

Inna Semetsky and Cary Campbell*

Semiotics and/as Education

An interview with Inna Semetsky¹

Abstract: Inna Semetsky has written extensively on the philosophy of education, semiotics, and the art of Tarot, often in the same breath, drawing upon the thought of Charles Peirce, John Dewey, Carl Jung, and Gilles Deleuze, among others. Over the last decade she has launched a new interdisciplinary field of inquiry called *edusemiotics* (or educational semiotics) that uses semiotics to conceptualize the foundations of learning and education. In this interview Cary Campbell discusses with Semetsky: some of the details of the edusemiotic program (what it is, and purports to do); her work and collaboration with the late philosopher John Deely; her involvement in Tarot (as an active reader and a scholar of the subject); and her career of writing and research at large.

Keywords: edusemiotics; John Deely; learning theory; philosophy of education

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Interview question 1:

How did you first become interested in and dedicated to “The Way of Signs” (as Deely calls it)? Could you speak a little about your own personal discovery of semiotics and, if possible, how you first realized its relevance to education?

Trying to recall... My first degree was in complex adaptive systems and as I remember, the affinity of systems theory with semiotics rang a bell when I first encountered the term “semiotics” *per se*. I had just completed my MA in

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counseling psychology and was looking for someone who would supervise my PhD in New York. As I was earning my living as a teacher of mathematics and science (based, understandably, on my first degree and its follow-up, Graduate Dip. Ed. in maths/science), I was looking for someone who specialized in semiotics within the existing faculties of education. Eventually I found one professor (who ended up, strangely, not becoming my advisor) who taught semiotics, among other subjects, in the Department of Arts and Humanities at Teacher College in Columbia University, New York. So you may say that discovering the relevance of semiotics to the field of education, specifically, was somewhat fortuitous for me, initially, and it had little to do with what is known as “semiotics in education” [see question 2] which is a well-developed direction in general education – but *not* in the *philosophy of education*, which became my major in the PhD program.

I think it was even before I was admitted into the program that I went to one of the annual conferences of the Semiotic Society of America, held that year in Toronto, I think (sometime during the late 90s), where I met (and heard) John Deely and Marcel Danesi. I even remember Danesi’s presentation on Vico’s *New Science*, when I asked him a question along the lines of whether he thinks that history in Vico’s understanding somehow relates to the ancient “*memoria*” or perhaps Jung’s approach to collective memory (the collective unconscious – which to a large extent was the subject of research in my MA thesis [see question 4 below]. Marcel’s answer was positive and enthusiastic. I also remember talking to Deely during the board meeting and really connecting. At one of the subsequent SSA meetings, he gifted me his just published great tome *Four ages of understanding* (2001), which I treasure and that he signed, back then, as following: “for Inna Semetsky, in whose eyes the future of semiotics burns brightly.”

Interview question 2:

Semiotics has been applied to education in different capacities for a relatively long time – at least dating back to the work of Morris. One aspect of your work that I’ve found significant is that you present edusemiotics, not solely as a pedagogical tool or a sub-branch of applied semiotics, but rather as the very philosophical and theoretical foundation of educational philosophy. Can you speak a little about what this understanding of “semiotics as foundation for education” brings to contemporary research and educational endeavors at large?

Yes, there is a significant difference between edusemiotics as a philosophical, conceptual framework for education and especially its potential as a genuine learning theory, as I see it, and semiotics in education as an applied area. Interestingly, the neologism “edusemiotics” belongs to Marcel Danesi, who subtitled as such his Foreword to my 2010 volume *Semiotics education experience*.

It took a great deal of persuasion to convince the organizers of the 2014 IASS congress in Sofia at New Bulgarian University to include the panel on edusemiotics in, specifically, the area of “theoretical semiotics” as its novel sub-branch. Thus 2014 may be considered as the year when edusemiotics was formally launched. I am happy to say that at that stage there appeared several devoted collaborators on edusemiotics, the first among which was Andy Stables, professor in philosophy of education in London, who – independently of my preceding research – was interested in the life of signs, the interrelationship between living and learning as a response to signs, and – significantly – in the anti-dualistic approach to philosophy of education that up to this day continues to be haunted by the Cartesian paradigm.

I had earlier invited Andy to contribute an opening chapter to *Semiotics education experience* and later we co-authored a 2015 book *Edusemiotics: Semiotic philosophy as educational foundation* – this volume won an inaugural book award that year from the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (PESA). This book I think should become a foundational text for students in educational theory, but my guess is it will take considerable time – semiotics is rarely taught in the departments of education in English-speaking countries. In Europe, however, as I found out recently, the interest in edusemiotics is growing, even as the philosophical figure mostly associated with edusemiotics today is Gilles Deleuze, who, non-incidentally, was a central figure in my PhD dissertation and whose philosophical, poststructuralist position and his (and Felix Guattari’s) so-called a-signifying semiotics relates strongly, as I see it, to philosophical semiotics addressed by such American pragmatists as Peirce and Dewey (it’s no wonder that John Deely considered Charles S. Peirce to be the first postmodern philosopher!).

Back to IASS: at the panel, I went to great lengths to introduce, explain, and offer for discussion the distinguishing features of edusemiotics – which include, but are not limited to, the priority of process over product in education, the relational nature of experience and subjectivity and, respectively, the ontological priority of relations as such. The latest notion is the most challenging and relates to feminist approaches to ethics and to the direction of “new materialism” in science – the latter by itself still being a contested position eliciting great debates in the area of cultural theory. The challenge for

edusemiotics is to advance to the stage when it can elicit the same scope of debate in, importantly, educational theory.

Interview question 3:

Can you perhaps speak a little to why establishing “the ontological priority” of relations is both “challenging” but also necessary for the development of edusemiotics? Without going into too much detail, my experience is that describing and speaking about learning-as-semiosis is conceptually difficult, because relations (between learner and environment) are dynamic, and thus aren’t easily applicable into many of the dominant frameworks of explanation. However, this prioritizing of relations seems to be one of the great contributions edusemiotics makes to ed theory at large, specifically in locating learning outside of reductions to mind-independent (ens reale) and mind-dependent (ens rationis) reality.

We perceive the environment as, mainly, consisting of objects. What there “is” is a question addressed by ontology that accounts for the so-called “furniture of the universe.” But the universe, which is perfused with signs, cannot be reduced to “objects” that subscribe to the logic of identities – that is, being those things that they “are” and definitely not being what they are “not”: There is no in-between, any “middle” is excluded, and we can say with certainty that this is this and that is that. The semiotic reality, however, is not the world of substantial things: this or that. Signs are relational entities, which are defined as such by virtue of “mediation” of the “included” middle without which the evolutionary process of semiosis is unconceivable. Signs – via interpretants (that is, “thirds” as a middle term in a relation) always become other signs: They evolve.

Take the concept of *semiotics in education*. More often than not, it still deals with objects – even those that play a somewhat mediating role such as teaching “aids.” But *edusemiotics* purports to deal with signs, taking as its starting point the rejection of non-contradiction that says: If this is this, it cannot also be that. Logic as semiotics says it can, because “this” is always *becoming* “that.” People are also signs: In learning, in interpreting signs, they grow and become, as Peirce would say, *more developed signs*. It is the process of learning and evolving that brings together *ens reale* (reality) and *ens rationis* (our knowledge of reality). This means that, contrary to Kant, the supposedly unknowable reality as a concept becomes moot: Knowledge is attainable even if it lurks in the future. Of course it is a somewhat ideal, *theoretical*, postulate: We should remember that semiosis is a never-ending process and complete knowledge is a

function of an unlimited community of inquirers “situated” in infinite time. Still, by putting edusemiotics into *practice* (it is experience that is our teacher, said Peirce) and learning how to interpret the language of signs, we come closer to this knowledge, to genuine *gnosis* that, importantly, cannot be separated from self-knowledge because, again, people are signs among signs. Semiotics in education does not address self-knowledge but edusemiotics does!

Interview question 4:

Before John Deely sadly passed away earlier this year, you co-authored with him in an article that brought his distinct historical philosophical perspective to edusemiotics. Can you speak about how this collaboration came together, the significance you see in Deely’s semiotics at large, and what his ideas and perspectives can bring to educational frameworks?

Till John’s untimely death, we continued to communicate via emails even if sporadically. The face-to-face meetings were limited to my rather irregular participation at the SSA or IASS conferences, even as for two years I served on the SSA program committee. The last time I saw John was in 2014 in Sofia. I invited John to write an opening chapter for the 2017 comprehensive volume *Edusemiotics – A handbook*, published by Springer. Sadly it was during the production of this volume that John passed away and I subsequently included the following in the front matter: “This book is dedicated to the great John Deely, a dear friend and colleague whose research in the theory and history of semiotics is unsurpassable. His work is a lasting inspiration for generations of students to come, in philosophy, semiotics, and now edusemiotics.” John’s chapter is his “half” in our co-authored article that you refer to, titled “Semiotics, edusemiotics and the culture of education” in the journal *Educational Philosophy and Theory* published in 2016.

Why do I think John’s work in semiotics is unsurpassable? Because he was a philosopher *par excellence* who tackled the issues of metaphysics and ontology in addition to logic, who continually attracted our attention to the importance of medieval and premodern, as well as postmodern, discourse in semiotics and extended the “way of signs” to physical nature. The latter postulate is important for educators who by and large focus on culture (which is significant, no doubt) at the expense of understanding the nature of reality as semiotic and grounded in relations. One of the implications of this position, as I see it, is that *ethics recapitulates ontology*. Hence our addressing the problems related to the “culture of education,” especially in academia, with its persistent specialization and fragmentation of knowledge. What continues to be lacking is human

understanding that it is the fundamental process of semiosis, literally the way of signs, that bridges – via interpretants (human or non-human alike!) – culture and nature, mind and world, psyche and matter, thus integrating what is habitually perceived as binary opposites.

Interview question 5:

You are a leading expert in Tarot, and have frequently connected this passion to educational philosophy and semiotics. You've previously written that Tarot "can be considered an education tool contributing to our learning and, respectively, the evolution of the human mind situation in the larger, both cultural and natural, context." Could you speak about what Tarot means to you, and how it has informed your educational philosophy.

My MA thesis back in 1994 was titled "Introduction of Tarot readings into clinical psychotherapy – naturalistic inquiry." I am a practicing "reader." I should say that it is Tarot that motivated me to start my academic career, to pursue an MA and then a PhD, and to engage in research that resulted in ten books, with the 11th now in contract. I felt the connection of this topic to semiotics almost immediately: intuitively or abductively, rather than being rationalized by löschen "cool reason."

Starting from 1998, I was giving papers on Tarot at the SSA meetings and I should say that the acceptance of this subject matter by semioticians was almost natural, in contrast to the field of education: My 1999 paper "The adventures of a postmodern Fool, or the semiotics of learning" received the first Roberta Kelson Award from the SSA. "The Fool" is the name of the very first card of the Tarot so-called Major Arcana. Yet, it was only in 2011 that my first book on the subject of Tarot was published: It came out in the series "Cultural Studies and Education" by Sense Publishers in the Netherlands. I consider the 2013 book *The Edusemiotics of images: Essays on the art-science of Tarot* to be the culmination of my research because this book really demonstrates how Tarot works in practice, what this unorthodox *science* of signs (semiotics) is behind the art of interpreting – hence reading – the non-verbal language of Tarot pictures, and how it can contribute to human learning and the evolution of consciousness when we can become aware of the *meaning* of signs that "populate" the vast unconscious field.

Edusemiotics, being an integrative framework, is really a theory–practice nexus, just like Tarot, that as such has demonstrated its educational as well as broader existential potential. So you are right in asking how Tarot has informed my educational philosophy. Tarot is a Peircean interpretant *par excellence*:

While physically the layout of pictures is literally positioned between a reader and an “inquirer,” metaphysically it is positioned between the psychical and physical aspects of reality, thus uniting the both in compliance with the semiotic logic of the included middle, the included “Third” in accordance with Peirce’s categories. Mind is First, Peirce was saying, Matter is Second, Evolution is Third. Tarot represents the *embodied* mind. Thus a static layout manifests a momentary stopover in the evolutionary dynamics of signs, the ingenious example of synchronicity (using Jung’s term) in the otherwise diachronic process, an instant “projection” of the action of signs. It is a “tool” in the pragmatic sense, considering not only whether or not this “tool” is used, but whether it is used ethically. I think that the Tarot edusemiotics can create, paraphrasing Deely, the Fifth Age of Understanding that also coils back to the First Age and thus completes the circle of knowledge or, better to say, takes human thought further up along the spiral of knowledge.

Interview question 6:

Where do you see edusemiotics heading in the future, and what do you see as the important next steps for this emerging field of study?

I am trying to be optimistic. I was very lucky for many years because I was able to do pure research and to publish, respectively. My PhD studies were followed by a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Monash University in Melbourne, and after that I’ve held a position of research academic for quite a number of years that enabled me to write, publish, travel to the international conferences, and in this way disseminate the research results to the broad audience. With this in mind, in 2015 the Institute for Edusemiotic Studies (IES), for which I now serve as a chief consultant, was created. I have now retired from academia and apart from my publications I don’t see how I could actually contribute to the future of edusemiotics. Yes, it has emerged relatively quickly, in the grand scheme of things, as a distinctive field of study that parallels such well-developed sub-branches of theoretical semiotics as biosemiotics, but I think it is now up to interested others not only to encounter edusemiotics but also take a further step toward advancing this field so as to preserve its value for understanding how we learn.

I am very grateful that you have taken an interest in edusemiotics based on your full understanding of the significance of semiotics in general and, in particular, its place in education and learning. Thank you.

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Bionotes

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Cary Campbell (b. 1990) is a music educator and musician residing in Vancouver, Canada. He is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University and an educational researcher for MODAL research group. He studies the relevance of semiotics and the philosophy of Peirce for conceptualizing the foundations of education. Recent articles include “Learning that reflects the living: Aligning anticipation and edusemiotics” (2017) and “Indexical ways of knowing” (2016). He is also co-founder and editor of the website/magazine philosophasters.org.

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