designer

The Official Publication of the University & College Designers Association / **Vol. 30, No. 4**

Deadlines, Creativity and Nature:
Finding Balance in a Fast-Paced World

Ten Ideas for More Effective Critiquing

by Mario Estioko, John Forrest, Jr., and Gwen Amos

In a recent poll of graphic design students at Sacramento State University, 92% of respondents ranked studio critiquing as a "very important" part curriculum of an art/design education (the remaining 8% believed it was "important"). With such a significance placed on the practice, the logical call to action is this: What are we doing as instructors in regard to critique in the classroom, and how can we make it better? Here are 10 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. According to Richmond, "The critique has two primary goals. The first is to advance the students' work—the second goal of the critique has a longer time frame: to convey a structure that will sustain the work long after graduation." Students 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. The words critique and criteria share the same root. In order to effectively evaluate something, the conditions of its evaluation should be known. "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). Knowing the criteria up front, students 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.

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 (e.g., 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 critique 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 critique, 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. When students pin up work on the wall, they display different conceptual approaches to solving a similar problem. They also show a range of aesthetic. Critiquing multiple pieces at the same time enables teaching through parallel reference. Comparison can involve anything from craftsmanship to composition. The key to this technique is focusing on the work itself and avoiding reference to the creator of the work. This helps to reduce a perception of bias and keeps the students' attention on the principle being taught.

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," and 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 (e.g., "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.").

As mentioned in the previous point, purge personal references from the critique; 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, endeavor to use words that will keep the student open to feedback. Any dialogue that encourages defensiveness simply detracts from the objective.

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. Grundberg laments that "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). 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.

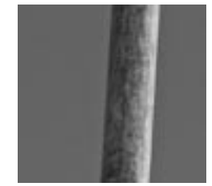
7) Critique Work Candidly: Deliver positive and negative comments directly and on equal footing. In the final analysis, all feedback is constructive and leads to the improvement of the work. A rounded critique should shed light on positive and negative aspects of the work. Avoid the urge to frontload a critique with praise before dredging up the bad points. You've probably heard sentences like, "The image and type combination are 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 critique comes off matter-of-fact, honest, and up front.

8) Critique 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 critique 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 critique 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) Critique like a Good Coach: Build a rapport to lay the foundation for results. Students are not 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 accept candid critiques, but thrive on them as well.

This chemistry 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 and 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.



Though the short-term goal of critique is improvement of the work, the long-term fruit is a better designer. Having a framework of the ten aforementioned ideas can promote a healthier execution of a practice students find so important to their learning. In this way, we can effectively use critiquing to mentor students into independent visual communicators.

WORKS CITED

Anthony, Kathryn H. Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studio. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991.

Elkins, James. Why Art Cannot Be Taught. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Richmond, Wendy. "A Request: Your Reflections on the Classroom Critique." *Communication Arts,* 43 (May/June. 2001): 169.