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Semiotising the student perception of learning outcomes in British higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a semiotic analysis of the student perception of learning outcomes in British higher education. It centres on three annotated images in Frank Furedi’s article “The Unhappiness Principles”, published in Times Higher Education in 2012. Drawing upon Peircean semiosis and iconicity, it provides a rhetoric-infused interpretation of the word–image complementarity exhibited in student participants’ written commentaries on the three images. This leads to a dialectical view of formative and summative assessment, in which process and product create each other through the same continuum of learning and teaching. In highlighting intellectualism as central to the ethnography of university life, this article argues that learner autonomy and the potential for transformation is deemed essential to the student experience in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Peircean semiotics; word–image complementarity; learning outcomes; learner autonomy; higher education

The study in context

My axiological stance for learning at university is influenced by the Confucian Classics that advocates what is worthwhile rather than what is simply useful in the life-long process of intellectual development. In particular, the notion of “culture, conduct, conscientiousness, and good faith” (Confucius 1995, 36) has inspired devotees and activists throughout the history to pursue ultimate truth about learning through question and answer. The root sense of this is captured in the Confucian epilogue: “no vexation, no enlightenment; no anxiety, no illumination” (Huang 1997, 88). This has informed my own contemplation of learning through theoretical observance and application. I thus align my thinking with intellectualism rather than learning activities unacquainted with theory or short on a theoretical gravitas. The failure to theorise issues relating to such activities might be regarded as a failure in one’s professional life. However, this is not to say that intellectualism is simply for the sake of theory or bolstering theoretical propositions. Rather, it is for the virtues and ideals that guide human participation in civilisation within which the idea of a university is situated.

Given the distinction between research-intensive and teaching-intensive institutions in British higher education, it seems that, when it comes to theory, the road begins to fork: in one direction, theory-laden and academic; in the other, practice-driven and vocational, coupled with (what can be) a resistance to thinking endowed with philosophy and
reasoning. These two directions can contrast sharply, almost to the point of mutual exclusion, given their differing ontological and epistemological positions.

During eight years of teaching on undergraduate programmes in two post-1992 universities, my perception is that the strong focus on prescribed learning outcomes – in particular, in module handbooks and assessment guidelines – is impacting on student behaviour. This manifests itself in students’ preoccupation with final grades at the expense of the dialogue that tutors attempt to set up with them through assessment. Such behaviour may be linked to students feeling “safer” with more concrete, pre-specified targets to aim for, rather than taking up opportunities of being challenged. It may also lead to a belief in students that the correlation between learning and outcome is of causality and the payoff of higher education is the attainment of learning outcomes whereby learning is transposed to outcomes. The potential consequence of this is arguably the displacement of academic rigour in favour of performance indicators that can form an impasse to students’ intellectual development.

Learner identities are discursively constructed, with individual attitudes and dispositions subject to variation. However, the narrative of learning outcomes tends to condense such diverse factors into arbitrary, intersubjective relations between the learner and the tutor. This fails to register human cognizance as imbued with uncertainty, in that it is through the construction of social, cultural and institutional meanings that one fathoms out everyday encounters and experiences. It discounts the ontogenetic formation of learning, leading to “a culture of intellectual passivity” (Naidoo and Williams 2015, 217), for example, the eroding of learner autonomy and ultimately the digression of students from developing independent thought in their chosen subject. Students may thus find themselves oscillating between an engagement in academic debate and more practical concerns, with resulting consternation about the purpose of intellectual endeavour. Hence, a perturbing fissure within a learning community can occur. In becoming protagonists in the savviness of learning outcomes, rather than in the pursuit of “the culture of education” (Bruner 1996), how can students find an oasis for self-cultivation through their own drive and determination? In defence of ethical conduct for knowledge and scholarship, can the principles of university endeavour and attention to learning outcomes be reconciled?

Social, political and economic changes in modern times challenge a single, ethnocentric view of human development that accommodates convergences over divergences. The intellectual movement of post-structuralism in the late 1960s has brought to the fore ontological plurality and indeterminacy of meaning that highlights the nature of knowledge in terms of the latitude of its scope and the verticality of its significance. Emblematic of how conformity and non-conformity is observed, Foucault’s (1972) notion of power and discourse poses questions about the genealogy and structure of social practices. In Derrida’s (1978) theory of deconstruction, writing, as a way of textual analysis seeking to uncover deferred meanings, is continuously equivocal and indeterminate. For Lacan (1993), the unconscious is structured as a language, given that signs and symbols are saturated in the unconscious, with a web of representations intersecting in a complex manner. These ideas suggest that grand narratives juxtaposing entrenched beliefs and values with emerging perspectives and assumptions seem to have failed to account for ways in which the human mind and activity interact and evolve. Thus, understanding the student experience of higher education becomes a reforming endeavour. In view of the new challenges posed by the knowledge-based economy in which product and process are of equal importance, the relationship between higher education and individual, societal identities is increasingly dialectical, each shaping...
and being shaped by the other. This shakes the conventions for constructing and applying knowledge, thus opening up a new discourse upon the “form of complexity in which our frameworks for understanding the world are themselves problematic” (Barnett 2000, 76).

The expansion of student intake in post-1992 universities has popularised the “student experience” as an area of concern in British higher education, with debates on what constitutes such experience and how it is perceived in response to changing societal values. Government-commissioned directives and research studies have sought to promote the student experience (Action on Access 2003; Morgan 2013; Park 2008; Soilemetzidis et al. 2014; Yorke 2003; Yorke and Longden 2008). However, despite a recognition of the dynamics and vicissitudes of university learning, a focus on students’ intellectual development within higher education has not hitherto been addressed. Moreover, accountability regarding such intellectual development seems to be circumscribed by political concern and intervention, albeit as an integral part of the student academic experience (e.g. Yorke 2003).

This article takes the position that learning and teaching is a semiotic process of appropriation and transformation rather than simply an act of prescribing what to quantify and how to quantify it, for which there is never only one universal algorithm. Intellectual well-being at higher education level is perceived as a cultivation of virtues and ideals through advanced learning, and the diversity of socially, institutionally mediated human development intensifies the need for such cultivation at both individual and collective levels. The omnipotence of one’s morality, freewill and self-interest pervades contingencies and uncertainties in human interactions with the world, together with the complication of environmental influences thrown in. These factors problematise the mastery of cultural systems that signify human actions, that is, the enactment of one’s understanding of the world that subsequently affects what comes about. This article, while intending to enhance personal pedagogic practice, departs from an instrumental view of higher education by semiotising students’ perception of learning outcomes that may be implicated in their engagement with learning and development.

Here, the word “semiotising” is used as a topographical gerund, a verb form of noun deriving from “semiotics”. This accords with Peircean sign action by virtue of his perception of semiotic entity as constitutive of the sign itself, an object the sign has relation to, and the meaning the sign signifies. It is important to note that the breadth and flexibility of Peircean semiotics allows sign action to be studied through various modes of representation.

Methodological orientation

The semiotic analysis, as presented in this article, falls within the hermeneutic research paradigm resonant with the “contemplative forms of enquiry that used a priori reasoning to achieve knowledge of external truths” (Carr 2006, 425). Peircean semiosis and iconicity serves as an overarching conceptual frame of reference, rendering this analysis more coherent and consistent in relation to the remainder of this article. Word–image complementarity is posited as the focus of a rhetoric-infused interpretation of student participants’ written commentaries on Furedi’s (2012) three annotated images.

Peircean semiosis and iconicity

Peircean theory of the sign centres on the notion of semiosis, in which any instance of signification denotes an interaction of representamen (the sign vehicle or the form the sign takes),
referent (an object the sign signals to) and interpretant (the meaning the sign signifies). Through such interaction, semiosis perpetuates itself, realising the meaning potential in which “signs mostly function each between two minds, or theatres of consciousness, of which the one is the agent that utters the sign (whether acoustically, optically, or otherwise), while the other is the patient mind that interprets the sign” (Peirce 1998, 403). Semiosis is also taken to mean sign action in terms of production and interpretation of signs through the “interplay between signs and interpreters that tends towards a discovery of true meaning, the object” (Bergman 2009, 114). For example, a photo-image (sign) functions to signal to a particular situation (object). The signified meaning is a concept (interpretant) that in turn elicits a further sign in relation to a further object and a further interpretant. These rudiments form the contour of Peircean semiosis and the potential of semiosis lies in the propensity of a sign for interpretation and signification.

Thus, interpretation becomes a defining feature of Peircean semiotics. As a means of sustaining an understanding of the object through the sign-object relation, interpretation entails the notion that “all reasoning is an interpretation of signs of some kind” (Robin 1967, 404). Each sign corresponds to Peirce’s three categories of the sign: icon, index, and symbol. An iconic sign is a mode of meaning making in which a representamen (signifier) resembles or references the object or referent (signified) in terms of visual qualities and characteristics, such as the figure of a male or female on toilet doors. An indexical sign functions to point to the nature of something directly, such as a human footprint indicating that the connection between the person and his or her footprint is not arbitrary. A symbolic sign has arbitrary meaning, and an understanding of its meaning requires the learning of, for example, words and numbers.

The iconic sign signifies or represents through resemblance or similarity, in that “the meaning of iconic signs lies mostly in their connotation: what makes a painting or a map an icon is that its qualities and attributes resemble the qualities and attributes of its object” (Misak 2004, 8). However, as Peirce (1932, 282) observes, “Many diagrams resemble their objects not at all in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of their parts that their likeness consists”. Moreover, with regard to perceptual dispositions and tendencies in making sense of reality, Eco (1976, 204–205) writes that at a certain point “the iconic representation, however stylised it may be, appears to be more true than the real experience, and people begin to look at things through the glasses of iconic convention”. This may bring into focus the interpretative, expository properties of iconic resemblance or reference that assist in apprehending individuals’ subjectives as a primer to concept formation and hence reaffirming their beliefs and value positions.

The word–image relation in an annotated image

Semiotic studies in word–image relations within sociolinguistics and allied areas (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; O’Halloran 2005; Royce 2007) owe much to Barthesian semiotics and Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics. Halliday’s (1978) notion of language as social semiotic, although concerned with how the linguistic system evolves in social context, is illuminating when defining language in its most productive sense as embracing the plurality of semiotic means and resources. The intersemiotic relationship between words and image, as examined in Royce (2007), may be further explicated in the light of Peircean iconicity. For example, a portrait of something is at least perceived to be similar to that something with regard to certain qualities and characteristics, “insofar as
it is like that thing and used as a sign of it” (Peirce 1932, 247). Considering written text to be a verbal sign and visual image a non-verbal sign, word–image relations are actualised through the open-ended, mediational properties in signification. The propensity of these two modalities for interpretation gives rise to iconic relations – as Eco (1999, 157) describes, “the series of interpretations of a sign can also assume ‘iconic’ forms. But ‘iconic’ does not necessarily mean ‘visual’”. Hence, each mode of meaning is not only a caption accompanying or superimposed on the other, but also capable of releasing what might be dormant or concealed within the other. This is exemplified in Hodge and Kress (1988) in terms of “direct perception” as a salient modality of iconic signs.

Premised on Peirce’s (1992) notion of reasoning through visual representations, Stjernfelt’s (2007) diagrammatology argues that an iconic sign is deployed to yield knowledge about its object that is explicitly present in the sign. This has been taken further in Bundgaard and Frederik (2010) to address the possibility of transformation between different semioses reconfigured or filtered through cognition and representation. These interrelated assumptions can coalesce under the paradigm of ecosemiotics (Nöth 1998, 2001), thus forging a conceptual unity for signification, communication and representation, in particular, the relationship between semiotic processes and the human ecosystem through which meanings are unremittingly being shaped.

The approach to written texts as verbal signs takes the form of deductive and linear itinerary, whereas the approach to visual images takes the form of circumnavigation, roaming so far and wide as to spiral outwards from the centre to the periphery and simultaneously inwards to the centre from the periphery. The latter approach provides an abductive capacity for semiotic analysis that supplements a deductive capacity inherent in the former approach. Given that verbal signs and visual images may camouflage or detract from what a particular modality possesses within a particular environment, this article takes the position that ideas or concepts in a written form are best in themselves. When absorbed by images, they are outside themselves – and this creates a sense of aporia, that is, perplexity or puzzlement, thus allowing different modalities to challenge or entrance.² For example, when a visual image is absorbed by a word concept, one is confronted with the insufficiency of verbal text to coincide with the environment it intends to delineate. This sets in motion a semiotic mapping of words and images that enables each of the modalities to “supplement, permeate and energise the other, creating an aura of semiotic unity and enrichment” (Ma 2014, 385).

It is noteworthy that this article moves beyond the confines of Saussurean linguistics and examines the complementary effect of words and images through the lens of Peircean iconicity. According to Bruss (1978), a shift in focus from a triadic model to a dyadic one is reductive in Peircean theory of the sign. This may imply that semiotics can, in essence, be reduced to linguistics as a fundamental part of semiotics. Hence, “to perceive what a substance signifies is inevitably to fall back in the individuation of language: there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language” (Barthes 1967, 10). For example, “the notion of language as social semiotic is not excluded from multimodal considerations, or perceived at the expense of multimodal interaction, but rather assists in the extending of disciplinary boundaries that can enrich semiotic production” (Ma 2014, 377). On the other hand, the word-forming potential of other modalities enriches language as a linguistic entity in that they can be cast into words. Such two-way exchange and enrichment between linguistics and semiotics is arguably deserving of more considered attention. As suggested in Barthes (1977, 41),
Here text (most often a snatch of dialogue) and image stand in a complementary relationship; the words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more general syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level.

This provokes what may be termed semiotic communion for generating the meaning potentials embedded in the text-image relationship.

**Method**

This study initiates from a personal interest in canvassing students’ views on learning outcomes. The methodological orientation, as discussed above, sets the ground for what follows as a method of investigation. Around 150 final-year undergraduate students on the Education Studies and Early Childhood Studies programmes of a post-1992 institution in the south of England were invited to write their commentaries on three annotated images from “The Unhappiness Principles” (Furedi 2012). Responses were diverse and those selected for data analysis focused the commentaries on the word–image complementarity exhibited in the annotated images. The intended purpose of participants’ engaging with word–image relations was to bring to the foreground their perception of, as well as dispositions and attitudes towards, learning outcomes in higher education.

For Furedi (2012, 36), the nation of learning outcomes rests on a utilitarian ethos to academic life that “serves to diminish what would otherwise be an open-ended experience for student and teacher alike”. His argument is predicated on three incremental propositions that serve as annotations for three images, as presented in the next section. The inherent subjectivity of these propositions is recognised in terms of, for example, ideology, lexical field and choice, and implicature. Premised on Peircean semiotics, each proposition alongside its accompanying image is taken to be an iconic sign capable of generating meaning potentials as with the image per se as an iconic sign. The participants’ written commentaries on these annotated images provide a forum for discourse, prompting students’ critical thinking. This in turn has potential to encourage continuing student engagement with the purposes of study at higher education level.

Sign actions exist in communication and representation in that “all modes need to be considered for their contribution to the meaning of a sign-complex” (Kress 2010, 54). The semiotic analysis, as presented in the following section, has three features: (a) the dynamics of sign action in meaning making, (b) a concern with audience through a rhetoric-infused approach to data analysis and interpretation and (c) an endeavour to articulate the nuances of students’ perception of learning outcomes. The issue of validity in this analysis concerns that of subjective truth in which subjectives are the main concern, that is, (a) the role of researcher in semiotising human perception and (b) the interpretative and expository features of the analysis in accord with the researcher’s predilection for semiotic understanding. This brings to the foreground the internal validity of this study, with reference to analytic rigour and penetration.

The interpretative genre and register of this analysis is congruent with the principles of “multimodal analysis” (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Machin 2013; Machin and Mayr 2012). The rhetoric-infused approach aims to illustrate the semiotic affordance of word–image complementarity displayed in students’ written commentaries on the three images. Argued from an ethical ground, this approach brings with it a concern with
knowledge and democracy in that it seeks audience’s free assent and volition to accept the reasons given and act upon them accordingly.

**Semiotic analysis**

**ANNOTATED IMAGE ONE**

The very purpose of learning outcomes as an instrument is to accomplish a shift in emphasis from learning to outcomes. (Furedi 2012, 35)

![Image](https://www.femillustration.com)

**PARTICIPANT COMMENTARY**

1. An interesting and alternative view. On reflection, in part I agree with this. While understanding the objective of what is being taught is both useful as a focus – for “student” and “teacher”, what is being actually learnt may be different to what is intended. Education then risks becoming about a controlled end product rather than a creative process, undermining the potential for what might be learnt as being greater than what is being taught.

**AUTHOR ANALYSIS**

The annotation in Annotated Image One signifies “a shift in emphasis from learning to outcome”, suggesting that learning is aligned with something static. This is in turn resonated in the image, setting in motion the process of higher education by ushering the viewer to an imagined world of foreseeable outcomes of learning. It would seem paradoxical that, upon making such an iconic sign, the representation operates as both “partial in relation to the object or phenomenon represented” and “full in relation to the sign-maker’s interest at the moment of making the sign” (Kress 2010, 71). The annotation prompts a feeling of agreeableness on the participant’s part that learning is subsumed to outcome. It also sparks off a sign of differentiation between what is acquired
by the learner and what is predetermined by the instructor, signifying the pursuit of knowledge being undermined or transposed into a set of metrics for achieving specified targets (lines 1–4). What is seemingly lamented in terms of interaction between the inner-semiosis within the participant and the outer-semiosis of word–image relations is that learner autonomy and the potential for transformation is ruled out in a product-approach to learning (lines 4–7). This, as a newly generated iconic sign, may represent the participant’s frustration over the difficulties in establishing equilibrium between scholarship and what might be termed a necessarily utilitarian-focused education system. The implicature rests on a lexical mapping, allowing the reader to sense the participant’s underlying concern: Does the notion of learning outcomes suppose a transcendental and context-free reasoning without recognising intellectual development as central to higher education? What is resembled may be doggedly existed or sequestered from political coercion, although “not openly, directly, completely or precisely asserted” (van Dijk 2001, 104).

**ANNOTATED IMAGE TWO**

The problem with utilitarian education is not its single-minded addiction to what is useful but its tendency to deprive teaching and learning of meaning. (Furedi 2012, 37)
PARTICIPANT COMMENTARY

1. This relates to my answer above. It is the difference between education becoming (or being) a rigid means of programming brains with controlled information, and a means for the human potential to flourish and evolve.

AUTHOR ANALYSIS

The annotation in Annotated Image Two captures a presupposition based on the “pre-constructed elements” (Fairclough 1995) employed to deconstruct the notion of utilitarian education. There is no hesitation in revealing ideological loadings and power relations in the constitution of utilitarian education. This leads the participant to recalibrate his or her position through further signification. Thus, a radical perspective is under way – interwoven in the participant’s remarks is a sense of the hindrance utilitarianism might evoke to the ideals of higher education. In contrast with the defining of teaching and learning based on the standards of utilitarianism, this statement delivers an iconic sign not only resonant with the image but also indicative of a tension between the ideological command of utilitarianism and the learner’s own zest for individuation (lines 1–4). Such tension may represent the participant’s inner-semiosis in terms of semantic concealment that the prime mover of learning recedes if the principle of higher education is not observed. However, the feelings sensed through verbal signs in terms of lexical choices are by no means succumbed to “a rigid means of programming brains”. This demonstrates in an iconic form the demise of the potential for transformation. The image, as an iconic sign that functions as part of the participant’s perceptual process, offers a semiotic outlet for inner feeling indicative of utilitarianism as programming the human mind to the point of intrusion. This may suggest the social nature of the participant’s inner-semiosis through language, that is, the “final element in the process of the development of the individual, from human being to person to what we may call ‘personality’, a personality being interpreted as a role complex” (Halliday 1978, 15). Such inner-semiosis derives from interaction with texts and discourse embedded in cultural, historical contexts, as well as from the word-forming potential of other semioses that bequeath meaning to language. In the view of Halliday (2007, 73),

we explain the nature of the individual as a derivation from and extension of his participation in the group. Instead of starting inside the organism and looking outwards, we can adopt a Durkheimian perspective and start from outside the organism in order to look inwards.

As the participant’s perception unfolds, an iconic tendency for meaning is continuously in operation: What does the notion of learning outcomes risk in utilitarianism when failing to address the complex and transformative nature of human learning? Where will the journey of higher education go from there?

ANNOTATED IMAGE THREE

The narratives through which learning outcomes are framed seek to distil a complex and necessarily open-ended dynamic into phrases that can never be more than platitudes. (Furedi 2012, 38)
PARTICIPANT COMMENTARY

Again in part I agree. On the one hand, the education system as it is required simply because this has become a guiding principle in many areas of life, and “things” which cannot be defined and measured are forced to be defined and measured in a method reminiscent of a dog chasing its tail – something of the spirit of running free is lost. The education system needs to be re-created to enable us to move away from these regimented and out-dated approaches that threaten the evolutionary potential of mankind. Cynically I suspect that our over-programmed brains are incapable of imagining something different.

AUTHOR ANALYSIS

The semiotic aura of contention intensifies in the annotation of Annotated Image Three, inveighing against the prescriptive nature of learning outcomes. After all, has our much-acclaimed learner autonomy and transformative learning become an ideological cliché or even dissipated in what might be termed the momentum of inclusion, diversity and social justice? What is prompted echoes the participant’s contempt over the obsession with learning outcomes, together with a rather stark metaphor as a warning icon: “a dog chasing its tail” (lines 4–5). Weaving together personal and situational contexts and the meditational, open-ended functions of word–image complementarity, this metaphor leads to a mental concept as reflected in the remark that “something of the spirit of running free is lost” (line 5). In a similar vein, the visual image, as complemented by the annotation, generates a further contemplation on the narrative of learning outcomes through explanatory reasoning. That is, the word–image interplay induces “something by knowing which we know something more” (Peirce 1958, 332). Thus, the meaning potential is continuously developed as “an instruction for interpretation, a mechanism
which starts from an initial stimulus and leads to all its illative consequences” (Eco 1984, 26). The reciprocity of the annotation and its accompanying image is seemingly recruited to the sharing of pains when observing the principle of higher education being devalued or deplored (lines 8–9).

The signification of word–image complementarity puts into perspective the absurdity of learning outcomes encapsulated in what is being lambasted, although what is suppressed may be a feeling of being at a loss to understand the value of advanced learning. The act of replacing intellectual rigour with practical engagement fails to benefit future learning. Without obfuscation, the participant’s “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5) projects such a new iconic sign, interfaced with critical evaluation (lines 5–8). This signer is shaped in such a way as to bear relation to the participant for whom the sign is intended. The “motivated conjunctions of form and meaning” (Kress 2010, 10) through making signs and forming interpretation result in signifier-signified reciprocation, making possible the “internal reconstruction of an external operation” (Vygotsky 1978, 56). At a non-mundane, unmitigated level, the participant is at pains to venerate the fundamental value of human evolution (lines 8–9). Rather than simply relaying the annotation by moving along the expected conceptual trajectory, this viewpoint transcends to a new direction through a radical, affective position for freedom, culminating with a shared signification that the veracity and complexity of human learning must be observed. The adverbial “cynically” and the hedging “I suspect” function as an iconic sign by which to indicate the participant’s commitment to what can be seen as an emotional need to build democracy in higher education. The participant’s prior experience serves as an iconic indicator that leads to his or her reflection and semiotic mapping, and the deliberation of such experience may take place at a met'iconic level. The word–image complementarity further elicits the uncertainty and provisionality of meaning, with recourse to inner-semiosis and outer-semiosis as to what may be termed multimodal iconicity in the participant’s lived experiences.

Reflection and implication

Peircean semiosis and iconicity renders conceptual impetus to the above analysis. The inner-semiosis and outer-semiosis involved in perception unite, as well as differentiate from each other, resulting in “semiotic alliance and amplification” (Ma 2014, 385). A mutual attribution of iconic mediation is thus constantly on the move, forging a unification of personal and situational realms for signification through “interpreting visual representation by placing its elements in a tradition that gives them a meaning other than their ‘immediate’ visual appearance suggests” (Bal 1991, 177). This makes signification never ephemeral but always generative, and inner-semiosis and outer-semioses entwine to become polymorphic, each feeding into and typifying the other in a transcendent congruence. The previous semiosis infiltrates the present one that in turn anticipates the future one – a revelation of the meaning potential “perpetually formed anew as a result of reciprocal mediation, renewal and transformation” (Ma 2013, 447), augmenting the dynamics of meaning making through word–image relations.

Moreover, it is productive to incorporate Peircean semiosis and iconicity into multimodal analysis. As demonstrated in the analysis, the metaphor “a dog chasing its tail” involves the iconic mode of representation through a chain of semiosis, that is, one
interpretant acting as a sign vehicle bringing about a further interpretant, yielding an increased understanding of the object. Given that perception is intrinsically feeling-laden, understanding how it is experienced and constructed in iconic forms may require a cross-examination of different processes of “coding the world into iconic signs that can re-present it within our mind” (Nichols 1981, 11). In doing so, the iconic functioning of signs is brought to bear on ways of responding to stimuli encountered in social and physical environments. The methodological implication of Peircean semiotics for this study is profound. It points to further directions for developing a more fully-fledged approach to multimodal analysis – as allusive in Lemke (2005, 45), “Every written genre has always been multimodal, deploying not only the signs of the linguistic system but also those of the visual-spatial meaning systems associated with orthography, typography, and page layout”.

Turning to the pedagogical implication of this study, the analysis suggests that assessment amounts to more than understanding the interaction of formative and summative functions. In view of the mutual shaping power between process and product through “situations, institutions and social structures” (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258), a dialectical approach to assessment may be introduced. For example, assessing student academic writing is an intersection of product and process. The mastery of rules and procedures in argumentation should be assessed as a summative outcome, whereas the quality of argument as a formative outcome. The two-fold nature of assessment does not constitute the polarising of product and process, but rather requires a recognition of their reciprocal edification as an integral part of the entire assessment regime, albeit the discreteness of one from the other assumed.

Teaching and learning is a macro-realm of discourse where power relations are dispersed, given that discourse is “a patchwork of thoughts, words, objects, events, actions, and interactions” (Gee 2005, 7). Thus, assessment is to be embedded within social relationships from which discourse is continuously produced and reproduced, in that “power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times” (Tyson 2006, 284, emphasis in the original). This requires an understanding of the linkage between formative and summative modes of assessment as togetherness of differences in the light of “dialogic inquiry” (Wells 1999) – in particular, when rethinking “disciplinary epistemology, theories of intellectual and moral development, student’s stages of intellectual development, and the psychology of giving and receiving feedback” (Yorke 2003, 477). The reciprocal mediating and shaping force between the two modes of assessment cannot be disregarded, in that it holds them together through such a dialogic that brings into focus process and product as the same continuum of teaching and learning. The practice of feedback, alongside its arbitrary companion feed-forward, can deviate from the recognition of the dynamics and complexity of assessment, with little emphasis placed on joint construction and negotiation of meaning with the learner, rendering itself unfit for purpose. Such practices may resemble a wishful-thinking and one-directional approach to encouraging students to contemplate on rationality and criticality as part of deep learning. It can result in a trivialisation of “transformative learning” (Illeris 2014) – in which “students are no longer perceived to be potential contributors to the public intellectual capital of the nation, but instead as private investors seeking a financial return in the form of enhanced employability skills” (Naidoo and Williams 2015, 213).

In keeping with these interrelated perspectives, this article brings semiotics into play in guarding against the utilitarianism of higher education. As underlined in Radford (2003,
Cognitive development is inherently social, in which the semiotic exploration of meaning potentials paves the way for understanding how knowing and being intertwine as a cultural, historical process rather than a utilitarian enterprise. Undoubtedly, an instrumentalist view of higher education is in itself a sophomoric account of knowledge appropriation and transformation, rendering students unable to see the dynamic yet fluid and evanescent nature of learning and development. It is thus arguably imperative to uphold a non-utilitarian stance for higher education by addressing the centrality of intellectualism in advanced learning.

Concluding remarks

Can learning outcomes be an indicator of learning that signifies intellectual development? If there are incalculable learning events, then there are incalculable outcomes. If there is a universal measurement for learning, then there will be no learner individuality. If the student academic experience is restrained to outcomes in lieu of learning, then intellectual well-being will risk being sidelined. If one cannot strive for self-cultivation, then there will be no means for realising one’s potential for transformation. How do these concerns fit with the idea of a university? Be there a war on learner autonomy, the battle is for the centrality of intellectual well-being in higher education without which academism may find its way to simple vocationalism.

Thus, learner autonomy and the potential for transformation must be deemed vital to the student experience. Knowledge and scholarship is to be situated at the core of teaching and learning. However, a utilitarianist approach to higher education is seemingly looming up especially in an environment where how-you-are-smart predominates how-smart-you-are; this may have deepened an existing ontological gap between what might be termed traditional and non-traditional academic staff. Might such an approach create psychological conflicts within a practice-dominant orientation – in particular, when the contradicting ego state struggles to find a balance between the existing self and compliance with what is, supposedly, an academic norm? Nevertheless, human consciousness is situated in social, cultural, biological milieus that come to determine what it is to become. As far as academism is concerned, theoretical knowledge is of crucial importance, albeit variably constructed in different cultures. However sharply critical or critically sharp an individual mind may be (either in learning or in teaching), with an absence of theoretical engagement, the university world – “generally associated with rationality, methodological principles, objectivity and logical argument” (Bloch 2012, 2) – can represent a dead end.

Open and emerging in outlook, the study presented in this article epitomises the importance of semiotics for understanding human development. Endowed with Peircean semiosis and iconicity, it has sought to offer a critical perspective on teaching and learning in higher education. Moreover, knowledge of the process and practice involved in social research is prone to inaccuracy or incompleteness (Schutt 2015) – and in the carrying out of this study new potential lines of inquiry were constantly coming to light.

Notes

1. Within the UK, “post-1992 universities” is used to refer to former polytechnics, central institutions or colleges of higher education that were given university status in 1992 or thereafter.
These institutions aim to widen participation for students from “non-traditional” backgrounds
and often identify themselves as teaching-intensive universities.

2. I am indebted to Bob Ballard for this insight.

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