



DIVERSITY IN THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN (HIGHER) EDUCATION (DIV.ED)

GUIDE



ERASMUS Multilateral Co-operation Project (01.10.2012-30.09.2014)

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FOREWORD

The present learning materials have been developed as main product of the European project “Diversity in the Learning Experience in (Higher) Education (DIV.ED)”, developed in the period 2012-2014, which has been co-funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Long Life Learning Erasmus Programme. The project has been coordinated by the Johannes Kepler Universität Linz / JKU (Austria).

The main purpose of the project was to design, pilot, implement, and exploit a learning module on the topic of Diversity. Learning materials in written and online format and a documentary film are the main project products supporting the learning process in the Diversity field.

The main target group of the DIV.ED project is higher education students; additional target groups are adult learners, teachers and teacher trainers. The module can be implemented also in (ICT-supported) informal learning.

The DIV.ED module consists of different learning devices, the main of which are learning materials created by a group of scholars from the partner institutions “Johannes Kepler Universität Linz”/“JKU” (Austria), “FernUniversität in Hagen”/“FeU-Hagen” (Germany), “Lietuvos Kalbų Pedagogų Asociacija”/“Language Teachers’ Association of Lithuania”/“LKPA” (Lithuania), and “Universidade Aberta”/“UAb” (Portugal). These learning materials have been elaborated in an online format by the specialised company “i.Zone” (Portugal). Three short digital movies focusing on collective understanding about cultural diversity and exemplifying a valuable tool of virtual pedagogy (“Digital Stories”) provide the module with complementary information and learning content. The documentary film entitled “The Minorities are the Majority – Diversity Learning”, produced by the Austrian film production company “On Screen”, addresses and aims to sensitise also a broader audience for Diversity issues.

The module has been evaluated at two different production stages (piloting, implementation) at the four educational partner institutions in Austria, Germany, Lithuania and Portugal by experts from the “European Association of Distance Teaching Universities”/“EADTU” (The Netherlands) as well as by external experts.

This Guide begins with a short presentation of the DIV.ED module (Section 1) and of the main features of the pedagogic approach, which plays a central role in the conception of the module (Section 2). The following Curricular Contents (Part I-III, chapter 1-9) are introduced by a short explanation for the target group (Section 3). Information about the structure and the content of the three Digital Stories are provided in Section 4, which contains also pedagogical suggestions for teachers. The main aspects of the e-version of the DIV.ED module are briefly explained in Section 5. Section 6 contains a list of the essential technological specifications and requirements for the use of the e-version of the DIV.ED module and of the Digital Stories in a learning environment. The final Section 7 describes briefly the experiences of the DIV.ED courses at the four different educational institutions participating in the piloting and evaluation of the DIV.ED products: on the basis of their definitely positive echo we could not find for these short reports a better title than “Best Practice Examples”.

The edition of this Guide has been performed with the contributions of Alison Benbow (structure, text) and Darlinda Moreira (text) and of Alison Benbow, Brian Dorsey and José Bidarra (English form).

The project team thanks all the students participating in the DIV.ED courses and the external experts for their contributions to the Guide evaluation. Our warm thanks go also to the colleagues Diana de Vallescar (Universidade Aberta) and Katharina Stößel (FernUniversität in Hagen), who contributed to lecturing and evaluating the DIV.ED courses.

Linz/Vienna, 30.09.2014

Dr. Susanna Buttaroni MSc
(DIV.ED Project Co-ordinator)

8. Nonverbal communication in the learning process

by Darlinda Moreira

In this chapter we are going to approach the topic of nonverbal communication, especially in connection to the learning process. We will propose some basic definitions of nonverbal communication and will discuss its functions and barriers. You will have the opportunity to analyse and reflect upon nonverbal messages codes. Finally, especial attention will be given to intercultural perspectives on and competences in nonverbal communication particularly in the context of the learning processes.

8.1 Nonverbal communication for learning in diverse contexts

Communication is essential for life and all human communities have a language to communicate. We communicate to socialise, to have fun, to get advice, to defend ideas, to learn, to laugh, to love and to construct a common knowledge. In short, the social act is eminently communicative. It is a vehicle to think and to express ourselves, and it also reflects knowledge in global and specific ways with the complexity that it requires.

Communication requires both context and interlocutors. Indeed, underlying the communicative process is a context and a social group that gives meaning to it (Gee, 1990). In educational settings, the negotiation of meanings and the interactions established among students and between students and teachers highlight the social and cultural aspects of communication and the relationship between them. These aspects are especially important because of the cultural diversity in contemporary classrooms and the multiple multicultural values and experiences of students and teachers within them. Moreover, because it is possible to find multiple linguistic contexts in classes that arise from students' native languages, from the language of the specific scientific fields, and even from the language of instruction that may be different from one's native language, the process of communication becomes highly complex as a result of the mix of different types of languages in both written and spoken forms.

A competent communicator must be able to address diverse people in different situations. And this is probably one reason why people, whilst communicating, produce a set of gestures and facial expressions, noises, body movements, eye contact, silence, touches, even the offering of small gifts. In short, a set of actions of nonverbal nature are produced in human interaction, even during verbal communication, this is linked to both the desire and the need to clarify communication. Nonverbal actions are intentionally sent by people to better understand each other while communicating. They have the potential for feedback and are interpreted as intentional.

“The study of nonverbal communication focuses on the messages people send to each other that do not contain words, such as messages sent through body motions; vocal qualities; and the use of time, space, artefacts, dress, and even smell.” (Neuliep, 2012, p. 286).

Indeed, much is communicated at a nonverbal level, and when we learn a spoken language we also learn various ways of nonverbal modes belonging to this code. If a person does not use the nonverbal mode of

communication in a proper way, the listener may think inappropriate things about the speaker and misunderstandings may happen. In fact, this is frequent when the speakers belong to different social groups and do not share the same nonverbal code.

In addition to actions performed in the moment of communication, humans also use their bodies to express who they are and their own identities while communicating – clothing and physical appearance smells and hairstyles are examples of frequent ways of transmitting group affiliation, professional status or adherence to an idea. Simple words, designs, symbols, and tables are also used in communication to show knowledge, experience, or skills that are part of shared cultural language. That is, there are several channels for nonverbal communication which are all put in motion in the communicative act:

- Kinesics - Communication with the body: body movements, eye contact and facial expressions;
- Paralanguage - the use of vocalisation: the voice, such as hissing, shushing, and whistling as volume, pitch, rate, and so forth;
- Proxemics – the space between ourselves and the others while communicating;
- Haptics – the use of touch in communication;
- Silence – different ways and functions of silence;
- Physical Appearance and Dress – the use of clothing, body style and hairdressing.

There are different perspectives regarding nonverbal communication. Some researchers believe that nonverbal communication is learned, others opine that it is innate and still others think that nonverbal communication is a communicative function. Indeed, we share with other species the capacity to communicate nonverbally, but there are also human-specific characteristics of nonverbal communication. In our point of view, there is evidence that sustains the three perspectives. Therefore, some gestures, such as smiling or crying, are used universally, although they may mean different things according to each culture and situation. Dressing and proxemics are learnt whilst immersed in our cultures, and we can look to paralanguage as a communicative function in the parallel way we look to verbal language.

TASK 8.1

Present an example from your own cultural nonverbal communication mode that illustrates each one of the channels indicated above. Compare some of your examples with your colleagues.

The environment also contributes to communication throughout nonverbal elements. Colours, space organisation, illumination and sounds are examples of contextual components that transmit meaning or add content to a specific situation. Usually blue is considered a “cold” colour and is used in formal environments and, depending on the culture; a different colour is associated with weddings, mourning, or other ceremonies and rituals.

To conclude, it is important to keep in mind that social groups do not share the same nonverbal codes. There are considerable differences not only among behaviours, but also about their interpretations. Thus, nonverbal communication varies across social groups and across cultures.

8.2 Functions of nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication has the function to contribute to communication and to regulate interaction. Whilst communicating, people use specific nonverbal elements that create impressions and meanings to contribute to interpretation. According to Jandt (2007), the most frequently performed functions of nonverbal communication are:

- Replacing spoken messages - For example, when we are abroad and we do not speak the local language, we tend to use gestures to communicate. Also symbols are a common way to communicate across different languages. In fact, in streets and highways, airports, hospitals and even in restaurants round the world it is possible to get information and communicate certain ideas.



Figure 8.1. Symbols to communicate cross-culturally.

- Sending uncomfortable messages – In some situations, it is easier to use nonverbal signals than words to communicate feelings and emotions. Moreover, there are gestures and sounds that are widely used to communicate emotions and other feelings. For example, when someone is walking and feels that he/she is falling down, most probably he/she will cry out. Or when a person is worried, she/he tends to perform some gestures that are used in this situation.
- Reinforcing and modifying verbal messages – Nonverbal communication is used to help to decode or encode verbal the messages. Small gestures and words like “yes”, for example, are abundantly used during a conversation as clues that give information on how the messages are being converged or interpreted. Thus, if you want to be ironic, for example, it will be important to use a corresponding intonation, e.g., by means of a certain voice, volume and pitch of the voice, otherwise the irony will be missing.
- Forming impressions to guide communication – Physical appearance and dress codes are common examples of nonverbal communication that humans use around the world to create communicational context or to provide information to others about situations and persons. For example, the way people dress to go to a graduation ceremony, a job interview or a rock concert is different. Also, if a person wants to show aspects of his/her ethnicity, gender or identity, symbols, hairstyles or clothes are good ways to form impressions and conduct communication. Indeed, as Jackson (2006, p. 323) highlights, “forms of body use are conditioned by our relationship with others, such as the way we come to regard bodily dispositions as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’”.
- Making relationships clear – When we speak to each other, messages not only transmit content, but also convey information about the relationships between speakers and what orientation it should take. For example, the volume of voice, the distance between people shows the presence of intimate,

personal, casual or public relationships (Jandt, 2007).

- Regulating interaction – This is an important nonverbal clue for the organisation of communication. In fact, it is through nonverbal signs that turn-taking is apprehended and conversation flows. People know when it is their turn in conversation because gestures, silences, and intonation indicates that to each other.

TASK 8.2

Observe the nonverbal behaviour of others around you for a day or two. Note at least one example of nonverbal behaviour used for each of the 5 functions indicated above. Write this out and be prepared to discuss your observations with your classmates.

8.3 Intercultural competences on nonverbal communication

The nonverbal component of communication can develop, damage or contradict the verbal aspects of our communication. As Shi and Fan (2010) pointed out “... miscommunication always occurred in the understanding of nonverbal behaviours because different social contexts might create extremely different rules for appropriate and effective use of nonverbal behaviours” (p. 114). This is even more the case during interactions among diverse people, where the effects upon nonverbal communication of the contexts in which the communication occurs are influenced by age, gender, location and culture. Indeed, nonverbal communication plays even a more important role when people from different cultures meet together and are engaged in intercultural communication. In these cases, they are more likely to look for nonverbal cues to clarify verbal communication.

As you read in chapter 2 and in chapter 7, there are barriers to intercultural communication, especially if people do not share few channels of nonverbal communication, and misunderstandings may arise because nonverbal cues are wrongly interpreted. Indeed, as Birdwhistel (1990, p. 34) notes, “Just as there are no universal words, no sound complexes, which carry the same meaning the world over, there are no body movements, facial expressions, or gestures which provoke identical responses the world over.” For example, depending on the social group, the gesture in Fig. 8.2 can have the meaning of a greeting (in a surf context, for example), a sign used in the American Sign Language or a cow in a rural area in the USA. In other social groups, like for example in some zone in the interior of Portugal, it may be even offensive.

Moreover, difficulties in intercultural communication may arise not only from individual differences but also from power relations and struggles over ethnicity and nationalities. Indeed, ethnic stereotypes as well as labels about the more socially disadvantaged may lead to discrimination that withdraw predisposition to interpret nonverbal cues and hide communication in general.

Finally, cultural conceptions about communication and about what is appropriated to communicate are other important elements to communicate cross-culturally.



Figure 8.2. The same gestures for different meanings.

TASK 8.3

Describe one or two situations in which you were misled by nonverbal cues.

TASK 8.4

Provide five examples that indicate the existence of different cultures around you (for example in your educational setting). Use each example:

- i) to highlight some aspects of nonverbal communication that you have learned;
- ii) to present a list of what was more difficult for you whilst communicating with people from different cultures.

Nowadays, information technologies like the Internet are introducing new modes of communication that make it easy to communicate transnationally and cross-culturally. Even distance and asynchronous communication have their special nonverbal communication ways to express feelings and provide help for interpretation. Indeed, in the Internet, nonverbal characters are crucial for more active and non-distorted communication. Examples like “LOL” or 🤔 🤔 were created to express laughs and feelings that were otherwise difficult to convey verbally in virtual environments like chat rooms. Ultimately, they display the human need for both nonverbal and verbal communication and to achieve a better cross-cultural communication.

Summary

In this chapter we addressed the nonverbal dimension of communication. Beginning with a definition of what is meant by nonverbal communication, we next directed the focus to the several channels that constitute the nonverbal communication mode that people use to communicate with each other. The function of each component was illustrated and analysed to show that, although the same nonverbal elements are used in all cultures, these elements are not only performed differently in communication but their meanings also vary cross-culturally.

Further reading

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Study questions

- Outline the principal characteristics of nonverbal communication.
- Describe strategies that can be implemented to overcome barriers and facilitate communication.
- Discuss the awareness of one's own nonverbal communication and present ideas to overcome eventual misunderstandings that may occur in nonverbal communication.
- Present a few examples of diversity in nonverbal communication.
- Reflect on aspects of intercultural communication that you have experienced. What suggestions about nonverbal communication would you give to a friend who is going to study in a foreign country?

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