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The Components of the 'Crit' in Art and Design Education

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Abstract

The design jury, design critique, or *crit* is a common teaching and learning strategy within art and design, and architecture education. The *crit* dates from the nineteenth century *Beaux-Arts* school of architecture education and has since evolved into a variety of different formats within contemporary art and design education. A number of authors have focused on the educational value, or lack thereof, for students who are assessed by a *crit* process and this is an on-going debate within art and design education. This work considers the existing literature, highlighting the component parts of the design *crit* with the aim of moving towards a shared understanding of the components of the *crit*. In doing so it is anticipated that this can be of use to design educators looking to implement the *crit* or considering the format of existing approaches. The research found eight components to be considered when implementing a *crit* and four other factors which may affect a successful implementation.

Keywords: design critiques, crit, design education, teaching and learning, studio-based learning

Introduction

The *crit*, often referred to as the design jury, critique or review, is a pedagogical approach used extensively in art and design education at third level. Within a *crit* students are expected to communicate their design intent and enter into a discussion of their work with tutors, peers, and in some cases external stakeholders such as industry practitioners, clients, and community members. The exact format of the *crit* can vary based on a number of factors such as discipline, institution and location. It can involve feedback from any combination of tutors, students, and external stakeholders. Similarly, it can involve the individual, a small group, larger class and numerous variations on these structures. It can be implemented as a formative approach or as a summative assessment method and this can have an impact on student perceptions (Cennamo & Brandt, 2012).

The *crit* has been subject to much criticism in recent years. Percy (2004) suggests that the *crit* leads to "...over-reliance on procedural questions and answers pertaining to the project brief rather than a critical engagement with the subject" (p. 152). Other authors such as Austerlitz and Aravot (2007), Blair (2007), and Flynn (2005), point to the potential negative impact that it can have on learners. Despite this, design educators see the *crit* as a core pedagogical approach to studio-based learning and are unlikely to abandon the approach due to the perceived benefits (Dannels, 2005; Doidge, 2006; Souleles, 2013). This paper will review the literature in terms of the broad components of a *crit* and the pedagogical considerations of these components.

This paper is aimed at those currently implementing or planning to implement a *crit* process and provides an overview of benefits and limitations of this method. Some of the reasons from the literature for implementing it are as follows:

- It acts as a fundamental teaching methodology within art and design education due to the largely practical and vocational nature of the project-based work which students carry out (Soueles, 2013).
- It plays a central role in developing the student's understanding of the design profession and can also contribute to the development of important workplace skills (Dannels, 2005).
- It can provide an opportunity for students to get feedback from their peers, tutors and industry (Simpson, 2012). Students receiving feedback and learning from their peers is an example of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) in effect.
- It encourages reflection and serves as a teaching method through which the student can be guided in the design process (Schön, 1983).
- It can be applied as an assessment method in order to evaluate a student's work and their ability to articulate their process (McCarthy, 2011).

While the reasons for implementing *crit* are, broadly speaking, in the interests of the students, it must be acknowledged that there is an on-going debate about the educational value of this approach (Blair, 2007; Dannels, Housley Gaffney & Norris Martin, 2011). It is the position of the author that if *crits* are considered in the context of modern educational pedagogies and implemented with a focus on desired learning outcomes, then the *crit* can be a beneficial teaching and learning approach in art and design education.

What is a *crit*?

Until the mid-nineteenth century, architects were educated through apprenticeships with *ateliers* where they learned from more experienced architects. In 1850, the *Beaux-Arts* school of architecture education began a formal academic program of architectural training (Koch, Schwennsen, Dutton & Smith, 2002). It was from this school that the *crit* was first developed in a closed jury format where the tutor defended the students work. The *Bauhaus* also had a lasting effect on the *crit* as it moved from being a closed session to an open review where those interested in the work could discuss it (Flynn, 2005).

From these beginnings, a number of variations on the *crit* have emerged, most of which share a number of characteristics in common. Blair (2007) describes the *crit* as “the main formal point for formative assessment” (p. 83) in art and design education where a student presents their work in front of peers and their teacher. In this case, it acts as a primarily verbal exchange of ideas and opinions. In addition to providing an opportunity for formative assessment, it allows the student to develop presentation skills to communicate their design vision and rationale.

The components of a *crit*

In order to identify the educational opportunities within the *crit* environment each component will be identified and discussed in terms of application and scope. These components are: timing, participants, formality, duration, audience, feedback, purpose, and location. In the following sections each component will be considered based on a review of the relevant literature.

Timing

There are two common stages in a project when a *crit* may be used, these are: at an interim stage, and during final assessment (Doidge et al., 2000). The interim *crit* tends to be more informal and involves a dialogue between tutor and student based on progress. This is a formative activity and is centred around guiding and supporting the student (Dannels, 2005), essentially it is focused on process and developing the learner within the professional field of practice. Using it at the end of a project is also common (Flynn, 2005) and will often involve a summative mark being given to the work. This form of *crit* tends to be more formal and often involves external parties such as industry or clients and focuses more on product or outcome as opposed to process.

Participants

There are two categories of participants who receive the *crit*: individual, and group (Cennamo & Brandt, 2012). Individual is the most common form of *crit* whereby a single individual has their work critiqued by their tutor, peers, and possibly invited guests. In this context the student is expected to communicate their design through visual, and/or oral means. The group *crit* as an approach can be used for group projects, this is especially beneficial where the studio teaching hours may not be sufficient to allow individual *crits* on a regular basis (Schrand & Eliason, 2012). One of the drawbacks however is that the feedback each student receives may be reduced but it can also reduce the individual stress of learners when presenting and having work critiqued (Cennamo et al., 2011).

Formality

Crits can be delivered in an informal manner or as part of more formal assessment processes within a programme. From the literature reviewed, an informal approach can provide a more

supportive learning opportunity for the student (Blair, 2007). In more formal settings students report anxiety and nervousness as well as issues with remembering the feedback they have received (McCarthy, 2011). Blair (2007) includes the following quote, which gives an insight into student perceptions of the formal *crit*: “ ‘*They’re really scary. I don’t know, it’s really nerve racking, not just giving the presentation but if someone criticises your work, to be able to take it as well’* ” (p. 87).

Duration

A *crit* can last from five minutes (Flynn, 2005) to 50 minutes (Percy, 2004) per student. The following quote from Flynn (2005) illustrates the issues with a five-minute *crit*: “ ‘*I felt that the pin-up crits were a bit rushed and when I failed one project it (the presentation) lasted less than five minutes’* ” (p. 76). Those that go on for a longer period of time encounter the opposite issue, whereby students struggle with the duration:

I don’t like the length that they go on, because I do find that, even unintentionally, you switch off people’s work and you might learn something if you hadn’t...I think the length of the crit is an issue with everyone because no one likes to sit in a room not doing anything for a day, just listening. You just can’t concentrate for that length of time. (Blair, 2007, p. 90)

While there is little evidence for an objectively best length of time for a *crit*, it can be inferred that students need an opportunity to receive sufficient feedback.

Audience

Another component of the *crit* is the audience who provide the critique and feedback on the work presented. There are three different groups to consider when it comes to the audience, these are: students, tutors, and external members.

Students providing feedback to their peers is a key aspect in the development of professional norms that are expected of design graduates (Dannels, 2005). The expectation is that students gain further insight into their own work by reflecting on how their peers have approached similar problems. The tutors within the *crit* process serve the role of design mentor and expert as they are expected to provide feedback and guidance to students. The design tutor is essentially acting as a master, passing on tacit knowledge of the discipline through a series of feedback sessions. Where external participants are present they may be experts in the field, clients, community members, or others with an interest in the project. In this instance the guests are expected to bring a professional perspective to the *crit* and provide the student with unique insights that the learner may not have considered (Dannels, 2005). Where the external participant is a client, they provide the perspective of the user in order to give the student insight into the end users of their designs.

The number of observers also plays a role with a tendency for small groups to facilitate the strongest outcomes, as outlined by Simpson (2012). Larger *crits* can cause additional anxiety for learners and in particular can cause issues with fellow students being unable to participate as they may be unable to hear the feedback that their peers receive (Blair, 2007).

Feedback

Students within design disciplines seek feedback and critique of their work in order to improve (Dannels et al., 2011). The literature shows a strong preference among students for clear, actionable feedback that they can implement in the next phase of their project or in future projects (Cennamo & Brandt, 2012; Simpson, 2012). The following statement from Dannels et al. (2011) shows how students value feedback: “ ‘*All feedback is useful to some degree, but for me, the best feedback points out a problem and offers some sort of solution* ’ ”

(p. 106-107). Here, it is clear that the student has a strong grasp of the value and importance of 'good' feedback.

Purpose

The *crit* is a well-established tool for formative assessment (Blair, 2007) and is a format that is suited to providing regular guidance and support to students. As it can have an impact on tutor perceptions of student performance, it is difficult to detach entirely from assessment even when used formatively (Percy, 2004). In this context, design tutors must be aware of impact that the design *crit* can have on students even if they are intended for formative purposes. When used as a summative assessment method it can cause students confusion (Percy, 2004; Flynn, 2005) as they may struggle to see the relationship between the feedback and their final grade.

Location

Location is an important factor that is often taken for granted. Blair (2007) highlights the difficulty with students participating in large group *crits* whereby they cannot hear due to distance from the speakers. Cennamo et al. (2011) point to different formats such as desk *crits*, pin-ups and juries with each of these having a different physical location. The desk *crit* involves students showing work at their desk while their peers and tutor(s) gather around the student. Pin-up *crits* involve students presenting work pinned to a wall within set bounds of the studio. The jury or review is often more formal in structure and takes place either within the studio or a designated exhibition space.

Meanwhile Flynn (2005) points to the spatial concerns and how, as design professionals, the tutors can modify the classroom layout to improve communication and participation.

Educators should consider the flexibility of layout in the spaces where the *crit* will take place.

From the research carried out a number of factors that, while not directly components of the *crit*, can have an impact on the successful implementation were identified and these are discussed in the next section.

External factors affecting a successful *crit*

The components discussed in the previous section relate specifically to the implementation of a *crit*. However, it is important to be aware that when implementing this teaching and learning approach there are a number of broader concerns to be considered. These criteria are: scaffolding of learning, the role of ego, tutor impact and technological consideration. Each of these factors will be discussed in detail below.

Scaffolding

The *crit* is fundamentally a communicative event and is embedded within art and design education where often there will have been limited scaffolding of learning in terms of presentation skills (Doidge et al., 2000). As outlined by Koch et al. (2002), students can and should be supported in the development of presentation and verbal communication skills. Similarly, Percy (2004) highlights the need for students to understand the fundamentals of argument and specifically argument as it relates to their own discipline. If this is embedded throughout the curriculum, learners should be able to form arguments and relate their work within the discourse of the discipline. As the student's success within this teaching and learning approach relies heavily on these skills it is an important factor to consider.

Ego

Ego is an important factor to consider within the discipline of design and it is of particular importance during the *crit*. Wong (2011) points out the inherent dichotomy of the *crit* where on the one hand students are encouraged to take the ‘expert’ critique professionally and not personally, while on the other hand they are expected to have a certain ego as designers in order to defend their own work. Similarly, it can be an opportunity for over-enthusiastic tutors or guests to demonstrate their knowledge of the discipline without necessarily providing effective feedback to the student. As Percy (2004) suggests, “*all staff teaching on the programme need to be inducted to the underpinning principles of argument as well as the theoretical and epistemological foundations of their subject*” (p. 153).

Tutors

Anthony (1991) highlights many of the issues that can occur during a *crit*, one of which is the critics arguing with each other and providing conflicting feedback. This behaviour is not only unprofessional in the context of providing student feedback, it is also counter-productive as students may be confused by what feedback they should take into account (Dannels et al., 2011). Within the *crit* process the teaching team holds considerable influence over the students’ own perceptions of their work. In the best cases, they can help to guide students but in the worst cases, confuse students. Because of this there is a need to ensure that all tutors are on the same page regarding what is expected from students, and what feedback is appropriate at the current stage.

Technology

As designers in the 21st century, technology plays an increasingly large role in the workplace and this has been filtering down to higher education. In recent years, technology has been

having an impact on art and design education through specialist software programmes, online learning resources, and a move towards independent learning (Percy, 2004; Souleles, 2013). The role of the *crit* in art and design education therefore needs to take into account these developments. Barber (2011) developed a blended learning approach to the traditional *crit* in order to facilitate asynchronous discussion and provide a computer-mediated environment where a more inclusive *crit* could take place. For educators in art and design it is important to consider how the technology of today can be leveraged to improve learning outcomes within the design studio.

Discussion

The *crit* has been the topic of much debate in art and design education but there is little consensus on the exact format that it should take. This is likely due to the fact that many higher education institutions have their own formats and structures that they apply. This is perhaps a testament to the flexibility of the *crit* as a teaching and learning methodology that it can be applied in such varying fields as architecture, fine art and design. What this review sought to achieve was to identify the common components across definitions and consider them in terms of teaching and learning outcomes. Based on this review of the literature the author has arrived at a set of components parts of *crit* and from these it is possible for educators to consider the variations on the structure that are possible.

Broadly speaking, the *crit* is an opportunity for students to discuss and receive feedback on their work from peers, tutors, and invited guests. It is hoped that educators may use this paper as a lens when reviewing their own processes and ask questions such as: Is our *crit* formative or summative and what would be the impact if we moved from one to the other? Table 1, below, outlines the key findings of this paper in relation to the components of the *crit* and

may act as a reference to those intending to use, or currently operating, it within their own teaching practice.

Components of the <i>crit</i>			
Timing	<i>Interim crit</i> - Allows a student to develop and improve within a project cycle.	<i>Final crit</i> - Opportunity to gather feedback on a completed work.	
Participants	<i>Individual</i> - More opportunity for personal feedback.	<i>Group</i> - Shared feedback with less individual anxiety.	
Formality	<i>Formal</i> - Increased anxiety and difficulty remembering feedback.	<i>Informal</i> - Improved student engagement with the critique and feedback.	
Audience	<i>Peers</i> - Opportunity to reflect on their own work and the work of their peers.	<i>Tutors</i> - Opportunity to pass on tacit knowledge in a master-apprentice model.	<i>Guests</i> - Can bring a new perspective and insight to students. Should be briefed prior to the crit.
Purpose	<i>Formative</i> - Provides regular opportunity to give student feedback.	<i>Summative</i> - Can be difficult for students to understand how assessment works in the <i>crit</i> context.	
Feedback	<i>Process-focused</i> - Allows students to develop improved work habits.	<i>Product-focused</i> - Can be narrow and related to the current proposed design only.	
Duration	<i>5 mins</i> - May be too short to allow meaningful feedback.	<i>10-20 mins</i> - Allows meaningful feedback within a reasonable timeframe.	<i>50 mins</i> - May be too long to maintain focus.
Location	<i>Desk crit</i> - Student feels most comfortable receiving feedback.	<i>Pin-up</i> - Can cause layout issues with distance to speaker.	<i>Review/Jury</i> - More formal feeling among students. Sometimes others have difficulty hearing.

Table 1: Summary of components of the *crit*

These eight components are the core aspects of the *crit* found across the literature, and each of them has a number of possible implementations. While there are no inherently ‘good’ or

'bad' elements there are a number of areas that point to a best practice approach where possible. Yorke (2003) points to the potential value of formative feedback in higher education and the interim *crit* is a clear example of ongoing formative assessment taking place within the design studio. This is not to say that using it in a summative manner is incorrect but rather that as a formative approach it can lead to improved student outcomes (Dannels, 2005). When considering the participants, it will largely come down to the nature of the project as to whether it is for group or individual, however group *crits* may be beneficial in order to scaffold learners in the early stages of a programme.

While formal *crits* may be of use for preparing students to present their work and speak about it publically, it may be beneficial to focus on the development of professional presenting skills in the early years of study while students are developing confidence as practitioners. Similarly, the audience can impact the student's perceptions of the *crit* and it may be worth considering who will be present for the student's critique and what will they and the students gain from their presence and feedback. An issue that is apparent from the literature is that students can become uncertain of the purpose of the *crit* (Doidge, Sara & White, 2006; Percy, 2004) and whether it is purely for formative purposes or if it affects the student's grades. It is important when using such a flexible teaching and learning method to ensure that the students are aware of the impact that the *crit* can have on their academic performance and whether or not it is graded or considered when grading.

Students show a preference for process-focused feedback over product-focused feedback especially when critiqued at an interim stage (Cennamo & Brandt, 2012; Simpson, 2012). While some element of product-focused feedback may be beneficial it is likely that most educators in the early stages of a programme are interested in improving student's processes.

As the duration of the *crit* can vary it will likely come down to individual programmes teams to decide how long each student should have, but to bear in mind that student attention can be limited. Similarly, whether the *crit* takes place at a student's desk, as a pin-up or in a jury environment will best be decided by the teaching team and will be dependent on the format and timing chosen. Table 2 shows a number of external factors that may also affect the *crit*.

External factors affecting a successful <i>crit</i>			
Scaffolding	<i>None</i> - Students expected to learn as they go.	<i>Presentation Skills</i> - Classes on presentation skills can help students communicate their design intent.	<i>Argument</i> - Students receive training on argument, especially as it relates to professional practice in order to position and defend their work.
Ego	<i>Student Ego</i> - Some confidence required when defending the work while not becoming offended by critique.	<i>Tutor/Guest Ego</i> - Egos to be held in-check in order to support the learner through relevant feedback.	
Tutors	<i>Inducted into process</i> - Tutors all agree on what is being assessed and key criteria prior to a <i>crit</i> .	<i>No induction</i> - Tutors attend <i>crit</i> without first discussing what should be expect at a given stage.	
Technology	<i>Traditional crit</i> - None or minimal technology is used as part of the <i>crit</i> .	<i>Blended crit</i> - Use of online resources and VLE's as part of the <i>crit</i> process can encourage student participation and feedback.	

Table 2: External factors that can affect a successful *crit*

Scaffolding has been discussed previously and can often be a factor that, while not directly part of the *crit*, can influence student success in later stages of the course. Ego as a factor is difficult to define due to its nature, and it is important to ensure that the *crit* is not a platform for experts to demonstrate their knowledge but rather that it is a learning opportunity for the student. Tutor induction to the *crit* process is important to ensure that all those providing

feedback are aware of the current stage and requirements of the students. The work of Anthony (2001), Blair (2007) and Dannels (2005) all point to the need for tutors to show consistency in feedback as a key facilitator for student engagement. As technology continues to develop, educators should be aware of emerging technologies and how they can adjust their processes to consider implementing these in their practice.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the role of the *crit* in art and design education and the key components to be considered when implementing this approach. Table 1 highlighted the core components of the *crit* and this provides the opportunity for educators to consider their own implementation. Table 2 covered a number of factors that, while not a component of the *crit*, could affect a successful implementation. The *crit* holds the potential to be a valuable educational approach provided it adapts to modern learning and teaching approaches as well as evolving technology.

Future work is intended to look at how these guidelines can be utilised when implementing a *crit* process. This work will focus on the robustness of these guidelines and how they can be applied in practice. Another factor of the future work will be to consider student perceptions of a newly implemented *crit* process.

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