

Interpersonal Communication Skills in Community Art: An Introduction to the Awareness Wheel

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My bus rolled into the Minneapolis Greyhound station on a sticky August afternoon. It was the late 1970s and the disco era had just peaked. Newly graduated from college, I relocated to the Twin Cities with the hopes of becoming a professional dancer. Many of the young artists I met here were employed through CETA¹, a federally funded jobs program. Although none of my friends knew it at the time, the CETA era had already peaked, too.

While I waited for the next wave of CETA jobs to open up (which never happened), I looked for a part-time typing job. In the University of Minnesota Daily classifieds I found an ad for an administrative assistant for a small publisher/training company that taught interpersonal communication skills. I remember reading the ad and thinking, “I have no idea what ‘interpersonal communication skills’ means – it’s gibberish.” I answered the ad. The people seemed nice enough, the business was based in a sweet little carriage house near the Walker Art Center, and the hours were flexible. I took the job. It turned out to be one of my favorite jobs ever and one of the most useful in the long run.

The firm was founded by three professors from the University of Minnesota who had done some significant research about how people talk and listen to one another. My job

¹ *CETA, the Comprehensive Employment Training Act, was a jobs program that included artists. Between 1975 and 1981, artists were paid through CETA to work in community centers, schools and other places where people gather. Although it was never intended to be an arts program, CETA turned into the largest federal public art program, much like the WPA program of the 1930s. The California Arts Council estimates that at its height CETA funded 10,000 arts positions nationally with another 6,000 arts-related positions. (The WPA had 5,000 jobs for artists). When we look at the landscape of the Twin Cities arts scene, many of the institutions that are vital to the arts today were formed during or shortly following the CETA era. Some organizations, like Intermedia Arts, (known at the time as UCV/University Community Video), had paid staff through CETA. Other organizations, though not directly staffed with CETA funds, grew out of the climate where individual artists were supported to engage with the greater community. Organizations such as the American Composers Forum, The Loft, Dance Today (formerly the Minnesota Dance Alliance), Forecast Public Artworks, Warm, Illusion Theater, Theatre de la Jeune Lune, Springboard for the Arts (formerly Resources and Counseling for the Arts), Milkweed Chronicle and many others grew out of the CETA era.*

was to type invoices for the books they were publishing. In the carriage house, I was introduced to their books and training materials. Most of their material at the time was about couple communication. They sent me through instructor training so that, when I answered the phones, I could explain what the company was all about.

During the training I was paired up with a physician from Montana. I remember getting feedback after one exercise that, while my partner was giving a brief presentation to the group, I rolled my eyes and made faces that non-verbally demonstrated my obvious disapproval of my partner's behavior. Sure enough, before the presentation my partner and I had made a plan to collaborate, but during the actual presentation he made choices that were different from what I thought we had agreed to. I was completely oblivious to my own anger as well as to the fact that I was telegraphing my irritation to everyone in the room. Everyone knew I was angry except me! I was horrified by what I learned during that training about my own lack of self-awareness and my communication patterns. I asked the company if I could go through the training a second time, with my boyfriend. Ned and I went through the training together and made a decision to try to apply what we had learned. We already had a five-year history together, and it felt contrived and self-conscious to try to change the way we talked and listened to each other; but we stuck with it. It was an important decision.

Ned is now my husband, a relationship that has lasted through the changes of our teens, twenties, thirties and forties. I believe a significant factor in the longevity of our relationship is that we were given a fundamental set of skills to communicate with each other very early on. Those skills have become part of the fabric of our relationship. During a fight last night, we invoked some ground rules we learned back in that training so many decades ago. The fight started out with a lot of mutual suffering and ended up being what I consider a "productive fight," that is, we learned some surprising things about ourselves and each other, and ended up a whole lot closer than when we began.

The name of the company I typed invoices for was Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc. (I can still type those words really fast) or ICP. I left ICP in the early eighties and started my full-time career as an independent dance artist. The root skills I learned at ICP have been critical to my success as an artist working in collaborative relationships, in communities and with diverse cultural organizations.

Community-Based Artist as Translator

When I work as an artist/facilitator in community settings, I need to be able to speak in many languages besides the language of my own artistic imagery. My artistic training was all about developing a free and ready access to my own idiosyncratic metaphoric

language (along with enough technique to effectively use my language). As a contemporary artist working outside a classical tradition, fluency with my own metaphoric language may be what defines me as an artist, whether I am a poet, painter, musician, or dancer. Yet, when I work in community settings, I also want to be able to give clear instructions. I want to be able to tell stories. I want to know how to listen to the messages that are being sent verbally, non-verbally, and through the artistic images that participants create. I have found that working as an artist with communities requires a broader range of communication skills than my artistic training ever prepared me for.

As much as I am an artist, I have also come to think of myself as a translator, shifting back and forth between many languages. I rely on what I learned at ICP to help make a conscious bridge between the different styles of communication that are called upon in my work.

The Awareness Wheel

One of the tools I was introduced to at ICP is the Awareness Wheel, a very simple but potent framework for bringing more awareness to my own experience. The Awareness Wheel divides experience into five areas: **sensory data, thoughts, feelings, wants** and **actions**. These five types of information are present even though we may not be consciously aware of them. Bringing them to consciousness can help us make decisions, resolve conflicts, and cultivate a deeper understanding of ourselves, and others.

- **Sensory data** is the information we take in directly through our senses, for example, what we see and hear.
- **Thoughts** are the meanings we make from our sensory data. Thoughts include our ideas, beliefs, assumptions, judgments, interpretations, meanings, and expectations. ²

²My **Thoughts** are the story I tell myself (and others) about my sensory data. My **Feelings** are the physiological responses of my body-mind to my **Thoughts**. The more clearly I know the difference between my **Thoughts** and my **Feelings**, the more choice I have about the meaning I bring to a situation and the corresponding emotions. **Thoughts** and **Feelings** frequently get mixed up. Some **Thoughts** in particular can trigger strong **Feelings**. People often say “I feel ...” and then finish the sentence with a **Thought**. For example, the phrases “I feel betrayed” or “I feel respected” are really **Thoughts**. A clearer statement might be, “I think I’m being betrayed and I’m angry.” Or “I believe you respect me and I feel happy about that.” Other **Thought** words which are commonly mistaken for **Feelings** are: abandoned, adequate/inadequate, challenged,

- **Feelings** are our emotions (sad, glad, mad, lonely, scared, surprised...).
- **Wants** are the desires, hopes, and yearnings we have for ourselves and for others.
- **Actions** are our actual behaviors: what we have said and done in the past, what we say and do in the present, what we are committed to doing in the future.³

Decision-making:

As individuals, we often have preferences for noticing what's happening in some zones of the Awareness Wheel while ignoring others. By consciously attending to all five zones of the Wheel, we are less likely to miss important information that could inform our decision-making. For example, research on brain-injured workers found that, when the limbic system was damaged (the limbic system is considered the emotional center of the brain), workers were unable to make final decisions. They could outline all the pros and cons of an issue; but when a boss insisted upon a decision, the workers were not capable of completing the task. The researchers concluded that decision-making is inherently an emotional process.

Conflict-resolution:

Sue Bronson, author of *Self-Assessment Tool for Mediators*, uses the Awareness Wheel for workplace and family conflict mediation. As a facilitator she holds the Wheel in her own mind and asks clarifying questions that invite people to recognize that, even internally, we have several perspectives on an issue. For example, although I may come into a mediation conflict holding a rigid position, there is a greater possibility for me to shift my position, without losing face, if I can also recognize that I hold multiple wants, beliefs, interpretations and feelings. Even if we don't resolve the dispute, there is increased clarity within one's own self, and this clarity may lead to resolution in the future. Sue developed five questions that correspond to the Awareness Wheel:

- What do you see and hear?
- What meaning does it hold for you?
- How do you feel?
- What do you want?
- What are you willing to do?

cheated, childish, competent/incompetent, conspicuous, controlled, deceitful, defeated, important, insulted, offended, persecuted, pressured, rejected, rewarded, slighted, tempted, threatened, tricked, unloved.

³ *This explanation of the Awareness Wheel was adapted from Core Communication: Skills and Processes by Sherod Miller and Phyllis A. Miller,*

Disputes may come up just because people are speaking different languages reflecting different zones of the wheel. When each person expands into more zones of the Wheel, the likelihood of finding a common language increases.

Self-awareness:

The most profound benefits I have found from using the Awareness Wheel have come from deepening my own self-awareness. The Awareness Wheel is really a map of human experience. Using the Awareness Wheel was the first process that taught me to distinguish the content of my experience from the structure of my experience. Like art-making, interpersonal communication has two aspects: the content and the form. Art reminds us of the complex relationship between what we express and how we express it. The Awareness Wheel helps me clarify that relationship. Having a map of the territory of my experience (sense data, thoughts, feelings, wants and actions) keeps me from getting swept away by my automatic reactions.

Freedom is possible when we do not automatically identify with our thoughts, feelings and wants. The Awareness Wheel is a doorway into mindfulness. It offers a structure to be present to what is really happening, so that I can make choices about my actions rather than reacting mindlessly.

Here's an example:

May, 1998. It is the culmination of seven months work preparing a series of art and education events for the visit of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama has just finished his first talk of the visit. As I exit Northrop Auditorium, a friend who is volunteering as an usher tells me, "Something pretty ugly is going on outside on the plaza." I step onto the plaza where a man holding a black book, labeled BIBLE in big white letters, is shouting that the Dalai Lama is the devil and all those gathered are going to Hell. The tone of his voice is rageful. The plaza is filled with Tibetans wearing traditional clothing, and others who have just come from the auditorium. Some of the faces of the Tibetans look hurt and confused. Some of the other Tibetans look angry. They start throwing coins at the preacher and shouting back at him, "What's wrong with you? How can you say these things? Is this what you want – money!?!". The preacher has a group of followers with him who are trying to get the Tibetan children to take their evangelical comic books. One Tibetan man approaches the preacher and starts to shove him.

In the flash of an instant, mindfulness arises, and I notice the following flow of my own experience:

"The Tibetan man is so angry he's lost control of himself." (thought/ interpretation)

"The preacher is crazy." (thought/ judgment)

“The spaces between people in the crowd are beginning to close in.” (sense data)
“A fight is about to break out between these two groups.” (thought/ expectation)
“I’m afraid.”(feeling)
“I want to stay safe.” (want)
“I’m worried for the safety of others on the plaza.” (feeling)
“I want to do what I can to diffuse the situation and keep others safe.” (want)
“I feel love for many of the people on the plaza.” (feeling)
“The depth of my love protects me.” (thought/ belief)
“Both these men are hurting.” (thought/ interpretation)
“I feel compassion toward both these men.” (feeling)
“I intend to act from this compassion.” (want)

I step forward and gently, but firmly, place my hands on the shoulders of the Tibetan man and turn him away from the preacher as I calmly say the word, “No.” (action)
I hear the gentle tone in my own voice. (sense data)
I see the Tibetan man walk slowly away. I see more spaces open up between the bodies of the people on the plaza. (sense data)
“The crowd is breaking up, it’s over.” (thought/ interpretation)

All of the above happens within a couple of quick seconds. With practice, mindfulness can also be very quick. Now, if I’m able to notice and label, “This is fear, it is an emotional part of my experience,” then I am much less likely to be hooked by the fear. If I am not hooked by the fear, then the fear is less likely to drive my behavior. If I can notice and label, “This urge to stay safe is a want; a want is present,” then I am less likely to unconsciously act out the want.

If I can notice that fear and want are present without believing that this fear and wanting are ME (rather than simply the emotional and wanting dimensions of experience) then I am much less likely to react FROM this fear and wanting. Instead I have the opportunity to respond TO the fear and wanting. I suddenly have the freedom to choose how I want to relate to my internal situation, as well as the external situation. The freedom to choose my actions means that I can decide how I want to engage with the situation. When my behavior is not being driven by unconscious thoughts and feelings, I have the capacity to choose my actions. The capacity to choose my actions is the most powerful tool I know for creating my life moment-by-moment, choice-by-choice, action-by-action. This is a taste of freedom.

I consider myself very fortunate to have been exposed to ICP’s material at such a formative age. I have been exploring the Awareness Wheel for over twenty years now, and I am still discovering new ways to use it. Learning to bring mindfulness to our experience and our communication can feel clumsy at first. Any new skill can feel

clumsy at first, whether learning to play the piano, take photographs, or bring mindfulness to our communication. With practice and patience, mindfulness can be gradually integrated into the way we talk and listen to ourselves, and others. In my experience it has been well worth the effort.

The Awareness Wheel is just one component of the skills and processes that have been developed by the people at ICP. If you are interested in learning more you can contact: Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc. at www.couplecommunication.com or 1-800-328-5099. The book *Core Communication: Skills and Processes* by Sherod Miller and Phyllis A. Miller was published by ICP in 1997.