

Peter S. Petralia  
Teaching Philosophy

For the past decade, I have been working in theatre as a writer and director, primarily with the company I founded in New York City, Proto-type Theater. My work with Proto-type, and my artistic work in general, has focused on life in our highly globalized, politicized, and mobile era, where ideas have become currency and identity is fluid. Specifically, the content of my work has developed from research into psychology, religion, sexuality, neurology, and invisibility and has been explored in formats that focus on how people interact with ideas in theatres. What are the most effective ways of creating a sense of shared investment in an audience in a world where most communication is mediated by some form of technology or other? My fascination with this rather fundamental question bridges my artistic practice and my teaching philosophy.

*“Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.”*

This Chinese Proverb neatly encapsulates the basic foundation of my approach to teaching. My affinity for this quotation can be attributed to its parallel relevance to my artistic practice, and in fact, my teaching philosophy can be seen as a direct outgrowth of my experiences working as a professional artist. Great performances are those that implicate the audience, draw them in and make them active participants in the performative events unfolding around them. Excellent teaching works the same way – it isn't about telling students what to do, enforcing memorization, or simply showing. It is instead about engaging the mind in an exploration of a subject and providing guidance that allows a student to discover their own way through a set of material. In fact, teaching is a collaborative event, just like theatre.

I believe a student-centered learning environment best supports this philosophy while encouraging innovation and creativity. This means that my role is as a facilitator and resource more than as a lecturer or imparter of knowledge. Through a combination of readings, demonstrations, full group discussions, small-group activities, public engagements, and student-led exercises, students gain a wide range of contextual information that together provide a set of tools and influences that allow for a broad, yet focused, understanding of a subject. As much as possible, the individual needs of the particular students I am working with should guide the curriculum. This requires an enormous amount of flexibility, but that flexibility results in learning occurring in a synchronous manner: I learn as much as I teach.

Because my own education has come primarily from practical, real-world experiences, I believe strongly in connecting the 'theoretical/analytical' with the 'practical'. My belief in the importance of making connections outside of the classroom means that I am constantly encouraging my students to engage with the concepts we are working with in other contexts, personal or professional. It also means that I place a premium on experiential learning: the best playwrights have had their plays read, seen in a workshop setting, or performed professionally; the best directors have directed in a public setting; the best artists have engaged in a conversation with the public. In my artistic practice, I hold frequent public rehearsals and work-in-progress showings of the work whenever possible, because a large part of being an artist is about being subject to public scrutiny. As an educator, I use my substantial industry contacts to try and provide opportunities for students to experience their work in a professional setting where possible. At the least, peer showings provide students an opportunity to reflect on their practice and develop critical skills in responding to the work of their colleagues.

As artists we engage in a dialogue with the public. It's important to remember that we are not simply making work for our own sake, but for the sake of a greater community of people. By encouraging my students to put themselves in situations where they face the public, I believe I help them to develop the skills necessary to see their work in its proper context. Of course, I also understand the need to graduate experiences so that students are not exposed to inappropriate public scrutiny before they are ready. Knowing when to take the next step in learning comes back to student-centered education: working with the student to understand where they are in their process and helping them to access the activities that will best serve their needs.

A key component of my approach to teaching comes from Liz Lehrman's Critical Response<sup>1</sup> method, a feedback method that I use in my own professional practice. Critical Response is an artist-centered feedback method that is used in rehearsal, work in progress, and workshop settings as a way for audience participants to provide productive reflection on the work an artist has made. I teach Critical Response to my students as a way of ensuring that they are able to provide productive feedback to each other in peer review sessions, and I use it as a guide when I am reviewing practical work that has been submitted for assessment. The key concern implicit in Critical Response is: what is the artist trying to say/do and how are they doing it? With these questions in mind, I am better able to reflect on the work of my students without overly imposing my own artistic interests.

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<sup>1</sup> See next page for a description of Critical Response.

## Liz Lehrman's Critical Response Format

The responsibilities of the responders are twofold: 1) not to bring their own agenda to work they are responding to and 2) have a desire for the artist to do her/his best work. Responders are attempting to help the artist create her/his piece, not to create their own. *It is important for responders, as hard as this may be, to no bring their own bias and expectations to the process.*

The responsibility of the artist is to be honest and open. The artist needs to be in a place where they can question their own work in a somewhat public environment. Also, it is the motivation and meaning of the creator that is the basis on which feedback is given, so the artist should be very clear about her/his intent.

Process Steps:

### 1. Affirmation and Observation

Responders give the artist either positive feedback about the work or moments that affected them. People want to hear that what they have just completed has meaning. The artist must work to really hear the comments. Responders need to try to make the palette of responses as wide as possible. Be specific and expansive in the use of vocabulary about the work. Responders should not say what they *wanted to see*, instead they should say what they *did see* (or hear).

### 2. Artist Questions Responders

Artist has the time to ask the viewers questions about the work. Be specific; nothing is too insignificant. The more the artist clarifies what s/he is working on, the more meaningful becomes the dialogue. Responders should answer honestly, but again should not make suggestions (i.e. it is fine for responders to say that they didn't like something and *why* they didn't like it, but it is less helpful to say *how* they think the problem should be fixed. It is fine to for responders to say that they wanted more or less of something, but they should just be careful not to make the work about them...it is about the artist's vision for the piece).

### 3. Responders Question Artist

Responders ask neutral questions of the artist about the work. It is very important not to be judgmental in the phrasing of the questions. This is a chance for the responders to help the artist step back and analyze the work. If given the chance, most criticisms can be stated or explored in this step in a neutral fashion.

### 4. Criticisms and Opinions

If there is a criticism that can't be stated in the form of a neutral question, responders can express opinions about the work to the artist **after they have asked permission of the artist**. The artist is allowed to refuse at any time. The opinions should be positive criticism, based on problem-solving techniques. It may seem redundant to ask permission for every single criticism, but it is very important. This gives the artist control of this very sensitive step and creates a dialogue, albeit a very basic one. Each criticism should start with, "I have a comment/criticism/opinion about X. Would you like to hear it?". The artist can they say yes or no.