critique IS CREATIVE

The critical response process in Theory and Action

LIZ LERMAN AND JOHN BORSTEL

Edited by John Borstel

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS Middletown, Connecticut
To everyone who has taken the risk of putting forward work in progress

To everyone who has asked a thoughtful question before stating an opinion

To everyone who has sought to guide a conversation to make it better
## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xiii
Prologue: Opening Circles *Liz Lerman* 1
Introduction 3

### I: THE PRACTICE

#### 1. FRAMING FEEDBACK 11

From Your Beginnings *Liz Lerman* 12
Living Feedback:
- A Short Memoir of Critique Experiences *John Borstel* 13
- The Broadest Possible Interpretation of Creativity *Mark Callahan* 18
- Reimagining Feedback *Liz Lerman* 21

#### 2. ROLES AND STEPS 27

“Practice, Practice” *Liz Lerman* 28
The Critical Response Process in Brief 29
The Roles 32
Step One 37
Step Two 48
Step Three 60
Step Four 75
II: APPLICATIONS

Authors’ Note 86

3. LEARNING AND TEACHING 87

Interrupting Authority  Liz Lerman 93
Rigorous Nurture: The Critical Response Process and Adolescents
Elizabeth Johnson Levine 94
Engaging the Vital Power of Your Peers: CRP in Jazz Education
Carlos Lopez-Real 105
Developing the Artistic Voice  Gerda van Zelm 108
If the Artist Asks, It’s Our Job to Answer:
CRP in the College Dance Composition Studio  Gesel Mason 112
Unleashing Autonomy, Cultivating Leadership:
CRP in Advanced Music Education  Sean Riley 118
An Adaptation of CRP for Peer Review in Small Seminar
Courses in STEM  Lekelia D. Jenkins 126
Toward a CRP Pedagogy  Kathryn Prince 129
You Are the Teacher  Liz Lerman 138

4. ARTISTRY AND INSTITUTIONS 143

Critiquing and Caring  Liz Lerman 148
Mentoring and Facilitating in the Visual Arts:
CRP at Women’s Art Resources of Minnesota  Jill Waterhouse 149
Process and Ethos: CRP for New Operas at
American Lyric Theater  Lawrence Edelson 155
An Accommodating Blueprint:
Multidisciplinary Perspectives on CRP  Rebekah West 157
Getting Where We Need to Be: CRP in Organization, Collaboration,
and Production at Dance & Bmore  Clay Philip 162
CRP on Yourself  Liz Lerman 168
CRP in a Time of Reckoning  *Liz Lerman*  176
Out of the Shadow Side of Niceness: CRP in a Mennonite Seminary Worship Lab  *Rachel Miller Jacobs*  177
Learning a City, Resisting Erasure: CRP in Community and Collaborative Process  *Bimbola Akinbola and Cassie Meador*  180
Advancing Equity: CRP at Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario  *Charles C. Smith, Kevin A. Ormsby, and Shula Strassfeld*  190
Human Works in Progress: CRP and Personal Change  *Phil Stoesz*  197
Civic Dramaturgy: Undoing Racism through the Critical Response Process  *Isaac Gómez*  201
The Critical Response Process: Aesthetics of Time  *Cristóbal Martínez*  207
Closing Ritual  *Liz Lerman*  220

About the Authors and Contributors  225
Index  231
The Critical Response Process came into being at a time when I was seeking the kind of critique that would make me excited to go back to work.
The Critical Response Process was born during a period when it seemed that product was everything, and process was to be kept secret. Things have changed. CRP worked then, and it works now.
The Critical Response Process is a system for feedback.
The Critical Response Process is also a collection of tools that can be applied independent of each other for a wide range of human purposes.
The Critical Response Process is a kind of ritual. Like good ritual, it holds you in relationship to values that would be otherwise hard to keep in the rush of daily living.
The Critical Response Process is a set of practices that allow you to live on the horizontal in a world dominated by the hierarchical. This means it can help you manage ambiguities, hold multiple perspectives, and function where meaning depends on context but where values and ethics still matter.
The Critical Response Process is an opportunity to rethink your aesthetics, your opinions, and your assumptions about any subject.
The Critical Response Process helps you manage your judgments, which are occurring daily in numerous different settings.
The Critical Response Process can lead to deeper conversations as well as more civil ones.
The Critical Response Process was put out into the world as a photocopied sheet of paper over thirty years ago. It is now in wide use around the world. It still holds close to its original form, but is always generating new knowledge while evolving in its purposes, adaptations, and variations. We hope you will evolve it too.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors extend their sincere thanks to the contributing writers credited in the table of contents and contributor biographical notes. We are also grateful to those consenting to use of quotes and excerpts used in the text: James Bundy, Andrew Burke, Linda Chapman, James Darrah, Michael Despars, Brian Francoise, Ruth Fraser, Raji Ganesan, Helena Gaunt, Kristin Kjølberg, Diane Kuthy, Talia Mason, Paloma McGregor, Erika R. Moore, Roxie Perkins, Chris Postuma, Ellen Reid, Sadie Leigh Rothman, Michel A. Riquelme Sanderson, David Tinapple, Leigh-Ann Tower, and Suzannah Vaughn. For their contributions to the process and faith in the vision of this book, we thank Mary Cohen, Ellie Dubois, Christine Hamilton, Simon Hart, Falk Hübner, Jaine Lumsden, and Valeska Populoh.

Special thanks to Jane Brown and Linda Caro Reinisch for their financial support of the Critical Response Process. We are grateful for the support of the staff of Liz Lerman LLC, namely Amelia Cox, Erin Donohue, and Candice Williams. We are thankful to Dance Exchange for providing an incubator, laboratory, and an ongoing center for the practice of CRP.

We extend huge thanks to the staff and team at Wesleyan University Press, particularly to director and editor-in-chief Suzanna Tamminen whose vision and sustained support were unflagging, to production editor Jim Schley for his unique combination of precision and nurture, and to our deft and comprehensive copyeditor, Natalie Taylor Jones.

This book was supported in part by funding from the Montgomery County government and the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, Maryland.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in every encounter in which we teach or facilitate the Critical Response Process, the authors learn something new from a question, a response, an insight, an example, or a risk. With recognition of how that learning has been channeled into this book, we are deeply grateful to all the organizations that have hosted trainings.
and residencies focused on the Process and all the individuals who have spent time with us in CRP circles. You’ve helped to make this book what it is.

In Memoriam: Shula Strassfeld.
CRITIQUE IS CREATIVE
My mother believed in originality. She loved modern art and turning things into something they are not. In the first home I remember, our coffee table was an old barbeque grill that she painted. It also functioned to hold magazines. I think she just put something across it when people needed a shelf to rest their drinks. When we made the move to Washington, D.C., when I was four, and later to Milwaukee, she proudly bought doors that she turned into our kitchen table after she attached very modernistic iron legs to them. Creativity was important to her.

We often made things like paper doll clothes, cloth doll clothes, and dolls themselves out of Kleenex, rubber bands, and bits of fabric. And we always had crayons and paper at our disposal. Color, color, color. “Make a mark,” she’d say. In my earliest memory of her saying anything about how we were doing what we were doing, I was sprawled on the floor, loose paper all around me and a pile of crayons nearby. I was busy making circles. I remember my gleeful abandon as I scribbled circles of different sizes, different colors, pushing the crayon down hard or light to get a different weight of line. After four or five pages of these, I felt my mom standing over me. She looked at what I was doing and said, “Don’t just draw circles. Can’t you do something different?”

Despite the fact that this event happened very long ago, when I think of it I can still feel the admonishment in my body as a distortion in the inner workings of my core. Even as a child, I knew I had somehow failed in getting my mother to see what I had created. When our creativity is made invisible by the words of another, the experience brings a grave disappointment.

I am, in the language of today, a resilient being. And even then, as a child, within seconds I had removed the overly developed circle drawings. What happened next I can’t remember, but I imagine that I might have started drawing something else. It is conceivable that my mother’s sug-
gestion moved me to a new subject, which I may have attacked with joy, or newfound purpose, or with a dutiful resolve. It is possible that I was able to continue. It is, however, more likely that I put the supplies away and went outside to play.

I wish I could have told my mother to look more carefully. That if she had, she would have seen that no circle in my drawings was the same as another. She would have seen the abundant imagination at work as I formed and re-formed this amazing geometry.

It’s a useful story for all kinds of reasons, one of which is that the Critical Response Process and circles often go together. Most photographs of CRP workshops feature people sitting in circles. I have now been in hundreds of them. They are never the same. Patterns emerge, of course. Much of this book is about what we have learned by doing CRP over and over and over. But the uniqueness of each event supports the creativity of that child I was so long ago. The many colors, sizes, shapes, weights, and geometries exist to aid us in pursuing what is vital, mysterious, and challenging in the act of creating something new.
INTRODUCTION

Some events elude documentation. Though the Critical Response Process came into being swiftly and decisively through pilot ventures at Alternate ROOTS and the Colorado Dance Festival, it seems no one recorded an exact birthday for it. But we’re fairly confident that this system for giving and getting feedback got its start in 1990, and so has been in active use for over thirty years. It continues to thrive at its point of origin within the practice of its inventor, choreographer Liz Lerman, in her overlapping circles of influence as an artist, speaker, teacher, and out in the world. Its first decade brought a few changes in determining what was essential as opposed to auxiliary (the core Process contracting from six to four steps) and in how Liz named its components (particularly in the case of step one). But aside from those minor points of communication, CRP has required remarkably little tinkering.

It has, however, demanded some clear and detailed description. Our first CRP book, *Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process: A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, from Dance to Dessert*, appeared in 2003. A quick read at sixty-four illustrated pages, the book offered a fast-track means of getting CRP into eager hands, helping to disseminate the Process into worldwide use. In its modest aspiration to serve as a user’s manual, the first book offered a basic description of the Process and guidelines for facilitators, along with a few variations and sidebars featuring user insights. It has been heartening to hear from those who have been able to establish a practice of CRP based on the book alone, as it fulfilled its function as a basic primer.

But that function was limited. Even as we wrote that guide, we knew we were leaving many paths unexplored, and the passage of time has revealed an ever-broadening range of practice and theory not encompassed in the original book. As steady as its core principles have been, CRP has constantly yielded discovery about its ramifications for learning and in-
sight, as well as its internal workings as a vehicle for personal and interpersonal intelligence. Users have increasingly come to recognize its potential as an integrated system for ethical communication, the value of its variations, and the broad applicability of its principles, both within and far beyond its original domain of the arts. Almost every CRP workshop or facilitation session raises a new question or illuminates a new angle. Some are relevant to the mechanics and inner dynamics of the Process, its three roles, and the range of options participants have in enacting them. We continue to learn about the journey of an opinion as it moves through the Process and ponder the role of clarifying questions. We regularly gain new insight into the relationship of expertise and naivete as blocks to dialogue or sources of information, and about randomness versus organization in the conversations that follow the structure of CRP. Some discoveries are relevant to applications of CRP’s values beyond their original purpose for artistic critique—in particular, how regularly stating what is meaningful and resonant can enhance workplace interaction, how the attempt to remove judgment from a question can diffuse potential conflicts in a relationship, and how life changes when you ask permission to offer an opinion.

Beyond our first book, which stands as the clearest, most codified version of CRP, our distribution method has been open, informal, and highly adaptive. From the beginning the Process has been making its own progress in the world, passing from person to person and site to site with users encouraged to experiment, vary, and tailor it to their immediate needs. We have led many workshops, sometimes with a sole focus on CRP, often incorporating it with other artmaking or community-building methods, always customizing the approach and emphasis to the host organization and participants. Through the original book, articles, workshops, and user-to-user dissemination, CRP has been introduced to thousands of people and has won adherents all over the planet. It has constituted a core method for institutions like New York Theatre Workshop, has been a cornerstone of the MFA program at Yale School of Drama, and has become a fulcrum for change among the participating conservatories in Europe’s Innovative Conservatoire (ICON), to mention just a few. In spite of this reception, it wasn’t until 2019 that we instituted a certification program for facilitators; we are just beginning to establish an online source for literature on CRP as this book goes to press.

The upside of the loosely structured distribution system with which CRP has made its way to a wider audience is that it is constantly finding
new users, both individual and institutional. In the spirit of open-source technology, CRP has thrived through adaptive usage and application to local conditions and specific challenges, compounding the volume of discovery. The downside is that the Process and its progress have been impossible to track. With equal measures of delight and consternation we watch CRP emerging in unexpected places and worry about how well or poorly its principles are being enacted.

Meanwhile, the three decades since CRP’s invention have witnessed some dramatic change in the domain of the arts as much as anywhere else. In the early 1990s arts world of CRP’s origins as Liz was experiencing it, product was everything: the primary basis for consideration in education, public perception, and professional practice. But the last twenty years have seen a growing premium placed on process and its value as a source of learning, a focus for documentation and analysis, a locus of public encounter, and an income-generating asset. Process, moreover, is increasingly perceived in an integrated rather than binary relationship to product—a both/and rather than an either/or. Relative to CRP, this change in our perception of process has radically repositioned the concept of a work in progress from the artist’s secretive purview to a hub for public engagement, from a forum of feints, failures, and red pencil to a generative laboratory. In the neighborhoods of the art world where this new mentality has taken hold, artists can be more vulnerable, artwork more pliant and malleable, interim states of formation more exposed and appreciated, and an audience’s role as a co-creator of meaning more active and overt. Work in progress has come out of its closet: rather than a focus for shame, apology, and inadequacy, work in progress can now stand as an emblem for (just imagine!) progress.

The implications for CRP have been powerful: Institutionally, it has expanded from internal functioning to public programming. It has come to anchor educational programs where artists’ capacity to represent their ideas and process are valued on par with their ability to deliver a product. And, perhaps true to its roots in Liz Lerman’s expansive and democratic approach to creative participation, its structure and principles have increasingly been deployed in community engagement and civic dialogue.

Other shifts have come with thirty years of generational turnover. With changing trends in parenting and education, people arriving at adulthood may not have felt the bruising criticism—both in art and life—that was typical for earlier cohorts. A gentler ethos of feedback may have prevailed in the upbringing of the generation that is taking the stage post-millennium.
But those reared in this more supportive climate face their own dilemmas. If in 1990 the emphasis in the practice of CRP was to help artists find functional meaning and to forestall defensiveness as a counter to the fractious noise of then-typical critique, the stress three decades later may well be on assuring that efforts designed to nurture can also offer challenge, substance, and discernment.

Thirty years has also brought an accumulation of variations as CRP has been channeled into the cultures of particular artistic disciplines, and ventured and interrogated in domains beyond the arts. For example, within the social sciences it has proven compatible with the values of Participatory Action Research. In the laboratory sciences it has been explored as a partner to peer review. And in educational circles, as you will see later in this book, numerous variations have informed core pedagogies, curriculum development, and formative assessment. Meanwhile, life in a globalized world increasingly calls on us to communicate across difference in a rapidly evolving conversation about history, coexistence, exploitation, redress, and the legacies of systemic racism and White supremacy. These realities heighten the challenge and potential of CRP, giving new urgency to some long-standing questions: Artmaking contexts aside, is this method of feedback relevant to cross-cultural dialogue in and of itself? Does CRP contain its own cultural biases? If so, how might they be managed or mitigated? What are the power dynamics of the Process, and can we deploy them equitably? And getting back to art, in any community from Baltimore to Phoenix to Brisbane, where cultural practitioners are grappling with cross-cultural issues in the work they make, the question arises: How can CRP support such work and the conversations it inspires, and what do artists, responders, and facilitators need to know to use it effectively?

As authors, our own points of reference have expanded over the history of CRP, also affecting the contents of this book. Through reading, conversation, artistic practice, and teaching, both of us have explored the nature of creative acts, creative tools, and creative capacities. In the process, we’ve discovered much that illuminates the generative nature of the principles of CRP and the creative energy of the dialogue it supports. One important idea in this regard has been that of divergent/convergent thinking. Broadly speaking, divergent thinking sounds and feels like what people often suppose creativity to be: multiple ideas, fecund production of options, flaps open, eureka, the aha moment, abundant fruit produced by free-flowing process. But as long as those ideas remain merely ideas, divergence is only half the story. For a creative project to evolve and progress, divergence
must meet convergence, the complementary force that narrows, weighs merits, edits, moves into viable production, engineers vision into reality, and, yes, judges. Without moving through cycles of divergence and convergence, no vision becomes a reality.

CRP, we’ve discovered, mirrors and incorporates these forces of divergence and convergence, as well as helping the user manage their interactions in the creative process. It’s easy to assume that critique and feedback reside in the realm of the convergent, but our experience in hundreds of CRP circles insists that divergent functions are consistently stimulated as well: new perceptions emerge, contrasting interpretations coexist, and we find that a problem may have multiple solutions. By observing interacting forces of divergence that are inevitably active in a Critical Response session, we have come to think of critique not as a pause button on the creative process but as a way of heightening and intensifying it into a concentrated session of time. With the Critical Response Process, critique is creative.

We have witnessed a constantly emerging and expanding body of knowledge about CRP that this volume seeks to capture, however partially, while still offering enough of the essentials to offer a point of entry for a reader new to the Process. While reflecting some of the transdisciplinary reach CRP has achieved, this text holds its center in artistic practice, generally using “artist” to designate the person presenting work in progress. With contributions from practitioners in education, science, and religious practice, we trust that this work provides examples from other fields for readers intent on broader applications to make the translation. Encouraging that kind of active engagement by the reader, and reaching beyond the functions of a primer, we suggest multiple ways to approach this book: As a travel guide, offering an armchair tour of CRP applications; as a symposium, inviting varied perspectives on a central topic and interpretations of a core text; and as a practical handbook that will get you thinking about the uses of the Critical Response Process and its values in your life and practice. Rather than representing a summation, we hope this work sparks more reflection, inquiry, and experimentation, and begins a process of gathering the literature that will support CRP and its uses over the next thirty years.
Origin stories are powerful, whether the subject is a cosmos, a culture, or a custom. It’s always an interesting question as to when and how anything begins, particularly anything, like the Critical Response Process (CRP), which seeks to be generative or to harness human creative capacity. Find a starting point and you can always ask, “What happened before that... and what happened before that?” And much as we like to think of a single point of genesis—one common ancestor for all the human DNA, a single source for all the languages spoken on earth—it’s worth remembering that many complex phenomena trace back to multiple causes, that as many roots twist beneath the trunk of a tree as branches spread above it.

So it is with CRP. Its roots touch into individual and collective experiences of feedback, the formalized or haphazard customs of critique, and the circumstances that gave rise to Liz’s impulse to formulate this system thirty years ago. With this first chapter serving to put CRP into some perspective before exploring its particulars, we will look at some of those varied roots. In her opening words, Liz poses the constancy and centrality of feedback in any human life, as its components of judgment and reflection shape our sense of who we are and what is (or isn’t) true or beautiful. Taking an autoethnographic approach in the section that follows, John probes his own biography for signal moments of giving and getting feedback, what they taught him, and how such moments often point to formative shifts in self-understanding and life purpose. Guest contributor Mark Callahan puts CRP into the context of a broader range of investigations, examining critique as it has been practiced in arts and academic settings, including the studies-in-practice that he has engaged with his students at the University of Georgia. Finally, to conclude this round of source perspectives and to launch us into the particulars of the Critical Response Process, Liz takes us back to the concrete origins of the Process and the experiences and contexts that spurred her to bring it into being.
From Your Beginnings

*Liz Lerman*

It starts the moment you are conceived. People all around you are already giving you feedback, talking to you about their hopes, their concerns, and their belief in your future. You will be great. You will be beautiful. You are making my life too difficult. Wow, you moved. Oh, you are making me sick. Oh, look how strong you are.

It only increases after you are born. You start expressing yourself and someone starts doing things and saying things in response. What is the relationship between how much you cry to how much they pat you? The judgments begin to fly all around you. And yes—your behavior, your thinking, and your being are affected by the tone, style, meaning, touch, timing, sounds, and quality of everything you take in. We begin this amazing journey surrounded by opinions and judgment, inseparable from the feelings of the people giving us this information: They love us; they hate us; they want the best for us; they know more than us; they want us to do something quite particular; they want us to fend for ourselves; they want to teach us; and they want to use us as an example to themselves or others. They measure their own success by the way we act.

When a process, such as the Critical Response Process, asks you to think about your judgments and opinions, it can feel not just personal, but as something that impacts your core being. You are communicating with a part of yourself that comes from your earliest beginnings. When we examine our ancestry, we can see that these opinions and judgments are part of our inheritance. Therefore, when we adjust the way we think or act in moments of feedback, we are simultaneously moving backward and forward in time. We may not want to change because we know we are feeling the weight of our family history and cultural traditions of the past, even as we consider the way we hold our ideas in the present. These are not ordinary ideas, but rather the ethics and perceptions that make up our very nature and that anchor our core beliefs. They remind me of how my friend and colleague, indigenous scholar Bryan Brayboy, defines aesthetics: “What communities determine to be good, true, right, and beautiful.” With these essentials, we are impacting the relationships we hold with those around us into the future, whether with our children, colleagues, collaborators, students, bosses, or neighbors.

That is why the Critical Response Process is so valuable. That is why it is
hard to do. That is why it is a lifelong practice. That is why we, and it, fail regularly.

Living Feedback: A Short Memoir of Critique Experiences
*John Borstel*

People I encounter in my CRP travels occasionally ask how I got involved with teaching and facilitating this feedback method. Usually I explain that it started at Dance Exchange, the organization Liz Lerman founded in 1976. My administrative role there when I joined the staff in 1993 focused on communications, placing me in a series of deepening conversations with Liz as she was responding to the first wave of interest in the Process in the mid-1990s. At the time, CRP was “merely” the best articulated of many tools of process that Liz was fostering, as she espoused the critical value of artists sharing their knowledge and methods. Benefiting from an organizational ethos that encouraged artists and administrators alike to expand their capacities, I gradually began to develop a CRP practice. I gained experience as a facilitator, as I was occasionally pressed into service when Liz or one of the CRP-adept dancers in the company was unavailable. Having identified as a visual artist and writer rather than as a performer, I latched on to the multidisciplinary nature of CRP as a unique opportunity to be a teacher in Dance Exchange’s residency work.

I gradually grew into the role. I encountered no bolt of lightning or single transformative moment in my emergence into CRP. Indeed, it’s been difficult to pin down a personal origin story for my discovered vocation in this corner of the world of feedback and critique. Musing on this has left me wondering what, in my distant or more recent past, ultimately drew me to CRP. The memories evoked by the question have been illuminating.

**CHILDHOOD**

I’m nine years old, and I’m taking a weekly art class at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Each week, we explore a different art material. One day the medium is tissue paper collage, and the teacher says to me, “John, I want you to do a picture about something other than *Alice in Wonderland*. Isn’t there something else that interests you?” Actually, there isn’t; I’m pretty obsessed with Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books at that point. I fake an attempt at something else, even as I notice that (obsession being the norm at that age) the teacher is not redirecting the several girls in class who have
been drawing, painting, and sculpting nothing but horses. I lack the words at that stage, but I know the correction is aimed at pushing me toward a “gender-appropriate” subject, because Alice is not a fitting role model for boys. I feel reprimanded at my core, judged as not quite right. Criticize my art, and you criticize me.

**ADOLESCENCE**

At twelve years old, I’m hanging out with my mother in the studio where she does her needlework. She asks me if I want to try one of the kits she’s assembled for her classroom visits that introduce kids to embroidery: it includes a strip of burlap the size of a bookmark, lengths of colored yarn, and a fat, blunt needle. I stitch some varied-length dashes in a series of parallel lines of green and blue yarn, and hold it up for her approval. Glancing at my completed strip, she says, “Well, that’s okay, but it really isn’t very interesting. It’s just haphazard. You can come up with something better.” I am mildly shocked. Up to that point, practically all of my artistic efforts have been met with her approbation and encouragement. Feeling like I have something to prove, I make a second attempt, devoting several hours to crafting a carefully calculated series of diamonds and chevrons, which wins her distracted approval. Suddenly, my mother, the source of most of what I know about art up to that point, is holding me to a standard. Suddenly the terms of the conversation have changed. It’s disorienting and somehow fiercely motivating.

**HIGH SCHOOL**

Attending an alternative high school program of D.C. Public Schools, I’m one of a group of students taking a regular intaglio class at the Smithsonian’s National Collection of Fine Arts. The instructor, a master printmaker, mostly teaches us etching techniques and doesn’t comment on content or style unless asked. But one day he’s in an intense conversation with another of the students and approaches one of my prints, which is sitting next to me on the worktable. “Take this, for instance,” he says, pointing to the small portrait I’ve made, but not acknowledging me. “It’s a little abstract, a little realistic, a little like a cartoon. By being a little of everything, it ends up not being much of anything.” The critique of my work doesn’t hurt nearly as much as being used as a bad example, one not even worth directly engaging in the conversation. I react in kind by attempting to disappear and minimizing my future encounters with the master.
COLLEGE

Having switched my intended major at Georgetown University from art to English, I’m nonetheless in search of an artistic mentor and find one in Professor Daniel Brush. Dan’s harshest criticism is silence; I notice that he saves even his negative commentary for the students whose work he respects, so I actually feel good when he tells me to give up on a piece and move on to the next. His most useful comments are often the tersest. Responding to one of my collages, he asks, “Why have you fragmented Greta Garbo when she’s already fragmented?” When he remarks about another, “You have achieved the implication of color without using color,” I feel triumphant.

POST-COLLEGE

In my late twenties I’m taking a course on illustration at the Corcoran School of Art. My drawing skills are below the class average and I tend to compensate with an effort at surprising content. At every class meeting there’s a group crit where we pin that week’s assignment to a board. The instructor makes selective comments, asks occasional questions, and opens the floor for reactions from students. True to form for a noted art school, the peer critique is untrammeled. One of my classmates executes lifelike renderings and handles media with great finesse, but I judge her work as vapid. When the assignment is to draw a still life using complementary hues, she brings in a watercolor rhapsody of three curling autumn leaves, and, invited to introduce it, enthuses about the beauty of the season. I roll my eyes and make audible noises of disdain. When the discussion turns to my piece—an overworked inking of a tortoise skull, a staple remover, and three anagram tiles—she turns on me and says, “John! Why do you always have to be so clever? Those things together are just weird.” Given our complementary sensibilities, we could be learning a lot from each other, but nothing in the structure of the class or the protocol for critique supports that possibility. Crits are a sparring match. And much of the responsibility is mine: At that point I don’t have the capacity to recognize how my biases, based in the imagined threat of someone with skills I lacked, were thwarting my own growth.

CAREER

In my forties, as my professional work increasingly focuses on writing, I take a series of courses at the Writer’s Center in Bethesda, Maryland. Group feedback is a constant, but the structure and style of the critiques
vary with the instructors. Some encourage dialogue and questions, others hold strictly to the principle of keeping silent while your work is discussed. “Your writing needs to stand on its own without your explanations or defense,” we’re told. When this is the rule, I try to adhere, but more than once the teacher glares at me and sternly says, “You don’t get to talk.” The reprimand deflates me. Because my own excitements, doubts, and inquiries are off the table, I feel disconnected from my own process, un-motivated about making revisions, deprived of the natural joy of making something.

**EMERGENCE**

During the same period, I’m starting to facilitate and train others in CRP. Hoping to expose myself to other modes of critique, I sign up for a series of sessions in Fieldwork for Mixed Disciplines hosted at D.C.’s Dance Place, bringing in some photography projects I’ve been developing. Here, too, the standard is that artists should just listen and not engage in the conversation when their work is up for discussion. But somehow the effect is different. Because we are meeting every week and a spirit of reciprocity is established as we support one another in shaping works in progress, I really deepen my investment in the rigors of my own work. For a point of comparison, I bring the same project to Dance Exchange for a session of CRP. The combination of critique modes and the information I gain from two supportive communities proves highly motivating. I submit some of the resulting work to open exhibition calls, and for the first time I have my work selected for public display.

**GRAD SCHOOL**

A perennial late-bloomer, I’m finally in grad school in my fifties, getting an MFA in interdisciplinary arts through the low-residency program at Goddard College in rural Vermont. The student body for the program gathers once a semester. These weeklong residencies are a combination of summer camp and seminar. My classmates include not only the expected dancers, actors, and painters, but also clowns, glassblowers, rap artists, and cartoonists. Critique, to the extent that it happens, tends to be catch-as-catch-can, either at the whim of a particular faculty member or inside the various affinity groups that form. I offer some well-received workshops and structured facilitations in CRP, but mostly I find I’m practicing the Process in one-on-one conversations. Listening. Offering observations and statements of meaning. Inviting, answering, and asking
questions. I seem to gain a reputation as a valuable conversation partner, and people seek me out. I know my innate capacities are only incidental. It has everything to do with the skills I’ve gained through CRP for listening, reflection, and inquiry.

Personal stories have anchored the ways we have introduced CRP since its beginning. Often we ask workshop participants to contemplate questions like those Liz was asking herself when she invented CRP: “Think of a time when you had an energizing experience of feedback, or think about a person whom you trust to give you useful feedback—defining good feedback as the kind that leaves you so you can’t wait to get back to work. What happened in these encounters that made them effective? What concrete approaches or principles were at play?” Just as most people can conjure vivid experiences of discomfort and anxiety from their memories, most people, when asked, can also relate an incident of effective feedback from their life history. The question elicits numerous values and qualities, at least some of which are embodied in CRP and addressed at some point in this book: trust, respect, focus on the work as opposed to the person, specificity, inquiry, and so on. In that way, the discussion directly fertilizes the ground on which we’ll be planting CRP. Moreover, it helps people recognize that effective feedback generally has a structural, technical, or value base of some kind and casts feedback experience out of the discomfort zone and into an appreciative light.

As I hope my introduction to this essay has made clear, I had no role in the invention of CRP. Thus I long hesitated to link my own history to CRP or the general discipline of critique. But then I did, writing and sharing the narratives in the above memoir with our CRP students and certification candidates, encouraging them to excavate their own pasts for resonant feedback moments. In doing so, I discovered anew the significance of feedback in our lives. Almost always, I’ve found, each of the memorable experiences of feedback a person invokes marks a formative moment in their life. The time they understood they had a distinctive gift or passion. The moment when they realized they had to be the source of their own self-worth. The incident when they were directed on a path that ended up defining their life. The insight that illuminated a passage from one culture, aesthetic, or value system into another. The turning point when they realized they’d found an artistic, vocational, or spiritual home. Feedback defines our human relationships and shapes our sense of self. Feedback matters, and it matters to have effective principles to guide it.
THE BROADEST POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF CREATIVITY
Mark Callahan

In my capacity as a teacher and artistic director of an interdisciplinary initiative for advanced research in the arts at the University of Georgia, I encounter creative people working at different stages of learning in an array of fields. An inherent challenge of this work is to enable productive critical communication so that students can grow and collaborative teams can improve their work. Curious about the experiences of my peers, I developed a habit of asking how they “did feedback” in their respective fields and began recording some of these conversations in a podcast series as a way to share perspectives. The Feedback series includes interviews with professionals in art, creative writing, dance, music, theater, biology, athletics, community design, psychology, and engineering.

While informative, the conversations often raised even more questions about how we learn to give and receive feedback, what makes it effective, and how we measure success. This line of inquiry eventually led me to create a seminar course to examine critical evaluation methods in the arts with a practice-based approach for better understanding. In the seminar, students engage with contextual readings and discussions to help illuminate their own experiences with critical dialogue and participate in group feedback in varied formats, including the Critical Response Process.

From a historical perspective, the development of CRP can be viewed as part of a broader range of investigations of critique that emerged during the late twentieth century. Given the involvement of feedback in almost every aspect of an artist’s training, in hindsight it is surprising that the delivery methods for such an integral part of teaching were not already under constant scrutiny and improvement. Instead, students were more likely to experience a range of inherited critique practices in settings where learning objectives were rarely, if ever, openly examined. The acquisition of feedback skills through social learning was mainly effective in reinforcing the expectations of a particular teacher, institution, or field.

Much of the scholarship on critique methods provides insights into conventional values by capturing some of the vast informal knowledge that saturates each field through stories and practical “survival” advice. These perspectives tend to be constrained by disciplinary boundaries with an emphasis on how to get more out of existing approaches. Students are envisioned as the primary beneficiaries of critique, if they are somehow
able to manage the simultaneous processing of feedback, articulate defense of creative decisions, regulation of emotional sensitivity, editing and synthesis of received opinions, and temporary dismissal of their ego.

While the “how” of critique seems to be more implied than understood, its specific value to education has been widely articulated. In academic settings, critique is variously described as a platform for peer review, a means of assessment and evaluation, a training ground for professionalization, and a vehicle for practice in appreciation and criticism. Viewed collectively, the amassed information about critique methods and objectives suggests the theoretical existence of a multiuse tool that can attend to the needs of all constituents.

But in practice there is a different reality. In typical academic critique, artists are called upon to navigate a complex set of technical, psychological, and institutional conditions both within and beyond their control. Students are confronted with nonviable advice (“Don’t take it personally,” “Drop your ego”) and false dichotomies (“Be receptive,” “Be thick-skinned”) that only add to the confusion of expectations. Ideally, a basic shared goal of critical feedback is authentic, personal, artistic growth—the palpable excitement of self-revelation that translates to creative actions. Unfortunately, when institutions and instructors depend upon critique to deliver multiple learning objectives without first establishing its role as a pathway to growth, the resulting environment is inconsistent at best, ranging from enlightened discourse to the domination of unhelpful opinions.

My conversations with students reveal as much useful information through examining what happens before and after feedback as in studying the critique process itself. Artists commonly experience hope, dread, anxiety, a mad rush of work, self-doubt, overconfidence, and inflated expectations for critique. Peers and teachers may be completely unaware when students self-edit work to be shared in anticipation of the kind of feedback they think they will receive. If the objectives of a critique session are unclear or not fully understood, the feedback may feel unauthentic to the artist. Post-feedback routines range from celebratory relief to cool dismissal, including some creative (and some unhealthy) practices to gain a sense of distance from the experience. Even when students excel in the stated goals of a critique and appear receptive to relevant feedback, they are often left on their own to attempt to filter commentary and try to understand what they did well.

Some of the pressure students experience relative to critique may re-
late to a sense of being judged and trying to meet the expectations of their chosen fields. A comparison of critique methods across disciplines can highlight ways that specific professional values are deeply embedded in different approaches to feedback. For example, the discursiveness that characterizes writers’ workshops and visual arts critiques reflects an importance placed on the articulation of intent and multiple interpretations. In some performing arts fields (and athletics), feedback happens in practice settings such as rehearsals, where complex protocols of deference to master class leaders, directors, and coaches have evolved to prevent chaos (and injury) within ensembles. Creative practitioners who share their work in more than one environment notice other contrasts and limits of critique methods; they may, for instance, receive evaluations and suggested revisions that completely contradict one another, without clear rationale or a sense of priority.

I do not consider the Critical Response Process to be the all-purpose teaching tool that can supply evaluation, professional development, appreciation, and criticism in every situation. I do not think that such a tool exists in a singular form. But the principles that animate CRP are fundamental to a productive learning environment. The intentional sequencing of steps lends utility to the Process as a formative assessment method, allowing teachers and students to work together to address specific areas of strength and needs for development. Its transparent system reduces anxiety (students know what to expect) and invites participation without requiring excuse or a compromise of values. And the formality of the Process is complemented by a flexibility of application to creative work in multiple states of development, encouraging the seamless integration of reflection and critical thinking with making.

For the practice-based component of my critical evaluation methods seminar, CRP provides a format that allows us to study the dynamics of feedback from the inside. It creates a common ground for seminar participants with previous experience in critique from different disciplinary backgrounds in the arts. Over the course of the seminar, each participant has opportunities to inhabit the three key roles of CRP (artist, responder, and facilitator). It is exciting when a participant steps into a new role with a fresh point of view and demonstrates an increased awareness of how those relationships can better support one another. We pay special attention to the designated role of notetaker (or “scribe”), a duty that creates a tangible appreciation of how much communication occurs during feedback and invites the artist to focus completely on the content of discus-
The scribe is additionally charged with capturing what the artist says in moments of self-realization and the uncovering of new ideas.

The structure of the Process invites artists and facilitators to thoughtfully prepare for feedback by generating questions and addressing concerns before critical dialogue begins. For students, this is a truly productive exercise that encourages peer mentorship in an organic way and can help replace stress with focus. We immediately sense the benefits of preparation during feedback as the artist and facilitator work together to lead with the most relevant and urgent issues surrounding the work, effectively bypassing the risk of getting sidetracked by introductory statements that may be laden with extraneous background information or preemptive defenses. Following the feedback, students receive notes from the session that will support their ability to evaluate ideas, identify action items, and, most importantly, achieve a kind of second feedback by reviewing their own questions and statements.

Artists who encounter the Process find a protocol that preserves and nurtures the personal and emotional aspects of making art and participating in feedback. Their role is not to explain or defend their creative work but to share and invite inquiry. They receive direct responses and have time and space to arrive at their own creative solutions. For students who are accustomed to methods that prioritize the values of teacher, institution, or field before personal feedback, an experience of the Process can lead to questions about who is truly being served by critique.

I remain fascinated by the Critical Response Process in part because it does not aim to address or fix problems that persist in conventional modes of critique from any single field. Instead, it embraces the broadest possible interpretation of creativity and proceeds directly from the premise that the goal of feedback is to be useful to the artist. This clarity of purpose is instructive to any program that seeks to build learning objectives around the central core of sustained artistic growth.

Reimagining Feedback

*Liz Lerman*

I was raised classically, which means that you are either right or wrong—and mostly wrong. That is almost the definition of classicism. You prepare yourself to reach standards set long ago by other people, and then you go about meeting or bettering these expectations. Yes, there is some room for interpretation, but mostly it’s working the measurements. I received
this education as a ballet student from my early childhood through my teens, and I loved it. I loved working at it, and I loved the satisfaction I felt when I met the demands.

I didn’t mind the corrections. It meant that others saw you and expected that you could do it. It was all built into the system of training to become a ballerina. I didn’t mind being told what to do or how to do it. But I hated the yelling. I hated the fact that my teachers could use verbal assault to get at me and my body in any way they wished. They could berate me for all kinds of things that didn’t feel true to me: you are lazy, you are not working hard enough, you should be able to do that by now. Even as a child I knew this was wrong. But I loved dancing, so I put up with the harangue. In fact, I built strategies for dealing with it. I would pretend that I was made of holes and the screams went through me. I practiced putting on a “listening” face accompanied by head nods. I told myself while it was happening that it was going to be worth it because someday I would be dancing on the great stages of the world. Sometimes I simply pretended I was behind a screen and just didn’t listen as the words rained down on me.

Looking back, I can see that my strategies were highly creative. Without strategies like these, we wouldn’t survive our schooling. The problem is that in filtering out the abusive delivery, we missed the useful substance of what the critic was telling us. Despite this eventual realization, I don’t think I would have devised the Critical Response Process if I had stayed in ballet. It was when I left that part of the dance field for more contemporary forms that I began to see that my established strategies wouldn’t work, in part because the feedback I was getting was changing.

In contemporary dance, there still seemed to be a right and a wrong. I just couldn’t tell why or how they had been determined. And now it was not just about how high my leg could go, but also about what I was doing and communicating as I made dances for myself and others. The feedback was all over the place. I tried to listen, and in response I tried to do “what they wanted,” because, after all, they were my teachers. It worked for a while. But when I began to grow up as a choreographer and truly started to have my own ideas, it became a wrestling match between what I thought I had done and what they thought they had seen. I don’t think I would have made CRP, however, if this were all that was going on. I could have muscled through it.

But something else was happening at that time (the mid-1980s), and it added to my troubles. For a brief period in the history of the United States,
the National Endowment for the Arts awarded fellowships to individual artists. I received one for $2,500, and as a recipient I was then sent around the country to see and report on the work of fellow applicants. Apparently, the panels that judged the applications were interested in what we had to say about each other.

Off I went with a lot of energy and enthusiasm to see the work of my colleagues, my compatriots, my competitors, and my field. I was shocked. In the simple language I would have used then, I said to myself, “I don’t like this.” At the time I was making intergenerational dances about documentary topics, often employing the spoken word. So where were the old people dancing? Where was the political subject matter? Where was the part where the dancers talk onstage? As I walked out into the darkness after the shows, I slowly realized that what I liked was my own work, and work that reflected back to me elements I valued within it. What was I going to make of artistic material that was so entirely different from my own?

I went back to the hotel and pulled out the report form. What was I going to say? These awards were important, a vital step for moving one’s work around the country and gaining opportunities to continue making dances. I was stymied. It was important to me to be fair. There had to be other ways to think about work than simply reflecting my own values. Obviously, I had to ask myself some different questions in order to write honestly about the choreography I had witnessed. How could I come to terms with aesthetics I didn’t share?

The problem compounded itself as I began to tour, and was asked more frequently to teach composition classes at universities, which meant giving feedback to people not all that much younger than I was. I noticed I had plenty to say. But based on what? I knew how to get them to make work like mine. But I wondered: What should I say or how should I ask questions that would support them to create work more like themselves?

The issue of feedback was taking its toll on me, and I fervently began to problem-solve, first by observing what I was doing. In teaching dance technique classes, I had already spent at least a decade playing with feedback systems. I had experimented with pairing students and assigning protocols for observation, comments, and questions. Starting as an effort to share some of the knowledge of the room beyond what was usually the teacher’s sole privilege of noticing and commenting, these pairings allowed for a formidable amount of growth in students’ technical skills and built their investment in the class and in each other. As a precursor to what would become some of the steps in CRP, I was trying desperately to
engage people fully in their own progress, to become aware of their own knowledge and to learn to give it generously to others.

Other influences were at work too. Teaching at Sandy Spring Friends School in the years following my college graduation, I had learned about Reevaluation Counseling (RC), a form of therapeutic peer counseling that, at least for me, was an effective set of tools for stepping out of some of my patterns of behavior. I learned a lot from my years in RC, and specifically borrowed two approaches in my teaching and eventual ensemble practices. The first is the idea of beginning an encounter by telling your counseling partner something affirming about their being. Over the years, this was translated and further reshaped as an important aspect of CRP’s step one. The second idea was paired learning, which also came to me through a custom in Jewish education called chavruta, when two people study together. Both RC and chavruta come to similar conclusions that partnering with someone, while studying or examining ourselves, seems to increase our capacity to remain focused and curious, and that helping someone else while working hard on ourselves brings about renewed purpose. This idea influenced the dialogic nature of CRP and informed some of its most effective applications.

In addition to teaching, I was now choreographing with an ensemble and managing a small nonprofit arts organization. The tasks associated with these big jobs also began to bend under the pressure I felt to bring humane systems into the workplace and to challenge ideas of leadership and even artistic authority. Countless small tragedies, blowups, breakthroughs, and beautiful moments of synchronicity called on me to develop ways of working to make our time together as a staff and company worth the effort, and to give us all opportunities to grow. Received ideas about how businesses are supposed to be run or dances supposed to be made could be reimagined in light of our dreams, our best sensibilities, and our deep-seated knowledge. Though flawed or faltering at times, our collaborative spirit, enthusiastic sharing of ideas, and participatory democracy suffused our organizational functions across the range from the dance studio to the conference room.

In this grand stew of influences, I was also reflecting on my own experiences of feedback. I asked myself why I could hear almost anything from certain people in my life. What integral element in some relationships made it possible to move through all kinds of feedback regardless of tone or language? I approached friends and colleagues with this question and heard many anecdotes that championed directness, even bluntness, but
never cruelty and never brutality for its own sake. They described how these very trusted people in their lives did not use their position, their knowledge, or their authority to hurt someone with disdain, dismissal, or discouragement. I knew I wanted to figure out how to secure the essentials of that kind of relationship, even between strangers. Gradually I recognized that a feedback process would need to offer a way to filter out the very human inclination to club another person with our intellect, our knowledge, our point of view, our position. Key features of CRP grew out of this realization.

Over the first fifteen years of doing and teaching CRP, the practice was all about giving and receiving feedback. It was only later that I began to understand that we were engaging in more. The word feedback, though helpful, didn’t necessarily cover the breadth of what was coming up in CRP sessions and in workshops. The Critical Response Process was asking me, and all of us, to consider what judgment itself is, and how in its myriad forms it affects our inner lives, our most intimate relationships, our artmaking, and our commentary on the world. With that realization, we started to get a grip on how to move these judgments, opinions, and feedback itself into inquiry, conversation, and useful knowledge. This is a kind of meddling of major proportions. It has been fascinating, difficult to do, and so emotional.

In this meddling, as I’ve conducted CRP workshops across the US and internationally, many people have offered distinctive words to describe this Process. Some say it’s research, or inquiry, or mindfulness in action. Others have said it’s a communication device or a practice for civic dialogue. I firmly believe in multiple words for the same thing, so I take pleasure in contextualizing the frameworks of CRP within these various constructs. But I also believe that some words hold many meanings, so when people began to refer to CRP with one particular word—ritual—I found a certain contentment, even though the term can be off-putting to some. Perhaps it is my years of training that imbue the idea of ritual with a sense of well-being. Preparation and repetition call on us to set aside time and space, and declare that this thing that is about to happen has importance—enough importance to require setting up a circle, acknowledging all who are present, and preparing ourselves to receive a creative gift or a perilous idea from another human being. And so we begin a ritual of giving feedback.

Thirty years after its introduction, the Critical Response Process is thriving. Part of what makes it successful is its capacity to live with both
rigorous hairsplitting orthodoxy and flexible structure that promotes a vigorous diversity of practice. I am relieved to witness this, as I have a certain distaste for codification but love theme and variation. With CRP, we have the formal four-step facilitated approach to giving and receiving feedback. We have roles and responsibilities as experienced through years of practice that have taught us a few things: We can see the disasters coming. We can take time-outs to help us reconvene our ambitions and our senses. We notice that within these codes are multiple directions that one can take. We see that even within the constraints of the system, multiple possibilities enable us to move ahead with our creative and critical faculties on full alert and harnessed for purpose.

But we also see that by disaggregating the steps, the roles, and the rules, we begin to discover other uses and many divergent pathways. Over the past decades some of us have jumped into these spaces with urgency and curiosity, and more recently we hear from people out in the world about how they are experimenting with deconstructing and remixing CRP. Some of that history and news is gathered in the coming chapters of this volume.

Like anything that has been let loose into the world, some of these experiments go awry. Some work is shoddy. Some processes lack commitment or full comprehension of the principles. The Process itself meddles with our histories, and right now our histories are meddling with the Process. I was motivated from CRP’s inception to find a corrective for some of the abuses of power, privilege, and influence that have been perpetrated in the guise of artistic feedback. But also from its beginnings I have been concerned about how this Process may reflect biases and assumptions that I hold, having been born in the middle of the last century and raised in a liberal household. In the last decade, within CRP circles we have witnessed how distortions of the Process can lead to pain and alienation among people of color and people living with personal and historic trauma. We are pressing deeply into CRP’s effects to see if we can bring the best of its principles into supporting the present work of equity, justice, and belonging.

I am happy to see that that the variations continue, along with challenges to some of the language and practices that may accompany the Process. Enough of a global community cares about protecting the innate virtues of the original Process so that its life can be extended for years to come, even as we all push the boundaries and permeable membranes of its simple but very complex structure.