A dialogical model for studio critiques in Design Education.

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Abstract: In this study I present a model of feedback typologies for design education to support sustainable assessments during critique sessions and the results of a qualitative research conducted to evaluate the model impact on the student body. I argue that critique should function as a public social reality where student and faculty meet to talk about Design; it has to be built together within a dynamic exchange of arguments and feedback. The role of critique in design education, in fact, transcends its assessment function. Studio critiques are the moment in which students learn to become members of a community of practice, where the relationships between different members of that community are negotiated, where the ethos of an individual as a designer is voiced, where independent thinking is nurtured, where the culture of egalitarian working space can emerge, where social relationships and professional identities are developed and where self analysis and reflection are mastered.

Keywords: Critique, Higher Education, Assessment, Sustainable feedback, Model

1. Critique in design education

Critique is an assessment process that involves knowledge transmission (Uluoglu, 2000), communication (Wong, 2011), and presentation in a public setting (Dannels et al., 2008). In design education, critique is an event in which students present their designs and critics provide feedback (Dannels et al., 2008). Critique not only plays a fundamental role in education but it also directly informs the practice of making. In the indeterminate zone of practice where the know-how is in the action the studio critique is the metalanguage to be spoken. When the process is a conversation with the material of a situation critique and is integral part of that conversation, as Schön described in his book The design studio (1985). Critique – whether it is self critique, peer review or expert tutoring – is an integral part of the process of designing.

Certain disciplines exhibit peculiar approaches, techniques and formats to the point of producing their own communicative genre. In art and architecture for example, critiques often connote...
negative experiences, charged with destructive and personally abusive juries. A New York Time report from 2006 describes different art school critique styles in the US: Becky Smith, who earned her Yale M.F.A. in 1998, describes it “like a gladiator spectator sport. And yes, it can be traumatic” (Finkel, J. 2006). Similar experiences are reported elsewhere: “there is no field of study that offers so much humiliation as architecture (...) nothing pleases the people like torture. Sadly, there are learned behaviors that pass not only from generation to generation but also virus-like amongst peers, often within one afternoon. Students often don’t see the implicit grappling for power and attention that tempts critics in this scenario” (Stanley, 2015).

The reiteraton of these destructive practices seem to be linked more to a lack of faculty training and guidance toward a healthy practice of critique rather than its perceived effectiveness. While there is no evidence or studies demonstrating that destructive critiques benefit learning outcomes, increase strengths or prepare for the working environment, motivating feedback had been proven to produce a positive impact on student learning and development (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Smith & King, 2004). Many scholars have addressed the need for critiques to avoid the climate of fear, defensiveness and anxiety that have been traditionally associated with critiques and the ineffectiveness of heavy reliance on error correction (Anthony, 1991; Paulus, 1999) but little research has been done on the interaction between students and faculty during the practice of destructive critique and the reason for its perpetuation. Psychoanalytic perspectives suggest that the academic silence could be interpreted itself as a defensive response toward the experience of traumatic critiques “something that we don’t want to remember or experience and let alone discuss” (Ochsner, 2000). Arguing that studio reviews are expected to be harmful has been recognized as a “countertransfer in reference to unprocessed pain echo can only be assuaged by inflicting similar pain to others” (Ochsner, 2000). Faculty who have been experiencing destructive juries as students will tend to consider them part of a solid educational path and inflict them on their students as a means to deal with their own trauma. The emotional experience associated with harshly negative juries can remain alive even years later for those who repressed their emotions to prove they are strong enough to endure them.

1.1 Sustainable assessment and feedback

The notion of sustainable assessment and sustainable feedback addresses this issue and has recently become quite influential. Careless et al. (2011) describe it as “dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the students on a current task, whilst also developing the ability to self regulate performance on future task.” Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (Juwah et al., 2004) developed a theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice that might help support learner self-regulation. Good feedback helps evaluate a good performance, increases reflection and self-assessment, substantiate student self-regulation, encourages teacher and peer dialogue, supports positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem, provides opportunities to reach desired performance, and informs teacher development (Nicol & Milligan, 2006).

These studies re-discuss the practice of critique in higher education and need to be elaborated into actionable tools for student and faculty; the lack of faculty education and development on sustainable assessments are still evident. Few schools offer faculty training to reform their critique culture and assess their learning outcomes. Safe spaces to discuss and learn the pedagogy around and strategies for educationally successful critiques are uncommon.

Despite the importance of studio critique in design education, the case where the existing knowledge on the topic is used to assess and increase faculty competencies in delivering educationally successful critiques is still rare. Instructors tend to follow ingrained conventions without examining the underlying pedagogy (Moore, 2001) and little has been written on how faculty might enhance
the quality of their critiques and interactions with students; even more sporadic are cases of students being equipped with an operative knowledge that allows them to diagnosticate and invoke critiques that are appropriate for their design stage and case. Students themselves perceive faculty feedback as one of the least satisfactory aspects of higher education (Beaumont, O’Doherty, & Shannon, 2008; Clouder, Broughan, Jewell, & Steventon, 2013). Developing and improving effective feedback methods and techniques to be offered to faculty and students becomes of primarily importance to achieve desired learning outcomes.

2. Research methodology

This paper presents the results of a qualitative research conducted in the context of the first year of our MFA in Communications Design. In this study I developed a model of feedback typologies for design education designed to support sustainable assessment during critique sessions (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). I presented and trained a large group of students on how to use this framework for peer review. I conducted a participant observation during mid-term peer review to assess the framework. At the end of the semester I conducted focus group and semi structured interviews to further the evaluation of the model and its impact on the student practice and learning (Figure 1).

The framework integrates students more effectively into an academic community of practice through front loading feedback as preparatory guidance (Beaumont, O’Doherty, & Shannon, 2008) and builds in time for workshops that engage students with assessment criteria and discussion of exemplars (Rust, 2003).

This framework creates an opportunity for faculty to (1) reassess their critique methods, (2) diversify and expand the knowledge on the types of feedback they can provide, (3) foster a culture of class participation and discussion. Students can use this model as a tool to (1b) facilitate their understanding of critique typologies and methods, (2b) increase their awareness of the types of feedback they do and should receive, (3b) develop the ability to solicit healthy feedbacks and (4b) learn how to perform successful peer reviews.

This qualitative research investigates the influence that providing preparatory guidance on sustainable critiques and meaning-level feedback can have on student personal understanding and design practice and on their relation with peers and faculty; and furthermore, how can a space created for students training simultaneously offer an opportunity for faculty professional advancement.

![Figure 1. Research methodology and phases](image-url)
3. Feedback typologies framework

The framework is built on the work of Deanna P. Dannels and Kelly Norris Martin (2005, 2008a, 2008b) and by Oh’s theoretical framework of design critiquing (2012). It has been reframed in the context of Design and organized around the idea that not only a critique should be a free from judgment and aggression, but a meaning-making dialogue between a teacher and student rather than a process or revision and editing. It opposes meaning-level feedback and error-correction feedback and argues that only the former has positive impact and can facilitate learning. What Bruton (2007) explains in language development can be applied to design: a focus on errors correction does not accurately provide insight into students’ learning progress because error-focused feedback does not consider broader development skills. Beaumont, O’Doherty, & Shannon, (2008) second this idea and assess that the concept of quality feedback is gradually changing from that of an expert correcting a student’s errors, towards a student-centred process model (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hounsell, 2006; Rust et al., 2003).

In the model in Figure 1 typologies of feedback are clustered in five main categories, three meaning-making quality feedback (interpretation, exploration, comparison) and two error correction feedback (direction, judgment). The first should be encouraged as they positive influence student development, the second should be discouraged as they have been demonstrated to hinder learning outcomes.
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| Meaning-level feedback | Error correction |
|------------------------|------------------|
| **What I see (interpretation)** | **What should be done (direction)** |
| INVESTIGATIVE to understand | DIRECTIVE on design choices |
| Why did you...? | A book would be a more appropriate choice |
| What was your process? | Reduce the size |
| INTERPRETATIVE on design semantics | |
| This image has negative connotations | |
| This reads as... | |
| SUGGESTIVE on designer approach | |
| You should try... | |
| I would suggest... | |
| GENERATIVE to diverge or converge | |
| What about... | |
| What if... | |
| ASSOCIATIVE to suggest examples | |
| It reminds me of... | |
| Have you seen the work of... | |
| COMPARATIVE to situate the design | |
| How does it relate to... | |
| What is the difference between... | |
| ETHICAL on design ethos | |
| What motivated you to... | |
| What is the impact? | |
| encouraged | discouraged |

Figure 2. In the model the typologies if feedback are clustered in five main categories, three meaning-making quality feedback (interpretation, exploration, comparison) and two error correction feedback (direction, judgment). The first should be encouraged as they positive influence student development, the second should be discouraged as they have been demonstrated to hinder learning outcomes.

**Meaning-making quality feedback**

*Interpretation* works as a mirror to the designer to portray what the viewer sees through

- **Investigative feedback** given to understand a project
e.g. Why did you...? What was your process?

- **Interpretative feedback** given to discuss design semantics
e.g. This image has negative connotations. This reads as...
**Exploration** generates new possibilities for development

- **Generative feedback** to help the design to diverge and broaden or to converge and focus
e.g. What about.. How might we.. What if..

- **Suggestive feedback** on the design approach
e.g. You should try to.. I would suggest to...

**Comparison** helps position a project in relationship with a larger context by using

- **Associative feedback** helps expressing what the design evoke in the audience
e.g. It reminds me of.. Have you seen the work of...

- **Comparative feedback** to situate the design in relation to its precedents
e.g. How does it relates to.. What is the difference between..

- **Ethical feedback** discusses the design ethos and the project impact
e.g. What motivated you to? What is the impact?

**Error correction feedback**

*Judgment* expresses what the audience thinks of the design, positively or negatively but without context or criteria to position the judgment apart from the speaker authority.

- **Judgmental feedback** is used to express opinions
e.g I don’t like it... This is bad... You are not a good designer... This is excellent...

*Direction* points at what the audience thinks should be done without expressing reasoning for it

- **Directive feedback** attempt to influence design choices
e.g. A book would be a more appropriate medium for this project. Reduce the size

Providing students with such a model has been demonstrated to be a success not only in term of having a more informed body of students, but opening up conversations that transcend the evaluative power of feedback. In the semistructured interviews I conducted (see fig 5) students articulated a noticeable increase in their capability to perform peer review after being offered this framework. Students report an upgrade in confidence around their ability to provide meaningful comments to their peers.

More importantly, the framework has been reported to work as a negotiation space, a common ground to define expectation around feedback and critique. Through this common ground, students reference being able to negotiate a relationship and request quality feedback from their peers and their faculty. Students invoke the framework as a set of tools that allow them to express their thoughts about a design clearly and without fears. Student that were previously uncomfortable in giving feedback to their classmate and intimidated by receiving it were reassured and relieved by the establishment of the framework as a shared space for discussion.

### 3.1 Critique as an dynamic conversation

This framework argues that studio critiques should be conducted as a dynamic conversation between faculty and students. Feedback should be generative and constructive instead of judgmental and
directive – especially at graduate level – and the critique session should be an interactive conversation between faculty and students.

Faculty and students should be provided with a systematic means to create the space for this conversation to happen, the reciprocality of such educational space should be fostered and taught.

I argue that critique in Design is like a meeting place, a public social reality where student and faculty uses a project to talk about Design. This public social reality has to be built together within a dynamic exchange of arguments and feedback. This public social reality can be constructed for the benefit of the class or shared between faculty and student in desk critique, but in both cases is build by the active engagement of both parties. One way feedback does not produce a conversation and does not treat design as a meeting space but as an object of evaluation. The conversation about a project should be instead treated as an opportunity to talk about design at higher level, to learn and practice the appropriate vocabulary and furthermore to foster the ability to think critically about our discipline and practice. As William Deresiewicz describes in his talk, we should foster the ability of our students to build arguments that allow them to be political individuals. The reiteration of a master apprenticeship relationship in the critique session does not nurture independent thinking and sustainable self evaluation. Is through the construction of a conversation that we build the structure for our students to understand their practice and its impact on the larger community.

During the presentation I provided students with a set of strategies to participate and guide a conversational critique session that performs as a public social reality:

• participants should comment on the project rather than the designer, detaching the situation from the person and using a passive voice.

• they should focus on description, rather than judgment or inference, by representing what they see, instead of making assumptions on the designer motivation.

• participants should discuss Design by using the project as a shared topic: the goal of the critique should be to learn to talk about Design and investigate the project contribution to the larger Design discourse.

• critique should be a dynamic conversation, an active dialogical relationship that needs to be maintain by all parties involved; critique should work similar to a tennis match, where both parties ask questions, listen carefully to the response, build on that response and ask further questions.
A critique session uses a project to talk about Design

**Comment on the project rather than the designer**
- Detach the situation from the person and use passive voice
- The paper could be cleaned and not You are a mess.
- The delivery can be reorganized and not You don’t know how to present

**Focus on description rather than judgment and inference**
- Describe what you see, not your assumptions on the designer motivation
- This color combination reminds me of political parties and not
- Why didn’t you think about the political implication of this poster

**Discuss about Design by using the project as a shared topic**
- The goal is to learn something about Design
- Share ideas and talk about the project as a contribution to Design discourse
- This poster is questioning the relationship between digital and printing and not
- Use Illustrator instead of drawing and see what happens

**Feedback should be a dynamic conversation**
- Create and maintain a dialogical relationship, as a tennis match.
- Ask questions, listen carefully to the response, built on that response.
- Comment and then create the space for the other to participate equally
  a. What was the intent?
  b. To create a rhythm, what do you think is their reaction to this medium?
  c. They might respond to a fast pace, even more if challenging their assumptions. What about referring to the past?
  d. Yes, I can even cite the author, or should I defend anonymity? and not
  e. What was the intent?
  f. To create a rhythm a. challenging their assumptions? b. OK a. Maybe more color? b. OK

*Figure 3. Explicative model on how to create a dynamic conversation*

Much of the literature has discussed dialogical feedback sessions, but none propose an active simultaneous conversation as a strategy for critique. The process might be defined dialogical in terms of content, but it rarely is in terms of dynamics. Feedback has been conceptualized more as a dialogue rather than as information transmission. However, studies report that the current growth in class sizes has been stopping the teacher to engage students in dialogue (Nicol & Milligan, 2006).

In practice, students usually keep silence and record faculty comments and might respond by modify their design later; few faculty actively involve students in asking questions back to them during critiques beside the often rhetorical “do you have any questions?”

This paper argues that critique sessions should actively be built around an alternating conversation session, the back and forth between faculty and student is fundamental to develop a deep understanding of the practice and to the progressive construction of meaning as they make progress through the conversation.

The standard critique where a faculty ask questions, student responses and faculty makes comment, cannot be truly defined as sustainable critique: it does not foster student independence, nor it nurtures critical thinking. More importantly it does not address the full educational potential of a critique session.

### 4. Rethinking the goals of critique

The role of critique in design education, in fact, transcends its assessment function. Studio critiques are the moment in which students learn to become members of a community of practice, where the relationships between different members of that community are negotiated, where the ethos of an individual as a designer is voiced, where independent thinking is nurtured, where the culture of egalitarian working space can emerge, where social relationships and professional identities are developed, where self analysis and reflection are mastered.

Supporting students in the construction of a community of practice should be one of the cardinal objectives of any higher education program; the privilege of being surrounded by a group of peers...
and experts who are willing to contribute and dedicate time to the personal development of each individual in the class constitutes one of the most valuable aspects of a higher education. Building a stronger student network requires investment and determination: we as faculty should communicate to students the importance of peer networks not only as a benefit for the future job placement but more important as an opportunity to learn collaboration and cooperation that will make a designer thrive in the workforce and allow her to be a leader in the field. Cultivating harsh competition has been already proven to be detrimental to student future success and solely enhance the power of the studio instructor (Anthony, 2012; Ochsner, 2000). Critique can teach students to negotiate their relationships as different members of that community of practice; students can determine their demeanor in the community and develop their identity in relationship to the larger group. The findings of this research highlight that presenting quality feedback as an expected currency for students collaboration is a successful strategy to accelerate the creation of a community of practice in a newly formed body of students as first year. Student report to be able to identify those among their peer who are dedicated and motivated to the growth and development of themselves and of the group and select them as preferred partners and points of reference. They report to be able to build tighter work relationships with those students who put an effort in learning how to provide quality feedback and collaboration leads to academic success. Those who disengage from peer feedback to prioritize the receiving of teacher feedback are left aside and end up performing less successfully in the course: social relationships and professional identities are developed mostly within the mutual exchange of peer feedback in or outside class.

Critique is also where independent thinking is nurtured and self analysis and reflection are mastered. As discussed previously, sustainable feedback is intended to make students less and less dependent on the teacher feedback to evaluate their progress. The presented feedback model did not have a significant impact on students ability to self evaluate and redirect their project. An investigation more focused on self evaluation might be needed. Despite of the success of the model itself in provide further support to nurture independent thinking, critique remains the place where student response to their peer creative production is compared and measured. All scholarship is a conversation. If we can help students to understand that all scholarship is about asking questions then we can make the classroom a place in which the conversation is the norm.

Critique should be the place where the ethos of an individual as a designer is voiced and allowed to emerge. The conversation during a critique should address the project as a transitional space between the inner and outer reality of the designer. Students project their inner selves on a designed object in an intermediate (both internal and external) experience that Winnicott identifies as belonging to the realm of play in children and found at the root of creativity and imagination in adults (Winnicott, 1953 in Ochsner, 2000). Investigating this transitionality is among the most powerful and transformative practices that can be activated during a critique session.

And finally, this research argues that critique is where the culture of an egalitarian working space can emerge. The relationship between critique session and work environment has been discussed in different scholarly research. Dannels, Gaffney, & Martin (2008) argue in their paper that a critique session that does not simulate the structure and practices of a work environment is detrimental to a student’s development and makes them ill prepared for their own future. This paper proposes a very different position: fostering a critique culture that promotes egalitarian participation, that erodes hierarchical structures will equip students with the strength to change the culture of the working places they will encounter after graduation. I strongly advocate for students being coached to be an agent of change that will shape – and sometimes design – their workplace culture. All participants in
a critique – faculty, students, guest or expert – should embody and employ the values that we consider just: equality, mutual support, engagement, diversity and respect.

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