



Practical Tips for Wellness Workshops

Compiled by Maskworx in collaboration with Fay Wilkinson

Introduction

All art making is therapeutic, however when conducting a healing arts workshop in mask, unless you are a trained therapist, then these guidelines will be helpful in providing a safe environment for participants. Mask is a powerful communication medium. They can conceal and protect as well as reveal and enlighten.

- Ⓢ The amount of time you have, the intent of the workshop, the physical and emotional wellbeing of the participants and the number you are working with will affect how you structure the workshop and what can be accomplished.
- Ⓢ How the masks are used (whether they are worn or not) and whether collaborative stories/sculptures will be created are also factors.

Respect

A core value in mask making is Respect for the Mask as a timeless container of knowledge. Remember mask etiquette at all times; no food & drink nearby, no fingers in eye-holes, keep the mask 'face up' once completed.

Care; boundaries & guidelines

Create and maintain a safe and secure atmosphere for creative process to happen as mask and story can be particularly powerful. Although mask work is serious business, it can also be uplifting and energizing. Laughter is as healing as tears are.

Participant's responsibilities:

- Ⓢ Listen to yourself and others with an openness of heart, mind and spirit
- Ⓢ Confidentiality – what happens in ‘creative space’ stays in creative space (wherever art is being created, the space is automatically deepened/ritualized/sacralised - whichever word you prefer - by the act of creating a special purpose personal and group space. In some cultures, Aboriginal for example, the space is “brushed off” with branches or bunches of herbs or burning incense to ‘cleanse’ it for creative purpose.
- Ⓢ Respect for one another; no interruption or feedback unless requested, no judgments, and remember to speak from your own experiences (speak from an “I” position) rather than generalizations.
- Ⓢ And respect for one another’s space; refrain from touching a piece without permission.
- Ⓢ Take responsibility for your own wellbeing – ask for what you need
- Ⓢ If you need to absent yourself from the space, let your facilitator know
- Ⓢ If the facilitator asks you to stop and take the mask off, agree to act on that directive.

Workshop facilitator's responsibilities:

Demonstrate a curious, open and authentic approach from the get-go...

- Ⓢ To conduct a warm up/wind down exercise such as “reflective practice” – where participants are given the opportunity to review their previous days work before they proceed with the next task, serves to bring the group into cohesion and helps cement the learning/healing process too.
- Ⓢ To keep and hold the space; to be the timekeeper
- Ⓢ To clearly outline how the day will take shape (but also remain flexible as events/outcomes may be weather-dependent for example).
- Ⓢ Before creativity begins it is wise to ensure that the artistic direction is clearly defined or stated. A coherent theme may be necessary so that dark, scary images do not emerge unbidden and dominate. Sometimes this might happen anyway so it is useful to know what to do if the images become too much, too soon. Keep a couple of empty shoeboxes on hand in case a mask does become too highly charged for the maker to handle. If this happens, pop the mask inside the shoebox and wait for it to “cool down”.
- Ⓢ Participants are less likely to go to deep places if there is a relatively short time for each stage of the creative process



- Ⓢ To respond to the needs of the individuals and the group
- Ⓢ To be able to intervene only when necessary with grounding exercises
- Ⓢ Stop a participant-in-mask if you witness difficulties arising – for example hysterical crying or uncontrollable shaking. Usually ‘standing steady’ alongside the person is all that is required to calm them
- Ⓢ Keep things moving forward...
- Ⓢ To know your limits as a leader working with mask and story (based upon your experience and training). Be able to refer participants to further help if necessary, or have a trained person as a co-facilitator or readily available.

Listening & Talking times

Groups, and especially female groups, tend to chatter which can be good for group solidarity but it can also become an ‘escape route’ and hold the participants back. Designate a regular time for a “yarning circle” where each group member takes their turn to talk about their work-in-progress. It is important to also schedule quiet times for coming into conversation with their mask.

Masks and Stories

There are various ways to use mask in a wellness workshop. The two most widely used are:

- Ⓢ Mask as Story
- Ⓢ Mask as Storyteller

Mask as Story (4 levels)

The blank mask is intended to become the maker’s Story Site. The maker will make their own visual narrative using the classic face shape as a ‘storyscape’. Note: if the maker prefers their story to remain undisclosed, it’s okay and in fact quite creative, for their artistry to be situated on the inner surface of their mask.

- Ⓢ **1st level – mechanical** hands on processes, remembering safety tips regarding sharp blades left uncovered, etc.
- Ⓢ **2nd level – aesthetic**, mindful processes using the symbolic language of the mythic imagination.



- Ⓢ **3rd level – alchemical**, the act of transforming those highly charged symbols into something the maker can comfortably sit with.
- Ⓢ **4th level – movement** towards a resolution or insight. Usually what happens is the ‘feeling tone’ of the work changes in some way. This signals the process has begun of honoring *everything* that has been brought to the emerging story. It is like a house with the ‘colour’ of having been lived in.

Mask as Storyteller

The blank mask is intended to become the embodiment and personification of the *teller* of the maker’s story or chapter in that story. For example, it could be human, an animal, an emotion, an inanimate object like a rock, or an observer. The story need not be literal. The classic face shape or any of the shapes inscribed in the Multimask can be used.

Practicalities

- Ⓢ Traditionally a full face mask does not speak. Half masks, or masks where the maker’s mouth and lips are seen, can speak.
- Ⓢ A full or half mask hand held with a rod can be particularly helpful for some, particularly older participants, as they can easily control whether the mask is near their face or not (for some a mask over the face can be too ‘close’ both physically and emotionally).
- Ⓢ A simple “moppet” (puppet-mask) can be constructed using the mask as the face with a hand-held stick.
- Ⓢ The mask can be simple and uncluttered in design and decoration. It is to convey the essence of the teller of the story, not the story itself.
- Ⓢ Check for comfort on the face. Small foam pieces placed inside the mask on the forehead and cheeks can make a better fit.
- Ⓢ Make allowances for eye glasses or add a piece of dowelling.

Bringing the mask to life

- Ⓢ Add dimension with written word, poetry, small props or percussion instruments, dance or collaboration with others.
- Ⓢ Come into conversation with your mask by asking a series of questions (dialoguing); who are you? where are you from? why have you come? what do you want? etc...



- Ⓢ A mask really comes alive when it is worn, or through movement (dance or mime). If the maker does not choose to wear it, then some other person may hold it in front of the maker from a distance and intuitively move it for them. The maker may then choose to move with it.
- Ⓢ It is customary to turn away from your audience as you put your mask on and, later, remove it.

Only Positive Feedback

Avoid having expectations. Mask-making in is all about *process* not about outcomes. Suggest each participant reward themselves for having courageously submitted their personal stories to creative purpose and sharing.

Returning to the ‘real’ world

Finally, before farewell, check with each individual participant if there is any safety issues in their social world. Then prepare all participants for re-entry into the ‘real’ world by warning them about feeling ‘spacey’, vulnerable, forgetful, impaired peripheral vision (especially when driving), etc. Above all mask-making activities should be about having fun, feeling happy and optimistic, and becoming more robust as a person.

**For further help or assistance
please feel free to contact us**

masks@maskworx.co.nz

tele: 64-9-272 2981

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feedback and our photo gallery.**

www.maskworx.co.nz

