

A method and example of new media education as liberal arts

[Özgür sanat olarak yeni medya eğitime bir yöntem ve örnek]

[Une méthode et un exemple d'éducation aux nouveaux médias en tant qu'arts libéraux]

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to report an example of Edusemiotics. It introduces a course on the background, goals, and reality of new media education in undergraduate courses. Semiotics and liberal education have something in common, interdisciplinary nature, and the point of contact gave rise to Edusemiotics. New media semiotics participates in the transformation of liberal education while enhancing human creativity and subjectivity even in the era of digital innovation by critically accepting the aspects of digital communication that continue to innovate. Through the study of new media semiotics, students enrolled in undergraduate programs have transformed from indiscriminate consumers of digital civilization into producers and consumers who critically accept it.

Keywords: Edusemiotics, liberal education, new media studies, learner-led learning activities

Özet

Bu yazının amacı bir eğitim göstergibilimi örneğini sunmaktır. Lisans derslerinde yeni medya eğitiminin arka planı, amaçları ve gerçekliği üzerine bir ders sunmaktadır. Göstergibilim ve özgür eğitimin ortak, alanlar arası bir doğası vardır ve buluşma yeri Eğitim göstergibilimini doğurmuştur. Yeni medya göstergibilimi, dijital iletişimin yenilik yapmaya devam eden yönlerini eleştirel olarak kabul ederek dijital yenilik çağında bile insanın yaratıcılığını ve öznelliğini geliştirirken özgür eğitimin dönüşümüne de katkıda bulunur. Yeni medya göstergibiliminin incelenmesi yoluyla lisans programlarına kayıtlı öğrenciler, dijital uygarlığın ayırım gözetmeyen tüketicilerinden onu eleştirel olarak kabul eden üreticilere ve tüketicilere dönüştüler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eğitim göstergibilimi, özgür eğitim, yeni medya çalışmaları, öğrenci odaklı öğrenme etkinlikleri

Résumé

Le but de cet article est de rapporter un exemple d'Edusémiotique. Il présente un cours sur le contexte, les objectifs et la réalité de l'éducation aux nouveaux médias dans les cours de premier cycle. La sémiotique et l'éducation libérale ont quelque chose en commun, un caractère interdisciplinaire, et le point de contact a donné naissance à l'édusémiotique. La sémiotique des nouveaux médias participe à la transformation de l'éducation libérale tout en renforçant la créativité et la subjectivité humaines, même à l'ère de l'innovation numérique, en acceptant de manière critique les aspects de la communication numérique qui continuent d'innover. Grâce à l'étude de la sémiotique des nouveaux médias, les étudiants

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inscrits dans des programmes de premier cycle sont passés du statut de consommateurs aveugles de la civilisation numérique à ceux de producteurs et de consommateurs qui l'acceptent de manière critique.

Mots-clés : Édusémiotique, éducation libérale, études des nouveaux médias, activités d'apprentissage dirigées par l'apprenant

1. Introduction

Semiotics and liberal education have some intersections. This is because while the goal of semiotics is a general study on the production and reception of meaning, liberal education is also an interdisciplinary education based on literacy and encompassing basic studies.

Semiotics is one of the modern liberal arts that embody the ideology of liberal education, and studying and teaching semiotics does not deviate from the purpose and method of liberal education. This article introduces a case in which teaching and learning activities were conducted by incorporating media semiotics, a cutting-edge application of social semiotics to digital media, into the undergraduate curriculum of higher education.

2. Overview of liberal education

Liberal education grew out of the Greek and Roman notion that free citizens needed the ability to actively participate and cooperate in civil society. Greece's 'Paideia, παιδεία' was to develop human virtue as well as practical skills and functions so as to foster healthy citizens. At this time, however, there was clearly a limit to the 'free citizen'. They belonged to a powerful class, excluding women, slaves, workers, and foreigners who accounted for the majority of the population at the time. The competencies that those who did not need to work were mainly oratory skills, and traditional, aristocratic values to lead intellectual thinking, truth-seeking. Today, all citizens of the world are free, at least institutionally, and liberal education has become an essential education for citizens of all civilized societies.

The 12th cycle iconography of Herrad von Landsberg's <Hortus deliciarum, Garden of Delights> describes the seven academic fields of liberal education, that is, liberal arts, as an allegory. Here, we can see Philosophy's orders over the trivium and quadrivium, profane studies. As is well known, the 'trivium' is logic, grammar, and rhetoric, which consists the areas related to thinking and communication, and 'quadrivium', which consists arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy, on which we understand the material world. Beyond the realm of the seven liberal arts, there are four men, working at desks underneath. They represent poets, mage, and magicians. They are working beyond the influence of philosophy and the seven liberal arts, and following the Greek conception, were regarded dangerous and impure Cicero developed the Greek Phaideia into 'Humanitas'. Adding the value of humanity to Phaideia, Humanitas became a general education of knowledge learning, thinking skills, communication, emotion, and bodily exploration. Liberal education went beyond learning knowledge to cultivate wisdom and to make 'total man' ultimately. Liberal education was systematized in the Middle Ages and continued till now, despite inflection points such as geographic discovery, religious reform, enlightenment, revolution, and industrialization.

From the 19th century to the early 20th century, the number of universities rapidly increased, and technology-related subjects necessary for economic growth entered the liberal arts. From then on, the dichotomy between 'liberal education' and so-called 'professional or vocational education', and the conflict between them have emerged, and it continues to this day. However, in the historical context of liberal education, this controversy was resolved long ago. For example, in his inauguration speech as president of St. Andrews University in 1867, J. S. Mill clearly stated the purpose of university education as follows:

The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture are the discipline and the furniture of the mind, expanding its powers and storing it with knowledge (A Committee of the Corporation and the Academical Faculty, 1828).

The Yale Report not only reaffirms the purpose of liberal education to pursue the goodness, but also details the educational content and context that can realize the ideals of liberal education that have been formed in the previous era. The area of learning encompasses the entire human knowledge, but it aims at an interdisciplinary approach rather than an introductory level in specific subjects, and further pursues a balance between personality completion and intellectual development. It goes without saying that all of these are the goals of undergraduate programs and have become the principles of curriculum design in most of universities in the United States.

3. Semiotics, ancient and today's liberal arts

Sometimes a new discipline tries to find its origins in an old, authentic discipline to emphasize its legitimacy. However, in the case of semiotics, this is a historical fact, not a dependency syndrome. Augustine set agenda for the emergence of universities, and *De Doctrina Christiana* “became during the middle ages the most important and widely cited authority on behalf of the Christian appropriation of pagan culture and liberal art” (Kimball, 2010, p. 47), and at the same time, it is evaluated as the first systematic sign theory. Olteaunu urged that “Peirce did not develop a new philosophical system, but rather rediscovered and an old, forgotten medieval philosophy, *Doctrina Signorum* of St. Augustine”, and further, he declared that the semiotics was initially developed to serve education (Olteaunu, 2015, p. 38). Semiotics approached, with its versatility, particular education; matters such as language learning, knowledge acquisition, schematism, iconicity and notation, ethics, rhetoric of education, teaching and learning of mathematics, and Danesi finally coined the term *Edusemiotics* (Olteaunu, 2015, p. 22), which opened the door to combine liberal education and semiotic studies.

American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) characterizes liberal education as “a living tradition whose inherent flexibility and responsiveness contribute to its ongoing vitality and relevance” (AAC&U, 2020). Liberal education has always reflected the changes of the times and has always changed accordingly. If we trace the history of its transformation very roughly, geographic and scientific discoveries from the Renaissance and Age of Exploration, and engineering developments after the Industrial Revolution have led STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) to emerge as major liberal arts in higher education. Equity and global citizenship, new values that we must pursue in the neoliberal era, have become major issues in liberal education today. Entering the era of artificial intelligence, human-specific creative thinking, critical thinking skills, and empathy pursued by traditional liberal education have become more and more important topics in higher education. Very recently, the ‘SDGs’, or Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations in 2015, have been accepted as the future direction of liberal education, and specific programs are already being introduced in various organizations around the world.

Nadin, the only survivor of the first generation of modern semiotic researchers who dominated the 1960s, emphasized the nature of semiotics as liberal education that forms the basis of human activities of knowledge acquisition, and argued that all kinds of technical artifacts were also based on various classes of semiotic reality (Nadin, 2013). Pioneers in this field emphasized what *edusemiotics* aims for as follows:

Throughout the article, it is emphasized how *edusemiotics* does not mean semiotics applied to education, as a pedagogical aid or teaching/research tool, but is rather, “thinking” semiotics as the foundation for educational theory and practice at large (Olteaunu & Campelle, 2018, p. 245). Recently, some *edusemioticians* and multimodal culture researchers (A. Oltenu, G. Kress, etc.) recognize that the essence of media education is to focus on the multimodal communication, and they share the following perception by inheriting Nadin’s idea that semiotics provides a stage for “literary critics, art historians, confused structuralists, and even for some linguists, mathematicians, and sociologists” (Nadin, 2013, p. 105).

- What the teacher teaches does not necessarily correspond to what the students learn.
- True learning is possible in a free environment. Since liberal education is to foster free people, it must be conducted ‘freely’.
- The distinction between teaching activity ‘*lehren*’ and learning activity ‘*lernen*’ is nothing more than a lexical refraction.
- The semiotic work of transformation and transduction, which forms the basis of interpretation, is a field that produces new, innovative, and creative thinking.

The introduction of semiotics, especially semiotics of new media, into the higher education as one of the liberal arts ultimately fosters critical thinking that maximizes the creativity of cultural producers and audiences’ perspective. If producer-side education, which requires separate expertise, is conducted in the field of arts and sports for learners with artistic talents, it would be reasonable for the audience to take charge in the field where semiotics and education theories are combined with the aim of accepting critically. In today’s digital culture, the design of a new media education program that fosters efficient and sound communication skills emerges as a major agenda of liberal education in itself. The design of a new media education program that emerges should consider the following principles:

- We are committing the folly of teaching present knowledge to students who will live in the future. Liberal education, though traditional, must be reconstructed from the perspective of the present and future.

- New education program should aim to cultivate a wide range of knowledge, critical thinking, creative thinking, and communication skills that traditional liberal education has pursued.
- New education program continues to innovate in content, and teaching / learning method should be in line with current and future environmental changes. This requires the ability to adapt to the ‘digital turn’.
- New education program should consider the goal of liberal education in general, that is to say, solutions to human problems represented by ELSI (Ethical, Legal, and Social Application).

These principles made learner-led education possible at the level of individual courses, and in turn, those courses were able to make some contribution to achieving the mission of renewed liberal education.

When it comes to the design of new media education, there is another point to consider, especially in the situation of Korea. Korea is the birthplace of the ‘Korean Wave’ or ‘Hallyu’. The influence of the Korean Wave and its implication will need to be discussed separately, but what is clear is that the generation familiar with digital media is the protagonist of the Korean Wave culture, to put in short, K-Culture. However, culture is not just created by itself. Likewise, in the case of K-Culture, “the conditions and context that allow it to protrude visually, and the accumulated activities of the subjects, must precede” (Kim, 2023). Media scholars agree that the success of K-Culture stems from an environment of globalization, digitization, and hybridization, which was created when developmental cultural policies met democratic governance principles of advanced Western countries and called them for neo-developmental policies. However, there is no guarantee that K-Culture will continue to lead in the fierce competition of global platforms in the future, as seen by the diagnosis that “It is likely to evolve into an extended form that is currently not recognized (...), and it is a time when K-Culture policies will bring about a fundamental paradigm shift just as production structures and characteristics change” (Kim, 2022). If it is necessary to protect “the spontaneity, freedom, and creativity of creators” at the policy level (Kim, 2023), the ultimate way to discover and enhance the potential of producers and audiences should be implemented in education

4. A case at K University

4.1. Theoretical framework

The Department of Linguistics at K University has a semiotic program in its undergraduate course. Constituent subjects such as <General Semiotics>, <Visual Semiotics>, and <Applied Semiotics> provide a solid foundation for semiotic research, and ultimately have the effect of leading to the training of the next generation researchers. Among them, <Applied Semiotics> attempted to observe and explain the communication phenomenon conducted in new media, following digital transformation from a social and cultural perspective. Kress & Leeuwen (2006) and Kress (2009), now classics in this field, were adopted as basic textbooks, and recent papers showing the most recent research trends and examples were selected as in-depth materials. Students were able to learn key concepts of multimodal social semiotics through Leeuwen (2006) and Kress (2009). Students who were somewhat introduced to linguistics encountered the new fact that signs are not arbitrary relations but flexible motivated relations in social interactions and came to understand that identity and subjectivity are a process of meaning-making. However, among the contents of this text, the part explaining portable media convergence devices was not new from the digital natives’ perspective.

Students grasped the latest research trends in Bankov (2020). Here, students were much interested in ‘the map of the semiotics approaches to digital culture’ (Bankov, 2020, p. 3), a diagram in which the author intentionally uses visual techniques to illustrate the genealogy of complex modern semiotics. Bankov’s rich analysis of “very interesting approaches to many separate issues in digital culture”, including G. Cosenza’s *Introduzione alla semiotica dei nuovi media* (2014), M. Maieti’s *Semiotica dei Videogiochi* (2004), Hartely, Ibrus & Ojamaa’s *On the Digital Semiosphere : Culture, Median Science for the Anthropocene* (2020), helped students realize that media research is being conducted on a global level, and that more active research is being conducted in Italy, leaving behind the United States and France which were believed to be the original countries of semiotics, and to have the will to obtain and read the mentioned works in person. It was Poulsen & Kvåleb (2018) that provided a decisive research direction by proposing specific guidelines in new media studies for students, who are familiar with the operations and functions of new media but think that simply explaining or listing them is not sufficient for final research. For them, the following statement of this paper held students’ eyes.

The central objects of study are, therefore, firstly, the multimodal texts of social media, such as Instagram posts, and secondly, the social practice that the multimodal texts are part and parcel of (Poulsen & Kvåleb, 2018, p. 700).

Besides the well-known fact that social media perform the function of producing and accepting multi-modal texts through technical and social practice, Poulsen & Kvåleb proposed to approach to the study of social media sequentially following seven dimensions: multimodal dimension, the practice dimension, the social dimension, the media dimension, the material dimension, the historical dimension, and the critical dimension.

4.2. Designing teaching and learning activities

From the fall semester of 2021 to the fall semester of 2023, the author conducted courses of <Visual Semiotics> and <Applied Semiotics> for five semesters. Most of the students were Koreans, and there were some foreign students from China and Japan. Regardless of nationality, they were believers of K-Culture or Hallyu, and were at the same generation who were proficient in using digital devices as media of culture.

The most important principle in the design of the two courses was learner-led learning. To this end, the instructor's interference is limited to deliver minimal knowledge through "flipped learning", and from the middle of the semester, students voluntarily conceive a research project by "elevator pitch" to organize a team or adhere individual research, and then conducted research during the second half of the semester. The students present it at the end of the semester. It is similar to the so-called "Graduation Exhibition" or "Capstone Design", which are recently introduced in higher education. In addition, motivated learners were encouraged to participate in academic events of established researchers and submit reports on their understanding. Instead of eliminating paper-written tests such as midterm and final exams, the instructor reflect a series of learner activities conducted in the preparation and presentation of team or individual projects as major evaluation factors.

4.3. Examples of learner-led learning activities

For the past five semesters, students, as producers and audiences of new media culture, conducted final research and presented good results. Among them, there were attempts to find problems that researchers had not yet conceived, and solved them in their own way. They used to capture phenomena that the eyes of existing researchers could not reach as natural and daily practice.

In the midst of student research presentations during the fifth semester, there was something to note. It is that students have gradually moved from the level of analyzing the functions acquired through the daily use of newborn digital devices or applications that Poulsen & Kvåleb named "practice dimension" to the critical dimension through the social level of the media. The students were not only aware of the abuse and addiction of digital media, but also the various social pathologies they had, which the established people were concerned about, but they were developing themselves enough to seek alternatives.

In the fall 2023 semester <Application Semiotics>, several research results of students that fit the instructor's course design intention were produced. With two of these examples,¹ Kim Sung-hyun paid attention to the explosive increase in the number of Instagram users since the "story" function, which automatically deletes posted content within 24 hours, was launched. He tried to explain this phenomenon within the framework of social psychology theories such as Impression Management Theory, Privacy Calculus Model, and Social Penetration Theory. Contrary to common belief, social media performs its function by passing the exploratory emotional exchange stage and entering the stable emotional exchange stage within an intimate group, through appropriate self-control and privacy management rather than unrealistically processing and displaying itself to an unspecified number of people.

Ji Ho-hwan looked back on the development process of the new media's cutting-edge platform, the 'short-form', and explained why young generation are addicted to the platforms that provides short and intense pleasure. He found short forms as individual platform feeds, where self-efficacy and satisfaction of needs are created by interactions, often regardless of who the original creator was, and even false information is accepted uncritically.

5. Conclusion

The academic field that can be called 'social semiotics', 'multimodal semiotics', or 'media semiotics' are actually just in its infancy. However, the various meaning production-reception aspects covered by this area are neither completely new nor surprising to digital natives. New media semiotics should be developed from this generation. Over the past five semesters, there has been a noticeable trend in learner-led activities. As prior

¹ The borrowings of the students' research results have obtained the consent of the students. Hoping that they will grow up as future academic generations, the author intentionally reveals their names in the main text.

activities being accumulated, starting with research on “how to use a new platform”, students were gradually interested in to think about the characteristics of the media based on experience, and seriously consider what kind of social impact it would generate. While the older generation does not even know the existence of such media, let alone how to use it, Generation Z has already dealt from the practical, multimodal dimension to critical dimension suggested by Poulsen & Kvåleb (2018). The principle of designing new media education programs to provide solutions to human problems has already been put into operation.

As the successful examples of the two students show, new media research embodies the values pursued by traditional liberal education. Students were not simply immersed in the social and cultural phenomena triggered by new media. Above all, they identified problems of their own through vivid examples based on their own experience using new media, broadened their horizons of knowledge by exploring various previous studies to solve them, and in the process of finding solutions went beyond the social dimension to the critical one. If the ideology of liberal education is to expand the breadth of humanity without remaining narrow-minded, and the ideology of semiotics is also to deal with issues of communication and meaning that occur at the point of contact between humans and the world, then students who have completed this class have achieved at least some parts of this.

Students taking these courses are currently enrolled in undergraduate courses from almost all departments related to media, as well as the linguistics department where the course is offered. Here too, the versatility of semiotics is proven, as well as the value of media research and education as contemporary liberal arts. But in the part of teacher, there are not only rewards but a kind of frustration. In the era of so rapid ‘digital turn’, the only task of the contemporary teachers and researchers may be to discover the next generation of academics who will take on this field in the future, and encourage their potential. This is also one of the missions of modern liberal education.

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