

THE SEMANTIC SCHOOL: A PLATFORM FOR EDUCATIONAL DESIGN

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ONE OF THE ONGOING tasks of the budding educational leader is to devise, revise, and reflect on a platform of beliefs regarding schools, teaching and learning. Why do we have schools? What do we expect to do? How will we know if we've done it? One tends to start with the broad, find it vague, move to the specific, find it persnickety, and then move back towards the broad with a more realistic eye. The reflective practice has great value. Working away at something slowly over years, revising it again and again, workshopping it, etc., you come eventually to language that acts almost as revelation. You *did* mean that, even if you didn't know that at the time.

The tortured syntax of my first platforms orbited around the idea that educational leaders “must create (or promote the creation of) an environment that promotes the development of certain traits in kids.” Of these, I considered curiosity the most important. “Curiosity,” I said “is the *first cause* of all learning.” But I wasn't happy with how that sounded. “Promote the creation of an environment?” The verb seemed weak and the object – “an environment” – vague and unhelpful. Maybe I couldn't avoid that. The educational leader's job, after all, involves everything from curriculum to behavior to the duct work. Maybe there was no more precise way of putting it than “an environment.” My subsequent work on the platform added to this sense of “an environment” by introducing the importance of creating a “Culture of Evaluation” – an environment in which it was the norm to reflect on our practices, to evaluate our programs, and, most importantly, to *change them according to the outcomes of those evaluations*. I advocated not only the collection of data, but also the courage to act upon that data.

Still, I hadn't come up with the language to bring it all together. How did the curiosity thing mesh with the evaluation thing? Well, you only evaluate if you're curious about outcomes. Is that enough? What if I call it a “Culture of Inquiry?”

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That seemed closer. Inquiry involves curiosity *and* intelligence *and* evaluation. But what about kindness and the duct work? How do these fit in?

I stumbled across the language that would bring these ideas together when I began exploring the discipline of general semantics, around the same time, coincidentally, that I began my coursework. At one point, I remember mentioning to colleagues that my favorite educational theorist was Neil Postman, author of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969), *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979), *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), and *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), etc. It struck me that, while I started reading Postman out of casual interest, I had found something meaningful there that I could apply in my professional and academic capacities as well. I had discovered a vocabulary that I might use to great effect.

Nevertheless, I used this language only tentatively, partially because I didn't understand the scope of its applicability. Later, as I came to understand it better, a feeling that I can only describe as shyness about appearing "jargony" kept me from expressing these ideas as fully as I might. In the summer of 2006, however, I went to a seminar on general semantics in Fort Worth, Texas. A central idea that we chewed on there – the idea of the *semantic environment* – brought all my platform thinking together.

Consider this belief statement: The *raison d'être* of the educational leader is to maintain a *semantic environment* that encourages all students to *create meanings* that will allow them to participate as fully as possible in society, carrying out its obligations and enjoying its blessings.

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The term *semantic environment* refers to the interactive system that exists between a person and all those things within a person's purview that contribute to the 'meaning' a person creates in any particular situation. The term was coined by the founder of general semantics, Alfred Korzybski, in his 1933 book, *Science and Sanity*, in which he uses the formulation *neuro-semantic environment* to stress the interconnectedness between observer and observed, and between the speaker and the spoken. The idea was further developed by psychologist Wendell Johnson in his 1945 book *People in Quandaries*, and given full flourish by Neil Postman, first in his

1969 book *Language in America*, and then in his 1976 book, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*.

According to Postman, a semantic environment will have four elements: 1) people, 2) the purposes of those people, 3) the accepted rules of discourse by which these purposes are usually achieved, and 4) all communications actually taking place at the time. It is, in the words of psychologist Wendell Johnson, a person's environment of "attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, values, ideals, standards, customs, knowledge, interests, conventions, institutions, etc." A web of language, images, symbols, associations, assumptions, and mores structures this environment. The semantic environment is distinguished from the symbol environment by the fact that the semantic environment comprises all of those things that contribute to meaning, including the inner world of the observer, while the symbol environment, much more limited, refers only to the external referents that later accumulate meaning according to the observer's situation.

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A simple example of a semantic environment might be the church confessional. The meanings of the place, and the meanings I bring to it, make it reasonable for me to enter in, close the door, and say to the man in the next cubicle, "Bless me father, for I have sinned." Were a student to come up to me in the classroom and say, "Bless me father, for I have sinned," I would have to conclude that they were either joking or deluded. In other words, what the phrase *means to me* (i.e., the meaning I create for the phrase), or even *whether* it means to me, depends on the *semantic environment* in which it is spoken. This might equate with "context", if you include the inner "worlds" of both participants of the communication as part of context.

Teachers, administrators, and parents communicate many messages to kids over the course of a school day, and we communicate these messages within an environment and context that impacts their interpretation. In our coursework, in particular, we ask the kids to receive communications from us and create meaning from those communications – and we're assessing kids on whether and how well they do this! When I lecture the kids on, say, the Congress of Vienna, I expect (hope? pray?) that this will mean something to them. I hope that the semantic environment of my classroom makes it so the kids *can* create meaning from my lecture, and furthermore, that they *will* create the particular meaning I'm looking for. Now, look beyond the classroom to the school, the home, the district, and the state. It

is the job of educational leaders at each of these levels to promote the creation of a semantic environment in which all students can and will create such meanings.

The unspoken assumption of this premise is that semantic environments can be altered predictably for beneficial effect. Obviously, the semantic environments of schools change over time. Does it follow, then, that we can engineer these changes intentionally? Postman takes pains to argue that he did not choose the word “environment” casually. He argues that semantic environments, like biological environments, are ecological. In other words, you cannot alter any one part of the environment without affecting others. If you take a forest, for example, and remove one kind of tree, you won’t end up with the same forest minus those trees. You’ll end up with a distinctly different forest, with a distinctly different system of dynamic interaction. Similarly, as we have found in Maine, when you take a lake and introduce milfoil into it, you don’t get the same lake plus milfoil. You get a tragically different lake with a tragically different dynamic of life.

For this reason, semantic environments can be maddeningly complex, and those in schools, I would argue, particularly so. Schools involve a myriad of persons, each with their own history, learning style, and associations. The “messages sent” by the school depend on a variety of assumptions, some complementary, some contradictory, often built up over a huge span of time, often communicated inefficiently. Take, for example, the fairly common public school maxim, “Learning is at the center of all we do.” Compare that to the common practice in these schools that a zero is given for late work. These two messages are both elements of the semantic environment but they work at cross-purposes. What do we consider central? That they do the work, or that they are prompt? Is the point of the assessment to measure knowledge gained, or behavior?

Most importantly, it requires the adoption of a different model of communication, one that is not bipartite (sender-receiver) but systemic (organism-as-a-whole-in-its-semantic-environment).

Kids are barraged with messages throughout their day. Their semantic environment is incredibly fecund, a veritable rain forest, dense with shallowly rooted communications. These messages include not just the “talk” going on, but the behaviors and inferences. Public announcements that interrupt class, student pullouts (when a student is called away from class for some reason), teacher salaries, dress codes, physical plant issues, eligibility rules, etc. – all of these communicate something to kids about what school “means.” How many of these

“communications” promote “learning” or the creation of meaning for kids? How many block it?

It is the educational leader’s responsibility to promote the creation of a semantic environment with as few barriers and as many opportunities for the creation of meaning as possible. This requires an educational leader to understand how kids create meaning, how different kids create different meanings from the same situation, what sort of things communicate what kinds of meaning, etc. Most importantly, it requires the adoption of a different *model* of communication, one that is not bipartite (sender-receiver) but systemic (organism-as-a-whole-in-its-semantic-environment). This was brought home to me recently when I advocated among my colleagues for a Standards-Based reporting system in our school district, as opposed to the old norm referenced number grades.

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I argued that by changing the “talk” – i.e., the way in which we communicate information about achievement – we don’t simply change the way we report on some neutral object. We change the very behavior we evaluate. Achievement doesn’t exist apart from our reports of it. Achievement is a judgment of behaviors. By changing the way we report on achievement, we change its definition. We change what it is. Potentially, by changing our definition of achievement in this way, we’ll change the behaviors it reflects. That’s the hope, anyway.

Thousands of things might alter a school’s semantic environment: a rise in school violence, the introduction of a new technology, a change in policy regarding cell phones, academic detention or graduation requirements, the consolidation of special ed classes in one wing or their integration into mainstream classes, the introduction of zero tolerance policies, or the spread of rumors in the hallways. Each thing means something different for each kid, and each thing *means differently*. Managing the semantic environment requires that we know communications, know ourselves, and know our kids – not just as a group, but one at a time. It requires constant evaluation and constant revision. Lastly, it requires curiosity, inquiry, and kindness.