

Textversion av podden Educational Research in the Arts, avsnitt 7: Liz Lerman och Jonas Simonsson

Liz Lerman

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Carina Borgström Källén

You've just heard Liz Lehrman, a choreographer and educator who has spent a lot of time investigating how to give and receive meaningful feedback. A very important skill in all kinds of work, not least in the arts and in pedagogy. And guess what? Liz has created a method that helps students and teachers see their work from new perspectives. A method that is especially useful in artistic education. It is called critical response process, CRP. Her work with the critical response process has influenced instruction in arts education at many artistic academies around the world. Among these is the Academy of Music and Drama. And this is why Liz Lerman was recently appointed as an honorary doctor at the Artistic Faculty of the University University of Gothenburg. In this episode of the ERA podcast, you will meet Liz Lerman and Professor Jonas Simonson, a musician and a teacher at the Academy of Music and Drama. Once again, Welcome, Liz, and welcome, Jonas.

Jonas Simonsson

Thank you very much.

Carina

I'm so curious about your work, Liz. But before we speak about CRP, maybe you could tell us something about yourself and your background. How come you ended up as a choreographer and educator?

Liz

It's such a lovely and, of course, gigantic question. I had an enormous apparent desire to move as a child, and I was lucky enough to be born into a family that was both very political and very esthetic and artistic. And between those poles, I was raised and given an amazing dance education, first in classical ballet and then in modern forms. But the major teacher I had as a young person was a wild woman who was a real rebel. And so she infused with me not just the steps, but ways of thinking. And as we were thinking about the passion of young people, even by the age of 14, I was already rapidly asking a lot of questions, which

I have been pursuing ever since. But the career I forged included trying to fit into a system that was uncomfortable for me, both in terms of making art, but also how we talk about it. And so I developed some different methods and different institutions in order to try to find my way.

Carina

How does it feel to have been awarded an honorary doctorate?

Liz

It's funny. I could make light of it or I could be quite serious about it, and maybe in both ways. Rewards and awards are odd things. Sometimes they drive you, they help you keep going. Sometimes they let you know that somebody saw something in you and you're grateful, and that helps you keep going. Being myself relatively new to full-time work in academia, I'm not sure how I feel about this, but I know that my own institution at home, Arizona State University, values this highly. As I was telling people that I was coming here, I realized this is maybe the first time that critical response process has been acknowledged. And so for it to be seen in this light in the context of knowledge systems, which is, of course, what our academics are busy doing is deciding which the knowledge systems we value. In that regard, this is really good. Not so much for me personally at this age, but for critical response, a wonderful thing. I'm grateful because I know that Jonas and other people had to work to make this happen. So gratitude.

Carina

Thank you, Liz. Could you please tell us about your critical response process? How come you developed the method and what are these four steps about?

Liz

Yes. And again, we could go on for weeks, but I'll say in its simplest form, I was asked to actually to give a talk at a high school graduation in my city for an art school. And when I walked in, they asked you to speak with the students first before you do this. So I came a few weeks early and I walked into the classroom and they applauded me like I was a rock star I was shaken and surprised and what's up? It turns out that they had been using critical response process in their classrooms. They were so happy to have found a system that helped them become themselves and improve. They asked me, Well, how did you make it up? It's partly because I was with them, these beautiful young people. I said, and I had never said it quite like this before. I said, Well, I was miserable. I was a completely passionate dancer choreographer, convinced that my work was going to change the world or something like that. But I hated the way I was treated, and I hated the way we treated each other, and I hated the way the system was working.

Liz

I didn't understand why some people had the authority to say whatever they wanted, however they wanted to you in any manner, including in the newspaper. How is this even possible? And so began a series of long... It took for me several years of experimenting and trying. But one part of it was asking every person I met, When have you gotten good feedback? By which I meant, When were you given some information that made you want to go back to work? When could you just not wait to get back to the kitchen, to the studio, to the parenting room, to whatever it was you're working on? Almost everybody said the same things over and over in different language. That helped me. Well, that confirmed that I was on the right track. Eventually, developed these steps. As I like to say, we practice the steps, but actually, as your question also informed us, it's not the steps, it's the values. It's what you're trying to do in each of those steps that matter. At their simplest, after a meeting, after a dinner, you're trying to tell your child something that they just did. You have a work in progress in front of you, which my colleague, John Barcel, says works in progress is the wonderful freedom of being incomplete.

Liz

We have this incomplete thing in front of us. First, you let the person know that what they've done for you has meaning. I think this is like a daily act. I don't think this goes away. It's not like you get it once and you're done, but you let people know that... And meaning is big, but the thing can be small. It was interesting to me the way you looked at me when you said the thing you just said or something like that. The second step, and this is important, is that the person who's done the making goes first. They ask their questions. Let the person who's been working through this for years or months or days or hours, let them ask what's on their mind, because in my opinion, they won't really hear if you don't address what they're worrying about. So let's get it on. But you have to stay on topic. You have to answer what they ask. In the third step, the people, those of us responding, we get to ask our questions. We attempt not to put our opinion in the question. You have an opportunity to investigate your own assumptions and to try to get more information from the person.

Liz

And the last step is you ask permission to give an opinion if you still need to. You don't always have to. And those opinions can be positive or negative, but you do get consent and you let the person know, I'm about to tell you something heavy or light. And we all know that in friendships and in our relationships in life, these things are important. You just don't want to hit somebody sideways. You don't want to suddenly throw something at them. And as we observe in the world right now, The shock and surprise of getting feedback when you're not expecting it or when it's different from what you're ready for has terrible results. So you can fix it. Use these kinds of things and it can go better.

Carina

Thank you. So thank you, Liz. Thank you so much for this. I'm curious, what do you think characterizes learning and teaching in artistic subjects from your perspective? I mean, Is it different from learning and teaching other subjects? And in that case, how?

Liz

I think all learning maybe is hopefully really discovery. You hope that you're making possible, even if it's been taught for thousands of years, that the person in front of you is experiencing the learning as if they themselves have found it and can do something with it. And some of that learning we might describe as factual or technical. It will go better if you hit the nail this way. It will go better, actually, if you lift your leg this way. If you blow into this instrument this way, it might go better. If you want to add these numbers up, it's going to go better if you do it this way. I mean, there's certain things, and those things require a certain practicing and doing over and over and over and over again. If a person invested in understanding why they need to practice this over and over again. It can be thrilling. I myself actually loved practicing dancing. I loved practicing my flute last, I'm sorry to say, Jonas, as the beautiful flute player that he is. But I really think, and of course, in my late adulthood, you understand that practice can be resting, can be meditative, can be a place in which your knowledge is so well placed that you are able to live in a beautiful way.

Liz

You don't know that as a young person, but you can find that later. So that's one learning and one practicing. I think because a lot of that is measurable, it has dominated our systems in the West and has made it less possible for us to have all the other magnificent ways that people learn and discover and that we share information and knowledge in all of those systems, some of which have been systematized in other places like ritual inside some religious settings, for example, even mysteries inside that some people like the occult. I mean, they're all around us all the time. I myself love creativity as a core driver and practice and maker and also something that can serve every field and everything you do. But that learning and teaching requires something different. Sometimes our institutions, our schools, our families can't tolerate it because it's a little bit wild. It can be managed. It can be. And in fact, managing it is one of the thrilling things to figure out in life is how you have all that happening at once all around you. But it's not impossible and it is doable, and you can even evaluate it depending on what you are looking for.

Liz

But if you're not just measuring, then systems like CRP turn out to be incredibly helpful as both a mechanism for keeping the fires burning in each person, but also keeping the fires down for the people that are trying to manage it. I mean, it's possible, and it still Curious to me why this is so hard for our institutions. And again, I can speak a little bit about the United States and a little bit about the Western world. There's a lot of the world I don't know anything about, so I don't know. But I do know that this learning Training is thrilling, and it is a birthright, and it makes me sad and grievous that it is not more well-normalised in our institutions.

Carina

Do you think it would be possible to use CRP with young children as well or with adolescents? We do.

Liz

We use it. I know it to be in use as little as second-graders, and I know families that use it in their child rearing. Yeah, absolutely. In fact, even the facilitation can come from young people. It is my deepest belief that it's reciprocal and that people, whatever age they are, can be facilitators, can be responders, and can be the artist or the maker. What we notice is that, at least my own experience with adolescents has been, they tend to take it faster and do it more quickly and get on with it. But yeah, it works.

Carina

Why do you think your method had had such an impact in higher music education or in higher artistic education, perhaps we should say?

Liz

Well, and here too, I'm going to ask my beautiful colleague, Jonas, to step in because I think he can tell us this directly. What I observe about critical response process is that it's both very simple and very hard. So the simplicity of it makes people willing to try it, and the complexity makes certain people stay with it. Some people will drop out and say, No, it's too hard. But for the people who stay with it, then it's allowance for nuance, complexity, strangeness, all of that is a wonderful thing. But what I think it did when I had the great opportunity to be at ICON, which Jonas can describe maybe in more detail, but a group of conservatories that had gathered together, is that CRP is a concrete way to affect change. Change. And you can talk about change and you can desire change, you wish for change, but the actual change is sometimes really hard. And here was this simple little thing to just try and actually had impact. Whether you were teaching in classical music one-on-one, just the astonishment. I remember one of the musicians at Icon sing. She was regularly teaching one-on-one as they do in higher education of music, and having in CRP, the artist goes first with their question to have the student go first with the problem that they were having with their music was life-changing to this teacher.

Liz

Just that one simple thing. I think that's partly why it took hold.

Jonas

I would say that it also creates for me or us as teachers, it gives us a platform, a protocol to actually dealing with the feedback that are so necessary in our teaching and in artistic processes. Even if we are a bit resistant or questioning the protocol, the form that creates anyhow a platform to talk about how do we address feedback, giving and getting feedback. That develops our thinking, it develops our language, it also develops our understanding for how to give place for the things you were talking about when it's well-functioning, when the feedback you want to derive from your opinions, your thoughts, your reflections,

that you gain a higher awareness and you also can see what is beneficial or useful right now for the artists that are here present. It also raises your sensibility for what's needed now and what's not needed now. You urge to understand the artist in a more holistic way than just telling your opinions and not really knowing what's the need for the artist. I think it's a method also for calibrating yourself to the situation and to sense what are the needs now and how can I contribute and how can I contribute with not saying things that are not necessary, for example.

Liz

That's really interesting, Jonas, because, again, it suggests that in each moment in a person's life, this is the moment they're in. Can we be in there with them? And what is that? And then how do we bring our particular knowledge to bear in relationship to the inquiry that they are engaged in, which is lovely. The other thing I've been hearing lately is not actually surprised me, but I've heard it enough now to think it must be some truth to it. In this case, it was a poet who approached me, but she was teaching poetry in higher education. And she said that critical response process had now moved very swiftly into the poetry world. And she said, everyone's very relieved because they were so distressed over giving feedback in the manner in which they had been raised. They didn't want to do that. And so their solutions had been to They have no feedback because they just couldn't. And then to find critical response in a mechanism by which they could now engage in a humane way, again, their knowledge in relationship to the knowledge in front of them. And she said that people really working hard and practicing with it.

I think there's probably some information about that from a variety of fields. Maybe, too, as you see more and more women, I know that I'm not sure it's gendered, but just not wanting to do any harm. And so nourish, nourish, nourish. And part of that is don't hurt somebody. And that means they might not get feedback. They may not. And so the fact that there's a to how we do this in a way to hold people accountable for what they're doing, well, I think it's thrilling.

Jonas

Another aspect is that you train your metacognition and your meta cognitive capacities to actually understand your thinking and how to use that to facilitate others' work. Also, you learn about your language a lot and how to pose questions and how to address your opinions in a structured way that will help. It's very much also about being helpful.

Carina

In line with that, I'm thinking about now retired senior lecturer, Robert Schenk, who originally introduced CRP at the Academy of Music and Drama already in 2013. And when he was asked to describe CRP, he said something like, Instead of students being apprentices to masters, CRP is about empowerment and ownership. The learner owns their own development. Could you elaborate around this a little bit, Jónas and Liz?

Liz

Do you want to start, Jónas?

Jonas

I think I know Robert since many years, and he's also very capable of condensing things out of a lot. When I've gotten his feedback after concerts, I remember how he puts things, and within a few words, he can say a lot of things. I totally agree with him, and he I've framed a few things with some of the qualities within CRP that works very well. I recognize myself in this description.

Liz

We can think and reflect about so what if people have their own agency? I mean, so what? So first of all, he's right. Most of our education is do it like I did it. And the critical response process is not that. In fact, part of the urgency in my own figuring it out was this realization that as I became both a touring artist and then someone asked to be giving master classes and things like that, that I knew how to help people become me because I understood a little bit about how I had become me. But I didn't know how to help them become them unless I figured out some new things. And that required me to, in some I don't want to say, I say, ignorant, not in a bad way. I had to become... I was ignorant about them. And so how could I come to understand them so that I could say something that might, again, help them find agency in their own light so that it's not that feedback normalizes everything, or that feedback makes everybody the same, actually, no. What is it that could help this person be that. Now, what I want to add is that the importance of that right Now, so I teach in an institution, 50% of our students are first-generation college students.

Liz

They come from all kinds of different diverse backgrounds. Many of them hold down full-time jobs. Often, they are the only person taking care of their elders. And there is a way in which they may have been raised inside the United States, which could make them feel less than. Perhaps maybe they don't actually belong in that Maybe they shouldn't have come to this school. Well, maybe in all of that, in addition to the normal doubts that all of us carry about ourselves, the normal worries, these are additional ones that our systems have put in place. How critically important is it for us to be able to make sure by the time they leave this institution that they understand how important they are as an individual and as a part of their community? How critical is this? It's not just, can they count and can they do whatever we need to ask them to be able to do to get their final exam done. No, it's who they think they are as a person to be able to, well, count on their experience as mattering, that they have a point of view, to help their community or themselves or this world.

Liz

And I don't want my students to... I don't want to let them slip away without making sure that that is not also happening. One of the ways we do that is critical response.

Carina

I'm wondering, could there be a problem with the ambition of staying neutral when asking questions? Is it really possible to ask neutral and non-judgmental questions? And Then later in step four, give advice to the student. Isn't that contradictory?

Liz

Well, you've done a great thing because you've put in relationship the step three and four. And if we were in a workshop, we would really, really dig in. But let's see how we can pull these things apart. No, there's nothing really neutral. You can't. I mean, even just the fact that I've noticed this particular thing in this, out of five minutes of time, I've decided to ask a question about this one thing. I mean, that's already a signal that something's cooking. So no. But neutral isn't just about easing the way in for the artist. Neutral is an opportunity for the person giving the response to de-escalate their opinion and their theories. I can always bring my theory to bear. I believe this to be true, and it must be true in this moment. Well, actually, my theory may not be true in this moment. The one way for me to check myself is to sort out what's the neutral question to ask. So that is It's a verb. Getting to neutral is a verb. It's an action, right? And then you are simply uncovering what the other person knows. And usually there needs to be a discussion.

Liz

I believe the neutral question leads to a much more interesting discussion and a much more possibility for growth than an argument, which is what will ensue if it's not neutral or a defensive mechanism. And it's just not useful to be defensive. The relationship between them giving an opinion is this is how I think about it. If I know more, let's see, I'm working with Jonas, and I've asked him a neutral question, and I understand more about why he held the the way he did in this particular moment and what he's thinking about. I may still think it needs work, and I may still have something to inform him about, but now it's much more surgical. That is to say, I can be very specific. Oh, he's trying to... I'm making this up, Jonas, but he's trying to embody the wind while he plays this thing because of the way the wind blows across the island that we walked on the other day. It gives me either a whole way into questioning about, can you ever embody the wind, which would keep us in step three, or I have an opinion about that as a choreographer.

Liz

Can I give you an idea about how to hold your flute? I mean, that's how that works, as opposed to a general impression about what happens when flute players try to move or something like that.

Carina

So it's not about you as an artist. It's not about your hiding your knowledge and your experience.

Liz

Yes, I think a lot of people... I think that that's a frequently felt problem, and that has to do with this idea of having the speed with which your knowledge comes to you is interesting to us, of course. Is it correct, right, and useful in the moment? Use the neutral question to double-check before you go. But of course, your knowledge is why you even noticed in the first place. I often think this, though. It's like, what do we do with our expertise? What do we do with it? I can hit you over the head with it. I can, but it's much more interesting. I need to be in relationship with it and then to see if this is actually the moment. I mean, even with my daughter, we joke about this all the time, but I used to say to her things like, this would be a version of step four in parenting. I have an opinion. Would you like to hear it? I would usually say something like, Hey, I need to be a parent for a moment right now. I mean, may I? And she was so interesting. She would calibrate it right back.

She could say, Well, I can take about a minute's worth. And she was telling me, this is how much I can hear, mom, and then don't go on. The rest is going to be in the ways ask it anyway.

Jonas

I think a critical response process is also about critiquing. The different steps managing it's you to be able to do that in a constructive way and helpful way for the artist. I think the open and neutral questions, they have helped me also to understand my ways of thinking when I digest or filter my opinions. And especially in teaching, I would like to find a way to talk with my students that they will understand their own learning. Sometimes it's not helpful to come with a solution, my solution. It's much more helpful to ask them, How do you think about this? What's your solution? Then, of course, we have step four as a possibility for, Well, you haven't really seen this possibility yet, but I can point that direction for you. Do you want to hear my what I see here. Then, of course, there is a lot of space for being critical. I think also CRP helps us to find ways to be critical in a concrete and specific way that is needed. Sometimes you are a bit blurry and not too specific about things that you say. Things come out in a non-useful way. Then if you have the language and have practiced the language a bit more, then it's also very helpful just for an ordinary critiquing session.

Jonas

You can go right into step four as you say this. You address the thing and then you are a bit more well-formulated about what are the things I need to address here and how can I do it in a way that helps the artist. I think it's also a meta-reflection on your language, how you talk and what's important to derive from a piece you have been taking part of a performance or a presentation. How do we speak about learning and creative processes? It helps also to do that.

Liz

Yes. A few things here. Sometimes I say people think critical response was made so that people who are cruel or harsh can change their ways. But it's also good for people who are too nice. It actually gives you

a way to be, as you say, Yona, specific. It's not just in the fourth step. There's another step. In the second step, an artist... This happened once. I had just finished a workshop and I was out in the hallway and I overheard somebody saying to somebody else who'd been in the workshop, Yeah, but it really doesn't work because I still didn't hear. It was something about specificity. I recognized that this person had not used the second step. So the artist asks a question, the one I often use as an example is, What do you think about the ending of the dance I just showed you? Now, once I ask that, you can say it didn't work. Okay. And then I could say, well, tell me why, which I noticed the artist yesterday was very clear. I don't want to just know. I want you to tell me why you're saying what you're saying. She wanted the information.

Liz

If I ask you, it means I am ready to hear. But this requires you, the responder, to be truthful and to say out loud in the circle, it doesn't work. Here's why it's not working for me. You did this, this. Then the process is doing its job. The artist still has the rest of step two, three, and four to work their way through that information they just got. So by the time they leave that session, as we like to say, you can't wait to go back to work. And I am convinced that when artists understand that people will stay on topic, if I ask you about the ending, you're going to talk about the ending, you're not going to talk about anything else. They will ask really hard questions of themselves.

Carina

How do you want your method to be taken care of by the future generations of teachers? I mean, do you have any advice for coming generations, given your long experience?

Liz

Well, it's a beautiful question. It's very timely because, of course, we're trying to figure this out. In fact, the new book that just came out, I have a section It's one of my more favorite paragraphs, but it's about the fact that I don't like codifying too much. I was always afraid to. I've always said, experiment, try it, use it. People are messing with the process for years and years. And some of what I hear back is it's shoddy. I mean, people do really bad things with it, and you cringe, but it goes with the territory of sharing. But also what I've come to see is that the importance is more value-driven to understand why you would take the time to do that first step. And the more you understand why you're doing the things, the more the variations stay true. It isn't are you copying the steps? It's are you working your way through what the values allow you to do? So getting people... I mean, we have this certification program, and hopefully more and more people will take part in that because it's pretty intense and you come out of it with both the freedom to be bold, but also a deeper understanding of the various responsibilities of critical response.

Liz

But your question cuts really deeply to questions I have about Everything you do in a life, which is what do you leave for others? And what do you say? Well, we did the best we could, or I did the best I can. And that's that. I'm working on something right now. I'm calling legacy Unboxed because everybody wants you to tie your legacy up in a neat little bow and say, See, here it is, and pass it on to some collection. It doesn't feel like that to me. It feels much more like I'm super active, maybe as much as I've ever been in my life, but I know I'm at the end. In what forms or manners do you lay these things out in hopes that people take the best of it and that has some usefulness in the time to come. But for me, it has nothing to do with age. I just think young people are amazing and children are amazing. The people my daughters age and my daughter, they're amazing. Just to keep nurturing and helping them find their way in such a really complicated and difficult world.

Jonas

I think also your approach list to CRP and life in general, that you try to stay very open and you say, as you said, experiment, try out, see what happens, and what does your experience in teaching you. Try things. Does it work? Continue doing it, developing it. If it doesn't work, try another way. I think that's the way we find our ways to create useful tools and see our Maybe could be a way into a way of thinking and systemising opinions. For some, it doesn't work, but for many, it does. You have to adjust it to your practice, to your situation and find ways for each situation so it fits. I mean, it's about who is there, what's their pre-knowledge, what are we doing, what outcome do we want? You have to redesign it every time, I would say.

Liz

To me, this is one of its glories, and I suppose for some people, some of its problems. But for example, I have colleagues at home, one in particular, John Borstel, who co-wrote this recent book. We talk once a week. We have been working together for over 30 years. We have an agenda. There's stuff we have to work out about other things we do. But we probably talk critical response about 30 minutes of every meeting. This means he'll want to know everything that happened here in sweet. And I will talk him through what I learned by doing the sessions this week. What happened? I'm still puzzling over something that happened yesterday with Brigitte and Niels. That That whole exchange, that was phenomenal. What was happening in the room? And can I figure out? In part because I think if I can figure out that moment, I can understand how to make it happen again in other cases. This was quite complex. But this community of practice, which we're trying to form with all of our practitioners, is not only doing it, but having a place to reflect on what you did, what happened, how can you yourself not just improve as a facilitator, but just trying to understand its application because people are putting critical response to work and racial reckoning.

Liz

I did a critical response process for the security guards at Google. This is a huge company that wants to invest in its workers and see if they can grow, and they found critical response and asked for some time.

It's that and hoping that people find a way. I'm encouraging here in Sweden, there are enough people doing it now, especially, I think after this week where there was a real heightened awareness of who's been experimenting with it, maybe underground and coming out now, to have some regular time together because it ignites your willingness to continue to explore. Yes.

Carina

So thank you so much, Liz Lerman and Jonas Simonson.