How to Survive Critique: A Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback

Karen Cheng :: ARCADE :: from Issue 30.3

There is no single, omnipotent critic capable of unilaterally determining how good or bad a design is. Of course, some people *(i.e., design faculty, Pritzker Prize winners)* are more informed or knowledgeable than others, but design is a complex endeavor, resistant to simple metrics or measures. Therefore, in design education, instructors rely heavily on a subjective form of review known as "critique." There are many ways to critique and be critiqued, and learning how to give and receive feedback is an essential skill that extends beyond design education. Here, a few thoughts for students and their critics—and critics and the critiqued at large.

A visit from guest critic Jean François Porchez, French type designer, in February 2012. Photo: Sam Cook

How to Survive Critique: For Critics

Avoid creating a "climate of fear."
Certain students respond well to intense, combative and competitive situations, but they are a minority. Studies find that most students prefer environments that they define as "supportive." Furthermore, teacher behaviors such as humor, affinity seeking ("a positive attitude toward another person") and self-disclosure ("sharing personal feelings and information with others") have been found to reduce defensiveness, hostility and anxiety in students. Psychologists theorize that students can better direct their attentions toward specific tasks (like improving their design work) when they are not preoccupied with "fight or flight" responses (as triggered by threats to their egos).

Use the hamburger method.
Begin with a positive, constructive comment on something that works well in the design *(top half of the fluffy bun).* Next, get to the meat, which is, of course, constructive criticism—what could be improved. Finally, end with another positive acknowledgement *(bottom half of the bun).*

Many "old-school" faculty members dismiss this method as superficial candy-coating *(known more colloquially as "the shit sandwich").* But candy-coating isn't such a bad idea—it makes it possible to swallow much needed medicine. As long as the "buns" are comprised of genuine, accurate observations, students benefit from receiving feedback that tells them both what is and isn't working in their designs. *(Of course, this method requires that you be able to observe at least two aspects of the design that are effective.)*

Focus on "why."
In a productive critique, critics must explain why they do or do not accept the solution being offered by the designer. The entire raison d'être for critique is our desire to analyze and debate the success of a design. In the analysis, we need to determine what components are essential

and how those components work together toward success or failure. If the design is flawed, does the error lie within the individual components themselves or in the way they have been combined? A detailed analysis of why is essential in enabling the designer to improve his or her work. Simple statements of affinity, positive or negative are insufficient.

Make actionable suggestions.
Many design students, especially novices, love direct suggestions. That way, they can simply point back to the critic ("It was your idea!") when the result is awful. Of course, there are ways to deflect (some instructors say, "Well, if that's what you got out of what I said…"), but such strategies don't build rapport for future critiques.

Perhaps the best solution is to first point out the problem, then offer several possible solutions, hedging carefully with phrases such as "it might not work in this case" and "this is just one idea," etc. In this way, the critic provides specific examples that clarify without assuming total responsibility for failure.

Respond to the work and to the person.
A good critic responds to both the work as well as the person who made it. The best instructors recognize that some students are fragile and need support and encouragement to do their best. Other students are bold and require blunt, strongly-worded feedback to even slightly change their perspectives. Still others are indifferent or preoccupied with aspects of their lives that are not design-orientated (what's for lunch?). Critique involves managing these and other personalities, motivations, backgrounds and cultures.

Photo: Sam Cook

How to Survive Critique: For Design Students
Be ready with your work.
Generally speaking, instructors think poorly of students who are unprepared for a critique. There are exceptions—professors who think, "Great! Now I can leave class early!"—but those aren't faculty mentors you want to cultivate.

Even if you don't have any work to show, it's still best to come to the critique and participate by watching and listening (also known as "learning from others"). You should tell the instructor that a major catastrophe prevented you from completing your project, but do this simply, without making elaborate excuses. You should also apologize, say that you feel badly about the situation and that it won't happen again. However, try not to cry or freak out (this kills the mood for the rest of the class).

Be ready to say something about your work.
Some design projects are self-explanatory, and in this case, your instructor and classmates can immediately respond to your work without preamble. However, if complete silence falls, it usually means that either: 1) no one can figure out what they are seeing or 2) the work is truly dreadful. In these instances, you need to jump in and briefly explain what you had in mind when you made the work. Keep it short—the more you talk, the less time there is for feedback.

Based on your rationale, the group can discuss if your basic concept is compelling or not. If the concept is viable, individuals can try to offer suggestions that improve the design execution. If the concept isn't worthwhile, the critique ends—there's no point in "polishing the turd."

Listen, keep an open mind and avoid getting defensive.
It can be painful to hear negative comments about your work, but the most important thing you can do during a critique is listen. You want to be aware of all the reactions people have to your work, both good and bad. Most importantly, you want to understand why people respond the way they do. This information will enable you to adjust and revise your design with the goal of making it more successful.

Avoid being defensive. You don't have to justify your work—arguing makes you seem unwilling to accept input. Try to stay calm. If anger management is a problem, plan in advance—for example, make a voodoo doll that you can stab when you get home, after critique.

The fact is that most people are pretty nice—too nice. Some students hesitate to give any negative feedback at all. You can encourage their participation by openly inviting constructive criticism: "What do you think is the least successful part? Where do you think I can make improvements?"

Don't take it personally.
If you have a particularly bad critique (overwhelmingly negative feedback, the critics tear up, tear down or otherwise crush your work), try to not take it personally. There are some mean-spirited individuals, but generally, faculty and students are just trying to help. In an ideal world, those giving critique would be respectful and focus objectively and rationally on both the flaws and merits of your design solution. However, we live in a non-ideal reality.

Take notes, or have someone take notes for you.
Get in the habit of recording the feedback that you receive. Instructors like to see you write down their suggestions (Tip: clients like this, too). Critiques move quickly, and it's easy to forget ideas and references (to other designers or related design projects).

Be positive and polite.
Even if you get totally crushed, thank your colleagues and the instructor. Phrases like: "Thanks, I'll think about all this" or "I appreciate the input" encourage people to keep helping you in the future.

After the critique: Decide what revisions to make.
Not all the suggestions you receive in critique will be useful. Some input may actually be in direct conflict. For example, one person told you to make an element larger, but another person said to make the same part smaller. Now what?

What matters is analyzing why people make conflicting suggestions. Often, a problem has multiple solutions. After the critique, it's up to you to decide how to address the issues that were identified. To do this, you need to think critically about the objectives of your design—what exactly the design needs to accomplish—and determine how specific changes can move you toward a more effective solution.

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