

Nonverbal Communication and At First Sight

By: Kristie Hille
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Mary Campbell

The movie, At First Sight, starring Val Kilmer and Mira Sorvino is a great example of the power and limitations of nonverbal communication. It is the story of Virgil Adamson, who has been blind since the age of 3. He is now a middle-aged man, living in the small resort town that he grew up in. Virgil works as a massage therapist at the resort, where he meets a woman named Amy Benic. During Amy's short visit to the resort, the two fall in love. Virgil opens Amy's eyes to the whole new world of the blind. She is amazed and intrigued by how much he gets out of life even though he is blind. When Amy learns of a surgical procedure that may be able to restore Virgil's sight, he decides to do it, after some persuading. He wants to be with Amy in her hometown of New York and feels that he has nothing to lose by having the surgery. The surgery is successful at restoring his sight, but Virgil is very confused at what he sees. Since he doesn't have any memory of sight, he does not visually recognize anything, but rather has to touch and feel things to recognize what they are.

Virgil has a tough time learning to live in a seeing world, but works hard to try to function and learn to live as Amy does. Many challenges arise that find him frustrated and alone. Amy is there for him during all of his challenges and offers what support she can, even though she may not understand all that he is going through.

Throughout the film, there are many communication issues that are presented. Not only do we see the difference in nonverbal communication used between the blind and seeing, but the changes in communication for Virgil once he regains his sight. Before we go over the communication issues that are shown in the film, let us take a closer look at what is considered nonverbal communication and how important it is in our lives.

Nonverbal communication is one of the many ways by which people communicate with one another. This method of communication is used as much, if not more often, than verbal communication. As defined on page 223 of the text, Looking Out

Looking In, nonverbal communication consists of “messages that are expressed by other than linguistic means.” This suggests that nonverbal communication not only includes gestures, movements, facial expressions, and touch, but also includes noises and vocal expressions such as tone, pitch, and loudness of voice, sighs, screams, laughs, and the like.

Between cultures and genders, there are some differences in the meanings and expressions of nonverbal communication. Some signs and gestures may have completely opposite meanings from culture to culture. There are also differences in what is considered the norm for different cultures, in areas such as eye contact and personal space, as well as general difference in how outgoing or reserved communication styles are. Despite these differences, individuals are able to adjust their communication styles to fit another culture, once they are aware of the differences. There are also nonverbal expressions that are universal, that help to make communication between cultures possible with a little work, understanding, and patience.

When we think of nonverbal communication, we often only think of facial expressions or gestures, but in fact, there are many different types of nonverbal communication, some of which were mentioned above. The types mentioned in Looking Out Looking In include: body orientation, posture, gestures, face and eyes, voice, touch, physical attractiveness, clothing, distance, territoriality, physical environment, and time.

Given the vast amount of communication that can fall into the nonverbal category, it is easy to see how important it is to learn, understand, and pay attention to this form of communication. Although nonverbal messages can be ambiguous, we can learn the general meaning behind most of these messages and how to determine what was meant by the nonverbal communication we receive from others. If necessary, we can clarify with the individual who communicated to us what their true meaning was.

Nonverbal communication can either be intentional or unintentional. Either way, it is impossible not to display some sort of nonverbal expression. This can be understood given the wide range of types of nonverbal communication, and when we realize that we often make facial expressions, fidget, twitch nervously, and other such acts without meaning to.

In relation to verbal messages, nonverbal communication can be repeating, substituting, complementing, accenting, regulating, contradicting, or deceiving the given verbal message. In many instances nonverbal expressions are helpful in supporting the verbal messages we are sending. In other situations, our true intentions can be seen in our nonverbal communication, even if our words contradict it. In such cases, people rely more on the meaning of the nonverbal messages, as they may show someone's true intentions and help to reveal a person's attitudes and feelings.

In At First Sight, we learn how different communication is for the blind. The majority of Virgil's communication with others and the world around him is done through sound and touch. Since he grew up in the same town in which he still lives, he has memorized the town and where everything is, such as the sidewalks, stores, trees, and other obstacles. When Virgil was showing Amy around the town, he was able to point out everything to her. He knew when the librarian was approaching by the sound of her dilapidated car, and he was even able to inform Amy it was going to rain by picking up on the scents and sounds. The rain also revealed to Amy how reliant Virgil was on sounds. When they ducked into an abandoned building to get out of the rain, Virgil was able to tell Amy about the structure and dimensions of the building based on the sounds of the rain falling down on and around it.

Virgil is completely reliant on all of his senses besides his sight. All of his nonverbal communication (both the communication he touch. He is not able to see facial expressions, gestures, body orientation, and such other things that seeing individuals

touch. He is not able to see facial expressions, gestures, body orientation, and such other things that seeing individuals rely on. Although Virgil has learned to get along well in his life, there are aspects of communicating that hinder him. He and Amy had a few problems understanding each other, as Virgil was unable to see Amy's facial expressions and gestures. Amy did a good job adjusting to him and did her best to explain things that Virgil could not see, such a facial expression she was trying to communicate to him. She let him feel and touch her face to see what she looked like and to show him that she was smiling, as he was not able to see her expressing her happiness to be with him. Amy took the time to explain to him what the abandoned building and surrounding area looked like, as Virgil had never seen it, and no one else had even told him the building was there. She also explains the concept of the horizon to him when she was speaking of it in a story she was telling. Although this was a concept that was foreign to him, Amy was able to be descriptive enough to help him to understand.

The patience and understand that Amy and Virgil showed for one another is a great example of how anyone can learn to communicate with someone who comes from a different background or culture. Although it may take some time and work, two individuals who want to form any type of relationship, whether it be for social or business reasons, can learn to adjust to each other's communication styles. Amy was patient enough to explain things to Virgil in ways that were familiar to him and would help him to understand. Virgil was also very understanding with Amy and helped her feel comfortable around him and his lifestyle that was very different for her.

Virgil's communication issues change greatly when he has the surgery that restores his sight. When he first opened his eyes after the surgery, Virgil is very confused by all that he sees. He even says "this can't be seeing". He does not understand what he sees, as he has no visual memory. Since he has no memory of ever

seeing, he does not associate the images he is now seeing with objects or people. Virgil still relies on hearing and touching to recognize what he sees. When both Amy and Virgil's sister, Jenny, are standing before him in the hospital, he does not know which one is which, until they speak to him and he is able to associate each of them to their voice. Later on, when he visits a therapist, he does not realize the difference between an apple and a picture of an apple. Virgil also has a great deal of trouble with dimensions and depth perception.

Virgil begins to get very overwhelmed with all of the sights he is bombarded with as he begins to see for the first time. Just trying to take in all that he sees and experiences when his eyes are open is almost too much for him. When he is going home to Amy's apartment after leaving the hospital, Amy has the apartment full of balloons and flowers. This was meant to be a welcome for him and a celebration of his new sight. Virgil is shocked and taken back by the sight, as it feels like an overload for his eyes. The many colors and images were too much for him to take in at once.

Communication for Virgil becomes more difficult at this point. When he is speaking to Amy, he does not recognize her emotions as expressed on her face. Since he has never seen facial expressions, he has to ask her what the different expressions she uses mean. As Amy often shows facial expressions and other non-verbal expressions unintentionally, she starts to get impatient when trying to recognize her own meanings and explain each of these to Virgil. Virgil is also now able to see the interaction between Amy and her ex-husband, and for the first time "sees" jealousy. These complications in communication start to put a distance between Virgil and Amy. Virgil has a hard time adjusting to the seeing world that he was never exposed to until this time. He feels very alone and isolated for the first time. He does not look people in the eyes when he is speaking to them, as he has never done this before. He does not realize the importance of paying attention to a person's facial expressions, gestures,

body language, orientation, and the like. As he is experiencing this, we can see that most people pay attention to these details without even realizing it. This helps us to learn about how someone is feeling toward us, if they are comfortable with us, if they seem nervous about the conversation, etc. Virgil is unaware of the importance of this and does not get the same feedback when he looks at someone he is speaking to.

Virgil is fascinated by all of the different sights around him and tries to take everything in that he can, but he does not know when it is inappropriate to do so. When he sees a homeless person on the street, he wants to look at him to understand what and who he is, and gets yelled at by the man for staring. He acts as a blind man, but no longer has that excuse. For example, when he goes into a sports club to apply for a job, he realized that he is not able to read or fill out the application on his own. Even though he is no longer blind, he still has handicaps that prevent him from being able to function as every other seeing person. It is as if he is from a different culture, as has not been able to adjust to the differences in communication styles and is still trying to figure out what is appropriate.

The time that Virgil is able to see is short, as he eyes soon revert back to their disease and cause him to again go blind. As his eyes are fading in and out during this time, Virgil soaks in as much as he can so that he will remember what it was like to see. At the end of the film, Amy and Virgil become very close once again. They have been through so much together during the trials of Virgil's sight and learning how to communicate with one another through Virgil's initial blindness, regaining of his sight, and losing it again. It is easy to see how much they now appreciate each other and the lessons they have learned in communicating with people who are from different backgrounds.

At First Sight is a wonderful film that gives great insight and examples of many communication issues. It is easy to recognize the importance of nonverbal

communication in our lives to express and read feelings, relationships, sincerity, nervousness, and so many other things. This film also shows challenges that the blind have in communication with others and with people communicating with them. The relationship that builds between Virgil and Amy is a great example of individuals working to understand each other and learning how to communicate with one another despite their differences. It is possible for people to learn to communicate with others whether the barrier is blindness, language, or cultural differences. With patience and understanding we can overcome communication issues in order to build relationships.

Bibliography

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At First Sight. Screenplay by Steve Levitt, Irwin Winkler, Rob Cowan, and Oliver Sacks. Dir. Irwin Winkler. Prod. Rob Cowan and Irwin Winkler. Perf. Val Kilmer, Mira Sorvino, Kelly McGillis, Steven Weber, Bruce Davison, Nathan Lane, Ken Howard, and Allison Smith. Videocassette. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1998.