
EDUCATION

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ANDREA JOHNSON *WRITING TO REAL PEOPLE*

ESSAY? Research paper? Editorial? Response paper? For eight semesters, I've taught an introductory course in general semantics at Alverno College, Milwaukee. And for eight semesters, I've searched for a powerful end-of-the-course writing assignment that would enable students to integrate general semantics principles with personal awarenesses. This phantom assignment would reach into their nervous systems and help them (1) evaluate personal experiences; (2) recognize changes in behaviors and attitudes; and (3) apply general semantics formulations to 1 and 2.

My previous attempts at creating a comprehensive assignment had met with various degrees of success. Even when students gave me lovingly written papers that could attest to their understanding of general semantics, I felt as if something was missing. I couldn't hear their voices—the parameters of past papers seemed too confining and the students' words seemed constricted.

This semester I tried a new approach. I told my students about two friends I had met at the 1989 General Semantics Summer Seminar-Workshop, Dominique Benoit and Pascale de la Saussay. They intend to organize an Institute of General Semantics in France. I suggested that Dominique and Pascale would enjoy hearing from students who could share ideas about how they applied general semantics to their personal or professional situations.

At first the students gasped. "You want us to write to real people who will really read this?!" Recovering from the ego-diminishing discovery that I wasn't real, I assured them that they had grasped the concept. They responded with suspicion—"Will you correct the letters, have us rewrite and then send them out?" No. Each student makes two copies of the letter; one gets mailed and one gets assessed. "I suppose you'll send only the best letters." No, again. Each letter will be forwarded. Armed with a one-page out-

line of the assignment, the students accepted the challenge and began their work.

I didn't need to read all seventy letters before I knew I had something specific in my hands. The lump in my throat told me that. The students' responses reflected the diversity of their backgrounds, ages, situations, and understanding of general semantics formulations. One thing remained constant, however: they saw real connections between their lives and what they had learned over the semester. With the permission of my students, I'd like to share samples of their work.

The Sibling Connection (Several students chose to focus on how to improve a tenuous relationship with their brothers or sisters.) "When I was beginning to understand the notion of *dating*, I found it easier to talk with my sister. Every time we talked, I tried to remember that she was different from the time before. Sure, we still argue, but it is a lot easier to talk with her an hour after an argument because I know I will be somewhat different than we were while arguing. I don't think that general semantics will make any of my relationships problem-free, but understanding the dating notion will continue to help me work out problems over time."

Self-Image Observations (Many students used this letter to articulate how they now viewed themselves and to speculate on how they thought others viewed them.) "As a child, I was told I wasn't pretty enough to have boyfriends, or athletic enough to participate in sports, or talented enough to play the piano. For years I carried these maps with me, accepting them, as only an innocent child can, to be true. My general semantics class has helped me to better understand the constraints placed upon me by other people's ideals. The three principles that gave me the greatest insights are 'the map is not the territory,' indexing, and abstractions."

"Labels keep people apart by blinding them to any other aspect of the person. I encounter this type of labeling quite frequently because I am overweight. When people look at me they usually don't see an articulate, intelligent, well-mannered student of general semantics; they see a fat person. Because this label is painful to accept, I tend to become defensive and I retreat. Because I now realize a little better why people react the way they do, I am less defensive and so I can help others realize that fat person 1 is not fat person 2."

"The principles of general semantics have taught me that many of the difficulties I experienced with my self-worth came about because I confused 'me' with my roles. My roles will continue to change, yet the 'me' in me will still remain. I can now work toward enhancing my inner self, and I can go out into the community and the world around me without feeling restricted by my role labels."

Relationship Conflicts (A recurring theme: girl meets boy, girl gets boy, girl reevaluates boy, girl wises up.) "As I learned more about general semantics, I saw some of the mistakes I was making in my relationships. It occurred to me that both of us had very different ideas about love and commitment. I realized my map needed to be updated. I was cheating myself out of new experiences because my old map had me deadlocked. General semantics didn't save this relationship, but it did give me a clearer understanding about myself. It also gave me some useful tools to employ in future relationships. General semantics gave me some answers to some questions and freed me from my life in an intensional world."

Cross-Cultural Understanding (A Japanese exchange student provided me with a new appreciation for second-language learners.) "English is my second language, and American culture was unfamiliar to me when I first came to America. Sometimes people tried hard to understand me, and sometimes they thought they understood when they did not. As time passed, my English skills improved, but there came new problems. Some people saw me as a Japanese, but not as an individual. Those people put their stereotypes of all Japanese on me. This bothered me a lot until I understand some of the reasons for stereotyping. I suspect that it was easy for people to stereotype me because I was not able to communicate enough to show my individuality. Soon I became able to think in English and deliver English words more smoothly. People could then index that Japanese 1 is not Japanese 2, but then a new problem started. I began to feel two personalities in me – one when I spoke Japanese and one when I spoke English. I pondered this a lot and wondered if I had a psychological problem. Now I understand that the differences in languages had an effect on me. When I speak in English, I can say things more clearly and directly so that I feel myself as a direct person. However, when I speak in Japanese, I have to select from so many ways to say one thing that I have to choose carefully. Each way has a slightly different connotation, so that automatically I am more careful and thus more indirect and shy. By applying the principles of general semantics to my second-language learning process in America, I can see what happened to me both inside and out."

The World of Work (Most of my students depend upon outside employment to pay for their college education. Several letters looked at their work environment as a place that provided countless opportunities to practice general semantics.) "Although I have performed the same job for many years, I can still become angry at the way people talk to me. By recognizing holes in my map, I have come to believe that the anxious anger that comes across the phone lines is not being directed at me personally. I then feel more compelled to help this person out rather than return the anger I hear in their voices. By updating my map, dating and indexing customers,

and knowing that there is an 'etc.' in every situation, I have become a more effective communicator at work."

Dealing with Domestic Violence (Even after working closely with students for four months, I could not imagine some of the pain they managed to work through in my class.) "The violent behavior I tolerated during the marriage took a toll on my self-esteem, self-image, and self-concept. Through the general semantics principles of dating, indexing, and the-map-is-not-the-territory, I repossessed some measure of self-trust and confidence. The idea of self 'then' and self 'here-now' is critical in helping me focus on an idea/task/issue without discounting what learning has occurred between failure-in-past and today's goals. I allow a range of problem-solving skills to gain strength which over time, with each success, builds confidence to use those skills toward more successes. After the violence experience in marriage, I struggle to maintain that man 1 is not man 2 is not man 3. Even though I know that not all men are violent, I am terrified of anger. As long as I can see that anger 1 is not anger 2 is not anger 3, I remain calm and safe. This principle helps prevent generalizations about what I fear, which in turn allows me to see the world more accurately. What started as 'stupid about' soon shifted to 'too stupid to . . .' and on toward feeling hopeless. This was perhaps the most critical factor in shattering my self-esteem and confidence. By understanding that I had created maps about my maps of my example's maps, I recognized the need to lay aside those maps and examine the territory. I found this crucial in reestablishing a healthy relationship with myself."

Testimonials (They speak for themselves). "Studying two-valued orientation has helped me see the gray areas in life. This idea of gray areas helped me in a group project. In this course we were expected to discuss a controversial issue within our group. My group argued for days over who was 'right' and who was 'wrong.' Finally, I realized what we were facing. I brought in my general semantics text and explained two-valued orientation to the rest of my group members. After that, we were able to focus on the 'gray' areas of the issue."

"With reinforcement from my general semantics class, I now try harder than ever to avoid absolutes such as 'always' and 'never' in my speech; I try not to lump people into categories; and I try to balance 'facts' that might otherwise have me thinking in extremes."

"In the past, the only conditions I could see involved choices between good and bad, right and wrong, black and white. I will forever be grateful to Andrea for helping me discover that the world actually comes in assorted shades of gray."

It seems to me that looking for the "perfect" writing assignment is antithetical to the principles of general semantics. However, as educators, we can look for and find ways for students to participate at their own levels of comprehension and application. We can give them a voice. Perhaps this means writing to real people about real happenings in their lives. (And the papers are in the mail!)

