Qualitative evaluation of
semiotic-based intercultural training

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Abstract. This second of a two-part series of articles on applied semiotics and intercultural training provides a qualitative evaluation of the research initiative *Tools for Cultural Development*. The discussion will firstly centre on several theoretical and methodological challenges inherent to the qualitative research paradigm and then relate these shifting concerns to convergent findings in poststructuralist (and postcolonial) semiotics, especially with respect to phenomenology and pragmatics. Analysis of four focus group interviews in France and Australia will examine and evaluate the 2007 training experience in light of the culture-specific contexts and stakeholder groups involved. Of particular concern will be the capacity of qualitative evaluative processes to account for the "local meanings" and "voices" within the trainee narratives so as to highlight their perceptions as to the use of semiotics for designing culturally significant practices in education and praxis.

Keywords: applied semiotics, intercultural education, qualitative research, semiotic training

In this second of a two-part series of articles on semiotics and intercultural training,[1] the following study represents an exploratory qualitative evaluation of the short-term learning outcomes stemming from the applied research initiative entitled *Tools for Cultural Development*. Description of this project in the previous article firstly established the spatiotemporal localization of the training sessions. These sessions were delivered in Australia and France to six groups of participants from both academic and professional communities in 2007. Each workshop delivered eighteen to twenty hours of training, based on learning materials and practices originally developed for a regular, three credit, thirty-six hour undergraduate course. In Australia, the three participating stakeholder groups included representation from Aboriginal cultures, with one workshop being conducted in its entirety in the Aboriginal community of Yarrabah, North Queensland. All six groups involved in the initiative, although composed of individuals from diverse cultural origins, were considered homogeneous in light of the shared professional, community, academic and cultural parameters that established their respective specificity and learning expectations within the mosaic of the project. The academic disciplines addressed by the training initiative included the administrative and health sciences, journalism and communication studies, education and native studies.

This wide range of disciplinary perspectives within the umbrella of a single applied research initiative represented a promising and challenging opportunity for testing the interdisciplinary potential of the proposed semiotic-based approach to intercultural training. This overriding finality was further strengthened by a detailed literature review that brought to light a recognized gap across the disciplines for a common theoretical framework by which to work with culture (Bhawuk 1998; Black, Mendenhall 1990: 115). In an exploratory attempt to begin answering this need, the initial article provided in-depth discussion of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the semiotic-based course design. This design resulted in a target repertoire of twelve intercultural skills on which to present a two-phased evaluation of the eighteen hour training process. Based on pre- and post-course surveys, quantitative evaluation revealed that statistically significant improvement was achieved in all six workshops with respect to eleven of the twelve skills. The data was based on independent t tests ($p<.05$) of the mean.

As stipulated in the initial article, this second study will now undertake qualitative evaluation of *Tools for Cultural Development*. The objective of this follow-up phase is to obtain and analyse data on how the participants perceived themselves as having benefitted, directly or not, from the workshop experience. Such inquiry unavoidably calls into play deeper, underlying issues related to expectations specific

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[1]   The first article titled "Designing a semiotic-based approach to intercultural training" appeared in 2011 in *Sign Systems Studies* 39(1): 145–180.

to each of the professional, academic and cultural contexts in which the workshops took place. In stating that the finality of both articles is to "put semiotics to the test", so to speak, and to subsequently examine how applied semiotics might serve to translate academic knowledge within the "ivory tower" into much-needed knowhow for effective intercultural problem-solving in fieldwork, this target transition from theory to praxis necessitates further clarification of the principles and methods by which the study chooses to frame its qualitative evaluation process in terms of the participating subjects.

A first concern in formulating such a frame lies in specifying the underlying continuity between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the project. In other words, how does the proposed hybrid model formed by twinning Peirce's phenomenological semiotics with Tartu cultural semiotics tie in with advances in the constantly evolving qualitative research paradigm? In answer to this question, the central focus of the proposed qualitative evaluation process remains the semiotic definition of a culture as a "universe of meaning" or semiosphere and the manner in which improved understanding of such "cultural meaning" possibly impacts on intercultural training and applied research initiatives. In this regard, the third edition of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin, Lincoln 2005) offers a comprehensive and up-to-date view of the field and will serve as the major reference for dove-tailing components of the proposed semiotic training model with qualitative research practice and strategies pertaining to cultural "meaning".

This theoretical and methodological grounding sets the stage for a more specific discussion as to the possible applications of sign theory and sign models for decoding transcripts of group interviews and subsequently interpreting "local meanings" attributed by trainees to their workshop experience. To this end, analysis will seek to broaden a theme-based approach in order to better integrate elements of narrative and discursive analysis and consequently present a more contextualized account of focus group interaction. References to studies by Tarasti (1998) and Merrell (2001) will illustrate how both dyadic and triadic models of the sign contain a built-in potential, or "empty space", by which existing modes of signification can be renewed and transformed through personal and collective experience, especially in a postcolonial cultural setting. The issue of post-colonialism, although not an explicit problematic in the overall study as such, remains omnipresent in this qualitative evaluation phase because of the interaction that occurred between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants in North Queensland workshops as well as between students of French, African and Arab cultures in the Avignon and Paris sessions. In both cases, underlying tensions and social urgencies, often linked to post-conflict situations in other countries, contributed to the motivation of participants for engaging in dialogue and knowledge-building as to what intercultural training could and should be.

The major thrust of this second article, however, remains the analysis of the focus group interviews and the insights offered by participants as to the strengths and limitations of the semiotic-based pedagogy with respect to specific professional and cultural contexts and situations. Particular concern will be given to applying the theoretical and methodological principles introduced in the preceding parts of the study so as to glean (interpret) as much as possible from the explicit and tacit meanings attributed by participants to their training experience. Consequently, the primary function of the focus group interviews is not considered to be the accumulation of testimony or "proof" as to the possible, generalized and objective effectiveness of the training proposed but rather to "give voice" to members from specific communities and thus gain better understanding as to how the workshops proved significant in terms of "local meanings" and specific social, professional and cultural contexts (Stake 2005: 443). The qualitative evaluation process views the trainees interviewed as equal partners in the applied research process and considers the semiotic orientation of the workshops as a structure or vehicle for dialogical interaction on training as opposed to a one-way, and perhaps postcolonial, knowledge transfer initiative of "best practice" involving culturally diverse stakeholders.

1. The semiotic-based training model and the field of the qualitative research

In combining Tartu's functionalist/systemic cultural semiotics with Peirce's phenomenological sign theory, the intercultural training process in *Tools for Cultural Development* aligns the observation and evaluation of learning outcomes with several core research traditions and assumptions of qualitative research, starting with that of pragmatics and pragmatism:

> A different grounding for social research can be found in pragmatic philosophy. Dewey, James, Peirce and others (Diggins 1994)[2] offer an interesting and fruitful foundation for ontological and epistemological questions in social research that is action relevant. Pragmatism links theory and praxis. The core reflection process is connected to action outcomes that involve manipulating material and social factors in a given context. (Greenwood, Levin 2005: 53)

The semiotic intercultural training process thus defines the cultural phenomena under study (specific cultural microcosms chosen by trainees) in terms of their concrete and observable effects, that is, the signs by which the target cultures represent themselves to themselves and to others. As individual signs do not exist

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[2]   Diggins, John Patrick 1994. *The Promise of Pragmatism. Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

in a vacuum but originate from within an encompassing system and its inherent communicative and auto-communicative processes, Tartu cultural semiotics provides Peircean pragmatics with an indispensable theoretical and analytical model by which to link the signs observed (and interpreted) to what the cultural system does, namely, to its main cultural functions (collective memory, action plan and sign creation). The role of the sign observed within the functions of the culture thereby allows the observer to formulate a hypothesis with respect to its "meaning" within the whole.

This holistic or functionalist/systemic point of departure improves the trainees' capacity to "see the forest and not only the trees" and orients intercultural training to what, in reference to Foucault, can be labelled as a "genealogical approach". Defined as an approach that "attempts to understand how any 'subject' (e.g., a person, a social formation, a social movement, an institution) has been constituted out of particular intersections of forces and systems of forces" (Kamberelis, Dimitriadis 2005: 888), this research strategy has been extensively used in focus groups by individuals such as Paulo Freire in Brazil and Jonathan Kozol in New York for building critical pedagogical practice. Such focus groups have been further qualified as "dialogic" as they build off a pragmatic model of communication based on the dialogical nature of sign action and ongoing feedback between subjects for reciprocal confirmation, rejection and modification of messages within a specific communicative context. This communicative dynamic became of strategic importance in establishing the learner-centred, hermeneutic approach targeted by the workshop situations as these involved both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants as well as university students from former "colonies" and post-conflict countries:

> Dialogic validity has its roots in the classical ethnographic and hermeneutic project of capturing "the native's point of view" or, to quote Bronislaw Malinowski, "to realize his vision of his world". (Saukko 2005: 348)

Paraphrasing Freire, analysis of the focus group interviews coming out of the *Tools for Cultural Development* begins with the assumption that the participants are not objects in the story of this particular research project but rather are recognized as subjects of their own lives and narratives. This pragmatic, communicative stance crosscuts with what Denzin and Lincoln (2005: xv) consider as one of the five major directing principles of qualitative research: "the investigation of new pedagogical and interpretive practices that interactively engage critical cultural analysis in the classroom and the local community". The focus group format used for this study thus aims at providing a communicative platform for collaborative learning and investigation of concrete intercultural practices in the "here and now" of the individuals and communities concerned.

Nested within this communicative framework lies the complimentary issue of "meaning" and more precisely, of the interpretation made by analysis of the local "meanings" transmitted through written transcripts of the oral focus group interview situation. Once again, Peirce's phenomenological semiotics sets the parameters for that interpretive process which lies at the very heart of poststructuralist, qualitative research inquiry and according to which "language [being] an unstable system of referents, thus it is impossible ever to capture completely the meaning of an action, text or intention" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 27). Consequently, the task of the researcher is "to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 3). Semiotics figures among the *bricolage* of multiple approaches mobilized for accomplishing this complex task (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 7) and is often associated to the seminal influence of Clifford Geertz who, in *The Interpretations of Culture* (1973) and *Local Knowledge* (1983) introduced a new phase of qualitative research by arguing "that the old functional, positivist, behavioral, totalizing approaches to the human disciplines were giving way to a more pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended perspective" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 17).

However, while affirming that "the province of qualitative research, accordingly, is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 8), the authors make no mention of the parallel development of cultural semiotics as expressed initially by Lotman and scholars of the Tartu-Moscow School in their collective *Theses for the Semiotic Analysis of Culture* (Ivanov et al. 1974). The fact that this equally seminal work appeared at the same time that Geertz was developing his views on culture as a semiotic, further confirms Peeter Torop's (2002: 398) observation as to the need for heighted awareness of Lotman's work outside of the Russian (and one might add, of the former Soviet) world. The hybrid (Tartu/Peirce) training model proposed for this study thereby provides an opportunity to further examine the potential of cultural semiotics in determining how the interrelated narratives of workshop participants can perhaps build into a shared multi-voiced interpretation that attempts to "make sense" out of the six distinct workshops situations delivered.

2. Sign models and text analysis: methodological considerations

Although qualitative research makes extensive use of narrative enquiry (Chase 2005) and of discourse analysis (Peräkylä 2005), the very use of terms such as "meaning" and "sense", criticized many times over by semioticians as "fuzzy words" (Morris 1964: 43–44), calls for a clearer understanding of how the narrative and

discursive practices of subjects can, through sign action or semiosis, articulate and communicate unspecified or vague "meanings" into sharply defined and recognizable units of "signification". In this semiotic context, "meaning" is considered as indefinable unless expressed by and for subjects in a visual, auditory or tactile way (Greimas, Courtés 1979: 187, 298).

If it is unavoidably through signs that subjects communicate and signify, one might question, as does Eero Tarasti (1998: 118–119), the current emphasis on communication as opposed to the corollary element of signification:

> The real problem is that the world of *communication* has attained such an exaggerated position that one has forgotten the other side of the semiotic project, that of *signification*, from which entirely new theoretical avenues are opened […] It is also argued that we live in a world of interpretations and interpreting. We do not speak about matters of truth directly, but dwell upon what has been said about them. (Greimas said this decades ago, when he stated that there is no *vérité* but only *véridiction*).

The challenge of interpreting the possible cultural signification of signs is further complicated by what Edward T. Hall has referred to as the "hidden dimension" (1978) or the "silent language" (1984) of culture and presupposes adequate prior knowledge of collective conventions and signifying modes of behaviour and expression. Tarasti (1998: 116–117) signals the urgency of this invisibility when it involves, as did the workshop situations, individuals and groups dealing with postcolonial conflicts and challenges:

> One colonizing technique is that of silencing. Pre-colonial practices are suppressed simply by the fact that one no longer talks about them. The colonized subject keeps silent, since this is his only possibility for transcendence: the colonizing discursive practice has taken the voice into its possession.

In this sense, poststructural semiotics and qualitative research closely mirror each other in terms of their shared preoccupation with the ever-present relationships between research and social power: "Always when we signify or provide something with significance, we create a sign which serves as a tool of power" (Tarasti 1998: 119). Denzin and Lincoln invest the qualitative research paradigm with not only an interpretive but also a critical mandate: "Many scholars began to judge the days of value-free enquiry based on a God's-eye view of reality to be over. Today, many agree that all inquiry is moral and political" (2005: x).

In terms of semiotic analytical methodology, the critical and interpretive task of research calls for the creation of "a discursive space [that] has to be taken in

the same way as physical space (Le Corbusier once said that the first cultural act of man is to take space into his possession)" (Tarasti 1998: 117). Such an empty space allows subjects to "be detached from their earlier, fixed signifying relations", thereby negating or abandoning "ready-made meaning" and "breaking free from the power of the signified" (Tarasti 1998: 118). As a result, Tarasti (1998: 115) calls for a model of the sign by which the signifier/signified relationship [can] be "broadened to include the one which – or who – makes something signify (*signum facere*), that is to say, the one who has the modal competence to provide something with a meaning". An individual may thereby "influence the signifying process […] change his or her own position as a subject, define himself, and so escape the power of dominant signs" (Tarasti 1998: 118). This broadening of inquiry into the "meanings" attributed by the trainees to the training experience thereby enlarges the sign model to include the interpretive action of the subjects themselves as primary agents in the signifying process which the focus groups will then attempt to portray. The testimony or narrative fragments gleaned through the interview format thus constitute meaning making processes of a lived experience.

In demonstrating how the contextualized interpretations of subjects can renew and transform existing sign systems, Tarasti reiterates what Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 3) describe as the blurring of lines between text and context. The objective of this asymmetry is

> to create spaces for decolonizing (Aldama 2001[3]; Tierney 2000[4]), to provide frameworks for hearing silence and listening to the voices of the silenced (LeCompte 1993[5]; Smith 2001[6]); to create spaces for dialogue across difference; to analyze and made sense of complex and shifting experiences, identities, and realities, and to understand little and big changes that affect our lives. (Smith 2005: 103)

This destabilizing process taps into what Lotman (1990: 125) has described as the essentially heterogeneous and assymetrical nature of the semiosphere and reiterates, as previously mentioned, qualitative research's view of "language as an

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[3]   Aldama, Arturo J. 2001. *Disrupting Savagism: Intersecting Chicano, Mexican Immigrant, and Native American Struggles for Self-Representation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[4]   Tierney, William G. 2000. Undaunted courage: Life history and the postmodern challenge. In: Denzin, Norman; Lincoln, Yvonna (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage, 537–554.

[5]   LeCompte, Margaret D. 1993. A framework for hearing silence: What does telling stories mean when we are supposed to be doing science? In: McLaughlin, Daniel; Tierney, William G. (eds.), *Naming Silenced Lives*. New York: Routledge, 29–50.

[6]   Smith, Linda Tuhiway 2001. Troubling spaces. *Journal of Critical Psychology* 4: 175–182.

unstable system of referents" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 27). Extended to culture, this asymmetry or diversity (heterogeneity) of cultural referents, elements and functions within the semiosphere, allows Merrell (2001: 388) "to bring about a coalescence of [Lotman]'s thought with that of Peirce". In so doing, Merrell (2001: 394) mirrors Tarasti's enlarged view of the cultural sign as a triadic composite whose vortex is "'emptiness', the sheer possibility of anything and everything".

In this sense, the evolutionary dynamics between text and context give rise to interplay between Peirce's phenomenological categories of Firstness (sensation), Secondness (fact) and Thirdness (sign) in discovering and expressing of new significations. Sentient, intuitive and non-verbal signals at the level of Firstness can find themselves in opposition to the reified, official discourse and texts that impose a certain interpretation of "reality" as presumed, actual fact or Secondness. Expression of alternative views by subjects through signifying practices or Thirdness thus becomes a means by which individuals and communities can act on and possibly transform existing and outdated meanings. Merrell (2001: 410) thus concludes as to the potential of Firstness for engendering "Thirdness, subversive Thirdness" within a particular cultural context. His meshing of Lotman's cultural theory with Peircean phenomenological semiotics reaffirms the hybrid model proposed for this study and supplies a triadic model of cultural semiosis for interpreting the focus group narratives. This three-part sign model includes the experienced sensation of the material vehicle of the sign, the representamen, the object to which it refers "out there" as well as the action of interpreting subjects (trainees). The third component that Peirce calls the interpretant allows analysis to factor in the "social-cultural necessity" (Merrell 2001: 389) of the subjects into the study. In so doing, this triad or enlarged model of the sign once again evokes Foucault's notion of genealogy and

> makes us responsible for the discourses we inhabit and for the histories we evoke. Broadening the range of focus groups "referents" allows us to think through contemporary research praxis in more expansive ways. (Kamberelis, Dimitriadis 2005: 904).

Such expansion is further amplified by consideration of the transcripts, at least in part, as narratives, as a distinct discourse by which the participants expressed not only ideas and thoughts, but also emotions and individual points of view as protagonists and actors in the workshop experience. Analysis will summarize and highlight the dominant recurrent themes or *idées maîtresses* in the accounts made of the training in an attempt to interpret the causal links between "what" the participants chose to talk about and the "how" or the manner in which these interpretations were made within and between the groups.

3. The focus group transcripts: analysis and commentary

Analysis of the "what" and "how" in the transcript data from the focus groups in Australia and France will specify into the concepts of "theme" and "voice". Identification of possible themes involves an interpretive process of abstraction by which recurrent and similar units of information are named and categorized. Subsequent "meanings" will be interpreted not so much as concepts or ideas (elements signified) but in relational terms with respect to their functions and links to other units (Nöth 1995: 93). Owing to the evaluative nature of the study, and in reference to Greimas' semiotic definition of theme (Greimas, Courtés 1979: 394), the term will be used in conjunction with the concurrent element of value, positive and negative, that the narratives of the participants associate with a particular thematic component of the workshop. Description of these themes and related values will follow the four basic, open-ended questions that functioned as *idées maîtresses* in framing the focus group interviews into a common linear and temporal sequence. A general introductory question firstly allowed participants to identify aspects of the training that worked or did not work for them as well as the possible reasons or causes they associated to their critical appreciations. The second and third questions examined the possible effectiveness of the learning materials (documents and workbooks) and of the teaching strategies deployed. A final question gave the participants the chance to voice their opinions as to the relevance of the training in relation to their needs and concerns. In the actual interview process, the authors of the study then included a fifth, self-reflective question to obtain critical feedback as to the sustainability of the training model and its dependency or autonomy with respect to the pedagogical style and strategies of the co-researcher, Dr. Roger Parent, who acted as workshop facilitator.

All in all, co-researcher Dr. Stanley Varnhagen facilitated four focus groups. The two Australian interviews were conducted on August 1, 2007 in the Aboriginal community of Yarrabah (eight participants) and on August 6, 2007 at the offices of Queensland Rural and Remote Health in Cairns, North Queensland (ten participants). These interviews were done in English, as was the first interview in France at the American Business School, Paris (IGS Group) on December 12, 2007 (two participants). Dr. Varnhagen was assisted by a translator during the final interview which took place on December 17, 2007 at the University of Avignon (ten participants). The length of the interviews varied according to the size of the group but lasted for one hour on average. Approximately thirty individuals participated in this qualitative phase of the research.

Analysis will seek to determine the convergent and diverging patterns of thematic elements/values narrated in the interviews but will not undertake a

comparative study of the groups due to the limited number of participants. However, the complimentary concept of "voice"

> draws our attention to what the narrator communicates and how she or she communicates it as well as to the subject positions or social locations from which he or she speaks (Gubrium, Holstein 2002[7]). [...] Furthermore, when researchers treat narration as actively creative and the narrator's voice as particular, they move away from the questions about the factual nature of the narrator's statements. Instead, they highlight the versions of self, reality and experience that the story teller produces through the telling. (Chase 2005: 657)

In this regard, the transcripts reveal several significant distinguishing features between the academic voices of the undergraduate and graduate students in France and those of the Australian health service professionals and Aboriginal community representatives. In both cases, this specificity led to important overlaps with respect to these two categories of training. For example, transcripts of the Yarrabah interview were somewhat fragmented due to technical difficulties. However, participants in the Cairns interview made numerous references to the training session in Yarrabah and filled many of the missing gaps. Both these groups clearly shared a common preoccupation with the culture-specific/culture-general aspects of the training model. In France, the Paris and Avignon interviews also gave rise to a dominant theme: the transition from cognitive to experiential learning. This cleavage between the Australian and French groups could be attributed to the specific contexts, professional and academic, in which the workshop sessions took place. However, the two dominant themes in the four focus groups discussions complement one another within the multi-dimensional model used for designing and implementing the training. Analysis of these interviews will further examine how a tailor-made approach to meeting the needs of specific groups finds itself already structured into the intercultural training.

3.1. Aspects of the training that worked and did not work

Overall, focus group participants attributed a positive value to their experience and generally qualified the training as an "excellent workshop". More specifically, responses in all four groups expressed strong appreciation for the dynamic manner in which the course was delivered. As such, however, this theme is not of particular

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[7]   Gubrium, Jaber F.; Holstein, James A. 2002. From the individual interview to the interview society. In: Gubrium, Jaber F.; Holstein, James A. (eds.), *Handbook of Interview Research: Content and Method*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 3–32.

significance in that effective teaching of any subject matter or discipline necessitates a certain degree of identification to the trainer/instructor. Teaching styles and individual modes of delivery in a classroom situation thereby play an important and recognized role in establishing a motivating context for learning and self-discovery. However, trainee appreciation in the workshops went beyond issues of personality and became indicative of a classroom experience that touched participants on a deeper subjective and collective level: "I walked away feeling uplifted and free […] Instead of fragmenting people and culture, [Roger] was able to bring them together". Initial analysis of the transcripts linked this generalized appreciation to three subthemes: the trainees' capacity to integrate the course content delivered with previous and on-going training experiences, the accessibility of the concepts and signifying practices taught, and subsequently, the practical value of the cognitive and experiential acquisitions derived from the workshops.

Regarding integration, trainee narratives described course content as not being necessarily new as such. All four focus groups related how the workshop training was compatible with existing programs of study to which they were exposed. French students noted how the training complemented course work in other disciplines. Arts, education and business students generally found the semiotic-based model "very much in line" with and complementary to their other subjects. This cross-fertilization between the disciplines led them to better understand concepts that had been presented in other courses. This interdisciplinary linkage also seemed to provide students with new tools for research as well as reinforce previous and parallel instruction. For some students, though, this redundancy made the learning strategies and activities at the beginning of the course seem somewhat repetitive, even "simplistic". However, other students considered the repetition of key concepts and principles as a necessary process by which to transform acquired knowledge into spontaneous knowhow in order to fit the needs of a particular field situation. Analysis thus suggests that the transition from an academic to an experiential model remains an issue in a university setting. The Australian focus groups pointed to similar crossovers with their college and family well-being programs, as well as to specialized training dealing with self-harm prevention, substance abuse and community development.

The innovative factor and perceived value of the workshops was attributed rather to the way in which the course content was "packaged": "It gave me a better understanding of my own culture and a way of looking at my own culture that is certainly different than I've looked at before". More specifically, the innovative quality attributed to the training was further defined as an increased awareness of the workings of a culture through its signs. Participants referred to the semiotic model deployed as a "mental framework" and a "more systematic approach" for

communicating to others about culture. In turn, the newly acquired meta-cognitive and communicative capacity thus described impacted on the accessibility of the concepts presented as trainees described how they gained understanding of culture on two levels at the same time. Focus groups participants spoke of insight obtained into culture from a "universal" perspective and yet "staying faithful to [individual] cultures". The culture-general and culture-specific perspectives thus seemed to have produced a cumulative, cross-fertilizing effect on one another that allowed participants to "work in a better and faster way". This knowledge and skill transfer extended to the individual cultures of the participants as well as to the host or target cultures that provided a backdrop to the training and consequently set up "a safe place where you can exchange". In this respect, the Australian focus groups provided a distinct voice in that participants particularly valued the safety and trust experienced in the classroom situation, observing that the "indigenous representatives there clearly felt okay in speaking their minds".

All four groups stressed the fact that the intercultural training provided was immediately usable in "such a variety of circumstances". Such narratives further described this perceived applied value through two additional themes: transferability and creativity. Course content could be directly transferred to specific situations. Skills and concepts learned could also serve as a catalyst for generating new ideas and new projects. Participants further observed that the cultural insight gained from newly acquired concepts and related vocabulary provided a code and thereby enhanced their capacity for communicating about culture to others. The dialogue resulting from this exchange in the classroom situation then opened the door to practical applications and problem solving in the workplace and in organizational culture. Paradoxically, this point was especially stressed by some Australian and Aboriginal focus-group participants who saw a potential strength in the proposed use of techniques developed by organizational cultures for resolving larger social issues in specific communities. On the other hand, French students in business and education made surprisingly little mention of organizational and institutional cultures. Participants in Avignon and Paris particularly stressed the value of a practical and workable methodology for cultural analysis. The creative focus of the Australian groups can thus be seen as gravitating towards organizational solutions to pressing health-related problems in stakeholder groups whereas the French groups were more preoccupied with means by which to gain greater understanding of the culturally diverse clientele they would face at the end of their studies.

Despite these different contexts and applications, testimony from both groups gave equal weight to the enhanced capacity for problem solving within a clearly defined cultural microcosm. In summary, the relationship between classroom instruction and experiential or "hands-on" learning activities so as "to put into

practice what was seen in the videos" became a positive defining value of the course. Participants found themselves "thinking more strategically and in a different manner" about the evolutionary dynamics of a cultural environment. They felt they now had a "new avenue to look at" creative problem-solving with respect to the cultural needs identified. Overall, these thematic elements could be interpreted at the theoretical level as indicative of stronger meta-cognitive skills resulting from the semiotic-based training model that allowed participants to learn how to learn about culture.

However, many students felt that the eighteen to twenty hour time-frame allotted for the training was insufficient to adequately cover and assimilate the five modules of the course. As stated previously, the learning materials used (five workbooks and documentaries) were originally designed for a standard thirty-six hour, three credit university course. Delivery of this academic format normally spanned a one to four month period. Although the European and Australian trainees felt that they had learned a great deal, they also wished they could have learned more, had there been more sessions. In general, they preferred a three hour classroom period. Early morning scheduling of the class proved sometimes difficult to manage. Students seemed to prefer a late morning and early afternoon time slot. Class size further impacted on the time management issue. At the University of Avignon, the class of education students numbered over twenty-five. Course content had to be sacrificed, especially in the final module, in order to maintain an individualized, learner-centred approach to the training.

The Australian focus groups described the eighteen to twenty hour in-service workshops as "very intensive", almost to the point of an intellectual overload: "some of the detail just flipped over my concentration level". The privileged opportunity to provide on-site training in the Aboriginal community of Yarrabah further challenged the academic design of the course as well as its intercultural range. Before delivery of the workshop could commence, cultural protocol required that an orientation session be presented to community representatives. Once the facilitator "was adopted" by the assembly, the course could then officially begin. However, due to "that investment of time", trainees felt a concern on the part of the facilitator, and a subsequent determination "to get [in] my twenty hours (laughter)". Of particular concern was the related issue of ethic procedures for the proposed research and training activities, as well as the impact of these processes on the time frame of the course. Presentation of the ethics documentation and forms were seen as unduly cumbersome, "awkward and disorganized". In Yarrabah, this situation was further amplified by the fact that the ethics documents could be signed only after the orientation session to the community, thereby creating an ambiguity as to when documentation of the research/training process officially began.

Besides signalling an aspect of the course "that needs to be reviewed", focus group discussion in Australia pointed to a deeper issue of reciprocity and ethical partnerships between academic researchers and collaborating communities: "indigenous communities are sick and tired of being researched and nothing coming back to them […] They want a partnership and outcomes for them."

3.2. The effectiveness of the learning materials (documentaries and workbooks)

The theme of the second *idée maîtresse* allowed for evaluation of the learning materials. The focus group interviews generally acknowledged that these audio-visual and paper-based resources assisted in making difficult, abstract concepts clear and precise, as well as in providing an effective methodological guide for cultural analysis which constituted one of the major outcomes of the course. At this point, preferences varied as to relative value of these resources. For some trainees, the documentaries were deemed more important than the workbooks while others held the opposite view. Also, not all five documentaries generated the same interest level. As the eighteen to twenty hour time-frame gave rise to a rapid pace of instruction in order to cover the basic objectives of the course, the five accompanying workbooks proved a valuable compliment to the classroom experience because the information presented by the instructor was available to the student in a written format for individual study outside of class. However, this observation especially holds true for the French students. Because the course was delivered in an academic setting over a period of six weeks, the workbooks became a means by which to further consolidate cognitive and experiential learning objectives. It was also noted that the written support materials provided individuals with a permanent resource for further reference and that the classroom experience had given them sufficient knowledge of each workbook to continue exploration on their own. The focus groups in Paris and Avignon agreed that the classroom instruction was the determining factor in learning how to work with the written resource. They found the structure and language of each workbook to be clear, in spite of some language difficulties related to European versus Canadian French. The learning resources were thus found to be conducive to learner autonomy.

As with the first question, participant response suggests that the perceived value of the learning materials was linked to the semiotic content they served to transmit. Once again, testimony indicated how the semiotic terminology presented in the workbooks provided participants with a code by which to express their intuitive glimpses of cultural phenomena. Regarding the documentaries, participants in France and Australia found the use of images from current events to illustrate

semiotic concepts generally more effective than the accompanying explanatory interviews. Australian participants experienced some difficulty with European accents in some of the English-language interviews featured in the videos. They also would have appreciated more Aboriginal content. Because of the professional and in-service setting in which these trainees found themselves, they had much less (if any) time for individual field work outside of class with the workbooks. The audio-visual resource consequently played a more crucial role than in an academic environment as it facilitated rapid learning acquisition by illustrating abstract cultural theory through specific cultural contexts: "[it] pushed it up on the board where I can actually see my culture and my spirit". The Australian focus groups generally acknowledged that the audio-visual resource proved effective by providing "visual clues" that gave an "understanding where the concept would come from and also […] examples of how these concepts worked". These participants especially stressed the contextualization of course content made possible through the historical footage in documentaries and the subsequent importance allotted to the recognition of oral tradition, of the oral history in their community, of the "secret that wasn't written in the historian's books".

3.3. Effectiveness of the teaching strategies

The perceived value attributed by trainees to the audio-visual and written resources went beyond the inherent effectiveness, or not, of the learning materials and addressed their functional relationship to the overall training experience. The focus group interviews revealed that appreciation of the learning resources related directly to the personalized interaction participants developed with the facilitator in the classroom experience. In turn, it must be noted that this interaction was made possible through the learning environment set up through the documentaries and workbooks. Trainee narratives thus seem to indicate that implementation of these resources was successful in establishing a motivating learning environment where individual self-discovery and positive group dynamics could reinforce one another: "The generosity of this environment is overwhelming. It's always so giving and understanding. I feel with this group that we became closer and I feel like we're part of a family."

Consequently, such narratives seem to further reveal a cause-and-effect relationship between the learning strategies deployed and the individualized encounters made possible through the one-on-one interactions between facilitator and trainees. In other words, if participants expressed strong appreciation for the time taken by the instructor to explain and clarify complex concepts, this individualized attention was made possible by the fact that course content was already contained

in the learning resources! As hoped for in the initial design of the course, intercultural training thereby became a hermeneutic, interactive process by which to accompany individuals in the learning process through interaction, exchange and dialogue, according to specific needs and backgrounds. As a result of this on-going feedback, participants especially noted that teaching strategies and course content were spontaneously adapted to fit specific *contexts as the instructor and the group gradually defined and created the learning experience together*: "I think it worked because there was a capacity adapt to, in particular, to what various people brought, to do that in a way that linked to the particular roles that people have."

A recurrent theme in the focus group evaluation of the teaching strategies experienced was the facilitator's use of narrative and imagery, as opposed to abstraction and logic, in order to further illustrate semiotic concepts through lived experiences and examples: "It's good that we can use his experiences directly." The personalized classroom experience and the instructor's capacity to integrate examples of lived experience and culture-specific case studies in presentation of culture-general material conferred credibility to training. In both the academic and professional training contexts, the theme of credibility was closely aligned to that of vulnerability and transparency in the positive value attributed to the facilitator/trainee relationship. These processes established a narrative linkage between the cultural references of the facilitator as a French-speaking individual from Western Canada and his relationship to the teaching of applied cultural semiotics: "He did an introduction of himself. He put himself up. He really exposed himself." In Australia, this shared narrative established a strong connection with participants who in turn began sharing their history: "The first day was really, really powerful because he listened to our stories even though he knew he was the professor […] Yarrabah people heard stories from their elders that they never heard."

In light of these shared referents, culture-general course content could be described in terms of the community's cultural codes and knowledge base. In short, the learning materials were not so much conducive to knowledge transfer as they are to increasing individual and collective awareness of the trainees' own cultural experience and tacit knowledge: "He [Roger] understood that we had all these skills and he pointed it out to us and showed us." Meta-cognitive development thus resulted through the acquisition of a vocabulary by which participants could name what was already there: "[T]hese skills are skills that are already in the community, they just didn't have a name […] It's a skill that was already here." In turn, this meta-cognitive ability further reinforced learner autonomy and provided insights for future innovative action: "[T]he experience of the people's stories gave me more knowledge of myself and where I would like to go in the future." Once this level of cultural and self-awareness was reached in the group, "things started coming

together really fast" as the resulting exchange between participants further tapped into, and recognized, intercultural common ground.

In Australia, the theme of future collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects gave voice to the principle of "vouching" in building significant and effective relationships between individual communities and service organizations. Defined in terms of ethics, reciprocity and intercultural collaboration, vouching means that

> I know you, I trust you, I trust that you're going to build relationships with other people, and bring other people into this community who will not do damage, or in any way harm this community. And it's quite an important principle. And it's important that people coming in, proposing to build relationships, be aware that there is likely another participant, person or organization who will be vouching for their ethical conduct while they're in that community.

Not only do such comments evoke the complex moral issues and the (postcolonial) power dynamics implicit in the intercultural training process under study, they also refer to the extensive logistical support system that made the workshops possible in both Australia and France. In this sense, evaluation of the piloting experience extends beyond the search for a transferable, objective body of knowledge and demonstrates the perceived value of intercultural competency for the host institutions involved in making the workshops a reality.

This value, as voiced by both those being trained and those involved in "behind-the-scenes" vouching, further stressed how the training was able to "spark interest" in different stakeholder communities because of its potential for practical application. The transition from intercultural competency to that of cultural creativity and performance became especially evident for the participants in the fifth and final training module: "[I]t's not until you get to video five […] that you're actually getting appreciation of where that practical model could be put in place." Subsequent focus group discussion suggested the need for structuring more practical, short-term learning objectives and group feedback in each of the four preceding modules so that trainees could apply the techniques on a more immediate basis. Such formative evaluative processes could be put in place on a regular, even daily basis, to allow trainees to reflect on what "could get implemented a lot quicker than at the end of a whole course".

3.4. Relevance of the training

The recognized importance, and urgency, of applying the training to specific projects and needs brought the focus group discussions to the fourth question: that

of the perceived relevance of the training. Reaction from participants provided a wide variety of responses. However, for both the Australian and French groups, the relevance of the concepts and skills acquired stemmed from the fact that these acquisitions corresponded firstly to their individual and collective lived experiences: "this course for me is about my culture". In other words, it would appear that the meta-cognitive development acquired through the training provided them with a vocabulary for expressing, in cognitive and affective terms, what they basically felt they knew intuitively. The training experience thus seemed to answer an interdisciplinary need for an effective and accessible methodology by which to observe and analyse cultural microcosms from a practical perspective. In "learning to learn" about cultures, trainees further indicated they learned a lot about themselves, their family, and their family or community culture. As indicated earlier, the relevancy factor impacted not only at the cognitive level but also resonated on a deep emotional level. Some Australian participants compared the training to a "healing journey", to "medicine water". This heightened awareness subsequently led to a greater openness towards other cultures: "The thing I remember is not to judge […] not to offend people, to respect their culture". The students' increased capacity to exchange with other cultures "without being afraid, to learn to discover before judging, to better understand other cultures and how they interact" was a recurrent and dominant theme at this stage of the interviews. For the Australian focus groups, this growing intercultural relevancy was strongly linked to having an "indigenous content in the mix".

   The theme of relevancy concerned not only the past experience of the workshops but also a project for further training and praxis in the future. For example, some participants envisaged the training experience as a foundation on which to plan a subsequent thirty-six hour, three credit undergraduate course in following years, especially with respect to training trainers. Similarly with French students, Australian trainees also signalled the creative potential of the training for "improving one's own culture and that of others". When asked if this perceived personal and professional relevance was of a short-, medium- or long-term nature, most of the participants felt that the training outcomes extended to all three. Participants saw the short-term effect as manifested through the attitudinal changes resulting from the intercultural training and the subsequent heightened intercultural awareness. The skills and concepts learned were felt to be immediately applicable to other courses as well as to everyday life and immediate projects. The medium-term implications related to the "time it would take to digest the concepts" of the course and suggested the learning process did not end with the course itself. The long-term implications referred to the future applications of the training in their professional and academic careers in the form of research projects, job creating initiatives

and inter-university collaboration. (Concluding remarks on the evaluation process revealed that some students found the wording of the pre-course survey difficult because they had yet to master the terms of the proposed questionnaire.) Speculation as to these possible spin-offs once again related to the recurring issue of praxis and of practical application of the training as well as to the necessity of appropriate infrastructure and resources by which to undertake concrete initiatives to meet specific cultural needs. The cultural creativity generated by the training process and the capacity of the approach to move participants beyond competency into innovative action and performance, however, raised the final issue of sustainability and the capacity of the host institutions to pursue the training and field initiatives without the continued presence of the facilitator.

In conclusion, delivery of an integrated, multi-levelled approach to intercultural training in multiple cultural, professional and academic environments appears to work off the dynamics of a dialogical interplay between an objectively defined and transferable body of knowledge, processes and practices, and a culture-specific, learner-centred pedagogy. Participant reaction to the interactive pedagogical experience reiterates the importance of implementing an individualized and personalized form of instruction with each stakeholder group and its tacit base of knowledge and know-how, as opposed to a "standardized" or "one size fits all" approach. Intercultural facilitators and researchers can thus play a vital role in this knowledge-building process with subjects from host communities. When asked how central the facilitator was to the perceived effectiveness of the six workshops delivered as well as to the sustainability of the pedagogical model used for the training, the focus groups provided a series of observations that, when examined in light of the larger qualitative research paradigm, went beyond issues of individuality and reflected a growing preoccupation towards "theory and method that connect politics, pedagogy, and ethics to action in the world?" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: x).

At a superficial level, participants referred to a series of traits they appreciated in the delivery of the training, such as the use of humour, the instructor's passion for the subject matter taught, his capacity to put on an "engaging and compelling" performance, etc. However, such qualities are standard fare for any professional educator and, as such, signal the presence of deeper, underlying themes as well as their related (and perhaps unavoidable) political and historical issues. Like in all educational settings, the facilitator, teacher or professor must work at establishing a relationship, a meta-communicative bond, with students and trainees so that they can identify with the "message" or subject matter taught on a cognitive as well as on an affective level. This pedagogical and communicative principle holds especially true for multi-leveled intercultural training where instruction must deal with culture as

both a social construct and lived experience (often charged with powerful political and emotional undertones). There is no escaping the fact that the trainers and researchers must care, and care deeply, about both course content and the cultural needs of the stakeholder group they face in an attempt "to implement a critical, interpretive approach that will help them (and others) to make sense of the terrifying conditions that define daily life in the first decades of this new century" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: xiv). This imperative holds especially true for facilitating intercultural training and research in a postcolonial perspective. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 1) states,

> the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism […] The word itself is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary […] It is implicated in the worst excesses of [how] knowledge about indigenous peoples was collective, classified, and then represented back to the West.

Sensitivity, transparency, authenticity and especially humility are perhaps the most essential qualities for attempting to deal with the "Other" as a research subject and, hopefully, to better connect cultures through education and applied research.

In attempting to achieve that interactive stance, intercultural facilitators should not neglect the value of sharing their own cultural identities and lived experiences in the classroom experience. When delivering the six workshops, the facilitator taught from the initial perspective of his Western francophone experience. Participants in Australia subsequently qualified the facilitator as "an indigenous man. He came with knowledge and experience of a person who's marginalized and I think that was a critical position to be from". However, complementary to this positioning was the fact that the instructor was "an outsider", a "guy with a funny accent from somewhere else" who could be "kind of forgiven for certain things". This particular voice reiterates the methodological importance of recognizing that every "researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 21).

As a result, almost all the focus group participants agreed that the course could be delivered by other facilitators "but not anybody". In specifying their criteria for effective implementation of intercultural training, the interviews once again insisted on the importance of an energetic and dynamic mode of presentation. They also saw the classroom experience as not being exclusively culture-specific. The course content presented could therefore be taught by facilitators from different cultural origins provided these had in-depth knowledge of the pedagogical design and content as well as "experience over a diverse range of organizational and cultural

contexts". However, the focus groups did state unanimously that the training could not be delivered by phone or video-conferencing exclusively. Direct, one-on-one interaction with the facilitator, as well as among themselves, was deemed essential to a successful implementation of the proposed learning experience, as it assumes, as already mentioned, "a relativist ontology (multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent cocreate understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 24).

Trainees further based their evaluation of the sustainability of the training on the view that the course "was well-structured and interesting in itself". Once again, focus group testimony associated the theme of course design to the value of learning activities and exercises that could engage the students at multiple levels (metacognitive, cognitive, affective, behavioural). The varied teaching strategies deployed (academic, experiential, self-conscious and culture-conscious) also received a strong positive value because they allowed for a rapid adaptation of classroom delivery to the specific needs of each workshop. Such adaptation was attributable not only to the teaching practices but to the communicative positioning of the training that acknowledged "where we were coming from". In turn, this repeated reference to the "broadening of 'focus group referents'" (Kamberelis, Dimitriadis 2005: 904) further suggests the methodological importance, as Tarasti and Merrell have pointed-ed out, of an enlarged, triadic model of the sign for integrating context into text in an intercultural (and postcolonial) setting. In final analysis, the focus groups transcripts, explicitly and implicitly, raised the issue of training as a "performance" on the part of the facilitator. This emphasis illustrates how such performance models the wider need for performance, innovation and problem solving in the participating or host communities. Such need translates into the recognized shift from "cultural competency" to "intercultural performance" on the part of researchers, educators and trainees alike in a combined effort to link individual and cultural creativity to inquiry so that research "becomes praxis – practical, reflective, pragmatic action – directed to solving problems in the world" (Denzin, Lincoln 2005: 34).

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Квалитативная оценка межкультурного обучения с семиотической точки зрения

Вторая часть из серии статей о семиотике и межкультурном обучении дает квалитативную оценку эмпирическому проекту «Средства для культурного развития». Сначала дискуссия сосредоточивается на теоретических и методологических трудностях применительно к квалитативной парадигме, связывая их затем с близкими проблемами в постструктуралистской и постколониальной семиотике, особенно относительно феноменологии и прагматики.

Анализ четырех интервью с фокус-группой во Франции и Австралии проверяет и оценивает опыт тренировочного эксперимента 2007 года в свете культурно-специфического контекста и вовлеченных групп. Особенное внимание обращается на способность качественных оценочных процессов учитывать «местные значения» и «голоса» в рамках рассказов участника тренировочного процесса, чтобы выдвинуть на первый план их восприятие относительно использования семиотики для межкультурного обучения и практики.

Semiootikal põhineva kultuuridevahelise õppe kvalitatiivne hindamine

Käesolevas artiklis, mis moodustab teise osa semiootikat ja kultuuridevahelist õpet käsitlevast kaheosalisest uurimusest, antakse kvalitatiivne hinnang rakenduslikule uurimisprojektile *Kultuurilise arengu tööriistad*. Diskussioon keskendub kõigepealt teoreetilistele ning metodoloogilistele väljakutsetele, mis seostuvad kvalitatiivse uurimisparadigmaga, ning seejärel suhestatuna selle teiseneva probleemistiku konvergentsete avastustega poststrukturalistlikus (ja postkoloniaalses) semiootikas, eriti fenomenoloogia ja pragmaatika osas. 2007. aastal Prantsusmaal ja Austraalias läbi viidud nelja fookusgrupiintervjuu analüüsis vaadeldakse ning hinnatakse koolituskogemust kultuurispetsiifilistest kontekstidest ning kaasatud huvigruppidest lähtudes. Erilist tähelepanu pööratakse kvalitatiivsete hindamisprotsesside võimele pakkuda seletusi "kohalikele tähendustele" ja "häältele" koolitatavate narratiivides, et tuua esile nende arusaamu seoses semiootika kasutamisega hariduses ja praktikas.