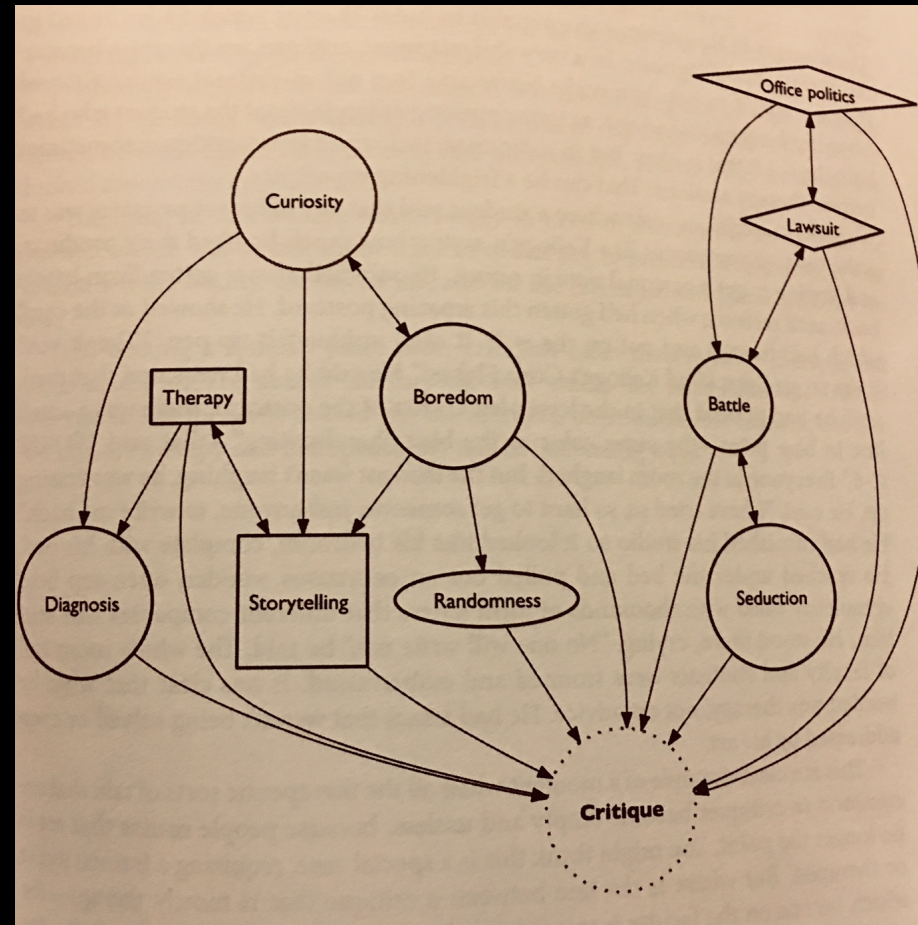


# Methods of Critique for the Arts and Beyond

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From James Elkins'  
Art Critiques: A Guide

Speaker's Notes for slide 1: In his book, *Art Critiques: A Guide*, James Elkins describes with some irony both the simplicity and complexity of the art critique. While reducing the convention to its most essential: an opportunity to see how your work looks to other people, a public conversation, or a way to give and get feedback, most people who have been in art programs will recognize his discussion of the more fraught aspects including metaphors like “storytelling,” “therapy,” and “different languages all spoken at once.” In his book, he includes diagrams such as this one and an incredibly long list of words for “ways to fail.”

[https://books.google.com/books/about/Art\\_Critiques.html?id=YzomuA AACAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Art_Critiques.html?id=YzomuA AACAAJ)

# ~ART~ CRITIQUE BINGO

How Hard Can You Art?

<i>Sleeping</i>	Denying Obvious Social/Political or Racial Overtones	Crying	<i>Femism To The Point Of Mild Nihilism</i>	Hiding Texting
Awkward Silence Over 5 Seconds	Stifled Tears	<i>Forgetting A Name</i>	One Word Answer To Complex Question	<i>Marxism</i>
Irrelevant References	Recycled Work	Finishing Work Right Before Class	<i>Someone Forgetting Your Name</i>	Class Running Over By 30+ Minutes
Texting	<i>Jean Luc Godard</i>	Awkward Silence	"Accessing" or "Entering" Work	Name Dropping
Repeating Question Asked Earlier	You Crying	Loud Eating	Incoherent Mumbling	That One Person Who Never Makes Work Doesn't For 2+ Of Their Scheduled Crits In A Row

Speaker's notes (previous slide): Anecdotally, I can say that many of us, students and teachers alike, have participated in critiques that were demoralizing, ineffective, and otherwise felt like the most tragic of missed opportunities. The unpredictable and co-created quality of crits gives them their power but also opens the process to the risk of a completely unsatisfying unfolding.

Some unique qualities of critique as assessment that Elizabeth Soep identifies are:

- moment-to-moment improvisation
- reciprocity
- **an orientation toward emerging work**
- knowledge is co-constructed within communities of practice

Speaker's notes for the previous slide: But the conversation that is "critique" is of unique value and not just in the arts. Embedded in the process of critique is not only a powerful assessment (in its broadest form) of what has been done so far but also, hopefully, road signs and a momentum forward regardless of where it falls in a semester because of the cumulative nature of making art. Ideally the critique is an intersection of assessment and learning. Elizabeth Soep says that critiques operate with a third view of learning which reconciles the model of acquiring information with that of a property of everyday experience by framing learning as a process of **situated participation**, in which new information is generated, enabling people to reorganize their relationships and shift the conditions that shape minds, circumstances, actions, and products.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/003172170508700109>

## Challenges?

- getting students to talk during critiques
- fuller involvement/participation from all who are present
- more interpretation in critiques
- less negative and personal
- more articulate instructors and students
- goodwill (and generosity?)
- a fair distribution of time
- making critiques more descriptive and interpretive
- less exclusively judgmental
- more exploratory
- productively responsive

Nevertheless, critiques are not easy. Critiques are events and the dynamics are unpredictable. No critique happens free of the general lore about the critique itself, anxieties, expectations... Here are some of the challenges that Terry Barrett gathered over a decade or more. I added a couple of my own in blue.

([http://terrybarrettart.com/images/pdfs/Barrett%20\(2000\)%20Studio%20Critiques%20of%20Student%20Art.pdf](http://terrybarrettart.com/images/pdfs/Barrett%20(2000)%20Studio%20Critiques%20of%20Student%20Art.pdf))

## Progressive Stages in Feldman's Model of Art Criticism

- Description
- Analysis
- Interpretation
- Judgment



Jackson Pollock was championed by the critic Clement Greenberg



Speaker's notes for the previous slide: Most often in my experience, critiques are free flowing conversations, sometimes dominated by one or two voices and taking on the dynamic between those individuals. Other times a model is used or at least underpins the conversation. The Feldman model is a classic model of art criticism in general that was formalized in the 1960s and reflects a modernist sensibility. This modernist inheritance is also felt in the positioning of the professor or professors as the authorities even when they would prefer to encourage the voices of their students.

From Julie Jung:

<b>Feminist Pedagogy</b>
Co-constructs knowledge among teacher and students; disrupts teacher/student binary
Egalitarian, community-based
Adopts discussion or workshop format
Attentive to process, context
Respects situated knowledges and each person's experiences, expertise

If critiques are of such potential value, in both assessment and pedagogical terms, how can we create the best conditions for productive dynamism--ones that address the professors' genuine desire for all students to participate more fully in the process of creating meaningful and rich dialogue? I would like to offer two structures that evolved out the critical pedagogies of the 1970s including feminist pedagogy.

# The Non-Judgmental Critique

The non-judgmental discussion method is a way to help people to grow in their own unique direction by reflecting them back to themselves. Assimilating the approach is a process. It will only work if the intentions of its method are understood, practiced and internalized through repetition.

Profs. Judith Roode and Joyce Lyon



The Non-Judgmental Critique is a method that came out of the feminist art movement in Minneapolis in the 70s and 80s centered around the WARM Gallery. It evolved as a collaborative practice between Judith Roode on the left and Joyce Lyon, on the ladder. Roode initiated a women's mentorship program and Lyon was my first university art prof in 1985 at the U of M and shared this method –and its continued evolution--with me.

Stephanie Trenchard's piece is called "Service."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cojALL-nVEA>



We are going to get a partial taste of two methods, understanding that we aren't truly following the protocol. In the first place, we won't have the artist present as they would be but I will share the discussion. Having an artist here didn't seem right since we will be rushed and not able to really complete the process in its full integrity and thereby take care of the artist. So I asked a former student if we could use a piece that I thought would be interesting to talk about. Stephanie Trenchard is a glass artist and this is a video she made—as a non-traditional student—for a class I taught last summer in which the prompt was to create a piece about one's relationship with the kitchen. She chose to make her first video.

## The Non-judgmental Critique Method:

Members of the group each speak about the work. (Basics: Take turns. Follow an order. Say “pass.” Repeats are good.)

Each observer says what they see/notice, each one giving a full description. Many categories of observation are appropriate: formal visual characteristics (color, shape, type of line, movements, etc.) as well as literal descriptions of what’s included/what’s omitted, how it’s organized and presented. It is often useful to look for what repeats, what seems emphasized.

Initially (and this will be difficult), there must be no judgmental comments

Start every sentence with “I notice” to avoid issues of like or dislike. “I like” is a verbal habit that can curtail awareness and acuteness of observation. **(The intention is not to avoid judgments --not to be “nice”-- but rather to have judgment develop out of the richest and deepest observation and reflection. This method is intended to help one focus.)**

Within these parameters, nothing is too obvious or off the wall to notice and say.

It is important for everyone to participate. Each person’s contributions to the process are unique and important. Repetition can reveal shared response. Difference can express alternative perspectives or complexity.

People having their work talked about should take notes (or, better, someone else should take notes for them).

Follow a circle order, starting with a different person each time.

Use a timer for each person --each person’s work is equally important.

Don’t worry initially what the work “means”. “Meaning” will arise from the process of paying attention.

This process is a risk --it may not “all come together” later (although often it does). It is valuable in other ways.



# Next steps would be...

2. What does it remind you of --what associations does it evoke—to the speaker and in the person's previous work? (If you can, identify the elements evoking the associations.)

3. Any feelings the work calls up.

Review—what was beneficial and how might it work outside the arts?



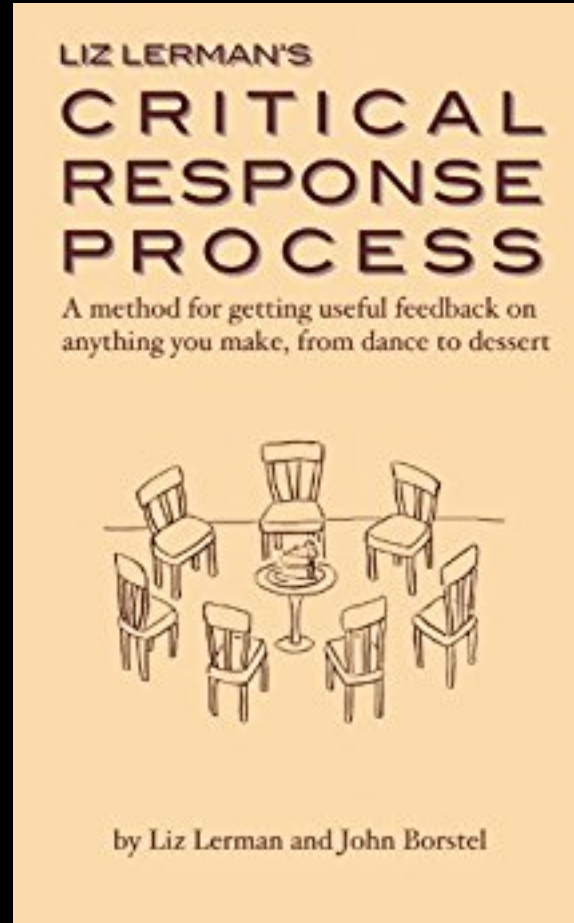
“Several years ago, I finally acknowledged to myself how uncomfortable I was around most aspects of criticism. I had been involved in the process of creating art, seeing art and teaching art-making for a very long time, but I had not found peace with my many questions, and with the array of feelings brought up by both giving and receiving criticism.” Liz Lerman about creating CRP

The second method, called Critical Response Process, was created by dancer, choreographer, and teacher, Liz Lerman to get the feedback she needed to make better work in a way that was helpful. As **Lerman's** website states: “Critical Response Process (CRP) is a feedback system based on the principle that the best possible outcome is for the maker to want to **go back to work.**” And here I want to make a disclaimer that there are official trainings for this method that I have yet to be able to attend but I am using the manual and have watched videos of the process.



# Hallmarks of Lerman's work and her method

- Curiosity
- Engagement
- Generosity



Lerman's work has been used extensively for all art forms and even beyond. As we review it, you can probably think of ways that it could apply outside the arts. <https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process/>

Step 1: Statements of Meaning. What was valuable, meaningful, evocative, surprising, curious, memorable, exciting, effective about the work that was created? Being able to have that spirit of working from what's working is an incredible asset to bring to any learning environment.

Lerman says: "I too have experimented with that approach (where the idea is that there is no positive or negative implied) using it here in step one. However, I keep coming back to the need for positive, affirmative information... after all these years of doing work, and after many positive comments from others, it still makes sense to me that we tell each other at least one thing that we noticed about the work being discussed that brought us something special."



- Step 2: Artist as Questioner. In a learning environment for somebody who is creating, to have the opportunity to articulate what are their struggles and desires. It allows a person to really create their own vision and voice.
- Step 3: Neutral Questions. These are questions that have no opinion embedded inside. So, instead of saying “Why is your lighting so dark?” we’d ask something like “What informed your lighting choices?” This allows people, without defensiveness, to be able to explore why they’re making the choices that they are.

“I have discovered, though, that the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions is precisely the process necessary to get to the questions that matter for the artist.”

If you cannot ask a neutral question or feel very strongly you must give feedback that is not neutral, step 4 allows you to offer opinions.

- Step 4: Opinion Time. These are permissioned opinions. For instance, “I have an opinion about your lighting choices, would you like to hear it?” If somebody has gone through the process of creating, people usually want to know those opinions. But it just allows us to prepare for the opinions, to allow ourselves to receive it.

Discussion: What was beneficial and how might it work outside the arts?