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Theatrical Tools to Support the Community Agreement

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THEATRICAL TOOLS TO SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY AGREEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

When working with a new group of people, it is common practice to create a Community Agreement in pursuit of quality outcomes. This tool uses dialogue to methodically outline the desired educational or creative environment, democratically articulating the commitments and expectations to remain in place throughout the duration of the group's existence and setting all participants in accord with the work to come. However, the Community Agreement can fail to support individual participants during moments of inevitable tension. In such moments, participants may experience unplanned emotional or physical reactions in response to triggering material or ideas. To navigate these reactions and ensure the Community Agreement is sustained throughout the entire process, it is necessary to introduce specific operational tools. One solution lies in Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (CRP) and Theatrical Intimacy's boundary-establishing practice of "Button," which are tools commonly found within the theatrical setting that strategically work to guide participants through moments of heightened tension so they can return their focus to the overall objective.

This thesis begins by demonstrating an instance where the Community Agreement fails to support participants when uncontrollable discourse arises in the graduate classroom. I present the addition of CRP and "Button" as appropriate and effective solutions to remedy this observed weakness and test them in the undergraduate classroom. Turning focus to my field of study, the last part of this thesis contextualizes these dialogical tools in the Theatre for Young Audiences field, offering suggestions regarding the application of these tools with Elementary, Middle, and High School students.

I dedicate this thesis to myself. I did it!

I would not have been able to do this without my dog, mom, dad, brother, and boyfriend who walked this seemingly endless journey with me. "Woo hoo! I'm doing great."

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A baby learning to walk falls down, but a parent encourages them to keep going. A growing young person struggles to conform to the one-size-fits-all nature of an established curriculum, but prescribed interventions lead them back to the path of success. Likewise, stumbles and struggles are expected and properly attended to as a young person progresses through Elementary, Middle, and High school. When a young person enters adulthood, however, previously established support structures no longer seem to apply.

The problem with this is that people do not magically become perfect upon entering adulthood, which means struggles and stumbles do not disappear. One key problem in the pre-professional or professional setting lies in the lack of support systems available to aid adults as they navigate challenging situations within high-stakes environments. Compounded in complexity when vulnerability is added to the mix, the consequences of such situations can have large impacts on key relationships and potential opportunities.

The Community Agreement is an effective structure that can support participants of all ages as they work toward a common goal, but what happens when struggles, stumbles, or other challenging situations introduce tension or unregulated discourse? This thesis draws upon my experience as a graduate student and instructor, first presenting the Community Agreement as an effective community-building practice while recognizing it is not a one-size-fits-all solution to every potential situation. Additional support structures are necessary to serve as theoretical guardrails when tension threatens to disrupt the forward momentum of creation, so this thesis argues the inclusion of Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (CRP) and Theatrical Intimacy's practice of calling "Button" as two possible solutions.

As a Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) practitioner, I believe having structure allows creativity to thrive within any setting. Active in the field since 2016, I have had plenty of opportunities to create theatre both with and for young people ranging from age birth to eighteen. After examining the Community Agreement, CRP, and "Button" as they are relevant to my graduate journey and personal

practice, I apply these tools to the field of TYA. Drawing upon eight years of active experience in the field compounded by intentional introduction of these tools to youth in the Central Florida area over the past two years, I articulate recommendations and suggestions regarding the application of these tools to Elementary, Middle, and High School students.

Community Agreement

When working with a new group of people, creating a Community Agreement in pursuit of quality outcomes is relatively common practice. The Community Agreement uses dialogue to methodically outline the desired professional, educational, or creative environment, democratically articulating the commitments and expectations to remain in place throughout the duration of the group's existence and setting all participants in accord with the work to come. While the Community Agreement effectively initiates this desired environment, maintaining this environment throughout the duration of the process can sometimes be challenging. The solution is to implement support systems that have the ability to accommodate a group's changing needs, particularly in the presence of tension.

Struggles, stumbles, and challenging situations are inevitable. In a perfect world, fostering collaborative awareness and mindfulness could sufficiently allow participants to work through anything, but some situations cause participants to experience unplanned emotional or physical reactions in response to triggering material or ideas. Rather than seeking a completely new approach, this thesis presents the addition of specific operational tools that support the Community Agreement as a solution for addressing maintenance concerns. Encountered within diverse theatrical settings but originally borrowed from the fields of dance critique and theatrical intimacy, respectively, Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (CRP) and Theatrical Intimacy's boundary-establishing practice of calling "Button" are tools that strategically work to guide participants through moments of heightened tension so they can return their focus to the overall objective.

Within the theatrical setting, CRP and "Button" support artists as they navigate the vulnerability inherent in artistic work or personal creation. Sharing a functional tone as proponents of community

dialogue, they are highly compatible with a Community Agreement. Literal and conceptual integration of these tools creates a contingency plan for potential disruptions by establishing a protocol for navigating a variety of roadblocks that could hinder overall progress. By promoting mutual trust and strengthening unity within the group, the utilization of these tools can lead to more meaningful interactions, better outcomes, and a stronger community. I will fully introduce these tools in the next chapter, but one must first understand the Community Agreement as a tool to understand its potential weaknesses before exploring possible solutions.

As a practice of inclusivity, the Community Agreement aims to provide every participant in a social setting with the ability to identify and address their individual needs and desires in the context of the work to be done. It articulates a universally agreed-upon commitment to an environment that is grounded in mutual respect and understanding. Established through dialogue, it highlights diversity within a community of people and unites them in pursuit of achieving a shared vision. For instance, in the way theatre practitioners utilize ensemble-building exercises to unite a cast of performers, also called *icebreakers* in non-theatrical settings, the Community Agreement has the ability to succinctly transform a group of strangers into a team.

Logistically, the Community Agreement differs from regular rules and norms because it articulates a communal space participants aspire to create. Rules are "mandated and enforced by an authority… [that does] not necessarily reflect the will or buy-in of the group," such as rules of the road or safety precautions that are created and followed for the greater good of society, and norms are "the ways in which we behave and are currently in relationship to each other, whether consciously and explicitly or not," like the general understanding that people wait in orderly lines or hold doors open for the elderly ("Developing" *Nat'l Equity Project*). The Community Agreement deviates from rules and norms because it contextualizes the group's objective based on who participants are and what they are working toward within the context of other given circumstances. This personalized approach allows facilitators to easily adapt the agreement to any setting.

Traditionally, there are two different types of agreements every group should consider - relational, "about how we want to be in relationship with each other" and operational, "[which works to] identity procedures or structures we all agree to use" ("Developing" *Nat'l Equity Project*). As this thesis will demonstrate, relational aspects are often simple to articulate, while operational aspects require more intentional thought. For reference, the Scientific Method is an example of an operational procedure that regulates inquiry from a scientific standpoint. Similarly, CRP and "Button" serve as specific operational tools that can be activated when discourse or challenging ideas threaten overall progress. A functional Community Agreement is a marriage of relational and operational aspects, as the clear articulation of operational elements is the key to maintaining the environment created through relational aspects.

Applying a commitment to inclusion at the classroom level, many institutions of higher education have adopted the practice of establishing a Community Agreement. A handful of national universities, all ranked within the top fifty by US News and World Report ("Best"), openly articulate their commitment to creating learning agreements in the classroom space: Harvard University ("Group Agreements"), Cornell University ("Introduction"), Berkeley University of California ("Creating" *Berkeley*), University of Washington ("Developing" *Washington*), and Boston University ("Creating" *Boston*). Other universities within the top fifty may also partake in the practice, but identifying these few by name demonstrates that universities are beginning to actively share their recommendation of this procedure to faculty and staff as a community-building tool. Additionally, some instructors employ the practice without the help of formal guidelines. For example, the University of Central Florida (UCF) does not document this procedure like the other universities listed above, but professors actively utilize this tool in practice.

As a student in the graduate classroom at UCF, I first encountered the Community Agreement in my Fall 2021 Methods of Teaching Drama course, during which my classmates and I were led to discuss our individual and group identities in the context of the material we were scheduled to learn. We began by identifying words or short phrases that either described the learning environment we desired to create or defined what we needed from one another to function successfully as a community within the confines of our classroom. These words and short phrases were written in bright marker on a giant sticky note affixed

to the wall, and each was accompanied by a discussion of what the word or phrase might specifically look like in practice. For example, suppose a participant were to offer "be positive" as a guiding principle. In that case, details such as "remain optimistic when the solution is unclear" or "take breaks and celebrate small successes" might emerge from the discussion. This document was signed by all participants and displayed during every class session as a reminder of the expectations we created for ourselves, which led me to feel welcome in the space, engaged with the course material, and committed to my classmates.

Almost immediately after discovering this tool, I was actively applying it to my work with youth in the TYA field using the same method I had been exposed to in the graduate classroom. UCF's TYA program exists in institutional partnership with Orlando Family Stage (OFS), a professional TYA-producing theatre that serves the Central Florida area. This partnership served as a catalyst for the Community Agreement's transition from the graduate classroom to the TYA field. The opportunity to immediately and consistently test the practice in the field with diverse groups of youth participants has proven to be a key asset in the development of my personal practice as a TYA practitioner. More specifically to this thesis, almost three years of active application has allowed me to draw conclusions regarding best practices, which will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4.

A year after my initial introduction to the Community Agreement in the graduate classroom, I began facilitating the practice in the UCF classroom while serving as an instructor of multiple undergraduate Acting for Nonmajors courses. I enjoy beginning the process with a simple exercise: I instruct students to form a circle, close their eyes, and take a single step forward. Upon opening their eyes, I lead a class discussion regarding our observations. Students are quick to point out the diversity of their choices (for example, some steps naturally end up being larger than others) but each choice is valid based upon individual interpretation of the command. I lead the conversation to weigh the costs and benefits of our diverse perspectives and contextualize the value of this within our classroom environment. After this, we dive into creating our Community Agreement in the style I initially experienced in my Methods of Teaching Drama class.

Recognizing that every group member has an individual perspective is essential in establishing an environment based on mutual respect, trust, and understanding. Instructors of all kinds face the challenge of navigating perspectival differences within the learning or creative environment, which makes it our responsibility to guide participants in identifying, acknowledging, and navigating differences in perspective. Recognizing such differences is highly influential in promoting mutual understanding and collaboration, and the Community Agreement effectively allows students to utilize the power of their diverse perspectives to support and challenge each other. After the Community Agreement is created, upholding the established and agreed-upon parameters mutually falls upon each individual in the space.

While the Community Agreement can beneficially contribute to community-building, collaboration can still feel uncomfortable even when the group operates within agreed-upon and established parameters. In order to comprehensively support participants, the Community Agreement must also guide interactions containing ideas that might be opposing, challenging, or perceived as harmful. As it typically exists, the Community Agreement has the potential to fall short during such strenuous moments, which is why it is necessary to explore support systems such as CRP and "Button." The following anecdote illustrates this susceptibility.

Discovering the Achilles' Heel

In the Community Agreement I made with my classmates in my Methods of Teaching Drama course, my group agreed to envision the learning space as a "sandbox." In practice, this meant we viewed the classroom as a place where all were welcome to play, embrace new experiences, and discover new meanings throughout the semester. The Community Agreement truly felt like it had established a healthy learning environment where everyone could feel comfortable and empowered to take risks in the earnest pursuit of knowledge.

Within the first few weeks, as part of an assignment, I created a ten-minute lesson plan to engage young people in kindergarten through second grade. Our unit in class centered around folklore, so I created my plan based on a story I had encountered in the past called *The Hatseller and the Monkeys,*

published in 1999 by Baba Wagué Diakité. The story tells of a West African hatseller who encounters trouble-making monkeys on his trip to town to sell hats for his family (Diakité).

For my facilitation, I utilized the technique of Teacher-in-Role, a common practice during which "the teacher takes on a character or role that is relevant to dramatic story or inquiry in order to introduce information or facilitate students' meaning-making and interaction" (Dawson and Kiger Lee 344). Per this technique, I assumed the role of BaMusa, the hatseller, and led students on a journey of discovery in pursuit of specific learning standards and objectives.

In the experimental "sandbox" classroom environment, the students I facilitated consisted of my adult classmates playfully assuming the identity of kindergarteners. The Teacher-in-Role approach engages students to become active players within the story by assigning roles to student participants, which allows them to have a deeper and more meaningful connection to the material. Per this method, I assigned my pretend kindergarteners the role of the monkeys.

I approached the moment in my lesson plan where I planned to break character and instruct a student to take the hats off of BaMusa's head and hand them out to the other students/monkeys. To ensure this action ran smoothly, I communicated with the colleague I planned to select before the start of class. This colleague completed the requested action, allowing me to make my request and quickly step back into character. I finished executing my lesson plan, and the class moved on to the next student facilitator.

During my execution, I referred to my colleague who helped me by distributing BaMusa's hats as a "little monkey." At the time, all my classmates were playing "little monkeys" in my imagined scenario, and I was trying to keep my students engaged in the world of the story as dictated by the Teacher-in-Role method. However, unbeknownst to me, this reference took on the meaning of a racial trigger for this particular student, and I was completely unaware of the impact my comment had made. Despite blanket considerations of respect established through the Community Agreement, no established precedent gave my classmate the means to identify this misunderstanding so we could professionally address it and move forward.

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An outside party might question why no one else in the space moved to intervene. Witnesses to the facilitation include the six other students and the course professor. These seven extra pairs of eyes either expressed a similar lack of precedent to guide a proper response or failed to register the trigger's impact due to differences in personal experiences, beliefs, or cultural backgrounds. While I will never know the perspectives of the other participants in the space during this time, every individual in the space was technically following the guidelines we had established for ourselves. We were missing the ability to identify and learn from the moment, which resulted in the ultimate failure to maintain our Community Agreement.

The situation escalated quickly. Outside parties from other areas of the university stepped in to help remedy the situation, but their good intentions were limited by their knowledge of the situation and unfairly expedited due to the institutional pressure of needing to correct the situation as quickly as possible. Looking back, the need for a swift and acceptable solution was largely impacted by the social and political turbulence that erupted in the Summer of 2020 and intensified in the post-pandemic culture. For one reason or another, I observed this outside guidance thrust everyone involved into the territory of black-and-white thinking, where nuance was discounted, and an unhealthy victim/perpetrator assumption was adopted.

In this high-intensity situation, the comfortable, low-stakes environment established by the Community Agreement suddenly felt, to me, like life-or-death circumstances. This might seem drastic to an outsider, but this phenomenon is supported by neuroscience. Raising situational stakes to extremes can cause the brain to disintegrate. This means the different sections of the brain are no longer communicating effectively, essentially blocking a person from maintaining the state of learning or understanding that is critical for graduate students. Consequently, all I remember from this time is overwhelming guilt and shame.

I have since recovered from this challenging time, but I feel the need to share this personal experience as it ignited my journey of seeking out strategies for intentional communication that would extend throughout my graduate career and ultimately inform this thesis. Considering the external factors

that informed the fallout of this situation, it is important to recognize that this was indeed a "crisis" situation, meaning the personal and professional impact of this particular exchange was magnified to a scale that rarely occurs. In terms of testing my proposed tools, it is impossible to recreate the same "crisis" situation to accurately measure the impact my tools might have made, but living through this experience has shown me the importance of having a contingency plan to navigate the unpredictable elements of the learning or creative process.

The National Equity Project dictates in its Community Agreement guidelines, "Some of the most critical conversations teams need to have are emotional, painful, and uncomfortable (e.g. equity issues, examining individual teacher practice), but we won't engage or make ourselves vulnerable without emotional safety and trust" ("Developing"). In good faith, my class dutifully created a Community Agreement that comfortably established our "sandbox" space and class culture based on mutual respect and empathetic support. The opportunity to consider identity and purpose contextually was appropriately given and received, yet a single trigger managed to destroy the emotional safety and trust the small community had worked diligently to establish. In an effort to prevent "crisis" situations from derailing work created by future communities of people, this thesis demonstrates how CRP and "Button" work to minimize the potential of any situation to reach a similar, uncontrollable level of tension.

Roadmap

This chapter introduced the Community Agreement as an effective community-building tool for working with a new group of people. However, as demonstrated through a challenging and formative personal anecdote, it also presented a potential crack in the foundation that could cause the entire structure to crumble. As possible support structures for an imperfect system, Chapter 2 introduces CRP and "Button" as effective disruptors of this demonstrated weakness from a scientific lens and speculates how the situation described above might have played out differently if these tools had been adequately established and available. Chapter 3 consists of a Case Study detailing the application of these tools to the Community Agreement in the undergraduate classroom, ultimately proving them to be excellent support

structures. Lastly, Chapter 4 contextualizes these tools in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences, offering suggestions regarding the application of these tools with Elementary, Middle, and High School students.

CHAPTER TWO: MY SOLUTIONS

Critical Response Process

Developed in the 1990s by Liz Lerman, a prominent choreographer and educator, the Critical Response Process is a structured feedback technique that collaboratively and constructively facilitates meaningful critique through dialogical exploration. As Liz Lerman's website articulates, CRP "is a method for giving and getting feedback on work in progress, designed to leave the maker eager and motivated to get back to work" ("Critical Response Process"). It accomplishes this by fostering a relationship of mutual trust between participants, enabling feedback to remain challenging and relevant as it is sliced into specific and digestible bites. Initially developed with creative and artistic fields in mind, its underlying concepts provide a foundation for intentional communication within interdisciplinary settings.

A typical session of CRP sorts participants into three roles: the artist, the responders, and the facilitator. Respect for the presenting artist as the work's author lies at the core of the practice. Responders refer to those collaborators in the space who actively engage in giving feedback, typically positioned in a circle to promote a sense of support over judgment. The facilitator, operating within the space as a neutral party, manages the tone of the session by explaining and leading the process, regulating each step, keeping track of time, and addressing any conflicts or misunderstandings to maintain the integrity of the process. It is also typical to have a transcriber write down feedback so the artist can focus on remaining present in the moment.

There are four steps to the process, which are curated to foster helpful feedback that is regulated, specific, and relevant. The art in focus can assume any medium, making the process highly adaptive and applicable to many situations. To best illustrate this process in action, I will introduce the four steps with an example dialogue inspired by classroom exploration using a simple puppet as the object of criticism. Imagine the following sample dialogue occurring after the puppet pictured below has been activated with voice and movement in a live setting.

Figure 1 This is "Shell," a puppet I made for a virtual class created for the very young in 2020. I share him with my students so they can practice the Critical Response Process using a low-stakes object before transitioning to material that contains higher stakes.

Table 1 identifies each step of the Critical Response Process and pairs it with sample feedback that participants might offer in response to Figure 1.

Step of Process	Sample Feedback
"**Step 1 - Statements of Meaning:** Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work they have just witnessed" ("Critical Response Process").	The eye movement grabbed my attention. It reminds me of a 'muppet' character. The energy articulated through his voice and movements is very engaging.
"**Step 2 - Artist as Questioner:** The artist asks questions about the work. In answering, responders stay on topic with the question and may express opinions in direct response to the artist's questions" ("Critical Response Process").	I've been using this puppet for a few years. Did you notice any wear and tear? If so, was it distracting?
"**Step 3 - Neutral Questions:** Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them" ("Critical Response Process").	For what purpose did you create this puppet to serve? What inspired your choice of color?
"**Step 4 - Opinion Time:** Responders state opinions, given permission from the artist; the artist has the option to say no" ("Critical Response Process").	I have an opinion about the color, can I share it? (permission granted) I think it will add more depth if you add some painted streaks of gray, black, and brown around the exterior of the shell.

The Critical Response Process productively harnesses the power of diverse perspectives by generating feedback through dialogue, which allows colleagues to compose feedback that can be both supportive and challenging. The framework equips participants to express difficult ideas or makes space for challenging conversations in a productive manner. However, full integration of this process as a management tool is not always possible due to time constraints. To illustrate this dilemma, I refer again to my Methods of Teaching Drama course.

My classmates and I were briefly introduced to CRP before I embarked upon the facilitation discussed in Chapter 1, but my understanding at this time was severely limited and proved to be superficial until I took the time a year later to really dig into the theory that drives it. After each facilitation in Methods of Teaching Drama, time constraints allotted each person approximately five

minutes to debrief using CRP. Unfortunately, the overall sense of incomprehension throughout the class hindered the effective use of the process. If CRP is to be effective, it must be thoughtfully framed and thoroughly explained.

If my class had more time and a better understanding of CRP, the process could have invited participants to a platform through which they could express their concerns and begin to unpack the "crisis" situation dialogically. The triggering comment could have been introduced during Step 1: Statements of Meaning, Step 3: Neutral Questions, or Step 4: Permissioned Opinions by any of the eight participants in the room. A pointed conversation could have revealed my comment's impact considering intentions, and a challenging but necessary conversation could have begun to work through and move beyond the triggering moment. Furthermore, because CRP emphasizes the growth of the individual artist, a thorough understanding of this tool could have established the idea that valuable feedback can come from all participants in the room, effectively presenting a platform for each voice to be heard.

Because deadlines are prevalent in life for a variety of different reasons, a possible solution for managing time constraints lies in focusing feedback on only one or two steps of the process. If adequate time is available to develop a comprehensive understanding of each step, students can still utilize the structure to frame what they need to say. For example, rather than going through all four steps, a truncated version of Step 1: Statements of Meaning might lead into Step 3: Neutral Questions or Step 4: Permissioned Opinions. In this sense, the order of operations can be adapted to suit the needs of any environment as long as the integrity of the process remains at the core. Such an adaptation might have better served the feedback session that occurred after my facilitation, and the whole situation might have played out differently.

"Button"

When access to the total package of CRP is unrealistic, "Button" is a quick and efficient dialogical intervention applicable within any context. "Button" is a self-advocacy tool that has recently grown in popularity thanks partly to the blossoming field of Theatrical Intimacy. A foundational

practitioner in this field, Chelsea Pace simply defines this tool in her book *Staging Sex*: "The 'Button' is a word that indicates that the action needs to pause for a moment" (Pace 17). The simplicity of this concept, pausing and giving attention to an individual's need quickly without the expectation of lengthy explanations, makes it highly adaptable.

Within Theatrical Intimacy, "Button" establishes boundaries, ensures consent, and enhances communication between actors during moments of physical and emotional expression. My interest in this tool stems from its ability to work within heightened states of emotion. Speaking as a participant in the creative space, it is comforting to know this tool exists as a functional protective measure by signaling an individual has a need that must be addressed, even when it might be challenging to articulate. Establishing such a mutually understood and regulated protocol to address discomfort as it arises allows participants to let down their protective barriers and exhibit vulnerability in pursuit of excellent learning or artistic creation. "Button" is miniature in size compared to the Critical Response Process, but it is a powerful and universally applicable tool that allows participants to work through individual moments that might become loaded with tension.

Serving as a more immediate intervention, if a student from my Methods of Teaching Drama course had felt empowered to call "Button" when my comment was made, an immediate pause in my facilitation could have provided the space to address what was said and adjust accordingly. This simple tool could have transformed my casual comment into a critical learning opportunity for all present within the space.

Evidence

To support these proposed tools as effective supplementary structures, compelling evidence from the fields of psychology, communication, and neurology supports CRP and "Button" as imperative dialogical tools. This next section looks at the complex social and environmental factors that influence meaningful conversations through the science of feedback before viewing natural physical and emotional reactions from a neurological standpoint.

From a mechanical perspective, the traditional use of the word "feedback" assumes binary thinking - that something is either *working* or *not working*. Presumably, the solution has a prescribed fix. However, feedback communicated in real-world circumstances does not share this binary mindset. Rather than being categorized as right or wrong, the validity of feedback is shaded by human emotions, perceptions, and expectations. Unlike machines, interpersonal and intrapersonal communication is very complex and nuanced. Such intricacies reveal humankind's beauty while highlighting the need for critical thinking and intentional sorting.

CRP and "Button" are tools rooted in community dialogue, which can be viewed as an intentional exchange of feedback occurring in real time - the receiver of feedback is both consciously and subconsciously interpreting what the giver is contributing, which is mirrored when the roles are reversed. Positing the concept of feedback simply as "any information you get about yourself ," actions, thoughts, and words (including the intentional lack thereof) all hold an immense amount of valuable information (Stone and Heen 4). By deconstructing the complex elements that influence dialogical encounters, meaning and intention can be considered in relationship to given factors and objectives.

Explicit and implicit social and environmental factors color feedback, which impacts the delivery and implementation of the entire feedback system. Simply put, a person can convey the same information or criticism in a number of different ways, each producing a different outcome (whether intentional or not.) The aftermath of my Methods of Teaching Drama facilitation brought my awareness to implicit rules and expectations present within the academic sphere of higher education that I failed to recognize because they were never articulated. Implicit rules do not seem to surface unless something goes awry, but discussing feedback protocols and procedures can help address fears of the unknown. The Community Agreement itself is a great tool to establish the precedent of open conversation, which can create open channels for future dialogue.

Personal experiences, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds intertwine to inform how we give and interpret information. These shape a person's personality and preferences, which influence interpersonal communication. Feedback is colored not only by *what* we say but *how* we say it, *who* we say it to, *when*

we say it, *where* the interaction occurs, and many other factors. Chelsea Pace effectively drives home the need for these tools, stating, "Without a shared behavioral language, it is difficult to interpret other people's behavior or feel confident that your own will be interpreted correctly" (8). Knowing that we all interpret things differently, establishing such a protocol is the only way to mitigate and navigate the anxiety associated with trying new things in a new space with new people.

To create a platform for discussion, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project classify feedback into three categories: appreciation, coaching, and evaluation. A combination of all three types of feedback is necessary for optimum growth and productivity. When both parties, the giver and the receiver, agree on what type of feedback they intend, the feedback itself is more likely to be helpful, productive, and implemented. If the parties disagree on the type, the feedback can feel very unhelpful, unkind, or even incorrect. For example, if the giver provides an evaluation based on performance, but the receiver is seeking appreciation, both parties are likely to experience frustration. To counter this common misunderstanding, CRP explicitly creates space for all three types of feedback to co-exist by providing structure to a process that can be approached from many angles.

Even when both parties agree on feedback type, further factors might prevent feedback from being understood and utilized. Stone and Heen present these as disruptive triggers, categorized into three types: identity, relationship, and validity. These occur when feedback does not match perceptions in alignment with personal experiences, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds. Firstly, identity triggers can feel like personal attacks. For example, when I played the villain character in a short theatrical program, the kids in the audience expressed their dislike for me long after I got out of costume. Secondly, relationship triggers have to do with the source of the information. For example, my family has always supported me, but the same compliment about my lovely performance holds more weight when it comes from a professional in the field. Lastly, validity concerns the accuracy of information. For example, how can I expect a friend who has never owned a dog to advise me about training my dog? As an intervention to these common disruptive triggers, "Button" is an effective tool because it creates space for acknowledgment, reparation (if needed), and problem-solving.

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Considering all the factors that may come into play, processing feedback within any environment could result in a lengthy discussion. Yet this dialogue becomes even more complex and nuanced as the vulnerability associated with personal creation is added to the situation. As Liz Lerman's colleague John Borstel says, "Criticize my art, and you criticize me" (Lerman and Borstel *Critique* 14). Lerman created CRP as a response to "the constancy and centrality of feedback in any human life, as its components of judgment and reflection shape our sense of who we are and what is (or isn't) true or beautiful" (Lerman and Borstel *Critique* 11). "Button" further supports this susceptibility as a momentary interventional tool meant to maintain forward momentum in unprecedented situations. When infused into the Community Agreement, the Critical Response Process and "Button" validate the vulnerability that accompanies creativity, equipping participants to use the power of dialogue as a compass that keeps them moving in a productive direction.

In an ideal world, growing awareness of the diverse factors present within any situation would allow participants to look inward for self-guidance when navigating difficult conversations effectively. While personal awareness can help, maintaining this awareness is not always possible due to how the human brain functions. Triggers or high stakes can lead to disintegration, which prevents logical thought and awareness from prevailing. Therefore, interventional tools are crucial to manage these moments.

Generally speaking, different parts of the brain serve different purposes. As all systems in the body work together to create a functioning organism, the brain works best when all its parts are integrated (Bryson and Payne 6). Triggers and misunderstandings can negatively affect an individual's cognitive ability to engage in dialogue, and such disruptors are almost impossible to predict. The comment I made in my Methods of Teaching Drama course was a racial trigger for my colleague, which implies the possibility that he was simply unable to find the words to speak up.

Integration of the brain occurs in two different ways. The first, horizontal integration, can be simply referred to as communication between the left brain and right brain. The left brain deals with all things *logic* (it is "logical, linguistic, and literal" and interprets the *letter of the law*), and the right brain deals with all things *emotion* (it is "emotional, nonverbal, experiential, and autobiographical" and

interprets *the spirit of the law*) (Bryson and Payne 15). When these two sides of the brain communicate in a balanced nature, a person can effectively consider both logical and emotional aspects of a situation before contributing to a conversation or providing feedback.

As a student in the graduate classroom, there have been times when I have noticed myself unintentionally favoring the emotional left side of my brain over the logical right. For example, I grew up in a military family, and my belief system is rooted in that experience. Members of my graduate cohort do not share my patriotic views, and I have struggled to navigate conversations during which this topic is specifically relevant to the task at hand. I am triggered when my colleagues strongly disapprove of the military in our common learning environment without experience or evidence to support their claims. Their comments sometimes feel like a personal attack, and I feel angry, offended, and frustrated. These feelings are counterproductive to collaboration, as my brain prevents me from listening to what my colleagues say and I am instead consumed with the mental chatter of my own thoughts.

The second way the brain integrates is through vertical integration. By envisioning the brain as a house, vertical integration can be simply referred to as regulated communication between the downstairs and upstairs parts of the brain (Bryson and Payne 39). The downstairs, or primitive, part of the brain includes the brain stem and the limbic region that deal with "basic functions (like breathing and blinking)... innate reactions and impulses (like fight and flight), and… strong emotions (like anger or fear)" (Bryson and Payne 39). The upstairs, or highly sophisticated, part of the brain includes the cerebral cortex and its various parts that deal with "higher-order and analytical thinking" such as "thinking, imagining, and planning" (Bryson and Payne 40). Similar to horizontal integration, vertical integration occurs when both levels are effectively communicating.

When I first encountered this simplistic upstairs/downstairs brain metaphor, I was struggling with severe anxiety that was a product of the situation surrounding my Methods of Teaching Drama course. During this time, I remember often feeling like I wanted to physically run away, but I did not know why. I now know this is because my anxiety was causing me to mentally inhabit the primitive part of my

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downstairs brain that was constantly signaling danger and encouraging the appropriate response from my body.

A crucial part of the downstairs brain, the amygdala, or "the watchdog of the brain," is always on high alert for perceived danger (Bryson and Payne 42). When it senses danger, it hijacks control of the upstairs brain, resulting in instinctive action. This is helpful for survival instances, such as if a bear is chasing a person, but it is unhelpful if two people are trying to have a productive conversation. When the brain is consumed with this sympathetic emergency response fueled by the amygdala, the brain is unable to absorb new information or learn (King et al). This essentially blocks a person from maintaining the state of learning or understanding that is critical for graduate school.

According to intimacy coordinator Chelsea Pace, the "Button" tool "gives the actors a chance to breathe and something to say when their Fight-Flight-Freeze response takes over" (19). Therefore, this tool could be very useful to signal distress or discomfort without requiring an immediate deep dive into the source or reasoning. This tool presents one way for a participant to take ownership of their self-care throughout the duration of the learning or creative process, as it allows adequate time for the participant to return to regular integration before moving forward, if necessary.

CRP can be used to establish another level of individual support, as the structure intentionally keeps the situational stakes low so the artist can properly listen, absorb, and apply feedback. Utilized within the presence of vulnerability, the process systematically frames challenging ideas in a way that allows the artist to maintain equilibrium within the brain. When the brain is properly balanced, awareness and logical thought prevail.

Upon reflection, the Community Agreement my Methods of Teaching Drama class created effectively established the class relationally, but a general lack of awareness led to the system's failure to support participants throughout the process once tension was introduced. Unfortunately, the small community quickly fell apart in the aftermath of the "crisis" situation because we did not have specific operational structures to help us navigate unexpected situations. In theory, supplementing future Community Agreements with tools such as CRP and "Button" can create the essential barriers needed to

maintain effective collaboration despite potentially volatile situations. These tools will be applied and

studied in the Case Study of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: CASE STUDY

This chapter utilizes practice as research to test the effectiveness of the Critical Response Process (CRP) and "Button" in maintaining the environment established by the Community Agreement in the undergraduate college classroom throughout the duration of an entire semester. As a Graduate Teaching Associate, I was granted multiple opportunities to serve as an instructor of record for an undergraduate Acting for Nonmajors course. This chapter focuses on this course's Spring 2023 and Fall 2023 iterations.

Spring 2023

I served as the sole instructor for the Spring 2023 iteration of Acting for Nonmajors, which gave me the opportunity and platform to consider and practice introducing CRP and "Button" to a group of undergraduate students for the first time. As articulated in the course syllabus, this course aims to "explore the fundamentals of acting both through practice and analytical observation." Knowing ahead of time the students in my classes would have diverse skill levels and career aspirations, my overarching goal was to meet students where they were as individuals and enable them to be the best versions of themselves.

To equip students with the agency to work toward this ultimate goal, I led students to create our Community Agreement. This occurred during the second week of class, as waiting until semester enrollment settled was essential to ensure every participant had the opportunity to contribute to the conversation. The Community Agreement this class created uplifted self-care as an individual priority and established constructive criticism as the desired tone of interpersonal dialogue. As a result of these preferences, tools like CRP and "Button" seemed a natural fit to aid in establishing and fostering such concepts within the classroom environment.

By this point in my graduate career, I had briefly dabbled with these tools and was very interested in their potential for classroom management, but I did not have much experience or confidence in implementing them. Layered on to this unsteady foundation, I was afraid to experiment with new practices because I was still grappling with an overwhelming sense of institutional distrust. I was just

beginning to recover from the personal and professional impact of the incident and its aftermath from Chapter 1, so I was terrified that I would be misunderstood again and not be able to recover.

"Button"

A staple source in the field of theatrical intimacy, Chelsea Pace's text *Staging Sex* follows the verbal introduction of "Button" with a series of basic exercises intended to activate it from a concept to practice (Pace 17-21). I had previously participated in these exercises during an online training session offered by Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE), but I found them to be rudimentary and, frankly, non-essential for the college classroom. Combining this assumption with my extremely limited confidence, I did not want my students to feel like I was questioning their intelligence or treating them like children. I chose not to lead my students through these exercises and instead relied solely on a verbal introduction.

As a result of this choice, "Button" was conceptually well-received, accepted, and appreciated. Students were excited about this tool's ability to establish a practice for self-care and prioritize their individual needs as necessary. Unfortunately, however, it was not adopted into regular practice. As an instructor, I successfully presented the tool, but I failed to scaffold the use of the tool into existence. This experience made me realize the importance of Pace's follow-up exercises that transform the idea from a concept to a practice through play.

Critical Response Process

A major assignment in the Acting for Nonmajors course syllabus is the Monologue Performance, which requires students to perform a one-minute piece from a published play or musical "that they have not previously used in an audition or performed on stage." Students are led to analyze the story and given circumstances, discover the character they are playing, identify objectives and tactics within their selected piece, and workshop their monologue in preparation for the final performance.

In response to the class call for constructive criticism, I wanted to use the Critical Response Process during the individual workshop sessions leading up to the final performance. However, my lack of personal confidence and peer support led me to pivot my plan at the last minute. Rather than

introducing the tool itself, I led a class discussion addressing two tangential points: vulnerability in the acting classroom and constructive criticism.

I initiated this discussion by drawing attention to the vulnerability inherent in personal creation. Growing up in the performance world, I was trained to leave any baggage at the door before I entered the rehearsal space. This is acceptable to an extent, but this concept of forgetting the human being behind the character is becoming obsolete in consideration of contemporary practices. Thinking of these changing norms and the whole-person approach of my Acting for Nonmajors course, I immediately shared my distaste for this trend. Authentic acting challenges students to reflect inward and draw inspiration from lived experiences, so it is impossible to completely forget oneself upon entering the space. One must discover a balance of drawing upon authentic emotions and actions while preserving mental health, being careful not to dig so deep that it might become harmful. To counteract this expectation, I addressed such vulnerability through the lens of emotional intelligence in the acting classroom. I centered this conversation around a non-academic article I found on Howlround, an online platform that serves as an open forum for the theatre community (Neely). A productive conversation led to a general awareness that helped define our priorities moving forward with the assignment. Still, similar to how I failed to activate "Button" from theory into practice, this concept was only accepted and discussed within the confines of a single class session.

I segued the conversation on emotional intelligence to offer a primitive method for giving constructive criticism, known as the "feedback sandwich." This method encourages participants to frame a criticism or suggestion with compliments, where the compliments create the metaphorical bread of the sandwich, and the criticism or suggestion is the filling. Similar to the discussion on emotional intelligence, this concept was accepted and discussed only within the confines of a single class session. Retrospect reveals I should have led follow-up conversations to keep the idea alive, but I was still learning to be an effective teacher. I unexpectedly later discovered that CRP exists in opposition to this sandwich method, as the compliments in the sandwich can quickly become forced and superficial, which is not productive for the artist trying to improve.

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When it came time for the workshop sessions associated with the Monologue Assignment, I had students sign up individually for a ten-minute slot to meet with me, perform, and receive feedback on their monologue-in-progress. To my surprise, I discovered myself naturally offering feedback in the style of CRP, perhaps because I was increasingly growing more aware of its driving methodology. The feedback I gave during this time was inquiry-based, encouraging, and mindful, which led to practical workshop sessions and resulted in successful class presentations of final monologue performances.

While I was pleased with the feedback I was giving, I realized in my reflections on the workshop procedure that some of my feedback was highly repetitive. As an instructor, I desire to provide insightful, selection-specific feedback that encourages students to dig deeper into their character or given circumstances, ultimately making their performance more compelling to the audience. My goal is to challenge my students by offering personalized guidance but not overwhelm them with too much information at one time. Reflecting on my experiences as a budding performer, I remembered how observing others receive instruction in a workshop setting helped me understand such repetitive, yet fundamental, direction and apply it to my own work. This experience of learning through observation reduced the repetition of universal feedback coming from the instructor, allowing me to receive specific feedback when it was my turn to perform. I realized this was the element that was missing - students could greatly benefit from observing each other during the workshop process. CRP presented itself as an enabling structure for this desired communal participation.

Thankfully, no significant tension arose throughout the semester that required the prior establishment of CRP and "Button" as course-correcting procedures, so this class was able to effectively maintain the Community Agreement throughout the duration of the semester. However, my hesitation to try new things during this semester plagued "Button" with impermanence and resulted in a severely truncated introduction to CRP. Despite this, the lessons I learned throughout the semester were invaluable, and I finished this course filled with a renewed sense of potential, which left me excited to introduce and activate CRP and "Button" in subsequent classes. This renewed sense of purpose combined with a deeper understanding of the tools themselves led to the active application and practice of these

tools in the Fall 2023 course iteration of Acting for Nonmajors, which will be explored in the next section.

Fall 2023

During the Fall 2023 iteration of Acting for Nonmajors, I was blessed with a like-minded and encouraging co-instructor, a member of my cohort with whom I had successfully worked previously. I was mentally ready to press through the hesitation that hindered my instruction during the last iteration of this course, and the presence of a trusting co-instructor was highly enabling. I trusted my co-instructor to have my back in the classroom, and our collaboration gave me the space to take the lead in introducing and testing CRP and "Button."

Combining a deeper conceptual understanding of CRP and "Button" with newly discovered pedagogical techniques acquired from other aspects of my graduate education, I was ready for the challenge of both introducing and implementing these tools. In theory, they supported the Community Agreement, but what did that look like in practice?

"Button"

During the second week of class, my co-instructor and I created a Community Agreement with the entire class to dictate the shared space we intended to create and expected to maintain throughout the semester. It quickly became apparent that this group of students was particularly conscientious of identifying content warnings in pursuit of maintaining a comfortable environment, so "Button" was a natural choice to enable a procedure for students to protect their mental health as needed without halting the momentum of the rest of the class. During the creation of this document, I verbally explained "Button" as a self-advocacy tool and promised we would work to activate it the next time we met for class. We also decided on a hand signal as a non-verbal option - students could show the call for "Button" by making a thumbs-up signal and gesturing the top part of the thumb downwards as if pushing an imaginary button.

As promised, knowing I had the support of my co-instructor, I utilized the next class to lead students through Pace's basic exercises to foster a deeper understanding of "Button" as a practical tool. We had already established trust with our students through creating the Community Agreement, so I felt comfortable asking them to bear with me as I led them through the simple exercises. One of the exercises we tried was an adaptation of "Simon Says" that playfully increased demands to the point where it prompted students to say "No," which was later exchanged for "Button" as alternative language. To my delight, they willingly joined me on this exploratory journey, which allowed me to recognize the power of these games as strategic baby steps that work together as a system to activate "Button" from theory into practice.

As is typical with novel concepts, there was a learning curve for implementing this new tool, which can be demonstrated by the first time "Button" was used in class. While students were participating in an activity that involved sharing the story of the play or musical they chose their monologue from, I heard a persistent and bothersome squeaking sound. Assuming it was something I could not control, I did my best to ignore it. All of a sudden, a student loudly interrupted the activity by saying, "What's that noise?" The sound immediately stopped. Before thinking, I said, "I don't know, but it's really bothering me." After this comment, the student who was making the sound apologized, "Sorry it's just my ADHD leg," meaning he was releasing excess energy through moving his leg, not intending to be disruptive. This prompted the student who made the initial comment to say, "Sorry, I should have 'Buttoned' that." I agreed in my own mind that I should have "Buttoned" that as well. In hindsight, I will never know if this student was embarrassed or offended during this interaction, but if I had used the tool, I would have avoided singling this student out. Calling "Button" could have framed the discussion regarding the annoying sound as attending to a student's expressed need rather than reflecting a judgment on another student's choice.

In another instance, I called "Button" myself: I was feeling anxiety in class one day, and I blatantly contradicted something my co-instructor said to the class regarding an assignment. I always strive to present a united front when teaching collaboratively, but my mind was elsewhere, and I made a

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mistake. We moved on to talking about the next thing, but I couldn't internally move on because the mental chatter of making this mistake was drowning out my other thoughts. I noticed I was not effectively engaging in the current conversation because my brain was temporarily disintegrating. When there was a lull in the conversation, in front of the entire class, I called "Button." I briefly backtracked and apologized, stating that what I said was incorrect and ensuring everyone was clear moving forward. We then immediately resumed the task at hand.

I wasn't feeling entirely better after calling "Button" because I had still made the comment I felt I needed to apologize for, but this tool allowed me to bring it up, fix it, and move on without dwelling on the lengthy story that ultimately influenced my actions. I still checked in with my co-teacher afterward to explain what had been going through my head, but I had successfully moved through that moment of discomfort. "Button" works, and using it as an instructor normalized it within the space.

As we navigated the rest of the semester, my co-teacher and I regularly reminded our students of "Button" and led them to brainstorm how it could be utilized as we worked to accomplish various objectives within the space. For example, students could signal "Button" to indicate a trip to the restroom without interrupting the delivery of class material. Providing such practical directions encouraged the use of the tool, and it became common practice when a student needed to leave early but did not want to cause a disruption. Consistent reminders throughout the semester combined with Pace's initiating exercises effectively forged the concept of "Button" into a practice that persisted throughout the duration of the course.

To gather data to analyze regarding the use of "Button" throughout the semester, I sent out a survey two weeks before the semester ended. The questions included on this survey can be found in Appendix A. Out of nineteen responders to my survey, all students understood how to use "Button," while almost half of the class (47.4%) reported they used the tool during class. When asked about how this tool impacted the perception of student participation in class, all but one student expressed the idea that they were encouraged to participate knowing they had the tool at their disposal as a safety net. One student shared how it allowed them to discreetly excuse themselves from the room when triggering peer

content was being shared, and another used it when he nervously forgot his lines and needed a minute to refresh before continuing. A raving review came from a student who self-identified specific health issues and mental challenges, stating it welcomed them to attend to their needs and return to class without feeling like they were causing alarm or being disruptive.

Personal boundaries can change daily, and "Button" equips students with the power to decide how far they want to push themselves within any given moment. One student shared, "There were some days when the world felt like it was on my shoulders, so coming into class and knowing that it was a safe environment to take whatever space I needed was so nice." I share this sentiment, as I find myself taking "Button" moments in my daily life when necessary, even if they are simply moments of pause in my own head. Building the awareness that a person's best effort might look different every day in response to external factors or other unknown circumstances has taught me a great deal about patience. I would like to challenge students in future iterations of this course to explore the use of this tool in their daily and professional lives so this greater awareness will continue to exist beyond the classroom.

While most responses from my survey awarded "Button" high praises, mostly for safety and comfort reasons, one student presented a thoughtful counterpoint. While this student approved of "Button" as a tool to help navigate the space and promote a sense of safety, they argued it might not be necessary, stating "The beauty of theatre is that the audience is able to see a wide variety of people within various performances, naturally some of these performances might make someone uncomfortable."

This student brings up a great point - sometimes the primary goal of a theatrical performance is to make the audience feel a sense of discomfort. The objective of a performance piece might be to challenge the status quo or tell a story that aims to move viewers in some sort of way. However, "Button" is a tool meant to be used in the learning or rehearsal process. While there are always exceptions, the presence of an audience implies the process has ended. To me, this places the conversation of audience consent in a different category, as "Button" emphasizes the safety of participants rather than the audience. In other words, happenings in a staged production are often rehearsed and expected, but my students did not know what to expect when they entered the classroom every day. This tool provided the sense of support

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necessary to dampen anxiety associated with the unknown and allowed my students to participate fully in accordance with their personal limits.

Critical Response Process

Given that my students were all nonmajors, meaning their primary area of focus was not theatre, I wanted to lean into the personal growth that my students could experience through participation in an acting class that might translate to their chosen career field. The prospect of utilizing CRP in my classroom became incredibly alluring as I considered this goal in combination with the desire to provide specific and meaningful feedback. I introduced students to the process over the course of a week (three fifty-minute class sessions), carefully scaffolding the underlying concepts before fully introducing the procedure itself.

Thinking about what we needed to learn before introducing the tool itself, I used the first day of class to introduce two concepts I identified as crucial elements in preparing students to fully understand the process preceding its activation. During class time, we read two separate articles exploring these concepts and followed up with a class discussion. Rather than pulling articles from the performing arts, I found articles that placed these concepts in the perspective of business and marketing to demonstrate their versatility as possible navigators within diverse careers.

Because CRP is grounded in inquiry, the first article emphasized deepening professional exploration by asking thoughtful questions. Pulled from the Harvard Business Review, the article argued that "questions and thoughtful answers foster smoother and more-effective interactions, they strengthen rapport and trust, and lead groups toward discovery" (Brooks and John). To directly relate this to CRP, I shared the page from the Critical Response Process text that gives examples of neutral questions (Lerman and Borstel *Liz Lerman* 23). This page proactively identifies the embedded opinion present in an opinionated question and translates it into a neutral question, which led the class to spend some time practicing forming neutral questions in response to a hastily drawn piece of cake that I role-played as my artistic masterpiece.
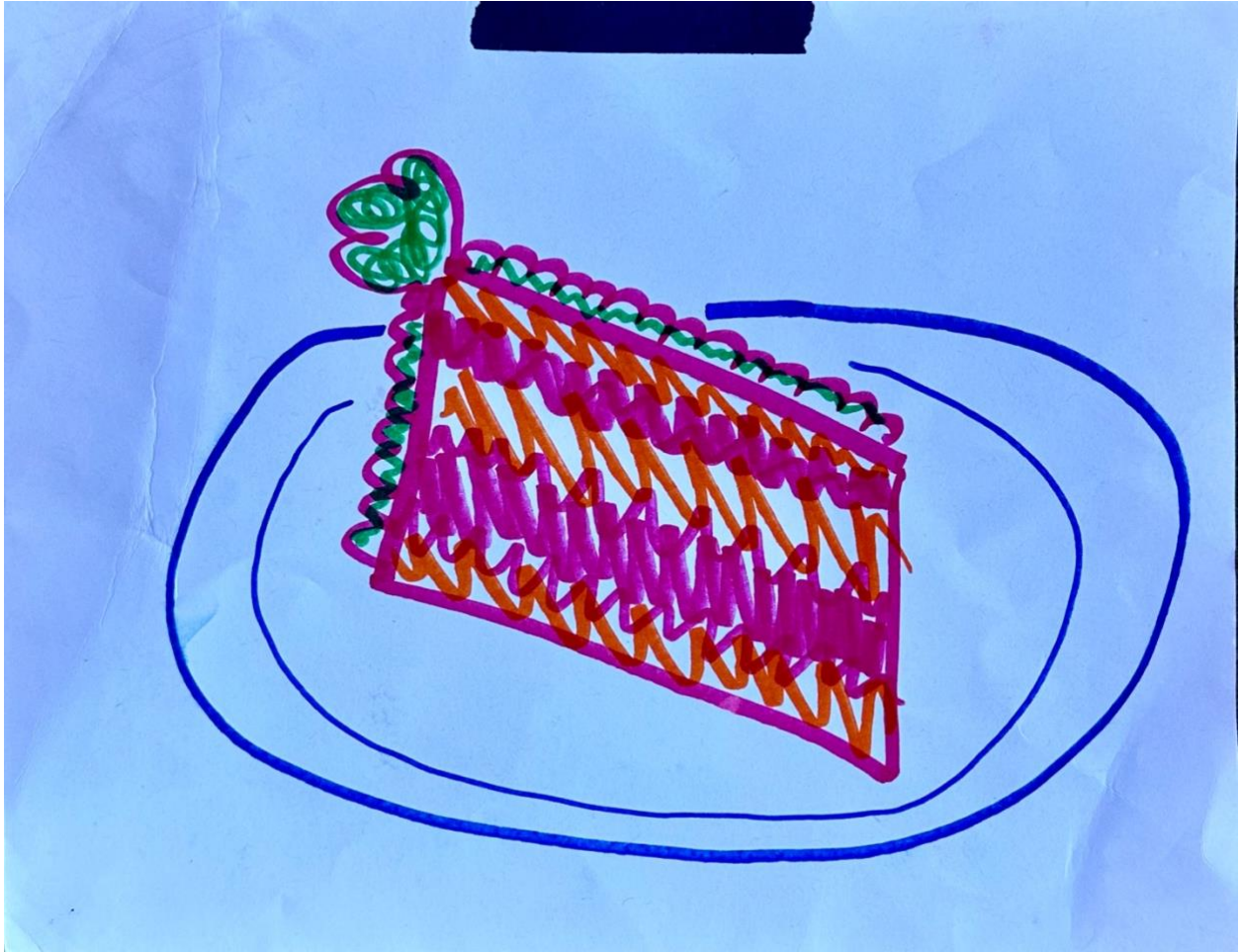
Figure 2 This is a hastily drawn piece of cake that I created during the Summer of 2023 when I introduced the Critical Response Process to a group of students in grades 3-8. I shared it with my undergraduate students in the Fall 2023 Acting for Nonmajors course to practice forming neutral questions.

The second article articulated the framing effect, during which "our decisions are influenced by the way information is presented" ("decisions"). At its core, CRP frames critical feedback into pieces that are easy to digest, so this article sparked a discussion about positive framing and its associated benefits. The class discussions following both of these articles were very productive, as the students were thoroughly engaged and seemed to truly understand and embrace the concepts.

On the second day, I introduced Liz Lerman as a choreographer and educator before I pulled focus to CRP itself. Preparation from the previous class's articles enabled me to introduce the entire process within one class. Surprisingly, students comprehended the steps so quickly that I had extra time after sharing my planned material. As all theatre artists do, I improvised. I grabbed my co-instructor's water bottle and, as a creative exercise to practice what we had just learned, pretended I was the creator of the product and wanted to receive some feedback on it. Playing the roles of both the facilitator and artist, I guided my students to practice creating statements of meaning, asking neutral questions, and sharing permissioned opinions. Further posing as the artist, I asked a question to the group about my color choice, and students practiced giving feedback relevant to my specific question. Because it is easier to first practice a new concept or idea in a setting where the stakes are very low, this improvised exercise proved to be the perfect transition for activating the process from theory into practice. I was excited to discover the strategy of prefacing personal application with objective application, allowing plenty of room for mistakes and learning before raising the stakes.

Keeping with this strategy, day three intentionally served to gradually raise the stakes as we continued to practice the process. Still serving both roles of artist and facilitator, this time I was genuinely playing the role of creator as I introduced two puppets that I had previously created from unrelated projects. Because we were still practicing, I made sure the puppets I chose to share felt enough removed from my personal identity that I was open to working through framing any potential harsh criticisms in the pursuit of learning. Replicating the technique I used with the water bottle the day prior, the first puppet I shared is pictured in Chapter 2. Because I had already created a character for this puppet and utilized it in performance, I shared by animating him as I traveled throughout the circle, briefly interacting

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with each student before removing the puppet from my hand and passing him around for further inspection.

The second puppet I shared was still a work in progress. It was also a hand puppet similar in structure to the one pictured in Chapter 2, but the puppet was unfinished and had been left on my apartment's shelf for almost a year as I had encountered a mental block during its creation. This character had not previously been used in practice, and it was not animated, so when I shared it around the circle I simply opened and closed the mouth with my hand in front of every responder before removing and passing it around for further inspection. As an artist, I received helpful feedback about the character and story the puppet gave off from a visual perspective. I honestly did not like anything about the puppet when first I brought it in, but I left class that day inspired to get back to work on it. Motivating the artist to get back to work is an objective of CRP, and it was surprising and exciting to recognize this occurring within myself so quickly.

Figure 3 This puppet was created in Fall 2021 during my Puppetry graduate course. I shared it with my undergraduate students in the Fall 2023 Acting for Nonmajors course to practice the Critical Response Process. As it is still a work-in-progress, the stakes for this unfinished puppet were higher than the stakes established by the previous puppet I shared.

Playing both roles of artist and facilitator while discussing work I had personally created was very interesting. I found the artist part of me wanting to constantly justify my choices in response to feedback being given, but the facilitator part of me caught these thoughts and refocused the conversation to remain centered on the process. If I could go back and do this again, I might engage my co-facilitator to play as my counterpart, but this experiment proved to be an essential learning experience for me as I was able to notice how the two separate roles intersected in my own head. In a way, I played witness in my own mind to the process working its magic within me as I was straddling the line between being open to feedback and getting defensive.

This method of practicing the process provided me with an opportunity to step in and out of my facilitator role, answering questions from an educational perspective to clarify aspects of the process as we went along. I was pleased that students immediately mastered neutral questions, so most of the corrections during the puppet practice sessions occurred during Step 4: Permissioned Opinions. Students were quick to express their opinions, but it was helpful to have the flexibility to rewind and practice asking permission before doing so. The interesting formality of this last step is established through habitual practice, and it was helpful to have space to practice the unnatural language. It reminded me of the simplistic exercises associated with activating "Button" from theory to practice.

After we practiced CRP with the puppets, my co-instructor performed a monologue, playing the role of the artist with me serving as the guiding facilitator. The transition of turning attention from an object to a live performance piece was the last crucial element needed to effectively prepare students in this class, as this practice session mirrored exactly what students were expected to do in their monologue workshops the following week. It was a great use of time that allowed students to ask any clarifying questions and prepare themselves to assume the role of artist when it was their turn.

During this final practice session focused on my co-facilitator's monologue, I noticed the feedback was becoming repetitive. Knowing that we would be extremely limited on time, I paused the process and gave students a tool to use to signal support and agreement with their peers without taking time to reiterate the same idea. Without revealing I first encountered this tool when working with the very

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young, I shared the sign language for "Me Too" as a way to indicate agreement quickly and silently. This proved very effective throughout subsequent workshops because we were extremely limited on time and students could easily show their support without slowing down the process.

The following four class sessions were dedicated to monologue workshops, during which my co-instructor and I alternated assuming the roles of facilitator and notetaker. The most challenging aspect of the process from my perspective at this stage was time management. We had to limit each student to two minutes of performance and five minutes of CRP - seven minutes total. This time limit was not ideal, but we adequately prepared our students to fully understand and anticipate each step of the process so we could move quickly during our workshop days. However, while the entire class showed engagement through body language, the same handful of students dominated the conversation. My co-instructor and I tried encouraging other students to contribute to the dialogue, but we simply did not have the time to slow down and consistently inspire new responders to take action. Perhaps splitting the class in half and practicing CRP with a smaller group of responders would allow the space to engage new voices in circumstances where time is limited.

The monologue performances immediately followed the workshops, and I sent out a survey that all twenty students completed a week after the performances concluded regarding their experience with CRP. The questions included on this survey can be found in Appendix A. This survey reveals that 59.1% of students found the Critical Response Process to be extremely helpful, while 36.4% found it to be very helpful, and only 4.5% found it to be neither helpful nor unhelpful. One student stated, "[CRP] got to the heart of what artist[s] need to hear, what needs to be worked on, and [gave] a platform for them to share what inspires them." Students in the "extremely helpful" group praised the structure, explicitly applauding simplicity, relevance, neutrality, artist agency, and two-way communication. One student revealed their newfound awareness of how intentional compliments and observations can benefit another person, five students expressed their pure enjoyment of the process, and a handful relished in the comfort and confidence it gave them.

CRP proved to be a versatile and suitable tool in consideration of my course objectives. My class consisted of various experience levels, so students who had never performed a monologue before were operating alongside experienced actors. CRP effectively met each individual wherever they were in the process and challenged them to improve. The survey supports this, as overall comfort levels with the Monologue Performance assignment increased after students experienced their CRP workshop session. Before their session, students were generally lacking confidence as they reported nerves and the general fear of being judged, uncomfortable, or embarrassed. After their session, students of all levels of experience reported feeling empowered, supported, and assured in their abilities, commenting upon the overall feeling of comfort present within the room.

My survey reveals the preparation process for CRP was effective, but it also identified some key improvements I can make next time. Some students reported that the feedback offered became redundant, especially during Step 3: Neutral Questions. A common question that was asked for almost every session when respondents did not have anything else to say was, "Why did you choose this material?" While this question was helpful to some people, it became more of an expected step rather than a challenging query. Every student had already demonstrated comprehension of neutral questions as a concept, but I can better advocate for the formation of diverse neutral questions that are specific to the individual artist. In the future, I would like to experiment by creating a word bank of neutral questions that students can choose from or build off.

A key discovery in this process was the realization that time constraints are a major limitation to effective use of CRP. Despite appreciating the process, one student shared the feeling of not having enough time for each workshop session. I suspect this comment might have come from a more experienced performer in the room, and as a performer, I completely understand this desire to be challenged. Unfortunately, the time constraint was a limitation of the class itself, but offering an additional coaching session outside of class for those who want a more intense feedback experience might be an effective solution to address this concern in the future. I can also be more transparent in guiding

responders to listen intently to universal feedback offered to other students and ponder how they might apply it to their own practice, which could elongate everyone's feedback experience.

As a final thought, CRP exists to support an environment that is both comfortable and challenging. The survey highlights comfort, but one student shared that classmates were being "too nice" when they were giving feedback, and I began to wonder if CRP was challenging enough. Referring back to my survey, I am happy to report that 86.4% of students felt like CRP challenged them, while only 9.1% reported it did not, and the remaining 4.5% stated it challenged the way they interact with people's work. Those who desire an extra challenge can sign up for an additional coaching session that will be offered in later iterations of this course.

Supporting the Community Agreement

In the Fall 2023 iteration of Acting for Nonmajors, I used the Community Agreement to create a specific learning environment and I activated CRP and "Button" as tools to promote and maintain this environment. Surveys probing the use of CRP and "Button" in my classroom prove a comfortable atmosphere was maintained while a majority of students in the room were genuinely challenged, and my analysis of this data has identified actionable steps I can take to improve these systems in the future. To measure the effect of these tools on maintaining the Community Agreement, I sent students another survey to complete during the last week of class. The questions included on this survey can be found in Appendix A. This third survey questioned the effectiveness of the Community Agreement itself and followed up with specific questions: Do you think we sustained the Community Agreement throughout the duration of the semester, and why? How did "Button" impact/support the Community Agreement? How did the Critical Response Process impact/support the Community Agreement?

Comments left on this survey affirmed my personal feelings toward the effectiveness of the Community Agreement itself as a community-building tool, as it proved to be the perfect initiating activity to set a precedent of collaboration and inclusivity. Feedback regarding feelings of class participation before, during, and after the creation of the document expressed a general shift from

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nervousness and hesitation to confidence and clarity. One student revealed, "I am usually very reticent in class, but I always felt encouraged, but not forced, to participate." For a class grounded in participation, this comment was affirming.

Confirming my hypothesis, this last survey revealed that CRP and "Button" effectively helped maintain the environment created by the Community Agreement. CRP supported the Community Agreement by further enforcing values of respect and boundaries while encouraging intentionality and reserving judgment. In the words of a student, "CRP is designed to give engaged, respectful constructive criticism which is what the Community Agreement is all about." Granting the artist agency in the process compounded the feeling of safety and comfort within the space, allowing students to lean into their vulnerability and grow as individual artists. Because it was built into the foundation of the Community Agreement itself, students shared their comfort knowing that they could always call "Button" and take a minute to take care of themselves if necessary. Access to this simple tool allowed students to confidently navigate the unknowns of the classroom in relation to ever-changing personal boundaries. As an instructor with access to the student surveys, I know "Button" was used by almost half of my students during class, but its subtle and non-disruptive nature led one student to comment, "I can't remember a time when someone really had to 'Button.'"

Had a "crisis" situation erupted throughout the duration of the semester, I am confident my class would have been capable of moving through it with relative grace and efficiency. However, I strongly believe reaching such unregulated levels of discourse was generally discouraged as a result of the established precedent of collaboration and inclusivity that was created through the Community Agreement and maintained through the active practice of CRP and "Button." The environment fostered through the use of these tools transformed a group of strangers into friends and unified them into an ensemble. I am so proud of the outcomes this group of students produced.

Bearing witness to such rewarding experiences in the undergraduate classroom produced by creating the Community Agreement and activating it with CRP and "Button" encouraged me to apply these techniques to my field of study, Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). How do these tools apply to

the comfortable and challenging environment I strive to create with young people ages 5-18? How do these tools stand up against structures that already exist to support youth in their journey of learning or creation? The next chapter explores these questions by contextualizing the Community Agreement, CRP, and "Button" in the field of TYA.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

This thesis opened by emphasizing the importance of mistakes as an essential part of the learning process, and this chapter aims to refocus the reader's attention on the variety of systems that exist to support young people in their learning journey from birth to approximately age eighteen. Until now, this thesis has posited the Community Agreement primarily as an appropriate structure to manage groups of adults ages eighteen and above that is strengthened by activating the Critical Response Process (CRP) and "Button," but as an active practitioner in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) since 2016, a majority of my professional work involves projects occurring with and for young people ranging from birth to age eighteen. This leads to the question, how do the tools this thesis focuses on apply to the field of TYA?

This chapter contextualizes this thesis's findings and my experiences in the field of TYA within the Central Florida area to assess the need, application, and possible benefits of using the Community Agreement, CRP, and "Button" in the youth theatre setting. There is currently limited research regarding the application of these tools to participants under 18, so this chapter aims to add to the growing body of knowledge. I explore the question of whether these tools are appropriate for working with young people, as well as what adaptations can be made to suit this specific demographic.

Moving forward, this thesis assumes the TYA field encompasses young people aged 5-18, as those from birth to age five are not generally developmentally advanced enough to make practical contributions that affect overall group dynamics. When it is necessary to account for specific differences within this vast age range, my general guidelines will be detailed by referencing different age ranges with the following titles: High School (grades 9-12), Middle School (grades 6-8), and Elementary School (grades K-5).

Community Agreement

The Community Agreement's flexible and widely adaptive nature presents it as an appropriate activity to unify participants of all ages toward a common goal. Generating a Community Agreement with

young people can be a different experience compared to the college classroom or other adult settings, but its fundamental purpose remains the same. Students are led through dialogue to imagine the environment they want to create in consideration of the objective they are gathered together to accomplish. This discussion is necessary to propel students toward intentional completion of the objective, but the age of participants significantly determines the exact methodology of this exercise.

Considering developmental differences within different age ranges, a skilled TYA practitioner effortlessly shifts fundamental aspects of communication, such as terminology and sentence structure, to best serve specific groups of young people. For example, a single practitioner might teach creative drama to five-year-olds on Saturday morning and direct teenagers toward creating a piece in response to pressing societal issues on Monday. With knowledge of this juxtaposition, the facilitator is responsible for mindfully shepherding new groups of young people toward a common goal in a way that is appropriate to their ages and needs. The Community Agreement attends to this responsibility by providing a solid framework through which the facilitator can define and activate common terminology. The necessity of this process can be illustrated by considering how a word changes meaning to an individual based on age, experience, and context.

In my extensive travels as a TYA practitioner, I have never met a group of students that has not, at minimum, heard of the word *respect*. When I ask students for a definition of the word, I am often bombarded with enthusiasm. Yet the complexity of the answer is highly dependent on the group's age range. When working with the very young, the answer is usually a repetition of the word itself, "*Respect* means to show respect." Those who are young but have experience operating within a school setting know the word's meaning as "raise your hand" or "don't talk when someone else is talking." Older students, conditioned to follow basic rules, frame the word with a nuanced complexity consistent with "be open to other people's ideas" or "listen intentionally and support everyone." This shows the meaning of the word *respect* evolves throughout a person's life as they grow and learn, also applicable to other flexible terms commonly present within the collaborative setting. This simple cognitive consideration

supports the Community Agreement as an imperative dialogical vessel to gather participants on the same page of understanding to best support a group of any age.

The Community Agreement succinctly guides the group to explore precisely how *respect* will be a driving force behind each participant's actions, words, and intentions in the space at all times through dialogue: What does *respect* look like in this space? Who do participants *respect*, and when? How do participants show *respect*, and why? The Community Agreement maturely contextualizes *respect* and other subjective terms in relationship to the group's overall objective, building trust and framing diverse perspectives as a superpower that participants can harness to create quality work that is challenging and meaningful.

General Guidelines

A Community Agreement created with young people should (at minimum) establish the group's objective, how participants intend to work toward that objective as an ensemble, and how to respond to tension (which means it might naturally include "Button"). There are numerous ways to do this, and I encourage instructors to experiment and discover what process works best for them.

When leading youth to create a Community Agreement, the language utilized should be intentional, straightforward, and generally positive. For example, instead of saying "No running," use the phrase "Use walking feet." Positive language encourages positive behavior. Furthermore, a TYA practitioner will naturally cater their communication strategies to suit the age range of the students they are working with, so it is essential to be intentional when framing guiding questions.

The document itself should be visually simple and appealing. I recommend borrowing the format I first discovered in my Methods of Teaching Drama course detailed in Chapter 1, where the Community Agreement takes the form of colorful short words or phrases on a giant sticky note or normal-sized piece of paper displayed where the group can see it every time they meet. The underlying idea is to summarize the accompanying discussions in a simple manner, so it serves as an effective visual reminder of

establishing conversations that can be revisited at any time in the process. If time permits, allow students to physically sign the document to enhance student ownership.

Instructors can establish the group's objective with an opening question: *Why are we here? What are we doing? What are we working toward?* I recommend selecting one word or short phrase representing the overall objective and creating a movement to accompany the word that embodies what students are working toward. After practicing the word and movement together, this word/movement can be easily recalled as an attention grabber for classroom management.

Instructors can lead participants to establish how they intend to work toward the objective as an ensemble by asking students what they must do within the space to accomplish their objective. I recommend jotting down all suggestions on a whiteboard or other temporary platform and translating them into three to five general guidelines that succinctly summarize all suggestions. Similar to creating the objective, these guidelines should be brief and accompanied by a verbal conversation contextualizing them in consideration of the objective. Furthermore, the discussion should clearly identify what following these guidelines might look like in action to set the stage for the work to come. For example, if a bullet point says "be safe with people and things," the accompanying discussion could address physical safety measures that must be taken within the physical rehearsal space along with acknowledging through conversation awareness of emotional safety.

I have found it is most effective to make the experience of creating the Community Agreement guidelines as physically active as possible, especially for Middle and Elementary students, so this step can be physically activated by splitting students into groups and having each group create a frozen picture (tableau) demonstrating their assigned guideline in action. If time permits, do not reveal which group has been assigned which guideline, so students need to guess which one they are seeing. If able, take a picture of each tableau, print it, and hang it next to the Community Agreement to serve as a further visual reminder of established expectations.

When considering how the group might respond to tension, instructors should assess the potential risks, both known and unknown, associated with a particular group that might impact their advancement

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toward achieving the objective. Knowing tension is inevitable, it is essential to have a conversation detailing the steps that will be taken in the event that something unexpected threatens to derail the forward momentum of the process. I recommend writing a version of "Button" into the Community Agreement to initiate this conversation. The version of "Button" that I believe is appropriate for each age range of students will be articulated in the next section.

Once created, facilitators should review the Community Agreement at the start of each session and verbally frame it in the context of the day's work. For example, if the group is scheduled to have a read-through of a play during the session, explore specific ways they can support each other throughout the process (follow along with your finger, be patient if someone loses their place, etc.) Consistent and specific reminders of strategies to uphold the Community Agreement as your group navigates different activities can reinforce productive habits.

As a final thought, the Community Agreement does not necessarily need to follow a formal procedure in order to accomplish its goal. Because TYA practitioners often have limited time to work with groups of students and often have lofty objectives to accomplish during this time, creating a Community Agreement in the traditional way outlined above is not always a good use of time. Therefore, the methodology that drives an instructor's approach to the Community Agreement must consider the amount of time allotted to work with a particular group of students in addition to considering the age of participants.

For example, asking Elementary students to set their expectations can be time-consuming and sometimes ineffective, as they are still learning what expectations are and why they are important. Every time I have tried creating a Community Agreement with Elementary students in the past, I find myself pivoting to a super simplified version of the Community Agreement. I introduce my basic rules: "Focus, Safety, Try Your Best!" to quickly establish three generic expectations. Each rule is accompanied by a gesture and a brief exploration of what each guideline translates to within the context of the space and objective. I highly recommend adopting these expectations at the onset of the process with Elementary

students as they effectively establish the spirit of the Community Agreement while setting the stage for articulating future expectations.

"Button"

When age-appropriate, "Button" should be written into the Community Agreement. "Button" is arguably a critical tool for use within High School because these theatrical settings often deal with mature or potentially sensitive material. The tool should be simply introduced and practiced through the basic exercises outlined in Pace's *Staging Sex* (Note: Despite the name of the book, these exercises are appropriate for all ages). Frame the introduction of the tool in the context of the overall objective, and regularly remind students they have access to the tool throughout the process. Support students by providing specific examples of ways students might use it in consideration of class activities and enable them with an accompanying nonverbal gesture.

During the Fall of 2023, I facilitated creating and producing an original play with a small group of students at a music organization in Central Florida called Daniela MV Music, LLC. Having created similar work with young people in the past, I anticipated tension might arise as we approached necessary decision-making in pursuit of creating a single cohesive story, so I decided to introduce "Button." I first led students to understand the concept of physical and emotional boundaries and then framed "Button" as a practical tool using the following sample text. This sample text introduces the tool in the context of this particular group's objective and limited physical space, ultimately aiming to provide specific examples of how the tool might be used during our process.

As artists, our work is personal. We really care about what we are creating, and this links us emotionally to the work we are doing. We are here creating and producing this play together as an ensemble, so there will be moments when we need to make decisions that, unfortunately, can't incorporate all the wonderful ideas we have as individuals. Therefore, we need a way to work through letting things go and moving forward together toward our common goal. 'Button' is a tool for us to use when we need it. It gives agency to the actors, allowing them to be in control of their actions.
'Button' is a universal tool that can give us a system of checks and balances as we move through this process both physically and emotionally. Physically, we will be staging this play, which might eventually involve touching of some sort, and we are working in a small space. We already talked about how we might be emotionally attached to our ideas, and we might have to sacrifice things we really like for the greater good of the ensemble.

Boundaries change every day, and that's ok! Button helps us respect each other and honor ourselves in the moment. For example, my stomach hurts today and I don't want to talk about it because it makes me feel uncomfortable. If you touch my stomach while we are playing a game, I might call Button and ask to modify the movement so it would not come near my stomach. I don't have to explain why I need this adjustment. I simply get to say what I need, make any adjustments, and move on. You know your body and mind best, and this tool gives us a way to maintain a comfortable, yet also challenging, environment while we are together.

"Pre-Button"

My experiences have led me to conclude the formal introduction of "Button" is fundamentally unnecessary for Elementary and Middle School students. Students of these ages typically interact with material that is tame in comparison to High School so the tool itself is not crucial to the process. Especially in the current post-pandemic era where instructors are managing the effects of a period of disrupted education, most younger students are still developing the listening skills necessary to create work as an ensemble. My experience has shown me that students this age are still learning what boundaries are and why they are important to honor, which directly impacts their understanding of the tool itself. From this perspective, it makes sense to provide structured activities through which young students can practice effective communication, ultimately leading up to discovering what boundaries are and how to communicate needs instead of wants. Younger students can participate in "Pre-Button" activities, which promote the essence of "Button" by encouraging students to practice navigating the honor of their space, friends, and self.

When it comes to "Pre-Button" activities, there are exercises that are specifically intended to promote young people's awareness and autonomy. I encourage instructors to experiment with different techniques and find what works best for their individual students. For example, having regular check-ins, both verbal and nonverbal, with students throughout the process is a great way to foster a sense of comfort and boundaries. The following examples offer some other suggestions of where to begin and are pulled directly from my experience in the field.

In the spirit of keeping instruction simple, encourage Elementary school students to raise their hand and be patient when they need something. I recommend practicing this through a game of freeze

dance. Every time the music stops, students freeze, raise their hands, and wait for further instruction.

When students master this, take suggestions each time you freeze regarding what animal/superhero/etc

everyone should move like when the music plays again. If you discover that your group struggles to

navigate big feelings (frustration, anger, etc), designate a corner of the room for students to visit when

they are experiencing big feelings and need a moment to reset before returning to work. Place some fidget

toys or a pencil and paper in this space to give young students something tactile to guide their return to a

regulated state of mind.

Middle school students can be led to explore boundaries conceptually by visualizing three rings

around their bodies. Inside the first ring is their comfort zone, the second contains a *zone of discomfort*,

and the third contains their boundary. Students should be encouraged to participate in class in their *zone*

of discomfort, which means they should feel welcome to make choices and try new things in the space.

Lead students in conversation to explore what kinds of normal activities might be considered to live in the

different zones. For example, the act of walking lives in the comfort zone, while walking to a new place

enters the *zone of discomfort*, and walking in a place that is unsafe is a boundary. Here is some sample

text to verbally illustrate this point:

> *Imagine you have three rings around your body. Within the first ring is our personal comfort zone, where we often live because it is safe and well-known. Within the second ring, we have our discomfort zone. We don't often put ourselves in this zone because we want to stick with what we already know feels good and safe. Beyond the third ring, however, lies the 'no zone.' We want to stay out of this zone because it feels extremely uncomfortable and very unsafe - this is our boundary. Within this space, we have already talked about how we need to work together as an ensemble (or in other cases, we have already created our Community Agreement to describe how we want to treat each other). As we work toward our goal, we want to challenge ourselves to live in the discomfort zone. We want to live here because we can only grow if we challenge ourselves and try new things. However, if something feels like it goes too far, it hits a boundary, and that is where we immediately stop.*

Critical Response Process

High School students are capable of utilizing CRP as articulated by Liz Lerman as long as it is

adequately introduced and subsequently understood. When introducing CRP, facilitators should scaffold

important concepts and introduce them one by one, as I did by facilitating class discussions with my

Acting for Nonmajors students in Chapter 3. Take adequate time to promote comprehension of the

individual steps, being sure to explain both how the steps work and why they are important. Preparatory steps should include neutral questions, positive framing, feedback through dialogue, and permissioned opinions. After the individual components are understood, walk students through the process itself using a depersonalized object. Students are expected and encouraged to make mistakes during their first few interactions with the process, so it is necessary to keep the stakes low with depersonalized objects or pretend masterpieces, like my colleagues' water bottle I referred to when introducing CRP to my undergraduate students. Gradually increase the stakes of the object receiving feedback until students feel comfortable with the process. Model the process using something meaningful so students feel enabled to try it for themselves, such as using the puppets I created. As the process advances to take on more personal work, potential mistakes are covered by "Button" as established in the Community Agreement.

"Pre-CRP"

In the Summer of 2023, I introduced CRP to a group of students in grades 3-8 who were gathered to produce and perform a staged production within a single week. Plagued by limited time, I was pleased with the succinct 30-minute introduction I was able to facilitate, but there was not sufficient time to translate the theory of CRP into practice, so we were unable to effectively utilize the tool throughout our process of creation. Even so, my interest in using CRP with Elementary and Middle school students remains fueled by CRP's conceptual ability to encourage intentional reflection, creative thought, and open questioning when working toward fulfilling a shared vision. Rather than taking the time to introduce the entire process to students of younger ages, I recommend facilitating individual steps of the process during moments of reflection or critique in a way that utilizes the steps without formally naming them.

While I am still pondering exactly what this might look like in practice and will continue to make new discoveries throughout my career, this initial thought led me to my first experiment. I decided to create a translated version of CRP intended to be used with Elementary and Middle students that informally guides students through CRP under revised nomenclature. I first identified key aspects of CRP and the main ideas driving each step in an attempt to boil the method down to its main ideas and present

the steps to young people in a way that was digestible and relevant. Rather than using traditional CRP terminology, my iteration of the process simplified the language and added corresponding gestures to activate each step within the mind and body. Furthermore, I framed this adaptation in the universally accepted concept of collaboration, as the focus was on the ensemble rather than the individual. I thought this shift in terminology might create an access point for younger students and the process would be effective in producing excellent collaborative work. The chart I created to outline this information, entitled "Structured Collaboration," is included in Appendix B.

I tested my "Structured Collaboration" process in a 60-minute workshop on November 3, 2023 as an offering of the Florida Theatre Conference. In summary, my workshop actively engaged students to explore collaboration and the power of personal perspectives before introducing and testing my adapted process through basic ensemble and tableau activities. While there were strong levels of engagement throughout the workshop, I ultimately decided the creation of yet another structure for youth was unnecessary. At this point in time, I have been led to conclude that there are already adequate structures in place that guide young students to observe, reflect, and experiment - there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Therefore, rather than suggesting CRP for Elementary and Middle School students, I suggest adopting a "Pre-CRP" approach that leans on strategies that encourage creative thought and open questioning, which is what most reflexive activities organically strive to do.

Greater Impact

As I think about the intentional spaces the Community Agreement, CRP, and "Button" exist to create, I am reminded of theatre's powerful impact on building and uplifting communities. Appropriately applying these ideas within theatrical projects involving young people has the potential to positively impact youth mental health. Social media is a double-edged sword, as it seems to positively support users as much as it negatively impacts them. In 2021, the Surgeon General issued an official Advisory called *Protecting Youth Mental Health* detailing the growing evidence-based concern for the adverse effects of social media on youth mental health (5). Supported by studies citing that symptoms related to depression

and anxiety have doubled since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, social isolation as a result of nationwide lockdowns combined with profound social-political challenges greatly impacted the essential balance between emotional, psychological, and social well-being that works to lay the foundation for overall health and resilience in young people (9). TYA directly intervenes with this trend of social isolation by curating a sense of community while providing young people with a space and platform to develop resiliency, amplify their voices, and discover community.

As a vessel for this strategic intervention, the Community Agreement directly impacts the quality of such theatrical experiences by establishing a comfortable and challenging environment that enables young people to absorb the social and emotional benefits participation in theatre fully offers. Furthermore, it aids in encouraging the development of healthy communication skills that will naturally translate into other areas of life. As the Community Agreement strengthens with the structure and ideology that drive CRP and "Button," so does the opportunity to move the needle on youth mental health. A comfortable and challenging environment with checks and balances to maintain progress paves the way for young people to reap the full social and emotional benefits theatre has to offer. A strong foundation greatly impacts the depth and quality of what is built upon it.

Conclusion

This thesis questioned, tested, and proved the effectiveness of CRP and "Button" in supporting and helping to maintain the environment established by the Community Agreement. Activating these tools or implementing the ideology that drives them in practice can lead to more meaningful interactions, better outcomes, and a stronger community for groups of all ages and levels of experience.

No matter how hard instructors try, complete safety cannot be guaranteed in the learning or creative space. No matter the age of participants or the context of the experience, unknown variables make it challenging to show vulnerability when working with a new group of people. Innovative ideas come from taking risks and making mistakes, and allowing the space for such potential stumbles is a privilege that can be constructed through intentional conversation and mutual understanding. The

Community Agreement leads participants to create this space, while CRP and "Button" serve as a safety net for participants to take risks of all sizes. Greater risks lead to greater rewards, and all people deserve to find a comfortable place where they can challenge themselves in pursuit of greatness.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

<u>"Button"</u>
Do you understand how to use "Button"? (yes or no)
Did you ever use "Button" during class? (yes or no)
If you feel comfortable, please share your experience using "Button". Was it helpful? Why, or why not?
How did having the ability to use this tool make you feel about participating in class? Why?

<u>Critical Response Process (CRP)</u>
What do you think about the Critical Response Process?
How helpful did you find the Critical Response Process (CRP) workshop to be? (Extremely helpful, Very helpful, Neither helpful nor unhelpful, Not very helpful, Extremely unhelpful)
Rate your comfort level with your Monologue Performance assignment *before* your CRP session. (scale of 1 to 5; uncomfortable to comfortable)
Why did you choose the above rating?
Rate your comfort level with your Monologue Performance assignment *after* your CRP session. (scale of 1 to 5; uncomfortable to comfortable)
Why did you choose the above rating?
Do you feel like the Critical Response Process challenged you?
In what ways did you feel this process challenged you (or did not challenge you)?
Would you change anything about how we learned the Critical Response Process or conducted our workshops?
Is there anything else you would like to share about the Critical Response process that might be helpful to know? Criticism is welcome.

<u>Community Agreement</u>
Do you think creating the Community Agreement was helpful? (yes or no)
Why did you select the above answer?
How did you feel about participating in class before we created the Community Agreement? During its creation? After its creation?
Do you think we sustained the Community Agreement throughout the duration of the semester? (yes or no)
Why did you select the above answer?
How did "Button" impact/support the Community Agreement?
How did the Critical Response Process impact/support the Community Agreement?

APPENDIX B: "STRUCTURED COLLABORATION"

Table 2 translates aspects of the Critical Response Process into a main idea that is adapted to communicate similar ideas with Elementary and Middle school ages and paired with an active component when appropriate.

Aspects of the Critical Response Process	Main Idea	Translated for Elementary & Middle School	Activated in the Body
Artist creates the work and shares it with the group	Focus on the artifact or experience as the center of attention	Define the objective: *What are we trying to do?* OR assign the objective: *This is what we are trying to do.* Follow up with completing the activity or experience for the first time	Hands touch above head to create an "O" shape: *The objective is…* Hands explode and fall slowly toward hands to sides, cite the objective as hands fall: (For example) *…to pass the clap around the circle.*
CRP avoids mushy compliments	Students need an opportunity to provide compliments	Represent the need to give compliments with a single gesture or motion that will acknowledge they tried their best and want to congratulate each other	Example: A quick, individual pat on the back or a single group clap
"Step 1 - Statements of Meaning: Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work they have just witnessed" ("Critical Response Process").	Harness the power of diverse perspectives, describe how the work was received from each individual perspective	*Encourage students to think like a scientist, and describe specific moments through observation: *How did we do? What worked? What didn't work?*	Fingers form a circle with each hand, raise circles to eyes, pretend you are looking at what you just did with your scientist goggles

Aspects of the Critical Response Process	Main Idea	Translated for Elementary & Middle School	Activated in the Body
"**Step 2 - Artist as Questioner:** The artist asks questions about the work. In answering, responders stay on topic with the question and may express opinions in direct response to the artist's questions" ("Critical Response Process").	Artist considers his/her own work and draws attention to a specific area of importance	The students are the artists, so this step is fulfilled by the above inquiry.	
"**Step 3 - Neutral Questions:** Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them" ("Critical Response Process").	Utilize open questions that create dialogue that challenge the artist to improve	*Ask the Ensemble: *What can we do better?* Encourage students to be very specific. Aim to identify at least two different tactics that might result in improvement. If the first time went really well, ask: *What might we do different?*	Students who have a suggestion place hands on top of head and wait patiently to be called upon
"**Step 4 - Opinion Time:** Responders state opinions, given permission from the artist; the artist has the option to say no" ("Critical Response Process").	Designate space and protocol to share opinions that might be valuable	Democratically choose one of the suggestions, giving a choice allows the ensemble to drive the process and express their personal preference	Example: *Show by a raise of hands who would like to try option 1 and who would like to try option 2*

Aspects of the Critical Response Process	Main Idea	Translated for Elementary & Middle School	Activated in the Body
Artist exits the session, reviews the feedback, and gets back to his/her art	Artist feels supported and empowered	Try the activity or experience again, applying the suggestion decided above	
End of process		Ask the ensemble: *Did we do better?* Or if we tried something different: *What did we think of it?* Repeat the process, trying a different suggestion if desired	

* Students who share similar observations or suggestions can use the "me too" gesture as a signal

Chart created Nov 1, 2023

APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION

November 29, 2023

Dear Bethany Post:

On 11/29/2023, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Activating Theatrical Intimacy Tools and Liz Lerman's CRP: cultivating a supportive and challenging learning environment in the field of TYA
Investigator:	Bethany Post
IRB ID:	STUDY00006125
Funding:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Post HRP-250, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should changes outside of administrative ones (study personnel, timelines, etc.) be made. If non-administrative changes are made (design, information collected, instrumentation, funding, etc.) and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination by **clicking Create Modification / CR** within the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kamille C. Birkbeck

Kamille Birkbeck
UCF IRB

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