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## Making Sense of Making Meaning, the Semiotic Way: Emotional Journey of a Novice Learner

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## Making Sense of Making Meaning, the Semiotic Way: Emotional Journey of a Novice Learner

### Abstract

I write this auto-ethnography as homage to my teachers and peers, both in the classroom and in scholarly realms, who inspired me to soar beyond the horizons of self and find meaning within the cosmic consciousness that surrounds us. As a novice learner in an introductory semiotics course, I learned about the process of meaning making. This paper is a product of my learning and understanding of a semiotic worldview. Encouraged by my professor, I delved deeply into the “thinkings” of two semiotic masterminds: Charles Sanders Peirce and Jakob von Uexküll, whose philosophies, ideologies and beliefs helped make sense of events in my own life as I saw it unfolding in new ways within my stream of consciousness. While indulging in the flavors of my auto-ethnographic inquiry, I was also privileged to have my fellow classmates share their experiences with me, through one on one-thought exchanges, captured via participation in class discussions and observations, as well as interviews and a survey, bringing my investigation into the realm of ethnography. The findings indicate that curiosity, fulfillment and hope are the critical bookends of the novice learners’ learning process. Based on the findings, I developed a new Curiosity Fulfillment Loop Model that may help explain how novice learners continue on their learning path to becoming seasoned learners, and yet always staying novice for some knowledge.

### Keywords

Auto-Ethnography, Ethnography, Semiotics, Novice, Learners, Peirce. Curiosity, Fulfillment, Hope, Education

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## **Making Sense of Making Meaning, the Semiotic Way: Emotional Journey of a Novice Learner**

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*I write this auto-ethnography as homage to my teachers and peers, both in the classroom and in scholarly realms, who inspired me to soar beyond the horizons of self and find meaning within the cosmic consciousness that surrounds us. As a novice learner in an introductory semiotics course, I learned about the process of meaning making. This paper is a product of my learning and understanding of a semiotic worldview. Encouraged by my professor, I delved deeply into the “thinkings” of two semiotic masterminds: Charles Sanders Peirce and Jakob von Uexküll, whose philosophies, ideologies and beliefs helped make sense of events in my own life as I saw it unfolding in new ways within my stream of consciousness. While indulging in the flavors of my auto-ethnographic inquiry, I was also privileged to have my fellow classmates share their experiences with me, through one on one-thought exchanges, captured via participation in class discussions and observations, as well as interviews and a survey, bringing my investigation into the realm of ethnography. The findings indicate that curiosity, fulfillment and hope are the critical bookends of the novice learners’ learning process. Based on the findings, I developed a new Curiosity Fulfillment Loop Model that may help explain how novice learners continue on their learning path to becoming seasoned learners, and yet always staying novice for some knowledge. Keywords: Auto-Ethnography, Ethnography, Semiotics, Novice, Learners, Peirce. Curiosity, Fulfillment, Hope, Education*

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### **Preface**

#### **Overview: How it Started**

This is the story of one: me. This is also the story of the five: my fellow novice learners. Above all, this is story of novice learners’ journey through the semiotic looking glass; a journey that ventures into an unknown world of signs, symbols, and meanings, transforming our intrinsic and extrinsic landscapes. As a researcher involved in investigating multiculturalism, and how it manifests itself within learning environments, I was deeply curious to know what I could learn from the “science of signs,” as I thought Semiotics to be. Thus, I signed up for an Introductory Semiotics course. As is evident, I had no prior knowledge of the subject, and therefore, I walked into the course with a blank slate, but with several expectations born out of the ignorance of little knowledge.

During my first day in the class, I realized that this course might not be what I thought it would be. It occurred to me that the dynamics and essence of the class would in fact be something that I may not have experienced before. I was right.

As a long-term student, I had grown to expect a certain form and alignment, a certain way that things are done in a course. For example, most classes have a specific lecture set up and some specific evaluation requirements. We are asked to do things in specific ways and follow a specific pattern of learning and evaluation. In the Semiotics class, however, I was

taken aback to hear the professor say that we could select how many papers we want to write and that there would be no lectures-only round table discussions!

During the weeks spent in the course, I have acquired knowledge that I was only remotely aware existed. Beyond that, I have learned how to use that knowledge intrinsically and extrinsically to enhance my self-awareness and explore the deepest depths of my consciousness. Because I am a dedicated social researcher and evolving scholar, committed to sharing with the world experiences that I perceive to be meaningful, I was compelled to indulge in this investigation to explore how I transformed from a novice learner of Semiotics to a full believer in the pursuit of meaning making. However, my labors are not limited to this purpose, but rather expanding from it.

As a learner, I have always been driven by feelings that I like to think of as “learning emotions.” These feelings play a major role in my learning process, sometimes even to the extent of completely enhancing or inhibiting my cognitive retention. While experiencing the Semiotic course, I went through several learning emotions, such as Curiosity, Fulfillment, and Hope. At the end of the experience, I emerged a more rationalized thinker in addition to the prolific feeler that I used to be. Thus, I discuss my experiences through emotional lenses, as part of my auto ethnography. However, I was not alone in experiencing this course, as I shared it with several classmates, who soon became my class family, my cultural copilots. I share their experiences as novice learners within the Semiotics and other courses. The questions I seek to address through this investigation are: How might novice learners optimize and make sense of their learning experiences when learning a subject for the first time? What emotions influence novice learners’ meaning making process?

### **Why Am I Doing This? Problem and Value Statement**

Semiotics is all about examining one’s ideas, emotions and perceptions within a universal context. An auto ethnographic study of my emotional experiences as a novice learner could be beneficial to future novice learners in providing a grounded example from which to draw. It is my belief that all learning experiences have an emotional lens, since learning cannot occur without the learners who are emotional beings. A learner’s emotional paradigm can be instrumental in creating or destroying meaningful learning experiences. Thus, it is imperative to examine how the learning emotions can be amplified through the learners’ introspections in positive ways. I find positive learning experiences to include emotions like curiosity, diligence, hope, elation, self-determination, fulfillment and confidence. Inspired by such thoughts, I embarked on this auto-ethnographic journey to find a venue to make sense of and articulate, what my novice-learner-of-Semiotics experience was like for me.

It is my understanding that most learners go through the process of being in a course or in college for the first time, and face the challenges that come with being a novice learner. This novice learner community bears a unique culture, marked by challenges specific to the nature of interacting with a subject or teaching style for the first time. In this context, I concur with Rosaldo’s (1993) view that, “Culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it. It refers broadly to the forms through which people make sense of their lives, rather than more narrowly to the opera or art museums” (p. 26).

My goal in trying to fill this gap is not to preach, but rather to provide my own experiences as an example for novice learners to help them visualize how they can capitalize on a learning opportunity, and also frame that learning within their own introspections and reflections. Piaget and Inhelder (1969), as well as Vygotsky (1978) discuss the value of learning through social interaction and the role of peer experiences in this process. As a peer, my experiences and knowledge may help other novice learners better understand how to construct knowledge more meaningfully (O’Donnell & King, 1999).

Literature supports the value of emotions in teaching and learning. Rienties and Rivers (2014) discuss how recently, the role of emotions has been reaffirmed as “being inextricably linked to cognition and learning, and therefore of interest to educational researchers” (p.2). Emotions are critical in the teaching and learning process, as they affect how a learner decides to study. Emotions also influence motivation, self-regulation and academic achievement (Kort, Reilly, & Picard, 2001; Schutz & DeCuir, 2002). Yet, *there is a gap in what kind of emotions are studied and what needs to be examined in the context of education.*

Literature supports the value of emotions in teaching and learning for adult learners. Kasworm (2008) discusses the four stages of the emotion of hope for adult learners and concludes “learning is not just within the adult; it is co-constructed through cultural and social interactions within a specific context that can unify or fracture the learner identity of the adult. Context does matter in the emotional journey of the learner” (p. 33).

Based on an observation that most research related to emotions focused only on the learners’ anxiety, and that there was sparse investigation into the achievement aspects of emotions, Pekrun (1992) designed and studied a Taxonomy of Students’ Emotions. This included positive-negative emotions related to learning tasks and social orientation. Pekrun (1992) asserted that such a wide range of emotion identification is necessary, because emotions “function as human reactions to important events” (p. 361). In subsequent years, Pekrun (2014) continued to develop this theory of emotions, and focused on four groups of academic emotions. *Achievement emotion* relate to achievement activities, and success and failure resulting from these activities. *Epistemic emotions* are triggered by cognitive problems. *Topic emotions* pertain to the topics presented in lessons. *Social emotions* relate to teachers and peers in the classroom (Pekrun, 2014, p. 8). Shuck, Albornoz, and Winberg (2007) use several examples from literature like Dirkx (2006) and O’Regan (2003), to support the view that the topic of emotions and learning has not been examined in depth, and given the value of emotions in the cognitive process, more needs to be done by way of producing scholarly literature.

The topic of emotions related to learning demands continual investigation and reexamination of existing perspectives, due to the rapidly changing nature of education and society. Shuck, Albornoz, and Winberg, (2007) describe the value of emotions as guides to our cognitive processes of learning, as we relate prior emotional learning experiences to newly acquired ones, and in the process strive to make meaning of what we have experienced. “By shaping experience, emotion angles the learning perspective and consequently the recollection of actual events later in life” (Shuck, Albornoz, & Winberg, 2007, p. 108). Thus, we need to examine learning emotions continually within changing learning paradigms to align past learning and teaching processes with contemporary ones, to arrive at the most current truth of our experiences. The relationship of emotions to education also relates to the thinking of one of the foundational semioticians I rely on, Jakob von Uexküll, who propounded the Umwelt Theory. “Umwelt” means “environment” in Germany, and in Semiotics it refers to a subjective universe created by an organism as it repeatedly interacts with the world in which it is placed. The theory implies that mind and world or matter is inseparable, as the mind or our perceptions make the world meaningful (Sharov, 2001).

It is my belief that as learners, the extrinsic learning world in which we are placed generates feelings in our intrinsic world. Our brains (cognitive reaction) and consciousness (emotional reaction) react to create unique Umwelts for individual learners. Saraswat, (2015) describes the work of Neuroscientist, David Eagleman, who demonstrated that our human brain operates like a computer that analyzes chemical and electric signals fed to it. These translate into a “feeling,” from which we then make a sense of our Umwelt. Phelps (2006) discusses the role of the Amygdala part of the brain in eliciting and controlling emotions:

The amygdala is a structure with extensive connections to brain areas thought to underlie cognitive functions... Because of its broad connectivity, the amygdala is ideally situated to influence cognitive functions in reaction to emotional stimuli. (p. 28)

Ellis (1995) studied how memory, emotions and symbolization are interconnected, and citing Edelman 1989 and Gray 1990, suggested that “all consciousness is permeated and directed by emotion ” (p. 6). In addition, Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun (2011) believe that “The complexity and dynamic nature of emotions make them difficult to study. Thus, the field would benefit greatly from an increase in systematic, theoretically grounded, and empirically sound research investigating emotions in academic settings” (p. 3). *Based on this discussion, I believe that research based on emotional aspects of learning is much needed, which is what this paper attempts to do.*

## Praxis

### Fusing Auto-Ethnography and Ethnography

#### *Methodology*

Since my experiences were not limited to just being mine, and were tethered to the experiences of my fellow novice learners in the class and the greater novice learner culture, I was compelled to follow a fusion qualitative methodological approach, combining auto-ethnography with ethnography. In this process, I draw from Rosaldo’s (1993) concepts of “experimental ethnography,” born out of the need to conform to the changing global dynamics of social analysis. “The difficulties of attempting to use classic ethnographic forms for new research programs raise conceptual issues, which in turn call for a widening of ethnography’s modes of composition. The “experimental moment” in ethnographic writing and the remaking of social analysis are inextricably linked” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 38). Based on Lette’s (1990) descriptions, I use both emic and etic approaches in my investigation, which are represented in the fusion methodology approach. The auto-ethnography relies on the emic, while the ethnography rests on the etic. “Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied” (Lette, 1990, p. 130). My narratives are a window to the experiences of novice learners, and are thus emic as I let this data “speak” to my readers and me. “Etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers” (Lette, 1990, p. 130). I lend an etic essence to my investigation as I use theoretical frames and literature to examine if the emergent themes from my narratives are applicable to the greater novice learner culture.

Young (2005) provides similar viewpoints stating how “Emic and Etic refer respectively to the situation of one’s self within or without a group, experience and/or community. It also involves an interaction between this self-definition and how others perceive one’s self” (p. 152). Thus, in literature etic and emic are known to be distinct, yet mutually inclusive parameters of our emotional and cultural experiences (Chen, 2010; Gould, 2010; Lindridge, 2015; Markee, 2012).

Morris, Leung, Ames, and Lickel (1999) contend that an integration of etic and emic creates a more balanced and justifiable investigation, because they are complementary, in that they “draw researchers’ attention to different components of justice judgments, making it more

likely that all of the important aspects of cognition will be recognized” (Morris et al., 1999, p. 791). Fusion of etic and emic perspectives have been discussed in several sources such as the works of Wang and Shi (2013), Sabbagh and Golden (2007), and Olive (2014).

Next, I will briefly discuss my approach to auto-ethnography. Ellis, Adams, and Buchner (2011) describe auto-ethnography as a research approach that uses descriptions to analyze systematically, our personal experiences. This allows us to make sense of, and to understand cultural experience. Custer (2014) describes the process as one that “can uncover many different feelings within the writer. It can be joyful, sad, revealing, exciting, and occasionally painful” (p. 1). Sparkes (2000) considers auto ethnographies to be “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (p. 21). Patton (2014) describes auto-ethnography as a process whereby researchers apply their personal experiences to the culture that they are studying, and create meaning from this interaction. The researchers move back and forth, in and out between their experiences, cultural traditions, and the culture being studied, until no distinction remains. Thus, they are able to identify their own place within the studied culture. I believe this to be the ideal way to investigate my own feelings with respect to my experiences, in order to make sense of my novice learner role in the Semiotics class. It works on the assumption that when a group of human beings interact for a period, they evolve a culture.

In this paper, I attempt to use my experiences as a novice learner of Semiotics to explore the culture of learning, from the lens of students in an interdisciplinary course, who are learning a subject for the first time. Such students are novice learners with respect to the subject. As my findings indicate, their learning experiences are quite distinct from non-novice students, and dependent on the learning situations in which they are placed.

### *Methods and Perspectives of Discoveries and Findings*

Combining the processes of auto- ethnography and ethnography allowed me to explore my “self” or internal surroundings in conjunction with my environment or external surroundings, including interacting with fellow inhabitants of the culture I sought to investigate. As ethnographers, we study cultural and relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences to help cultural members or *insiders* and cultural strangers or *outsiders* better understand the culture (Maso, 2001). As I engaged in the process of becoming a participant and observer in the culture of novice learners, I observed and took class notes that acted as the field notes of cultural happenings. I also used a short survey of six questions, and semi-structured interviews of five other novice students to identify their perceptions. I coded the contents from the three sources, and then examined literature and documents to validate the emergent themes and information. Finally, I engaged in member checking by reexamining my notes and sending a synopsis of the findings to the interviewees for new insights and final approvals.

My investigation involved both discoveries and findings. As auto ethnographers, we engage in acts of discoveries as we detect something new or so far undetected within our experiences, surroundings, and systems. However, discoveries may have limitations. As Danesi (2007) points out, knowledge systems may vary throughout the world, due to which we may be unable to view the whole picture or the universal truths at once. In other words, our knowledge systems can only give us partial glimpse of reality. Discoveries cannot be forced by logical analysis, because they simply happen. Therefore, for the sake of enhancing credibility of our discoveries, it may be beneficial to add perspectives of other culture members, which I did using ethnography. I delved deeper into my discoveries, and because of this process, I found answers to the questions generated by my discoveries. Thus, in this paper, I have made distinctions between my discoveries that were the result of my reflection and

introspection, and my findings that were the result of my deeper investigation into the ideas and issues emanating from the discoveries.

I used a combination of methods, as prescribed by Ellis et al. (2011), to establish validity and credibility of the auto-ethnographic process and fusing it with an ethnographic approach. I screened personal experiences to select ones that are relatable and viable for the research questions, validated analysis of personal experience using existing research, and observed, interviewed and surveyed cultural members (novice learners). The combination of the three data sources provided compelling support for my findings.

*Charles Sanders Peirce*

Peirce's Doctrine of Continuity and Theory of Synechism, forms the frame of my inquiry. Esposito (2005) describes the theory of Synechism, as "the view that the universe exists as a continuous whole of all its parts, with no part being fully separate, determined or determinate, and continues to increase in complexity and connectedness through semiosis and the operation of an irreducible and ubiquitous power of relational generality to mediate and unify substrates" (Abstract, p. 1). A critical principle of Synechism is the doctrine of continuity that, as cited by Esposito (2005), includes Peircean concepts such as "unbrokenness" (CP 1.163), "fluidity, the merging of part into part" (CP 1.164), where "all is fluid and every point directly partakes the being of every other" (CP 5.402n2; p. 3). Peirce's idea of continuity also had philosophical and logical considerations. Although Peirce believed that there could be some discontinuity, he did not subscribe to the view of absolute discontinuity. Rather, he saw the reality of continuity in thought, memory and perception as well as time since "the connection of past and future seems truly continuous" (Havenel, 2008, p. 124). In addition, Eposito (2005) quotes this about Peirce's view on time continuum, "Therefore, he argued, it is a sound hypothesis to believe that "time really is continuous." But he also argued that "time logically supposes a continuous range of intensity in feeling. (CP 6.132.)" (p. 3).

*My research questions focus on evaluating and understanding the meaning making process of learners divided by two time streams of the past and the present, with an underlying focus on how these meanings may facilitate learning for future novice learners.*

*Jakob von Uexküll*

The Umwelt Theory was propounded by Uexküll, in the book *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909a), in which he introduced the term "Umwelt" to denote the subjective (subjectivized, meaningful) world of an organism" (Kull, 2001, p. 7). "The life- world of every creature is formed only by those meaningful elements that are significant for it, which have a meaningful "tone," as Uexküll called it. All creatures – including humans – thus live as if in a meaning-filled "bubble," which is precisely their *Umwelt*" (University of Tartu 2016). Deely (2004) discusses why Umwelt is so critical in understanding Semiotics. In this discussion, Deely (1994) provides a glimpse of the Umwelt's relation to emotions. "Yet what the Umwelt is above all is a lattice and network of ontological relations between organism and environment, elevating the latter to the level of the animal's awareness, and organizing it according to the animals need and desires, even hopes" (p. 29). Weisfeld (2009) describes how emotions, particularly those of affect, play a key role in our worldview or Umwelt. Affects are defined as non-neutral emotions we like or dislike.



*My research questions focus on evaluating and understanding the emotional aspects of the meaning making process of novice learners.*

## Organization

It is my strong belief that emotions are powerful forces that enhance academic and self-learning, cultural understanding and philosophical perception building. Together, they define who we are and who we can become. As my primal mission (not primary, and I do know the difference!) in writing this piece is to make it relatable to my readers, I felt obligated to organize the contents using the lens of emotions, because I believe them to be primal as well. The central foci of my thoughts in embarking on this journey are sharing the emotional experiences of my fellow novice learners and me, and how they helped us transform as learners, by making us think more deeply about ourselves and the cosmos we are placed in. Even though I am by no means a seasoned semiotician, the marriage of my emotions with the learning process produced results that were unexpected and long lasting. I divide the sharing into three short narrative compilations, displayed as pages from a storybook. These narratives are about my in-class experience and the “other time and space” that the in-class took me. I also do this to limit the extent of the contents, as surely an entire life’s experiences cannot be articulated in a single paper! My intent, as stated prior, is to provide exemplars, and so I have selected only those incidents that I believe are highlighted moments of my experiences, both as a novice learner and an extension of my cultural self.

To complement the investigative part of my endeavor, I provide reflections on the significance of these stories and their alignment in my mind’s time and space paradigm. In addition, I narrate my “in-class” story as seen through the lens of my class observations. Here is where I introspect on developing and reshaping my philosophical perceptions, and identify emerging flagpoles of my thinking. As I introspect and dig deeper into my own thinking while engaged with the thinking of others, I tend to move back in time and mental space to recollect experiences that I feel identify with my current thought process. Finally, in the Proposition section, I discuss the sum of my findings through this investigation, accumulated through discourse and the “graphy” of literature reviews, self-reflection, and survey and interview analysis.

I selected *curiosity and fulfillment* as my two emotions in relation to learning in general, since I experienced them deeply as a novice learner in the Semiotic course. I selected *hope* as my emotion for learning via a cultural context as that is a potent emotion underpinning my experiences. I believe culture to be the fulcrum of a self’s existence, hence warranting special attention in any auto-ethnographic and ethnographic process. We are gregarious beings, and even though we have the ability to survive in our individual selves, we can thrive only when placed within specific communal selves. For example, my success as an individual is manifested in my roles as a mother, a spouse, a friend, a neighbor, a colleague, a student and so on. When attempting to identify my successes, I must include both my communal and individual identities.

I pondered long and hard over the selection of literary devices/s for my narratives, and finally settled upon the Stream of Consciousness literary device. William James (1892) coined this term to denote the flow of inner experiences. As a literary device, it refers to that technique which seeks to depict the different thoughts and feelings, which pass through the mind. “Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged” (James, 1892, n.p.). Thus, this device is an apt choice for sharing experiences related to emotions. Another, and perhaps, equally compelling reason is my fondness for Virginia Woolf, who “was considered as a famous novelist during the 20 century by the use of the

fictional style of writing stream of consciousness, she was portrayed her character's consciousness" (Bouzid, 2013, p. 14). Her techniques involve using a combination of interior monologues and free association within the realms of stream of consciousness. "Virginia Woolf, among the stream-of-consciousness writers, relies most on the indirect interior monologue and she uses it with great skill" (Sang, 2010, p. 174).

In constructing my narratives, I defer to her line of thinking as she explains the process of stream of consciousness, "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions-trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of numerous atoms..." (Woolf, 1966, p. 160), and elaborates on the core essence of its argument. "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf, 1966, p. 160).

### **Narrative One: The Story of the One: Emotions and Learning**

[Down the Rabbit Hole or up to the class]

The first day of class...I am hurrying along as I have no clue where the Stone building is...never heard of it. Surprise, surprise, who would have thought there is still a place to discover after fourteen years on campus. I guess learning is life-long. Is that not why I am back to school? It is hard, so hard to make ends meet, to find time for anything other than engagements of inquiry. Why must it be this way? Why this insatiable hunger to do more, be more? Who knows and at this point, I do not care. Must not be late to class...

"Excuse me, could you tell me where the Stone Building is," I ask the nice looking lady walking alongside me, without breaking a step. "Sure, it is that one" (pointing to the front). "Great, I am almost there now," I smile as she smiles back. What a pretty little thing! Oh oh, almost missed the steps. Climbing on I reach the elevator and it is out of order. Necessity being the order of the moment, I trudge up the stairs, weary (a little) since it has been a very long day. Up the stairs and down the hall, I am finally here.

There are a few students, no sign of the professor yet. I settle down to what I perceive to be a safe space. Not too close to the front to be too much in the professor's eye, and not too far back to be ignored. Now what? I take out my notebook, and look up to see the professor enter the class. She is not what I expected, at least not in the conventional way. What an unusual outfit? Reminds me of the Buddhist Lama capes. Why is she wearing that? She will stand out... is that on purpose? Despite my curiosity I am quite impressed. Her hair looks lovely, piled neatly on top of her head... reminds me of Mrs. Alexandar, my High School mentor.

As she proceeds to set up her teaching materials, neatly arranging them on the table, I sneak a peek at my classmates... everyone is waiting for her to begin. As she begins to talk about the course and its structure, she is circulating a couple of files: a yellow one and the other... wait a minute. Did I hear it right...? A non-yellow yellow file! I can see it is blue. Yellow and blue are seriously jarring color contrasts for me... what am I in for? She explains the materials and then we discuss some key aspects of semiotics: paradigms, space and time,

isomorphism, umwelt...many terms and meanings. I am trying to jot down all she is saying, but it is too much. I need to learn short hand, or I cannot keep up. All this is so new to me...never been in a semiotic class before.

Running furiously along with my pen and paper, I suddenly brake... trying to take in the dialogues unfolding right now... I want to hear and take it in first. Recollection can come later. "Umwelt: a word of German origin... meaning significant surroundings. Every species has an Umwelt-which is a significant surround. However, not everything is significant to all of us. Anything in nature is already a part of culture." How interesting! I like the word: umwelt. It has a velvety smoothness, with a touch of sophisticated taste... I like it and want to know more.

And why cannot I stop thinking of the non-yellow yellow file? ... Reminds me of Dorothy tripping down a yellow brick road...I feel like Dorothy, curious, skeptical, whimsical, mostly curious. Where will this yellow file road lead me?

[A non-yellow yellow file on a yellow brick road]

Day 2 in class.... Sitting in my safe space, I am a bit nervous today about how things will go. The first day left me in a sort of haze...not knowing what to make of it all. Words, concepts, so foreign to me; yet I feel drawn to them like something I once had and perhaps lost in the process of living. The professor is here! And I am curious to see if she has it. Yes, she does. The files are there, spread on the table, and I wonder what they have in store for us, especially the non-yellow yellow. I walk over to hand my QCK for the day to her. A promise made to myself is definitely worth keeping, so here it is. My very first QCK; a part of my curious plot to bring one every day of every class we have. I hope she likes it. I tried to do my best.

Settling down, we are about to start our discussion of the day. But wait, what about the files. Here they come... the yellow one followed by the blue, nay, the non-blue by default, non-yellow yellow file. I smack my mental lips, waiting for the files, waiting to see what quirky, exciting, relevant information they bring today. Pandora's box! Really! Pandora's box was nothing but trouble, so why does the file make me think of it now? I am troubled...no, very curious about so many things. How much time is spent on gathering the items; how much effort to sort what will peak our interests? These are signs of caring, and in return I too want to care in equal measure...

Back to Pandora...I remember. She held on to Hope and Love and through patience and caring she helped restore mankind's faith. I hear the conversation...it is all about paradigms and symbols and icons and indices... My fingers are a bit tired trying to jot it all down as fast as I can. So much to learn. Before I can feel the time slipping away, it is time to leave.

It is after dinner now. They are all asleep, the night, my hubby, my puppies...all but me. I am looking at my class notes and see Pandora scribbled in a lonely corner. Ahh... Danesi is looking at me hopefully. Will she pick me up or won't she! Oh well, come here you little book.... I like what I read, and resent what I

feel... A gnawing apparition of doubt, dribbling with a little curiosity at the corners of its mouth, starts to settle on my chest, as I stare at the V. A symbol for feminism, victory, greeting... a symbiotic story. But where does this lead to; what crevices of my consciousness is this V tying to pry open?

[fulfillment at last...or more curiosity?]

I am exhausted with the reading...must try and sleep now. Who knows what dreams may come to answer my curious doubts? Tossing and turning under the glow of the atomic clock projection, I see the time: it is 3.33...go figure! Is this a sign from somewhere, I know not where, but I am going to get up and write some more. I am thinking of the V and the ever increasing mystery of the symbol, Why is it important for me? Wait, it cannot be! ...Or can it? Many years ago I came to the United States with some hopes, one of which was to escape the male domination rhetoric of the Indian society. But what was I really trying to escape? I just could not bear the feelings of gender discrimination, and so I transformed into a fighter, someone who wanted to give back the oppression in equal measure. Could it be that I was treated this way because I was a threat to their masculinity and intellectuality? Yet, is this thought not reeking of a masculine approach, puffed with egotistical notions of superiority. I wanted to lead, dominate and control my environments, as an attempt to stand up against oppression and yet in the process, I could have become the oppressor? Is that possible? I may never really know since recollection is scarce after so many years. But the thought is a humbling one...most certainly leading to a subsuming of my ego with humility.

I put my pen away. It is almost 5 am and I need to get ready for work. A new day, a new idea, a new revelation about myself. Life is going to go on.... till it does not. But then, what new dreams may come, what new "me" may emerge... I do not know. From the time I drew my first breath to the time I breathe my last, I am continually being encased within the layers upon layers of my experiences, like the chrysalis encasing the caterpillar. At several momentous intervals in my life, I break out of the chrysalis to transform into something new, something different, while at the same time perhaps miraculously holding on to something that I used to be. Dorothy continues on the yellow brick road.....]

**Analysis using literary lens.** The recollections and descriptions in the above narrative provide some examples of the emotions of curiosity and fulfillment I experienced as a novice learner. These are just snippets of a very wide and deep range of experiences, which enriched my consciousness and allowed my expansion as a social and individual entity. I used them, as they were the freshest in my recollection, making them more credible as data. They also induced deeper impacts on my cognition and knowledge retention. In selecting, I also relied on Tinbergen (2005) who posits, "Description is never, can never be random; it is in fact, highly selective, and selection is made with reference to the problems, hypotheses, and methods the investigator has in mind" (p. 300). Literature supports the value of these learner emotions.

## Curiosity

Litman (2005) discusses a model of curiosity, incorporating the neuroscience of wanting and liking, and contends, “Acquiring knowledge when one’s curiosity has been aroused is considered intrinsically rewarding and highly pleasurable” (p. 793). He also contends that the discovery of new information may be rewarding because it “dispels undesirable states of ignorance or uncertainty rather than stimulate one’s interest (p.794). Based on my experiences, I am now well aware that as a learning emotion, curiosity is a powerful means to motivate continual learning, as the learner feels propelled by the thrust of successful discoveries to continue in the pursuit of satiating curiosity. Lowenstein (1994) offers similar understandings based on the works of foundational thinkers and psychologist like Freud, Kant, Burke and St. Augustine. Lowenstein (1994) describes curiosity as a passionate, intrinsic desire for information, coupled with an intense appetite for more knowledge.

Berlyne (1954) did groundbreaking research on curiosity and its value for learners. His research focused on understanding “why, out of the infinite range of knowable items in the universe, certain pieces of knowledge are more ardently sought and more readily retained than others” (p. 180). He distinguished between the curiosity that stimulated and enhanced perceptions (*perceptual curiosity*) and those that labored for knowledge (*epistemic curiosity*). In addition, he also categorized *specific curiosity* as the desire for a particular piece of information, and *diversive curiosity* as a more general seeking of stimulation (Lowenstein (1994). From my experience, I have come to believe that a critical aspect of curiosity in the context of learning is that it inspires a looping of desire to know more as new information to satiate an initial curiosity may reveal options for more questions and further learning. However, at a certain point, knowledge about a subject is satiated, leading to a lessening of curiosity for that subject. This establishes a distinction between the mindset of a first time or novice learner versus a learner who has had more exposure to the subject.

Kidd and Hayden (2015) discussed curiosity using Tinbergen’s (1963) four questions of behavior pertaining to function, evolution, mechanism, and development and posited that the primary function of curiosity is to facilitate learning and “allowing a learner to indulge his curiosity allows him to focus his effort on useful information that he does not yet possess.” (p. 450). Reio (2004) studied the relationship of curiosity to learning and found it to be a motivator for learning in both formal and informal learning contexts. The study findings suggest, “that curiosity, which is most often considered to be a transient motivational variable, might influence long-term learning outcomes in the classroom” (p. 21).

Several groundbreaking studies done on the subject of curiosity indicate that it is extremely important for learning. It is not only a catalyst to induce the brain to get involved in learning about something, but also an incentive that makes the subsequent learning a rewarding process. As a learner’s curiosity gets satisfied, he/she becomes more involved in the learning process and seeks to satisfy more curiosity generated from the continual learning. This is because fulfillment leads to the release of dopamine, which is a chemical produced by the brain that induces good feelings, akin to eating a favorite candy or ice cream (Gruber, Gelman, & Ranganath, 2014). Kang, Hsu, Krajchich, Loewenstein, McClure, Wang, and Camerer (2009) believe that curiosity “plays a critical role in motivating learning and discovery, especially by creative professionals, increasing the world’s store of knowledge” (p. 963). They hypothesized that the “striatum would be linked to curiosity because a growing body of evidence suggests that activity in the human striatum is correlated with the level of reward signals” (p. 964). Their studies indicated that not knowing enough or having prior incorrect information could act as a stimulant instead of a deterrent to learning. When learners are confident, but have little knowledge, that is challenged when exposed to the correct information versus the incorrect one that learners perceived to be true. This acts as a self-induced punishment, because their self-

confidence is challenged, leading to greater motivation to know more about the subject. Thus, curiosity can not only lead to fulfillment, but also generate more curiosity about newly discovered information. The study also indicated that curiosity allowed consolidation of new information for long-term memory.

Epistemic Curiosity is the one I focus on most, because it exists for all learners, including novice learners. Epistemic curiosity is the *desire for knowledge*. In its purest form, it inspires learners to learn new ideas in an attempt to fill gaps in information, as well as stimulate intellectual critical thinking to solve problems and promote scholarly accomplishments (Berlyne 1954; Lowenstein, 1994). Litman and Jimerson (2004) drew a distinction between interest induction and deprivation elimination, called I-type curiosity versus D-type curiosity. While I- type relates to acquiring knowledge simply for the pleasure of the process, indicating mastery- oriented learning, D-type curiosity emanates from the learner's desire or need to know facts about a specific subject to look for correctness, relevance, and accuracy of information. This is considered to be a stronger motive for seeking knowledge than I-type as it belongs to an unsatisfied need-like state (Liman, 2005; Litman, Hutchins, & Russon, 2005; Litman & Spielberger, 2003). In addition, there is a difference in the extrinsic curiosity, or the kind of curiosity that is imposed by a school assignment, versus intrinsic curiosity, or the kind of curiosity that applies to the student's own life. Promoting the latter will bring more long-term transfer of knowledge (Rinkevich, 2014).

### *Fulfillment*

For the purposes of this paper, I use the definition of fulfillment as that of a feeling of happiness and satisfaction (Vocabulary, 2016). It is a feeling that elicits enthusiasm, happiness and excitement. In the context of learning, I believe fulfillment to be a natural outcome of positive results of curiosity satiation. Silva Faria (2015) describes emotions pertaining to e-learning and asserts, "One of the positive emotion students can experience is the emotion of enthusiasm or excitement and it is believed that they play major part in the learning process" (p. 17). Fulfillment is a key motivator of learning, and is intimately linked to the emotion of curiosity. Feldenkrais (1981) believes that curiosity is the sole quality of mankind's nervous system that links all of us, and eventually leads to our learning through fulfillment. However, in order for fulfillment in learning to occur, we must know the limitations of that fulfillment. That is because fulfillment is an inherently individualized emotion, and will vary greatly from person to person. For instance, for someone who cannot walk due to a handicap, a life fulfillment could be developing the ability to walk. "There's a question of fulfillment if you can't walk; it's a fulfillment to be able to walk" (p. 30).

Fulfillment in learning can come through a combination of self- and co regulation, as well as students' perceptions of their learning environment. Again, this can be closely reflected in the level of curiosity the subject or teaching strategies initiate within learners. Perry (1968) examined the epistemological beliefs of college undergraduates, and found that learning was difficult for some students as they had a different perception of knowledge from their teachers. Students new to a subject frequently perceive learning to be a handed down process, versus one that involves critical thinking and analysis. However, when the learning situation incites curiosity, students move on to self-regulation and ultimate fulfillment. "Students progress from an absolutist view, in which knowledge is perceived as dualistic (right or wrong, good or bad) and handed down by authority, to a relativist one that recognizes the flexibility of knowledge and the possibility that it can be questioned or derived through reasoning" (Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996, p. 88).

## Reflection and Discoveries Pertaining to Curiosity and Fulfillment

My interactions with the course, the professor, my classmates, and the subject matter, all contributed to inciting my curiosities and motivating me to go beyond the class hours and spend considerable amount of time researching and learning about ideas we discussed within the one hour and 15 minutes space-time. The first few weeks' discussion focused around the topics of paradigm, syntagm, and syntax. There was also discussion on the concepts of space and time and their relation to paradigms. An interesting discussion related to the fact that Semiotics cannot be taught in a linear fashion as it is a meta-discipline. The philosophies, theories, and principles of semiotics are applicable to almost any discipline since they pertain to the quest of making meaning through the interpretation of signs and symbols, text and perceptions, and everything else in between. As the days went by, I found myself consciously and unconsciously applying the ideas and concepts to my surroundings to decipher their correlations, if any.

For instance, I found it intriguing that even though Semiotics cannot be taught in a linear fashion, there was a certain amount of linearity in how we were learning it. We were bound within specific space and time; the classroom and the designated class hours. However, the structure of the course was heavily nonlinear, almost unstructured in its essence. I found this to be a brilliant instructional strategy, as it exposed us to the true nature of Semiotics. In the context of a paradigm, which we were told is a basket of ideas related to a common theme, I believed that the class was a uniquely designed Semiotic paradigm that was being taught in a linear fashion, constricted by time and space. Yet, the learning was taking place outside of this space-time boundary, within the learners' intrinsic environments, as we sought to interact with familiar elements to visualize them in unfamiliar and so far unexplored contexts.

Although multitudes of ideas and topics were covered within the course discussions and readings, my levels of curiosity for them varied. While I did take extensive class notes, and browsed through them after class hours, I was motivated to do more research only on selected topics. For instance, I spent a lot of time researching items like the color classifications of Berlin and Kay, the Synechism philosophy of Peirce, Umwelt theorem of Uexküll, the concept of Limited and Unlimited good, Garbology and finally the Utopian vision of David Graeber. As I engaged in the reflective process, I became interested in discovering why I spent more time learning about these topics, to the exclusion of others. I did some introspection and came to some rudimentary conclusions.

I have always been inherently interested in color psychology, from the first time I learned about it as part of my training for technical and business writing. I have spent considerable amount of time studying the psychology of color with respect to cross-cultural communication. However, it was somewhat shocking for me to realize how little I knew of Berlin and Kay's (1969) model of the evolution of basic color terms systems. I felt a bit peeved, since I always believed that I did my due diligence during my research processes. I believe that this could be a product of epistemic curiosity (Berlyne 1954; Lowenstein, 1994) that I have described above, and Agentic thinking (Snyder, Rand and Sigmon, 2002) that I discuss subsequently in this paper. In addition, I found the associated research and history pertaining to this model a fascinating story in itself. For several years after the model was designed, scholars and philosophers have been going back and forth debating aspects of the model and defending them. I thought the level of tenacity that the model initiated, to be something worth studying in the future (Berlin & Kay, 1969; Fairchild, 2013; Jameson, 2005; Kay, Berlin, & Merrifield, 1991).

Regarding Peirce and Uexküll, I believe my interest stemmed from the fact that I could identify with their philosophies and theories based on my personal experiences. It was easy for me to understand the concept of continuity and worldview, as well as the influence of our

intrinsic and extrinsic environments in shaping our perspectives. My life has been rather unusual, and some of the experiences I have encountered are not commonplace. As a result, I have always been engaged in the process of trying to make sense of my thoughts, and their relation to my surroundings. In short, I am very prone to self-analysis and self-doubt, as I question every decision and idea I have.

In the context of limited and unlimited good also, I believe my interest stemmed from my historical roots as well as the experience of living in a community that display similar traits. Foster (1965) focused on peasant societies, who believe that since there is a finite amount of good items like land, food, and other survival provisions, if a member of society progresses in these items, he or she will do so only by taking away from other members of that society. "If 'Good' exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others" (Foster, 1965, pp. 296-297).

Thus, if some family or community member shows relative improvement concerning anything perceived as a part of the "Good," it is viewed as a threat to the entire community. Indians, by nature are socially jealous, which means that for the most part the progress of a member of society is viewed upon as suspicious or as a cause for negative competition. In contrast, the principle of unlimited good designed by Alan Dundes means that "there is no real limit as to how much of any one commodity can be produced. The folk idea of unlimited good reflects an American cultural theme of abundance" (Mullen, 1978, p. 210). Living in the American society for the past 15 years has given me a good exposure to this kind of thinking.

As for Garbology, which is defined as "the study of modern culture through the analysis of what is thrown away as garbage" (Merriam-Webster, 2016), it definitely has a deep-seated cultural connotation for me, as I cannot delete graphical memories of mountains of garbage that greets everyone traversing the by-roads of New Delhi! The Indian culture's lack of civic senses is legendary. Having grown up in such a culture, Garbology became a "thing" for me, as I struggled to disassociate myself from what I perceive to be an unsavory part of my ethnic heritage. To this day, several of my friends back home question how I became such a cleanliness "freak." I can only think of the syndrome that makes an alcoholic's child refrain from touching alcohol. On a philosophical level, I see the use of Garbology principles applicable to our emotional and consciousness garbage, or extra mental baggage we do not use or care about, because in essence that too is garbage.

Strangely enough, after reading David Graeber's (2015) "The Utopia of Rules," I could not but help thinking of garbology! Graeber (2015) rallies against the state and serving bureaucracy as extreme forces snuffing human freedom. Could that include the freedom to live, and be sustained in healthy, sanitary conditions, and can that be jeopardized by perceptions of bureaucratic brutality? Perhaps, yes. Let us look at the effects of strikes organized by sanitation workers worldwide. Some major incidents in 2015-2016 were the strikes in Chandigarh and New Delhi, India, and Paris, France (Express News Service, 2015; Melo, 2015; Zee Media Bureau, 2016). In each of these cases, the protests were against the perceived unjust policies and behavior of the government, and besides health issues, the "stink" was costly to the authorities. For example, the New Delhi strike cost the Indian government seventeen million dollars in rupee equivalent (Zee Media News, 2016). Sometimes, a sanitary workers' strike comes at a far greater cost. In 1962, the African-American Sanitary Workers' Union clashed with Memphis city officials. When they could not secure better affordances, Martin Luther King agreed to intervene and lead a nonviolent demonstration in support of the sanitation workers. The demonstration did not remain peaceful, resulting in the death of Larry Payne. Deeply concerned about this, King returned two months later for another peaceful demonstration and delivered his last speech as he was shot down the next evening (The Digital



Library of Georgia, 2013). These efforts at semiotic meaning making made my brain exhausted at the possibilities of connections between time, space and my universal surround.

Despite having some ideas as to my cognitive selection process for topics of interest, I pondered how novice learners become curious about the selective aspects of a subject matter that they are learning for the first time. Even though my self-analysis revealed a strong connection to experience and cultural background, to substantiate this further, I chose to include that question within my semi-structured interviews to gather data. Thus, my participation in the course took me through the cycle of curiosity–investigation–fulfillment and more curiosity about newly learned information leading to new investigations. I have explained this in more depth subsequently in the Principle Findings section.

## **Narrative Two: Emotions and Cultural Learning**

[what culture]

Yay, another Tuesday... Sitting in class, I am counting down, happy in the knowledge that time is moving so fast... relatively, I mean, compared to other semesters. As always we start our conversation with the file circulations, while exchanging some trivialities. As always, I am ready with my felt-grip pen to write down as many words of wisdom as I can... No, it is not getting any faster...my hand writing, but it sure is getting badder... (is that even a word/) I am an English professor...not in here...I quickly jot the word down in a circle. We are talking about sound symbolism and Linda Waugh and Roman Jakobson... I am lost, trying to fathom the depths of my professor's memory. How does she remember all these details? Here comes another one... The Image of the Limited Good... I am not fast enough to catch up with the fervor of her remembrances, so I will put the pen down and listen instead. Savor the stories being narrated... She talks about addiction... A word that was being used as a racist slur equated with Blacks...a 100 year ago.... We talk about culture that is habit and culture that is taught...we continue talking and here it is...4.15pm...go time!

I have some time between classes so I decide to transcribe on computer my daily scribblings for the class. Here it is...the what culture page. I transcribe for a while and then get stuck on the "culture is taught" part. Is it? What did my culture teach me? Strange... I want to think of things like food, clothing, language, ceremonies...but they all seem too trivial, too non-representative of what I feel my culture really taught me.... Why did I run away from India? What was I trying to escape? Why am I a non-rooted Indian? I shut down the computer as I feel the gush of heat and pain to my head...my killer friend the migraine is here! Best I go home...best I reflect on what memories of my culture brought this on.

The ride through hell

I am a happy, perky girl...the love and center of Ma and Bapi's life. It is late afternoon on Friday...I stand just inside of the school gates...a typical smelly, noisy, sultriness cloaks me...this feels like a normal afternoon for this industrial hub called Kanpur....and I am waiting for my rickshaw ride home...we live a few miles away from school and what a relief that is. Oh, here he is... Ahmad,

my rickshaw puller... I hop, skip and jump onto the rickshaw, and Ahmad starts cycling slowly. "Bucchi (meaning baby in Hindi), I have to pick up a packet for Bapi...I forgot to bring it from home...let us go and pick it up now, OK?" "Yeahhh...I will see Amma (Ahmad's wife), will she have Kheer for me?" "She may, you never know with Amma," (Hahahahaha).

Ahmad pedals on, meandering through the gullies (narrow streets) of the neighborhood, when suddenly a group of panicked people running in the opposite direction surrounds us. "Go back, go back," they scream. "You cannot have a Hindu in here right now.... the rioters are coming," an old lady shouts. "Get her out of here."

I can see that Ahmad is at his wit's end and not quite sure what to do. "Baby, we need to hide quickly," he says and although I am not sure what is going on, something in his voice scares me. He reverses his rickshaw and starts cycling as fast as he can, entering a different street that he hopes is away from the rioting crowd coming our way. As we move through the street, I can hear sounds of screaming and gunshots coming from the adjacent streets. Ahmad turns left at the end of the street and runs straight into 5 people, wielding knives and guns. "yah Allah," he moans, as the men looked at him and shout, "Look a 'ledde'."

Before I can fathom what is happening, through the lens of a nightmare I see the men drag Ahmad from the rickshaw, beating and punching him, all the time shouting, "Tell us what a Ledde is doing with a Hindu girl." They beat him senseless, all the while paying no attention to me, as I sit motionless on the rickshaw, helpless and weeping in silence. After what seems like a lifetime, the men finally leave.... Ahmad is bleeding and cringing by the roadside... a thin trickle of crimson stains his shirt as the muddy road soaks up a few droplets of life falling from a fractured face and mind.... I can feel the bile gushing up, as I am drowning in the cacophony of my heart... I feel, I wait...

It is almost an hour now... I think...no sign of anyone. Wait...who is that coming our way? I cringe, trying to become a melted wax button on a forgotten niche...As he comes closer, I look at him sideways...Thank Lord! it is Asif, Ahmad's brother, who lives nearby. He found us. Asif walks up to me and says things I cannot hear...his soft tone has an urgency, desperation, sadness... "Come Bitia, we go home now." I nod my head, closing my eyes as Asif bends to pick Ahmad up and helps him on to the rickshaw. We drive in silence and arrive at the hospital. I wait outside as Asif admits his brother in the hospital... Is this what eternity feels like? I wrap my arms tightly across my chest and with closed eyes, I wait for Asif to take me home.

It is a few weeks later now as I am finding out that more than 300 men were injured and 70 killed in these riots, all because some maniac left a sack full of cows' feet on the doorstep of a Hindu temple! But more appalling is the discovery that the word "ledde" meant "a street mongrel!" I love Ahmad, who is a kind, gentle old man, whom my parents trust with their little girl. He has three daughters of his own, who are NOT the products of street mongrels. I realize now, how much I hate being labeled a Hindu, a rich-man's daughter,

...as anything other than a human being. As for religion.... I do not ever want to hear that word.

[The cat did not get my tongue; death did]

It is four years later now...I am looking forward to completing my senior High School year...only a few months left now...two in fact, this being October 31st, 1984. It is Wednesday...I do not like Wednesdays...it feels like an unwelcome guest, hogging the middle space of the week, neither here nor there... I resent this Wednesday even more as it reeks of a sinister omen, like a thousand creepy, cold slugs have crawled into my spine...The day had started alright, until the news came and we are being told that the school is closed... A lot of hush hush, low toned conversations are taking place among the teachers, but we are not told anything...My father is here; time to go home.

My mother is sticking her head outside the bedroom window screaming, "Hurry, hurry, get inside." I am too nervous, almost falling down as I try to run up the stairs...looking back to see if Bapi is also coming. What is going on? As I walk in the hallway, my mother rushes in and hugs me.... Oh dear... she sobs... Indira Gandhi is dead! "What, NOoo," I scream silently." It can't be... I adored her...she was my role model, someone I one day wanted to be. She cannot be dead...she was just alive as we watched the news last night.

Thursday morning wakes me up with a hellish siren ringing all around us. Woonwoonwoon it goes on and on, loud and wailing like a tornado's spin. As I am getting out of bed, I can hear sounds of people, many, many people...shrieking and ranting through the streets...they are all around us...all screaming "Sikh ko khatam karo (Death to the Sikhs)." I am scared, whimpering softly, I walk up the stairs to the second floor to my parent's bedroom. As I pass the covered veranda leading to their room, I hear loud commotions, coming right from across the street.... Should I check it out? I walk slowly and open the veranda window...

Through the mists of unreality, I can see a gang of people, including women, dragging two Sikh men... I hear blood-curdling screams coming from them, beyond the din of a dozen angry people ...I cannot turn my eyes away... I am a mouse mesmerized by the snake...This must be a sleepwaking dream...nay, a nightmare....NO, NO, NO, this is not happening...The men are dousing the two Sikhs with kerosene after tying them to a tree...I must look away now...but I do not. Within seconds that will last through my eternity I see the woman strike a match and the Sikhs start to burn, ALIVE...The gates of hell have opened and I am being swallowed in, slowly, corrosively...I am dying within, watching humanity die in front of my eyes...I open my mouth to scream, but I hear nothing. I close my eyes, tight... I pray till the knuckles of my soul bleeds... I open my eyes and they are still there...the hounds of hell.

It has been four days after the day Hades welcomed me into his arms...four days of silence. I hear my mother crying as she is talking to the doctor in the next room. "She is just in shock, and I can assure you, she will speak again. This is very natural for something like this," the doctor is trying to assure my mother...

I hate to hear my mother cry...I hate myself for putting her through this...but words have finally failed me.... lost in the screams and stench of burning flesh. ....]

### Analysis Using Literary Lens (Culture)

Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) discuss the culture of learning as “not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition... it is an integral part of what is learned” (p. 32). Culture is an integral part of learning, and the subject and teaching methods of a learning situation determine what a student learns and how much of that learning is retained. As a novice learner in the Semiotic course, I was privileged to participate in several discussions and conversations regarding culture. These discussions ranged from culture as habit, symbolisms of culture, as well as unique attributes of some specific cultures. All of these were very interesting and enlightening for me. However, the greatest take away from this experience in the context of learning about culture was the inspiration such discussions provided to introspect on my own cultural experiences and reevaluate them. As indicated in the narrative for this section, I have selected a few of these cultural experiences that left a lifelong impression, and reshaped me into the person I am today. Without the inspiration of the discussions in the class, my feelings and emotions about these incidents would probably have been closeted, as so far I have chosen to move on, without consciously looking back or engaging in retrospection. The value of culture as a learning tool with an emotional essence is undeniable. Due to the ability of culture to inspire deep-rooted and powerful emotions within people who experience culture, it can become a motivator for positive or negative knowledge. The turn a cultural learning experience may take will depend largely on the value perceptions of the learner.

#### *Culture as an emotion bound learning tool*

Human beings are an inherently culture specific species. Thus, culture can be a powerful tool for learning and cultural experiences can shape or reshape human personalities. Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) designed the Cultural Dimensions of Learning Framework (CDLF), describing eight cultural parameters exhibited in instructional situations, in an attempt to assist in the recognition of culturally based learning differences. They argue that learning about cultural differences is important to prevent generalization and stereotyping.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) believed that culture is something we learn as we interact with our social environment, and it is not something that we acquire through our genes. While discussing cultural commonalities within specific cultural groups across the human species, they observed that despite these differences there are common threads that bound people cross-culturally. Their perspectives hinted at culture being a tool for collaborative learning and understanding. “The world is full of confrontations between people, groups and nations, who think, feel and act differently. At the same time, these people, groups and nations...are exposed to common problems that demand cooperation for their solution” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 4). A critical aspect of their theory is the concept of “Mental programs,” which results due to the likening of the human thinking, feeling and acting patterns to those of a computer’s programming. The sources of one’s mental programming “starts within the family; it continues within the neighborhood, at school, in youth groups, at the workplace, and in the living community” (p. 5). Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) also discuss the emotional parameters of culture as being part of our moral circle, and they refer to emotions such as pride, happiness, and shame in this context.

Renowned anthropologist Edward Hall discussed the interaction of emotions and culture during the process of social cohesion. He believed that all aspects of human life were

touched by culture, including “personality, how people express themselves (including shows of emotion), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved...” (p. 16). In his book *Beyond Culture*, he displays the importance of humans’ interaction with their environments using distinct sensory systems. Using the example of his trips to Japan, where he was moved from hotel to hotel without being consulted, he demonstrates how human beings use different emotions to record various aspects of their social and individual existence. “To move someone without telling him is almost worse than an insult, because it means he is below the point at which feelings matter. In these circumstances, moves can be unsettling and damaging to the ego” (p. 61). After some introspection, Hall digresses his belief. “I knew that my emotions on being moved out of my room in Tokyo were of the gut type and quite strong. There was nothing intellectual about my initial response” (p. 62).

### *Hope theory*

In recording my cultural experiences used as exemplars, I understood that hope is a possible means by which negative cultural exposure can be harnessed to produce positive learnings. As I hobbled emotionally through the days following the October 1984 incident, I realized that the little girl in pigtails, who did not see any boundaries between her fellow human beings, was gone forever. More than grief, I was consumed with anger at the futility of this tremendous loss of our humanity. I promised myself that there would be no more labels for me, ever! I was not going to be identified as a Hindu, an Indian, a Bengali, or anything in between. I was not going to let the lens of communal disparity and hatred blind my sight, as I set my vision to focus only on the good of humanity. It seems strange to think of the experience in this way, but what other way could there be to keep my sanity. How could I breathe another day, if I did not strive to find the good, when I was surrounded by so much evil and hatred? I realized then that sadly, we are all meant to carry our little pieces of hell with us, hidden deep within the crevices of our consciousness. Many years later, as I blossomed into an educator, I recognized the value of these horrific events in giving me the ‘eye of the beholder’; in enabling me with the empathy for all cultures that comes from a life shattering experience. The torturous hours of introspection did not dull the pain or disgust, but did instill in me the hope that by focusing on the goodness of our species, we can be more deeply motivated to protect it by rising against the bad, the vicious, and the ugly.

Hope has always had a special place in learning process. Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon (2002) devised the Hope Theory that posited, “hopeful thought reflects the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways. ... hope, so defined, serves to drive the emotions and well-being of people” (p. 257). In the context of discussion hope related ideas, Snyder et al. (2002) describe the value of Agentic thinking, which refers to a person’s confidence in his or her ability to select a pathway to achieving a goal, and remaining steadfast on that pathway. In essence, Agentic thinking propels levels of tenacity in a person and in turn, propels their hope. In terms of learning, novice learners are more apt to benefit from Agentic thinking, as it is known to gain momentum, when faced with impediments. “Agentic thinking is important in all goal-directed thought, but it takes on special significance when people encounter impediments. During such instances of blockage, agency helps the person to apply the requisite motivation to the best alternate pathway” (p. 258).

When learners perceive their goal pursuits to be successful, they experience positive emotions and vice versa. Thus, the perceptions of goal-pursuits can elicit emotions. based on the feedback learners receive regarding the success or failure of their goal pursuits. This feedback can be self-inflicted in that “the feedback process is composed of the particular emotions that result from perceived successful or unsuccessful goal attainment” (p. 260). For example, in pursuing my goal of learning Semiotics to gain a deeper understanding of the

multiplicity of culture, I was faced with an unforeseen impediment when the class discussions on culture drove me to relive my traumatic cultural experiences. This impediment was amplified by the current racism charged rhetoric that is prevalent in the world, including the USA.

Fueled by my Agentic thinking, I revisited my original resolve to focus on the good in people and to stay away from labels. Even though I was afraid, I was also hopeful that if I got my hands dirty I would be able to find the nuggets of wisdom I needed to make sense of it all; to figure out how, despite running away to another country, I was still unable to escape the sings of racism. It seemed providential to me, as I have always believed that there are no coincidences in life. After deep introspection, I decided that it was time to act on my promise to myself so many years ago. I realized that it is not just enough to practice tolerance as a single entity. True tolerance will happen when we engage in communal dialogues and share our feelings and findings with the world. Thus, I have now embarked on a new journey to understand the causes of racial aggression resurgence in the USA. Once I identify the causes, I can hope to find viable solutions, emulating Snyder et al.'s idea that "Significant positive correlations (rs of .40 to .50) have been found between hope and problem solving" (p. 262).

### **Reflection and Discoveries Pertaining to Culture, Learning and Hope**

Because our minds and the worlds we live in are inseparable, we meander, introspect, reiterate and reinterpret realities, and in the process, we gain insights into the connections of paradigms within and without our Unwelten. Throughout my interaction within the class, I was introduced to multifarious aspects of culture. The idea that most resonated with me was the one propounded by Raymond Williams who believed in lived culture, which is a combination of the anthropological sense of culture as well as the "forms of signification that circulate within our society" (Williams, 1958, Editor's Introduction). In short, Williams believed that culture was a combination of ordinary, communal and cultural habits as well as creative individual perspectives (Williams, 1958). He also propounded the concept of "structure of feelings" in which he challenged the practice of describing and analyzing culture and society in the past tense. Williams believed that this approach excludes creativity, which is never fully situated in the past tense, but is rather a "formative process, within a specific present" (p. 129). He views creative practices to be of different kinds ranging from the "active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships" (p. 212) to the "articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness" (p. 212).

The stories that I shared in the culture section resonate with the philosophies discussed above. Although Williams looked at works of art as the shifting and continuing element between past and present, I conceived the products of my thinking and consciousness to be equally creative as any work of art. My interactions within a culture that is inherently racist should have created a similar sense of pugnacity, hatred, and distrust of people from other races. However, through my creative individual perspectives, I designed my own structure of feelings that allowed hope to prevail, rather than other negative emotions. As a member of the specific cultural group of Hindus, I was expected to follow the cultural mindset and develop natural aversions to people of other religions. Had I followed my cultural habit that would probably have been the case. However, my rational and individual selves protested against the erroneous assumption that a particular behavior-taking place within a specific time space paradigm, could be a true representation of an individual's personality or that the behavior of a few individuals could be a representation of the entire culture. During my retrospection process in the writing of this auto ethnography I recognized how the cultural habits of racial discrimination have transcended time and space, thriving within the consciousness's of generations of human beings who do not stop to think about the consequences of their thinking.

Perhaps, there is nothing more dangerous than the most common false assumption when people take their own cultural ways of thinking and behaving as representative of human nature and therefore the “right” way to think or behave.

Born in a culture that has openly practiced segregation of humanity in the name of race, caste system, and class distinctions - I sought to take refuge in hope as I was shrouded by hopelessness-hopelessness that threatened to transform into a rage and hatred and all that is ugly in humanity. I did not want to be a part of this. I wanted to scream and tell the people who spilled the blood of their own species and turned the streets red- “You are not just spilling the blood of your fellow human beings, you are spilling the blood of the future of your children, your family, everything you care about or ought to care about. You are killing humanity-stop. Stop and give hope to all and to yourselves.” My cultural experiences transformed into my crusade to fight against oppression and discrimination. I do so not because I pity the oppressed, but because I have hope that if we speak as large, unified wholes; if we speak loud enough, one day the oppressors will be forced to take notice and listen.

In this context, my discovery relates to another class discussion regarding the tenets of Ahimsa as propounded by Mahatma Gandhi. In the handout circulated in class about Gandhi’s four gifts, Ahimsa is described as waging peace to stop war and violence. At the heart of the Ahimsa philosophy is the principle of Satyagraha or nonviolent revolution. However, history has proven repeatedly that violence is very much a part of nonviolent revolutions. Thousands of Indians died during the Indian civil disobedience movement in which Gandhi was a significant player (Markovits, 2007). Gandhi’s resolve to be nonviolent did not prevent the perpetrators of violence to unleash it on him and his followers. Similar precedence can be found in other civil rights movements. One example that comes to mind is the massacre at Sharpsville, South Africa that showed Anti-Apartheid revolutionaries that peaceful protest will not work (SAHD, 2015). Surrounded by such musings, I now face a new dichotomy between my desire to pursue purposefully the path of antiracism through peaceful and educational means, and the ever- growing shadow of reality that racial freedom may not come without violence. I think of it as a contrast to the principles of nonviolence-a sort of violence for hope. I know that some people might look at this as an idealistic perspective, but I know that this is realistic. I only need to see the current news for reaffirmation. I am now discovering, with a sinking feeling, that there will be blood-before there can ever be hope that there will not! I leave this discovery to be evaluated, researched, and found for a later time.

### **The Story of the Five**

#### **In Class Story: My Fellow Novice Semioticians**

On a bright, yet sultry fall afternoon, five of us students met in a room on the second floor of a stone mansion on the first day of class. We were like travelers embarking on a pristine journey; we had a sense of purpose, yet uncertainty and curiosity as to where the road will lead. A lot would depend on our teacher, our guide and fellow traveler and what road map she would lay out for us. The mystery of the road map was soon revealed, as we learned with some trepidation that there was probably not going to be a road map, at least not in the conventional way we have known. Instead, we would be given tools to forge our own paths, through the thick, the thin, the deep-deep jungle of semiotic land. I remember having a sinking feeling and the gnawing urge to run away. This was a journey into the unknown, and we had to write our own story of success or failure.... input-output-throughput-put to the ultimate test-and we were the key players in the arena! We were no gladiators. We were not even first day

trained soldiers. But we were there, for better or worse. Today, writing this, I am, as are my fellow travelers, mighty glad that we did not run away.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, since the first day, we came into the jungle, armed with our tools- our determination, curiosity, courage, and perhaps a smidgen of annoyance, combined with the desire to question. And question we did, in our different ways, and some more than others, until we each found our Eureka moments that helped make sense of it all. Adam questioned the unstructured nature of the course, and was unhappy about the lack of specific directions until he realized that this kind of unfettered freedom came with its unique set of perks: he could write whatever he wanted to write about; no holds barred. His efforts were not going to be chained to stringent protocols of topic choices, or rules of style. Bianca was unsure of how the meta discipline of semiotics would fit in with her field, until she finally realized that it did, not in a straight-line fashion, but in a more deep rooted, fundamental, semantical way. The realization and encouragement from our teacher gave her the courage to go against the flow, and walk on a side path she wanted to be on, like a little escapade from the rigors of her more formal road within academe.

Each one of us walked the paths we had forged with our initiatives, with the help and brilliant guidance of our teacher. We labored, we faltered, we stood up and we prevailed. We thrived in the sunshine of freedom. The weeks as a novice student of the course made us experience the real value and essence of freedom, as we used ourselves to construct our learnings. The concept of freedom is the quintessential sustenance of the soul. In fact, every species, from the humble ant to the human kind, thrives in freedom. However, it is not a value to be trifled with, as freedom can only be appreciated when married to humility and introspection. True freedom is one that is achieved not only in our physical realms, but also in our values, attitudes, and ideals. Being a novice learner of semiotics, engaged in the process of meaning making, I came to realize that even the most ordinary days could bring forth extraordinary nuggets of wisdom. A simple, informal discussion between a few friends and a friendly teacher carries within it the power to transform one moment in time, capturing it in an aura of joy; one moment that we can relive forever. Like everything else in life, it all depends upon our perspectives!

### *Reflection of the five: A summary*

As learners, some of us were engaged in the micro culture of the Semiotic class, but all of us were embedded in the macro culture of novice learners. As I indulged in investigating through observations and interviews, while sharing experiences with my fellow culture-mates, I was relieved and intrigued to find that we had more things in common, than we had differences. As novice learners, we were faced with unique challenges, but we persevered and dealt with such challenges in our unique ways, emerging from this experience, a little more seasoned than before. One challenge we faced, in varying degrees, was the first reaction to the course/s that nearly broke the resolve to continue. In addition, the subject being new, we also faced varying degrees of self-doubts regarding our ability to succeed. For example, Bianca's immediate reaction to the semiotic course was, "I did not understand a class that wasn't exactly structured... I was like, "Wow that's really biased and I am going to fail this course" (Personal communication). Peter was a bit overwhelmed due to the American Studies course being



“combining a lot of approaches, a lot of different styles a lot of ways of thinking, terminology maybe so it can be a little anxious induce anxiety” (Personal communication). For his entrepreneurship class, Ted was concerned that, “It’s all new for me. So it is hard for me some time for me to get involved in the conversation, I mean the class discussion, it’s hard for me” (Personal communication). Natalie found the Botany course to be “it was kind of degrading in a way. It was very like, I wanted to learn about the subject but I already felt excluded like day one because I didn’t have that background that everybody else had,” which made it “very intimidating” (Personal communication).

When comparing her experiences in the Semiotic class to her Botany class, Natalie could clearly see the chasm between a nurturing versus non-nurturing environment. Her self-doubt emanated from being a marginalized novice learner within a dominant seasoned learner group in the Botany class. “It was kind of degrading in a way. It was very like, I wanted to learn about the subject but I already felt excluded like day one because I didn’t have that background that everybody else had,” which made it “very intimidating” (Personal communication).

However, we found our own path towards learning, as we were driven by our curiosity about the subject. In addition, we focused on what value the subject and the course was bringing to our overall development. This value was closely related to our personal experiences and self-interest that drove our academic interests. It seems that the value equation was a critical driving force to sustain our interest, supporting my earlier discussion in this paper. Ted found value in learning about business startups, as he was interested in opening his own business. Bianca learned because, “So I was going into the world with this completely wrong conception of things... So this class really opened it up, like, “Oh my gosh, so okay there is more to this world than I was told” (Personal communication). Peter found interest in learning Language and Identity because, “I’ve always been curious about growing up in a bi-cultural bilingual setting you know you’ll, you, I think it’s different from the mainstream” (Personal communication).

Closely linked to the curiosity and continued drive to learn was the element of fulfillment, the Eureka moments when we tried, tried, tried again and it worked, and it was fun! For example, here is what Adam experienced. “...what I really got into was the generative phenology ...And frankly, the reason I enjoyed it so much. I was just, it was like a puzzle. I have that same kind of thrill that like solving a Rubik’s cube does” (Personal communication). Similarly, Natalie described her fulfillment moments as, “...there were definitely moments after I finished the course when I would like look at a tree and how it was growing, I was like, “Oh, they cut off that stem, like the certain part that controls hormone growth, “Oh, I know why that’s happening. Incredible!” (Personal communication). More importantly, for all of us, the process did not end with the course materials, since we carried the torch of curiosity forward and found ways to continue learning the subject.

There were some interesting outliers found in the experiences of Adam and Natalie with respect to the Semiotic and Botany courses. Both felt they did not get good value out of them. However, despite their misgivings, in the overall assessment they did gain new knowledge in the form of strategies to overcome such motivational challenges and new insights as to what they could do differently in the future. Adam found an outlet for his frustration in writing an interesting paper, which may perhaps be published. Natalie realized that it was an error when she “got very caught up in this feeling behind from the beginning so I felt like I really need to put a lot of effort and to get the grade I wanted. So I ended up ignoring more of like the fun” (Personal communication). In the end, we all came out with new knowledge and wisdom.

## Proposition Principle Findings and Discussions

The findings are the result of data analyzed from life experiences, novice learner interviews and surveys literature and documents, to answer the research questions: *How might novice learners make sense of and optimize their learning experiences when learning a subject for the first time? What emotions influence novice learners' meaning making process?*

### Critical Bookends of the Learning Process: Curiosity and Fulfillment

Curiosity and fulfillment are emotions critical to a novice learning process. Novice learners may use their curiosity to seek fulfillment, thus engaging in intrinsic meaning making. This is a cyclical process, and I have developed the Curiosity-Fulfillment Loop diagram below, to demonstrate this. My classmates and I experienced this loop when participating in the course.

The curiosity (identified as step 1) motivates learners to investigate and seek knowledge (Identified as step 2). While engaged in investigation, they also partake in critical analysis, allowing them to keep aside some and select other information. This selection may be related to prior experiences and feelings associated with the subjects of study. Based on this they arrive at fulfillment (identified as step 3) when new information is either superimposed on existing ones, creating new knowledge or added to it enhancing and making existing knowledge deeper and broader. Finally, learners lose interest in some factors as the curiosity for these are fulfilled, but may develop new curiosities emanating from branches of information they come across during the investigation process, but did not select to pursue, as they were not directly related to the current investigation. The latter pieces of information may produce curiosity leading to more investigating. The cycle then continues, gradually transforming the novice learner into a seasoned one. The study participants substantiated this.

For example, in relation to the Semiotics course Peter stated, “even though I might have some fulfillment in terms of starting to understand it better I still have more questions, I still need to learn more, I'm still curious about diving deeper into the subject matter itself and to hopefully maybe understand it better one day” (Personal communication).

#### *The curiosity maker: What makes a novice learner curious?*

As novice learners, we might find it useful to introspect and evaluate why we are curious about one subject more than about other subjects. This understanding is critical for us to make sense of the learning process and to optimize the learning experience. Engagement in learning, using our personal experiences may create a more meaningful learning setting. This is somewhat similar to Experiential learning that Hansen (200) defined as “learning which combined mental, emotional, and physiological stimuli” (p. 27), and is guided more by intrinsic motivation than extrinsic ones, where the learners are the initiators and controllers of the learning process. Many times, when learners are not sure about why they are learning something, it can become a de- motivator to the cognitive process of memory making and retaining knowledge. Learners will always question concepts that they believe are irrelevant or too abstract for them (Mendler, 2014). Therefore, it would be helpful to self-analyze why we are more attracted to a particular topic versus others, to enhance our self-determination to learn and appreciate the value of our efforts. Several scholars have discussed the importance of content relevance to improve cognitive retention, explaining how student perceptions of relevance relate closely to learners' personal needs and goals, as well as career goals (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Keller, 1983). Such perceptions are influenced by several factors, including prior experiences and knowledge and the presentation style of the materials. In addition, human

beings are attracted to what they like so personal preferences may also be a factor (Mehrabian, 1981; Witty, 2007).

During the course of our participation in the class, my classmates and I were able to learn better and in-depth, because we engaged in the process of selecting what we wanted to learn and assessing why this was so. Of course, the design of the course and the freedom accorded to us by our professor was also a factor without which we may not have been as successful as we were in fulfilling curiosities. As students of the course, we realize that our sense of self is a very important piece of the learning puzzle, emulating Carl Rogers (1995) idea that learners learn significantly only those things that they believe are important for the maintenance and/or enhancement of, the structure of self.

### *Questioning and learning: Introspection to retrospection to new awakenings*

As novice learners, we have the advantage of a fresh slate when interacting with a subject for the first time. This allows us greater flexibility to construct our ideas and indulge in critical thinking, before selecting information, we perceive to be meaningful for us. When engaged in learning a new subject we have the opportunity to regulate our learning through analogical and logical reasoning and critical thinking (Simons, van der Linden & Duffy, 2007). Thus, it would be useful to question the contents during the learning and be productively curious about them, so that we can form well-informed opinions about the subject, investigate our opinions and ultimately gain sustainable knowledge. True belief (opinion) can be retained as long-term knowledge only when anchored to rationalization and critical thinking that allows us to explain why a belief is correct (American Historical Society, n.d.; Lee, 2010; Plato, 380 B.C.).

In addition, when learners are exposed to a subject over a period, it is possible for them to become resistant to changing their existing opinion with subsequent knowledge. The 'backfire effect' studies by researchers from the University of Michigan, indicate that when people who had prior opinions on a subject (in this case the subject was political issues), and were exposed to new, corrected facts in news stories, it did not change their minds but reaffirmed their prior beliefs (Nyhan, & Reifler, 2010). Thus, having a pristine mind about a subject is an advantageous situation to be in, and one we should try to capitalize on.

In this course, I was exposed to the ideas of Peirce for the first time. While I was fascinated by his philosophical stances, I also had the skepticism and curiosity to deeply examine such stances to find my own truth. During my investigations, I found Peirce's ideas on space- time continuum to be particularly interesting, and as I read on I was caught up in the multifarious debates and back-and-forth conversations about this topic (Burch, 2014; Havenel, 2008; Moore, 2007; Myrvold, 1995; Peirce & De Tienne, 1993). In doing so, I expanded my learning outside of the purview of what was covered in class by adding my own, unique understanding to the topic. I now know that as learners we can experience the space and time continuum.

Experiences, both negative and positive transcend time and space using the bridge of our memories-memories that are vivid enough to feel real, making our experiences in the current space real. A positively vivid memory feeds our happiness and longing to repeat the experience, while a negative one can still make us cry. For instance, my traumatic experiences of the Indian riots were not left behind in 1984. Every year, on Halloween day, I remember the incident, as the memory is tied to the date of October 31st. The space permeated with the horror of 1984 in an industrial town, ten thousand miles away has invaded my current space in the here and now, as I relive the memories every October 31, the night of the Halloween and a representor of horror.

### *Learning is a negotiable and reflective construct*

As novice learners, we must accept that the process of learning is a negotiable construct, so that we can use it to our advantage and make positive learning choices. We negotiate how we use the emotions, the pain, the elation, the surprise and everything in between, to make or break our current consciousness. That is why experiences can make us weak or strong, because we negotiate the outcomes of our experiences with our consciousness. When interacting with a new subject, or having a new experience, learners will benefit more if they focus their mind on gleaning positively charged knowledge and developing positive emotions from such interaction. Positive thinking is not just a fluffy emotion; it is also a valuable asset that can build up lifelong personal resources. Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, and Finkel, (2008) tested their “build hypothesis,” studying the impact of positivity using 139 working adults. This study provided evidence, supporting the broaden-and- build theory, which states that over time, recurrent experiences of positive emotions allow people to build a cache of personal resources. These shifts in positive emotions take time to appear, but over a period they can increase a variety of personal resources, like “mindful attention, self- acceptance, positive relations with others, and good physical health. Moreover, these gains in personal resources were consequential: They enabled people to become more satisfied with their lives and to experience fewer symptoms of depression” (Fredrickson et al., 2008, p. 1057).

In addition, making a conscious decision to learn about a new subject is necessary. In our interview, Natalie’s advice to novice learners was, “Think carefully before you take a course outside of your field and like really self-reflect on, "Am I looking to get something out of this for myself?" (Personal communication, March, 30, 2016).

### **Limitations and Implications**

The study provided several insights into how novice learners can optimize their learning experiences through the identification, evaluation and utilization of their learning emotions. Even though the study’s primary arena of experience took place within a Semiotic course setting, the findings have the potential to be useful for all novice learners who are learning something for the first time. This gives an opportunity to do further research to enhance and refine the findings by adding perspectives from other subject matters. In addition, the study focused only on novice learner perspectives and experiences, and excluded any insights from teachers. This provides the opportunity for future research to investigate the perspectives and experiences of teachers who are teaching novice learners. Much value can be gained from studying and analyzing stories of success and failure pertaining to teaching novice learners, the reasons for these and scopes for improvement. An afterthought about the setting of this study is that part of the positive and successful experiences could be related to the instructional design and teaching style used in this course. That provides opportunities for future research to examine the novice learner experiences in the same or similar course, but taught using different instructional styles.

### **Conclusion**

When I started on this journey of discovery, I had no idea what findings it will bring. My focus was on the challenges of the journey, and whatever destination it would bring me to was shrouded in a curious mist. Now that this journey has ended, I can see many new ones reaching out to be me, excited at the prospects of new beginnings. As a novice learner who entered into a semiotic world with no clue regarding what to find, I came upon treasures that will sustain my consciousness for a lifetime. Because of my quest to make sense of making

meaning, I am now a more refined, informed and knowledgeable learner, who is well prepared to meet new learning challenges. Sharing my experiences is a small attempt to pay this rewarding experience forward. I conclude this journey with a quotation from Charles Peirce, taken from his essay “How to Make our Ideas Clear” written in 1878, which sums up the essence of my experiences. “To know what we think, to be masters of our own meaning, will make a solid foundation for great and weighty thought.” A piece of wisdom penned in another century has spanned space and time to continue to provide excitement and fulfillment, becoming a testimony to the wonders of the learning process.

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