

ESTABLISHING A HELPING RELATIONSHIP: FACILITATING NON-VERBAL AND VERBAL COMMUNICATION

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A fundamental means by which a tutor builds a relationship with a tutee is through establishing a well-functioning process of communication. Effective communication is essential to the building of trust, the imparting of information, and to the successful resolution of any problem-solving effort. Indeed, effective communication between the tutor and the tutee is a cornerstone of a successful tutoring experience, and as such, can be a formidable process. A well-trained tutor must juggle many tasks, such as initiating conversation, establishing rapport, listening attentively, asking questions, remembering details, providing instruction, allowing for practice, making referrals, and terminating the session. It is, thus, important that the tutor have the communication skills needed to engage the tutee in an effective learning process.

The means by which people communicate are both verbal and non-verbal. Individuals can have an accurate grasp of effective verbal language skills and still have problems communicating because of the non-verbal messages that are transmitted (Egan, 1990). For instance, a tutor who takes the verbal messages of the tutee to be literal without taking into account the non-verbal facets of communication will have difficulty forming a connection with the tutee and establishing a workable relationship. Indeed, it is through both verbal and non-verbal messages that tutors and tutees discover accurate meaning from each other. It is, thus, important that tutees have the skills needed to interpret the range of messages that are an inherent part of the tutorial process.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In a tutorial relationship, as in most other relationships, much of what is communicated between two individuals is done non-verbally. By paying attention to non-verbal patterns of communication, tutors can gain useful insight and meaning from tutees and also sharpen their own communication skills. Body posture, gestures and facial expressions are commonly used to communicate messages and meaning non-verbally (Murphy & Dillion, 2003). In the counseling field, counselors must look at verbal and non-verbal means for communication with clients. Cultural aspects influence that communication.

Tutors, like counselors, must be aware that cultural groups may also have different patterns of communication that can impact the helping relationship. Having an understanding of the range of expressions within cultures will facilitate effective communication between tutor and tutee. At the same time, while it is important to be informed on various cultural practices, it is also important to avoid stereotyping or typecasting tutees based on their culture. Tutors should avoid expecting certain expressions from tutees because of their cultural backgrounds, given that ultimately, there are variations of non-verbal expression within cultures. They should simply be aware of these issues so they can exercise a broader range of possibilities when interpreting non-verbal messages. As such, the communication patterns of the tutee are not misinterpreted. Tutors must examine their abilities to make inferences from non-verbal expressions and to test these assumptions, rather than to assume them, when in doubt.

Body posture often reveals much about a person's mental, physical or emotional state and communicates added meaning to verbal messages. For instance, if a tutor is sitting erect and not slouching, it conveys to the tutee that the tutor is confident and ready to assist. If a

tutee is sitting with shoulders hunched, the tutor may surmise that the tutee is tired, bored, or disinterested. Gestures such as tapping feet, shrugging shoulders, clenching fists, and using hand movements may communicate added meaning. Excessive hand gesturing, in addition, may interfere with verbal messages. For example, a tutee may be frustrated by the use of excessive hand gestures of a well-intentioned tutor since these gestures may be distracting and break concentration.

Smiling, frowning, raising eyebrows, and the lack of or uses of eye contact are examples of facial expressions that also convey meaning when participants are communicating. In our culture, middle-class patterns call for direct eye contact in communication. In contrast, within the Asian culture, some people tend to avoid eye contact as a sign of respect to one another. Such is also the case within the traditional Hispanic culture. In this context, authority is generally honored, and individuals with power are shown respect in myriad ways. Using direct eye contact could be seen as challenging authority when a power differential exists, so subordinates often avert their glance in deference to those with authority. Tutors, by the nature of their roles, assume positions of authority. Having an awareness of these issues can only facilitate communication between tutor and tutee.

Exercise 1

The tutors in training are placed in triads (groups of three). One tutor, in pantomime form, role-plays a non-verbal gesture. The other members of the group attempt to identify the unspoken feelings of the tutor. The group of three compares their interpretations with the desired expression in the role-plays. Tutors are then able to identify the consistency with

which they are able to “read” the non-verbal messages of others and to develop the social skills necessary for this form of communication.

According to Devito (1998), there are six major ways in which non-verbal messages are used with verbal messages to convey meaning: (a) accent, (b) complement, (c) contradict, (d) control, (e) repeat, and (f) substitute. Non-verbal communication is sometimes used to accent or emphasize some part of the verbal message. A tutor might, for example, smile approvingly when praising a tutee for a correct response. Non-verbal communication is sometimes used to complement or add nuances of meaning to a verbal message. For instance, a tutor might put a “thumbs up” (to suggest good effort) when praising a tutor for a correct response after the tutee has faltered on several attempts to solve an equation. Non-verbal communication is sometimes used purposely to contradict a verbal message. For instance, a tutor might contradict her verbal message by winking to indicate that words should not be taken seriously.

Non-verbal communication may also be used to control the flow of verbal messages as when the tutors, for example, put up their hands to stop the tutee from finishing an incorrect response. Sometimes, non-verbal communication is used to repeat or restate a verbal message. For, example, tutors may give a questioning look or lean forward as they indicate that it is time for the tutee to respond. Non-verbal communication is also used to substitute for verbal messages such as when a tutor nods to indicate yes.

Because non-verbal communications are open to interpretation, forming accurate interpretations is important. Successful interpretation facilitates ongoing communication and assists the tutee in feeling understood. Many forms of nonverbal communications can be interpreted fairly easily. For example, most people would notice that when a person is

frowning, he or she is communicating displeasure or discomfort of one form or another. The person could also be pondering a situation. Other forms of non-verbal communication may be more difficult and are open to further interpretation. A helper who is able to notice and draw on the non-verbal means of communicating by the helpee is better able to connect with and ultimately serve the needs of the tutee (Okun, 1997).

Exercise 2

Introduce the tutors in training to the six ways non-verbal messages are used with verbal messages to convey meaning. Then show a 5-minute videotape of a tutoring session (either real or role-play). While the tape is playing, tutors are instructed to identify examples of each of the non-verbal communication patterns (accent, complement, contradict, control, repeat and substitute). After the video, instruct the tutors to reflect on the non-verbal communication patterns they found to be useful, effective, and clear. Tutors can then identify the ineffective, confusing, and unclear messages that could be easily misinterpreted by the tutee.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In addition to the non-verbal patterns just discussed, there are some very specific verbal means of communication that assist tutors in reaching their goals of providing helpful tutoring. These goals can be accomplished by listening, attending to, and responding to the tutees in such a way so that they know they have been heard and understood. By attending to the tutee, the tutor communicates to the tutee that he/she is respected, and that the tutor is interested in what it is that the tutee has to say. Using verbal statements, the tutor asks direct questions, following the lead of the tutee, which deepens the discussions and generates free

expression. It is important that the tutor listen to the tutee and refrain from interrupting the tutee or changing the subject.

Effective teaching and learning can take place when tutors communicate encouragement, support, respect, and non-judgmental acceptance. The following verbal communication behaviors facilitate learning.

Paraphrasing: “Let me see if I got this straight . . .” When tutors paraphrase, they use verbal statements that communicate what they have heard and understood the tutee to say.

For example, a tutee may say, “Things are falling apart at my house. Everything is in chaos. My girlfriend looks like she’s ready to dump me. I just can’t seem to concentrate on my studying right now.” The helper, in return, would paraphrase these statements with something along the lines of “It’s really tough going in your relationship, and that is making things difficult for you to study.”

Clarifying: “Are you upset because you disappointed yourself or because you disappointed others?” In clarifying, tutors attempt to bring into focus the concerns or questions of the tutees. This skill makes an assumption regarding the tutee’s communication and asks further questions when such clarification is necessary. As such, the tutor acknowledges confusion about the tutee’s statement and restates the comment or asks for further clarification or illustration.

Reflection: “What I hear you saying is . . .” In reflecting, tutors communicate what they understand the tutee to have said. We can reflect what we hear or what we infer. We can also reflect what we observe as well as specific content. Using the example above, a tutor could reflect back to the tutee the following: “You are really having a hard time, given

all that is happening in your relationship. It sounds like you are at a loss as to what to do, especially with your studying.”

Interpretation: “Perhaps the problem is . . .” When a tutor interprets information for the tutee, the tutor adds information to the tutor’s statement and helps the tutee understand his or her confusing feelings. For example, the tutee may comment, “I just can’t seem to please my professor. I keep working on my paper revisions but I never seem to get it right. She seems so unappreciative of my work.” The tutor, in return, could add, “It sounds like you are resenting your professor since you receive so little acknowledgment for your efforts.”

Indirect and Direct Questioning: “What areas would you like to address first with your math homework?” Tutors utilize questioning skills to assist the tutee in exploring their situations and options. Questions are used both to bring the needs of the tutee into focus as well as to direct the tutee to a particular issue. When the point of the exercise is to help the tutee examine or explore a situation, it is important to ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered by “yes” or “no.” Tutors would instead use questions that begin with “How” or “What.”

It is also important that the tutor asks questions that generate clarity. Asking too many questions can feel badgering to the tutee. Clarity can be gained when the questions help focus the tutee on the issue.

Exercise 3

Tutors in training are placed in triads. The facilitator prepares role-play scenarios for each group of a tutoring situation in which the tutee is expressing some kind of feeling. One student (tutee) is asked to present a tutoring-related problem to the other. The other (the tutor) is asked to paraphrase the tutee’s message. The third participant (observer) notes her

or his interpretation of the experience of both the tutor and tutee and provides feedback. Repeat the exercise and allow each participant to practice the skills of paraphrasing, reflecting, clarifying, interpreting, and questioning.

Just as productive verbal communication facilitates connection and assists in the helping process, non-productive verbal communication can impede this process (Okun, 1997). We have listed below some examples of unproductive responses that impede learning and communicate perceived superiority by the tutor and impatience toward the tutee.

- Interrupting: “Here, let me show you” (while student is trying to explain/master)
- Cajoling: “Come on, come on, you can do it, come on . . .”
- Exhorting: “If you had kept up with your work . . .”
- Preaching: “If you would do this, you could . . .”
- Teasing: “My baby brother could do this!”
- Shaming: “I can’t believe you’re not getting this. It’s really simple.”
- Patronizing: “I know this is sooo hard for you. I’ll try to teach this to you.”
- Using clichés: “No need to worry.”
- Changing the Subject: “Did I tell you . . .?”

Regardless of the intention, these forms of communication frustrate the tutee and block helpful learning within the tutoring relationship. Tutor trainers should provide ample opportunities for tutors to recognize these unhelpful communication patterns.

Exercise 4

Tutors in training are placed into triads. The facilitator prepares role-play scenarios that include examples of unproductive verbal responses. For example, the tutee is experiencing a problem. The tutor uses a non-productive, albeit possibly well-meaning,

response (see above). The third person (observer) notes his or her internal feeling as she/he witnesses this exchange and then provides feedback. The tutee should also reflect on how it felt to hear such a response.

This exercise is useful in assisting tutors to experience empathy for others who are struggling and to highlight ways in which good intentions can become hurtful if the tutors are not aware of or in tune with their own feelings and the feelings of others.

Productive verbal responses assist tutees in understanding the tutor, taking in the information, practicing as needed, and ultimately mastering the content. Non-productive verbal responses inhibit, threaten, and belittle the tutee while ultimately thwarting the learning process. Mastering positive and effective communication skills is essential to delivering superior tutorial services and creating memorable learning experiences for both tutor and tutee. And given that our early experiences impact our behaviors in later life, the tutee will be in a better position to “pass along” the positive experience to others as the cycle of learning continues.

Final Exercise

Invite two members of your training group to role-play scenario 1 and another two members to role-play scenario 2 in front of the group. Each role-play will last about 3 minutes.

- Role-play scenario 1: The tutee asks the tutor for help with an English paper assignment. The tutee is upset that he or she made a failing grade on the last writing assignment and blames the teacher and the former tutor for the lack of success on this paper. The tutor’s goal is to try to establish a trusting relationship,

provide empathy and help the tutee overcome the initial anger through the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

- Role-play scenario 2: Use the same role-play as above except this time the tutor becomes defensive and lectures the tutee on taking responsibility for his or her own actions. It is evident through the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication that the tutor has become very frustrated and fails to establish a trusting relationship, provide empathy and help the tutee overcome the initial anger.

The facilitator should then assist the group on processing the role-plays. Specifically, the facilitator should help the group identify both verbal and non-verbal communication, which were both helpful and hurtful in establishing a helping relationship.

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