

Pedagogy as design: a social semiotic approach to learning as communication.

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Gunther Kress

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Resumen

En el artículo describo las formas en que una teoría de la semiótica social se ocupa del aprendizaje. En ese enfoque de la educación, el aprendizaje se concibe como un trabajo semiótico, un proceso transformador de interacción con el mundo impulsado por el interés, así como su resultado en formas de "identidad" de los estudiantes. La teoría de la semiótica social afirma que el aprendizaje tiene lugar en todos los entornos socioculturales, incluidos los espacios de aprendizaje formal, diseñados por profesores para promover la comunicación y la interacción en torno a los planes de estudio de las materias. El éxito de la comunicación como aprendizaje depende de la interpretación de los estudiantes, como su respuesta a las "indicaciones" curriculares presentadas por sus maestros. En esto, los maestros tienen un papel nuevo y crucial en el aprendizaje de sus estudiantes, como diseñadores de entornos de aprendizaje, incluido el lugar y el trabajo del poder en estos entornos: en la conformación de los tipos de agencia y, en ese sentido, los tipos de significado que pueden ser expresados. Como podemos observar, las tecnologías contemporáneas para la producción y difusión de mensajes se están volviendo omnipresentes. Dados estos entornos, es crucial que los educadores sean conscientes de cómo el mercado neoliberal promueve su forma de identidad, la de "consumidor", para que los maestros puedan tomar decisiones pedagógicas conscientes que les brinden a los estudiantes los recursos para tomar sus propias decisiones informadas acerca del mundo.

Palabras clave: Semiótica social, aprendizaje, compromiso, identidad, diseño, comunicación.

Abstract

In the paper I outline ways in which a Social Semiotic theory deals with learning. In that approach to education, learning is conceived as semiotic work, an interest-driven transformative process of engagement with the world, as well as its outcome in forms of student "identity". Social Semiotic theory asserts that learning takes place in all social-cultural environments, including spaces of formal learning, designed by teachers to promote communication and interaction around subject curricula. The success of communication as learning depends on the students' interpretation, as their response to the curricular "prompts" put forward by their teachers. In this, teachers have a new and crucial role in their students' learning, as designers of learning environments, including the place and working of power in these environments: in shaping kinds of agency and, in that, the kinds of meaning that can be made. As we can observe, contemporary technologies for the production and dissemination of messages are becoming ubiquitous. Given these environments, it is crucial that educators are aware how the neo-liberal market promotes its form of identity - that of "consumer" - so that teachers can make conscious pedagogical choices that will give students the resources to make their own, informed decisions about the world.

Keywords: Key words: Social Semiotics, learning, engagement, identity, design, communication.integracion.

1. Introduction: challenging mainstream views of teaching and learning

Semiotics does not usually concern itself with education – whether formal or informal. Yet semiotics deals with meaning, a concern which it shares with education, and hence with learning: that is, an engagement by someone with an aspect of the world in order to gain some understanding. Here I briefly outline some ways in which a Social Semiotic theory deals with learning. Minimally, an account of learning, deals with a learner and with that which engages her or his interest at a particular moment. Learning describes this process of engagement and its outcome. Hence a Social Semiotic approach to education and to learning in general places the learner at the centre of attention. Formal environments of learning and teaching are characterized by the presence of a teacher, whose task it is to assist a learner's engagement with a shaped body of knowledge, a curriculum.

Social Semiotics assumes that meaning arises in action and interaction. Hence even in the absence of a teacher a learner can engage with an aspect of the world which is of interest to her or to him. However, my focus here is on learning and teaching, that is, on environments in which a learner has the assistance of a teacher to gain understanding of framed knowledge, that is, of a curriculum. In such environments the focus is always on interaction of learner and teacher focused on a curriculum. In other words, a learning-teaching environment is an instance of communication more generally.

A social semiotic approach treats communication as a rhetorical process. In that process meaning is made twice: once by the initial maker of the message – the rhetor and shaped by a designer – and then, in turn, by (a member of) the audience. Usually the initial maker of the message, the rhetor, acts as designer of the meaning to be communicated: always bearing in mind the interests of the audience in shaping the message. The audience – one or many – takes the message as a prompt for interpretation, and, in doing so, focuses on that part of the message which is of interest to them. In this approach, communication is absolutely not “decoding”. Rather, interpretation is, and communication is assumed to have happened when there has been interpretation. The success of communication depends on interpretation, not on the initial maker or making of the message. It is interpretation that guarantees the success of communication. In a social semiotic approach it is taken for granted that without interpretation there is no communication.

If the communicational environment happens to be one of learning and teaching, we can say that it is the interpretation of the learner which guarantees the success of the learning / teaching event.

That is a radical move away from traditional and mainstream notions of both communication, and of teaching and learning. Formerly both had regarded the maker of the message – in environments of teaching and learning the teacher – as crucial to the success of the teaching and learning event. Now, the learner's response is at the centre and is seen as crucial to the success of the event. If we define pedagogy as the social relations in environments of learning and teaching, then that is a radically different conception of power in pedagogy – of learning and teaching, of education. For a currently realistic conception of pedagogy it is both possible and essential.

2. The theoretical perspective of Social Semiotics

Semiotics is the academic enterprise concerned with the study of meaning and meaning-making. Social Semiotics is distinct from many other versions of semiotics in insisting that meaning arises in social action and inter-action, so that the social, in its many manifestations, is seen as the origin and the shaping frame for meaning; and therefore for learning. Not all learning arises in inter-action, though much of it does: whether in the formal setting of a school, of an apprenticeship, in professional training, or in quite informal environments such as casual encounters, or in work of all kinds. But just as meaning-making can be the result of a “self-initiated” engagement with an aspect of the world, so can learning.

Face-to-face interactions happen constantly, in different environments and with a variety of means of interacting – of modes. Often, maybe most frequently, this involves speech, usually with many other semiotic resources, such as gaze, body-positioning, gesture drawn in as well. That list of modes is large though different in different societies, depending on what communicative – semiotic – resources are available in particular environments.

In increasingly many instances face-to-face interaction is giving way to (inter-)action via a range of digitally enabled means. Here too, meaning is made by a range of modes. While some of the contemporary media use modes of face-to-face interaction – speech, for instance; or facial expression; or gesture; in settings of a similar kind to those of face-to face interaction – it is essential to be aware of differences which have a bearing on what meanings can be made in each case. That is particularly so where learning is the issue.

Scholars who take a Social Semiotic approach give due emphasis to the diverse range of means for making meanings, beyond those of speech and writing. These means – the modes – have distinct and different potentials communicatively, given their differing material bases and their distinct social shaping over time. Speech may be good at conveying meanings which are difficult to convey in writing. That is, the material basis of speech – air – has been socially shaped over often long periods, differently in different communities, to convey meanings difficult or impossible to convey in writing. Rhythm, for instance, or intonation, are used to shape information to convey emphasis, or cohesion, or to indicate a distinction of given and new information. Conversely, writing, with its material basis of marks on surfaces, has been shaped to achieve different meanings. Semiotic complexity – complexity of ideas to be communicated – is handled differently in writing and speech. Above all, while speech is ephemeral writing is not: it has persistence.

Given that all communities have a range of modes to express the meanings they wish and need to make, and given that learning is about meaning, it is essential that all modes, all the means for making meaning evident, are given full recognition where learning is the issue.

3. Learning as semiotic work and the recognition of semiotic work

Change is a constant in all instances of (inter-) action. (Inter-) action is work. Change through (inter-) action is always meaningful. Work changes the worker; it changes what is worked on; work changes the tools used. Work is agentive, and what is worked on or with bears the traces of the agent who has worked. Physical, social work is at one and the same time always semiotic work. Both physical and semiotic work produce meaning. All work is meaningful. Where there are traces of work, we know meaning has been made. The question is: what meaning has been made? And: by whom and with what resources has the meaning been made? In work and through work, cultural / semiotic resources are produced.

In environments where learning is the issue, the task is the recognition of semiotic work. There is a long tradition in learning theories and research that assumes that learning happens by means of “language”. We can use Michael Halliday’s phrase and dictum that “Language is as it is because of the functions it serves in society” (Michael Halliday, 1973: “the internal organization of language is not arbitrary but embodies a positive reflection of the functions that language has evolved to serve in the life of social man”) When we unpick that phrase slightly we see that language has been shaped by social agents, doing social / semiotic work in carrying out specific social and semiotic tasks. Halliday’s phrase can be extended and changed in one further step to say that all semiotic resources are as they are because of the functions they serve in society. And we can plausibly extend that phrase in one further step and say that social institutions are, overall, relatively reliable mirrors of the society in which and for which they function.

That provides us with an essential tool for recognizing two crucial aspects of a theory of learning. One is: semiotic work as the making of meaning; and the other, the making of meaning always is learning. In social and semiotic work, social and semiotic institutions are shaped and produced, such as the institution we call pedagogy. We can make that more specific and say that the institution of pedagogy names the kinds of social relations which exist in environments of learning and teaching. Specifically, it allows us to examine and describe how the social phenomenon of power appears in such environments, and shapes the social and semiotic practices of learning.

4. The briefest sketch of the contemporary social environment

Given the assumption in Social Semiotics that meaning arises in "the social", that is in social action and interaction, it is essential to have a relatively clear sense of what that social is like. After all, it will be the or at least a major factor in shaping the social environments for learning and teaching; as for instance in the workings of power in these environments; the kinds of agency; and therefore the kinds of meaning that will be made. It may well be controversial to say that present mainstream (traditional) pedagogies in much of Europe are based on notions of the social which remain solidly based in the past: with all the attendant problems produced by that given how a present generation of school students sees and experiences the world.

As a very brief characterization one can say that the traditional and still dominant conception of education – both as pedagogy and as curriculum – imagines the nation state and its economy as it existed broadly fifty years ago. That entails notions of the citizen, with duties and responsibilities which existed then, and notion of workers for an economy which disappeared about thirty years ago. It ignores the fact that the present generation of school students has grown up in a society in which that state has been replaced as the dominant force by the neo-liberal capitalist market. Whereas that former state imagined an education system that would produce citizens with a relatively shared set of values, and workers for a very different economy to that of the present, the neo-liberal capitalist market is interested in consumers. Where citizens were imagined as identities shaped by the demands of that former state, the market is interested in consumers. The identities of citizens and consumers are pretty well incommensurate.

Entailed in that profound change is a move from an adherence to social authority to individual agency expressed as the capacity for choice in that market. Social and semiotic consequences are that conventions (e.g. the "rules" of grammar – in all forms of social action) have given way to individual style. A limited range of semiotic resources has been replaced by a plethora of these; and the previously prized capacity for competent performance in the use of a limited range of modes has given way to the present requirement of the capacity for multimodal design. A major change has been the move from the centrality of "language" to the increasing recognition and dominance of multimodality. The "page" as one normalized resource for composition is giving way or has already given way to screens of various kinds and – largely invisible – affordances. With that have come changes in principles of composition, particularly the move from linearity to modularity. Contemporary technologies for the production and dissemination of messages are ubiquitous; and with these come the "invisible", normalized effects of templates and increasingly, the use of (also invisible) algorithms to standardize according to principles not of the user's choosing.

5. Design, identity and learning

The deep social changes and their semiotic consequences have had and continue to have their effects on forms of identity. The person who learned – and had normalized and naturalized for herself and himself – the notion of adherence to rules which were presented as immutable, will have developed a distinctly different identity to the person who is at ease in (multimodal) design. Multimodality mirrors the plethora of resources offered in all kinds of markets; and the invitation to choose mirrors the ethics of the neo-liberal capitalist market, which has elevated choice to its major and guiding principle.

In that environment design is the normalized, naturalized and expected capacity. Design has clear, positive features: instead of rules which are opaque in origin and intent, and presented as unalterable, design offers the possibility of shaping available resources into coherent compositions which respond to and arise out of the interests of the individual designer. The potential offered by the technologies of production and dissemination offer the possibilities of a 'voice' in the world around. For the rhetor interested in putting her or his conceptions into the world, for materializing – giving material realization to his or her interests in 'what is to be designed' is, or can be, for an imagined audience, motivating and rewarding. If that is complemented by ethical principles of design and dissemination it offers real rather than merely imaginary power to the individual rhetor / designer. Materializing the rhetor's purposes as a shaped sign complex conveys power, whether designed and realized as material objects, texts, or practices.

It is in that context that pedagogy can be overtly and knowingly designed – rather than representing the intentions of some other – head-teacher, school principal, local and national politician. What kind of identity do those in control of education imagine? Does that coincide in any way and conform with forms of identity invoked, implied or developed in present or imagined pedagogies and curricula?

6. A paradigm change

It is clear that we are witness to and involved in a paradigm change in social and in semiotic domains. Contemporary technologies of production and dissemination amplify the social and semiotic changes, and increasingly seem to dominate them in quite fundamental respects. In that regard, it is impossible at the moment to predict how far the introduction of algorithms into the social semiotic landscape will go. Nor is it possible to predict the effects of robotics in that domain.

What is clear is that that the conflation and overlapping of educational aims and strategies with requirements and expectations of the contemporary world of work demand an entirely different conception of what the tasks of institutional learning need to be. One place to start, and an absolutely fundamental issue for learning, is a clear awareness of what the social frames and conditions are in which and for which learning has taken place, takes place at the moment, and needs urgently to be moved into. Learning always happens in a specific social environment, and it is the stance of education, both in its pedagogies and in its curricula, toward the real – rather than an imagined, nostalgic and deeply ideological – world that needs to be the guiding consideration.

It is utterly clear that conditions of learning in a time of instability and provisionality demand new thinking of the place of education – in as far as those who wish to foster and support it are concerned.

7. A conception of learning for the new paradigm

Learning names both the process and the outcome of the transformative engagement by an individual with an aspect of the world – the "prompt" – which is the focus of her or his attention, with principles brought by her or him to that engagement. That engagement leads to a transformation of the individual's semiotic /conceptual /social resources and in the ceaseless transformation of these 'inner' resources in social-semiotic action, there is a constant transformation of identity.

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