Writer as Choreographer: Critical Response Process in the Writing Center

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Drawing from experience as a choreographer and dancer, but also as a Writing Center Director and writing teacher, McCarroll asks what we might learn about power in the writer/tutor relationship from the Critical Response Method used in dance workshops. Inspired by choreographer Liz Lerman, McCarroll suggests that clear guidelines can empower the writer to speak her needs and questions *and* can offer structure for the writing tutor.

The dance studio grows quiet. The audience—core members of Circle Modern Dance participating in a feedback session for works in progress—waits for sound. They look to me as the choreographer, expecting me to cue the music so that the dance can start. Instead, I set a metronome and allow it to begin marking time. At once, all five dancers begin to speak. All five dancers begin to move. The audience fidgets.

The Writing Center opens. A new tutor takes her seat as a student writer joins her. Introductions are made. The tutor is nervous; the writer is nervous. The tutor makes small talk. The writer pulls out a draft of a paper. The tutor leans forward to read. The writer fidgets.

What happens next—the various ways that these players feel, react, and move through the session—has much to do with power, comfort, and authority. It also has much to do with the script of the feedback session. Both the creator and the respondent have much at stake. The writer and choreographer feel exposed. The tutor is braced for the moment that she is expected to reveal the secret to writing, which she worries she doesn't have. The fellow dancer feels responsible to offer something, but worries she lacks the language.

In both of these scenarios, anxieties about power, ability, and responsibility loom. The choreographer feels protective and unsure of her work, as the audience member doubts his right to react to the work. The writer simultaneously wants help but is weary of exposing herself in order to seek that help, while the tutor navigates boundaries and expectations, hoping to help. In these moments, things could go badly. The potential for dialogic feedback structure tends toward monologue in both choreography and writing feedback workshops. Without a clear structure, the helper can help too much—with suggestions and responses that feel like conclusions rather than introductions to a conversation about the work at hand. In a traditional choreography feedback session, audience members suggest, "you could . . ." which often feels like "you should . . ." to a choreographer who is asked to

remain silent in the conversation. In a writing center, it is easy for the tutor to fill the quiet space, correct all of the "errors" and get carried away offering suggestions. And in each scenario, the vulnerable one who just shared something—whether a dance piece or a paper—can be left feeling defensive or voiceless. Sometimes she feels shame, wishing that she had kept to herself. We are taught to accept feedback; to question makes us seem defensive, which is framed in the creative process as insecure and closed-minded rather than committed and clear. So, half of a conversation becomes muted and the creator can leave a feedback session or writing center consultation feeling disconnected from the thing that she created.

There are alternatives. Those of us who train and work with peer tutors have seen how collaborative learning can work, empowering rather than silencing both parties. Collaborative learning and feedback sessions do not necessarily leave the creator feeling silenced. There is work that the creator can do to maintain power while still being open to potential change. Here, though, I want to focus on the work that we can do as a pedagogical community to teach effective workshopping in a way that shares power, evokes productive responses, and empowers the creator to revise a piece of work. A model exists in the dance world. J. Michael Rifenberg and Lindsey Allgood (2015) remind us, "Through its participatory and unscripted roots, performance art flattens audience and rhetor into a singular performer, similar to the act of tutoring where the tutor and tutee collaboratively work toward stronger writing." I'm interested in exploring the participatory but *highly scripted* nature of critical response in order to learn methods of engaging actively in communication around creation and revision.

A few years ago, after many years as a modern dancer, I choreographed my first piece. I was processing motherhood, a Ph.D. program, and an evolving marriage. In short, I was working to find ways that my experience could feel multi-faceted rather than fragmented. My piece was about my vulnerability, and I was especially vulnerable to share this part of myself with an audience.

I was dancing and choreographing with a community-based dance company in Knoxville, Tennessee that utilized the Critical Response Process, which was first created by dancer and choreographer Liz Lerman. My experience with this process not only helped me feel more authentic and comfortable as I continued to work with the piece, but it helped the piece evolve in important ways that would not have happened without this input. Most importantly, though, the Critical Response Process shifted my understanding of collaboration, which I have taken off the stage and into the classroom.

Dance offers a model for collaborative feedback, in part because of the impossibility for this creative act to happen in isolation. Simply put, the work doesn't exist without bodies to give life to the imagined or the sketched out. That, combined with the lack of a consistent notation system, means that to share a dance piece, one needs people. Unlike music, which can be notated and shared, or writing, which

is most often produced and consumed without interaction, dance is necessarily collaborative and communicative in its creation. Lerman's method, intended for choreographers, offers an important model for classroom instructors and writing tutors. A collaborative form of feedback in the classroom can empower and encourage student writers while also shaping a role for a peer—shifting a classmate from an uncommitted proofread into a collaborator. Carroll Hauptle, in "Liberating Dialogue in Peer Review: Applying Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process to the Writing Classroom" (2006) offers a model for this work that will serve many writing instructors. It was in my recent role as a Writing Center Director, though, that I found a new application for the Critical Response Process.

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process was developed for her own dance company in order to turn critique into a stage of creation that inspires a return to the work, rather than a turn away from it. As a choreographer and as a dancer called upon for feedback, Lerman understood the difficulty of being on either side of the process. Previously, Lerman felt that when she listened to criticism, she felt silenced. She writes that she recalls feeling that "to respond in [a] 'mature' way to criticism meant quietly taking it, rather than attempting to engage in a dialogue, since to respond at all was somehow deemed either defensive or a violation of an unspoken boundary" (Lerman & Borstell, 2003, p. 6). In an attempt to encourage a dialogue, Lerman developed a highly structured process that gives voice to both the creator and the audience, guiding a conversation that remains focused on the work at hand. The dialogue that develops, and the script that guides this dialogue, is applicable and transformative in a collaborative tutoring session as well. What can happen differently with questions come first from the creator. A question like, "Did the example that I used from the final scene of the novel support my thesis?" does at least two things. It directs the tutor into a specific moment of the text, empowering the writer to direct the session. It also creates a metacognitive level of reflection before the conversation takes off.

When a dancer steps up to share a bit of choreography or when a writer enters the Writing Center, he or she has already made difficult choices. The writer has already chosen to be vulnerable in an effort to produce a better piece of writing. Those of us working in Writing Centers know that these student writers take many forms. There is value in thinking about the various types of student writers we encounter, and in thinking carefully about the methods that tutors might bring to these encounters. The Critical Response Process offers one more tool, and has been effective with the most eager writer and the most bitter writer, offering a balanced way to discuss a piece of work with an emphasis on revision instead of assessment.

In her public lectures, her website, and her publications, Liz Lerman outlines clear steps that she first developed for choreography, but which can be applied to a number of generative processes, and can be modified for effective use in a tutoring session. My own experience with the metronome piece, which was later

titled "Rattle," can serve to demonstrate the way that the original Critical Response Process plays out. After describing my own experience in the creator's role, I will recommend ways that this method can be used in a tutoring session. My hope is that a concrete method of response can be taught to tutors in their training courses as another means of maintaining a balance of power in individual sessions.

At the showing of works in progress, my dancers took the stage and performed the complete piece, which was very much in draft form. Immediately following the performance, the show's director acted as a facilitator for the Critical Response Process, asking first for responses from the audience. This first step, *Statements of Meaning*, is meant to answer the need of the artist to understand that what she has just shared has been received. While the general tone of this first step tends to be affirmative, the idea is to move beyond the general praise and to work toward more useful feedback. The facilitator might ask, "What was stimulating? Meaningful? Evocative? Surprising?" The audience then responds, guided—we hope—with the piece of art in mind more than the ego of the artist. With my metronome piece, some said that they were moved by the cacophony of the multiple texts. Another said that he appreciated the sharp angularity of the movement, and the precision with which the dancers performed. At that stage, I nodded, but did not respond. It felt good to hear that part of what I had intended had landed. I had intentions as I choreographed, and it was deeply affirming to know that some of those intentions had worked. The specificity of the response left me focused on the work itself rather than my own pride or insecurities as a creator of that work.

In the tutoring session, the *Statement of Meaning* stage often happens naturally, but can be overlooked. Encouraging tutors to parrot back the overall ideas of the paper that they have just read ensures that writers and tutors are in agreement about the general shape of the work. Statements like, "I hear you when you make this comparison between the two texts," or "I hadn't thought of the novel in this light before. This is a productive critical lens, I think" can affirm the writer that what she has written was clear enough to be understood, can reveal potential gaps in understanding, and can offer a starting point for questions that will guide the second step. When a tutor keeps in mind this first stage of response, it can quiet the critical voice that might rise in the throat of the well-intentioned tutor and derail the collaborative process.

In the second step, *Artist as Questioner*, the creator is empowered to ask questions of the audience. Sometimes, as in a company where this process is familiar, a choreographer will bring questions to the showing. At other times, these questions are more spontaneous. Lerman explains, "The more artists clarify their focus, the more intense and deep the dialogue becomes" (Lerman & Borstel, 2003, p.19). The facilitator asks the creator for questions, and can help the artist form effective questions as needed. According to Lerman, "General questions often elicit more varied responses, which can be helpful if the artist is seeking a broad survey of reactions

to a particular aspect of the work. But when an artist poses her inquiry broadly, she may find that the response is not addressing the issue that is really at the root of her question" (Lerman & Borstel, 2003, p.19). I asked, for example, "Does it work to have all the dancers speaking at the same time?" After receiving varied and contradictory responses, the facilitator asked me to reframe my question. "What would it mean for it to 'work'?" he asked. When I clarified, "Does it create a sense of anxiety but also monotony to have the dancers speaking at the same time?" the answers were clearer.

This step for writing tutors can be central to empowering writers to direct the tutoring session. A typical question that a tutor asks of a writer is, "What would you like to work on today?" Student writers might be clear on that topic, but more frequently do not know how to respond to so broad a question. To slightly shift the question toward more specificity and toward an empowering of the writer, a tutor might instead state, "I'd like to hear what questions you have for me now that we're starting to discuss your paper." This subtle shift might move a student writer from thinking about how a reader and future grader of the paper would answer the question (what I NEED to fix) to how the writer might answer the question (what I want to understand). As in the situation described above, where the facilitator asked, "What would it mean for it to 'work'?" there are ways that tutors can ask clarifying questions of the writer. If a writer says, for example, "I just want to make sure that it flows," a tutor might ask, "What would the best structure be for this assignment? What would flow look like?" Always, whether in a dance showing or a tutoring question, it is important for the facilitator or the tutor to acknowledge that the creator might not have questions yet. There will be another opportunity for questions at the end of the session.

In the third step, *Neutral Questions from Responders*, "The dialogue is now reversed and responders can ask the artist informational or factual questions" (Lerman & Borstel, 2003, p. 20). The neutrality of the question is tricky, and the integration of the Critical Response Process into any feedback process requires a clear discussion of neutral questions. In my own example with the choreography showing, a non-neutral question might have been, "Why does the piece have no narrative arc?" while a neutral question might have been, "What sort of narrative structure were you hoping to develop?" This step is probably the trickiest *and* the most fruitful. Once a responder learns to frame a neutral question, the artist or writer is positioned to embody a subject position rather than a defensive object position. Lerman writes, "When defensiveness starts, learning stops" and offers clear steps to guide a conversation that is critical but also empowering to the creator (Lerman & Borstel, 2003, p. 21).

In a tutor training course, I spend significant time modeling neutral questions. Many questions that feel neutral to a tutor do not feel neutral to the writer. An effective assignment that I have used involves asking pairs of tutor trainees to create

lists of neutral questions in response to a sample paper that they read. We then spend time sharing these neutral questions to evaluate not only whether they are truly neutral, but to anticipate the topics that might be opened up. This is a part of most tutoring dialogues that truly aim for collaboration, but a clear intentional choice of neutrality can shift "Does your conclusion really fit the thesis?" to "What is the relationship between the conclusion and the introduction?" The prior really translates to "Your conclusion doesn't fit your thesis" while the latter allows the writer to reflect on the relationship and offer connections that might be fruitful for discussion and revision.

The fourth step, *Permissioned Opinions*, is a space for an observer to make a suggestion while still empowering the creator. In my showing, a fellow company member said, "I have an opinion about costumes. Would you like to hear it?" I had a very general concept for costumes, but was open to suggestions, so I agreed that I'd like to hear her opinion. It turned out that her idea was similar to mine, which confirmed the general sentiment but offered a more concrete image than I had been able to pull up. This not only helped me decide what costumes to design, but affirmed that my sense had been echoed, and my intention had been felt. Later in the discussion, though, another member said, "I have a suggestion for a song. Would you like to hear it?" In that moment, because I felt very bound to the metronome idea, I explained why I was not interested in a song suggestion and we moved on. Because of the clear structure of the process, I could say no without apology or awkwardness.

In Writing Centers, there is a temptation to remain in this fourth step, but often without permission. An uncertain tutor, or an ill-prepared tutor, can overstep lines without even seeing the line, assuming that opinions and suggestions are what is sought when a writer walks through the door. The concept of the permissioned opinion forces a tutor to check her power and encourages a writer to claim his power. When a writer decides whether she wants to hear about a particular idea, she is more likely to feel empowered when she leaves the Writing Center. Lerman explains that although the process of asking for permission can feel stilted and formal, it is essential for a few reasons:

> For the responder, forming the initial statements offers a kind of warm-up and mental preparation for identifying and stating the opinion itself. For artists, it affords a chance to readjust their focus to become receptive to a new partner and new idea. Finally, it serves to maintain the Process' dynamic of dialogue through an exchange that keeps both speakers focused and listening. The step may seem formal, but often the formality, discipline and structure inherent in the Process make it safe for people to go into a more challenging dialogue. (Lerman & Borstel, 2003, p. 22)

With a tutor rather than a group of responders, it is even more important to ask whether an opinion is permissioned in order to maintain a balanced dialogue that feels safe and focused.

Finally, Lerman encourages a facilitator in the Critical Response Process to bring closure to the conversation. The facilitator can ask the artist about next steps, ensuring that as she leaves the showing, she has a concrete plan to move forward. Lerman explains, "This short exchange affords artists the final word in the discussion of their work as well as a moment to consolidate the information they've gathered through the Process, while responders get confirmation of the purpose their involvement has served" (Lerman & Borstel, 2003, p. 22). In my own experience as a choreographer, the facilitator asked me about next steps, which led me to synthesize the observations that I had heard and allowed me to ask one final question. Much of our conversation was around the intention to create a sense of chaos while still creating a structured piece that drew an audience in, rather than pushing them away. I restated the feedback that I had heard about the placement of dancers on stage, and asked a final question about the conclusion of the piece. I left the showing with a clear understanding of the revisions that I wanted to make to the choreography. My dancers were privy to this conversation, which helped them understand anew what I intended. Perhaps as much as anything, though, as I heard myself speak my intentions, ask my questions, and state my plans for revision, I felt not only that my work existed but that I had some control over it. Because dance is necessarily collaborative, it is possible for a choreographer—especially a new or uncertain choreographer—to doubt his or her instincts as other choreographers see a piece in process and as dancers ask questions to clarify directions. Many artists—visual, musical—use a workshop model to hear feedback from peers, and many artists find the workshop to be disempowering. Lerman's process aims to help the artist both learn from others during the development stage *and* have her own intentions heard. Each step in the process aims to create a true dialogue that can be transformative for the piece of art and empowering to both the audience and the choreographer.

The final few minutes of any tutoring session can be a challenge. Time runs out and it can feel like the conversation stops mid-sentence. I continually encourage tutors to ensure that the tutoring session is punctuated in order to create a sense of closure, but also to hold student writers accountable for their next steps. What I often observe during these final conversations tends toward a tutor-driven summary. Tutors mean well here, but they are stepping into the realm of the instructor who wraps up a lecture for a class. The writer in this situation is thrust into the student role, passively observing or listening to the authoritative voice of the tutor. The final word, in too many tutoring sessions, is taken by the tutor. The Critical Response Process enables the writer to claim the last word, and to frame for herself the most important ideas of the session as well as the next steps in her revision process.

Figure 16.1. The author and another dancer in the final performance of "Rattle" (photo courtesy of Larry Crowell).

Incorporation of Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process into training for peer tutors of writing can provide a productive model for collaborative feedback in the

Writing Center, breaking down the tutor/writer power dynamic to more actively empower the writer. In her innovative process, Lerman works to create offerings of feedback, always enabling the creator to decline feedback, but also encouraging the critic to categorize the feedback. This shift to empower the writer, when applied in a Writing Center setting, serves to not only give voice to the writer, but also relieves the tutor of the pressures to always have an answer. It is not always the tutor who claims the power or who steps over a line. It is often an insecure writer who grants that power or who begs for too much feedback. Adherence to this structure can liberate both student writer and peer tutor to follow a script built on collaboration. Lerman's methodology is especially effective as it acknowledges the subjectivity of writing while encouraging a conversation around revision. Moving away from directive tutoring, which can silence a writer and place a tutor in an expert position, Lerman's method depends upon and encourages strong guidance by the writer who determines the shape of the tutoring session. As the student inhabits the writerly position, the session can enable a more productive session that empowers a student *and* allows for the vulnerability that is essential for change.

Critical Response Process for Writing Tutors

Step One: Statement of Meaning

After reading the paper with the student writer, take a moment to tell the writer what you heard. What resonated with you? What made you think? What works well? This is the most overtly affirmative portion of the tutoring session, but should be specific and grounded. Rather than, "This is a good start," aim for, "The connection you are making between the Dickinson and Plath made me see Dickinson in a new light," or "It really worked for me that you wrote so assertively and directly in your conclusion."

Step Two: Artist as Questioner

This is a stage that the student writer will not necessarily expect. If you rush the first step, and are too vague in explaining this step, student writers are likely to rely on the classic, "I just want to make sure this flows" or "Does it make sense?" lines. Instead, take a moment to explain the process that you are using. Say, "I'll share my ideas in a minute, but first I want to hear what questions you have for me now that I have just read your paper." If the student writer is vague, guide them to be more specific. "Which sections might not flow? Can you ask about a particular part of the paper? That will help me give more concrete feedback." This step might be very

short (or even absent), but it could be extensive. Be sure to offer a chance for the writer to ask more than one question, especially if she seems comfortable with this part of the process.

Step Three: Neutral Questions from Responders

Work to construct truly neutral questions for the writer. The more specific, the better. You might try to connect to the issues that were raised in Step Two. Consider the embedded opinion in questions that you might ask: "Do you really understand the poem you're writing about?" reveals the embedded opinion: "I don't think that you know what this poem is about." Instead: "How did you prepare your interpretation of this poem?"

Step Four: Permissioned Opinions

As a tutor, you might assume that any opinion is already permissioned. Instead, ask whether the writer would like to hear your idea about a specific section of the paper. You might say, "I have an idea about how to open the paper. Would you like to hear it?" This formality might feel awkward, but it turns a potential monologue into a dialogue and encourages the writer to stay engaged.

Closure

Be sure to save a few minutes to wrap up the session. Instead of the traditional format, in which the tutor reframes the main points for the writer, your job is to invite that reframing from the writer. "Talk to me about your next steps. What do you plan to do for this revision?" This allows the writer to have the last word, to ask a final question, and to leave the session feeling in control of her writing.

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