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 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 personal experience of the discipline, 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.

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 discussion of work in the context of the studio environment.
• 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 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 study identified 4 main categories which can have an impact on the student learning experience in the studio crit:

1. 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.

2. 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)

3. 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.

4. References


Converting Institute of the Arts

The study 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 E) Blair (2006)

Creative individuals tend to be self-confident, independent, uninhibited and curious, willing to speculate and take risks. (“Creative individuals tend to be self-confident, independent, uninhibited and curious, willing to speculate and take risks.”)

It’s sort of a losing battle really to argue with your tutor, who knows better than you. (Student F) Blair (2006)

The key factor which my study contributes to the empirical study of art and design students learning is the sense of the pinnacle of confidence for even the students who are being given good constructive feedback from their peers and teachers, cannot get in the way of the students’ ability to receive and absorb critical 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 tutor and peers;
- test ideas in a supportive environment without the pressures of the ‘real world’.

This is ‘what you might not be able to express your self 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 K) Blair (2006)

It’s that feeling that you might not be able to express your self 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 K) Blair (2006)

Students stated that for much of their presentation they were literally in a heightened state of anxiety, their learning must be impaired. Why does the crit scenario have such extreme emotional responses from students? There does not seem to be any other scenario in studio-based education where this takes place.

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References


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Limitations of the Study

When you’ve got two contradictions between people saying different things, you lose your confidence in a way as well. (Student D) Blair (2006)