

Global Module Outline: **ARE GESTURES UNIVERSALLY UNDERSTANDABLE?**

Purpose and rationale of Module

Non-verbal communication makes up to 93% of all communication, and a good portion of it is done through gestures. We assume these gestures to be universally understood, yet they are the cause and reason for much miscommunication among peoples of different cultures. The purpose of this module is for participants to become aware of their own use of gestures as support and conveyor of cultural information; to realize that this method of communication is important yet culturally-laden; and that the assignment of meaning to gesture is both arbitrary and significant in a given culture.

Define the structure of the module (could be a unit plan, a lesson plan, a case study, a series of readings and activities, a collection of resources and how to use them, etc.).

The module consists of

1. A series of videotaped cultural vignettes recorded by the participant(s) showcasing contextualized examples of the participant's or participants' culturally-laden gestures or facial expressions; and
2. Videotaped interviews of natives from cultures different from the module participants as to their understanding of the different gestures and facial expressions as obtained in #1.

Connections to Global learning outcomes

- Understands one's own culture in a global context
- Demonstrates knowledge of other cultures

An application question or a concrete "so what" question – why would someone care about this module? This would be helpful for whoever is taking this unit and using it. What is it you hope the reader of this unit (faculty, student or others) would be able to answer or address as a result of completing this module?

One way to understand that culture is learned and that misunderstandings may stem from not being aware of one's culturally-motivated behaviors is to look at gestures and facial expressions. Do all "speakers" of a culture understand some gestures/facial expressions the same way, and use them in the same contexts? Do these gestures/facial expressions have the same meanings and uses among all peoples who speak the same language but live in different countries (i.e. English in Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, the U.S., etc.)? Do these same gestures/facial expressions have the same or different meanings, or any meaning at all, in other cultures? This module aims at helping participants reevaluate some of their assumptions related to the universality of non-verbal communication, and in particular of gestures and facial expressions.

Step-by-Step procedures or definition of options (this may include an explanation of the Activities and a preferred sequence, if there is one, or simply a paragraph overview of how to best use this module)

Participants in the module are to:

1. Identify 10 gestures and/or facial expressions (at least 3 must be related or important to their area of study or expertise) that have been ascribed a certain cultural meaning in their first culture, such as sticking one's tongue out, making a V with the index and middle finger, nodding one's head, making a T shape with the hands, placing one's elbows on the table, etc.;

2. Videotape themselves or others from the same culture demonstrating the gestures and/or facial expression in context, and explaining their significance/meaning(s) and uses;
3. Find representatives of at least 2 other cultures around the world, show them the videotaped gestures/facial expressions, and ask them to explain their meaning(s) and significance in their respective cultures;
 - a. If the meaning/use of a particular gesture/facial expression is different in their culture, participants are to obtain a detailed description and optimally a videotaped demonstration of the different meaning(s) and uses in context;
 - b. If the gesture/facial expression makes no sense to the representative of the other culture, participants are then to obtain a detailed description and optimally a videotaped, contextualized demonstration of another gesture/facial expression that has a cultural significance in the other's culture;
4. Reflect on
 - a. The meaning, significance and uses of particular gestures/facial expressions in their own cultures and in their own areas of study or expertise;
 - b. The similarities and differences of uses and meanings of gestures/facial expressions in their and others' cultures;
 - c. The arbitrariness and learned nature of non-verbals (particularly gestures and facial expressions) in culture;
 - d. How this activity informs their developing understanding of cultural relationships and knowledge as it relates to their area of study or expertise.

An assessments of outcomes

A rubric is under development.

A list of Resources (either that were used to create the unit and/or those that might be helpful for additional study on this topic or problem)

- Communicating with gestures www.everythingsl.net/in-services/body_language.php
- Wikipedia www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/gesture
- Azar, Beth: What's in a face? Do facial expressions reflect inner feelings? Or are they social devices for influencing others? www.apa.org January 2000, vol.31, no. 1
- Shea, Christopher: Facial expressions: as much nurture as nature? [Blogs.wsj.com](http://blogs.wsj.com), April 19, 2012
- Mestel, Rosie: Do facial expressions convey the same expressions across the world? Articles.latimes.com, April 17, 2012

Extension:

- Creating a bank of gestures/facial expression that is:
 - Universally understood, or understood in several cultures
 - Unique to a culture
- Creating a tutorial/webpage of gestures/facial expressions
 - For people interested in knowing more about what gestures/facial expressions mean in a given language and
 - How/when they are used
 - Through a 3-D character model program such as *Poser 8* (after the <http://www.simplybodylanguage.com> model for example)
- Having a video loop of those different gestures/facial expressions during a cultural fair on campus or any other culturally-motivated event to help spreading awareness

- Doing a pragmatics activities with preservice students, i.e. asking preservice students to recognize some commonly-used gestures/facial expressions in the U.S. classroom, and to compare it with some of the gestures/facial expressions identified in the module activity, and try to identify which would not be readily understandable to students of other cultures, could be misinterpreted, and would have to be taught to children/explained to parents.