

FEEDBACK FOR CREATIVITY AND EQUITY



Feedback is a necessary part of creative life. However, it may cause questions, imposter syndrome, anxiety, even hurt— for both the givers and receivers! In my own recent experiences as both a teacher and student, I have been struck by how much of our feedback process is caught up in colonial models and fully threaded with toxic power dynamics.

Feedback is often used to answer the question “What is good?” For many, regardless of their role in the dance world, that answer has too often been defined by white, European aesthetics of body, form, technique, and language. These ideologies, upheld by popular culture, academia, and personal practice, have become assumptions and unexamined biases.

In my classes, I use Liz Lerman’s Creative Response Process (CRP) because of its potential to uncolonize, shift power dynamics, and promote agency. CRP serves as a check to the preferences of viewers by centering instead the artist, their process, and work. I have used this method to help students give feedback to each other that is validating and useful in classes from Middle School through university. By refusing to accept a framework or checklist, we honor the artist’s “creative sovereignty”, allowing them an uncolonized creative practice (hat tip to the incredible Tara Moses for this phrase).

WHAT IS CRP

The first step in the CRP is “Statements of Meaning”, as viewers offer what they saw/heard/felt that seems important to the piece, or what it meant to them. From the beginning, we establish that the work has meaning and purpose; the work is already art.

In step two, the artist may ask questions. This is where the power of the CRP to disrupt colonized, hierarchical, and/or patriarchal systems and shift agency has its biggest opportunity— the artist controls the conversation. The goal of the CRP is to help the artist create the piece they want to create, whether or not that piece fits with anyone else’s expectations.

Step three, neutral questions (those framed without opinion) from the viewers, is the most difficult, but incredibly important. Once viewers gain the skill of asking neutral questions they recognize how often their own opinion

is communicated to others without consent, in both dance and life. Neutral questions can be as simple as, “Can you tell me more about ____?” There is no fixing, authoritative answer, nor teacher providing a guide. Instead, artists construct their own answers from an examination of their work prompted by the questions. This allows a focus on the creative process, not only the product. Artists are encouraged to develop their own way of working and their own aesthetic values.

The process formally concludes with viewers asking for permission to share their opinions. Viewers may hold any opinions they like, but the artist must give consent before the viewer may offer them. Again, the artist’s needs are the focus.

Every step of the way, CRP keeps the artist grounded in their creative power. No rubric or overarching concept of “good art” has been enforced. Instead, feedback encourages personal examination and agency in the creative process.

WHY USE CRP

Currently, I am taking two writing classes. One uses CRP for feedback, and one does not. There is a distinct difference in the type of feedback given (fixes v. observations or questions), who is speaking (the class v. the artist), and personally, my feelings about my work and process after receiving the feedback. The more instances I see and experience of CRP at work, or notably not being used to offer feedback, the more I am convinced that feedback, while crucial to creativity, is something many of us do not do well. Instead of approaching to experience art, we enter to enforce our perception of what is art.

Often when we give feedback, we think we are centering the artwork. But, what we are usually doing is trying to convey the ways we (as teacher, critic, or audience) would “fix” the work to fit what we want it to be— which may have nothing whatsoever to do with the artist’s vision of it.

Another common use of feedback is to show how informed or correct the viewer is. By passing judgement on another’s work as less than, we can show off our high standards. When we praise something that fits our personal construction of art, we validate our own point of view. Unfortunately, neither of these is of any assistance to the artist, which should be the point of feedback. CRP is a distinct departure from the teacher, critic, or even audience as the centered point of view. Instead, the person speaking the most, and the most often, is the artist, as they respond to Statements of Meaning and both ask and answer questions. As they do so, they examine their own creative choices, and discover ways they might develop their work.

CRP allows us to stop enforcing personal paradigms of art, and instead give space for differences in expression and creativity.