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Demythifying Multicultural Education: Social Semiotics as a Tool of Critical Pedagogy

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Education has become a battleground for cultural supremacy parading under a banner of inclusion and tolerance that serves to hide insidious problems of social justice, power, and racism. The fact that we distinguish "multicultural education" as a particular "sub" genre of education speaks directly to many of the problems inherent in such labeling. It leads to diversity-for-inequality, ensuring the marginalization of such studies by reducing multiculturalism (and thereby its importance) to an isolated "subject" appended to the core curricula of schools. This reflects the widespread belief that multicultural education is only for students from "other" than the dominant group. Even at the university level, Caribbean Studies Centers, Black History Institutes, and other "ethnic" programs are physically and ideologically located at the institutional periphery. The positioning and content of these entities generally neutralizes conflict and fosters an ethnocentric, romanticized embracing of culture that glorifies individualism, trivializes history, and depreciates the significance of struggle. As McLaren (in Steinberg, 1992, p. 396) summarizes:

Diversity that somehow constitutes itself as a harmonious ensemble of benign cultural spheres is a conservative and liberal model of multiculturalism that, in my mind, deserves to be jettisoned because, when we try to make culture an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords we subscribe to a form of social amnesia in which we forget that all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms.

I attempt here to shift the focus of education from superficial nods to subordinate groups which often celebrate deficits and disguise the legacy of colonialism, to a pedagogy of critical analyses of the inequities inherent in such a system. A social semiotic approach to education offers a powerful challenge to selectively reproduced cultural politics and provides a way to deconstruct domination and essentialism; distinction and dualism—and thereby to reconstruct, that is democratize, schools and society.

Semiotics and Multiculturalism

Semiotics refers to the "general study of meaning-making (semiosis) including not just meanings we make with language, but meanings we make with every sort of object, event

or action in so far as it is endowed with a significance or a symbolic value" (Lemke, 1995, p.9). The term "social semiotics" is used to emphasize that social, historical, cultural, and political contexts are integral to the construction of meaning; this differs from the structural semiotics of the Saussurean tradition which applies more mechanistic linguistic analysis to the "science" of signs (Deely, 1982; 1990; Eco, 1976; 1979).

We are all practicing semioticians to some degree, whether we know it or not. We engage in meaning-making daily, from the minute we awaken to a newscast on the radio to the dreams we have as we sleep at night. Semiotics is inherent in our daily activities including reading a newspaper, learning a language, watching a movie, studying behavior, creating art, going shopping, and reading literature. As such, it has a great deal to offer the fields of critical theory and practice, including "multicultural education."

Multiculturalism has been diminished by being relegated to the realm of schooling. Multiculturalism is about more than schooling: It is about life — about who we are and about every aspect of our interactions with each other and the world. Social semiotics helps us understand these interrelationships. It gives us access to multiple viewpoints and their interactions, allowing us to see how various factors, such as race, gender, and class, mediate each other, and to examine them in relation to the underlying social forces that shape our assumptions. Semiotics avoids objectification and, therefore, reification. It focuses on the collapse of those categories, thus helping us to understand things from a different viewpoint — as object, subject, and transformative agent. It permits a deeper understanding by our reflection on multiple and often contradictory perspectives, not by the substitution of one "truth" with another (Nieto, 1996). Semiotic inquiry is always reflective, in continual dialogue with its own assumptions and aware of the processes of learning.

According to Freire (1985), critical pedagogy encourages students to question, seek their own meaning, and to recognize their right and responsibility to take action. Social semiotics provides a critical tool that values diversity and fosters critical thinking and reflection, thereby informing and enabling agency. It provides a critical hermeneutic and historical epistemology (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1996) that enables a meta-awareness of the social, historical, cultural, economic, and political dynamics of education. It demystifies representation, appropriation, and power by interrogating the codes which are responsible for positioning these agents as "responsible for the uneven distribution of power, the unequal social division of labor, and the forms of investment that social agents have in different orientations to social meaning-making" (Thibault, 1991, p. 192).

For example, contrary to popular practice, having a class celebration day in honor of Puerto Ricans being granted U.S. citizenship in 1917 is not multicultural education. Similarly, substituting "politically correct" information for what students may already know by telling students that Puerto Ricans do not consider citizenship to have been "granted" to

them but rather imposed on them involuntarily, is not critical pedagogy (Nieto, 1996). It only becomes a critical, multicultural pedagogy through the use of social semiotics — an analysis and interpretation of different perspectives embedded in their time and place, which provides a basis for understanding and action. As teacher educators, we must move beyond the superficial to a more complex understanding of multicultural pedagogy.

Underlying a social semiotic approach to education is the assumption that the purpose of learning is to be able to understand the meaning of something. The curriculum in American schools emphasizes received knowledge over creativity and critical thinking. Knowledge, however, is not the same as understanding. The nature of understanding, as Shank (1992) explains, "is different than the nature of knowing, because understanding deals with meaning and knowing deals with [empirical] truth" (p. 201).

One problem with the current positivist paradigm of education (which makes claims to objectivity and, therefore, sees knowledge as neutral and universal) is that it equates knowing the "truth" with understanding its meaning. When we consider the world as a web of signs and symbols, not a compendium of facts (Deely, 1982), we go beyond accepting the passive receipt of "knowledge" to the construction of meaning.

A second assumption is that a social semiotic approach to education encompasses and expands multiculturalism, feminism, humanism, anti-racism, and a host of other "isms" through its embodiment of critical theory. Unlike these "isms," however, a social semiotic approach enables us to go beyond the bifurcations and fragmentation often inherent in such stances. It provides a more integrated and synthetic framework that directs our attention to the complexity and interrelations among categorizations and dynamics and to expose the subtleties of their exclusionary reductionism.

Thirdly, since all signs have ideologies embedded in them, and language is a primary sign system, issues of language are critical to a social semiotic approach. Language, as used here, includes both voice and silence. That distinction is important because inclusion of a group's language can mask the exclusion of their voice, as often happens in bilingual and ESL programs. The fundamental goal of these programs is to mainstream students into English-only classrooms as quickly as possible. They generally emphasize vocabulary and the mechanics of language at the expense of content, creativity, and critical thinking while stripping away the language the student brings with her by negating its value and situating it as inferior to English. By severely limiting these programs in number, scope, and length, languages other than English are further de-legitimized and their speakers blatantly devalued and subjugated. Language is closely tied to personal identity (Snow, 1992), and forced assimilation into the dominant tongue dehumanizes and delimits. The social semiotics of language interpretation exposes these dynamics of sound and silence, imagery and power, contradiction and politics.

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& Passeron, 1977). Yet, it is a narrow view that conceives of education as solely the purview of schools, especially as mass-media plays an ever increasing role in the representation and production of culture — and in the lives of our students. This is not to equate education with culture, but to extend the "pedagogy of culture to the culture of pedagogy" (Grossberg, 1994, p. 11) or what Giroux (1994, p. 47) calls "a critical pedagogy of representation and a representational pedagogy." Central to such a pedagogy is the incorporation of the semiotic dynamics involved in representations and the demystification of their modes of authority by the exposition of the underlying "politics" and exploitation of representations within particular ideological and social practices which promote certain forms of cultural production.

Because we live in a technological, post-modern, multicultural society, we are inevitably faced with multiple ideologies comprised of many discourses (Macedo, 1996). Thus, it is imperative that we acquire many literacies (Gee, 1992) — a critical and coherent comprehension of the complex whole, not just an isolated part. We must develop a critical understanding of psychological entities such as "memories, beliefs, values, meanings, and so forth...which are actually out in the social world of action and interaction" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 131). Such symbolic processes are necessary to "cathect body and communal vision" (McLaren, 1991, p. 159). An educational social semiotic can connect the self — consciously and critically — to modes of subjectivity of self and other.

By expanding the search for alternative modes of structuring reality to include and legitimate both verbal and non-verbal voices that have been neither heard nor understood in the stentorian hegemony of the patriarchal view (Spina, 1995), social semiotics provides a vehicle of communication and hope that offers a way to transform symbols and to generate symbols with transformative power. It enables us to move beyond considering signs as a means of communication to considering them modes of thought and to create the space within which multi-discourse can take place. Further, in the classroom, social semiotics opens the way for interdisciplinary aesthetics, and non-canonical literature and art that allow students and teachers to recognize the multiplicity of selves and meanings in context through an intimate, non-judgmental, and dialogic pedagogy.

Curricular Implications

A critical social semiotics creates a pedagogy predicated on a politics of the possible, emphasizing teaching as meaning-making, not mastering a set of techniques. In traditional schooling, teaching frequently means slavishly enforcing lesson plans developed by curriculum writers with no relationship to student lives. The origins of the "knowledge" and its underlying ideology are seldom questioned. The role of social forces in the reproduction and privileging of the dominant culture remain invisible.

The propagation of specific instructional methods reinforces the notion of teaching as technique. But teachers' adherence to "instructions for instruction" yields preconceived

results. To go beyond prescription, mechanistic views of instruction need to shift to a critical view that considers the socio-political dimensions of education (Bartolomé, 1996). We need a pedagogy responsive to the needs of students instead of prescribed teaching methods and materials which are restrictive to students and exploitive of teachers, showing a lack of trust in teachers' judgments and undermining their professionalism (Carlson, 1996).

Unlike technical teaching, there are many ways to do semiotic inquiry, and no one methodology that can be transferred effectively across classrooms. A methodology implies an ideology; the richer the ideology, the more diverse the methods. Semiotics represents aspects of a dynamic situation and cannot be captured in frozen criteria or precise formulae. However, some hallmarks of social semiotic pedagogy can be identified.

Following Thibault (1991, p. 244), a social semiotic pedagogy would

articulate those social meaning-making practices that can intervene in and potentially change the metastable dialectic of system-maintaining and system-changing relations and practices...construct a self-reflexive praxis that can specify the local and global connections and disjunctions among interaction subsystems and...articulate intelligent and responsible hypotheses about where, when, and how to intervene in patterned social meaning making on any given level in the social semiotic system.

A semiotic approach to education focuses on how codes of meaning operate, both explicitly and implicitly, to help students determine how to construct their own understanding. It de-centers Anglocentric values and re-situates education in its ideological and historical context, opening the way for democratic and liberatory education grounded in participants' lived experience. This cannot be accomplished by simply adding or integrating content about ethnicity, women, or other marginalized groups to existing curriculum. One must be committed to answering the following questions, posed by Lemke (1983, p. 159):

Who is doing what to whom with this text? And how? What social interests are maintained or contested in this text, or through its intertextual relations? What social practices are reproduced or challenged by the relations between the discursive practices and the co-patterned meaning relations in texts?

In this light, reading a sentimentalized story about Squanto at Thanksgiving is not multiculturalism. It doesn't speak against domination but serves to further reinforce the myths of colonialism by glossing over the impact of Whites on Native American culture and presenting these groups as mutually benevolent and cooperative. This, in fact, promotes racism by functioning to dissolve cultural differences and distort history. Similarly, the meaning of celebrations such as Cinco de Mayo have been lost through an emphasis on food and artifacts without reference to the events they commemorate. Cinco de Mayo celebrates Mexican resistance to cultural invasion, yet, in the name of "multicultural education," it is stripped of its political implications (Morrison, 1972).

In literature, a book such as *The Bluest Eye*, may be added to the existing canon of works by Melville, Twain, Shakespeare, Hawthorn, Faulkner, and other proponents of the dominant culture. However, like ethnic holidays, it remains an addendum—an “extra.” The message is that it is “less important,” “inferior,” “dispensable.” Furthermore, substantive issues of race, class, gender, and politics are not discussed whether the author is Twain, Steinbeck, or Morrison; whether the celebration is Cinco de Mayo, Columbus Day, or Kwanza.

A social semiotic curriculum must challenge the assumptions underlying the dominant curriculum. It must be emancipatory and empowering — a pedagogy of action that not only transforms consciousness but changes lives. As Bartolomé (1996, p. 233) argues, pedagogy should “speak to the day to day reality, struggles, concerns, and dreams of [our] students.” This requires attending to the unique sociocultural context of each situation. It requires that we, as teachers, move beyond complicity in perpetuating the status quo through complacent replication of whatever methodological recipes are currently in favor.

For example, although there is substantial evidence that collaborative learning models are effective (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Newman, 1989), many students find collaborative work, especially models that use the novice-expert matrix, as simply another way to re-present power. We need to problematize such models while also exploring why we assume the superiority of more egalitarian learning relationships. Power needs to be made visible. The power of the teacher goes beyond expertise. This does not mean that we teachers or teacher educators should deny this power, but rather that we should actively problematize it and use it to increase the power of others.

Similarly, reading must not be “a submission to the authority of the text” (Giroux & McLaren, 1992, p. 19). Reading a text, whether verbal, visual, or in some other form, must become a dialectical process whereby one engages the text from a critical, interpretive standpoint that exposes the spoken and unspoken semiotics of such discourses. For example, in problematizing the traditional textbook story of Columbus by exploring whose version of the story is being told and why, you will discover that it is not even Columbus’ story. Original sources, including his journals, reveal a preoccupation with gold, brutality, rape, and slavery. The work of Bartolome de las Casas, a priest who arrived in Hispanola a few years after Columbus and became an advocate for the rights of the natives, is also available. His book, *The Devastation of the Indies*, should be required reading in every teacher education program. The point is neither to denounce nor praise Columbus or who/whatever the chosen topic is, but to widen our view of history to include a global interpretation of our past so we may reach a more substantive, honest understanding of our present.

Semiotics provides a strong basis for interdisciplinary studies by encouraging students to employ a broad range of skills and studies to add support to their interpretations and

substance to their understanding. Each content area may be seen as a way of organizing signs. If students are seen as individuals seeking to understand (and use) signs, whether linguistic, pictorial, mathematical, gestural, or notational, then an interdisciplinary repertoire is crucial to learning. A teacher education pedagogy that addresses multiple modes of representation across categorical boundaries broadens the opportunities for understanding and equality. By learning to think in terms of signs we become less willing to accept observations as facts and more aware of the underlying assumptions that contribute such interpretations.

"Multicultural" approaches to education often ignore issues of multilingualism as well as the growing body of research that points to the cognitive advantages of true bilingualism (e.g., Cummins, 1988; Flores & Diaz, 1991). Instead, bilingualism is viewed as a transition to assimilation into English. In many schools, students whose first language is not English are in the majority. Yet, as Macedo says, "one cannot celebrate the different cultural values through the very dominant language that devalues, in many ways, the cultural experience of different cultural groups" (1994, p. 124). He calls this, aptly, the "tongue-tying of America." Monolingualism serves to perpetuate social control over subordinate language groups while ignoring the political, psychological, and pedagogical implications of this approach.

Through social semiotics, teacher educators can expose these hidden agendas as a site of power and resistance. Many bilingual and ESL programs are based on deficit models instead of the notion of a democratic and liberatory education. They frequently emphasize syntax and vocabulary, aiming at developing English language skills at the expense of meaningful learning, development of self-concept, and socio-cultural identity. As Macedo (1994, p. 125-126) says the present overdose of monolingualism and Anglocentrism that dominates the current educational debate not only contributes to a type of mind-tied America, but also prevents the development of educators and leaders who can rethink what it means to prepare students to enter the ever-changing, multilingual, multicultural world of the 21st century.

As educators, we must engage in dialogue around these and related issues as symbolic (semiotic) acts that perpetuate differential learning and disempowerment. We must actively advocate against current isolationist forms of domination toward a globally integrated policy of education, politics, and economics.

Concluding Remarks

A social semiotic approach to education can help students and teacher educators to deconstruct the reproduction of class, politicize the ideology of colonialism, and overcome the inequities they engender. By moving outside the hegemonic limits of logical positivism, semiotics stretches the boundary between the expressed and unexpressed

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toward the possibility of additional dimensions of understanding as a result of the hermeneutic grasping of what Wittgenstein (1965) called these "new forms of life." The recognition of this opens the way for critical interpretation and the relationality of value, provoking discovery and vitality, substance and transformation, in a field dominated too long by dead white males.

The teacher educator's role, then, becomes one of enabling prospective or current teachers to develop their own sensibilities, whatever they may be, and to support those positions by reason so that they may do the same for their students. This explicatory process does not simply reinforce student views but scaffolds them to clarification through a striving for critical awareness, with standards that are not imposed from the outside but arrived at from within, recognizing a multiplicity of reasons for interpretation.

In preparing teachers it is important that we understand how our own subjectivity privileges certain views and to actively render visible (with the goal of transforming) the partiality of our own perspective. In teaching practice, for example, we need to identify and problematize not only the material teachers cover but classroom events and interactions. Within our own university classrooms, we must actively engage with resistance and discomfort, providing experience with the construction of understanding. At both the university and the school we need to encourage ownership and voice in the learning process, addressing a range of learning styles and preferences for alternate modes of representation. As boundary-breakers, we need to teach, as Maxine Greene (1996, p. 29) writes, "in such a way as to arouse passion..."

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