know the whole story of the object because we are always looking at it from our own frames of reference.
Overlapping meanings of visual culture signs, within the context of a social and cultural aesthetic position are often cause for cognitive dissonance. It was a lot easier when we used only high art exemplars, those special works of art that had withstood the test of time, as our only visual referents and exemplars for practicing visual pedagogy. When multiple meanings of a signifier overlap, the juxtaposition facilitates synergy between philosophical and practical aesthetics, informal and formal education, technological innovation and intervention, and personal and cultural histories. Visual artifacts teach us about our selves and our cultures. Semiotic strategies for looking at them facilitates interrogation of these multiply juxpaposed messages.

Visual and mental images are the substance of cognition. Harry Broudy (1987), a philosopher of education who was specifically interested in the realm of the visual, explained that as we spend time in the world, we build up an "imagic store," a cache of almost instantly accessible mental images that serve as touchstones and metaphors for understanding. These mental images ground our thinking.

Our imagic store partners with events and material signifiers to facilitate reasoning and understanding as we negotiate our own and our students' understanding of cultures and significance. Marcel Danesi’s (1995) considers advertising to be the most powerful contemporary form of contemporary aesthetics and communication:

Advertising’s implicit messages, styles of presentation, and visual images are surreptitiously shaping the thoughts, personalities, and lifestyle behaviors of countless individuals as well as covertly suggesting how we might best satisfy our innermost urges and aspirations. But at another level advertising has evolved into a fin du siecle medium of artistic expression that distinguishes the human species from all others -- the capacity and urgent propensity to make meaning through symbolism. (p. 7)

The juxtaposition of art education and semiotics ensures a lively path for educators interested in engaging with artifacts of culture, both real and virtual. New media, advertising, rituals, costumes, personal adornments, fine art, popular culture, and traditional crafts can find their way into art education discourse and practices.
and can be used to interrogate ideas and make meaning. Interpreting a variety of artifacts, from multiple cultures, from different points of view invites metacognitive reasoning that can inform not only discourse, but also studio production activities that, in my opinion remains at the center of art education practices, especially in the early grades. By using semiotic strategies to interrogate cultural artifacts of all sorts, students can use codes, signs, and symbols as thoughtful foundations for their art work and for making sense in their daily lives.

To conclude, I would like to talk about corn, which in some ways exemplifies my engagements with visual pedagogy and semiotics. When I was a child, I loved riding along with my uncle in his combine as he harvested corn, and I loved eating the newly picked and roasted corn on the cob. I still can’t wait until August when I can buy fresh corn from local farmers. I decorate my house with corn in the autumn and I live in a small city amid acres of biogenetically modified corn. (But that’s another story.) I’m currently on sabbatical and live very near a site where a cornfield has been turned into art. I have participated in and written about the DeKalb, Illinois annual corn festival (Smith-Shank, 2003), which has been used by local art teachers as a site of student research and the background for making their art. These students visited farms, watched parts of the harvest, helped plan and design costumes for the parade, located sites for trash removal, mapped sites for port-a-potties, and helped prepare thousands of ears of corn to give to festival visitors. They interviewed vendors and inquired about the artifacts they had for sale. They studied the significance of corn to local and historic cultures.

Anything can be a sign, and most things are, most of the time, even corn. It is up to art educators in schools and other sites of visual pedagogy to locate meaningful signifiers for their students that resonate with the students’ imagic store and cultural experiences, and then to facilitate the students’ textual and visual research into the ways the signs elicit meanings that go beyond the uniquely personal.

REFERENCES:


