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Grace Ritz Amigone

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Writing Lab Tutors: Hidden Messages That Matter

Grace Ritz Amigone

One of the most innovative and effective resources found in writing labs is the peer tutor. Peer tutoring or conferencing is the cornerstone on which writing labs are built, and one aspect of peer tutoring that is not often attended to is that of nonverbal communication. The field of nonverbal communication contains insights which have a practical application in the writing lab and can enhance the ability of peer tutors to deal with writers who come to them for help. For while the main vehicle of communication in a writing lab is the word, whether written or spoken, nonverbal cues present another form of communication which ought to be examined and considered when training peer tutors. The fact is that “every verbal act contains nonverbal aspects which are essential to the meaning of the verbal act” (Smith and Williamson, 1977, p. 201). Keeping in mind that eighty percent of message meaning is derived from nonverbal language (Thompson, 1973, p. 1) will help achieve more effective conferencing.

In his definitive work, *The Silent Language*, Edward T. Hall identified ten primary message systems (1959, p. 38), four of which pertain particularly to writing lab situations. The initial gestures another makes towards us can have lingering consequences. For example, if someone ignores us or backs away from us at a first meeting, our social insecurities come to the fore and mitigate the encounter. Is it my breath? Has my deodorant stopped working? Am I physically repugnant? Such unconscious self-castigation need never arise in the writing lab client if the tutor considers the importance of gesture, and the best initial gesture to make to a client is to acknowledge her presence as soon as she approaches by raising the head and establishing eye contact. According to Smith and Williamson, “eye contact is certainly one of the most

meaningful acts a person can perform. . . .it is a certain sign that mutual perception has occurred”(p. 210). If eye contact is accompanied by a smile, the tutor has taken a major step towards setting a client at ease.

Touch or touching is a form of nonverbal reassurance but in a situation such as tutoring it's best to refrain from this sort of behavior. In our culture, there is very little bodily contact between persons outside the family except when close friends greet each other or say goodbye. The handshake may be too formal a gesture for a writing lab. However there are ways to provide a kind of stroking other than a physical stroking. One of the most common nonverbal strokes is the nod. Thompson calls the nod “a subjective procedure that encourages students to keep talking” (p. 162). A tutor can use a nod to punctuate conversation as well as to let clients know they are on the right track or to indicate comprehension of the subject being read without interrupting. Even a slight nod can be picked up peripherally; it seeps into the unconscious mind without intruding on the conscious mind.

At the end of a tutoring session, if one feels comfortable doing it, there is a permissible form of touching, the pat on the back. To reach over and pat the client on the back is a way of reinforcing the positive aspects of the encounter. Again, do this only if it seems effortless and unstudied. If it feels awkward to the doer, the client will sense the discomfort and then a gesture that was meant to be reassuring will appear condescending.

When you were younger, your mother probably reminded you often to “Sit up straight; don't slouch!” She knew the importance of posture—it is indeed a major message system. “Although a person's body may be capable of assuming many different postures, his culture, his profession, and even his circle of acquaintances” (Thompson, p. 113) are responsible for dictating the choice of postures. A forward lean of the body communicates attention and approval; closeness in body position reveals a mental feeling of closeness. Also, people of equal status sit closer than those of unequal status. Since the very name “peer” indicates equality, body orientation during a tutoring session can establish the notion of equality and whether or not a tutor is accessible. Folding the arms, thereby compressing the body, sends out a cold and rejecting cue. It may signal impatience or a general unpleasant reaction to the client. Any form of body contraction is an indication of wariness and even disapproval, as is leaning away from someone. To lean back and withdraw, especially as a client is reading his work to the tutor, is to assume a negative, refusing position. Also, crossing the legs so that knee points at the other person is in effect pointing one's disapproval, creating a barrier. On the other hand, a leg crossed with foot

pointing towards the client signals approval and sets up a more open atmosphere. Birdwhistell has done extensive research on this latter point and calls his work the science of kinesics (1970). Keeping the arms unfolded, feet flat on the floor or legs crossed with knees pointing towards a client indicates warmth and acceptance, that the tutor is relaxed and does not want to rush through the session.

Another expression of disapproval or impatience is drumming the fingers on the table, checking one's watch, clicking a ballpoint pen, doodling, or gazing off into the distance. All of these signal boredom or inattention. Supportive signals to keep in mind are frequent smiling, absence of impatient gestures, more eye contact, and greater degree of forward lean.

Voice tone and physical appearance both convey obvious messages. Has anyone ever cautioned you, "Don't use that tone with me!"? Most people change tone of voice to indicate disapproval or that a mistake has been made. Hall refers to this as a formal learning pattern, a preface to learning. A corrective tone is adopted by parents and teachers to signal that an important point is being presented, a point which is not debatable; it is a question of either right or wrong. When allowing this formal tone to come through, a tutor is assuming a judgmental, dictatorial stance which is symptomatic of a negative learning situation. Right now to yourself, try saying "That sounds fine" sincerely and then sarcastically. The difference is immediately evident. A positive response to a client based on tone of voice is best tied to a nondirective approach. Instead of saying "Don't write that kind of sentence," a tutor can use the softer, nondirective, "Perhaps there's a better way to express that." The latter automatically lends itself to a less imperious tone of voice. As Mina Shaughnessy points out, the student writer "fears that writing will not only expose but magnify his inadequacies" (p. 85) and the tone a tutor adopts can help minimize this sense of inadequacy. Jack Benny was able to use the one word "Well!" to convey a flood of indignation and disbelief.

Clothing and physical appearance comprise an additional set of nonverbal cues. It's perfectly all right to look casual. After all, the writing lab is a casual nonformal place. But to look unkempt is to say to your clients that they don't merit your best. "The healthiest or most desirable body image embraces the entire physical body" (Smith and Williamson, p. 259) and this includes what a person puts on the body. When a person's body image is integrated with his mental outlook, he is "embodied," has a sense of himself which makes him at ease in any social province. This sense of embodiment, this ease, is conveyed subtly and has a subliminal effect on others. One interesting aside: tutors in

“The Writing Place” at SUNY/Buffalo report that older students tend to gravitate towards tutors who are more traditionally dressed, in other words, towards those who look like teachers.

As far as seating arrangements are concerned, it’s best to sit next to clients rather than to sit at a desk across from them. A desk is a socially acceptable barrier; it is perceived as a base of operations, an island of authority. A person approaching another’s desk is consigned to the role of supplicant because the desk intervenes and causes accommodation before the session even begins. If the lab is equipped with tables, the same psychology is at work. Therefore, tutors should take a seat away from the end of the table, leaving space for the client, or tutors should invite the client to sit next to them if the room has desks. Hall asserts that space communicates and because of this can be considered dynamic. His conception of spatial zones presented in *The Hidden Dimension* includes four kinds of micro-space: intimate, personal, social, and public, all subdivisions of a factor generally referred to as territoriality. Territoriality is defined as behavior by which an organism characteristically lays claim to an area and defends it against members of its own species. The space closest to a person is intimate space. In America, extremely close body positions indicate intimacy and the intimate zone extends outward three inches from a person to approximately eighteen inches. We save intimate space for those with whom we have a loving relationship or for very close friends. Within this space human interaction is usually of a parental or sexual nature and the odors and size of another person can be acute and all-engulfing. No one should enter another’s intimate zone without a well-perceived invitation or she will invite censure and disapproval. Next time you go to a detective movie, watch the supersleuth cause his subject to crumble by accusing him nose to nose. Filmmakers have long been cognizant of the results of invading someone’s intimate space and use the close-up to create tension within a frame. Therefore, if tutors lean in too close to clients they appear to be crowding them, and clients may retreat both physically and mentally. But just as crowding can trigger aversive behavior, so withdrawal can signal an attempt to isolate oneself. Knowing this, it’s advisable to establish a distance of about two feet between tutor and client which results in a combination of personal and social space. Both will feel most comfortable at this distance.

While persons carry their personal space with them, their work space is sometimes determined by others. One works best when personal space is not violated. Tutors must be ready to relinquish some personal space and convert it into work space for clients. Although tutors may bring their own books and papers to the lab to work on when there’s a

lull, they should push them far down the table to indicate that the tutoring session takes precedence. This also provides an uncluttered area for the tutoring session. I remember a student who came in just to rest for a minute because she had an armload of heavy Psychology books, and stayed to help with a term paper. She said that she never would have stopped if she hadn't seen an empty surface in the nick of time!

The work space must not be construed as only a surface for working. A writing lab deals not just with an isolated area—a student's writing problem—but engages the whole student, a student who is influenced by many factors. This means that the conception of work space is broader than merely a table or desk. The writing lab is an ecological system and the entire environment is important. It is not overstating the case to say that much of the success of a writing lab is at the mercy of others, those who plan such labs, because the colors and accessories used invite a particular mental set. If the room is bright and cheerful it invites tutees to venture in and stay through the revising process. People react to color both intellectually and emotionally; it is a separate language, one understood by the unconscious mind. It brings about actual changes in the vascular system. Such a number of human emotional states have long been associated with color that many clichés have arisen from this association. In *Color and Human Response*, Birren points out that the most appealing colors in all cultures are red and blue, followed closely by yellow and green. Red, he suggests, stirs the blood, cheers up the dour, stimulates the appetite, "increases blood pressure, pulse rate and other autonomic functions" (p. 105). Blue is a calming color and inspires an agreeable mood. Even plants are "most receptive to red and blue" (p. 16) and are most active in the presence of red and blue light. Yellow suggests sunshine, warmth, pleasantness. Finally, green decreases restlessness hence aiding the mind in developing ideas.

The Writing Place at SUNY/Buffalo has red and blue seats and a large green logo outside the door; tutors can, if they choose, don bright yellow tee shirts provided by the lab. That mix covers all the bases and was not coincidental. If your writing lab is drab and not scheduled for redecoration, it can be made visually energetic by adding colorful posters. A standing rack of resource and reference books and pamphlets can be useful and colorful. One last word about color: psychologists believe that the wearer of bright colors is usually one who has a great reserve of energy and conveys this in the colors he chooses. The use of bright color is a subliminal invitation to others to tap these energy reserves. While speaking of brightness, it's necessary to mention the role that lighting plays. Visual experiments show that "fatigue rates

rise in direct proportion to the dimming of the visual field” (Thompson, p. 80). So the lab should be well lit, though not glaring. Glare cuts down on the visual field and can cause agitation (Hurvich and Jameson, 1966, p. 51).

A lab that is well-appointed and well-stocked projects the promise of an agreeable experience on the metacommunicative level. And if tutors are positive and approachable, the achievement will be an integrated total experience for the writers, an experience which will bring others to the lab by the oldest of advertising techniques—word of mouth. Keep in mind these four words: acknowledgment, appropriateness, efficiency and flexibility. These are the keys to nonverbal cues in the writing lab. The goal of aiding writers will be met on a more complete scale if tutors are mindful that a whole human being, not just a writing problem, is coming into the lab.

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