

The Wonderful Freedom of Not Being Finished: Four Values for Constructive Critique

by John Borstel

What is the value of young people making theatre together? Those who do it – the youth themselves and their adult teachers, facilitators, and directors – will have a variety of answers. Though I'm not a youth theatre practitioner myself, I've worked long enough at the crossroads of artmaking, education, and community engagement to feel qualified to guess at a few of the benefits: You get to know your peers in new and deeper ways. You learn about yourself, perhaps about skills, capacities, and viewpoints that you didn't know you had. You build common purpose and gain tools for working and being with other people. You get practice in both leading and following, and understanding when to do which. You research and perceive the world in ways that stretch you beyond anything you can learn in a classroom. You get to be an artist, and because society needs artists and because you discover that you need to be an artist, you might get launched on your life's work. Whatever you end up doing, doing theatre will help you to emerge into who you are.

Of course, the list could go on and on. Whatever the reason for young people to make theatre, I'd like to suggest that there's an important role for a thoughtful process of critique and feedback to play in the process. It stands to reason: if something is so clearly worth doing, then doing it with intention, reflection, and dialogue can only enhance and deepen the experience. Engaging with meaningful critique will produce benefits for the individual young artist, for the ensemble, and for the product that they are working together to create.

But perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself when I use words like 'thoughtful' and 'meaningful,' or suggest that qualities like intention, reflection, and dialogue are normal aspects of feedback experience. After all, most of us have been on the receiving end of critiques that felt pointless, reckless, or even destructive, that

undermined rather than enhanced the experience they addressed. It might have been a free-for-all, a chance for one person to pontificate, or a session of shoulds and musts based on a set of prescriptions for what supposedly works and what doesn't. Or it was all pleasantries, a series of encouraging generalities with little substance. *How* we critique matters. Done right, feedback is a constructive, progressive experience. Done right, the information gained is useful, actionable, maybe even inspiring.

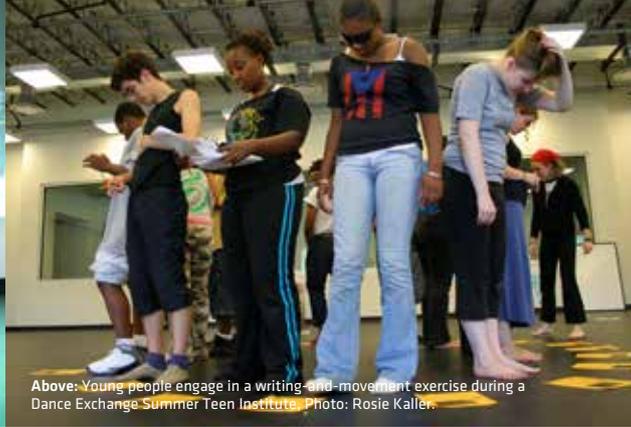
I speak from experience. For over ten years I have been facilitating, teaching, and writing about one well-tested, highly effective method for group feedback on artistic works in progress, Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (sometimes known by the initials CRP). This process emphasises the power of questions, the importance of good facilitation, and the potential of informed dialogue between a maker and a group of responders. Unlike some feedback methods, it offers an active role to artists in the critique of their own work. Working closely with choreographer Liz Lerman, originator of CRP, I've observed the power of this particular process to turn feedback into a kind of dress rehearsal for the connections that we're usually seeking when we set out to make art.

A thoughtfully-managed feedback session is a first chance for art to make an encounter with some kind of audience. Perhaps we will hit the tender spot between what is familiar and what is surprising so that we spark an experience of discovery. Maybe we'll represent a meaning that someone else will recognise and even inspire another person's capacity to make meaning of their own from what we show them. Maybe we'll just express a feeling that others can recognise from within their own scope of emotion. All of those possibilities can be captured, held up to the light, inspected when we engage in a positive experience of critique.





Above: Young performers at a public showing during a Dance Exchange Summer Teen Institute. Photo: Rosie Kaller.



Above: Young people engage in a writing and movement exercise during a Dance Exchange Summer Teen Institute. Photo: Rosie Kaller.

Below: Young people rehearse during a Dance Exchange Summer Teen Institute, working under the leadership of Elizabeth Johnson.



Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process in Brief

THE ROLES

- The artist offers a work in progress for review and feels prepared to question that work in a dialogue with other people.
- One, a few, or many responders – committed to the artist's intent to make excellent work – engage in the dialogue with the artist.
- The facilitator, initiates each step, keeps the process on track, and works to help the artist and responders use the process to frame useful questions and responses.

THE PROCESS

The Critical Response Process takes place after a presentation of artistic work. Work can be short or long, large or small, and at any stage in its development.

THE CORE STEPS

1. **Statements of Meaning:** Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, striking in the work they have just witnessed.
2. **Artist as Questioner:** The artist asks questions about the work. After each question, the responders answer. Responders may express opinions if they are in direct response to the question asked and do not contain suggestions for changes.
3. **Neutral Questions:** Responders ask neutral questions about the work. The artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them. For example, if you are discussing the lighting of a scene, "Why was it so dark?" is not a neutral question. "What ideas guided your choices about lighting?" is.
4. **Opinion Time:** Responders state opinions, subject to permission from the artist. The usual form is "I have an opinion about _____, would you like to hear it?" The artist has the option to say no.

Liz Lerman's Critical Response ProcessSM
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Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make from dance to dessert by Liz Lerman and John Borstel offers a comprehensive overview of the process, its inner workings and variations.

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Please understand that when I say "a positive experience of critique" I don't mean one in which we get complete validation for all we're doing. I mean one that raises questions, affords insights and 'ah-ha's,' and leaves makers and interpreters feeling excited, stimulated, and motivated to go back to work on the creative product in which they're engaged.

The moment of feedback is a potent one. I believe it is potent in part because it holds within a small, concentrated span of time many of the components of the larger creative process that it echoes. Good critique can be a kind of microcosm for the bigger journey that the artist has been travelling, a recapitulation of thought, action, and process that can leverage the maker back onto the path toward completion of the project.

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process offers an effective, actionable series of steps for getting the most out of this potent moment. The sidebar *Critical Response Process in Brief* presents the basic mechanics of the process. Underpinning these mechanics are a series of values that I've gradually come to recognise as central to the functioning of meaningful critique. Four of these values are particularly notable for their relationship to human creativity.

Observation:

Numerous thinkers in the fields of education, psychology, and innovation theory have enumerated the components of creative process.¹ Almost every list puts *observation* near the top. In order to use the objects, stories, needs, problems, and actions around us as the raw material of a creative act, we must first perceive them and organise them into consciousness and memory. Observation of the world and its contents establishes the base of information and experience on which creative works draw. To get to the point of creating anything worthwhile, the artist must engage in myriad acts of observation.

If feedback is the moment when the making of art meets the discernment of the art that's been made, observation starts with the actions of the artist and continues with the perception of the viewer. Just as there can be no art without observation as fuel, there can be no meaningful discussion, feedback or critique of a work until it has been thoroughly observed.

That may seem obvious, but for some of us it is so easy to jump from the objective experience of looking at someone else's work to the subjective satisfaction of witnessing our own reactions to it – all of the responses and opinions that assert our identity and tell us who we are. Some make this slide into subjectivity more precipitously than others, but we all do it. Just try getting people to describe, in strictly neutral terms, what's in a picture or a poem. You will find that they very quickly slip into interpretation or an attempt to voice meaning as they personally see it.

1. Systems highlighting the central role of observation or related values include the creative capacities outlined by Robert Root-Bernstein and Michele Root-Bernstein in their book *Sparks of Genius*, the personality traits of creative individuals as noted by Feldhusen and Westby, and the CREATES Brainsets Model outlined by Shelly Carson in *Your Creative Brain*.



Above: "A Mother/Daughter Distance Dance".

The ability to stay in the mode of unbiased observation, and then to make the transition into acts of interpreting and making meaning with full consciousness are skills, and skills that may require some active cultivation.

In practice, thoughtful observation of a work in progress might call on us to turn up the volume on some of the brain's capacities, while turning it down on others. We may need to quiet our minds and ask ourselves some questions before we begin: What am I seeing, sensing, observing? If I had to describe it to someone who hasn't witnessed it, how would I describe it? Observation consists both in perceiving the thing presented and in perceiving our reaction to it, so can I distinguish between what's in front of me and my personal experience of it? To take something in, in a spirit of full observation, may be innate for some sensibilities. Some people are natural reporters and collectors of sensations. But others among us may need to use questions like these to cultivate habits of mind that support good observation.

Do we share our observations with the artist as part of critique? We might. Knowing how a work is perceived, what stood out, and what a viewer observed in her or his own experience can be valuable information to a maker. Of at least equal importance, however, is how observation serves as the platform for the other values that come into play in useful critique.

Positive Response

What's working? What's effective? What's meaningful? What am I connecting with? In assessing a work of art and managing our relationship to it as a viewer it is easy to neglect the answers to these questions in favour of what isn't working and the whys and wherefores of what we would fix, what the artist should be doing instead of what they are doing now, or how we would do it differently if it were ours. So natural is our compulsion to name flaws and suggest fix-its that without a system to slow us down we may skip the step of letting the maker know the positive side of our response.

Intuitively and through repeated observation, I've long understood the value of this kind of positive response when a work is put forward for critique. But I didn't have much rigorous theory to back it up, which often left me wondering if I were advocating a feel-good experience for its own sake or as a kind of palliative buffer on the negative stuff. Then I encountered the work of Barbara Fredrickson, a researcher in positive psychology, the branch of study that addresses the origin and function of such positive human traits as happiness, compassion, and altruism. Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory states that positive emotions *increase the number of behavioral options and broaden the scopes of attention and cognition*. Putting that in the terms of a critique experience, positive response from a viewer inspires positive emotion from the maker, which in turn opens the latter up to learning, to discovery, to the possibility of change, and the perception of a wider range of possible outcomes for the work under discussion. This opening, broadening, and building seems very close in spirit to the varied good reasons I suggested at the top of this article for why theatre-making can be such a valuable experience for young people.

Step One of Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process functions in part to engender this positive effect. In that step, responders answer this question: What was exciting, meaningful, memorable or evocative to you about the work in progress you just witnessed? The question filters in favour of the positive, but note that it involves more than just saying what's good. The question opens the conversation up to a wide range of experience, not merely what you liked or you didn't, what's working or what isn't. The doors are wide open for many kinds of connections to be made between the art and the viewer, and the viewer back to the artist. To be thus heard, seen, acknowledged is a positive human experience and the wider we can open the portals of perception, the more we can build to the possibility for openness and learning for the artist.

Enquiry

I love the words 'work in progress.' There's a wonderful freedom in not being finished. You don't need to have all the answers or solutions. You can let yourself live in the realm of questioning for a while.

To ask a question is a powerful act. If we are the maker of the work in progress, the act of framing a question can enable us to analyse and reflect in new ways. It can help us see gaps we missed or alert us to possibilities we didn't recognise. It can tell us what's really important. And the information we get when we ask a question helps us understand what we have made in the context of the human encounter for which it was intended.

Turning the tables, and letting the viewers ask the questions can elicit information and bring context and intention into the discussion. We can be disabused of misleading assumptions, which frees us to give more informed critique. Sometimes we can challenge the artist to think beyond their limitations, identify a gap, or to make a discovery in the act of answering a question.

I broached the subject of enquiry with my audience when I spoke to the Theatre for Young Audiences Gathering in Kilkenny last year by sharing an activity that I've used numerous times before. In pairs, I asked them to talk briefly about a work in progress in their own lives and to frame a question about it. Then as a group we listened to a few of the questions: "How will the length of a work affect the process for making it?" "How do you set up a theatre company... and am I in too far to back out now?" It is interesting to note how resonant and broadly applicable some of these questions are when they are separated from their context, and to note the language people use to frame their questions. In Kilkenny, as is often the case, 'how' questions dominated. I also asked participants to reflect on what happened when they made the transition from the narrative about their work in progress to asking a question. One respondent gave testimony to feeling a kind of internal shift and to getting new insights simply because she was asked to pose a question.

An Environment for Inspiration

Elizabeth Johnson is an Adjunct Artist of the Dance Exchange with over ten years' experience as choreographer, dancer, educator, Associate Artistic Director and director of the company's Teen Exchange programme. She is currently based at Arizona State University where she is the coordinator of socially engaged practice.

The values I've learned through CRP inform how I move through the world: Looking for and stating what's exciting or memorable, asking questions, recognising my own judgments, reframing an idea in neutral language. With practice these all become habits.

In introducing these ideas to young people, I don't start by teaching the whole Critical Response Process or putting out a big structure or rationale at first. Rather I try to integrate the values in each class. They inform how I facilitate and give instructions. And they become the environment in which the students interact.

For instance, as a way to start developing a movement vocabulary for a dance project, I might ask everyone in the group to come up with ten movements that put the idea of 'flight' into their bodies. Then I'll ask them to form pairs, share their material and to say to their partners one thing they found striking or meaningful and why. Then each partner 'borrows' some of the other's movement, trying it on for themselves, at the same time mirroring it back to the person who devised it. In that brief encounter there are skills for observation, appreciation, effective listening, and reflection.

A little later, after ensembles of three and four have worked together to make small choreographic studies, we'll have a group showing. After we watch each piece, I'll ask viewers, "What was surprising or memorable? What caught your eye?" For early work in progress, that might be all the feedback we do, but as a teacher, I am watching the responses for ideas that can help the group see new options and or show me what challenges I might want to build into their next assignment. This is also a time for students to be inspired by the good work in the room. This environment makes everyone do their best: rather than seeing other's success as making your work less, it is an opportunity to name what you appreciate and incorporate that into your next work. I think this helps with teen judgment, competition, and insecurity.

All along the way, I will ask both individuals and groups what their questions are about the things they have made. This harnesses the value of enquiry and parallels Step Two in CRP. Sometimes teenagers will want to use this for narrowing down, or getting the assurance that they've made the right choice. "Did you like the song we chose for the beginning?" "Should we end the piece all dancing together or back in the two duets?" I encourage them to try to get beyond these either/or terms and to name the issue behind the question. Think about what you want to communicate and form a question around that: "How did you react to the first song?" "What idea did you get when you saw us split into pairs at the end?"

The neutral question concept in Step 3 of CRP is a great technique for suspending judgment. That keeps defensiveness from derailing the learning. But I don't pursue the idea of neutrality too hard. Instead, when young people are responding to the work of their peers, I'll ask, "What makes you curious?" "What do you want to know more about?" If you set up a context for curiosity, usually the questions will be neutral.

Elizabeth Johnson



Above: "A Mother/Daughter Distance Dance"

Below: CRP in action, Photos: Dance Exchange and Rosie Kaller.



Judgment

Judgment gets a very bad rap these days, at least in the United States where I live and work. "Don't be so judgmental!" "I feel judged!" These are reactions to experiences where judgment has been inappropriately personalised or where prejudice or a prescribed set of standards are given undue authority. But such experiences shouldn't obscure the value, the essential role of thoughtful judgment in the assessment of work in progress.

A viable process of critique requires some degree of judgment. After all, if feedback is to play a useful role in the arc of a creative process, it's reasonable to expect guidance in assessing, making choices, and narrowing options, all of which implies that judgments must be made. But balance is needed. If judgment is the sole focus of critique, its starting place and main objective, the experience becomes limited and can impinge on the artist's sense of autonomy and the valuable role they can play in the critique of their own work.

Just like observation, judgment is a value that has a role both in critique and in the larger creative process. When we consider the full arc of creative action that takes us from initial impulse, through varied stages of inspiration, generating, analysis, editing and crafting a final product, we can recognise that the role of judgment must be managed in very different ways at different stages. Our brains have very strong mechanisms for judgment. They are seated in the left frontal lobe and keep us from doing stupid things like walking into brick walls or making rude comments in polite company. They police our own impulses in ways that benefit us. But they can also inhibit positive impulses to experiment, express, and risk, allowing doubt to stifle our capacity to think and act in original ways. Writer's block and other creative barriers are incidents of this judgmental mechanism tyrannising our actions to the point of productive paralysis. Thus the judgmental mechanisms have to be silenced at the inspiration and generation phases of the creative act and successful artists often have developed particular habits of mind that enable them to achieve this silencing.

But we must be ready to reengage that capacity of judgment when we get to other stages of the creative process, those where we take the raw material we've generated and do the sorting, sifting, and amending that inform a rigorously crafted piece of work.



In the creative process itself it is essential to be able both to engage and suspend judgment depending on the particular task at hand, with generative acts, for instance, benefitting from suspended judgment, and planning or assessment acts benefitting from engaged judgment. Likewise the process of critical response also calls on us to sometimes suspend, sometimes engage judgment, or our outward expression of judgment. Because the deployment of judgment in critique requires us to move back and forth between these two options with alacrity and an awareness of context and the impact of our statements and actions, I have been calling it 'Mindful Judgment Agility.'

To be mindful and agile with judgment takes technique. Sequencing your actions can help. If you've arrived at judgment that you trust, the first step may not be to express it. Remembering the merits of enquiry, it might be to find a great question that gets at the essence of your judgment without expressing it. This is the powerful concept of the neutral question, which is Step 3 of the Critical Response Process. When you hear the answer to such a question, you might find that you want to alter your judgment. Or your question might lead the artist to conclusions that make it unnecessary to share your judgments. Or you might lay the groundwork for a thoughtful sharing of your judgment.

I hope you will consider these values if you're engaged in arts work with young people and want to make critique a constructive, forward-thinking experience for them. I hope you will reflect on the experiences of Julianne Franz and Elizabeth Johnson, two artists with vast youth arts experience who highlight the practical applications of meaningful feedback in sidebars to this article. Most of all I hope you will assess the values that bring you to youth theatre work. Why are you doing what you are doing? What do you believe young people have to gain from experience of making theatre together? Rich discovery will be the reward when you connect those convictions to the potent moment when work in progress meets the power of observation, positive response, inquiry, and well-managed judgment.

John Borstel is a visual artist, performing arts administrator, and co-author of Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: a method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert. Currently Senior Advisor for Dance Exchange, he has taught and facilitated CRP throughout the United States and in Europe.

Empathetic DNA

Since 2000, through Center Stage's Encounter programme in Baltimore, Julianne Franz has been training young people ages 14 to 18 who identify as actors, dancers, poets, playwrights, and musicians to build a creative community, one that thrives on the dynamics of their differences. Upon graduation, Encounter young people are charged with finding and/or building more of these kinds of communities.

Encounter works with 25 to 35 teenagers at a time, young people from diverse backgrounds and very different neighbourhoods around Baltimore, a large city with its share of urban problems. It's a community of students who come together because they want to make a positive change and because they want people to listen. Performance work is developed through an ensemble-based devised theatre practice, which asks them to create content addressing a common theme like home, fight, or destination. Students bring to the community the stories of their lives and those stories are put to work both in their writing and performance. It's leadership training as much as it is theatre.

We have been dedicated to using the Critical Response Process as a tool for both its critical and loving attributes. We usually train Encounter young people in all four steps of the Critical Response Process, but concentrate primarily on Steps One and Two. Step One is a great unifier. In the variation we use, I ask for short, gut-based responses that start with, "I'm still thinking about," "I remember most," "I was touched by," "I connected to." With this approach, the group builds collective memory and the responders share their emotional connection to another's work. It takes good care of the artist and it also supports responders - it gives them half their sentence. The nature of these prompts diminishes the importance of opinion and shares from the emotional life. The conversation expresses the things we care most about.

When we practice Step Two the artist asks one or two questions about what they've just presented. And in those questions they are expressing what they care about, what is important to them in what they've communicated. In preparing them to ask their questions I make sure they understand that they have to be susceptible to the full range of response that the question might draw. It's an act of risk, vulnerability, and trust. That itself helps nurture the values at the heart of Encounter.

In our last project we did an exercise where we put chairs in various positions to suggest different power dynamics. We used these chair images as the basis for scene study. One student presented a scene where a character had claimed a chair and another attempted to push him off. When he had a chance for a Step Two question, the author of this unfinished scene asked, "Is it more powerful for someone to talk back or to walk away?" It sparked an important conversation, and other students took the question into their own process. It became a generative question for developing the play, which was eventually titled, *FIGHT or Flight*.

In Encounter we are making theatre as a deeply empathetic process; these steps from Critical Response help inject structure into that process. The DNA of the Critical Response Process is full of empathy and inspires Encounter students to connect deeply to the work of others and realise that their work depends on it.

Julianne Franz