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Exploring the Signs of the Times Around Us and Proposing Alternative Interpretations

I have just returned from a trip to Europe, specifically Poland, where I had the opportunity to witness the signs of the changing times firsthand. There are more buildings, cafes, art galleries, businesses, cars, bridges, and highways than there were during my past visits. There are more trees, shrubbery, and plants, in cities, towns, and villages, splendidly colorful and species-rich. Like me, people who are living in this region of Europe have wholeheartedly welcomed these changes. Unfortunately, there are also signs of the times that are unwelcome and even undesirable. Examples include the hectic pace of business turning upside-down the traditionally slower paced lifestyles of the Europeans and the profusion of billboards with advertising campaigns that demand from the customer 24-hour attention, yet promise a better and easier life with almost no effort after the purchase of their products and services. Notably, these are often foreign goods and services.

While one might be tempted to see these commercial signs in simple binary (good/bad) terms, Saussure (1915, 1966) argues that as signifiers there is another way to look at them. These signs serve as the means of communicating the implicit messages (signified/concepts) about Poland and its social reality today. For example, the inferences one might draw from the collective signifiers presented by the billboards and other ads could include the following “signifieds,” or things represented by the signifiers: economic growth; confidence; art curation; and eco-consciousness, even as they might also be market competition, consumerism, and traffic congestion. The latter view opens the door to an interpretation and conversation about the signs of the times that I had observed in today’s Poland that is more sophisticated than simply perceiving them as wholly disparate perceptions (positive/negative).

Recognizing that changes are happening globally and rapidly in every sphere of human endeavor, here in the USA and abroad, this issue of the *Ubiquity Research Strand* has invited the authors to capture the signs of the times they have observed in the areas of literacy, the arts, and literature within schools, communities, and beyond. Accordingly, the articles included in this issue are researcher-witnessed firsthand accounts of the signs of the times they have documented. Readers are invited to explore the interpretations the authors have proposed in their individual pieces. A brief overview of these articles follows.

In the article *Commemoration, Testimony, and Protest in Argentina: An Exploration of Response and Responsibilities*, Damico and Lybarger examine student activism as depicted through a series of semiotically-rich signs, such as the photographs and student bodily enactments of the protests in Buenos Aires, as well as through traditional text, i.e. student-written reflections about these events. The authors offer three “signifieds” of their own—commemoration, testimony, and protest—as means to understanding these historical events in Argentina. They charge their readers to apply these interpretative lenses in apprehending the events in Argentina and other recent protests, such as the demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri and other social justice movements, such as Occupy, the Tahrir Square protests, and Black Lives Matter in the U.S. and other parts of the world. They also put forth a call to take action through our respective responsibilities and positions, or as the authors put it, “to respond in critical solidarity.”

On a more traditional front, in *Evolution of a Learner-Teacher-Researcher: Or, How Not to Teach the Research Paper*, an autoethnographic narrative piece, Fleming investigates the shift in thinking and doing research and the signs that had led to her moving away from the traditional research format to the inquiry-based endeavor in her high school classroom.

In conclusion, the articles in this issue invite the readers to examine closely not only the signs of the times they eyewitness in their own contexts and the signifieds they carry with them, but also to propose alternative interpretations and solutions. This, however, requires embracing what Maxine Greene called “social imagination,” that is, “thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to vibrant ways of being in the world” (Greene, 1995, p. 5). I hope that we can all learn to embrace such vibrancy.

References

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Author Bio: Ewa McGrail is an Associate Professor of Language and Literacy Education at Georgia State University. In her research, McGrail examines digital writing and new media composition; copyright and copyright awareness, as well as media literacy and social representations of outgroups or individuals who are otherwise not in the mainstream.