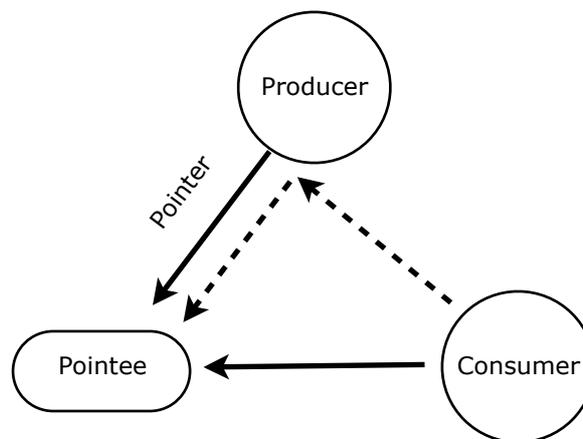


## Pointing Attention

By [James Lawley](#) | Published 5 April 2012 [www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/78/](http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/78/)

In a [previous blog](#) (24 Feb 2012) I explored the nature of pointing and its relevance to the perspective I adopt as a symbolic modeller. Below I continue that exploration and widen the scope of how pointing is a metaphor for so much of what happens in Symbolic Modelling.

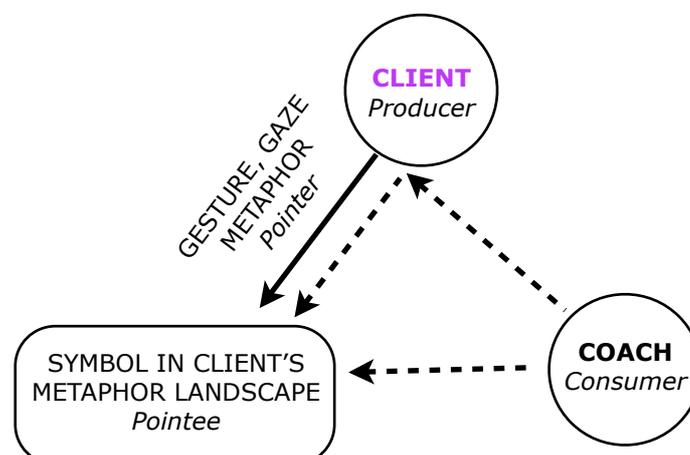
Based on Raymond Tallis' *Michelangelo's Finger*,<sup>1</sup> the following diagram summarises what is involved when a person (the *producer*) points out something (the *pointee*) to someone (the *consumer*) using their finger, or some other *pointer*. The dotted lines represent what the consumer has to do with their attention to be able to identify the item pointed to.



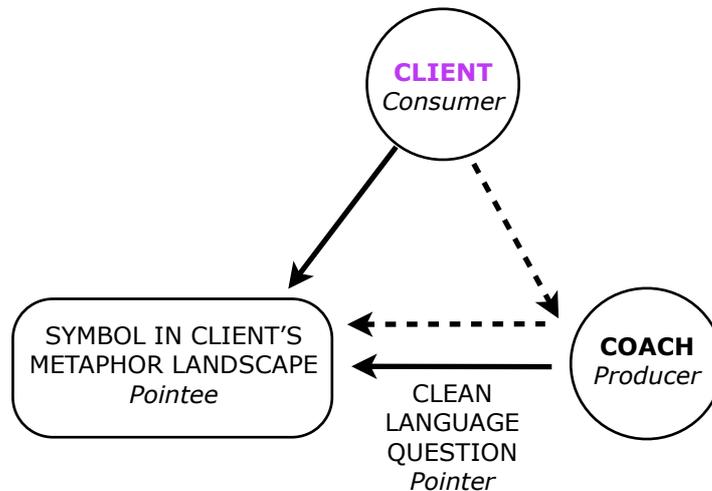
I maintain that being able to appreciate another person's perspective *while maintaining your own* requires a special kind of modelling skill. Luckily one that almost all of us possess innately.

## Symbolic Modelling

People are continually point to items in their inner world – especially through gesture, gaze and metaphor. Each time they do, a facilitator has an opportunity to adopt a 'consumer of pointing' modelling perspective – something Penny Tompkins and I do *continuously* during a session of Symbolic Modelling. Thus:



When the facilitator asks a clean question of what has been pointed to a switch occurs. Each clean question 'points to' or 'points out' some aspect of the client's metaphor landscape. The *client* now becomes the *consumer* of the facilitator's pointing:



When the client answers the question the roles switch back, and so on. This very simple oscillation creates an iterative process that forms the spine of a Symbolic Modelling session. It is how we facilitate the development of the client's embodied, psychoactive metaphor landscape.

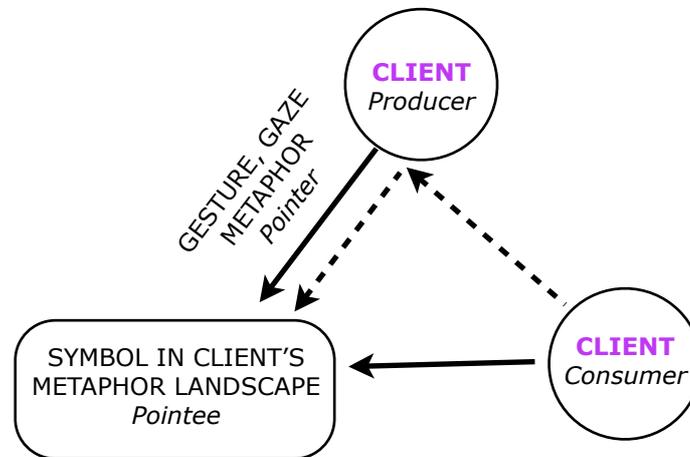
I know of no other method of therapy or coaching where both the client and facilitator so *consistently point to a single inner landscape* – the client's. If you are not trained in a clean approach and you are thinking this seems similar to how you facilitate, I haven't made the distinction clear. In over 15 years of training this process I have never found anyone who can maintain the consumer- and producer-of-pointing roles *consistently*, without thoroughly retraining their attention.<sup>2</sup>

## Mind-body phenomena

Tallis describes a situation where the producer points to something that is outside the visual field of the consumer, e.g. "He went that-a-way." But he does not mention a similar but more common case where people use their gestures and words to point to something *within their body or mental space*. Pointing to mind-body phenomena happens all the time in everyday conversation. But we are so involved in the content of what we are saying and thinking we often have only the minutest awareness that we are indicating the location and form of symbols in our 'psyche-space' (as David Grove sometimes called it). And the same goes for the recipient of the pointing.

A skilled clean facilitator can help amplify the pointing to and point out nature of a conversation. To do so they need to do two things: to create a 'clean environment' – one with a low level of contaminants from their own inner world; and to ask about the spatial aspects of the client's metaphors. (Most metaphors have an explicit or implicit spatial aspect, as long as your ears and eyes know what to listen and look for.)

Then something quite fascinating happens. The client becomes aware they are *pointing out things to them self*. The client notices they are simultaneously both the producer and consumer of their own pointing:



Gregory Bateson called this a "double description". The dialectical effect is the inclusion of both descriptions into a transcendent third perspective – just as depth perception emerges from binocular vision. I believe most gestures and movements of the body are not communication to another person, but aids to our own thinking process. By noticing how our inner world works we gain a deep insight into why we act and respond the way we do, and we start to notice choice points – places where our process could go in a different direction and result in a different outcome. Penny and I call this *self-modelling*.<sup>3</sup>

## Purpose of Pointing

Tallis notes that pointing has two key purposes. First to rectify a perceived deficit in the consumer - we point out something they can't see or are not yet aware of and we "understand that the other's comparative disadvantage can be set right" (p.10). As a result we momentarily share a perspective, and fulfill the second purpose: we "make a world in common" (p.132). Tallis suggests that the ability to perform this kind of mental gymnastics makes possible the kind of society only humans have:

If one subscribes to the idea that language originated out of gesture, then pointing, as the most versatile of all gestures, and the one that seems closest to the primary, that is to say the referential, function of language, we may argue that it is crucial to the beginning of truly social being (of a kind unknown elsewhere in the animal kingdom), of a collectivization of consciousness upon which community, discourse, civilization and knowledge are based." (p. 131)

The purpose of pointing makes sense when producer and consumer are pointing at different people, but what about, as mentioned above, when one person plays both roles? Then the client is, in effect, rectifying a deficit in their own awareness. They either

become conscious of what before was tacit knowledge, or they have a creative insight. In so doing conscious and subconscious share (momentarily at least) the same perspective and thereby establish a different kind of relationship. Not Topdog and Underdog. Not Master and Emissary. Not rider and horse. Not adversaries, nor even allies. Instead they are co-inspirers – they form a Necessary Unity.<sup>4</sup>

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Tallis, *Michelangelo’s Finger: An exploration of everyday transcendence* (Atlantic Books, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> For a description of exercises using pointing see Marian Way’s blog: [cleanlearning.co.uk/blog/discuss/pointing-the-metaphor-we-have-been-looking-for/](http://cleanlearning.co.uk/blog/discuss/pointing-the-metaphor-we-have-been-looking-for/)

These exercises could be extended by the producer pointing from different positions at different kinds of things using different parts of the body, with and without words.

<sup>3</sup> By now you may have figured out a fourth possibility that completes the set (a description of which will have to wait for another blog):

Producer: Client Consumer: Facilitator	Producer: Facilitator Consumer: Client
Producer: Client Consumer: Client	Producer: Facilitator Consumer: Facilitator

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, coined the phrase ‘**Topdog vs. Underdog**’ to describe a self-torture game that people play with themselves.

Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale University Press; 2010). For an overview see [iainmcgilchrist.com](http://iainmcgilchrist.com) and my three blogs on this fascinating book:

[cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/21/Ent-sprechen-says-it-all.html](http://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/21/Ent-sprechen-says-it-all.html)

[cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/22/Mutual-gaze.html](http://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/22/Mutual-gaze.html)

[cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/42/Balancing-brain-hemispheres.html](http://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/42/Balancing-brain-hemispheres.html)

Humberto Maturana: "**Co-inspiration** arises from the conversations we have with each other that are conducted in mutual respect for the other and it provides for a manner of working together in freedom." [oise.utoronto.ca/tlcentre/conf2004/process.html](http://oise.utoronto.ca/tlcentre/conf2004/process.html)

Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature A Necessary Unity – Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences* (Hampton Press; 1979).