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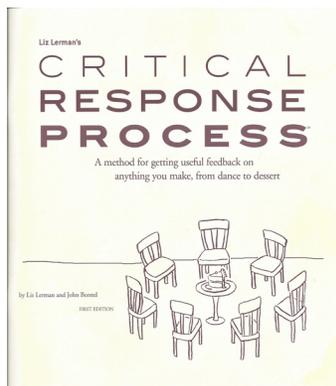
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BOOK REVIEW AND NEW PROTOCOL: Critical Response Process

By Luci Englert McKean, NSRF Special Projects Manager, and CFG Coach in Indiana, luci@nsrfharmony.org

CRITICAL RESPONSE PROCESS: A Method For Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, From Dance to Dessert

By Liz Lerman and John Borstel, First Edition, 2003, Self-published by The Dance Exchange, Inc. www.danceexchange.org



Art students in undergraduate and graduate programs undergo regular critiques of their work. From the stories I've heard, one either quickly develops a very "thick skin" or changes majors. I've heard stories that sounded more like hazing or military boot camp than an academic process designed to help grow an artist.

Liz Lerman, a renowned choreographer, felt that the standard artist's critique format was often unnecessarily brutal and frequently not very helpful, so she developed a four-step process to help put the artist in charge of the critique process. After using and tweaking the process over several years, she wrote a book and added "facilitation fundamentals," variations, and examples of the process in action.

As a CFG Coach, I find Lerman's 64-page book quite helpful in thinking not only about protocols for creative projects, but also NSRF protocols in general. She writes very transparently with suggestions for

facilitating her process, offering instructions and specifics that participants should achieve in particular steps. The similarities and differences between her Process and our Protocols is worth considering. I was inspired to draft a new protocol that combines what I feel are the best

aspects of CFG perspectives and tools with her specifics around the creative process.

The most important tweak I made was to prioritize the goal of the group helping the artist/presenter grow and explore, over the "critics" desire to express themselves and get answers. Some users of the Process already did that, "*Liberating moments were when I just sat still and listened; when I answered that I didn't want to hear an opinion about an issue I was tired of discussing; and when I left a question unanswered, to probe for future investigation.*"

Additionally, it seems that most artists' critiques require the artist to think on their feet and respond to every criticism, while this new protocol prioritizes time for silent reflection and eliminates the need for the artist to "defend" the work.

But even if one never uses this protocol to support an artist or critique a creative project, this small book provides many insights good for any CFG coach to consider. Lerman has given considerable thought to the perspective of people who give criticism for a living or for fun,

noting how uncomfortable they can be when asked to restrict their offerings and follow the rules of her Process. Sound familiar? Didn't we all chafe under restrictive aspects of protocols until we recognized and internalized the benefits of following them?

One step of Lerman's process requires the forming of "Neutral Questions," which are practically the same as our familiar "Probing Questions." She says, "*For many people, forming a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. But the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions enables the responder to recognize and acknowledge the personal values at play. Often these are the very questions that the artist needs to hear.*"

She continues, "*People who are used to giving feedback from a position of authority—teachers, directors, adjudicators—may feel at first that forming Neutral Questions makes them sacrifice the right to tell the truth very directly. But many quickly discover that they can say whatever is important through this mechanism, and in the process, get the artist to think more reflectively than he might if the opinion or solution were directly stated. The opportunity for opinions comes soon after, anyway.*"

Lerman suggests a possible warm-up activity—pairing group members to practice forming neutral/probing questions regarding objects in the environment including your partner's attire. Doing this practice, the difference becomes readily apparent between "Wouldn't a textile hanging on the wall help muffle the noise level in here?" and "What is the primary intent for this room and might the wall decor have an impact on that?"

The book also talks about "The Challenge of Fixits." "*When asked to respond to a work in progress, it is remarkable how quickly we slide from observation into opinion, and then to a 'fixit,' that is, a directive*

suggestion for a change. The arrival at the fixit can be so unconscious that the responder may need to do some mental backtracking to realize that an opinion underlies the fixit."

What a great explanation for the difference between a Probing Question and "a suggestion with a question mark at the end." Sometimes suggestions are welcome, but they can come with a hidden pricetag. Lerman herself describes a situation when she once welcomed fixits on a dance with which she was struggling. She later incorporated the suggestion gleaned from the group, and "*People loved it. Critics loved it. And what they loved about it was the very thing she had fixed. I always felt that I should put an asterisk in the program and explain that the device that made it work was not my idea. I might have*

solved the problem myself if she had asked me enough questions: Did I have other tools for making my ideas more concrete? Was there a visible metaphor that could focus the audience's attention? How could I use a prop to convey my meaning? I know I would have grown the creative muscles I needed to develop my own solution."

Although it seems to me that "fixits" are a bit antithetical to NSRF protocols, I decided, like Lerman, to allow the artist/

presenter to decide whether to accept them or not, and so created a pair of Critical Response Process Protocols, [one with](#), and [one without fixits](#). (Use those links to download PDFs or email us for copies.)

I'd recommend CFG coaches consider obtaining a copy of this book, particularly if they work with artists or art students, or if they're seeking greater understanding of the use of Probing Questions.

Practitioners of Lerman's Process or this adapted Protocol may benefit from "internalizing the process," as she describes on page 52. "*Sometimes I can use the Critical Response Process backwards. I am in a conversation, and I hear something about my work*

"Remember: Nothing is too small to notice. When defensiveness starts, learning stops. Turn discomfort into inquiry."

that I could perceive as negative. No permission asked, just opinion stated. In that moment, I have some choices, including to feel bad, angry, or vengeful, or just to sulk. But lately I have used the moment to ask myself 'What if this person had asked me a neutral question in order to get me thinking about the problem they are perceiving? What would that neutral question have been?' Then I go about answering the criticism as though I had heard the neutral question. Usually I learn a lot this way."

Additionally, I've asked an art teacher who's been going through the CFG Coaches Training to convert Lerman's Critical Response Process into a rubric she and her colleagues can use with their students. Many thanks to Betty Lark Ross, Visual Art Department Chair of the Latin School in Chicago for developing this rubric, for reviewing my protocol and article, and for being willing to share the rubric with NSRF Connections readers. [Click this link for the rubric PDF](#) or email us for a copy.

Another art rubric developed by a CFG Coach is [available for download here](#). Thanks to Jennifer Handrick, visual art instructor and secondary art CA in the Chippewa Falls Area School District for the offering.

Links:

NSRF Critical Response Process Protocol

NSRF Critical Response Process Protocol (with Fixits)

Critical Response Process Rubric (Betty Lark Ross, Latin School)

Four-part Art Rubric (Jennifer Handrick, Chippewa Falls)

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