



# The Culture Hour

A CASUAL FORUM FOR STUDENT INSIGHTS,  
QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS ABOUT CULTURE

Notes from 9/17/2008

Dear Students,

We had another intellectually stimulating meeting last week in which we discussed non-verbal communication...specifically eye-contact and physical distance.

Here are my thoughts:

- **experts say that 90% of communication is non-verbal;**
- **all of non-verbal communication is culturally sensitive;**
- **most people read and process non-verbal communication SUBCONSCIOUSLY;**
- **most people are not in the habit of questioning the conclusions they draw from non-verbal communication;**

**WOW!**

When you think about the facts above, it is amazing that we ever have an effective communication exchange! In a short conversation with you, my eyes and brain are busy taking in all kinds of information – and drawing conclusions based on my culturally influenced assumptions...but if I am basing it on a false assumption, then my CONCLUSION is false as well!

**For example, eye contact.**

If I am your teacher questioning you about your homework that is not completed and you avert eye contact, look at the floor, I will draw the conclusion that you are lying, which is very disrespectful by the way, because my cultural assumption tells me that people who avoid eye contact are probably lying. **But, wait!** You are avoiding eye contact because you are showing me respect!

**What about Americans and eye contact?**

- In general, Americans value eye contact;
- Eye contact shows respect;
- Parents teach their children
- Eye contact shows a degree of honesty;
- Eye contact also shows closeness and intimacy;
- My family tends to keep longer eye contact than other Americans – that is my family culture;
- How much eye contact is acceptable is hard to pinpoint...
- If you make too much eye contact, it can make everyone uncomfortable, too little and you might be considered dishonest!
- Staring is definitely impolite;

SO....

**What do you think?!?**

Kimberly

# TERAH'S THOUGHTS AND NOTES:

Dear students,

As usual, I would like to thank everyone who took some time to attend our second meeting. I would also like to apologize for the change of the day (of the week) we usually meet (from Tuesday to Wednesday). The change seems to have affected several students, judging from the number that attended last week's meeting. We greatly missed those who did not attend, and I urge you to come to this week's meeting.

We had a very lively discussion with members who attended, and it was an enlightening session. Last week's topic/s was/were about eye contact and personal space. We discussed the purpose of eye contact in the American culture and duration of eye contact. We also shared information about eye contact in the perspective of our own cultures. In addition, appropriate personal space in American culture and other cultures was discussed. The following adds some information to what we had already shared.

## Eye Contact

The information below is adapted from:

<http://www.matthewarnoldstern.com/tips/tipps16.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye\\_contact#Social\\_meanings\\_of\\_eye\\_contact](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye_contact#Social_meanings_of_eye_contact)

### **Purpose:**

- ✓ Show attentiveness and personal involvement
- ✓ Sincerity and openness
- ✓ Retention and Recall (Wikipedia)

### **How to use it correctly:**

- Duration:

It might work to match the duration of eye contact to that of the other person. If he/she is comfortable maintaining longer periods of eye contact, then do so. However, if she/he is uncomfortable, then shorter but frequent eye contact would work.

- People from other cultures

It's my guess that students from cultures that do not encourage eye contact have already been in situations where eye contact is required. I can imagine how uncomfortable it is to be in such situations. The good news is that the uncomfortable feeling due to maintaining eye contact is surmountable. Start small by maintaining eye contact for brief periods such as one second, and gradually increase the duration to appropriate or desired level. It might take some time for the desired level to be achieved, but remember be persistent.

### **Cultural differences:**

- US

Eye contact in the US is expected. Therefore, if you are having problems with eye contact and you want to ensure a happy socialization in the US, it would be important for you to start working on eye contact. I would also like to inform you that I am available to help students deal with such issues and many others. Feel free to contact me if you need further help. Other cultures, e.g. African culture, encourage minimal eye contact.

## **Personal space**

The information below is adapted from:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proxemics>

- Personal space is another important area that is valued in western cultures, probably even more important than eye contact. You will agree that a person would be outraged if you violate their personal space than when you fail to maintain eye. However, all rules of interaction are important and they should be respected and upheld.
- The following is a rough guide (adapted from Wikipedia) of approximate distances you need to maintain when interacting with other people. For more information, consult the above link.

### **Suggested distances:**

#### **Intimate interactions**

6 to 18 inches (15 - 45 cm)

#### **Interaction with close friends**

1.5 to 4 feet (45 – 120 cm)

#### **Interaction with acquaintances**

4 to 12 feet (1.2 – 3.6m)

#### **Interaction in a public setting**

12 to 25 feet (3.6 - 7.5 m)

*The information above is adapted from:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proxemics>