

# Why doesn't Mona Lisa smile?

Renate Seebauer

Burgenland House of Europe, Austria

---

## Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

### Background and keywords:

Body positions, gestures (e.g. meaning expressed by the position of one's arms or the way of holding one's head, ...), distance behaviour and signs of relationship (relative proportions, holding tight and being held tight, ...), often reveal more about a person than what the speaker is actually saying (i.e. the utterances of the speaker or what is verbalized). "Typical male/typical female" characteristics of non-verbal communication are also evident. Many examples of this can be found in advertisements from the clothing industry. Advertising flyers (direct mail advertisements), fashion journals and pictures are ideal materials for analyzing and raising an awareness of messages related to body language.

Keywords: Gender-specific non-verbal behaviour; implicit messages from nonverbal communication.

### Similar topics:

See keywords

### Materials:

- Brochures containing advertisements from the clothing industry, fashion journals for making the collage;
- Scissors;
- Glue;
- Packaging paper or cardboard of 40x50;
- 4 boxes.

### Duration:

Two class sessions (if no follow-up activities)

### Number of participants:

10 or more children; ideal with classes of up to 24 – 26 children

### Age:

11 years of age and upwards (i.e. 5th grade), in class, afternoon supervision, youth activities.

### Aims:

- To promote practical creativity skills and increase an awareness for conscious observation and recognition of nonverbal messages;
- To provide a change-in-pace from a more standardized approach, by making collages and spontaneously combining typical male/female forms of nonverbal communication;

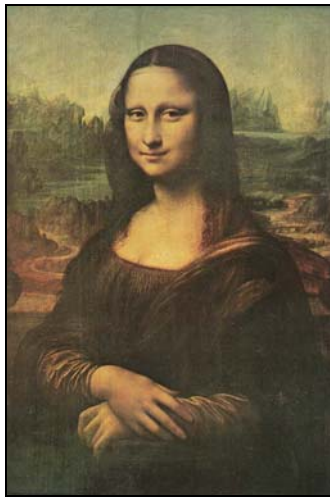
- To encourage the desire for an increased awareness of reality; to promote creativity, imagination and spontaneity;
- Ideal for project-oriented work in art classes, German or mother tongue language instruction, multimedia classes; *Doing Gender*.

### (Short) Explanation:

#### Steps:

1. To make *this exercise more stimulating*, select a famous painting to which collage transformations can be made (i.e. replacing the head, exchanging heads: male – female and starting all over again, ...). The Internet und image processing programmes offer many possibilities for this.

The portrait of "Mona Lisa" (also known as La Gioconda by Leonardo da Vinci; was painted during the period between 1503 and 1505) and the "Self-portrait in a Fur Coat („Selbstbildnis im Pelzrock") by Albrecht Dürer (1500) is provided as a suggestion for the purpose of this example (cf. below).



"What does not go together here?"

The children can see that a man would never place his hands like in the modified middle picture of "Mona Lisa".

2. Are there typical male/female ways of

- placing arms/hands;
- of sitting, positioning legs;
- holding one's head, ...?

Raise awareness in class discussions about the following points:

How do boys/men and girls/women position their arms/hands in fashion shows?

How do they position their legs? When they are sitting? When they are standing?

How do they hold their head?

Analyze the advertising brochure in pair work.

The results can be presented in a table, prepared in advance, such as the one below.

Lastly, findings can be discussed and compared.

How are "masculinity" and "femininity" represented in our advertising brochures?		
	Typically masculine	Typically feminine
1. Arms/ Hands		
2. Position of legs (sitting, standing)		
3. Way of holding head		

3. Boy or girl? – Man or woman? Make a collage in pairs

- First, the children cut out pictures of males and females (as much as possible of the same size) from the brochures that they have brought with them and then they cut the pictures of the persons roughly in half (i.e. across their waistlines).
- Then all of the "male and female" upper bodies are placed in two boxes. Likewise the "male and female lower bodies" are placed in two other boxes.
- Each pairs selects at least five "male and/or female upper bodies" and five "female and/or male lower bodies".
- Next, the figures will be reassembled (e.g. a male upper body with a female lower body or the exact opposite).
- In preparation for discussions planned for phase 2, have the students undertake tasks involving finding and choosing, grouping, exchanging, combining, building and again destroying.
- The individual collages will be hung up next to each other and discussed.

**Variations (continuation):**

For the "shadow pictures" lesson (cf. Mühlen Achs, 1998, p. 135f.) – which can be continued in "physical education" or in "drama class" – a source of light and technical equipment (i.e. a screen) is required.

Actors act in the area in-between the source of light and the screen. The rest of the group gathers in front of the screen and observes the activities that are shown as shadow pictures.

Through body positions and movements, the actors act out the following:

- I am strong/weak;
- I am angry/sad;
- I am proud/anxious; ...

Also, the targets, "I am a girl/a boy"; "I am a woman/a man" can be interpreted by means of body-language.

- What is the original meaning behind gender rituals?
- What meaning do they really convey?

**Reflection:**

The information processing focuses on "messages", which transmit specifically male or female forms of nonverbal communication (standing with legs wide apart; crossing legs; arms spread out or straight down at sides, position of hands; pointing index finger; head

slanted off to the side; looking downwards, looking far off to the distance, ... of "Theoretical Part").