

BOOK REVIEWS

HOWARD A. SMITH. *Teaching Adolescents: Educational psychology as a science of signs*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press (2007). 392 pp. \$60. (ISBN 0802090990).

This book is about teaching and teachers, about adolescents, about the science of signs (semiotics), and about educational psychology. In short, it lives up to its title. In this review, I will give an overview of the book and then identify what for me were its three most striking features.

In the first chapter, Smith presents the theoretical foundation for the book. This is semiotics, outlined first by Charles Peirce, and which Smith defines as the doctrine, study, or science of signs (p. 4). A sign is anything that stands for something else, although to function as a sign, there needs to be an act of interpretation by someone. Examples of signs include words, numbers, desks in rows, and perfume. Of greatest interest is applied semiotics, especially the sub-discipline of psychosemiotics, “the study of how humans learn, understand, and use the signs of culture” (p. 5). Psychosemiotics is highly relevant to education because the essence of schooling, in Smith’s view, is the teaching and learning of cultural signs, notably the three Rs. Next Smith turns to communication, the process whereby recipients of acts or messages derive meanings that affect their behavior. Communication embraces both verbal signs, such as talk, and nonverbal ones, such as school size and classroom design.

After reviewing class management and discipline from a semiotic perspective, Smith turns to theories of adolescent development, expressing a strong preference for Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach over Piaget’s biopsychological one. The center of the book, “Signs of Learning,” is a discussion of theories of learning (again Smith supports cultural constructivist over behaviorist and information processing approaches). Smith argues that teachers must attend not only to the three Rs but to all the other “signways” of learning: spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, social-personal, and naturalistic. Although these are similar in name to Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences, for Smith, these different ways of knowing are located not just inside people’s heads

but rather extend outward to cultural and environmental artefacts. Smith advocates transmediation: the translation by the student of content from one signway to another.

Peirce proposed three types of reasoning: deduction, induction, and abduction. Abduction is represented by the following syllogism:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course.
Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true. (p. 194)

The first statement shows that “the element of surprise is central to Peircean thought, with substantial implications for educational practice” (p. 195). One such implication is that teachers should plan for surprise: “teacher-proof” curricular materials notwithstanding, they should leave room in their lesson plans for deviation and spontaneity. In his discussion of exceptionalities, Smith argues that labeling adolescents “exceptional” or especially “disabled” carries far-reaching implications not only for the bearer of the term but for everyone else in that sociocultural context. In the final chapters Smith turns to broader matters of culture and society that nevertheless have an impact on the classroom. For example, teachers ignore teenage sexuality at their peril: “Like it or not, every teacher is a sexuality educator who must deal constantly with matters affecting sex and gender” (p. 269). Finally, Smith focuses on teachers, reviewing what expertise in teaching consists of and presenting advice for how to survive and thrive in the profession.

What I found most striking about this book is its theoretical coherence. Semiotics and psychosemiotics run deeply throughout; Smith consistently presents teaching and learning as dealing with signs. If you don’t know much about Peirce it’s okay; this is not a heavy theoretical treatise about Peircean thought. But the idea of semiotics is at least subliminally present on every page. No matter what he’s talking about, Smith comes back to the idea that human activity is grounded in meaning, in other words, in signs. Good teachers are astute readers and expert conveyors of signs. Teaching is a semiotic process and learning is semiosis: becoming a skilled reader of signs. Thus the book could be read as a case study in applied semiotics.

A second striking feature is breadth. As shown above, in nine chapters Smith discusses a wide range of topics in educational psychology: classroom management and discipline, theories of adolescent development, theories of learning, societal and cultural matters, exceptionalities, and expertise in teaching, among others. Thus the book could be read as a textbook on educational psychology.

A third striking feature is practical wisdom. Smith is not so high-falutin’ that he won’t deign to mention real-world problems. Boxes labeled “Tips for Teachers” appear frequently; hands-on advice is sprinkled through every chapter. Some

examples: “Do not confront or embarrass students in front of peers; you may win the battle but you will probably lose the war” (p. 82); to promote feelings of self-worth, schools should institute a no-cut policy for most extracurricular activities (p. 139); to reduce stress, beware of meetings and maintain outside interests (p. 330). Smith comes across as a wise man sharing what he has learned over the years. Helpfully, he provides an annotated reading list after each chapter and a Glossary at the end. Thus the book could be read as a survival manual for beginning teachers.

Smith says he wrote the book mainly for preservice secondary school teachers, but I think it could be read profitably by teachers of any age group at any stage of their career. How well it would serve as a textbook in an educational psychology course would depend, I suppose, on whether the instructor buys into its theoretical position. *Teaching Adolescents* has the advantage, at least, that there is absolutely no doubt what that position is. This is a fine and generous book.

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