

Paper #2: A Difficult Conversation

THIS PAPER IS DUE DECEMBER 8, 2008 WITHOUT FAIL. If you haven't completed it, turn in what you have. You may submit your paper by e-mail if you choose: send it to dhalkin@earthlink.net. If you do not receive a reply from me, assume I didn't get it, and bring a hardcopy of your paper to class.)

Please read Martin Keogh's essay "101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation: Boundaries and Trust". You can find this essay by going to the Chicago Contact Improv Jam webpage (<http://www.chicagocontactimprov.com/>), click on the link "Resources for Students of Contact Improvisation". Then click on the link for the essay "101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation: Boundaries and Trust".

After reading the essay, think of an unpleasant/uncomfortable event that would bring up the need for you to talk about an issue of boundaries and/or trust with the person you were dancing with. It could be one of the situations mentioned in the article, a situation you have experienced or witnessed, or something completely from your imagination. Please choose a situation you suspect would be difficult for you – the purpose of this assignment is to explore speaking about an uncomfortable interaction in a way that is helpful.

Now follow the steps below to create a 1-2 page script for your part of the conversation about this event (use quotation marks). The conversation might take place while you are still dancing together, right after the dance has stopped (either by you stopping it, or after it has ended spontaneously), or some time later when you are ready to address the issue (maybe the end of the jam, or on a different day). You don't need to write the other person's part, but you are welcome to, especially if your dialogue ends up shorter than 2 full pages. You can also insert commentary into the script on why you are choosing to express yourself in a certain way:

Example:

"When would be a good time to talk about the dance we had in yesterday's class?"

[I'm telling them that I want to talk about our dance, but giving them some control over when it happens.]

Step 1) Write three ways you could say the question you would use to initiate the conversation. Your goal is to promote openness of communication and start a "learning" conversation that allows you to express your experience, allows them to express their experience, and for both of you to communicate what you need from the other person in order to feel comfortable dancing with each other in the future.

Example:

Step 1: "Would you mind if we stopped for a moment and talked?" or "Something has just come up for me, can we talk about it? or "I'm finding this dance really difficult, can we talk about it?"

Now use the following steps to telling the person your viewpoint of the event. It is important to convey that you are offering your perception, and that you are interested in their perception.

Step 2a) Describe the event by what happened physically.

Because this is the beginning of the conversation, keep in mind that they may recall things differently than you do, so try to say things in a neutral way and avoid using emotionally charged words in this initial description.

Step 2b) Ask if they can recall the event, and if they have anything to add to your description.

Step 2c) Describe the feelings you have about the event. Say what the impact was on you physically, emotionally and/or spiritually. Explain why it is important to you to discuss this event, how it interferes with your ability to dance with them.

- Avoid stating what you thought their intentions were or how what happened is a result of some fault of theirs. (For example, instead of saying "It seems to me you aren't listening during the dance" say "My feeling is that I never have an opportunity to contribute to the direction of the dance, I kept trying to initiate things but it seems to me they are never followed through.")
- Avoid making judgements about either them or you as a person (avoid descriptive adjectives that imply things, such as who was "wrong" or "right", who was "inconsiderate" or "insensitive").
- Speak from your experience - sometimes it helps to start out saying "My experience was..." or "My feeling is..."

- Be honest – saying what is true for you and allowing the other person to state what is true for them is essential for good interpersonal communication,

Step 3) Ask them their viewpoint. Ask them about their feelings, both about what happened and about what you have just told them.

Imagine that their interpretation of the event is different than yours. (Perhaps they suggest you are “taking things too seriously and need to be more flexible”. Or maybe they feel that the things you describe are legitimate within the form of contact improvisation and question why you are making a big deal about it...)

Step 4) Restate their perceptions and feelings, acknowledging them as a valid.

The idea is that everyone's perception should be respected and honored, even if there is disagreement. Listening can transform a conversation when it's done well. First, paraphrase and acknowledge their feelings and perceptions, so they know you have heard them and are trying to understand their viewpoint. Ask questions about things you are unclear about.

- At this stage, avoid correcting their view or stating a solution to any issue/problem that they raise.

Step 5) Now offer a summary of the differences in your views, and comment on anything you need to. Ask them if they have anything to add.

Step 6) Say what you need to be able to move on. State the principles or ideas that are fundamental to the way you explore contact improvisation that need to be honored by them.

Example: "When we are in a dance and I initiate movements that create more space between us, and especially if I say that I need more space, I need to know that you will honor my request. I also want you to use a more open style with me when we are dancing very close, so that my ability to create more space isn't interfered with. I want to be able to dance with you, but without this I won't feel safe because it feels like you are not respectful of my needs.

Step 7) Ask them what they need from you and what they would like to have happen next.

Step 8) Thank them for having this conversation with you.

Note: Some people will not be open to this process. That's OK - at times being with someone/something that doesn't rub you the right way will cause you to discover something immensely valuable to you, even though at the time it doesn't make you feel warm and fuzzy. A river needs the rocks it collides with to become aerated; a path without challenges often doesn't go anywhere interesting.

(This assignment is based on ideas from the book "Difficult Conversations" by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen. Penguin Books 2000. It is inspired by the many contact improvisers I've met who communicate about boundaries with decency, respect and caring. Thanks to Jeff Wallace for contributing some of the ideas and wording of this assignment.)