

Choosing My Gestures Wisely

By Matthew A. Dal Santo

I used to think of tutoring as solely a verbal activity. We do, after all, most often consider what we say to the student about their work. Shortly after becoming a writing tutor, I began to meet regularly with Carol, an international, returning-adult student. She was sensitive about her skills as a writer, so I tried not to "attack" her work specifically when pointing out problems, but rather, refer to "especially troublesome issues that all writers encounter." At the same time, I did not want to over-generalize, causing her to overlook the advice being given. Despite my attempts at mitigating my own criticism of her work, she regularly took offense to what I said.

Carol used gestures when she spoke to me, and plenty of them. So many in fact, that I found myself gesturing more when I was around her. During one of our meetings, as Carol and I searched for a thesis in her "Tower of Babel" essay, I noticed myself making a gesture that I had done unconsciously many times before: I pointed my finger. I pointed at the ceiling when saying something especially important; I pointed toward the English department when referring to the paper's audience; and most importantly, I pointed to her paper when illustrating one of these "common problems in writing." Being a frequent user of hand gestures herself, she must have derived more meaning from my body language than I had even intended.

I began to experiment. I found that when I placed my hand on her paper, or pointed directly at it when referring generally to issues in writing, she usually began to leaf through her paper, looking for an example of the problem. Sometimes she became defensive, claiming not to have ever made this mistake, specifically. If I smiled when pointing out a problem in the text, she most often responded likewise, nodding her head in agreement, leaning back in her chair as if to say, "You're right, this does need work." It was only when I failed to smile, deliberately stripping away the "sugar coating" from my words that she abjured her confidence in my advice.

Having realized the effects that my body language had on the writing session, I am able to adjust my posture and gestures according to what approach I feel my students need. Just as an ESL student may need a more hands-on, directive form of tutoring in order to fully grasp the mechanics of English, or a native speaker might sooner prefer a conversation about their writing process, I now spend the first few minutes of the session getting a feel of the student's own body language. This allows me not only to consider what messages my inadvertent gestures might imply, but also to match the intensity of my non-verbal communication to that of the student.

Writing centers everywhere are evolving to meet their students' constantly-changing technological demands, and soon, there may not be a need for a discussion of this kind; but for now, we are still engaging our students face-to-face, using our bodies and our voices. I know now that my body speaks a language of its own. So I consider the type of educator I would like to become, and literally use my whole being to help me become it.