



Volume 1, Issue #3

Getting the Message Across

COMO Tom Venezia, DVC-ED

In our continuing series of newsletters focused on improving instruction, this issue addresses Non-verbal Communication. Often times, speakers, presenters and instructors forget that communications involves more than just what is said. Commodore Maxim, once again, does a great job of addressing this important topic.

Non-Verbal Communication

COMO L. Daniel Maxim, ANACO-RB

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said.” Peter F. Drucker¹

“I speak two languages, Body and English.” Mae West

Introduction

This issue of WAYPOINTS addresses the topic of non-verbal communication. Numerous references are included for those who wish to learn more about this topic than can be covered in a short brief.

As shown in the illustration below,² non-verbal communication (sometimes called body language although the term is more general) includes a variety of elements ranging from appearance, facial/hand gestures, head movements, eye contact, posture, touching, and even how closely you stand from your audience.³

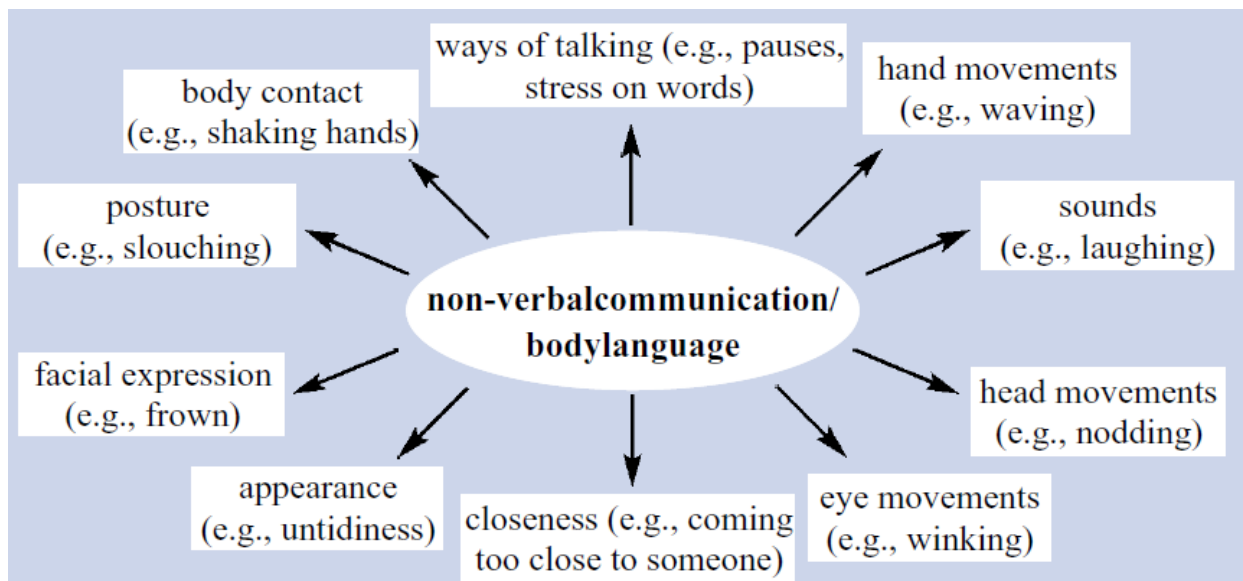
¹ <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/here-there-and-everywhere/201109/43-quotes-body-language>.

² This illustration taken from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1705977/pdf/jceh_13_35_044.pdf.

All web sites included in this issue of WAYPOINTS accessed on 16 February 2013.

³ See

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/16/fashion/16space.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0&ei=5088&en=2d57a58460696fe0&ex=1321333200&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&adxnlnx=1360952911-GiGlc%204rGv5tgtv/72uJsQ.



As communications involve both the sender and receiver, it is important to consider both those subtle signals that you send as an instructor and the cues that your audience provides regarding the how your message is being received. Words, images, visual aids, models, graphs, and video clips are certainly important, but they are just one part of the educational experience.

Estimates of the precise importance of non-verbal communications vary,⁴ but all investigators agree that non-verbal communications are important determinants of how your audience reacts to what you say. Both the popular and more scientific literature have examined the role of non-verbal communications and cues from the perspective of such diverse groups as business presenters,⁵ service personnel,⁶ physicians,⁷ attorneys,⁸ police,⁹ and teachers¹⁰ of foreign languages.¹¹ There is even a Center for Non-Verbal Studies that publishes an extensive dictionary of possible non-verbal cues.¹²

⁴ For various views on the subject, see e.g., <http://resourcemagazine.co.uk/acatalog/lapakko.pdf>, <http://rer.sagepub.com/content/49/4/631.full.pdf>, http://www.creducation.org/resources/nonverbal_communication/, <http://www.mcser.org/images/stories/MJSS-Special-issues/MJSS-October2011/role%20of%20non-verbal%20communication%20in%20education.pdf>, <http://www.mcser.org/images/stories/MJSS-Special-issues/MJSS-October2011/role%20of%20non-verbal%20communication%20in%20education.pdf>, <http://news.ufl.edu/1999/01/21/body-language/>, http://changingminds.org/explanations/behaviors/body_language/mehrabian.htm, <http://science.tumblr.com/post/11503975876/science-behind-the-factoid-93-body-language>, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beyond-words/201109/is-nonverbal-communication-numbers-game>, and <http://www.mnsu.edu/cmst/ctam/ctamj/ctamj2007.pdf>.

⁵ See e.g., <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/201202> or <http://www.leadership-and-motivation-training.com/types-of-nonverbal-communication.html>.

⁶ See e.g., <http://www.res.otaru-uc.ac.jp/~js/downloads/MKTF2002-PDF/Oct-10/The%20role%20of%20nonverbal%20comm.pdf>.

⁷ See e.g., <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2814257/>.

⁸ See e.g., http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/communication/pdf/thesis07.robins.pdf.

⁹ See e.g., <http://standanddelivergroup.com/william-hall-on-communication-lessons-from-the-police/> and <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/publications/Abstract.aspx?id=46579>.

¹⁰ See e.g., http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_196610_galloway.pdf.

¹¹ See e.g., http://gse.au.edu/materials/Advanced_Communication/Allen.pdf. For more references on non-verbal cues in the classroom, see <http://www.hrepic.com/Teaching/GenEducation/nonverbcom/nonverbcom.htm>.

¹² See <http://center-for-nonverbal-studies.org/6101.html>.

To give you some idea of the power of non-verbal communications, try watching a good foreign film in a language you don't understand without the subtitles—or watch an opera. You will miss the information provided by the spoken language, but probably come away with a good understanding of the plot. Household pets, particularly dogs, are masters of non-verbal communication—they often have the ability to read the emotions of their masters. And if you have ever taken your dog to a nursing home or hospital, you can see the benefits of their non-verbal communication skills!

What instructor's convey

An instructor can moderate the classroom educational experience in several ways by appropriate use of non-verbal communications. A professional appearance (appropriate uniform, good personal grooming), good posture (not slouching), friendly demeanor (frequent smiling), good humor (laughter), varying speech tones (for emphasis), and frequent eye contact with (but not staring at) members of the audience are ways to build rapport in the classroom. Facial expressions including smiling, frowning (doubt, distrust), and raised eyebrows (surprise) can also communicate. One author claims that there are seven distinct facial expressions that denote joy, surprise, contempt, sadness, anger, disgust, and fear.¹³

A brief tap on the shoulder of the student or arm of a student you're speaking with can elicit a subconscious response that makes you more persuasive.¹⁴ Nodding (up and down = yes) or turning your head from side to side indicates agreement or disagreement. Hand gestures are a common form of non-verbal communication. For example, 'High fives' indicate celebration. The 'shoulder shrug' indicates 'I don't know.' 'Knocking on wood' or 'fingers crossed' indicates a wish that something will or will not come true. Banging your fist on the desk is used for emphasis. One website offers a long list of hand gestures.¹⁵

Downcast eyes, halting speech, slouching, may be signs of indifference and/or lack of confidence. And how close you stand to members of your audience is also important. As noted by one source:¹⁶

“People often refer to their need for "personal space," which is also an important type of nonverbal communication. The amount of distance we need and the amount of space we perceive as belonging to us is influenced by a number of factors including social norms, situational factors, personality characteristics and level of familiarity. For example, the amount of personal space needed when having a casual conversation with another person usually varies between 18 inches to four feet. On the other hand, the personal distance needed when speaking to a crowd of people is around 10 to 12 feet.”

¹³ See <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2011/05/facial-expressions.aspx>.

¹⁴ See e.g., <http://www.smartclassroommanagement.com/2009/09/07/body-language-and-classroom-management/>.

¹⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_gestures.

¹⁶ See <http://psychology.about.com/od/nonverbalcommunication/a/nonverbaltypes.htm>.

Getting “in someone’s face” is intimidating and can cause discomfort. ‘Acceptable’ distances are culturally defined to some degree.¹⁷ (The study of such physical distances is called *proxemics*.¹⁸)

Like it or not, you are always communicating with your audience—even without words. The trick is to have your non-verbal signals reinforce what you are saying.

What instructors can learn from non-verbal clues

Experienced instructors can also learn how to ‘read’ the non-verbal clues offered by the audience. For example, puzzled expressions or blank stares suggest that this might be a good time to ask a specific question to check if you are really being understood. Students who maintain eye contact are likely to be interested. Nodding (up and down) is also a good sign. One report¹⁹ offers the following indicators of ‘positive body language’ on the part of your audience that you might consider employing during a classroom session:

- Relaxed posture - Comfortably seated, relaxed breathing, no visible stiffness or abrupt movements. These indicate no major barriers to communication.
- Arms relaxed - Uncrossed arms and hands open (palms up or otherwise visible to the other person) are signs of openness.
- Good eye contact - Looking in the other person's eyes, particularly when they are speaking, indicates interest in that person. Proper eye contact involves looking away occasionally to avoid staring.
- Nodding agreement - When nods are used to punctuate key things the other person has said, they signal agreement, interest and understanding. However, continual unconscious bobbing of the head usually indicates that the listener is tuning out.
- Taking notes - Shows interest and involvement, particularly if notes are on what the other person is saying.
- Smiling/adding humor - This is a very positive sign. It signals a warm personal relationship.
- Leaning closer - Reducing the distance between two people, particularly when the other person is speaking. Indicates interest is up and barriers are down.
- Gesturing warmly - Talking with hands, particularly with palms open, indicates involvement in the conversation and openness to the other person.

Conversely, there are several signs and signals that your audience is not engaged. These include:

- Body tense - Stiffness, wrinkled brow, jerky body motion, and hands clasped in front or palms down on the table. These can indicate concern with the topic or dealing with the other person.
- Arms folded in front - Creates a barrier; can express resistance to what is being said.
- Hand on face - A hand over one's mouth is a closed gesture. Leaning on one's elbow with the chin in the hand can communicate boredom.

¹⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_language.

¹⁸ See <http://www.nonverbal-world.com/2011/11/reading-body-language-proxemics.html>.

¹⁹ See http://www.assoa.nt.edu.au/MATERIALS/ppd/body_language.pdf.

- Fidgeting - Moving around a lot, playing with things and drumming fingers are usually a sign of boredom, nervousness or impatience.
- Arms behind head, leaning back - In a well-established relationship this can be a relaxed gesture.
- Yawning - Boredom, confusion. The other person is talking too much or in too much technical detail.
- Impatience - Trying to interrupt what the other person is saying, opening one's mouth frequently as if to speak.
- Distraction - Eyes flicking about, blank stares, flipping through literature without really reading it, looking at others in the office, looking at the person's body or clothing.
- Leaning away - Avoiding moving closer, even when something is handed to the person, is strongly negative.
- Negative facial expressions - These include shaking head, eyes narrowed, scowling, frowning.

Another author²⁰ suggests that troublesome signs include:

“Heads are down.

Eyes are glazed, or gazing at something else.

Hands may be picking at cloths, or fiddling with pens.

People may be writing or doodling. (Note, however, that some researchers suggest that this can help people concentrate more effectively.)

They may be sitting slumped in their chairs.”

However, there are limits to our ability to read non-verbal cues and we can make mistakes.²¹ For example, crossed arms or legs are sometimes taken as a sign of defensiveness or rejection, but could simply mean that the person is cold. Rubbing the eyes may simply mean that the person has an eye irritation rather than being tired or upset. Consider several clues, not just one when drawing inferences from body language. When in doubt, it is always appropriate to ask questions for clarification or agreement.

It takes practice before non-verbal clues can be read reliably. You may find it easier to try to read an audience when someone else is teaching. In the right circumstances you can ask members of the audience for feedback directly and compare what they say with what you observed. As with any other skill, you can improve with practice. Give it a try and see if it helps your classroom presentation skills!

²⁰ See http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Body_Language.htm.

²¹ See e.g., <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/17/science/non-verbal-cues-are-easy-to-misinterpret.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.