

The Art Group Crit. How do you make a Firing Squad Less Scary?

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Abstract

The relationship between achievement and feedback, and the fact that effective feedback improves achievement, is well documented (Taylor and McCormack, 2004; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). This is especially true of written feedback. However, in art and design education, feedback will take place in an often emotionally charged face-to-face meeting where verbal criticism, both negative and positive, takes place in front of an audience. The forum for this feedback in art education is the Group Crit (Crit, Art Crit, or Group Critique) at which students are expected to present and perform. It is the students' reception and perception of this oral feedback in today's quality-focused context, which is at the heart of this study.

This article presents a study into the impact of verbal feedback on achievement in art and design education via a survey taken amongst 60 undergraduate art and design students at the University of Wolverhampton in 2009/10. The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative responses and identified a fundamentally emotional and fear-focused perception of the Group Crit, one opposed to its supportive and bespoke dynamic intentions. A stress factor (Anthony, 1991; Pope, 2005) is created when personalised feedback is perceived as a negative (critical) reflection on the student's performance (at the Crit); their self-worth and esteem receiving the criticism, not the work presented. Criticism, and by implication feedback, is perceived as negative, personal and subjective, fraught with contradiction and loss of 'respect' – in opposition to the students' previous prescriptive and 'objective' educational experiences.

Keywords: Art Crit; verbal feedback; assessment; emotion; audience.

Aim

The aim of my research, undertaken at University of Wolverhampton during 2009/10, was to understand some of the pressures felt by students whilst receiving and making verbal commentary on their own art works and those of others during the Crit. This paper draws upon my survey, e-mail exchanges with colleagues and Q&A discussions following presentations of this survey at conferences (Higher Education Academy Teaching and Learning Conferences at the University of Sunderland, 2010, and Ravensbourne, 2011). This research sought anonymous student opinion through the qualitative element of the survey. The majority of these students had little experience of the Group Crit model prior to higher education and my research shows that students are often 'intimidated, scared and frightened' by the Crit type of feedback and of being 'made' to contribute vocally to group sessions. These same students, unfamiliar with the Crit method, are defining themselves as separate; often alienated and differentiated from others and their peers.

Rationale

The purpose of the survey was to explore the effectiveness of feedback and focus upon the student experience. This investigation took place in the light of the NSS (National Student Survey) data on feedback that showed satisfaction levels of 57% and 58% for 2009 and 2010 surveys for all UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (HEFCE, 2010). Student satisfaction surveys have key elements that relate to assessment and feedback, however, the NSS is data specific and does not ask the students to express or state an opinion on their satisfaction or dissatisfaction levels. This paper draws upon my previous research, analysing student experiences regarding the effectiveness of verbal feedback, for the Learning and Teaching Research Network at the University of Wolverhampton in 2009.

The premise of this research paper is that, if effective (verbal) feedback creates accurate, positive perceptions of learning (objectives), self-reflective internalised standards, and improves students' autonomous decision making, why is it so poorly rated in the NSS? Much broader and complex issues, such as the students' perceptions of self-worth, status and esteem, require consideration, as 'students can feel diminished, discouraged and dejected by the feedback they receive' (Taylor and McCormack, 2004:2). A student's

ability to receive and process (verbal) feedback is essential to learning. The student's progression and the value of their achievement will be measured by the impact of this feedback. Their ability and need to understand, relate, review, respond and take ownership of this feedback is central to learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). This lack of ownership and credibility of the Crit amongst students forms the rationale set out in this paper.

The ambition of the Crit is complex, its functions misunderstood (Horton, 2007). However, it puts sharing, peer-to-peer feedback, interactivity and an experience of learning that encourages autonomy at its centre (Taylor, and McCormack, 2004; Deanna and Martin, 2008). At the Crit, the group working on the same theme and project will discuss similar references, problems (technical and conceptual) and knowledge about the topic and subject. The design of the Crit is not consensual (Percy, 2004), however, its broad aim, from my personal experience and research, is for a formative and immediate view of students' work to be shared and good and bad practice disseminated amongst the group. It is immediate, dynamic, spontaneous and an opportunity for students to benchmark visually.

By definition, a 'Group Crit' – a critical review by peers – is aspirational; where the group itself is supporting and sharing views with each of the individual(s) it contains. A Crit is dynamic, spontaneous and immediate where everyone gets a chance to view each other's work (Blythman et al., 2008). The Crit is where the community supports the individual to create, make and achieve. It is the place where judgements, perceptions and analysis deliver sublime insights, understanding, comprehension and success. The Group is where the individual becomes subservient to the whole, where the material incentive is: the improvement of each other's work and the final grade and outcome, an educational standing, awarded as a community at a time of transition and discovery. The student shifts their position from being dependent on these others (the group) to semi-independent as they pass from project assignment and a contextual fledgling, to becoming a fully independent thinker (Deanna and Martin, 2008).

However, feedback on work is often perceived as criticism of the students' self. It is delivered in front of an audience (usually of peers) and as such heightens the pressure and tension (Taylor and McCormack, 2004). The Crit, whilst representing a place where people can flourish and create the invisible bonds that make often-disparate practices and

methods seem connected, is also difficult as it pits students' internal standards against the group and the lecturer, and can be seen as an affirmation of their perceived low ability (Blumenfeld, 1992) and more specifically low self-esteem.

Methodology

The research consisted of the distribution of a questionnaire and collation of quantitative and qualitative feedback from 60 first and second year students on an undergraduate art and design programme. The survey asked students to comment on their experience of the art Group Crit and the effectiveness of the feedback they had received. Questions were designed to allow personal and open commentary on specific aspects of the Crit and the questionnaires were submitted anonymously to enable free responses. There were 60 responses from a total of approximately 100 students from the questionnaires, which were disseminated at contextual studies lectures, one for each level. Each group and each level reflected a balance of abilities in a widening participation institution. Some questionnaires were returned blank and about a third wrote little (or no personal) commentary in the qualitative feedback space (but answered the set questions). Each questionnaire was transcribed and these transcripts were lettered according to individual student responses. Common themes were then identified relating to perceptions of the learning experience and its objectives. Each cluster of comments could then be read as themes and high degrees of consistency in responses identified.

The questionnaire addressed several key areas of feedback at the Group Crit and included responses to feedback received, performance, and motivation in response to formative verbal feedback and impact on student learning. There was a high degree of consistency in responses to certain themes, specifically relating to: linking feedback to improving work; time allocated for each Crit and it being the same for each student; increasing one-to-one tutorials; and lecturers offering contradictory and mixed messages towards learning goals. These findings reflect those of research undertaken by Blythman et al. (2008) and Taylor and McCormack (2004). Differing responses were received relating to: the structure of Crits in identifying learning goals; the pressures of feedback with an audience; and the performance at the Crit in terms of self-worth, status and esteem.

Setting the context – the Crit

The key findings were that whilst students value and see the need for feedback and information on how to improve their work, they dislike the format and type of feedback received in the Crit. My research showed:

- a) Deep concerns amongst students towards being criticised; they expressed emotional and fear-focused responses towards feedback, amplified by the public nature of the Crit. Indeed one respondent wrote in response to a question on how to improve the Crit – ‘how do you make a firing squad less scary?’.
- b) The Crit model is the opposite of the prescriptive teaching style students have previously encountered and whilst, on the whole, students value the Crit and (verbal) feedback, it appears to be the least successful model for those who are struggling the most. These students have nothing or little to present and feel ignored. The process is at least divisive, splitting those students for whom the process works and those for whom it does not.

Key points from the research

What do I need to do to pass?

The collective views of peers, professionals, lecturers gives a small view of how the Professional World might be and how demanding it is. (Student A)

The Crit takes place in an environment where its success is measured not just by those students who are paying to pass and achieve a good pass, but also in a ‘quality assurance’ environment, where the methods of feedback, and therefore success, are also being scrutinised.

Group Critique gives an opportunity to put my work into context. It gives an opportunity to compare your own way of working to other students and see other areas (contexts) of photography (art). You find new ideas towards your work. (Student C)

The Crit is a shared experience and an opportunity to (visually) compare:

It has allowed me to explore other practitioners and their work and have a more levelled understanding. (Fine Art Student B)

This immediacy is powerful, illuminating and shocking. The shared visual experience can cut through confusion and difficult language, as an image, a set of outcomes, and works in progress are presented. The Crit provides immediate feedback, debate and review that are dynamic, unique and direct.

They break you down and leave you to put the pieces back together. (Finkel, 2006:2)

At the centre of this powerful emotional environment is a hierarchy consisting of the lecturer (director), peer group (audience), and the individual student (performer) that is unequal in its power relations (Horton, 2007). Additionally, all aspects of this performance, from the mode of presentation to the pitch and description of the work produced, are being reviewed in relation to each other and each Learning Objective.

More and most regularly students, in the Wolverhampton research, seem to be asking 'what do I need to do to pass?' and 'I am unsure as to how this Crit model helps me achieve this aim'. However, much of the language used at a Crit can be asserting aspirational pedagogic practice, creating wide ranging reflective and contextual possibilities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), whilst stressing the potential for personal development. This runs counter to a quantitative grade-led, objective criterion and the prescriptive methodology where simplistic and generic requests, such as 'more or add', are the descriptive significant feedback required by students; specifically feedback such as, 'more research', 'more development' or 'more analysis'.

Changed one or two things after attending a Crit – even if it's something I have not liked. To get a decent grade. (Student D)

The Crit and its discursive practice appear to be unconnected to grades and grade awarding, as the lecturer (the subjective connoisseur – typified by the phrase 'I cannot describe it, but I know a good piece of work when I see it' (O'Donovan et al., 2004:328)

and the group will award their approval, not grade, as the most significant voice. The language of the Crit is often subjective, philosophical, aspirational and exclusive, not objective and literal.

Having a main tutor figure is stressful. It is easier to talk just to peers. It feels like you are trying to impress a teacher. (Student F)

The aspiration to pass by objective and incremental process criteria, through the 'more or add' feedback, circumvents the interactive, spontaneous and digressive feedback aspects of Crit. Listing things to be completed within a specific time frame to improve a grade drives many of the prescriptive educational curricula that students have previously experienced. The Crit runs counter to these objectives- and criteria-led art course specifications and requirements, which seem to service very different needs; the first attempts to encourage independence by offering personal, cultural and developmental feedback, the second focuses on dependency and passing the course aspirations. Students are simply refusing to engage with the Crit, by not attending or refusing to take part.

It is something I cannot and will not do. (Student E)

Criticism is personal

There are arguments during group critiques, some people liking and others disliking it. (Fine Art Student G)

Critical awareness is an awakening which takes place at the same time as a growing personal awareness of public criticism. Students' negative response to 'being criticised' and being given feedback can obscure the constructive and important detail made in the feedback itself. The Wolverhampton research found that, whilst students realised the importance of the event and appreciated that feedback was important to their academic development, there were many negative emotions generated by the practice of the Crit. Students placed their emotions and feelings, specifically a fear-focused response, at the heart of describing their experiences of the Crit. Students feel like they are being judged and exposed, and that they themselves are placed at the heart of the Crit; a criticism of the

work is a criticism 'of me', their self-esteem, and emotion.

It makes me feel like I am being judged and I just can't do it, I start to get really panicked and shaky. (Student H)

Students become adept at very effective and partial listening, quickly discerning those contributions and individuals worth listening to and ignoring others. At the same time students are quick to separate, distance themselves from, and 'out' or 'other' individuals in the group. Here individuals are positioned and ranked in terms of their worth by the quality of commentary received and feedback given.

If they turn up!!! People seem scared of Crits. Although they do feel (some) feedback is critical and critical to their work. (Student G)

A discourse on the context, practice and meaning of a work requires a complex vocabulary. Publicly sharing this and being in a community with peers leads to other less obvious and more surprising issues. These include micro-changes in relationships between group members and value assigned to individuals, the development of bonds with those achieving a similar standard, and disassociations from those who are not, or do not, share similar subject views. Personalised associations reflect a divergence between the work and the performance, their value and that of the outcome.

I don't think that students who struggle the most get the help they require and are almost pushed to one side because they are not achieving at the same level.
(Student J)

The audience amplifies student concerns that they are 'intimidated, scared and frightened' by this type of feedback and of being 'made' to contribute vocally or 'perform' to groups. The learning experience and its value, from an art and design student perspective, are inextricably tied to the performance and audience response. Students may not feel prepared and equipped to deal with these presenting, performing and contextual skills, and state that they have had little previous experience or preparation for the Crit. In my survey the majority of students said that they were unfamiliar with the Crit prior to university. Students therefore attempt to opt out of the Crit by limiting their exposure and involvement.

They express a preference for an alternative format, although what that alternative is, is not clear, but defined by a dislike of the Crit model.

Most people in class don't give themselves in to the Crit and others' work...so generally I think it would help me a lot to listen to something about my work from another perspective. (Student K)

A great deal of the pressure comes from the loaded psychodynamics of the Crit. Students are exposing themselves in public to negative (critical) comments about their art (Finkel, 2006). Negative outcomes can include fear of personal exposure, feelings of ridicule and shame, the destruction of self-esteem, and lack of power in the feedback process itself. Additionally, the notion of being 'respected' or more powerfully the sense of being disrespected, in addition to these predictable feelings, is at the heart of the feedback issue for the Crit.

Criticism is stressful

I find them (Crits) very stressful because you start to worry about whether fellow students will like it or not and I hate receiving bad feedback because it tends to knock me back and I'm not entirely confident in myself anyway. (Student D)

The audience at a Crit is made up from an observing group (more often than not a group of peers and usually the presenting student's cohort) and at least one lecturer whom is also the assessor. Each member of the group is 'equal' and has the option to comment on this work as they see fit and upon any element of the work produced. By being self-reflective and critical of their own work, students seek to convince their audience (and themselves) of the validity of their position (Percy, 2004). Here the commentary is verbal, spontaneous, unrecorded and temporary (given at that time). It is not recorded unless the student takes notes.

The Crit environment can be gladiatorial, combative and unforgiving, with few places to hide, and yet we expect students to prosper and survive this with little instruction. Students are quite literally defending (their work) themselves. This is feedback, which is up close and personal, being delivered by peers who a student may simultaneously respect or

mistrust, and value. By the nature of a shared community students will have created friendships and relationships, and also enemies. The Crit is, therefore, loaded emotionally before any work is shown and its combative, performative, and theatrical qualities increase the need for trust and compassion. Those who cannot find a way of participating become isolated and alienated from the discourse (Percy, 2004).

It's important to put your work into context...comparing it to work your peers are producing. People need to have a level of maturity to respond appropriately. I don't think people should be forced to contribute if they don't understand enough.

(Student E)

For the best outcome at the Crit it is vital that the student selects (from all aspects of the work produced) the key area of their work that they need feedback upon – so pre-production skills including preview, editing and selection are important preparations for defending it (Horton, 2007). The notion of 'respect' and 'respecting the work' is crucial to the emotional well-being of each student at the Crit. It is here that the presenting student discovers that intimate, personal and emotionally charged pieces of work are seen as derivative, misconceived, poorly presented, 'crap', a pastiche – or quite simply misunderstood. It is often the case that even when positive comments are made, that students hear the negative ones most.

It depends on the people who are in the Crit with you, many people are constructive while some people are cruel – whether they mean to be or not I don't know.

(Student L).

The X Factor

The first few minutes tend to be a bit tense. I dread going first. (Student G)

In creative subjects the need to understand a complex set of production and assessment objectives is paramount to achievement. The move towards learning and assessment objectives that reward both product and process criteria means that reflective, and specifically self-reflective, qualities are significant and important skills. As art works are personalised, therapeutic and about their producer (the presenting student), it is they, the

students themselves, who are subjected to interrogation. There is a need to trust and be able to confide in this group. Unsurprisingly students can and do get emotionally involved in these sessions. There is a point where the success or failure of the Crit is about the performance – how well did I do? Did I do justice to the work? There is the illusive potential of a positive and self-affirming quality to the Crit and ‘my performance’, an X factor. Being seen, performing, and receiving the praise which this might attract, is flattering in terms of status and may confirm the student’s self-concept. Just as avoiding failure or looking incompetent in front of others drives other students to avoid the Crit.

Tasks with objective criteria that instruct are less threatening because personal exposure through performance is limited and diminished; less of ‘me’ is engaged and therefore ego is not tied up in the success of the task.

Presenting in front of a group is a good way to boost your confidence, although I – myself – sometimes get anxious about what others have to say. (Student M)

This psychodynamic of being looked at and observed whilst being critiqued – praised or criticized – is dramatic. In commentary on their personal feelings, students reveal the potential for the Crit to become a ‘performance review’ by an audience about them, rather than a review about their work. At the same time, students become hyper sensitive and selective towards whom their audience is. Quickly identifying those worth listening to and ‘othering’ those students not deemed worthy of a voice. In this combative arena the Crit becomes exclusive and not inclusive.

Yes, feedback can improve projects because it brings up other things to consider that you may not have thought of, however, you can get feedback from students who don’t have the intellectual understanding required. (Student N)

In statements such as these, students are not reflecting on the Crit itself, but on the people feeding back, who are ‘outed’ as lesser members of the group. There is pressure at the Crit to ‘have something to say’ and it is necessary to get a response (even a poor or bad response), as silence is the enemy of the Crit structure.

Some people get really stressed and hate talking about their work. Produce a good piece of work and you shouldn’t get stressed. (Student O)

The ability to be self-reflective is not necessarily innate amongst students nor is the ability to be original or innovative, nor have students necessarily achieved these skills prior to university. It is also true that students have not necessarily had a great deal of experience in activities such as group critiques or of making presentations of ideas and practical works. However, as art educators in HEIs, we believe that through evaluation and feedback, these key decision-making processes can at least be made transparent, and we can create an environment within which judgements on student achievement can be made.

The role of the academic needs to embrace the requirement to prepare students for their engagement with the critique. (Percy, 2004:6)

Conclusion

Several key areas regarding esteem emerged from the Wolverhampton study, relating to both the nature of criticism and the experience and impact of being criticised, specifically feelings of a lack of respect. This impact, because the artwork presented is often personal, is in itself personalised ('it's about me'), internalised ('I am being criticised'), and not the work. This illustrates the potential for a deep sense of injustice and embarrassment at the heart of the student experience of the Crit.

Whilst Crits are undeniably relevant, essential and a part of the performance monitoring of student works throughout undergraduate and postgraduate education, they are not necessarily a process which students might choose, given an option. Students recognise the need for feedback and value feedback upon their work. Feedback which will improve the quality of their work is recognised by students as that which best enables them to achieve the grade. The Crit is at best unfamiliar to students and at worst too esoteric and providing too little direction to improve their work. Students 'achieve' by engaging in assessment tasks that are central to learning. It is the case that skills in self-reflection and evaluation are neither pre-learned nor innate, nor do they bear a clear relation to grades defined by simplistic objective terms such as 'limited', 'basic', or 'competent'.

Provisional conclusions regarding the improvement of feedback, suggested by students, would include: greater contact and individualised support; smaller groups (seminar model); more peer-to-peer feedback opportunities and more one-to-one tutorials. Feedback can be improved by explaining the Crit, timing the Crit, exploring the student role and voice, as well as by providing clear guidelines relating to the role of subjective feedback and how that feedback relates to the grade awarded. It is important to guide participants in highlighting the 'more positive' elements of the work produced and in being constructive with feedback that shares best practice and listens to students. There is also a need for transitional skills into higher education and an exposition of the teaching and learning styles, not prescriptive education but self-efficacy, independent and innovative learning. Further research into Crit-induced stress and its relationship to student performance, through a longitudinal study, would provide a more sensitised insight into its impacts.

Always worrying no matter how much or how little you do. (Student P)

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