TEACHING GENERAL SEMANTICS TO THOSE LESS LIKELY TO SUCCEED:
A Teaching Experience with High School Dropouts

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“See what I have in my hands?”
“Yeah, it’s a pair of glasses.”
“You’re wrong. It’s the smallest color television set ever made.”
“And you’re a nut. It’s a pair of glasses. And you can’t change it by calling
it a color television set.”
“You mean you can’t see the soap opera that’s playing on it?”
“Get this guy a straight jacket. He’s some kind of nut!”

That more or less undignified conversation took place in a class of high
school dropouts, most of whom were in the Street Academy of St. Louis ... and
most were there at the prodding of their parole officer.

Can these street kids be taught general semantics ... human communication
... and what good will it do them anyway? We sought the answers to these and
many more questions in a unique experimental teaching experience.

“Are you trying to tell me that I can’t change this pair of glasses into the
smallest color television set ever made?”
“You some kind of lunatic or something? That’s a pair of glasses, and you
can’t change it by calling it something else.”
“Oh, then can I make you a liar by calling you one? Can I make you any-
thing I call you by calling you that?”
“I guess not.”
Pursuing the principle of “the word is not the thing” with this group was a great challenge ... and great fun.

“What would you do if I called you a son of a bitch?”
“I would get out my peace maker ... and you wouldn’t do that no more.”
“What’s your peace maker?”
“Call me a son of a bitch and you’ll find out!”
“You mean you would rub me out just for calling you a name?”
“Yeah, that’s exactly what I mean. I couldn’t let you get away with calling me a name even if I had to take the risk of five to ten years if I got caught.”

“Are you saying that it’s really worth five to ten years of your life and maybe the rest of your life to kill me because I called you a name and you couldn’t let me get away with it? Is that what you’re saying?”
“Yeah.”
“Is that the only way to handle words or names like that?”
“It’s the only way I know. I’m saying that it ain’t manly to let you get away with that.”
“But can I make you a son of a bitch just by calling you one?”
“Never thought about it that way before.”
“Could it be a bad language habit?”
“What the hell does that mean?”
“Do you have to fight with people or rub them out just because they say something you don’t like? Can their words make you what they call you?”
“I guess not.”

So began a series of weeks and weeks of working with kids from ages fourteen to eighteen who were “least likely to succeed.”

In many of our discussions and classes, more than bad language habits were revealed. Some of the facts that govern the lives of these students were revealed. Listen.

“That’s the way I always thought it was and that’s the right way to handle situations like this. Life is just a big fight ... like a big battle all the time and you have to keep your guard up and be ready to fight all the time.”

“Fight for what? We’re not talking about somebody beating up on you or stealing from you. We’re talking about somebody talking to you. Can their hot air, the sounds coming from their throat, hurt you? How can they hurt you?”
“It hurts me when somebody puts me down. I can’t take that. If somebody hits me, I hurt. But the pain goes away after awhile. What don’t ever go away is when somebody puts me down, makes me feel like a damn fool. That never goes away. I can’t remember who hurt me last with their fists. But I got a whole list of people that I won’t ever forget.”

“How will you forget them?”

“Because they made me feel like I was dirt ... like I was nothing.”

“How did they do that?”

“By the way they talked to me.”

Through this method of teaching general semantics, we were able to develop some principles such as:

1) Everybody wants to feel like somebody
2) The word is not the thing
3) Listening
4) Words and meaning
5) Verbal, non-verbal and tactile communication
6) Language habits
7) A hostile approach begets a hostile response
8) Little things make a big difference in how people get along with each other
9) The IFD formula (Idealization — Frustration — Demoralization)
10) Allness
11) Etc.
12) Indexing
13) Dating
If we are to increase the knowledge and the importance of general semantics, then I believe we need very much to seek, explore, experiment, and even adopt new methods and techniques of teaching and learning.

I have no problem with many of the learned and scientific papers on the subject, even though I sometimes have difficulty extracting the usable meaning of the information imparted.

There are a number of different reasons for my problems or difficulties. Among them are my admitted ignorance (how’s that for applying the etc., principle?) of many aspects of the subject. Others are the language used by the writers, highly technical language, that is. They imply sometimes a high degree of knowledge, reading, and learning. There are still others, but enough for now.

My first exposure to the subject of general semantics came in 1954 when the International Society for General Semantics held a meeting in my hometown, St. Louis, at Washington University. I delivered a paper at the time, which was later published in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*.

Its subject was “Bringing General Semantics Down to Earth.” I have been taking off on that theme ever since.

More recently, I have been talking with a group of young people in the Juvenile Court of St. Louis County. Among the preventive measures adopted by the court is a learning program to assist these young people in troubles of one kind or another in qualifying for their high school equivalency (GED).

The same principles of communication are used. According to the authorities, the kids like the exchanges that take place. Interestingly enough, I have found what I regard is a degree of intelligence and a grasp of the subject that rates them much better than average, from my experience.

Could one assume or deduce from this that many of the young people who are in trouble with the police or the juvenile authorities are pretty savvy to begin with?

Is that one of the reasons they are in trouble ... or were they “dumb” enough to get caught while others “made it” before they got too far off the beaten path?

I don’t know, and I certainly have no scientific answers. But, I do know it’s a great challenge talking with and debating the subject with these kids, and I always go away feeling invigorated mentally.

Frequently, in our teaching of the subject, I remember some of our earliest experiences in the business of communication. I recall very vividly to this day what happened when one of our clients gave us a proposed handbook for employees and asked us to “put it in English so our people would or could understand it.”

My partner Bob Hillard, a Phi Beta Kappa, Summa Cum Laude graduate from the University of Minnesota School of Journalism, and one of the most
brilliant persons I ever knew, also labored over the legalese.

We came to a portion that, no matter how hard we tried or what combination of words we used, it just didn’t make sense. So, we went back to the client, telling him of our failure and of our deep concern with not being able to understand what the lawyers were driving at.

So, our client called the attorney who wrote the pamphlet and told him that we were having trouble with the copy.

“Read it to me,” said the legal author. After it was read to him, he admitted he didn’t know what the language meant either, even though he had written it!

That’s not so unusual, I suppose, except that the attorney turned author said, “I don’t know what it means either, but leave it in anyway!”

How many other tomes are written by people who not only don’t know what they mean but are even unwilling to try to have it make sense? There’s lots of room for teaching and understanding the subject of human communication, with particular emphasis on the effect of words on our nervous systems. That, to me, is what general semantics is “all about.”

In the meantime, we’ll keep writing and talking and teaching and preaching that we need to make sure we really continue to do something about “Bringing General Semantics Down to Earth” between those very erudite and complicated tomes on the subject.

Because if we don’t, we shall end up talking to ourselves, and that would be a real tragedy for everyone who could benefit from better and improved understanding.

From *ETC* 43-1, Spring 1986. Alfred Fleishman was co-founder of Fleishman-Hillard, Incorporated, St. Louis, Missouri.