

The Certification Question

Chelsea Pace

Originally Published as a solo article on June 1, 2021, in The Journal of Consent-Based Performance

About the Author:

Chelsea Pace (she, her) is a leading intimacy choreographer, coordinator, and educator. As Co-Founder and Head Faculty of Theatrical Intimacy Education, she has shared her work with thousands of theatre and film artists around the world from major studio sets and international workshops to indies and off-broadway. Chelsea has been developing ethical, efficient, and effective systems for staging intimacy for more than a decade. In 2021, Chelsea was honored with The Kennedy Center Gold Medallion for work "revolutionizing rehearsal rooms and classroom spaces by implementing systems that center the most vulnerable" and for "bringing never-ending clarity and practicality to the art and process of intimacy direction." Her book, *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* has been adopted by dozens of university theatre, dance, and film programs and professional training programs internationally. Chelsea is a co-founder of The Journal of Consent-Based Performance.

I want to be an intimacy choreographer or coordinator. How do I get certified?

Several times a week, we get asked that question: *How do I get certified?* And after years of answering in bits and pieces, I wanted to put the full answer, and our reasoning, all in one place.

The Short Answer: Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) doesn't certify and we have no plans to offer certification for intimacy choreographers, intimacy coordinators, or any other intimacy specialty in the future. Our plan is to continue training as many people as possible in consent-based practices.

Lots of people that train with TIE are successful intimacy professionals, but there are also lots of people that train with us because they want to be better actors, directors, stage managers, producers, designers, teachers, choreographers, and people. We love that. TIE training is for everybody.

The Long Answer: We don't (and won't) certify and the reasons why are much bigger than the answer itself.

Consent has emerged as a central, foundational consideration in production processes where it had previously been overlooked, and people are thinking critically about how they approach intimacy in the rehearsal room. As theatres and producing organizations hire more and more intimacy choreographers, we need to answer the question of what it means to be qualified to do this work.

While the formalized discipline of intimacy work may be newer, the work itself has been happening in formal and informal ways for centuries. A number of intimacy training organizations have popped up around the world to meet the growing demand for qualified

intimacy professionals and broader consent education. Theatrical Intimacy Education was founded, in part, to help meet that need.

All of these organizations have slightly different approaches to intimacy work, organizational structures, and visions for what the intimacy field should be. Those differences are cultural, philosophical, and practical. **Diversity of approaches is a good thing for everyone and I genuinely believe that all of the intimacy organizations are doing what they think is best to make the industries we work in a better place.**

The people leading the field are always leveraging power, for better or for worse, and I think we need to be deeply critical about the systems we intentionally or inadvertently introduce or perpetuate. I think the choice to introduce or perpetuate certification and certification-style systems in intimacy work is a major error that is undermining the good work the field is trying to do.

The existence of “certification” leverages systems of power that promote inequality, exclusion, and the dynamics of deeply problematic master-teacher models to capitalize, financially or otherwise, on gatekeeping access to knowledge and opportunity. Intimacy work—or more broadly, consent work—should shine a light on the long-established hierarchies of power in our industries- not perpetuate them. Intimacy specialists, their organizations, and other powerful players in the field should be a levelling force. Intimacy work evolved out of communal efforts, and was established by the work of many. It should be both open to everyone and everyone’s responsibility because if consent is someone else’s job, it becomes no one’s job.

In an ecosystem where certification exists at all, qualified people will be overlooked because they have not invested time and money into paying for access to a certification that they do not need to effectively do their work. Someone who has been skillfully doing this work for decades may now need to seek designation from someone else at great expense, financial and otherwise due to some externally imposed, not entirely agreed-upon standard. Self-study disregarded. Innovation discouraged.

Devaluing individuals' experience in this way disproportionately impacts people of the Global Majority, or BIPOC.

People with privilege and means are well-positioned to obtain certifications, which indicates that intimacy work may very well go the path of fight choreography, where the vast majority of the people with formal credentials and leadership are white men with access to financial resources. The people at the greatest disadvantage are the same people that have historically been underrepresented by the industries and had their work stolen and profited off of by those in power. Quotas and diversity statements are not an antidote to the poison baked straight into the pie.

We have seen this all before.

Disciplines that have parallels to intimacy work—fight and stunt work in particular have long had certifications and tiers of certification—so people familiar with those models may be open to seeing them replicated in the intimacy world. Unclear standards, uneven application of criteria, and favoritism cloud the histories of the theatre and film industries and without intervention, the intimacy field is following in those footsteps.

We see it from institutions. Academic departments list “certified intimacy choreographer” as a preferred qualification for a position and contribute to driving hopeful and current academics in a viciously competitive job market into a feeding frenzy for certification. Artists competing for gigs want to stand out, hiring organizations want someone else to do the vetting for them, and certification becomes a legible marker to potential employers.

The desire to quantify qualification and add legibility to legitimacy has existed for at least as long as colonialism (thank you to Kaja Dunn for that language). But experience matters and is legitimate whether or not you choose to seek certification to make it legible and easier to digest for the powerful.

Yes, it is inconvenient for institutions and individuals to assess the qualifications of a person holistically, and yes, it takes more time and perspective. But the demand for intimacy

work exploded because people cut corners and leveraged their power to do things the easy way, so it is harmful to repeat those patterns as we build this field.

Colonialism and capitalism play no small part in the preservation of this certification ecosystem.

A powerful individual could benefit by restricting access to knowledge and opportunity. It isn't possible to talk about power in this industry (an industry that purports to talk about power) without acknowledging that intimacy work is profitable. TIE sells workshop registrations and a look at our books would tell you that we make enough money off of it to pay ourselves and our team a fair rate, to train our team at no cost to them, to support our research, and to fund initiatives and partnerships that are important to us. We make all of that money without offering certification and while encouraging folks to train with everyone. But it is easy to see how a powerful organization could make a lot of money playing keeper-of-the-keys. When the demand for certification is driven by people who profit from that ecosystem, we need to ask who is really benefiting and who is profiting by replicating these systems.

True determination of qualification cannot be made when only powerful people (and people who stand to profit) sit at the table. White supremacy, capitalism, and precedent are seductive and corrosive forces that can't be ignored.

Intimacy work is important. We should strive to ensure that qualified people do it. But, it is also a business, and we would be remiss to forget that when we look at who profits from decisions designed to keep people out of the field. If everyone isn't at the table, we need to ask why. Leaders in this field have an obligation to not just figure out how they can capitalize from an ecosystem of certification, but how they can actively fight against it.

Sometimes these organizational structures and barriers to entry are framed as protections for the field. The idea is that by focusing on standards, unqualified people or people who behave badly won't be able to find their way in and do harm or undermine the good work of the qualified. These are solutions to the wrong problems. **The answer to inexperience isn't barriers, it's education and mentorship.** Certifications and standards won't weed out abusers

and creeps- refusing to protect them will. No amount of gatekeeping can stop the savvy, determined manipulator from working within a system, using a certification to cover up the harms they cause.

With the demand for “certified” professionals so high and spots in training programs so limited, the dangerous vacuum has created the perfect loophole. Anyone, regardless of their qualifications, can pronounce themselves certified. It might sound ridiculous, but it’s been happening. It is understandably unpopular to point it out, but everyone in this field that holds a certification in intimacy work has certified themselves or has been certified by someone who certified themselves. Many of them may be enormously qualified, but if the ecosystem allows for self-certification, more and more people will choose to cut out the expensive, short-supply, time-consuming middleman and certify themselves. Yes, people in-the-know will know the difference between a qualified certified person and an unqualified certified person, but the quality of the work is at risk in a certification ecosystem.

As the field develops, there is a pedagogical and industrial advantage incentivising training with and learning from as many people as possible. Lots of people have made important contributions to intimacy work, but no one-- and I am including myself and TIE in this-- owns it and no one knows everything about it. Not every brilliant intimacy practitioner is affiliated with an organization. Learning from everyone and encouraging everyone to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field is how we will do the most good. If the goal of intimacy work in general becomes limited to obtaining a certificate from a particular organization, there is meaningful motivation to limit one’s scope of study to achieve the certification. Certification systems divide people into schools of approach which limits cross pollination and meaningful, productive criticism.

The desire to protect meaningful investments has made participants in the field understandably protective of their teachers in whom they have faithfully invested so much time, energy, and money. It replicates a master-teacher model pervasive in theatre and film that reinforces harmful power dynamics. If every intimacy organization, Theatrical Intimacy

Education included, is based on the research of its members, how can we know that and in good conscience say that the self-study of others is invalid or unworthy of recognition?

The Certification Ecosystem is invisible if it's working for you, but that doesn't mean that it isn't a huge problem and certification by another name isn't the solution. Rules that disregard the decades of experience from people doing this work before it was recognized as intimacy work are demeaning. Guidelines that can only be met with considerable expense are classist. Standards that require you to pay the person who wrote the standards to help you meet the standards is an abuse of power. A long resume or a big price tag is not an indication of quality. The certification problem isn't about titles and who has them or who doesn't- it's about who is profiting and who is being kept out. It's ableist, classist, ageist, harmful. It keeps out new people, people coming from other areas of the industry, people with care obligations, and it is in direct contradiction to all of the anti-racist promises recently published on organizational websites.

If you feel the desire to defend the Certification Ecosystem or the people in power in the field, ask yourself what opening this work up to everyone would cost you or the organizations that you have invested in.

That's the point. That's the cost of an equitable, inclusive, generous, radical field.

The good news is, it doesn't have to be this way. We have a choice. As I said earlier, I believe that every single person who leads an organization or chooses to participate in this field genuinely wants to make it better for everyone. In an art form reflective of our increasingly pluralistic society, many of us, with our limited lived experiences, will continually have growing and learning to do. So, let's do it together.

Let's model this industry in the image of the people doing it- diverse, supportive, generous, and curious. Let's learn from each other's mistakes and from the mistakes of other fields. Let's take the time to see the whole person, or better yet, the whole field, when we sit

down, as a community to figure out what we are about. Let's stop sniping over acronyms and instead sit down and talk about values and who we are failing. Let's take the emphasis off of keeping people out and instead ask, who is missing and how can we build a table that they will want to sit at. Let's get artists paid for their time while continuing to center people over profit margins. Let's teach institutions and individuals to ask better questions and to hire whole people, not resume lines.

While the work is old, the field is young. As we figure out who we are, it is imperative that we shift the conversation away from benchmarks, guidelines, minimums, and requirements towards the goals of the field. The goals can't be quantified in hours of training or dollars paid, but maybe they can be captured in open, welcoming conversations, supportive partnerships, and trying to spread our relatively new wings. We need to turn the attention away from standards and towards the radically inclusive conversation about how we want to be known and how we want our work to be recognized within this growing field.

This is old work and a new field and it is changing every day. Alignments and companies and values will continue to evolve. We don't all need to get along, and we won't, but let's keep disagreeing for the good of the field instead of digging in our heels to protect power. We need each other. We are a bunch of imperfect people trying to do important work right.

That's the long answer.

References

Pace, Chelsea. 2020. *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy*. New York, NY: Routledge.