

Helping students realize the value of critique/feedback

Subjective vs objective: the eternal battle with design critiques

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I know, I know another short read on how to critique.

Over the past few years I have been experimenting with various critique styles in my graphic design courses to build students design confidence, engagement, and perceived value of feedback. Previously, I used a classic critique style where we assemble in a large group and all the students pinup and present their work. Many times students started out with “It’s not where I wanted it to be” or just plainly “here’s my work”. We discuss the “good” ones, while each student would talk more about their work — *sometimes talking about their concept* — then move to discuss the “bad” ones. If this went beyond 15-20 minutes I could see the students eyes glaze over, participation would wane and my voice would be the only one giving feedback.

The consequence of this style of critique were student comments at the end of the semester including “I felt the professor was trying to make me design like him”, “The professor didn’t let me express myself”, etc. All comments that educators have read at some point and felt [Insert emotion of your choice. I know this has happened to you]. All we want to do is help our students get better, why don’t they understand that [*written with a hint of sarcasm and earnest*]? This was the impetus for experimenting with more effective ways to help students engage with and understand the value and power of critique.

As I write this there are many art & design professors shifting the language from critique to feedback. I hear this small shift improves students perceptions of the value of critique and results in more active and engaged participation.

I have established a unique toolbox of design critique styles that I use depending on course level and student need. My favorite being post it note critiques — a topic for another article. I think all educators have this toolbox, but let me share the styles that worked well over the 2020 Spring semester teaching an upper level graphic design course with thirteen students.

PROJECT

To give some context to the course, the project we were working on was a brand identity for the 2020 University and College Designers Association (UCDA) Design Educator Summit (DES) with the theme of human and centered. Students were to engage in research, create a logo, and develop it into a brand identity style guide.

After the project brief was introduced in class, students researched UCDA, past identities of the UCDA DES, other academic conferences with the same theme, and created a visual thesaurus around the theme of human and centered. Students looked through books for inspiration such as *Logo Modernism* by Taschen and *Logo, Design, Love* by David Airey. We looked at Pentagram’s website and the blog *Under Consideration: Brand New* for excellent identity systems and current trends in branding. To gain insight into what an attendee would expect or would like to see in the identity/brand, students created a survey and sent it to past attendees of the DES.

INDIVIDUAL CRITIQUE

From the research, students created ten hand drawn sketches. A small number I know, but I framed it as bringing ten distinct ideas to class not just ten sketches of one visual with slight refinements. For this initial critique we met one-on-one. I felt it was important to do this at the beginning to discuss which idea was the strongest and most inline with attendee expectation and student research. This conversation

framed which direction the student was most interested in pursuing to refine their idea for the next ten sketches due the following class.

SMALL GROUP CRITIQUE: 2-3 STUDENTS

Next class we met in small groups of two to three students to critique their work. With such a small group it relieved some of the pressure and anxiety of speaking in front of the whole class. However, I let students know that discomfort and not knowing where to go next are normal emotions to feel during a critique (presenting work or giving feedback) and to embrace it, they are exactly where they need to be.

Before starting the critique, I begin talking about the difference between objective and subjective comments. Subjective comments indicate personal feelings (“I don’t like…” or “I really like…”) and can be received as a personal attack on work or empty praise. These comments have the potential to allow a student to feel finished and not progress to the next iteration or shut down their creativity; neither are helpful. Objective comments indicate thought independent of feelings and can be received as constructive and helpful. When a student responds to another students work I encourage them to start out with “I think this is effective/not effective because (insert gd vocabulary and reiteration of concept)”. These comments have the potential to give students insight into why their work is or is not effectively communicating and leaves space to dig a little deeper into the concept and offer comments on how to strengthen it.

Each student presents their work by articulating the concepts and showing their sketches. For the students that are viewing the work I ask them to keep in mind the concept and do their best to objectively look at the work and provide comments. Typically the first comment is “I really like..” To which I interrupt and say “I think this is effective because[insert gd vocabulary]” to reinforce objective feedback and design principles. This is a mindset shift for students and requires patience and tenacity on the educators part until it becomes second nature.

When we shift to what is not effective, I ask the group what the student could do to make their work more effectively convey their concept using the phrase “I think this could be more effective by [insert design vocabulary]”. This helps to keep students engaged and present in critique and helps to support their classmate with possible directions and materials to try. This can also benefit the group as a whole, if there is feedback that might apply to their own work or spark some creativity.

At this point the concept behind their identities are narrowed down to one or two ideas. Based on the feedback students receive they refine their idea and visuals throughout the next ten sketches.

SMALL GROUP CRITIQUE: 2-3 STUDENTS TAKE 2

Shuffling up students in the next class, we meet again in small groups of two to three to receive feedback from fresh eyes. Repeating the format from the previous critique helps to build comfort and confidence as we focus on how well (or not well) the concept is communicating through the *formal elements* of design. Be patient and wait for students to speak. They know their vocabulary they just need the space to build their confidence to articulate it. Based on the feedback during this critique students digitize their work and engage in ten more sketches.

WHOLE CLASS CRITIQUE

I found that there was some excitement around the anticipation of meeting as a group to look at everyones work. Up until this point they have only seen work from classmates they were in small group critique with or those that they sit next too..

In preparation for the group critique I asked the students to isolate their logo on a tabloid sized page and print it out large and the size of a dime. Once the work is pinned up on the wall, I ask students to spend

5 or so minutes getting up close to look at their classmates work and to think about what is and what is not effective about each one.

Before beginning the critique, I talk about how important it is to get as much feedback from as many perspectives as possible. Borrowing from Communication Theory, I point out that our identities¹ — the memories, experiences, relationships, physical characteristics, and values that create one's sense of self — along with our socially constructed reality² — our daily interactions with others and life experiences — develop each of our perspectives on how we receive and communicate information. Since we all have different perspectives, based on our past and current experiences and interactions, each student brings a broad and sometimes conflicting perspective when reviewing work for clarity and concept.

I point out that students will always receive conflicting feedback on their work. But, understanding and valuing how your work is communicating to a broad audience is crucial to build creative confidence in articulating their concept. Which leads into what feedback to adopt/try based on concept, demographic, skill level, and available resources.

I had each student articulate their concept and briefly explain the formal elements. I also left space for students to ask for specific feedback on a specific area or problem of their work. The group was encouraged to provide feedback using the phrase “I think this is effective/not effective because [insert gd vocabulary]”. Having an almost finished piece of work vs. many initial sketches on the wall in a group critique helped to maintain student participation and engagement.

Based on feedback from this critique session students move to their final ten sketches for next class, bringing the total number to fifty. Mostly at this point students are smoothing out an arc of a line, finding or editing just the right typeface, or exploring the right shade of a color.

With each critique session, I encouraged students to speak first about their classmates work. Helping to democratize the power and value of critique. If student comments were incomplete or needed more explanation I would offer my voice as guidance. If all the issues were not addressed with the work during the initial round of feedback, I would then address the issues.

INDIVIDUAL CRITIQUE

We met one-on-one during the next critique. The logos were almost finished and some students even moved ahead and incorporated them into mockups. We discuss small tweaks and refinements such as kerning, spacing between type and image, and enhancing contrast for a 3-D effect to perfect them. This was the last time students would have a scheduled feedback session before they moved on to create the brand standard guide.

Final project reflections mentioned how helpful the individual and small group critiques were along with the extended timeline for this project:

“For me personally, it was group discussions and critiques. I can generate ideas on my own, but I've never been through a discussion with a person or group of people and not left with something new to work with. Especially during the first project - all the time that we spent sketching and meeting up and then sketching some more and meeting up again was great. I know I would have eventually come up with something worthwhile on my own, but the final piece that I managed to put together was an order of magnitude better thanks to hearing input from the rest of the class.” - Hunter Beyer

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/identity>

² Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Anchor, 1967.

“Our class and small group critiques were crucial to allowing for success in my first project. They also pushed me as a designer to critically look at my peer’s work as well as my own. It can be difficult to articulate what I want to say about design, so with each critique session I began to feel more confident in this part of the design process” - Katie Segler

“I really gained a lot to my thought and design process by having small critiques. When it was Professor Ward and one or two other students I found it less intimidating and I was able to receive more in-depth critiques of my work which was more beneficial to my design process.” - Wren Kress

ADAPTING TO ONLINE LEARNING

We utilized Blackboard for the semester as our Learning Management System to conduct class. We were able to shift what we had done in person — one-on-one, peer to peer, small group, and class wide critique methods— to virtual by using the Breakout Group function within the Blackboard Collaborate Ultra feature. For example, we reminded students of the expectations of critique, set a time limit, and split the students up into groups of three in the Breakout Groups. We were able to move between the Breakout Groups as Instructors adding in our comments or just listening in on the rich dialogue. At the end of the time we brought everyone back into the main course room and asked for a few share outs of their ideas, the feedback, and next steps they will take with their work. These methods can be easily adapted to other platforms like Zoom, FaceTime, or Messenger Rooms within Facebook.

CONCLUSION

By varying the size of critique groups and connecting it with identity we created a low-risk low-pressure critique environment that helped to minimize student anxiety. By minimizing student anxiety we were able to get them into a habit of contributing objective feedback and using design vocabulary without the fear of being wrong.

Whether in person or through a computer screen the frequency of critiques and the expected amount of work for each helped students to become more comfortable with failure. Helping students to become more adaptable and flexible with the iteration of an idea along with the value of objective feedback from those with diverse perspectives.

I hope that sharing this critique success sheds some light on reinforcing the value of feedback and how to build design confidence for long-term impact on student learning.