



## The Ethical Practice of MORE THAN WORDS

I have been asked to produce some ethical guidelines for the MORE THAN WORDS project. The basic principles outlined below are intended to apply both to the project itself, and to the application of its methodologies in future contexts. Much of this document is derived from principles expounded by StoryCenter (University of California, Berkeley). This document is intended as an evolving set of recommendations, open to additions, questioning and emendation. The principles do not currently include ethical considerations specific to therapeutic approaches, as these are not Border Crossings' area of expertise. We would welcome any additions that IKTE may want to make in respect of this.

Ethics must be viewed as a process, rather than as a one-off occasion of "gaining consent." Ongoing dialogue between participants, staff members, partners and funders about how best to design and implement an ethically responsible project is key to ethical practice. This includes the development of: project goals and objectives, recruitment and preparation strategies, privacy guidelines, strategies to ensure emotional support for during and following workshops, and distribution strategies.

Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, has argued that the foundation of ethics is hospitality, the readiness and the inclination to welcome the Other into one's home. Ethics, he claims, is hospitality, acceptance of the Other as different but of equal standing. In a project based around a series of visits to one another's home countries, this would seem to be a useful framing consideration.

### 1. Participant Wellbeing

Participants' physical, emotional, and social wellbeing should be at the centre of all phases of the project. Facilitators must have expertise in group facilitation and must be committed to an approach that views the process of creation as being equally important as the end product. Facilitators should be attentive to how culture and power can impact on relationships; and so should work from a stance of cultural humility. With regard to MORE THAN WORDS, facilitators needs to be particularly respectful of language differences, and to recognise the power structures contained within language and the knowledge of language. As the poet Adrienne Rich famously said: "This is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk to you."

Facilitators need to maintain appropriate boundaries at all times while remaining open to processes of listening and understanding. Precisely because of its potency, the physical, face-to-face encounter is the most crucial area where the ethical bonds of humanity become manifest.

Strategies to ensure the wellbeing of vulnerable participants are particularly important: personal storytelling is generally not appropriate for individuals currently experiencing strong symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (and this includes many new arrivals from conflict zones). It is not appropriate to elicit personal stories of conflict or trauma, although these can certainly be included if they are offered. Facilitators should support participants who are

sharing stories about painful life experiences in approaching these narratives from a position of strength rather than from a vantage point that reinforces victimhood, and mechanisms for post-workshop debriefing should be in place, where necessary.

## 2. Consent

Participants must have the knowledge and support they need to make informed choices about workshop participation and the content, production, and use of their work. Facilitators must be equipped to offer guidance in these decision-making processes in a way that protects the dignity and safety of participants. Consent should be viewed as a process, not as a one-time activity.

## 3. Knowledge Production and Ownership

Participants have the right to freedom of expression in representing themselves within the parameters or thematic concerns of the project and without being coerced or censored. Facilitators should be able to assist participants in determining whether or not it is safe for them to attach their names to their work and whether images of themselves or others should be blurred to protect their privacy and maintain their safety. Participants and facilitators should agree to maintain confidentiality about information and materials that are revealed in a workshop, and should agree on what materials may subsequently be circulated in the public domain. Where possible, facilitators should engage participants in outlining context and discussion points for their work and in determining where, why, and how their work will be publicly distributed.

Distribution strategies must be rooted first and foremost in the needs of, and designed to benefit, participants and their communities, rather than primarily serving the agendas of distant viewers or funders.

## 4. A position of humility

Cultural humility is a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique. The starting point for such an approach is not an examination of someone else's belief system, but rather a process of giving careful consideration to one's own assumptions and beliefs, which are embedded in one's own understandings and life experiences.

Cultural difference means that people see, hear, and perceive the world in different ways. As a result, the forms and approaches they take to drama, dance, telling stories and clowning are also very different. There is no formula for making art – no prescription or template. Providing a map, illuminating the possibilities, outlining a framework – these are better metaphors for how the methods emerging from our project can assist people in expressing their experiences, cultures and identities.

Being seen and heard meets a deep-seated human need for connection. The simple yet critically important act of being acknowledged, being watched and listened to, can change everything. It can change the participants, the facilitators, the audience and the social, political and cultural space.

We should recognise that MORE THAN WORDS is not only using cultural production as a means to represent the world, but emphatically to change it, adopting an ethical agenda. We should understand that this ethical position embraces the linguistic, social and cultural marginality of our target groups, and should celebrate that marginality for its potential to offer new perspectives and positive interventions.

As bell hooks writes:

Silenced. We fear those who speak about us, who do not speak to us and with us. We know what it is like to be silenced. We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, and unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain.

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity.... Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.

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