# Perception/ Interpretation/ Impact

Dr Bernadette Blair examines the design studio critique and the learning value of formative feedback

The focus of my doctorate thesis is the formative verbal feedback design students receive in studio crits and the learning achieved through these experiences.

A focused study of six undergraduate design courses in three university art and design faculties in the south-east of England was undertaken, the data collected through the observation of crits at each Institution, one to one interviews with students at all levels on the identified courses, small focus group interviews, and interviews with the teachers running the crits on these courses. The full findings of this study are published in my EdD thesis but I would like to précis some of the findings in this article.

**My rationale for carrying out this study was:**

- a review of practice. The crit, as a learning and teaching tool has, unlike much pedagogic development and practice, stayed more or less the same for the last 50 years. (Sheffield Architecture review. 2004)

- that with the exception of architecture, there has, within design disciplines, been minimal research into the role and function of the crit in student learning. Why has the practice remained the same? Is the crit as sound educationally as we believe? Does the 'if its not broken don't mend it' scenario ring true?

- my own research interest in formative assessment in Art and Design. The studio crit is a key arena where this takes place. Prior research (Blair, 2003; 2004) indicates that the verbal feedback students receive in studio crit sessions, together with written feedback, concludes that students' interpretation and understanding of verbal formative feedback is not always the same as their tutor.

The studio crit is an established and important part of a studio-based culture, where teachers and students can discuss, experiment with and develop ideas and concepts within a 'supportive environment.' The study examines the role and nature of the formative feedback received by students and given by tutors and sometimes student peers at the crit, and examines how design students interpret the formative verbal feedback they receive at studio crits and how they perceive the impact this has on their current and future learning.

**The research questions that the student interviewees on each course were asked included:**

- What they thought the functions and definitions of a crit were.
- What perceived learning they gained through the crit experience.
- In their perception, did the formative feedback result in a more informed understanding of their work.

**Tutors were asked:**

- What they thought the functions and definitions of a crit were.
- What they perceived as the learning which should be gained through the crit.
- What their own memories of crits were as students and whether they thought this had influenced their orchestration of crits, or their own behaviour and conduct during crits.

**The data analysis indicates that the crit has a series of functions:**

- A critical analysis of the work by tutor and peers.
- A presentation of the work and of ideas by the student.
- A simulation of the professional/real world environment of the discipline.
- An opportunity for the student to both explain ideas and work and to receive feedback from tutors and peers.
- An opportunity for the student to reflect on their work and that of their peers.

The study also indicated that the learning, which takes place, is variable. It cannot automatically be assumed that by engaging with the activities, as listed above, learning will necessarily follow. The student's persona of themselves, prior experience or understanding – in this case of the crit, can affect the cognitive resources applied to the crit activities. The learning which takes place is not always, as might be expected, just dependent on the nature and quality of the current feedback given. The students' perception of their role in the crit together with their perception of self can distract the student from the task in hand and block any learning experience. »

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**The study identified 4 main categories which can have an impact on the student learning experience in the studio crit:**
The evaluation of their work and evaluating other students' work was agreed to be the most positive function of the crit. However, it did seem from my findings that most of this evaluation came from the tutors. The development of students' critical analysis through evaluation of their own or their peers' work was shown to be limited, even at level 3. Pope (2005) suggests this is because,

> The requirement for students to assess themselves and their peers, who will also assess them, can create a stress in the student. That stress will derive from inexperience, possibly the fear of hurting others, or being hurt by others (p.54.)

Students also voiced examples of subjective, negative feedback from teachers, which could block and interfere with any learning experience,

> It takes me a whole weekend to sift through the abuse to get back to the positive and negative things which related to my work. The personal issues, the humiliation in front of everyone else and it takes you a while to get over it as an individual. ([student J] Blair,B. 2006)

Even though feedback could be negative and students did comment, as shown above, on how this could have a negative impact on their confidence, all students wanted to be given honest, clear messages. Some felt that the feedback they received was not as clear as it could be,

> I think I could learn more and I could get more views through greater straightforward feedback ... then I would know what to do. Not like 'do they mean this' or just having thoughts about what do they mean. ([student K] Blair,B. 2006)

Students wanted honest comment and did not want praise, which might shroud accurate feedback. One European student was critical of the 'Englishness' of the feedback given at crits to students,

> They said 'oh it's great work and I thought no, that work is really rubbish and it is not good at all ... the British are really polite so instead of saying it's rubbish they try and say it in a really nice way. To me it is straightforward – if it's bad it's bad.' ([student K] Blair,B. 2006)

Cameron & Pearce's (1994) study into formative assessment concluded that verbal praise and supportive feedback without substance has little effect on performance.

Obtaining clarification of the project brief and what they were required to do was an area students stated as important. How tutors gave verbal feedback, both in manner and articulation, was regarded by students as an important factor in how they responded and acted upon this feedback,

> When you've got two contradictions between people saying different things, you lose their confidence in a way as well. ([student D] Blair,B. 2006)

Students at all levels, but particularly at level 1, seemed to be heavily reliant on a trust in their tutors' tacit knowledge above any self-evaluation or peer feedback. However there was also an element of negativity and a lack of understanding voiced about the trust or tacit knowledge of teachers,

> It's sort of a losing battle really to argue with your tutor, who knows better than you. ([student E] Blair,B. 2006)

This last student's comment indicates a 'blind' acceptance of what the teacher has said without question or clarification. Oak (1998 p.417) sees this as posing ' an interactional dilemma for the students'. Do they, as this student implies, say nothing and is this because they disagree with the comments but lack the confidence to say so, or is it because they agree with the feedback?

Confidence in their own abilities or in the process was the category where the most negative comments were voiced,

> Creative individuals tend to be self-confident, independent, uninhibited and curious, willing to speculate and take risks. (Dineen & Collins. 2005, p.49)

If this is the case, then the relationship between self-confidence and the quality of the student's creative performance is critical to the quality of the learning experience of the individual student. An under-confident individual anxious about the task is more likely to seek out more predictable, non-challenging and unimaginative solutions.

If a student's cognitive resources are interfered with in one or more of the crit activities, through either a negative experience or a misunderstanding of the formative feedback, or by being so apprehensive that they cannot listen to or absorb the feedback comments on either their own work or the work of others, then this can impair the student's performance and learning experience. This can result in the level of learning being affected. If students are learning in a supportive and what they perceive as a non-threatening environment, then motivational beliefs (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) are likely to be higher and they are more likely to 'make sense of the tasks in hand' (Marton & Saljo 1976) and learning is more likely to take place.

Every student interviewed, without exception commented on how difficult they found the experience of standing up in front of a large group and presenting their work.

> It's that feeling that you might not be able to express yourself at the right time and yeah, having the courage as well. Some people who are more shy can't take it, standing in front of so many people and expressing it. ([student M] Blair,B. 2006)

Students stated that for much of their presentation they were literally overcome with fear. They did not hear or remember what they had said or what had been said about their work, or even sometimes the comments made about other students' work.

The thesis analysis found that students became very inward looking just before, during and straight after their own presentation and become oblivious to what else is happening and being discussed around them:

> There is a pre-presentation period where you are so worried about your own presentation you are not even thinking about anybody else's work or about things which might be raised there. ([student B] Blair,B. 2006)

> It's one of those stupid things that once they say 'that's it' I thought 'oh, that's better and suddenly my head came back again. I can actually talk. I can't remember what I said at my presentation at all; it's all a blur. ([student F] Blair,B. 2006)

Because for a major part of their presentation many of the interviewed students were in a heightened state of anxiety, their learning must be impaired. Why does the crit scenario have such extreme emotive responses from students? There does not seem to be any other scenario in studio-based education where this takes place. Ramsden reminds us,

> Good teaching ... is nothing to do with frightening students. It's everything to do with benevolence and humility. (1992. p.98)

The key factor which my study contributes to the empirical study of art and design student learning is how the perception of self, even for students who are being given good constructive feedback from peers and teachers, can still get in the way of the students' ability to receive and absorb this information. This can result in the quality of the learning experience being impaired.

**The learning benefits of a good crit should equip students to:**

· reflect on their own learning in relation to their peers;

· learn from their peers;

· clarify ideas;

· practice presentation skills;

· develop their critical awareness;

· receive feedback from their tutors and peers;

· test ideas in a supportive environment without the pressures of the 'real world'.

The crit is viewed by students as an experience which 'has to be gone through', but without many positive benefits being cited by the students except the opportunity to view the whole group's work in one place, at the same time.

This study has highlighted the need to continually review the design curriculum's modes of feedback and hopefully this research will link and extend the limited debate within the design disciplines with the current debates on the studio crit also being developed in architectural education. •

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