

**From Multiple Interpretations to Shared Meaning:
Diversity, Inclusion, and Semiotics**

Catherine R. Barber

Janet K. McCollum

University of St. Thomas

Abstract

As higher education becomes more diverse, faculty and students will benefit from taking a mindful approach to understanding the numerous possible meanings that their choices of words and images may convey—that is, the semiotics of information. In a learning context, paying attention to semiotics involves examining how we receive and respond to the delivery of information and the meaning behind the information. By applying semiotics mindfully, both faculty and students open themselves to the possibility of diverse interpretations of the same information. As differences in interpretation are explored, the opportunity to create shared meaning emerges.

Key words: course design, diversity, inclusion

From Multiple Interpretations to Shared Meaning:

Diversity, Inclusion, and Semiotics

Have you ever provided students with what you thought was a masterful example that clearly illustrated a concept, only to be faced with puzzled expressions or comments that indicated differing interpretations? Or have you experienced the shock of discovering that your students perceived the meaning of an image in a completely different way from how you intended? If so, you have experienced the impact of semiotics. Semiotics is “the study of signs...[which] take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects” (Chandler, 2007, p. 2) and can incorporate multimodal media such as video. Semiotics helps us realize that meanings we may see as obvious or universal are often ambiguous and, in reality, socially constructed, varying over time, and culturally dependent (Chandler, 1999).

In this session, participants will mindfully apply semiotics to their courses and teaching to foster inclusion among diverse students through the development of shared understanding/meaning. Diversity refers to the wide variety of characteristics of members of an organization (Hays-Thomas, 2016), while inclusion involves “the degree to which [a person] perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness” (Shore et al., 2011, p. 1265). Although diversity is a reality of most college courses, inclusion of diverse students must be actively fostered by the instructor. To accomplish this purpose requires both innovation and collaboration. Innovation is employed in the mindful application of semiotics to management and organizational behavior courses, as students and colleagues collaborate in creation of shared meaning. This session has three key learning outcomes:

1. Participants will explain the interrelationship and impact of semiotics, inclusion, and diversity in their management/organizational behavior courses
2. Participants will describe diverse interpretations of images and text to be better informed when selecting text, graphics, and other information for their courses.
3. Participants will mindfully identify applications of semiotics in innovative ways to foster the development of shared meaning among diverse students.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

As higher education becomes increasingly more diverse (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), both faculty and students will benefit from taking a mindful approach to understanding the numerous possible meanings that their choices of words and images may convey—that is, the semiotics of information. In a learning context, paying attention to semiotics involves examining how we receive and respond to the delivery of information and the meaning behind the information. Such awareness of diverse interpretations of a message in turn requires *mindfulness*. Langer (1997) describes mindfulness as “openness to novelty and actively noticing differences, contexts, and perspectives” (p. 23).

By applying semiotics mindfully, faculty and students open themselves to the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same information. As differences in interpretation are explored, the opportunity to create shared meaning emerges. Mindfully applying semiotics to course design can enhance learning, as opportunities for students to connect with faculty, the course information, and each other are included (Barber et al., 2020). Furthermore, semiotic tools, such as culturally-relevant metaphors and graphics that resonate with students’ cultural knowledge, and language that is inclusive of all students (e.g., in the course syllabus, instructions for assignments, and other communications from the instructor), bring about a broader awareness of

diverse cultures and may increase students' engagement with a course (Gannon-Cook & Ley, 2015).

In addition, while semiotics is not a common topic in management and organizational behavior courses, it is an important concept for management students to understand. As management students enter the business world, they can benefit from their own semiotic mindfulness. For example, the ability to use semiotics to recognize differences in interpretation among project members and guide project members to shared understanding is a valuable skill in project management. Another example of the importance of mindfully applying semiotics to a business situation is the ability to effectively communicate with different groups within or outside a company by appropriately using the group's specialized words or framing an issue from the group's perspective.

An additional aspect of the usefulness of semiotics is its tie to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2018). UDL is a framework for optimizing learning for all students by designing "flexible and engaging learning environments" (Rao, 2015, p. 121). Research suggests that UDL can be used as a framework for engaging culturally and linguistically diverse students (e.g., Chita-Tegmark et al., 2012; Rao, 2015).

Surprisingly, UDL does not specifically mention semiotics, although the relevance of semiotics is clear, given that a core UDL principle is to provide students with multiple means of representation (CAST, 2018). Understanding and applying semiotics facilitates the understanding of meaning through the use of metaphors, stories, and images (Gannon-Cook & Ley, 2015). In addition, semiotics explores how understanding is created and influenced through the various ways we distribute information: text (written words), pictures and icons (static visual

representations), verbal messaging (audio podcasts), and videos (words, audio, and static and active visual representation). Therefore, semiotics is directly linked to this UDL core principle.

Session Overview

In this session, we will provide participants with a general background on diversity, inclusion, and semiotics. We will then ask participants to self-reflect on a series of images and words that we have chosen to represent various management/organizational behavior concepts. Self-reflection results will be shared within small groups, and the similarities and differences of participants' interpretation of meaning will be discussed. Small groups will also discuss the possible impact of these words and images on students. Using a semiotic lens, participants will then self-reflect on their students' reactions to information (text, images, etc.) in their courses, identifying situations where students have interpreted information differently from the faculty's intent. These situations will be shared in small groups, followed by a small group dialogue on how to apply what was learned about diversity, inclusion, and semiotics to participants' management and organizational behavior courses. We will wrap up with a whole group discussion on why diversity, inclusion, and semiotics are important concepts, and how these concepts can be included in the development and teaching of management and organizational behavior courses. As a take-home resource, participants will receive a handout of examples of when to use semiotics in the business world, which participants can share with their own students as they introduce this topic and seek student buy-in.

The application of semiotics to teaching and learning requires an innovative and collaborative approach. Designing innovative ways to incorporate semiotics into courses requires faculty and student collaboration, as true understanding of the diverse meanings of information can only be gained through conversations with others about their perspectives. In

keeping with the conference theme “Innovate and Collaborate,” participants in this session will experience collaborative dialogue as they explore innovative ways to mindfully apply semiotics in their management and organizational behavior courses. In addition, understanding and use of semiotics will help instructors foster more effective collaboration among their students, who will in turn be in a better position to collaborate in the workplace because of their understanding of semiotics.

Session Description

Time	Activity
5 min	Facilitator and participant introductions
10 min	Mini presentation on semiotics, diversity, and inclusion—what do these terms mean, what is their interrelationship, and why are they important to teaching management and organizational behavior? Presenters will also facilitate an initial brief discussion about what participants already know about semiotics, with examples from participants.
10 minutes	Activity 1: Several pictures will be shown, and participants will engage in guided self-reflection as they interpret the meaning of the pictures. Participants will engage in small group discussion of similarities and differences of interpretation, and insights on differences in interpretations will be shared.
10 minutes	Activity 2: Several words or phrases will be shown and participants will engage in guided self-reflection as they interpret the meaning of the words/phrases. Examples include words that have multiple meanings, including “boot,” “significant,” and “cast.” Participants will engage in

	<p>small group discussion of similarities and differences of interpretation, and insights on differences in interpretations will be shared.</p>
15 minutes	<p>Activity 3: The presenters will share examples of their own experience with courses in which students had differing interpretations of material and of the presenters' meaning. Participants will then self-reflect on the semiotic meaning of information in their own courses and students' potentially diverse interpretations. Participants will consider how to apply what they have learned to help students achieve shared meaning. Finally, participants from small groups will be invited to share their examples with the larger group.</p>
10 minutes	<p>Wrap up: Participants will engage in a whole group discussion of why semiotics, inclusion, and diversity are important considerations when developing and teaching management and organizational behavior courses.</p>

References

- Barber, C. R., McCollum, J. K., & Maboudian, W. L. (2020). *The new roadmap for creating online courses: An interactive workbook*. Cambridge University Press.
- CAST. (2018). *Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2* [graphic organizer]. Author. http://udlguidelines.cast.org/binaries/content/assets/udlguidelines/udlg-v2-2/udlg_graphicorganizer_v2-2_numbers-yes.pdf
- Chandler, D. (1999). *Semiotics for beginners*. [Ebook]. Retrieved from <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/?LMCL=NE3DTG>
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The basics* (2nd edition). Routledge.
- Chita-Tegmark, M., Gravel, J. W., Serpa, M. D. B., Domingos, Y., & Rose, D. H. (2012). Using the Universal Design for Learning framework to support culturally diverse learners. *Journal of Education*, 192(1), 17-22.
- Gannon-Cook, R., & Ley K. (2015). Overlooking the obvious: How to use semiotics and metaphors to reinforce e-learning. *Participatory Educational Research*, 2(3), 109-121.
- Hays-Thomas, R. (2016). *Managing workplace diversity and inclusion*. Routledge.
- Langer, E. J. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Rao, K. (2015). Universal design or learning and multimedia technology: Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students. *Journal of Educational Media and Hypermedia*, 24(2), 121-137.
- Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Ehrhart, K. H., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. *Journal of Management*, 37, 1262-1289.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2017* (NCES 2018-070), Chapter 3.