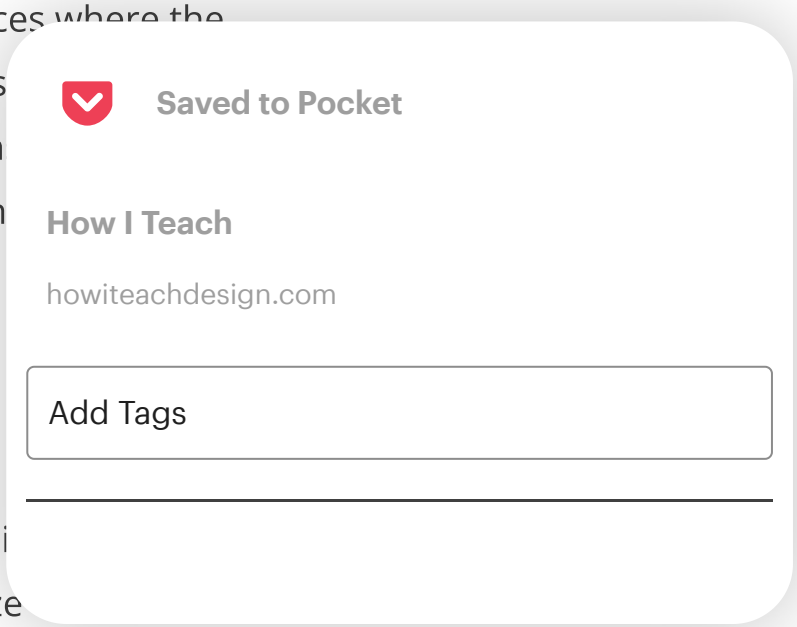
v I Teach - Reflecting on 15 years in design education on Kolko

CHAPTER FOUR: CLASS INTERACTIONS

Critique

Critique is a special type of learning experience that happens during a design studio. It emphasizes the negative in order to help students improve their work. During critique, students present their work to a group. The group identifies places where the work can improve. They discuss solutions, sketch those solution collaboratively to explore which benefit the work the most.

I wrote a book with more detail about the value of a critique and how to succesfully run one. Explore Creative Clarity at Amazon.



The pin up

A critique begins as a student di presents their work. I emphasize physicality of design deliverables—I ask students to print out their work and pin it up on the wall. This is true even for digital items, like screens, presentations, or animations (for

presentations, I have the students print their
les. For animations, I have the students
nt keyframes of their videos). When the work is displayed on the wall, several things happen.

First, the entire group can all observe the work at once. This means that they are all baselined on what the student has done, all responding to the same work, and all sharing an understanding of the scope and breadth of creative material.

Next, the group can see the work in an end-to-end story. Design always exists in a narrative context, and seeing the work on the wall gives physical expanse so that each student can read the story. This is often a series of frames; for example, if the student is pr
redesign of a mobile applicatio
show each frame in sequence. T
that the group can respond not
interface on any given screen, b
flow a user will experience throu
product—it helps ground the cr
detail but also in behavior.

Additionally, pinning up the work
instead of displaying it on a screen helps the student learn the best ways to communicate complex ideas to an audience (a skill they will need constantly when they are working

professionally). The first time a student pins they inevitably realize that the work is too all, too light, lacking annotation, and often nearly incomprehensible to the other students. This gives us an opportunity to discuss presentation and persuasion, and how every form of presentation (including critique) is an opportunity to shape opinion and comprehension.

The critique

Once the work is pinned up, the critique begins. While it's tempting for the student to explain the work, I encourage them to only describe the "rules of engagement", and then simply step back and let the grou work should be self-explanatory explanation seems harmless, bu presents a defensive position, a needs to rationalize their desigr That creates a dynamic of "me v that's not healthy in a critique.

Download an overview presentation on how to run a critique, as a Powerpoint document.

Instead, I teach students to desc *parameters* of the critique. This description of the type of feedback they are looking for, or the actual mechanics they want for the critique. For example, they may say:

> *'For this critique, I want to focus on the way I've laid out the navigation for the user. I would like feedback on if the navigation is clear. Please don't offer feedback on the graph down here, because I'm still working on that."*

This sets up boundaries for the critique, and says that some things are off limits.

After they establish the rules of critique, I ask the student to be quiet. Depending on how advanced the class is, I either take a backseat myself, or I start the critique. Early in a student's educational journey, they are afraid to speak their mind. In these cases, I'll start the critique by pointing out an element that isn't working, and I'll offer sugge to improve it. The benefit of sta critique is that students see anc the way I phrase my comments. challenge, though; younger or le experienced students will often —they will agree with what I say to voice a dissenting opinion.

No matter if I start the critique or else begins, I exemplify the behavior I want students to have—I sketch directly on top of the student's work with design changes and suggestions. When a student offers criticism,

I'll prompt them to "show us" instead of telling

Drawing a solution has several benefits. It

tures the idea so that the designer has a record of it later. And, it forces a level of specificity from the critiquer; they can't simply say things like "that isn't working" because they have to propose a way to make it work.

During the critique, I pay attention to, and correct, language from the students. When they say things like "I don't like that" or "That's weird", I prompt them—"what do you mean?" I ask them to focus on problems, not positive elements or things that are working. I ask them to explain why they react in a certain way. What about the design is bad? What prompted the comment that something is "weird"?

Sometimes, a critique feels like

personal. I'll see the person who

on the wall becoming defensive

entrench—defending their work

the benefits of the critique. Whe

happens, I'll stop the critique an

conversation. Instead of critiqui

we'll critique the critique itself. I

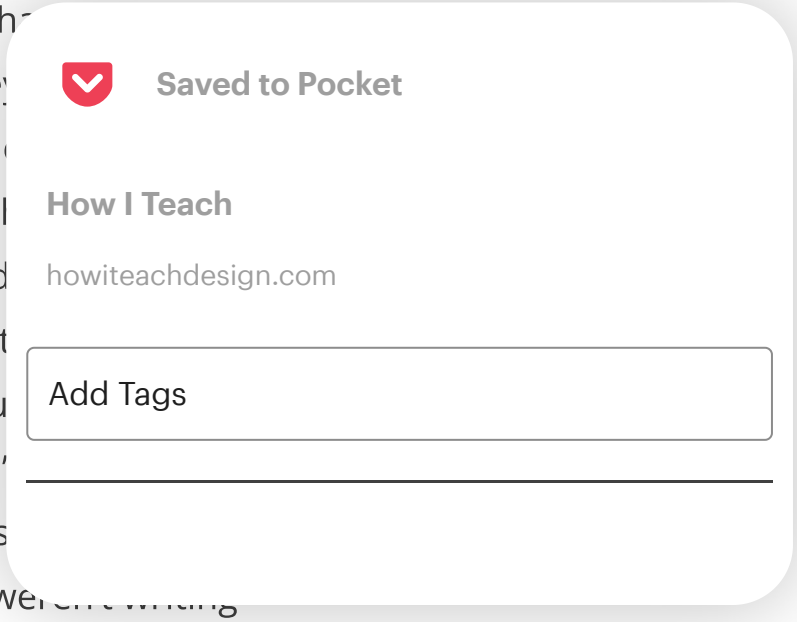
how the person became defensive, and we'll brainstorm ways to avoid this type of reaction in the future.

As the critique continues, I'll constantly remind dents of the rules of engagement and best ıctices. These typically include prompts to offer suggestions for improvement, to sketch solutions, and to identify problems and not just good qualities.

After the critique

When a critique is over, I'll often ask the student if they are aware of what they will change in future iterations. This causes a level of summative reflection—it encourages them to replay the critique, quickly, and make sure they synthesized the content with enough detail that they can move forward.

Less experienced students will h
of the detail of the critique. The
overwhelmed with the amount
they received, and sometimes t
the critique feeling less directed
started. I anticipate this during t
when I don't see students captu
down the conversation. Again, I'
critique about the critique—I'll s
critique and say "I noticed you we
this down. You probably won't be able to remember this all later. As the critique goes on, there are a few ways you can handle this. You can write down ideas yourself, or you can



assign one of your classmates to be the scribe.
s way, you'll be able to get more value out
his conversation."

Frequency

Early in their studies, there's a mental hurdle for students to work through. A student, assigned a project, works as hard as they could on it. The project is difficult for them, and it takes a long time. When they are confronted with negative criticism, they feel like their effort was wasted, and further steps seem insurmountable. They say to themselves, "There's no way I can make something like this again."

To get around this, I hold critique
frequently as possible. I don't w
student to be "done" with a proj
encouraging criticism of it. In th
of an in-class critique isn't just t
work. It's also to instill a culture
the student so they stop seeing
precious. Design is iterative and
and if a student starts to treat th
"finished", they will be reluctant to change it
even when confronted with a better solution.
A culture of criticism means that critique
becomes just another part of the design

process, just like research, sketching, or user
ting.

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