

General Semantics at TCU

Steve Stockdale, IGS Executive Director

In the fall semester, I taught a 3-hour credit course in general semantics at TCU in Fort Worth. This undergraduate course, offered in the Schieffer School of Journalism, was titled "General Semantics for Mass Communications." The course was offered as a "special topic" elective in the Schieffer School of Journalism for students majoring in journalism, advertising, public relations, and international communications. Erica Gann Gordon taught the course with me.

This course was focused on the application of general semantics to the specific career fields represented by the students. We devoted approximately half of the class time to discussing GS formulations specifically. The balance of the class time included presentations, debates, films, and lively discussions that addressed how these formulations applied to journalism, advertising, and public relations.

A detailed summary of the course, including the syllabus, assignments, quizzes, final exam, and student comments, is currently available online in pdf format: <http://www.time-binders.net/GS-course-summary.pdf>. (If not available when you read this, please contact the Institute to obtain a copy.)

Following are excerpted student reactions to these two questions asked at the end of the semester:

- 1) What did you get out of this course? (part of a graded essay)
- 2) Remembering your first reactions to the term *general semantics*, your expectations for this course, and your experiences during the semester, what are your suggestions regarding a new or different label instead of *general semantics*? (Final exam bonus question)

Excerpts of student responses to "What did you get out of this course?"

I have learned more things than I ever thought I could possibly know through one elective course.

I'm not trying to exaggerate and say that I have devoted the rest of my life to the further research of general semantics, because I don't think I have yet, but what I did learn this semester in this little journalism elective has had a tremendous impact on my daily life.

I feel this course has made me open my eyes to other people's perspectives by making me question my own motives for reacting too quickly. I know my personality, and I am quick to jump to conclusions, or to get on the defense when I think someone is attacking me. At times like these I use general semantics to ask myself why am I reacting this way, and if it is merited or not.

General semantics teaches us to talk less nonsense to ourselves and each other, and teaches us to be more tolerant, more accepting, less judgmental, and less dogmatic in life. If we as general semantics students apply these concepts to our everyday life, no matter what career we are in, we will learn to communicate more effectively and in return stay happier with less confusion involved in the process.

I would recommend this course to just about anyone struggling to fill a schedule with an extra class, and even suggest it as possibly a mandatory course for journalism majors/minors, and definitely for the communications majors/minors.

I wish there were a follow up class involving semantics that I could continue taking just to keep myself brushed up on the general semantics concepts throughout the rest of my career at Texas Christian University.

GS came at me from a general semantics perspective, a sociological perspective, an advertising perspective, and a public relations perspective. This class gave many aspects that one can only wish to learn in one class.

I still plan to work in the communications field one day, and what I will take from this discipline into that career is, most basically, a heightened sense of awareness of both the words I choose to use and the words used by those with whom I am assigned to communicate. An awareness that the same word can mean different things to those two parties. An awareness that I can never know all about anything — and neither can anyone else. An awareness that each issue has more than one side and more than one possible solution, that no issue is black and white. An awareness that true objectivity is unattainable and that bias must therefore be examined in all communication.

I wish I had been taught earlier about some of the general semantics principles, such as to recognize that the word is not the thing and that what we see is only a fraction of what is happening “out there” (and that what other people — namely parents, teachers, news anchors, reporters, movie directors, politicians, ministers, anyone who seems to be ‘all-knowing’ or speak about ‘irrefutable truths’ — see and share is only a fraction of all that occurs).

This course has helped me to “think outside of the box” in more ways than I have ever done before.

The insight we received through this class into the world of public relations was nearly invaluable to me, and I am sure that a great deal of my peers would agree. Propaganda has always been a clear form of manipulation, but to see the under-belly of the world of public relations and how they themselves are constantly manipulating audiences through General Semantics was eye-opening. Every bit of information involving this topic was fascinating to me and I will remember it for years to come.

I’m fairly certain that my studies of General Semantics will prove to be invaluable over the years, especially if I continue to focus and study the concepts once I have left the classroom. I am very happy that I chose to take this course and will never be able to fully express the depths of what I have learned or how it will bring change into my life for years to come.

I have gained so much more from this class than I could have imagined. This is one of the few classes that I have ever taken where my opinion was just that — nothing more, nothing less.

I will have to admit when I first signed up for this class I was very skeptical. I imagined dreading going to class, boring lectures on words and their meanings, and overall dissatisfaction with the course in general. However, I can say that this class has honestly opened my eyes to a different perspective on how to look at the world and understanding current events in general.

I found this class both interesting and informative. The general semantics outlook on life in general makes sense and will help me understand people and politics, religion, and advertising on a different, more advanced level.

While I took something away from each lesson, I found several ideas utterly fascinating. One phrase that was particularly intriguing to me was presented by Irving J. Lee. He said, “Words don’t mean...only a person does.” I understand this phrase to be implying that words are symbols and that we all too often assign meaning where there is none. A word is just a bunch of lines or dots on a page or a sound from within. Without context, without a person, that word

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is meaningless. While it may be somewhat time consuming and difficult, I believe that E-Prime is useful. It can be used in formal paper writing or everyday conversations and prove just as invaluable. While I have unfortunately not utilized this tool in my paper, I am aware each time I use the forbidden verb. Perhaps the point, however, is to be aware.

Since the first day of class I have noticed a difference in how I approach situations around me. Not only do I approach things differently, but my way of thinking has also changed. Speaking about the different processes involved in general semantics and analyzing different situations with these processes in mind, over time, changes your approach to a situation.

I believe that this course will be one that I will look back on and truly appreciate the knowledge that I have gained. This course has given me a new lens to view life through, and has expanded what, in sociology, is called my cultural capital. Just as I have been able to relate what I learned in sociology to just about every course I have taken since then, I know that I will be able to apply general semantics principles to courses I have yet to take. I feel that I will be less susceptible to misinformation and miscommunication because I often ask myself questions such as, "So What?" and challenge myself to look more skeptically at what is presented as fact.

Irving Lee told us that teaching and learning that lead to no significant change in behavior are practically worthless, and I think his statement has been proven throughout history. I take away knowledge from this course that I know I will use and that I have already used on many occasions. The stuff comes in handy.

I honestly feel like this General Semantics class has helped me understand my own creativity better and taught me to see things through many lenses besides my own two eyes. The awareness I have learned was unexpected and is all-important to my future.

In no way can I list any one single most important kernel of knowledge from this semester of learning, but I will say it has been very refreshing. I know many things I never knew and I have said many things I never imagined I would say. I have learned because I have listened. I have listened intently because General Semantics makes a difference. I can tell that it makes a difference and it will make a difference in my life. I feel lucky to have discovered this field of academia and I hope it will thrive in future years. I look forward to new discoveries and spinning color wheel trickery that I have never imagined. Thanks a lot for teaching me the things that you don't learn in school, it has been significant and enjoyable, and I appreciate it.

One of the first things that really struck me was learning about the concept of dating. I did not think about the importance of this concept before taking this course. The idea that one should say, "I do not like the way this person acted today" as opposed to "I hate this person" struck me as a much healthier way of viewing the world. Overall, I would say I have learned a great deal. Thank you for the course.

Student responses to the question, "What are your suggestions regarding a new or different label instead of *general semantics*?"

I believe the label change could be extremely beneficial in creating a map that better fits the territory of the subject. Initially, I believed the course would be a *general* overview of semantics. The term is confusing for those who are not familiar with the subject. Those who are familiar with the subject realize that words are just words and won't affect the effectiveness of the material.

I do not think that the name "general semantics" should be changed. When I first came to class I didn't know what general semantics was. Once I was told, I did not forget. Same with my friends and parents, when I told them they remembered. If I had a quiz and they would ask for which class, I would say, "GS." They would respond, "Oh, that class that has to do with the

meaning of words." *General Semantics* has a specific way it rolls off the tongue and into people minds. I believe it should stay the same.

I do not oppose a label change for General Semantics. The name does sound complicated and I have read that the confusing name has dissuaded many people from its study and validity. I suggest a new name for the Institute, "*The Institute of Human Interaction*," because I think this name would spark interest in the field. GS could be changed to *AHI*, "*Advanced Human Interaction*." Who wouldn't be interested in learning to interact with their world more efficiently?

To be honest I would agree that at least a short tag line should be added, if not the term changed. From a PR standpoint, I agree that the term is confusing because people may not even know what the words mean (including me before the semester). My suggestion would be to add a tag line which supports the term so that it does not have to change. Maybe something like "*Breaking down the boundaries of communication to provide for better understanding of society*."

Yes, yes, yes. We are all aware that words don't have meaning ... but titles can be misleading. Honestly, when I signed up for this course and told people what I was taking, everyone including myself thought that I was in a course about the meanings of words. In my defense, that is what *semantics* is. I suppose I glossed over the word *general* because it is attached to so many college courses, such as *general psych* or *general art*. These are not separate disciplines, but beginner courses. *General Semantics* is completely distinct from *semantics*, however I think it is very confusing. I would suggest a change ... sorry, Korzybski!

I believe the label *general semantics* stirs curiosity into finding out what exactly it means. I agree that perhaps a tag line should be included to further clarify or intrigue someone. Perhaps something like Institute of General Semantics: *Because this is not that*. Using some form of witty word play by one of the GS scholars/members would add what is needed or be a good middle ground.

Seeing that I had no idea what this class was about, or what *general semantics* even referred to, I think it would be beneficial if a tag line was added. From my experience in this class, I have learned how to express myself and use words to enhance both my listening and speaking skills. But sometimes I still find myself asking, "Why?" So I think the tag line I came up with appropriately expresses my feelings in a way others can relate to: "General Semantics ... *you don't get it until we confuse the hell out of you*."

During my experience in this class, the most prominent thing that has stood out for me is how we always studied the reactions of people to words/circumstances. I do not agree with changing the name. I don't believe it could change because it covers everything from time-binding to word magic. The best thing I can come up with is possibly a tag line to further explain. Perhaps something along the lines of: "General Semantics: *a study of people and reactions*."

The problem is that all the "labels" I want to use would mean nothing for people unfamiliar with General Semantics (like "extensional orientation"). Perhaps something like "Scientific Approach to Language." Or maybe a short tag line would work better ... *Exploring the relationships between words, meanings, and behavior ... How language affects life ... Rethinking what you think ..* or, hey, coin a new word: *LANGUASTICS* (I tried to combine *behavior* with *language* .. kind of sounds like *gymnastics* ... all the hoops that language makes us jump through).

I don't exactly know a term that should be used in place of general semantics but I definitely agree that it should be revised. When I say the name of this course to my friends, they look at me in sheer confusion. I think a revision should be mandatory to at least entice students to question what it is about and maybe persuade them to take the course. Some ideas for tag lines are: *The study of meanings of words ... How words affect your life ... Realizing and reacting to our words*.

*General Semantics:
a study of
people and
reactions.*

Change the name or include a tag line. I had no idea what GS entailed when I signed up for the class. I thought we would study speech or diction, but did not realize GS was actually a field of study whole unto itself. Just last night I was telling somebody I had to take a GS final today and they said, "You're taking *semantics*?" I said, "No, *General Semantics*. It's completely different than what you think."

I believe that it would actually benefit the Institute to make some changes. My first reaction to the term was that we would be studying word usage and word meanings. GS is clearly more diverse than that. I'm not sure it would be beneficial to change the term *general semantics* as that remains the name of what Korzybski created and what we study, but it would be helpful to include a descriptive tagline to help people realize that GS deals with areas of communication, psychology, etc., as well as the study of words and what they mean.

The name is a dilemma. When I first saw the email about GS I had no idea what it was or what it was about. But the description of the course did not really explain the class accurately as I have known it. The name tells nothing about what it is. A good name not only labels but also defines. The word *general* is well, too general. It also labels *semantics* as being bland and average. Terms like *advanced* or some other word that places semantics as an elite idea would be good. The Institute looks like no fun. Your image is too institutional. Use the fun things like the brain-teasing things more. Have like a game section on your website of them. Draw people in with the fun part of semantics, and then when they want more you can get more institutional on them.

On Learning

He who learns and learns and yet does not what he knows, is one who plows and plows yet never sows.

ancient Persian proverb, quoted by Alfred Korzybski
in *Science and Sanity*

Children must be free to think in all directions irrespective of the peculiar ideas of parents who often seal their children's minds with preconceived prejudices and false concepts of past generations. Unless we are very careful, very careful indeed, and very conscientious, there is still great danger that our children may turn out to be the same kind of people we are.

Major General Brock Chisholm,
first Director General of the World Health Organization

The aim of education is the condition of suspended judgment on everything.

George Santayana

If we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must be free to follow wherever that search may lead us. The free mind is no barking dog to be tethered on a 10-foot chain.

Adlai Stevenson