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## Edusemiotics To Date, an Introduction of

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### Synonyms

[Experience](#); [Habits](#); [Language](#); [Meaning](#); [Pedagogy](#); [Peirce](#); [Policy](#); [Relation](#); [Semiotics](#); [Sign](#)

### Introduction

Semiotics is the study of signs, especially as regards their action, usage, communication, and signification (or meaning). The word semiotics derives from the ancient Greek words for sign and signal. In ancient times semiotics was a specific branch of medicine, with signs describing symptoms. Later semiotics became a branch of philosophy, with signs describing the nature of things. Semiotics exceeds the science of linguistics, the latter limited to verbal signs of words and sentences, and encompasses both natural and invented signs, such as culturally specific artifacts. Human beings are sign users, and semiotics can also serve as a metalanguage, the function of which is to describe human action. Semiotics both constructs models, or sign systems, and considers them to be its own object of research.

Edusemiotics – educational semiotics – is a recently developed direction in educational theory that takes semiotics as its foundational philosophy and explores the philosophical specifics of semiotics in educational contexts. As a novel theoretical field of inquiry, it is complemented by research known under the banner “semiotics in education” and which is largely an applied enterprise. In this respect edusemiotics is a new conceptual framework used in both theoretical and empirical studies. Edusemiotics has also been given the status of being a new subbranch of theoretical semiotics, alongside biosemiotics or ecosemiotics, and it was launched as such at the 12th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS) held in September 2014 at the New Bulgarian University (Sofia, Bulgaria) that included participants from Europe, Australia, and North and South America.

### History, in Brief

While Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist perspective addressed largely linguistic signs, Charles Sanders Peirce’s philosophy did not limit signs to verbal utterances. Signs also peruse the nonhuman world in a variety of guises. Peirce’s perspective was pansemiotic and naturalistic and emphasized the process of signs’ growth and change called *semiosis*, representing the action, transformation, and evolution of signs across nature, culture, and the human mind. In

contrast to isolated substances, such as body and mind in the philosophy of Descartes, a Peircean genuine sign as a minimal unit of description is a tri-relative entity, referring to something that it is not (its object or referent) via a third category (interpretant). Human experience is always marked by signs, and all thinking and living proceeds in signs.

Preceding the birth of edusemiotics, in 2008 a group of mostly European researchers in education formed an informal online community under the name Network for Semiotics and Education (out of Oulu University, Finland). The Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain funded two international research seminars conducted by this group: in the University of Cergy in Paris in 2011 and in the University of Bath in 2012. Papers arising from these seminars appeared in two special issues of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (JoPE). Some members of the group were also invited to run a symposium at the Finnish Educational Research Association conference in Helsinki, followed by another one at the meeting of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in Imatra, Finland, in June 2013.

As a novel term, “edusemiotics” was coined by Marcel Danesi (the editor in chief of the journal *Semiotica*) as a subtitle to his Foreword to the comprehensive volume *Semiotics Education Experience* (Semetsky 2010). Recent research summarized in *Edusemiotics: Semiotic Philosophy as Educational Foundation* (Stables and Semetsky 2015) and *Pedagogy and Edusemiotics: Theoretical Challenges/Practical Opportunities* (Semetsky and Stables 2014) continues and develops this critical and creative impulse. While the first book is coauthored, the second represents an edited collection of chapters by international researchers including such members of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia as Jayne White and Marek Tesar. The seeds of edusemiotics however had been planted much earlier (some of these seminal works are listed in References).

## Edusemiotics as an Anti-Dualist Philosophy

Stressing the importance of “sculpting a veritable *edusemiotics for the future*” (Danesi 2010, p. vii), Danesi commented that “until recently, the idea of amalgamating signs with learning theory and education to establish a new branch, which can be called *edusemiotics*, has never really crystallized, even though the great Russian cultural psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky had remarked . . . that. . . ‘human beings actively remember with the help of signs’. . . In these words can be detected the *raison d’être* for establishing a connection between *semiotics* as the science of signs, *learning theory* or the science of how signs are learned, and *education*, that is, the practical art/science of teaching individuals how to interpret and understand signs.” Danesi noticed that research in education “has traditionally turned to psychology to help it transform teaching into a more ‘learning compatible’ and ‘performance-oriented’ activity” (2010, p. x). The shift to philosophy enabled by edusemiotics started to bring into sharp focus the dimensions of epistemology, ontology, and ethics often missing in educational research, together with existential questions of meaning – positing those as especially valuable for education and in urgent need of exploration.

Educational theory today, even if implicitly, is often haunted by the ghosts of the past: Cartesian substance dualism, analytic philosophy of language, and the scientific method of modernity as the sole ground for educational research. Human subjectivity with its gamut of experiences and purposes is thus excluded. Edusemiotics as an alternative philosophy is marked by several distinctive characteristics, the first being the priority of process over product as especially important for the discipline of education traditionally focused on finite measurable outcomes. Another important feature of edusemiotics as a distinctive conceptual framework is its ability to overcome the principle of noncontradiction and the logic of the excluded middle. The holistic perspective taken by edusemiotics entails relational ethics; expanded experience; emphasis on interpretations surpassing factual evidence; a conception

of language understood broadly in terms of semiotic structures exceeding the linguistic but encompassing images, diagrams, and other regimes of signs; embodied cognition; and the importance of self-formation as a lifelong process, thus having implications for education throughout the lifespan, inclusive of children and adults. Especially significant is edusemiotics for exploring questions of educational policy and practice and alternative research methodologies, including but not limited to phenomenology and hermeneutics with a view to positing multiple recommendations derived from its foundational principles.

In defiance of the fragmentation of knowledge still prevalent in education, edusemiotics construes a unifying paradigm that opens up a range of opportunities for human development and transformative education. Edusemiotics is an *integrative* conceptual framework. Integrative practices are largely absent from the Western educational system and relegated to Eastern traditions and philosophies such as Tao or Buddhism. In the West, philosophy and education continue to suffer from the great bifurcation between sign and object, between man and world, or – at the sociocultural level – between self and other. Overcoming such habitual dualisms both in theory and in practice is the ultimate purpose of edusemiotics. Edusemiotics continues and reinterprets the intellectual legacy of major philosophers and critical theorists, crossing over from American Pragmatism to Continental philosophy and also revisiting ancient philosophies, for example, Hermeticism. Philosophers in the pragmatic, versus analytic, tradition reject a sharp dichotomy between subject and object, body and mind, as well as epistemology reduced to the spectator theory of knowledge. Keeping this rejection from being just a slogan is indeed a task pursued by edusemiotics. This task is complex and requires the synthesis of cognition and affect, logic and ethics, and ontology and practice.

A minimal unit of description in edusemiotics, like in semiotics in general, is not an individual thing or person, but a sign as a relational – versus substantial – entity, which continuously engages

in changes and transformations, thus defying the perceived binary oppositions between not only Cartesian categories of mind versus matter but between all other dualisms. As a philosophy of education, edusemiotics aims toward ultimately organizing a sense of the relational self, in which a generic other would be integrated. C. S. Peirce's semiotics presents the whole universe as perfused with signs. In such a universe, the human mind is not separate from the environing physical world but is engaged in a continual participation with it, thus forming a holistic process-structure, a network, encompassing sociocultural and natural aspects. People are signs among signs and are sign users. Everything is a sign – still, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted. This statement sounds paradoxical, yet the presence of paradoxes is one of the characteristics of semiotics and edusemiotics. The modes of inference include, in addition to deduction and induction, also abduction functioning on the basis of the logic of discovery rather than just the logic of justification. Signs, via the dynamics of multiple interpretations and translations into other signs, evolve and grow. Learning is achieved not by an analytic, Cartesian mind that observes the world from which it is detached, but by synthetic – or integral – consciousness that constructs an expanded field of meanings informed by lived experience. Edusemiotics interrogates anthropocentrism, positing an embodied mind connected to the greater, posthuman environment. Education, in semiotic terms, is a relational process of growth as a function of engaging with, and learning from, signs situated in life, in experience, in ethical practice.

### **Some Practical Implications of Edusemiotics**

Experiential learning expands the walls of the traditional classroom and opens it to the greater social and natural world. Edusemiotics partakes of an open-ended practical inquiry that does not aim to attain finite and indubitable knowledge. It problematizes the prevalent role of formal instruction and elicits alternative pedagogies.

Pedagogy in the spirit of edusemiotics is not reducible to teaching “true” facts, but aims to enrich experience with meanings and values. Thus, learning by means of using signs becomes a modality of both formal and post-formal pedagogies that strengthen relations and connections and are oriented to meaning-making practices; the value dimension of edusemiotics is thus implied. This perspective defies the reductionist paradigm and the model of educational research as exclusively evidence based. Edusemiotics posits empirical evidence as always open to interpretations. It creates a novel open-ended foundation for knowledge which is always already of the nature of a process, thus subject to evolution, development, and the intrusion of signs that need to be interpreted anew in the unpredictable circumstances of lived experience for which our old habits of thought and action may be unfit or counterproductive. The process of semiosis that encompasses human beings functioning as signs elicits the transformation of habits as especially important in the context of education.

Logic as semiotics is the science of the necessary laws of thought. It defies the classical principle of noncontradiction that dates back to Aristotle and relates to the law of the excluded middle that “informs” the analytic logic of the propositional (verbal) language: a proposition is either true or its negation is true – that is, there is nothing in between the two parts of the contradiction. All binary opposites become subject to mediation enabled by the paradoxical structure of genuine signs that have an included middle (in this or that guise) which ensures signs’ dynamic growth in meanings rather than the attainment of stable truth. In contrast to the law of noncontradiction that continues to haunt education on the basis of which teachers demand unambiguous and singularly “right” answers, edusemiotics asserts that it is precisely logical contradictions (or moral dilemmas that may be embedded in lived experience) that may serve as important learning material. It is the indirect mediation as a semiotic interpretation that establishes a triadic versus dyadic relation. As relational entities, signs defy the logic of *either-or*; and it is the mediation peculiar to genuine signs

that constitutes their most distinctive aspect and amounts to the logic of the included middle, of *both-and*, that characterizes edusemiotics and makes education transformative and creative.

It is because of this logic that the creation of new signs takes place: signs grow, that is, they become other signs within the interpretive, that is indirect, mediated, and recursive, process of semiosis. Such process is the very foundation for the transformation of habits in actual practice. The transformation of habits – both in thought and in action – is embedded in the relational dynamics of “becoming” in contrast to static “being.” Accordingly, edusemiotics as a theoretical framework leads to reformulating the received notion of progress equated with material success and quantitative measures. Edusemiotics changes the perception of standards that serve as the established policy for testing, assessment, and evaluating academic success versus failure. Failure, in accord with the process of signs being transformed into other signs, may turn into its own opposite, that is, carry a positive value by virtue of being a learning experience. The edusemiotic perspective leads to positing new ethics oriented to creating reconciling relations between ourselves and others that can bring about mutual understanding and sharing each other’s values. Signs function as unorthodox “texts” comprising human experiences that can be “read” and interpreted. By responding to, and interpreting, such texts’ indirect and often subtle messages that, rather than being “clear and distinct” Cartesian ideas, often reach us at the unconscious levels only, we ourselves become *more developed signs*.

## Human Development

Edusemiotics has a bearing on teacher training and educational policy-making. Because semiosis is a never-ending process of signs becoming other signs, education cannot end when a child grows up: personal development proceeding through the life span cannot be limited to professional training. Edusemiotics demands a continual engagement with signs inclusive of personal

moral and intellectual growth as the transformation of habits. Edusemiotics reconceptualizes adult education in terms of lifelong learning from events and experiences, positing the human subject as a sign among other signs always already engaged in relations comprising the process of becoming. Edusemiotics defines subjectivity as a process. Such process necessarily involves self-reflection. The realization of meanings in lived experience enriches this very experience with its existential dimension and replaces moral norms and binary codes with relational ethics. A semiotic approach to the structures of knowledge leads to reciprocity between ethics and reason, knowledge and action. Teachers' self-knowledge becomes a must, because without knowing oneself one cannot know others – hence one would be unable to establish a genuine self-other relation as foundational for the *ethics of integration* – a distinguishing feature of edusemiotics.

The edusemiotic process of the evolution and transformation of signs intrinsically determines new opportunities for human development and transformative education and necessarily encompasses the future-oriented dimensions of becoming, novelty, and creativity. These elements were the defining characteristics of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy and need to be taken into account in education. As creative, edusemiotics problematizes the model of teaching reduced to the unidirectional transmission of pre-given content from a generic teacher to a generic student. Rather, teachers and students together are part of the same semiotic process: they form a single relational unit. In other words, teacher and student cannot function as individual and independent entities. When a teacher's aim is to instruct and a student's to receive an indubitable instruction, they, unbeknown to each other, put into practice the habitual philosophy of Cartesian dualism. Edusemiotics however posits a teacher and a student as one unified, albeit double-sided, whole – a sign, a relation. They are interrelated and interdependent by virtue of being embedded in the mutual field of signs creating shared meanings.

## Conclusion

Edusemiotics demands that the anti-Cartesian logic of signs becomes our new habit in life. However the educational field tends to subscribe to an old dualistic worldview across theory, practice, research, and especially policy! The old habits of thought and action appear to be resilient; indeed we wouldn't call them "habits" otherwise. Even if habits can eventually evolve and grow by virtue of themselves being signs of experience, they tend to become fixed and rigid, thus closing themselves to change and transformation in the manner of genuine signs. To put into practice the program of education in edusemiotics remains a current challenge. Still, research seminars and lectures are being given by "edusemioticians" at conferences around the world, and graduate seminars on the topic have been offered in some universities, notably in the University of Chile. In November 2014, a symposium on edusemiotics took place at the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia Annual Meeting in Hamilton, New Zealand. A special issue of the journal *Semiotica* titled "On Edusemiotics" is currently in production. And a comprehensive volume *Edusemiotics – A Handbook* is forthcoming with Springer Publishers.

The overall aim of edusemiotics is the creation of "the open society" (Peters 2009, p. 303; Simons et al. 2009) as the transformation of the whole of the knowledge economy. Continuing research in edusemiotics is needed to eradicate old habits and investigate the effects of such a perspective on diverse sociocultural relations. Edusemiotics is educative as it leads us out of old habits. Indeed, the Latin *educare* means to lead out as well as to bring out something that is within, however not confined within the narrow boundaries of Cartesian cogito. Edusemiotics displays radical, expansive reason constituted by signs. This reason should begin to inform educational policies and educational reform.

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