

The Language of Success

by Gerald M. Siegel

Although retired for a number of years, I was invited in October of 2003 to speak to the Minnesota Speech-Language-Hearing Association. I felt a familiar twitch on approaching my computer keyboard. In an old academic, the impulse to publish does not soon perish, and out came a manuscript addressing the theme of the conference, "The Language of Success." This article, as well as the speech, covers my career as a clinician, a teacher, an administrator, and a researcher in the field of speech-language pathology and audiology and how, along the way, I learned the language of success.

I received my BA and MA degrees at Brooklyn College. My clinical experiences there were meager. I mostly watched Robert West interview clients and learned how to say diadokokinesis very fast without stuttering. Graduate courses were all given in the late afternoon and evening. Many of the students were holding down full-time jobs as clinicians. In those days it was possible to be a certified clinician with only a BA degree. I had a full-time job too-as a teletypist for A. Milne Steel Distributing Company. I sat in a small office in Greenwich Village and sent messages that distributed steel bars all over the world. The people who worked there called me "the professor" because I studied every spare moment when not sending steel beams to distant locations. I wasn't a very good typist and undoubtedly there's some guy in Bangkok who is still waiting for the girder he ordered in 1953.

At the start I wanted to be a clinician, but couldn't do it. I never felt knowledgeable enough and chose a career in research instead. Researchers are not expected to have answers. In fact, if a researcher has an answer to anything, other researchers suspect that he isn't a real researcher. Researchers only need to know how to ask questions and how to criticize each other.

Clinical Success

I did have one significant success in my brief career as a clinician, however. My first job was to teach all the courses and run the clinic at the North Dakota Agricultural College in Fargo. A pulpit priest came to the clinic after

he developed a strangulated voice that made it impossible for him to preach. I don't recall what I suggested to him in that first session, but he never returned. Instead he joined an order of silent monks.

You have to be creative in this business.

Teaching Success

I was nominated by my students and received a Distinguished Teacher Award from the College of Liberal Arts. That was one my proudest accomplishments as a university teacher. There was one lecture in particular where I really sparkled. It was in a class in language development and I was teaching about Pivot Grammar. David McNeil, Roger Brown, and Lois Bloom had written about this early grammar. The idea was that very young children had a grammatical category of PIVOT words, or P-WORDS, like "my" or "more" or "want" and also a larger category of so-called OPEN or O-WORDS like "milk" or "up" or "play." According to the theory, children constructed their first grammatical sentences by combining a P-word with any of the O-words. Or, as I more succinctly put it: To make a sentence, children first choose a word that has the quality of P-ness and then combine it with another that has the quality of O-ness. There was a dramatic silence in the classroom after I uttered that grammatical formula, as my face turned beet-red, followed by long and raucous laughter. And eventually even the students joined in.

Administrative Success

I'm very proud of my brief career as an administrator. That is, I'm very proud it was so brief. Dean Fred Lukerman appointed me the director of research development in the College of Liberal Arts for a three-year term, in addition to my regular teaching responsibilities. It was such a big job I was allowed to hire an assistant. Lots of people applied for the assistant job and I finally hired Gerri Malandra. She was impatient, very quick, extremely competent, and intimidating. I hired her anyway. Within about six months to a year it was clear that Gerri could do the job herself and I was just taking up space. So I fired myself and regretfully accepted my own resignation, never to have an administrative post again.

There's a follow-up. I recently met someone who knew Gerri Malandra and asked how she was doing. It seems she wasn't at the university anymore.

When President Yudoff took the job at Texas she went with him in some high administrative post. That was a good hiring and firing.

Research Success

I didn't love everything about research. I was impatient with the details, with adding the long columns of numbers, with checking and rechecking results to be sure they were correct, and collecting reliability data. And I wasn't great around equipment. When I entered the lab that Dick Martin and I shared, he would become pale and all the machines would turn themselves off to protect themselves.

I liked to find a good question and figure out a way to answer it. And then, when the data were in, and it was time to tell their story-that's when I paced, and agonized, and complained, and sweated, and cursed-and really enjoyed myself. The story was there in the data, waiting to be teased out like the sculpture in a piece of marble. That's the part I liked best.

Well, maybe not the best. It was also thrilling to have a manuscript accepted and published. I looked forward to getting the journal with my article in it, with my name in the table of contents and then on the first page of the article itself. When the reprints came, I'd send one to everyone I'd ever been in school with since kindergarten and also my barber and the kid who delivered our newspaper. Admittedly, this is a form of narcissism and the university is precious because it encourages such feelings.

There were also terrors associated with research and publishing. You may remember a social psychologist named Robert Rosenthal who researched the effects of labeling on human behavior. He started out showing that if he randomly divided laboratory rats into two groups and arbitrarily labeled one group as the "bright" rats and the other as the "dull" rats, the dull rats didn't do as well in learning a maze as the rats that had been labeled as smart. It wasn't because calling them dull lowered their self-esteem. Rather, what Rosenthal found was that the research assistants who were running the experiment treated the two groups of rats differently-they handled the supposed smart critters more gently, and that affected how the animals performed.

Rosenthal suggested that a similar process takes place right in the classroom, with children. He called it the Pygmalion Effect. In brief, he said that certain

children get reputations for being stupid and from then on they are treated as such by their teachers from one grade to the next, and the label affects them all through their school years.

Rosenthal's ideas were very popular for awhile and his work showed up in newspaper reports and family magazines and he got lots of interviews. He was famous, and he entered my life-sort of.

Before Rosenthal published his work on the Pygmalion Effect, I had done an experiment like his though I didn't realize it at the time. At the Cambridge State Hospital in Minnesota, I selected a group of children with significant developmental delays and arbitrarily labeled some as advanced and some as slow in language skills relative to their overall ability. Then I asked adults to talk with them and analyzed whether the labels assigned to the children would affect the language behavior of the adults. The results didn't support Rosenthal's predictions. Unlike his research assistants with the rats, the adults in my study weren't affected by the labels. Instead, they responded to the children's actual language skills.

I wasn't very proud of the study. It certainly didn't seem groundbreaking, but I submitted it to the American Journal of Mental Deficiency and it was published and later, to my surprise, it was cited in several articles in child psychology journals. They found it more interesting than I had.

Here is the scary part. Some time later I got a letter, on Harvard University stationery, from Rosenthal asking whether I would be willing to send him the original data so he could do his own analysis and maybe treat the results in a different way. I was terrified. Even when you are careful, errors can creep into the collection, the recording, or the analysis of data. If I complied with his request, he might find all kinds of embarrassing mistakes. I thought of telling him that my dog had eaten the original data, but sent him what he asked for. As the weeks went by without word from him, I considered growing a beard and changing my name, or joining my Uncle Meyer in his grocery store in Brooklyn.

Finally he sent another letter. He thanked me for sharing my results and said that his analysis confirmed mine. Even better, he wrote that I had scooped him on the study of labeling effects. I didn't get interviewed for Ladies Home Journal or Redbook, but my ego was intact and I could breathe again. I shaved my beard and kept my own name.

Doing research wasn't always a smooth path. Editors and journal reviewers sometimes said harsh things about my manuscripts-an experience any researcher will have-and it was easy to feel personally attacked and defeated. Some of the work on stuttering I published with Dick Martin and Sam Haroldson was provocative and we were personally attacked. Sometimes I spent a huge amount of time and intellectual and emotional energy on research that didn't pan out, and it was always painful to trash an idea or a project I was invested in.

Sometimes I read articles in journals that should have mentioned the work we were doing in Minnesota, but we were ignored. Those guys didn't bother to read our journals. That was an ego blow.

But then a research project would come to fruition, and I would ponder the results, and write the article, often in collaboration with a student, and the article would appear in one of our journals. It would feel good to see it there, and to reread it. Maybe in a later issue of the journal, someone would argue with my interpretation, and that meant my work had been read and taken seriously, and that was great reward indeed.

My mother never entirely understood what I did for a living. She was proud that I was a professor at a fine university and she knew that I sometimes was invited to talk about talking. I was a doctor who didn't do any doctoring and didn't drive a luxury car like a real doctor.

She died a little more than two years ago and I went through her things. Among the letters and old pictures were articles I sent to her over the years, technical articles that she couldn't possibly understand, but sent as evidence, I guess, that I was really creating something out here in the wilds of Minnesota. She had saved them and probably shown them to the relatives and the other women in the building.

Looking though those reprints scattered among the old greeting cards and family pictures with me and my brother Joel when we were young and still wearing knickerbockers, I could sense my mother's pride and knew for a fact that I had been lucky in my profession and that, despite my Brooklyn accent, I had learned the language of success.

Gerald M. Siegel, retired from the University of Minnesota in 1997 after 40 years in academics. He received the ASHA Honors in 2002 and a Lifetime

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