

# Learning as Production, Critique as Assessment

*Elisabeth “Lissa” Soep  
Youth Radio*

*Lissa Soep is Senior Producer and Research Director at Youth Radio, a national youth development organization and independent production company where young people produce media stories for National Public Radio, iTunes, and other local, national, and international outlets. The Youth Radio stories Lissa has co-produced with young people—on topics ranging from school reform to mental illness to young soldiers returning from the Iraq war—have been awarded top media honors including the Edward R. Murrow and George Foster Peabody Awards for excellence in journalism.*

INTERVIEWER

You write about learning as production. How did you come to think about learning this way?

LS

Part of what inspired my thinking was a combination of watching what happened when young people generated original work for significant audiences, and realizing that there was powerful learning taking place that traditional acquisition models of learning could not explain. I was seeing a great deal of evidence that learning was something we *do*, as opposed to something we *possess* and then pass on.

INTERVIEWER

How does critique fit into this process?

LS

I became interested in critique initially because I have a background as a visual artist. There’s a ritual within formal visual arts education, pretty much at every level, called a “crit.” It’s a very formal event, where artists either respond to an assignment or develop a body of work, put it up on the walls, and bring in their peers and other artists. They go from piece to piece and essentially critique the strengths and merits, and then the weaknesses, of the work on display.

When I began my graduate work at Stanford, I wanted to look at young people and community-based organizations. So I started studying youth arts collaboratives, where artists were working with groups of young people to produce work that would end in some kind of presentation event to a public. Critique played a large role in these settings. They would often do formal critiques at certain points, where they would pass scripts around, look at the work, and have everyone give feedback.

But what really struck me was how critique became an organic part of the way they carried out their work. It was a much more emergent process, as opposed to a formal process at a certain time. It was more like, “We don’t know how to light this shot and it’s not working the way it’s set up and I don’t like it because this is going to happen, so let’s figure this out.” Critique became a resource within the production, as opposed to something tacked on at the end.

And that makes sense, given the research on what makes process-based writing and peer review effective. Sometimes the review process doesn't go that deep; kids just start to run through check lists and mark up their peers' papers. So I became really interested in looking at how we could create conditions for young people where critique was a necessary part of getting the work done, as opposed to an assigned process within their own individual writing or other form of expression.

INTERVIEWER

Were there particular conditions that you found had to be in place for critique to function in that way?

LS

Yes. In my research and my work with youth, I looked across various events to try and get a handle on the conditions that give rise to critique. First of all, I found that there have to be intense stakes attached to the work. Young people need to care enough, and have enough of an investment in the work, that they are motivated to take a critical eye to their own projects and those of their peers.

Second, the standards that are applied to judge the work should be negotiated collaboratively. If there's just a fixed battery of marks on how to determine the value of the work and it's all pre-figured in a "right answer" style, it's not that critique can't happen. But I'm interested in where critique becomes an organic part of the learning process. This is likely to rise up when part of what youth are asked to do, in addition to delivering on whatever project they're assigned, is to actually figure out questions of value, questions of when it's good enough, or what counts as a solid solution or project. This way, youth help drive the assessment process; they set the standards together, instead of just trying to meet someone else's prefigured standards.

Third, and related to that, accountability for the quality of the work needs to be distributed across the group. This is what it makes it necessary for folks to check in with each other and ensure each other's buy-in as they resolve problems and refine the work. They need to believe that the other people's positions and perspectives actually matter, as opposed to being a token exercise of "let me have you read my five-paragraph essay even though I know that your opinion doesn't really count."

Finally, there's an interdisciplinarity that seemed to be a marker of the different environments where I saw particularly robust forms of critique emerge. I don't mean this just in terms of combining different disciplines like English and Social Studies. It's also about environments where young people play various roles, so they often find themselves in situations where they are just at the edge of being in over their heads. As a result, I found that people would look around and turn to others to find ways of moving forward. Those seemed to be moments particularly ripe for critique, where youth realized "I actually don't have the solution here and there isn't an obvious authority figure who can tell me the answer, so I better look around because I'm doing something that's a little outside my particular area of expertise."

INTERVIEWER

How do we help youth develop their own shared standards for quality work, rather than just giving them our own?

LS

When I came to Youth Radio and became one of the adults in the mix, working on stories, and part of editorial meetings—all rich critique environments—I became personally invested in how adults and young people jointly articulate and exercise standards for our work. We spend a great deal of time negotiating standards, and making decisions about which standards are going to be prioritized for which kinds of projects.

A concept that emerged from this work is the notion of collegial pedagogy. One way of thinking about this is to consider a process where critique happens between youth and adults who are interdependently producing work and producing standards for the work.

At Youth Radio, this is a constant process. When we're developing story ideas, we'll weigh the standard of the outlet or venue and the standard of trying to get a story to the biggest possible audience. We know what kinds of production values different outlets and audiences require. But, at the same time, if a young person who's working on the piece wants to tell it in a different way, or wants to have a different sensibility to it, or wants to have content that would be unfamiliar to an audience like National Public Radio, that process of negotiating those standards together is part of the learning.

These are also some of our most highly charged discussions, because as we make decisions and develop standards, these carry over and inform future projects. You say, "Well, remember last time we did this and these were the consequences, so I really think we should go in this direction." The standards themselves represent an accumulation of knowledge that the group is continually forming together.

#### INTERVIEWER

As you talk, I'm getting this picture of critique as an informal, fluid process, which is different from what often happens in schools. . .

#### LS

The challenge in schools is to create a space for collaborative inquiry that doesn't conclude in a pre-figured right answer. Those are the sorts of conditions that give rise to critique, where the standards are outside the control of any one person in the room. For example, when we produced a piece about Oakland violence at Youth Radio, we had to make decisions together about whether to include quotes from police officers—who were dealing with the violence on the streets and at the center of policy debates on how the police should be employed—in an otherwise poetic lyrical story. The quality of that conversation is hard to capture in a grade. For us, it's about "what is going to be the ultimate effect, both on the aesthetic of the piece, but more importantly on the lives of the people involved" and "how will the outlet ultimately determine whether this piece is going to get out to the audiences that we want to reach."

This kind of work requires an outward-looking orientation. Amazing teachers are always coming up with ways to get their kids' work to real audiences. They know that it's powerful when someone besides them sees their students' work. But, as an educator in an environment like this, I am really aware that it's not just important for the students. It's important for the educators. It makes educators accountable, vulnerable, and invested in a different way when they know they're not the ones who ultimately determine whether a piece or a project was a success. It's powers beyond them.

And part of the work of critique is bringing those outside perspectives and judgments into the room so they become part of what is being discussed, even if no one from that projected audience is physically there. In an imaginary way, they are there, because everybody is bringing their perspectives to bear on the work as it's being produced. I like to think of critique as a really crowded space. I've noticed that in participating in critique, young people aren't only speaking for themselves but they're anticipating, imagining or projecting other voices and other perspectives as they assess each other's work. They situate their own thinking within other people's ideas and words, other people's intentions and investments. That has a lot of value as a learning experience for young people. And, in my view, it's not one they get enough of.

#### INTERVIEWER

So, what can schools learn from places like Youth Radio?

#### LS

I believe the richest place for shared practice across school and non-school spaces has to do with conditions. It's not about how to assign critique or make critique happen. It's about how to create those real inquiry-based experiences that require critique, and to infuse those into classrooms, theater projects, science labs, the yearbook, wherever. It's about intentionally building those conditions into as many places in young people's lives as we can find, whether it's in schools or outside of schools.

The more we can see each other as resources in our work with youth, the better. We work with the same kids. We share many of the same goals. It would benefit all of us if we could establish a more seamless relationship, where students could get credit for the kind of work they do in non-school spaces and teachers could see what students are capable of in those environments. Also, those of us within non-school spaces could learn about the criteria by which student work is judged in schools, so that we can make sure that the learning we do with youth is valuable in the eyes of educators.

INTERVIEWER

You've written a great deal about critique as a useful form of assessment. Could you talk about that?

LS

Critique is making judgments about work. In an organic process, critique happens along the way; it becomes a property of learning, as opposed to something that evaluates the end result. It rises up as a resource and becomes an engine in moving the work forward. When you look at the language that happens in critique, it is very forward-looking. It projects a future for the work that is being produced. There is something really important about that, in the sense that what I am doing is going to matter to me and to this community of producers and to our imagined audience. This speaks to the fact that assessment is something that can feed forward, instead of just feeding back.

INTERVIEWER

This sounds like pretty serious work. Is critique fun?

LS

Not always. It can be really uncomfortable and argumentative. It can also be very quiet. It reminds me of Stuart Tannock's idea of "swarming," where, as young people collaboratively compose something, like kids making a brochure together, their conversations start out pretty sequential. One person will talk, then another, and it's kind of fragmented. But as it picks up steam, Tannock says it becomes this swarming effect, where all of a sudden everybody is fired up, talking at the same time. If you walk into this not knowing what is happening, it can seem chaotic and disorganized and off-task. But really, those moments of swarming are critical in moving the work forward. That's how I think of critique. It can invigorate that kind of swarming effect; it gets really animated and passionate with all these different perspectives flying about. To me, that's a good sign that people are caring about what they're doing.

INTERVIEWER

What are you thinking about in your work now?

LS

I'm really moving from this idea of using critique in work with youth to the broader idea of a collegial pedagogy, where adult professionals in a field and young people emerging into that field come together to carry out shared projects and create original work for outside audiences.

This is different from collaborative learning. Collaborative learning implies that there is still an adult who has all the answers, and who is hopefully doing a good job of engaging young people in authentic questions and practices, to a point where they can become full participants in a given field.

In collegial pedagogy, young people and adults carry out projects together where they are truly dependent on one another to get the work done. Both parties come in with a certain set of skills, experiences and social networks. This kind of pedagogy values the perspectives and questions that young people bring, and the sensibilities they have that may be unfamiliar to the adults. In Youth Radio, we really try to create projects where youth and adults need each other, where young people lead the inquiry, and where public accountability comes from those outside the production process. Since both

parties are invested and vulnerable regarding the ultimate evaluation of the product, critique becomes a necessary resource for solving problems and evolving the work toward its final release.

At Youth Radio, the author of the piece gets the final say in what the piece looks like. This needs to be there. Otherwise, it's the adults driving the inquiry, making the judgments and owning the process. So young people have the ultimate say. But, they have to situate their own perspectives, desires, analysis and intentions within the larger context of what the work needs to do in the world, what its purpose truly is.

*To learn more about Lissa's work at Youth Radio and her research on critique and collegial pedagogy, check out the following:*

Chavez, Vivian & Soep, Elisabeth (2005). Youth Radio and the pedagogy of collegiality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(4), 409-434.

Soep, Elisabeth (2006). Critique: Assessment and the production of learning. *Teachers College Record*, 108(4), 748-777.

Soep, Elisabeth & Chavez, Vivian (forthcoming). *Drop that knowledge: Youth Radio stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

You can also access Teach Youth Radio curriculum resources that offer lesson ideas building on youth-produced stories at:

**<http://www.youthradio.org/archives/teach-youth-radio>**

**<http://drophatknowledge.wordpress.com>**