

# Chapter 11

## The Semiotics of “Monk” Rehearsals: A Weaving of Two Texts

Kathy L. Schuh

The room was quiet. The young musicians were seated in their chairs, holding their instruments on their laps. The conductor walked to the podium, opened her music, picked up her baton, and glanced over the group. As she raised her arms, the students lifted their instruments to their mouths. With an upsweep of her right arm, the students took a collective breath. As the conductor’s arms descended, the musicians began the piece together.

Music provides an arena for the exploration of semiotics and the meaning that individuals make of sign systems. For example, Henrotte (1992) discussed the relationship between music and gesture related to aesthetic value. Gestures in music, of which one type includes the physical movement of the conductor, is “an essential aspect of musical performance” (Ben-Tal 2012, p. 248). Burrows (1990) described the gestures of music, those that the conductor uses, as the closest representation of music itself. In musical rehearsals, this sign system allows communication and musical interpretation to integrate; Mathers (2009) notes the use of nonverbal expressions and movements, including gestures, as more effective than words to communicate feelings and mood. In my training as a K–12 music teacher, I learned the appropriate gestures used in conducting, allowing me to communicate to the band or choir how I wanted them to interpret the music they would play or sing. In this chapter, I describe monk rehearsals, an activity that I used during my teaching experience, and provide a semiotic interpretation of the two texts that the rehearsal included—the conducting text and the classroom management text.

Because I was the only music teacher at the two schools in which I taught during my 6 years as a K-12 music teacher, I had the opportunity to teach all of the students in the school all aspects of music. In particular, I was able to develop my own instrumental music program, sequencing the skills developed in my elementary, junior high, and senior high bands. From the beginning of their band experiences, students were not only to play the right notes but were also expected to interpret the written musical symbols and understand the role of the conductor to help them

---

K. L. Schuh (✉)  
The University of Iowa, Iowa, USA  
e-mail: kathy-schuh@uiowa.edu

with that interpretation. An important aspect of musical conducting is bringing out the nature of the piece in the way the composer intended by supporting musicians in the development of a unified interpretation of the piece. Aspects of music, such as meter and tempo, dynamics, articulation, and musical releases, are communicated through the gestures of the conductor. However, generally speaking, seventh-grade band students do not recognize these gestures (Cofer 1998), although the recognition can be increased with instruction. Skadsem (1997) found that high school and college choral students responded better to verbal indicators of dynamics (loudness and softness) than to modeling, gesturing, and referring to the written score, yet verbal instruction has limitations in music rehearsals. It can interrupt the flow of the rehearsal. And, in fact, nonverbal instruction (or reminders) is necessary in performances, where it is inappropriate for the conductor to verbally remind a musician of elements of musical expression in the piece.

The purpose of these conducting gestures and the students' sensitivity to them became more apparent in "monk" rehearsals. In a monk rehearsal<sup>1</sup>, talking is not allowed, not among the students or between students and director. I believe monk rehearsals provide a means to help students develop skills in the interpretation of musical gesture by drawing attention to those gestures. In my teaching, monk rehearsals were first used out of necessity. The instructional strategy allowed me to direct rehearsals when I had laryngitis. Monk rehearsals were so popular with the junior high and elementary band students in particular that they were used at times when I could be vocal.

## 11.1 Peirce's Sign Typology

In my analysis of the gestural signs within my rehearsal, I draw on Peirce's (1893–1910/1985) trichotomic system that includes representamen (or sign), object, and interpretant. These three elements are tightly bound together. The representamen, or the sign, is that which does the representing; "it stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 1893–1910/1985, p. 5). This sign is internal to the individual, created in the mind and may capture different aspects of that to which it refers. For example, qualisigns refer to the qualities of what is being represented (i.e., the quality is the sign) and sinsigns denote aspects of time and space. Legisigns are those words and symbols that have been developed by convention.

A sign is bound to an object. An object might be simply described as a "thing," although its existence does not have to be current (i.e., may have formerly existed or expected to exist in the future; Peirce 1893–1910/1985). The object is that about which the sign conveys further information. Not all objects are represented by signs (Deely 1990); some are merely objects and do not provide meaning for particular individuals. While the object might seem to be that which the sign is standing for (the referent or what is signified), categorically, types of objects capture the relationship between the object and the sign. An icon notes a relationship between the sign and

---

<sup>1</sup> I did not invent the use of monk rehearsals as an instructional strategy. I believe I found out about them through a discussion at a music conference in the 1980s.

object by resemblance. An index represents the object’s existence through time and/or space (Danesi 1998); being anything that focuses attention (Peirce 1893–1910/1985). Indices are further distinguished from one another. A spatical deixis refers to spatial locations. These might be indicated physically (e.g., pointing in direction) or through words (here, there), for example. Temporal deixis indicate relationships in time (before, after, and even left and right if one considers a timeline). Personal deixes indicate relationships among people. These could be indicated by gesture (e.g., pointing at someone) or through language (e.g., pronouns). Objects that are symbols represent by convention (such as a word). Finally, the interpretant captures the meaning of the sign, and again is denoted by three types which link to the signs themselves. For example, the interpretant of the qualisign is a rheme, of a sinsign is a dicsign, and an argument is the interpretant of a legisign (Danesi 1998). In Peirce’s (1893–1910/1985) description of ten classes of signs, he notes legitimate combinations of the sign, object, and interpretant type depending on focus of attention. Danesi (1998) summarized Peirce’s sign typology, noting the seemingly discrete types of signs (qualisigns, sinsigns, legisigns), objects (icons, indexes, symbols), and interpretants (rhemes, dicsigns, arguments). These nine elements guided, my interpretation of a monk rehearsal.

## 11.2 The Two Texts of Monk Rehearsals

The value of a monk rehearsal in terms of semiotic analysis was that it allowed a focus on interpretive gestures. In the rehearsal, I needed to make my gestures very clear so that the students would do what they were supposed to do, musically and otherwise. The gestures used in the rehearsal were objects; however, the intended outcome was that they be signs for the students. Two texts, each a weaving of signs to communicate (Danesi 1998), were involved in monk rehearsals. The first was the text of musical conducting. In isolation, the gestures did not implicitly imply musical interpretation. In other words, the gesture could be a mere object, rather than a sign, or could be a different sign. For example, a waving hand movement could mean nothing; it could be a gesture to hail a taxi, or a gesture that brings in the low brass in Holst’s *Second Suite in F*. Yet, when these gestures are integrated in a musical rehearsal, they support musical interpretation, and thus are potential signs for performers in the domain of music. Although the text of musical conducting has evolved and become conventionalized, and are thus symbols in much the same way words are, in this chapter I will consider that these symbols are the “residue” of icons and indexes (Danesi 1998). I will look at them as more than the conventionalized text that I was taught as a conductor and consider their nature as signs.

The second text used in monk rehearsals was invented as a means to facilitate the nonmusical aspects of the rehearsal—those aspects of classroom management that may typically have been gestural to a degree, but were largely verbal. During the monk rehearsal, new gestures were invented on the fly and later became common throughout the rehearsal. This text, referred to as the management text, was the weaving of gestures that were specific to our social situation and allowed the rehearsal to take place.

### 11.2.1 *Beginning the Rehearsal*

At the beginning of the monk rehearsal, students would prepare just as they would for any other rehearsal: setting up chairs and stands if needed, assembling instruments, and gathering their music. The students' nonverbal behavior indicated that being mute was fun, as they gestured with their hands and mouths, showing each other that they *were not* talking, reminding each other not to talk, and animatedly communicating with one another as they prepared for the rehearsal. These gestures replaced the typically verbal interaction and also included the students' feelings about this situation, interpreted as being enjoyable by both me and the students. Given this, these early rehearsal activities were signs themselves, indicating personal meaning of the situation to which the students responded. These were rhemes—an interpretant of a qualisign (Danesi 1998), their gestures referring to the quality of the experience.

A conducting strategy that I used every day that was particularly helpful in the monk rehearsals was the use of the podium to indicate that it was time to begin. My presence in front of the music stand (my podium) was a sinsign, which indicated we were ready to begin (thus, the interpretant was a dicisign). The object, the time to begin, was a temporal deixis noting the temporal relations among events. Further, this indexical relationship had developed into a convention. In musical groups, the conductor standing at the podium is a standard protocol for the beginning of rehearsal, thus, a legisign. This conventional sign is well understood in musical rehearsals and performance. In addition to this temporal sign for the beginning of the rehearsal, my presence at the podium also implied a personal deixis, noting a relationship among the individuals in the group—me as the conductor and the students as the players.

Our first task in the rehearsal was to organize the rehearsal music into playing order. In regular rehearsals, I would read the names of the pieces. In the monk rehearsal, I would hold up each piece of music in the order in which they would be played. Thus, the organization of the pieces as I presented them was a sinsign, representing the order in which the pieces would be rehearsed. While something as physical as showing sheets of papers may seem as an icon in terms of the object, with the presentation of the sheets physically resembling the order; rather it seems more a temporal deixis, much like a number line would be (Danesi 1998), with the presentation of the sheets capturing the temporal ordering.

### 11.2.2 *The Conducting Text: Elements of Music*

Following warm-ups, we would begin our first piece. The individual gestures in the text of musical conducting communicate a number of things: who plays, when they should play, the speed at which they should play, and the style in which they should play. In addition, the gestures prepare the musicians to play and support their interpretation of the music. Because I was at the podium, I had the students' attention to begin the piece (again, a legisign). I raised my arms with baton in hand. Students who would play within the first phrase placed their fingers appropriately and moved their instruments to their mouths (except for the percussionists, of course). My ges-

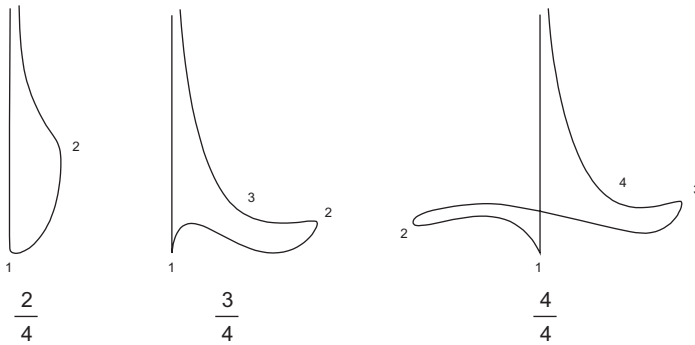
ture was indexical. More specifically, it may be considered a spatial deixis, capturing the correlation between my arm movement and the location of the instruments for the students who would play. With arms raised, I again scanned the entire group to make sure that they were ready, expecting eye contact with all individuals. I interpreted the students’ returned eye contact as a sign for their readiness, a personal deixis, referring to the relationship among participants—players and conductor ready to begin. If the entire group would play the first note, I would keep the wide view, communicating with all of the students with my eyes. If there was a smaller group who would play on the first beat, I focused my attention on them, turning my body toward them, maintaining eye contact, and directing the first beat pattern at them. This gesture was another index, a personal deixis, indicating specifically “who” was to play through my eye contact and physical placement.

The backbone of the musical conducting text is the beat or meter pattern (the beat being the “pulse” of the music). It indicates the meter of the piece (how many beats per measure, with a subtle stress on the first beat of each measure) and, for young bands in particular, helps the players stay together. Many conductors enact a number of meter patterns before the piece begins. As a young conductor, I had been told that this was an inferior conducting strategy<sup>2</sup>. Semiotic analysis provides an explanation of why this tactic may be considered inferior. It replaces the above-described indexical system with a gesture whose interpretation is better used as the music is played (i.e., the beat pattern becomes part of a management text as the conductor continues to wave about hoping for students’ attention). All that is needed to begin a piece is a one-beat preparation. This one-beat preparation can be a temporal deixis, indicating when in time the musical event would precisely occur, and as such, it is a sinsign. When a continuing gesture of multiple measures is provided before the piece begins, the beat gesture is merely an object in terms of meaning about *when* the piece should begin. Thus, another sign of readiness must be used, generally a verbal cue or an additional gesture. Because of this, the gesture no longer can be interpreted as a sign to begin the piece. The simple temporal deixis provides an efficient means to communicate information about how and when the piece should proceed. This single preparatory beat is also iconic, and thus a qualisign, foreshadowing the music to follow in terms of tempo and style. For example, a quickly occurring single beat indicates that the tempo of the piece will begin at that same quick tempo. A smooth pattern will communicate that the piece will begin in that smooth style, precisely one beat after the onset of the object.

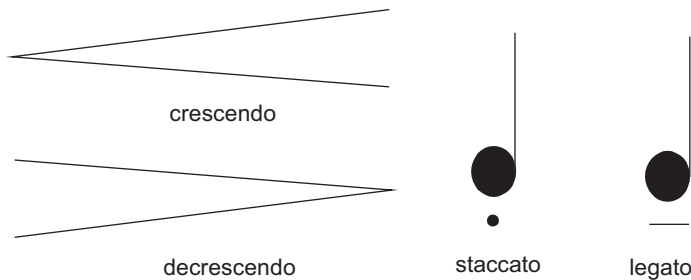
Within the piece, I communicated the meter of the piece using a beat pattern. There are many beat patterns and any number of them may be used in one piece as indicated by the composer. A commonality of patterns is that the first beat of the measure is always in the down position (see Fig. 11.1). Thus, the beat pattern continues as a sinsign to those who interpret it as such, indicated by a temporal deixis, just as the single preparatory beat began, correlating the first beat of the measures: the sound and the musical notation.

---

<sup>2</sup> I learned this conducting convention in my choral conducting course with Edwin R. Fissinger (1920–1990) as an undergraduate at North Dakota State University.



**Fig. 11.1** Temporal deixis of the common beat patterns showing where the beats in the measure lie in the conducting gesture



**Fig. 11.2** Iconic musical notation for dynamics and articulation

Embedded in the beat pattern, and often supplemented by the use of the other hand, are dynamic, articulation, and musical release signs. Dynamics (changes in loudness and softness) are largely indicated by the size of the beat pattern. This gesture is iconic in that it represents, by resemblance of size, the volume that the players will produce. The larger the pattern created by the conductor's arm, the larger the volume expected from the ensemble of musicians. Gradual changes in dynamics such as crescendos (gradually louder) and decrescendos (gradually softer) are indicated by the hand that is not gesturing the meter and are also iconic. Generally, a low hand, with palm down, represents soft and physically raising the hand (palm up) is a sign for the music to become louder. Although I chose not to focus on the relationships to written musical notation in this chapter, it is worth noting that the iconic relationship exists within the written symbolic notation as well. The shape of the decrescendo and crescendo symbols indicates the change in volume (see Fig. 11.2), this conventional musical symbol seeming to capture the idea that "symbols are 'residues' of icons and indexes" (Danesi 1998, p. 44).

Articulation is the style of attack on the notes; thus the signifiers are qualisigns, referring to qualities of the music. Examples are staccato (separated) and legato (connected). Again, the gesture is embedded within the beat pattern. Short bounces

at the beat points indicate that the notes played should be short as well. For legato, a fluid beat pattern indicates that the music should be played as such. These signs are also spatial deixis in that the style parallels the spacing of the notes (where they will occur related to one another)—the gesture physically mirrors what should happen aurally. The articulation gesture may also be considered iconic in that the visual appearance of the beat pattern parallels the aural length. Again, the written notation is an iconic representation in that the symbols look like what will be heard (see Fig. 11.2).

Musical releases (cutoffs, meaning something in the music ceases) may come at the end of a phrase, a section, or the end of the piece. In addition, a musical release may happen at different times for different players. If a musical release occurs within the piece for a particular player or group of players, the conducting continues. Thus, this closure cannot indicate finality. Often, there is a need for multiple gestures, communicating not only different releases and entrances to specific individuals but also different musical styles to different individuals in the group. For example, at the same time that the clarinets are to taper off, the trombones may be brought in with *gusto*. Thus, as noted previously, the gestures are iconic as well as various types of indexical gestures needing to also be interpreted in conjunction with a personal deixis—essentially stating who should interpret the sign. Body language, including head and arm movement as well as facial expressions supports this complex process (see Poggi 2011, for an annotation scheme of this complexity that captures the goal-directed communication of conductors that includes various elements of head, facial features, trunk, and hand gestures).

The musical release at the end of the piece is usually straightforward and indicates that everything should be silenced. This is often communicated through a circle gesture with a closing of the thumb and forefinger at the exact point where the piece is to end. This is a temporal deixis, representing “when” in time the piece will end, as well as being iconic (closing the sound), serving as both a qualisign and a sinsign. Further, a musical piece is not over until the conductor has lowered his or her arms. The hope of all musical conductors is that this sign has indeed been conventionalized to everyone in the audience at a musical performance. The lowered arms are a temporal deixis, a sigsign that applause can begin. While the conducting text is used in musical rehearsals as well as musical performances, rehearsals require additional signs to allow for their effectiveness.

### 11.2.3 *The Management Text*

Typically, the musical gestures described above are common in any rehearsal by any conductor. Many of the gestures that I have discussed communicate basic musical styles included in first and second year instrumental music books (Cofer 1998). Unique to the monk rehearsals is the management text that develops so a *rehearsal* can actually take place. Some of the beginning rehearsal activities and stepping away from the podium are gestures of the management text. The conductor standing

at the podium indicates it is time to work, while stepping away indicates the players' attention may briefly be diverted from the music.

In a rehearsal, musical difficulties can occur in a piece, meaning that particular parts need to be rehearsed. This can happen at any time during a piece; consequently a musical release can be given at any time. At that point in the monk rehearsal, it was necessary to communicate why we stopped if it was not the end of the song, where we would start again, who would play, how the music could be improved, and then the students needed an opportunity to improve. The management text facilitated this process.

When a musical release is given in the middle of a piece, it is often because there are improvements to be made in the playing or interpretation of the music. Semiotically, how these needed corrections may be interpreted depends on perspective. Assume, for example, that the musicians were well intending and believed they interpreted the music and conductor's gestures correctly. Then, the students' musical interpretation was a *dicsign*, meaning that their interpretation was a *sinsign*—capturing how their interpretation of the music was to proceed in time, or it could be a *rheme*, thus their interpretation of *qualisigns* in the musical experience. While these individual interpretations may seem legitimate, in an ensemble, the interpretation is very “conductor-centered” rather than being individually interpreted; in other words, the interpretation is grounded in *legisigns*. Given that, it is possible to misinterpret a sign if that sign is to be conventionalized; then the player's interpretant, the meaning of the sign, is viewed as being an error. The primary task in the musical rehearsal is to develop a mutual interpretation of the signs, which leads to further conventional understandings.

Fortunately, music is often marked with rehearsal letters (which can be indicated by forming letters with your fingers—an icon) or rehearsal numbers (which can be indicated by flashing numbers of fingers—also an icon) that facilitate starting in the middle of a piece. Once a rehearsal number or letter near the place to start was communicated, measures or beats before or after that area can be identified by indexical hand gestures. Personal *deixis* gestures indicated who is to play (pointing to individuals, instrument sections, or the full group). To communicate the style changes, I would use the musical conducting text, emphasizing the gesture *and* its appropriate interpretation. This allowed students to focus on the gestures and interpret them in a particular way. In monk rehearsals, students were typically more attentive to these style indicators, perhaps because of the novelty of the situation or because it was the primary means of communication.

While stopping in the middle of a piece is a sign that improvement is needed, in a monk rehearsal, as in any rehearsal, a positive assessment of the played music should be given to the players as well. Common gestures were used to indicate when a piece was well done such as clapping, OK sign, motioning for someone to stand up and take a bow, as well as facial gestures. These *qualisigns* were particularly important at the end of the rehearsal to send the students to their next class with some positive feedback.

The school bell, a temporal *deixis* typically used in schools, could not be used to end a musical rehearsal. In band, students needed to have time to properly maintain



their instruments, pack them up, and put away equipment as needed. The end of a monk rehearsal was easily indicated by closing my music folder, an alternative temporal deixis to the traditional bell.

### 11.3 Conclusion

Considering the activity in a classroom environment, such as a music classroom, from a semiotic perspective, points to a number of texts that may co-exist. As in this example, one text is specifically related to the content, the other to classroom management. The interaction between these two texts is important in that it seems reasonable to assume that if the domain-specific text is well used, and learners become attuned to the signs of the domain, the use of the classroom management text may decrease. Imagine for example, the use of the conductor at the podium to represent focused, quiet attention. Once students are well aware of this sign system have ascribed meaning to the gesture, and for well-intending students the management system is replaced with content-specific signs. Further, the analysis of the domain-specific text noted efficiencies in the use of particular sign systems (such as the single preparatory beat). Thus, semiotic analysis may indicate why potential signs in a domain may be more effective than others.

These sign systems allow for efficiencies in the process as participants become adept at interpreting the signs in the environment. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, these signs then mediate learning. It is through exposure to objects and interpreting these signs relative to the content and the learning environment that learning can take place. As students are exposed to objects in a domain, they can become signs to which learners ascribe meaning. Instruction can support this process, as noted by Cofer (1998), in improved seventh-grade band students’ interpretation of 18 conducting gestures. Some gestures seemed more difficult for students to ascribe meaning to, thus particular signs may take longer for students to interpret, or may develop later.

A limitation of this analysis concerns my own interpretation of Peirce’s trichotomic semiotic system. By definition, the three elements, object, signifier, and interpretant, are tightly bound (Deely 1990; Peirce 1893–1910/1985). Given that, it is difficult as well to see object, sign, and interpretation as elements that allow for distinct labeling as I have attempted. Peirce (1893–1910/1985) notes legitimate combinations of sign–object–interpretant relations, as well as aspects of particularness and collective laws, which I have omitted in the analysis. Certainly others may interpret the elements of my monk rehearsal differently.

Although I initially used monk rehearsals out of necessity, they became a very positive teaching tool in that the rehearsal provided opportunities for students’ heightened awareness of the gestures of conducting that were always in place but often times were not attended to. In other words, the instruction prompted objects to be realized as signs by necessity. It is the weaving of the management text and the musical conducting text that made the rehearsal successful, pushing the gestures

of musical interpretation to the forefront. There is much information in the signs of conducting. It is necessary for young musicians to learn these conventions. Monk rehearsals provide an enjoyable avenue for students to develop awareness of the gestures of musical conducting text. Further, the weaving of the two text involved in a monk rehearsal provided a rich venue for analyzing activity using Peirce's system of signs.

#### Notes

1. I likely learned about monk rehearsals as a teaching strategy through a discussion at a music conference in the 1980s.
2. I learned this conducting convention in my choral conducting course with Edwin R. Fissinger (1920-1990) as an undergraduate at North Dakota State University.

**Acknowledgments** The author would like to thank Danny Novo, Academic Technologies, University of Iowa, for his work on Fig. 11.2.

## References

- Ben-Tal, O. 2012. Characterizing musical gestures. *Musicae Scientiae* 16(3):247–261. doi:10.1177/1029864912458847.
- Burrows, D. 1990. *Sounds, speech, and music*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Cofer, R. S. 1998. Effects of conducting-gesture instruction on seventh-grade band students' performance response to conducting emblems. *Journal of Research in Music Education* 46(3):360–373. doi:10.2307/3345548.
- Danesi, M. 1998. *Sign, thought, and culture*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Deely, J. 1990. *Basics of Semiotics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Henrotte, G. A. 1992. Music and gesture: A semiotic inquiry. *The American Journal of Semiotics* 9(4):103–114. doi:10.5840/ajs19929410.
- Mathers, A. 2009. The use of gestural modes to enhance expressive conducting at all levels of entering behavior through the use of illustrators, affect displays and regulators. *International Journal of Music Education* 27(2):143–153. doi:10.1177/0255761409102322.
- Peirce, C. S. 1893–1910/1985. Logic as semiotic: The theory of signs. In *Semiotics: An introductory anthology*, ed. R. E. Innis, 1–23. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Poggi, I. 2011. Music and leadership: The choir conductor's multimodal communication. In *Integrating Gestures: The interdisciplinary nature of gesture*, eds. G. Stam and M. Ishino, 341–354. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins North America.
- Skadsem, J. A. 1997. Effect of conductor verbalization, dynamic markings, conductor gesture, and choir dynamic level on singers' dynamic responses. *Journal of Research on Music Education* 45(4):509–520. doi:10.2307/3345419.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

**Kathy L. Schuh** is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Iowa. Her research interests are learning sciences and meaning-making processes in children. Her major publications include *Knowledge construction in the learner-centered classroom* (2003), *Rhizome and the mind: Describing the metaphor* (with D.J. Cunningham, 2004), and *Idiosyncratic knowledge connections as affordances for knowledge construction* (2008). She is currently working on a book entitled *Making meaning by making connections*.