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A Helpful Supplement to Myth #6: “It’s just not my thing” — addressing facilitator doubts (Part 2 of 2) - Contact Improvisation Blog

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14–17 minutes

In Part 1 of this article, “[Myth #6: Written guidelines keep CI spaces safe](#),” I discussed why having written guidelines is an insufficient strategy for creating safer CI spaces, and explained why CI teachers and facilitators need to model talking about ethical sexuality. Here in Part 2, I’ll give detailed responses to common hesitations that teachers and facilitators often experience about raising conversations in their communities. In Myth #7 (coming soon), I’ll dig deeper into the common belief that it’s not CI teachers and facilitators’ jobs to talk about ethical sexuality.

Over the years, I’ve heard many CI teachers and facilitators express hesitancy about talking about sexual conduct in CI.

Generally I hear things along the lines of:

- “We don’t have enough time” a.k.a.
- Feeling that opening circles are too long as it is, or feeling self-consciousness around taking up “dancing time” by talking
- “I don’t want to lose students/attendees” a.k.a.
- Fearing that listeners will lose interest or be resistant
- “I don’t want to say the wrong thing” a.k.a.
- Feeling hung up or burdened by “politically correct” language, and stuck in how to express themselves
- “I don’t know enough” a.k.a.
- Not feeling clear about the issues
- “Who am I to say what’s right or wrong?” a.k.a.
- Feeling that CI’s many grey areas around how people touch and interact make it inappropriate to address what is or isn’t permissible (further discussed in Myth #7)

And I get it. It can be intimidating to talk about sexual conduct because it’s such a sensitive topic. It can feel risky, people are afraid to make mistakes, and so—if it’s not my job in the first place—why do it?

But even though I can empathize with the resistance of CI leaders, participants at CI jams, festivals, and classes, etc., *do need* to hear facilitators talking about sexual conduct. Therefore, I want to encourage CI leaders to speak up, despite their doubts and fears.

Step up and Speak Up: How can you talk about ethical sexuality, despite your fears?

"We don't have enough time"

Use the time you have

It's true that there may not always be "enough" time to delve into the whole history of sexual oppression and its impacts on CI culture. But that doesn't mean that we can't mention the importance of dancing and behaving in ways that fundamentally respect other dancers' rights not to experience unwanted sexual advances or energy. It can be three sentences that are comfortable to you. They don't need to be complicated, you don't need to get into the weeds. But in #2020 *not* talking about ethical sexuality is to be complicit.

"I don't want to lose students/attendees"

Trust that your audience can handle it... but send those who can't on their own journey

In 2020 you can assume that people won't be shocked by being asked to think about ethical sexuality. At least in the U.S., post-#metoo, the topic is ubiquitous.

Personally, when I'm addressing a group about ethical sexuality, and I sense agitation or resistance in the room, I remind myself that what I'm sensing includes excitement—not necessarily negativity, but anticipation and heightened attention, and possibly even relief, happiness, enthusiasm, etc. Odds are that there will be a person in the room for whom it is meaningful that you are speaking about these topics. There will be a person who has been *waiting* for someone to do so. And there will also be people who are grateful that you're speaking up simply because they recognize that it's important, and because every time someone speaks up, it makes it a little bit easier for everyone.

Probably things will go better than you think, but... If you find yourself choking on your words, I recommend centering yourself and focusing on believing that people are with you.

That said, not everyone will be. It's possible that questions will be raised and other opinions offered. Sometimes this leads to a productive discussion, but sometimes your words might also be met with active resistance. You might get pushback.

If that happens, it's important to discern between someone engaging in well-intentioned debate versus someone acting out emotionally because they are offended (though easier said than done). As unfair and inappropriate as it may be (because really everyone should be taking responsibility for educating themselves

and behaving better), this is a real phenomenon. Here are some suggestions for dealing with this:

- One practical solution is to work as a team. If it feels too vulnerable to bring ethical sexuality to the table alone, find an ally and bring it to the community together.
- Another recommendation is to draw clear boundaries, for example: state explicitly that you are not willing to elaborate on a group discussion in private after the jam (I say this from personal experience—it can be exhausting to meet others’ resistances, justifications, or emotional responses one-on-one).
- And though it may seem obvious, it’s worth remembering not to take others’ responses personally.

In the end, you might lose some students/attendees. On the other hand, you may also attract into your community people who now find CI more fun and accessible because you are discussing ethical sexuality.

“I don’t want to say the wrong thing”

Expose that you are on a learning curve about consent practice too

It’s okay to expose that you are learning. The reality is that we are all learning. Sharing that you yourself feel unsure about how to address this very complicated subject can help others let down their guard. The reality is that none of us, here on planet Earth, were raised with consent culture, nor has anyone actually experienced living in a fully realized consent culture. So if it’s true, expose the fact that you need to do more work to get clear on the issues. Being transparent about what you do and do not have clarity about is actually an important tenet of consensual communication.

Appeal to people’s best intentions

I have found that when I appeal to everybody’s best intentions people take more responsibility for their own actions. I like to include phrases like “we don’t want that,” “let’s not do that,” or “we can do better” to include the group in being on the “right” side of sexual ethics.

It may sound like a gimmick, but I actually believe that most people really don’t want to be transgressive or inappropriate, and that in fact, we all deserve the respect of having this be acknowledged. Inclusive language also helps me shape my role in the community: rather than having to speak like I’m policing people, I try to come from a place of articulating shared values, akin to not rolling on people’s knees.

Language Tips

Sometimes people ask me for soundbites, but this is what I think is more helpful:

We’re improvisers. We’re teachers. *Connect your words to the place in you that sincerely values that people not experience sexual transgression.* The rest is trial,

error, practice, and discovery.

Check your fragility

This may sound harsh, so let me explain. If what's holding you back from discussing ethical sexuality in your CI community is fear of saying something wrong and therefore prompting a discussion that will lead to opening yourself up to criticism, acknowledging that you've overlooked something important, or having to admit wrongdoings (even privately to yourself)... it's worth considering whether or not fragility¹ is coming into play.

For teachers/facilitators in CI, it's important that we not let our fragility impede our willingness to show up.

Moving towards consent culture is ongoing work that requires everyone's participation. No matter who we are, or whether or not we have previous experience thinking about these topics, deconstructing rape culture and moving toward consent culture requires deeply questioning the ways that we've been socialized to behave. This is challenging work!

And it's normal to hit some bumps along the way. Whether or not we come to the table with previous knowledge of consent practices it's quite likely that at some point we will unintentionally misuse terminology or say offensive things, and find ourselves in uncomfortable positions as a result. Part of putting in our best efforts is being willing to apologize for missteps, learn from mistakes, and move forward.

On the other hand resisting the work altogether (either through shutting down, avoidance, or spiritual bypassing²) are all common responses to feeling vulnerable about being questioned—but they are examples of fragility.

"I don't know enough"

Research

Competency about consent does not just "come naturally." It requires *ongoing commitment to learning*. Use the internet. Use and share [resources](#). Listen to survivors³. Expose yourself to language about consent practices. Stay informed, stay learning, stay conscious of the fact that if you are holding power in a space dedicated to intimate physical touch (Contact Improvisation), understanding consent culture is part of your job. #2020

But be humble

This includes:

- Cite your sources: tell people whom you are learning from.
- Don't pretend to know everything or have all the answers.
- Consent culture is horizontal and collective. It's built successfully when we emphasize dialogue and communication.

- Be mindful of what being a leader in your community might represent to marginalized folks in your community and how your views may be limited by your own experiences and identity.⁴

"Who am I to say what's right or wrong?"

Many CI teachers and facilitators have moral or philosophical doubts about whether or not it's our role to be discussing sexuality in CI in the first place.

I want to offer my view.

As teachers and facilitators, we may not know exactly what kind of dancing is "permissible" or not—but we want to help shape an environment in which every participant feels comfortable using their own voice to communicate what is and isn't okay for them.

While previously in CI we presumed that by *not* talking about sexuality we were leaving space for people to advocate for their own needs, now our culture offers a different understanding of the omnipresence of patriarchy and rape culture (#metoo) and an intersectional view of power imbalances—and with this, the responsibility to be proactive about shifting existing power dynamics. And yes, this requires effort.

Not acting means condoning the status quo

For teachers and facilitators, remaining silent about issues doesn't mean that we are not using our power. It means that we are occupying our roles as leaders in a way that silences discussion about a layer of CI that's important to many people.

When teachers/facilitators opt out of addressing ethical sexuality, in essence they support the cultural norms in which sexually unethical behavior goes unacknowledged and undiscussed. This not only wrongly reinforces the current power structure that favors predators over victims of sexual violence (rape culture), but also fails to offer insight and experience about navigating sexuality in CI.

But this a really big topic, which I'm going deep into the weeds on soon! Stay tuned for Myth #7: "It's not my place to get involved."

Conclusion

Here's what we talked about in addressing your concerns as a facilitator:

- "We don't have enough time"— ***Use the time you have***
- "I don't want to lose students/attendees." — ***Trust your audience.*** Commit to cultivating a community that values ethical sexuality.
- "I don't want to say the wrong thing".
- ***Expose that you are on a learning curve about consent practice too***
- ***Appeal to people's best intentions***
- Review the ***Language Tips*** above

- **Check your fragility** around these issues.
- "I don't know enough." Do your **Research! But be humble**
- "Who am I to say what's right or wrong?" —Use your power to help shape a consent-friendly environment, and not to condone silence around sexual violence.

When teachers/facilitators/organizers are willing to break the silence about sexual transgression in CI, use our voices to set clear expectations, open spaces for conversation, and otherwise do our part in promoting consent culture; we are contributing to a change that is making CI a safer, richer practice overall.

You *can* do it despite potential discomfort.

And again, if you are holding power in a space dedicated to intimate physical touch (Contact Improvisation), understanding consent culture is part of your job. #2020. Still not convinced? Stay with me for Myth #7, coming soon.

Happy Reading, Respectful Dancing!

Sarah

Footnotes

1. Roughly speaking, fragility is the manifestation of defensive emotional and psychological responses resulting from identification as an oppressor within an oppressor-oppressed dynamic. For example, white fragility in the context of racism, male fragility in the context of sexism, etc.
2. Believing that a conflict or issue is unworthy of attention because it can be spiritually "transcended." I have unfortunately encountered many people in the CI community who argue that people who are more spiritually aligned don't need to discuss/take action toward ethical sexuality in CI. (A subject for another post!)
3. But it's important that any time you find yourself wanting to ask questions, get opinions, or otherwise receive education about ethical sexuality from survivors, make sure to ask for consent. Rather than assuming that survivors are available resources, ask. Ask frequently. And do your part to look for other resources too.
4. While it's very important that we all do our part to deconstruct the existing power structures, it's also necessary that we realize that our views are naturally limited by our privileges and oppressions. There are many factors that affect this including race, ability, etc., but I want to specifically caution that when cis-straight men discuss the role of rape culture in CI from a position of power and authority:
 - (1) their leadership does not overturn the existing power dynamic
 - (2) they may likely insufficiently represent the views of queer folks and non-men,
 - (3) their asserting authority on the issue might in fact lead to them gaining trust and power that they'll then abuse (consciously or unconsciously)

On the other hand, of course, cis-straight men can leverage their privilege effectively by, for example, taking on the work of educating other cis-straight men, and doing their part to amplify the voices of those most directly affected by rape culture.

