

General Semantics at Texas Christian University

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I experienced the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time last July. I received a call from Dr. Chris Sawyer, chair of the Communication Studies Department at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth. He asked if I would consider teaching a directed studies course in general semantics for graduate students and seniors in the Communication Studies program. Two other adjunct professors had been previously scheduled to teach other topics, but each moved during the summer. The class was already on the schedule, with twenty-one students enrolled. I jumped at the chance.

I had the latitude to design the curriculum, assign readings, determine projects, and make grade evaluations. The three-credit class met once a week for two hours and forty minutes. Ten graduate students and eleven senior Communication Studies majors comprised the class.

The core of the curriculum included materials developed for the IGS seminar-workshops that have been a staple course offering at Alverno College in Milwaukee over the past few summers. I decided early in the process to emphasize in-class discussion, use as many demonstrations and exercises as made sense, and limit my lecture time. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans just prior to the second class, so much of the class discussion focused on the aftermath of Katrina and other events in the news.

The key assignments during the semester included:

- Six short writing assignments of 500-700 words that encouraged the students to write about their own reactions to events in the news or their own personal experiences.
- A written book report and oral presentation, with each student reading a different book from the general semantics literature.
- A group project, three students per group, consisting of a 20-minute presentation that applied general semantics to a specific target audience. The areas selected by the seven groups included:
 - GS in Family Communications
 - Applying GS to Censorship

- A GS Approach to Alcoholism and Drug Addiction
- Sports and GS
- TCU and Sanity: How to Get the Most from College Using GS
- 13 Ways Using GS to Get the Most out of Yourself When It Counts
- GS and the Per-forming Arts
- A final project for each student to create his or her own textbook on general semantics, including all of their work for the semester as well as new writing that addressed three topics:
 - What is general semantics about?
 - How is general semantics relevant to me?
 - What I think I got out of this course

Following comments are from the final projects.

Jane Arrowsmith (graduate student): I really did learn a lot in this course. One thing that stands out for me as we wrap up the semester is why I hadn't heard of general semantics before my second year in graduate school. It seems to me that this course is extremely relevant to not only communication, but to overall personal development.

This class also gave me the opportunity to do something that I have not been able to do much in graduate school—be creative and tell you what I think about things. We don't have many assignments that ask us to write about how we feel about a certain situation. It's been difficult for me to get out of academic writing mode and just free-write as thoughts come to my head. These final writing assignments have been very hard to do because I am having a hard time just writing what I want and not what I think would be a good academic answer.

Sara Reynolds (graduate student): I have learned a new way of thinking and understanding. The information we have learned about general semantics has helped open my eyes to what is actually happening around me. I have become more conscious of other people, the words I use, and the exacting science of language, perception and meaning. The knowledge gained through learning about

GS has created a system that I can use to evaluate the world around me. I now can make a conscious decision about what I perceive in everyday life, how it relates to me, and how it will influence me.

Ryan Ellinwood (senior): General semantics is by far the most relevant class I have taken toward my Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies. No other class has provoked the amount of interest and relevancy in the scope of human interaction, both interpersonally and worldly. Understanding abstraction and evaluation has been far more beneficial in comprehending human interaction than studying Maslow or Skinner.

Cristina Martinez (graduate student): I realized that GS opened my eyes to my own internal process. It seems like common sense, but if you do not try to be aware of yourself, then it totally passes you by. I act as if there is some cosmic force trying to hold me down and prevent me from being successful. As corny as it sounds, this class has helped me realize that just by the way I think, I am holding myself down. I am confined by my own negative thoughts and I would really like to get out of my cage.

Diane O'Rear (graduate student): Many of the concepts presented in this class are ones that I have previously picked up along the way or simply grasped intuitively. They've helped me to understand other people and their actions in ways that have made it easier for me to avoid taking things personally or misunderstanding intentions. Even though many of the insights presented in this course were not brand new to me, this semester has sharpened my skills in several ways.

The main change I can see in myself is that of being more careful to express myself in ways that make it clear that there are other points of view or that my perception is incomplete. This seems to open up greater levels of rapport and understanding with others. They seem to feel more open to expressing themselves and to politely correcting any misperceptions that I hold.

Rachel Lewis (graduate student): The issue of self-talk has had a profound impact on me. I began to take notice of how much I talked to myself and started to pay closer attention to what I was saying. ... I began to doubt my confidence after I started to analyze what I was saying to myself. This has become

particularly apparent to me in the last few weeks. I have been suffering from a little end-of-the-semester stress and have worried myself over all the things I have to do. After attempting to push it all to the back of my mind, I decided to take it head on. I have now talked myself down from my stress and found the motivation to take care of business. Everything will get done and life will go on. I simply had to talk myself out of the stress and into a divide and conquer mindset.

Veronica Shields (graduate student): One major principle of GS I have under my belt is, "the word is not the thing" — words do not carry value, but rather the experience does. With this tool I am able to positively evaluate the opinions of others without stereotyping and passing judgment. When someone says something I view offensive, I am now conditioned to recognize that what 'it' may mean to me is not what 'it' means to them. Also by using this technique, I have a better outlook and tolerance on language and communication as a whole.

Kerine Miller (graduate student): I learned just how limited my own senses are and that there is always more going on than what I can see. This was a valuable lesson, so now I am trying to make a conscious effort to learn as much as I can before I make certain assumptions or jump to conclusions. This also means that I have to work on my patience. I have to consider other people and try to put myself in their shoes in the hope that I can see a different perspective. I won't deny that this is more difficult and time consuming than I would like, but before this class, I was not as open to even making an attempt to do this.

In a way, GS is a way of life. I realize now that there are so many things in general semantics that I can use on a daily basis. The presentations in class also proved that GS can relate to so many things that only a fool could argue that it is not applicable to us.

I've always known that I wanted to help create a better Jamaica, and after taking this class I know I can. Whereas before I had the drive to do it, now I feel that I have some additional tools. I now know that I am not as resistant to change as I thought I was. I'm still teachable and that makes me feel good about myself. I'm also glad to know that I have finally learned something in grad school that I am not likely to forget in another six months.

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