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Body Language During In-Person and Online University Lectures: The Professor's View

Dr. Giuliana Salvato

During the Winter semester 2022, 521 Professors teaching in different Departments and Faculties of the University of Windsor received an email invitation to fill out a Qualtrics survey that investigated the role of the body during their lectures. The aim of the study was twofold: to inquire about Professors' awareness of their body language during teaching in-person and online; and Professors' observation and interpretation of students' body language during class. 89 Professors submitted their responses, although participants did not necessarily answer all the questions of the survey. A summative analysis of the results here follows.

To begin with, the majority of the Professors think that their usage of the body is more prominent and recurrent while teaching in-person. Professors stated that they noticed a reduced range of body language types while teaching online. For example, Professors said that when online, they can no longer walk around the classroom or cannot use large gestures, or they need to rely on their voice more extensively, or their face acquires a more focused role. Generally, Professors offered a more detailed description of their body language during teaching in-person. This suggests that when in a physical classroom, Professors may be more aware of their body and value its educational and communicative role while teaching. In a few cases, however, Professors provided the same answer for both class types, suggesting that for them the teaching format did not make a difference in body language usage. These Professors were able to adopt some strategies to continue to teach as their usual even when online. Moreover, for some Professors it was easier to reflect on the role of the body during class because they teach disciplines that require the study of the body (i.e., Human Kinetics, Drama, Nursing, Music). Having said so, Professors from Faculties that would be less expected to contribute their answers (e.g., Engineering) did show sensitivity towards the topic of this study and provided their comments.

With regard to the Professors' observation of their students' body language, participants stated that they do notice students' body language, or lack thereof, during class. Professors could describe the body parts involved in the movements (i.e., students' face, hands, and posture, in particular) or they offered an interpretation of the students' body movements (e.g., fatigue, boredom). In comparison to when they teach in-person, comments regarding students' body language online were less informative because, as the professors said, most students keep their camera off. Hence it is impossible to comment on students' body language. Those Professors who described students' body language online stated that face and hands stand out in particular. Interestingly, in some cases new body language emerged in the online modality (e.g., students' "thumbs up and down" recur online more than in-person). Also, some Professors acknowledged a sense of difficulty or awkwardness in using body language while online, not only for themselves but also for the students (e.g., "...they like me are also attempting to make eye contact except it doesn't come out..").

This study suggests the following general considerations. The body plays a salient (i.e., frequent) role in the context of university teaching and learning, especially in in-person classes. In some disciplines, the use of the body is not only salient but essential (i.e., Drama, Nursing, Human Kinetics, Music). Some body parts become more prominent depending on the teaching format: "posture" is more salient in-person vs. "hands and face" are more salient online. This

study found confirmation of the fact that the body is relevant across different disciplines because it is integrative to speech. Speech alone is not sufficient for Professors to conduct teaching and for students to learn. Moreover, body language usage is triggered by external sources such as teaching a specific discipline (e.g., teaching Music requires showing the emotions that a musical piece creates through body movements), but also by its intrinsic features (i.e., visual and kinesthetic) that help create or illustrate meaning.

Although this study has its own limitations, which the participants themselves pointed out in their final comments (e.g., “not allowing a more or less type of answer”), it offered an opportunity for Professors to reflect on theirs and their students’ body language usage and functions during university lectures, in-person and online.