

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (CRP)

(To be used for play responses for the Illinois High School Theatre Festival)

*The basic premise of the CRP is to keep ownership of the art in the laps of the artists. It is not our place as play responders to re-create their art for them. By making statements of meaning, answering the artists' questions, and asking neutral questions, we can help them to discover within themselves what needs to be done to take their art to the next level. Yes, we can give them opinions in the opinion phase, but we should not tell them how they should do that. We can guide them in the direction of finding the appropriate tools to be successful, but once we start telling them what to do, we usurp their art from them, and it then becomes ours and it should NOT be. Every program has a different background, different strengths and weaknesses. The CRP is about helping artists reflect on their work from where they are, not where we think they should be. Only when one comes to terms with this philosophy can one give truly effective feedback.

STEP 1. Statements of Meaning: Responders state what was meaningful, stimulating, surprising, evocative, memorable, interesting, exciting, striking, touching, challenging, compelling, delightful, different, and unique in the work they have just witnessed.

Philosophy: "...the Critical Response Process begins with the philosophy that **meaning** is at the heart of an artist's work, and to start with **meaning** is to begin with the essence of the artistic act." –Liz Lerman

Tips:

- Avoid stating opinions (though it is often difficult to avoid this).
- Be specific.
- Avoid using the word "like" but keep it positive.
- "Nothing is too small to notice."

Examples:

- I found the pacing of the play to be exiting.
- I found character interactions evocative.
- I found the stage pictures compelling.
- I found the concept of the scenic design to be stimulating.
- I found the sound design challenging, yet memorable.

Ask the artists if there was anything not addressed in this step.

STEP 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 (also called “Fix-Its”).

Philosophy: By having the artists ask questions first about the intent of their work, the respondents will be better able to frame the discussions around the needs of the artists. These questions are asked because they want to know.

Tips:

- Give artists examples of possible questions.
- Artist Questions can be general or specific.
- Artists should avoid asking if something was “liked.”
- Feel free to help the artists finesse their questions.
- Artists should ask open-ended questions about specific things.

Examples:

- How did you experience our transitions from one character to another?
- We worked particularly hard on the way we expressed character objective throughout the play. What did you think of the clarity of the characters’ journeys?
- We chose the colors of the costume design for very specific reasons. What was your interpretation of those choices?
- Could you comment on your ability to hear and understand us on stage?
- We had the challenge of cutting down a three-hour play to 90 minutes. How effective do you think our cutting of the play was?

Ask if there was anything not addressed in this step.

STEP 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.

Philosophy: “For many people, forming a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point... Often these are the very questions that the artist needs to hear.”-Liz Lerman

Tips:

- Practice creating questions from your opinion to be sure your opinion is not evident.
- This step is about understanding the artistic values of the artists.
- Artists will learn more through a discussion than through a lecture.
- Avoid questions that might cause defensiveness.
- Ask questions that encourage reflection.

Examples:

- If you were given another week of rehearsal, what would you work on?
- What lesson do you want your audience to walk away with?
- What did you do in rehearsal to develop your character?
- How was the discussion facilitated to unify your design elements?
- What guided your decisions about hairstyles?

Ask if there was anything not addressed in this step.

STEP 4. Permissioned 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 decline opinions for any reason.

Philosophy: “...forming the initial statement offers a ... mental warm-up for stating the opinion itself. For the artists, it affords a chance to readjust their focus to become receptive to a... new idea.”-Liz Lerman

Tips:

- Always ask permission about something specific and wait for yes/no.
- Honor the answer.
- DO be critical. Everyone has room to grow.
- Temper critical feedback, pillowed with something positive.
- Avoid gushing positive praise.

- Offer the opinion without a “Fix-It,” or telling them how to do it.
- Allow the artist to find the solution so ownership remains with them.

Examples:

- I have an opinion about the pacing between the two acts. Would you like to hear it?
- I have an opinion about the special-effect lighting choice at the end of act one. Would you like to hear it?
- I have an opinion about your choice to have live instrumentation on stage. Would you like to hear it?
- I have an opinion about the expression of characterization among the minor roles. Would you like to hear it?

Ask if there was anything not addressed in this step.

STEP 5. Follow-Up and Follow-Through: Artists then share with the responders what their next steps are in the development of their work. If this is a final performance, they can share a reflection of what they will be sure to focus on with their next project.

Philosophy: Theatre is a living art, where we as artists grow with every new experience. To maximize this benefit, stating future goals guide us on that journey.

“Based on what you’ve experienced in this conversation, what goals do you have for yourself in working on future projects?”

Thank all participants involved in the process.

Artists (or a designated recorder) should take copious notes in the discussion to aid in the writing of any reflections and the furthering of the development of their craft.