

Ten Ideas for More Effective Critiquing
by Mario Estioko, John P. Forrest, Jr., Gwen Amos

INTRODUCTION

A couple of semesters ago one of my students visited me during office hours seeking a critique on a design project he felt was going nowhere. As he laid the piece in front of me, he quipped with resignation, “Okay, tear me a new one.” Though mildly amused by his un-minced choice of words, I assured him I would do nothing of the sort. We proceeded to go over his work, but the way he prefaced the meeting caused me to reflect on this practice we call *critiquing*. Obviously he was joking, but it was apparent that his history with crits had not been painless — or at least he perceived it as being a less than friendly activity.

In this writing we will briefly examine the tradition of critiquing that’s been handed down through the years, discuss the state of critiquing and students today, and offer some practical ideas to improve the practice altogether in the classroom studio setting.

ORIGINS

The relationship of art teacher and student has evolved over the centuries in Western civilization. The master-apprentice arrangement of early Europe employed an authoritarian approach to education. “From the moment that the trainee was admitted into the guild, he belonged to his master's household and had to submit unconditionally to its discipline.” (Mitterauer, Sieder 105). Such a relationship, based in a commerce-driven setting, left little room for critical discourse in the transmission of a trade.

This system of training was innovated upon when the *École des Beaux Arts* was established in France in the early nineteenth century. It was the first example of higher education in the arts and changed the way the trade of architecture was passed on to successive generations. The academy brought with it scholarship, research and discourse. With the discourse came criticism. This new form of education eventually rippled to other forms of art and design and would be imported to the United States through students educated in Europe.

Chip Kidd's best-selling book, *The Cheese Monkeys*, satirizes the common style of design school critique found in America in the 1950s. The book takes on the point-of-view of the narrator who is “at art college ... and after failing to get the courses he wants, finds himself attending ‘Introduction to Graphic Design,’ taught by the inspiring, sadistic, and compelling Professor Winter Sorbeck. Through humiliation and excess he shows his naive young charges how to see the world through new eyes.” (*The Times*, London).

Critiquing in the fifties, though centuries advanced from the European master-apprentice system, perpetuated use of an authoritarian style, do-as-I-do form of instruction. Half a century later, post-

modernism, MTV and the information age has emboldened students to become more inquisitive about feedback on their work, and less likely to simply accept pronouncements originating from the lectern.

With this evolution of the teacher-student relationship to our present day, the need for understanding critique from the educator's point-of-view becomes crucial. The underlying call to action is this: What are we doing in regard to critique in the classroom and how can we make it better?

STATE OF THE CRIT TODAY

Thinking back on my own school experience, I guess my attitude was the same as the student who instigated this investigation; crits could be briskly direct and required a thick skin. You either learned to deal with it or you selected another major. Perhaps it's true with all of us who've gone through the art/design school experience: to a greater or lesser degree, we've endured a few critiques that sent us packing with our tails between our legs. In fact, for many of us, it was probably viewed as a proud rite of passage; almost a prerequisite for saying that we have learned design right. But now that I've had some years of being on the other side of the crit, I've begun to question the structure of the practice altogether.

Obviously, visual communication design is not for the faint of heart. We should be prepared to explain or defend our work at any time. And we should be aware that clients and art directors will rarely sugarcoat feedback; it's business. However, in this writing, we refer to a different context. We're talking about crits in learning situations where students are acquiring the theory and craft of visual communication design, learning to produce work to a caliber where they *could* have a client meeting.

Most of us acquire a crit style through our own school experience. We remember those days of putting our work on a wall, waiting for judgment. After presenting our piece, the instructor would usually give verbal feedback and we'd comment where appropriate. Most of us who went through this were never given any formal instruction about the practice. We somehow were supposed to know what it was we were doing by instinct, though we no doubt tried to follow our instructor's example in talking about the work. We probably assumed that since they were successful in the profession, they must be right in their pronouncements. Furthermore, we never thought to question the manner in which they conducted the practice. They were *critiquing*; it was what it was.

Herein lies the problem. Nobody has set down guidelines for classroom critiquing. "It's important to acknowledge that there is no good definition of "art critique" ---no model, no history, no guide." (Elkins, 112). It's an activity that is common to any studio class, no matter the discipline, yet styles and approaches can range dramatically. And this is simply because the practice of critiquing has been passed down through a sort of unregulated osmosis.

In a recent poll of graphic design students at CSUS Sacramento, 92% of respondents ranked studio critiquing as a "very important" part curriculum of an art/design education (the remaining 8% ranked it

“important”). It’s curious that something so critical to the learning process has been left to such chance in the academic environment.

It is with this fact in mind that we propose ten guidelines for the practice of studio critiquing. Though some may receive such a list with trepidation, the ideas put forth should be regarded as general principles for evaluating student work, allowing room for each instructor to maintain their own personal critiquing style.

“The greatest obstacle to the development of design studio instructional methods is the design instructor who often has difficulty dealing with education in any other terms than those they have experienced” (Malecha, 74).

TEN IDEAS

1) Critique Prepared Minds: *Prepare students by educating them on the critiquing process and motive.*

Laying groundwork ensures that students know what they are doing and why they are doing it. They should know that the overall objective of a critique is improvement of the work in the short-term, but also improvement of the student designer in the long-term.

2) Critique Using Established Criteria: *All feedback should be based on models and guidelines revealed to students in advance.*

“It is indeed ironic that while faculty routinely advise students to identify goals for their design projects, they themselves have rarely identified clear, obtainable goals for the jury process” (*Design Juries*, 30). The words critique and criteria share the same root. In order to effectively evaluate something, the conditions of its evaluation should be known up front. Obviously there will be times when a crit is used as a teaching tool to show how people would do things without a deeper knowledge of design, but sooner or later, all basic criteria should be known. Then a student can operate from a sense of foreknowledge instead of an “oh-I-didn’t-think-of-that” mentality. Doing projects without criteria is like going to a shooting range with a blindfold on.

Sometimes an ordered list can help you address the most important areas of evaluation first. Start with general importance and descend to minute detail. For example, the fact that a headline is not kerned correctly in a particular spot pales in comparison to an entire composition being an inappropriate solution for its content.

3) Critique in Proper Context: *Feedback on work should match the stage of development that the work is in, from concept to final piece.*

Information is needed before any evaluation is undertaken. Whenever I am asked to crit a piece I have no knowledge of, I first begin by asking questions: What is the purpose of the piece? What is the intent

of the piece? Who is the target audience(s)? What other variables or parameters are there to consider? What phase of the process does this represent? What areas would you like me to address in this crit (i.e., type, color, concept, grid, hierarchy, craftsmanship, etc)?" Beware of anyone who charges into criticism without at least some background on a project.

Also, it is important to crit from the standpoint of the user. If it is an event poster, view it from across the room, then up close. If it is a magazine spread, hold it in your hands, opening and closing it. If it is a billboard, walk past it to simulate the point of content transmission. The more contextual knowledge you bring to a crit, the more credible the feedback becomes.

4) Critique Using Comparison: *Besides individual evaluation, critiquing multiple pieces together can help students compare and contrast other approaches and solutions.*

5) Critique Articulately

Use concrete words, industry terminology and a neutral tone when giving feedback.

Watch the use of vague words in a critique. Words like *nice, good, beautiful*—though positive—are too general. Use words and phrases that specifically address areas and attributes being referred to. Instead of “this type is nice,” an alternative could be, “the scaling and color of the body text is aesthetically effective in its weight.” Conversely, avoid using terms that the recipient may not be familiar with (unless you define the words). Students will generally feel intimidated about asking definitions of unknown terms as they do not want to appear stupid in front of you and others.

“A critique can be imagined as a problem in translation, because for practical purposes the teacher may be speaking a different language from the student . . . Miscommunication is a trait of all communication, but it can derail art critiques in a way that doesn’t happen in ordinary speech.” (Elkins, 140).

Also, avoid the verb *like*. What we “like” personally often has little to do with the purpose of the piece and its target audience. Though it’s almost impossible to eradicate this subjective term from dialogue, try to keep to its usage to a minimum. If you want to express a positive response to a design, use the words that best articulate what you find aesthetically appealing or resonating from a message standpoint (i.e., “the primary colors used in the composition, coupled with the use of diagonals in the composition create a subtle perception of fun and frivolity, much like a childhood visit to the circus.”).

Purge personal references from the crit; this includes proper nouns and pronouns (i.e., you, he, she, etc.) Phrases like “*Johnny* isn’t seeing the white space here” can be counterproductive to the process. If one points to the area in question and simply says “this white space needs further investigation in its proportion...” the diagnosis will have been made without losing the patient. Again, we’re trying to use words that will keep the student open to feedback. Any dialogue that encourages defensiveness simply detracts from the objective.

In short, use tact and thoughtful word choice. Though critting like this can seem halting at first, it soon becomes second nature with effort. We simply have to adjust ourselves to a new language of critical review.

6) Critique without Imposing a Personal Style: *To encourage student creativity, comment on the work should be based on the needs and parameters of the problem, rather than the personal taste of the person critiquing.*

Solutions to any particular problem are myriad. Be sure in your feedback you are not confusing what you would like to see with what is actually working as a solution within the purview of the problem. This will allow the student designer to retain artistic originality yet ensure useful feedback to improve the solution.

According to Andy Grundberg, a critic for the *New York Times*: ‘connoisseurs’, be it of wine, photography, or design, make proclamations of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ based on their own particular tastes. The supporting reasons for these proclamations are rarely given, and without the benefit of explicit criteria, they are merely idiosyncratic, don’t lend themselves readily to discussion, and are not informative. Unfortunately, designers often play the role of connoisseur while serving on juries. Relying primarily on criticism based strictly on their own personal taste can create chaos and confusion for students (qtd. In Anthony, *Design Juries*, 105).

7) Critique Work Candidly: *Deliver positive and negative comments directly and on equal footing. In the final analysis, all feedback is constructive and leads to the improvement of the work.*

A rounded crit should shed light on positive and negative aspects of the work. Avoid the urge to front load a crit with praise before dredging up the bad points. You’ve probably heard sentences like, “The image and type combination is nice, and the format seems to work, BUT...” We all know what follows syntax like that. It’s probably a product of western culture, we tend to want to build up before we lower the boom. What seems polite comes off insincere. This is where thinking can be modified. Constructive criticism involves the good and the bad. But eventually, all feedback contributes to the overall betterment of the piece. Deal with all comments on equal footing: “If the gray scale of the picture is explored further, a more appropriate contrast can be found; the image and type combination is working in hierarchy; there’s a spelling error in the headline; the drop cap creates an appropriate aesthetic for the needed message...”

Such a crit comes off matter-of-fact, honest and up front.

8) Crit With Explanation: *Give reasons as to why work is effective or ineffective.*

“This type is working in readability because its size, leading to column width ratio is appropriately set. It’s also working aesthetically because it creates an appealing contrast to the headline and picture on the page. Message-wise, the choice, texture and structure of the typography reflects appropriate

connotative attributes needed in this cowboy resort brochure, traits such as: light, classic old west, earthy, rustic, fun.”

9) Critique with Suggestions for Improvement: *The student should move forward from a critique armed with strategies for improvement.*

Citing problems without suggesting possible solutions is just complaining. Students should have a clear plan of action as they move forward from a crit session. This is tricky business as a teacher can simply resort to a “just do this” mentality. In the short term, such delegation enables the student to solve the problem sooner, but in the long term, it robs the student of the learning experience. Recommendations in a crit should leave room for student experimentation. We need to remember we are teaching a process and way of thinking, not just trying to get to the end of an assignment.

10) Crit Like A Good Coach: *Build a rapport to lay the foundation for results.*

We don't believe students are saying they want an easy time with critiquing. Quite the contrary. They simply want their instructors to be fair and even-handed as they demand excellence in performance. Just like a good coach or mentor, we can stretch our students successfully if our interactions are based on clear guidelines, mutual respect and we as instructors make it obvious that we have the student's best interests at heart. In such a climate, students not only can accept candid critiques, they can thrive on them.

This cannot be achieved without an effective teacher-student rapport. We must know a little about our students, find out what motivates them, know their strengths, their weaknesses and gauge critiques with the individual in mind. We must be quick to celebrate success, but, just as importantly, point out performance that needs improvement. With such a relationship in place, when we demand the best of students, they will, more often than not, give it to us.

CONCLUSION

Though the short term goal of critique is improvement of the work, the long term fruit is a better pupil.

“For me, the critique has two primary goals. The first is to advance the students' work. The focus is typically on a portion of a project that will be completed within the semester. The second goal of the critique has a longer time frame: to convey a structure that will sustain the work long after graduation.” (Richmond).

Having a framework of the ten aforementioned ideas can promote a healthier execution of a practice students find so important to the learning. In this way, we can effectively use critiquing to mentor students into independent, creative, problem solvers.

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