

Professional Voices/Theoretical Framework

LITERACY IN THE ARTS

To work on language, to labour in the materiality of that which society regards as a means of contact and understanding, isn't that at one stroke to declare oneself a stranger/foreign [étranger] to language?

—Kristeva in Moi, 1986, p. 3.

Kristeva's words speak, in many ways, to my own work within the fields of both the English language arts and literacy. The more I investigate what it means to represent meaning, the more of a stranger I have become to what we traditionally think of as language, or oral and/or written language. For the past eight years, I have been examining the role of print and nonprint-based languages in the language arts classroom and beyond, from elementary to middle school to high school and with university students. I have studied what it means to be literate in other sign systems like the visual, musical, and dramatic arts, and how this newly learned literacy impacts instruction. Sign systems, as Harste (1994) reminds us, help us create meaning. We do not have direct access to our world. For example, seeing one object as a dog and another object as a computer is what our brain does. Meaning is not inherent in the actual object; our brain creates the meaning, or mediates between the object we see and the sense we make of this object. The more I work with these multiple literacies and learners' collective knowledge of these literacies to create meaning, the more I'm convinced that we must reconsider more carefully the role semiotics plays in learners' evolving growth in literacy.

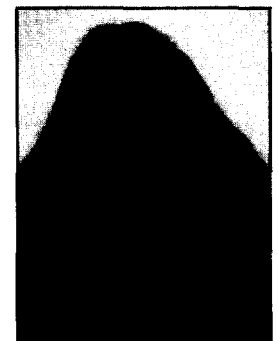
Together with elementary, middle, and high school teachers at the university and in teachers' classrooms, we have studied what it means to construct meaning by learning the literacies of multiple sign systems. When we investigated the visual arts, for example, we thought and created meaning working as artists. We explored art through color, line, perspective, gradation, and in a number of media including watercolor, tempera, graphite, clay, and paper. In other words, we learned the literacy of the visual arts. We did the same with the dramatic arts and the musical arts. This knowledge enabled us, then, to draw from each of the sign systems to create multimodal projects; to develop language arts curricula that depended on all sign systems to help children build their literacy; and to study, through children's artifacts, how children demonstrate growth in literacy and depth of response when able to draw upon more than just written and oral language to create meaning.

Two of the projects that we created were invitations: one was a literacy strategy that offered learners choices (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988), that were multimodal in nature, and that enabled teachers to use their newly learned literacies; the other made use of text sets that highlighted the integration of the arts and written language.

Throughout our investigation, we connected the visual, dramatic, and musical arts with writing and reading in the professional, trade, and children's books that we read. Then we created and studied text sets that focused on the arts, continually reflecting on the literacies we were learning and how to move this knowledge into prac-

Peggy Albers

College of
Education,
Georgia State
University, Atlanta



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tice. Debra, a second-grade teacher, states in her journal, "I learned how to make . . . the [paper] face 3-D, something I can use in my second-grade class projects." Teachers appreciated learning the literacies of the art forms; they were able to understand more clearly how to draw upon semiotics as a framework for teaching literacy in their own language arts curriculum.

As teachers found out, literacy in the arts, like print-based literacy, is process-based. It is recursive; that is, we continually move back and forth, out and in, working and reworking our masks, our watercolors, our clay sculptures, our plays, and our graphite drawings. Throughout this process, we observed, focused, listened, remembered, recorded, and represented our ideas using visual, dramatic, and musical arts media. We built our own artistic, dramatic, and musical literacy skills through repeated experiences with the techniques that define the art form. We learned specific techniques in the visual arts: in painting, we explored wash, resist, underpainting, and perspective; working with clay introduced us to techniques such as slab, coil, and pinch, as well as scoring and slipping. We learned specific techniques in the dramatic arts, too, including articulation, projection, improvisation, movement, and writing scripts. We also learned specific techniques of the musical arts such as tone, timing, keyboarding, rhythm, and song writing. Throughout, we talked about connections among and between print and nonprint texts that form semiotic systems of meaning. We continually asked questions: Why is learning the literacies of other sign systems important? Why should we pay attention to the representations that children create? In what way do children's artifacts help us see what semiotic systems they draw upon to represent meaning? To explain these questions, I draw upon social semiotics (Albers & Murphy, 2000) as a framework to guide our thinking.

Social Semiotics: A Framework for Understanding Representation of Meaning

In our book, *Telling Pieces: Art as Literacy in Middle School Classes*, Sharon Murphy and I (2000) argue that we mediate and represent meaning through semiotic systems. That is, we express meaning and interpret the meaning of others and of our world through semiotic systems. From scholars' work in semiotics, we derive five guiding principles for helping teachers explore the arts and literacy instruction.

1. Semiotic systems are collections of elements used in relation to other elements to represent meaning.
2. Semiotic systems can be of different types: visual, social, cultural, and so on.
3. In any particular text that is created, semiotic systems may overlap, co-occur, and work with or against the meanings of other systems.
4. Literacy is the ease with which we can create and interpret the signs of one or more semiotic systems through shared meanings with others.
5. Texts are ideological.

First, semiotic systems are collections of elements used in relation to other elements to represent meaning. A traffic light is one example of a semiotic system. Together, in a specific context, the red, amber, and green colors of the traffic light create the system. The meaning of the system does not reside in any one of the lights, but in how the lights are interpreted in relation to each other. In Figure 1, a teacher is using a collection of elements (construction paper, glue, scissors, among others) to create a semiotic system, a finished three-dimensional paper mask. Figure 2 shows several students displaying their own masks.

Second, semiotic systems can be of different types: visual, social, cultural, and



Figure 1. A teacher tries her hand at creating a 3-dimensional paper mask.



Figure 2. Students proudly display masks they have created themselves.

so on. It is possible to imagine many types of semiotic systems. Visual semiotic systems, for example, can include representations as diverse as oil canvas paintings, films, magazine advertisements, or modes of dress. In Figure 3, Elizabeth, a high school teacher, has created a clay mask that represents both a visual and cultural semiotic system. At the same time that she uses the elements, or signs, of the visual system (clay, clay slip, line, shape), she draws upon her own background experiences to represent her connection to drama and mythology. These elements work together in such a way that we can interpret

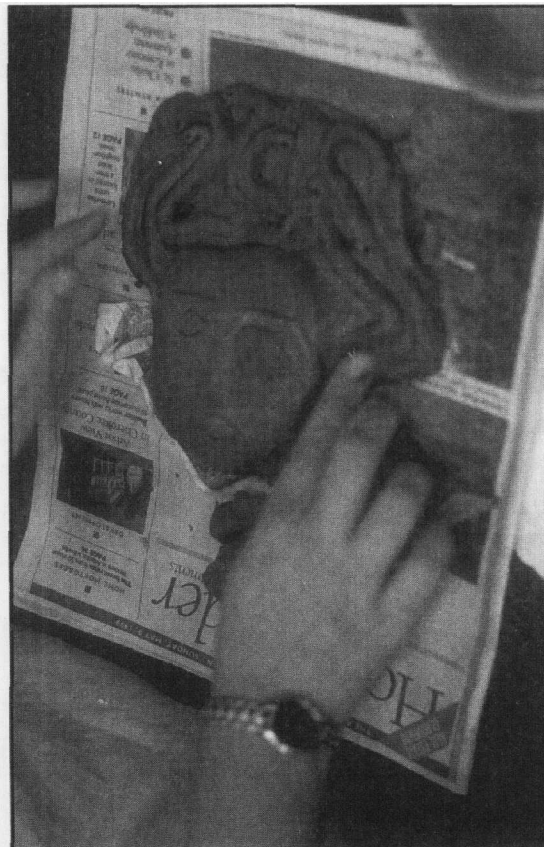


Figure 3. This teacher's clay mask demonstrates that semiotic systems can be visual, social, cultural, and so on.

and understand how clay works to complement the image of the Greek mask, conventions we accept in art.

Third, in any particular text that is created, semiotic systems may overlap, co-occur, and work with or against the meanings of other systems. Texts may use multiple resources to represent meaning. For example, the mode of a telephone conversation is verbal. The text is understood through intonation, pitch, silence, and sound along with unseen gestures (interpreted by the listener). However, if this conversation is written down, it changes: Even though the word choice is the same, ambiguity or even opposite meanings may result because print does not fully capture the intonation of oral conversation, even when we use typographic elements like punctuation, font size, or font style. Let's say you are talking to a friend about an event at school and say, "I can't believe the principal did that!" or, if you write your friend an e-mail and say, "I can't believe the principal did that." Even though the words are identical, the meanings of the sentences are different. Written language must use typographic elements and additional descriptive text to reduce ambiguity while oral language can reduce some ambiguity through intonation.

In the example below, teachers demonstrate how semiotic systems can overlap and co-occur in their creation of a humorous play about the Civil War. These teachers brainstormed what they knew of the Civil War, decided to take a humorous approach to this event, then created and performed their script. (See Figure 4.) This written text, without performance, is limited and flat. By overlapping written language (the script) with oral and nonverbal language (Daisy and Abe's talk, gestures and movements), this semiotic text holds a different, more complex, and rich meaning for its audience or interpreters.

**Happy Hour at Stone Saloon:
The True Story of the Civil War**

Setting: *The Stone Saloon in Charleston, 1863.*

Daisy: I've been working all night at this bar and I'm tired. We get so many good ol' boys in this saloon. Like Abe here.

Abe: Hey bartender, give me and my Daisy here a Charley. (Daisy sits on Abe's lap.)

Fourth, literacy is the ease with which we can create and/or interpret the signs of one or more semiotic systems. Each of the elements in a semiotic system is a sign. In pottery, among the signs that the potter uses are composition, color, shape, line, and form. In a written text, the signs needed by the writer are graphic letters, characters, and language; their presentation on the page; and the words of language. Figure 5 shows how lines are used to indicate movement in drawings, and illustrates that we are able to easily interpret and create representations using signs of one or more semiotic systems. Sometimes, we may not even be aware of the conventions that guide our use of signs. For example, we know that this ball is in motion because we use lines to represent that movement. However, some non-Western cultures do not interpret the curving lines as indicative of motion. Yet, to members of Western culture, the meaning of this convention is so obvious



Figure 4. Students prepare to perform a Civil War drama.

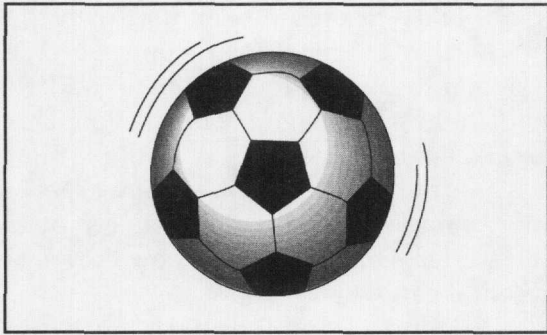


Figure 5. Lines representing movement offer a clear example of a cultural convention in art.

that they may not even recognize it as a convention.

And, fifth, texts are ideological. That is, texts that we create come from our set of beliefs and assumptions about the world. Visual representations provide a common example of how ideology works. One might interpret the artwork in Figure 6 as one student's display of strong Christian values represented through wire sculpture (Albers & Murphy, 2000). In written texts, and language in general, the historical use of the male pronoun in referring to all of humanity (he=humanity) illustrates a male-centered value system (Simpson, 1993). This usage virtually renders the female in-

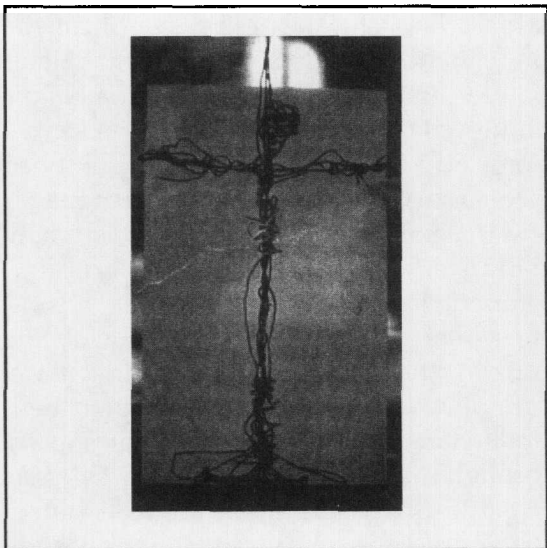


Figure 6. Sixth-grade student's wire sculpture

visible. All of these ways of representing ourselves, of communicating with our world, reflect our ideology, our beliefs about the world. Teachers, when representing meaning, always demonstrate some part of their beliefs. In Figure 7, Ed is working in clay to represent his interest in both drama and African history.

When teachers are able to learn the literacies of the sign systems and understand how semiotic systems of meaning work, they are better able to see how they can use the concept of semiotic systems in their classroom practice. As Carole, a fourth-grade teacher, writes in her journal, "I did not know that I could sketch! If I discovered a talent in myself, I can only imagine what I might find in my students!" Reflecting on the use of music in her second-grade class, Debra writes, "I thought it was interesting how we were

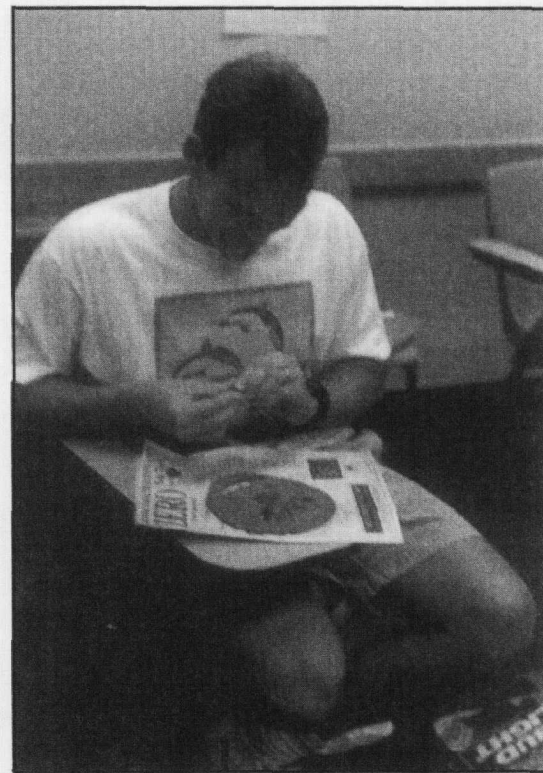


Figure 7. Ed's mask illustrates his ideological interests in drama and African history.

If we want children to represent meaning visually, musically, and/or dramatically, along with their written texts . . . we have a responsibility to teach them how to create meaning in many sign systems.

able to tell part of the story beforehand just by listening to the music. This would be a great way to work on prediction in story." Writing about clay techniques, Lynn, a kindergarten teacher, states: "In the past, I have not taught [my students] the necessary techniques to make anything more than just balls and lumps. That is something that I know I will change."

The sense of discovery in learning that these teachers are experiencing has inspired them to think of ways to introduce the arts into their own practice in spite of their county's firm control over English language arts curricula. Now they have a better understanding of the important role of semiotics in helping their students build their own literacy.

Social Semiotics in the Language Arts Classrooms

At first I was very intimidated by the watercolors, [but after] creating a watercolor myself, I now feel competent and confident enough to teach a lesson to my kids.

—Wendy, first-grade teacher

Wendy's journal comment is a representative illustration of how teachers, when they learn literacies of sign systems other than written and oral language, can imagine what was previously unimaginable—ways in which they can provide multimodal experiences that enable children to extend and deepen meaning through the arts.

Why is understanding semiotic systems important to language arts instruction?

First, I believe if we want children to represent meaning visually, musically, and/or dramatically, along with their written texts—in other words, to create a semiotic system—we have a responsibility to teach them how to create meaning in many sign systems. Just as we have a re-

sponsibility to provide children with the best-written language instruction, we have a similar responsibility to provide children with the best language *arts* instruction. This entails learning literacies of multiple sign systems ourselves. Not only can we create more complex meanings, but we can offer our students more choices in how they represent meaning.

Second, knowledge in multiple literacies is generative. That is, the more experience students have creating meaning in semiotic ways, the better they are able to represent their intended meaning.

Third, literacy in multiple sign systems suggests that we are able to interpret nonprint-based texts in much the same way that we interpret print-based texts. Because we have read line, shape, movement, and rhythm in a number of print and nonprint texts, and because we have learned literacies within various sign systems, we are able to better interpret nonprint texts. We look *for* and *at* line and shape; we *look for* and *understand* composition; we *study* and *find* meaning in movement and dialogue.

The need to understand the importance of semiotics to instruction cuts across teaching at all grade levels. Like their primary and middle school colleagues, secondary English teachers Ed and Elizabeth understand the value of introducing alternative semiotics into curricula that often value only written language representations. Ed writes, "As teachers, we emphasize sensory language, devices of language, and imagery in studied novels and student narrative essays. What we fail to do is give [students] a visual connection that extends their interpretation of the text." Elizabeth, too, invites her sophomores to create semiotic representations to deepen their understanding of written texts, as shown through the representation of *The Odyssey* in Figure 8. In a survey, her students stated that representing meaning semiotically enabled them to learn more, enhanced their

thinking, and helped them become better readers, writers, and speakers.

So what does all this talk about social semiotics mean for English language arts teachers? Although much of English/language arts instruction focuses on the development of children's linguistic skills, many scholars encourage language arts educators to broaden their scope of what constitutes language and meaning. These scholars argue that arts-based literacy instruction helps children solve problems in more complex ways (Gardner, 1991), enables them to communicate more deeply and richly (Harste, 1994), and allows them to engage in lively discussions and search for alternative perspectives (Greene, 1995). As Myers (1996) argues, this allows the language arts teacher to become a kind of archeologist who recognizes the layers of past literacy practices. These past literacy practices offer teachers more complex insights into the levels of representations that their children construct and, as Greene (1995) writes, "[The arts] open our eyes, they stir our flesh, they may even move us to try and repair our world" (p. 143).

The articles that follow suggest various ways in which classroom teachers have used the visual, musical, and dramatic arts to support children's literacy learning in their own classrooms and schools. The authors will show you, through classroom examples and through their own investigations into the arts, how their children have been able to create representations that more fully express their desired meanings.

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Figure 8. Through the creation of clay tiles, students demonstrated understanding and expanded thinking after reading.

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