Navigating Worlds of Significance: How Design Critiques Matter to Studio Participants

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Design   Instructional Design   Critique   Case Study

In this chapter we explore the design critique as a way that students and instructors (or other critics) navigate the complex worlds of significance made available to them through their involvement in studio pedagogy. We do this by first situating design critiques in a body of research and theoretical literature that explains what it means for studio participants to use critiques to navigate worlds of significance, and then by presenting a case study of a critique process we have used with design students that is sensitive to their attempts to navigate their own worlds of significance. This process was developed in our instructional design graduate program, where beginners are enrolled in a first-year, introductory studio class in instructional design, and their critics are enrolled in a second-year, advanced instructional design class. Over the duration of a semester, the more advanced students lead three hour-long critique sessions with a small number of beginning students after the beginners have reached various milestones in their first instructional design project. The case helps illustrate how critiques can be framed in a manner that better enables both students and critics to pursue possibilities the studio makes available to them, building a life that matters and that they can view as being excellent and worthwhile.

Introduction

In this chapter we explore the design critique as a way that students and instructors (or other critics) navigate the complex worlds of significance that are made available to them through their involvement in studio pedagogy. In this view, studio participants are seen first as active agents, using critiques to bring about social, pedagogical, or personal possibilities that matter to them (Yanchar, 2018), including the possibility of achieving excellence in their chosen design field (cf. Taylor, 1985). This does not discount that critiques can also accomplish other purposes, such as helping students develop design knowledge (Cennamo & Brandt, 2012), or socializing them into the norms and habits of a discipline (Scagnetti, 2017). But these are specific ways that critiques might be significant to studio participants, not

their ultimate ends. So they are better understood as "actions . . . [that] figure into the composition of [studio participants'] life story as a whole" (Guignon, 2012, p. 101), rather than being an independent force that critics can use to generate certain outcomes.

Our chapter consists of two parts. First, we situate design critiques in a body of research and theoretical literature that explains what it means for studio participants to use them to navigate worlds of significance. Second, we present a case study of a critique process we have used with design students that is sensitive to their attempts to navigate their own worlds of significance. We offer this case as a model for how studio instructors might design critique processes in a manner that aligns with participants' efforts to balance the various goods they aim to achieve (including their own efforts as parties also invested in the outcomes of studio curricula), and to take stands on the various possibilities they see being made available to them.

Background

As we (the first and second authors) have studied critiques in a variety of settings, we have seen how they are inescapably related to the values, goals, and different forms of the good that studio participants pursue through their participation in the pedagogy, to both positive and negative ends. This is what we mean by describing critiques as fitting into the worlds of significance of design studio participants (see Dreyfus, 1991, p. 97). This does not imply that those in the studio always see critiques as constructive or helpful. Saying that critiques contribute towards one's world of significance draws attention to the fact that they always matter in some fashion, but we recognize that the specific reasons could be favorable or unfavorable (it is possible, after all, for critiques to impede participants' ability to achieve forms of excellence towards which they are drawn; see Gray & Smith, 2016). As we have said elsewhere:

Critiques always mean something to [those participating in] them. . . . This is true whether they embrace the critique, try to escape it, or are simply bored of it; whether they feel compelled to critique by forces outside of their control, or would use critiques even if they were punished for doing so. (McDonald & Michela, 2019, pp. 1-2, emphasis in original)

For example, we have observed how studio instructors use critiques as a concrete practice for achieving a variety of desirable ends in their own worlds of significance. Instructors do not view their studio participation in terms of singular, or even well-defined, objectives. The studio opens up a number of possibilities to them – sometimes possibilities that they do not clearly understand – and critiques are a means both for bringing these possibilities into focus and for accomplishing ends they view as worth pursuing. These include outward-facing goals such as student growth or the enforcement of disciplinary standards of excellence, but also individual reasons such as the creation of a working environment they find personally rewarding (McDonald & Michela, 2019). These forms of the good are not always compatible with each other, and inconsistencies between them (such as when what is best for a students' emotional state may conflict with enforcing a disciplinary norm) can create tensions for instructors who find themselves pulled between various possibilities. To cope, some instructors described the importance of certain dispositions in their approach to critiques that help them balance the pursuit of different goods. These include a tolerance for risk, being attentive to the particular needs of critique situations, taking measures to act carefully when faced with complexity, and developing a sense of self-possession that helps them remain composed even when faced with a difficult challenge or the consequences of a mistake (McDonald & Michela, under review). So to say that critiques are how instructors navigate their worlds of significance implies that critiques help them move productively through an environment of uncertainty, and help them become a type of studio contributor they can view as capable of succeeding in such an unpredictable environment.

Recognizing this duality draws attention to an important facet of what it means for a practice like critique to be significant for participants. There is a relationship between how one engages in a practice (including what one accomplishes), and who one becomes through participation in that practice. But this is not a one-way relationship in which the practices dominate or control what one eventually becomes. People are not passive objects in the world, being acted upon by deterministic, cultural forces outside of their control. When they act within a world of significance, they are taking stands on the various possibilities they see being presented to them (Brinkmann, 2008). While it is true

that, most of the time, people do not have the choice of what those possibilities are, when they encounter a possibility they do make meaningful choices that "can be viewed as a kind of commentary on the options and possibilities made available through [their] cultural [or organizational] heritage" (Yanchar & Slife, 2017, p. 151). As Guignon (2012) stated:=

One's existence is brought to expression and worked out in the concrete stands we take in actually living our lives. We find ourselves thrown into a world that is not of our own choosing, but once we are in that world, we find ourselves faced with an array of possibilities or choices that are laid out in advance by the cultural context in which we find ourselves. On the basis of these possibilities, we can enter into professions, come to embody certain personality types, develop distinctive sorts of character, and undertake such mundane actions as riding a bike, doing the laundry, or reading a novel. Whether we realize it or not, we are always choosing possibilities of action in what we do (pp. 100; emphasis in original)

In the context of the studio, this implies that while critiques allow instructors to both accomplish something they believe is good and become someone they view as good, these are not two distinct outcomes that happen to result from the same process. They are different ways of focusing on the same phenomenon of what it means for someone to be involved in a certain world (Taylor, 1989). People are equally complicit in what they become (Merleau-Ponty, 2004), and should not be seen as being the product of what a certain society or culture imposes on them.

The same is true for students who are the recipients of critiques. In our research into student critiques we have seen that being critiqued does not mean that one is subjected to causal forces that deterministically produce a certain kind of outcome, such as critiques causing learning, or causing enculturation into a community of practice. Rather, we observed that students use critiques to take up specific ways of life that studio participation makes available to them, including helping them develop into the types of designers they desire to become. They did this through being selective in responding to critiques—trying to identify what were useful and timely suggestions, and paying attention to those while disregarding feedback they thought was more inconsequential. They also used the form and substance of critiques themselves to judge whether their critics were trustworthy, and whether the feedback those critics provided should be implemented (McDonald & Michela, 2020). What was often more important than the substance (or content) of a critique was that critiques, as a shared experience, provided an opportunity for both critics and students to build a relationship with each other. These relationships, in turn, changed how students saw critiques as a source of useful knowledge in both positive and negative ways (Michela & McDonald, 2020). Finally, students actively interpreted critiques in a manner that aligned with the growth towards which they were striving, regardless of the literal meaning of the feedback that critics offered (McDonald & Michela, 2020).

It is through these types of active engagements with critiques—taking stands, exploring possibilities, and pursuing saliences they recognize as being significant—that students help create the outcomes that are often promoted as a reason critiques should be used as a pedagogical approach. For instance, and as has been mentioned, critiques do not possess an innate power to enculturate students with the identity of a professional designer. Rather, when they are critiqued students are confronted with various possibilities, and choose to follow some of those possibilities over others. Do they listen to the critique or not? Do they resist or not? Do they reshape their work in response to the feedback or not? If their particular studio does not give them the option to actively resist, do they resent the feedback they are given or not? Each response opens up new possibilities while closing down others, and as students continue with certain patterns of possibility they shape themselves into what is typically called their identity as a designer, "gain[ing] an understanding of who [they are]. . . . Maybe [they] never put this understanding into words, but [their] life still makes sense to [them]" (Polt, 1999, p. 34). This, in turn, affects how they see their place in the design profession, and even how they define their profession itself:

[They] are necessarily aware of the world in which [they] operate. If [they] understand what it is to be a [designer], [they] also understand . . . what one can expect to find [when designing]. So [they] understand not only [themselves], but also the various kinds of things and people [they] encounter around [them] in the process of being [themselves]: students, colleagues, buildings, books, plants, roads. All these items have meaning for [them]" (Polt, 1999, p. 34).

Or, as Guignon (2012) stated, "what is definitive of a person's identity as an agent is not so much what goes on in her mind as the way her actions at any time figure into the composition of her life story as a whole" (p. 101). The process of building that life story, which in the studio is defined in large part through the giving and/or receiving of critiques, is ultimately what we mean when we say that critiques help studio participants navigate their worlds of significance. What they are navigating is a world that allows them to build a life that matters to them, hopefully one they can view as being excellent and worthwhile.

A Case Study Of Critiques In Design Students' Worlds Of Significance

This view – that critiques help studio participants navigate their worlds of significance – can be seen in a case study of an informal, small group critique process, where beginning design students are given feedback by other students who have additional experience. We have developed this process in our instructional design graduate program, where beginners are enrolled in a first-year, introductory studio class in instructional design, and their critics are enrolled in a second-year, advanced instructional design class. Over the duration of a semester, the more advanced students lead three critiques with a small number of beginning students after the beginners have reached various milestones in their first instructional design project. The first and third authors of this chapter are instructors of the courses referred to throughout the chapter, while the second is a former student who experienced the process both as a beginning student and later as a critic.

As we introduce our group critique process we emphasize that our purpose is not to describe an unprecedented strategy. We expect, in fact, that readers will find at least some similarities between this process and others with which they are familiar, or perhaps already using. Rather, we offer it as an example of how one can see critiques as being a way that studio participants—both beginning designers and more advanced peer critics—navigate different worlds of significance. Our belief is that this case can serve as a model that helps readers recognize similar issues in other critique practices. Additionally, we note that although we originally designed our critiques before carrying out our research into studio participants' worlds of significance, as we have improved the process over time we have tried to arrange the environment in which the critiques take place to support our critics in successfully balancing many of the goods towards which they might feel committed. Consistent with our views of what critiques can offer students, we have also attempted to improve the process so that it encourages those who receive critiques to reflect on how they can shape feedback to achieve their own goals, rather than taking feedback they are given as requirements they are obligated to implement. We will identify some of the possible connections between our research and our process in what follows; we encourage readers to look for other connections that might be useful for them.

Context

The context of our process is an introductory course in instructional design, a required course for all students enrolled in our instructional design graduate program. Instructional design is a discipline concerned with the design and development of both formal and informal learning experiences in a variety of settings (e.g., K-12 classrooms, higher education, on-the-job training, personal learning and development). This particular course is meant for students to take during their first year, and is structured around a semester-long project to develop an online learning module, either for a client or on a topic of personal interest. The critics are enrolled in our advanced instructional design course, typically during their second year in their graduate program. Many of our students come from backgrounds in education, psychology, or other social sciences. Being critiqued is a new experience for them and so, as will be seen, we offer some direct instruction to teach them what it means to give and receive critiques. Our process should still be applicable for students who already have experience with various critique processes, and useful in any design course in which students complete projects over a significant period of time.

Preparation for the group critiques begins early in the semester. We schedule three critiques, aligned with key milestones that beginning students will complete during the course of their project: 1) their initial description of an educational challenge they think can be improved by an online module (usually around week three of the 15-week

semester); 2) completion of the first prototype of their module (around week six); and 3) completion of the last prototype before they finalize their design and complete the project (around week ten). These stages were selected to maximize the impact of the peer critic. Critiques of students' initial ideas helps them think more carefully about the problem they are trying to solve, and allows critics to suggest (if necessary) that they redirect their thinking towards more productive possibilities. Critiques at the first prototype milestone facilitate similar redirection, or at least refinement, of beginners' work before they have invested significant time on aspects of their design that may ultimately prove to be ineffective. Critiques of the final prototype encourage beginners to polish their nearly final designs to be as compelling and effective as possible.

The unique contribution of our approach is found in the next phase of our preparation: a set of orientations for both beginning and advanced students. As noted, while we initially designed this process before carrying out research into design critiques, we have adjusted our procedure over time to align how we orient our participants with what we have learned about critiques being situated in their worlds of significance.

We first orient the critics. While this is partially a logistical orientation (e.g., informing students of how many beginners they will critique; that the experience will be a group critique; when and where the critiques will take place), most of the meeting is spent on preparing them to critique in a manner that is sensitive to both their own and the beginners' worlds of significance. We begin by asking student critics to reflect on critiques that have been most useful to them, followed by a discussion of practical strategies they might try during the upcoming critiques to encourage the same kinds of outcomes. We then provide them with a job aid that summarizes lessons we have learned from both scholarship and other critics about conducting effective critiques (see Figure 1). It is important to our process, however, that we not overly prescribe techniques for them to employ. Consistent with our view of them as attempting to balance competing and sometimes contradictory goods, our aim is to give them enough support so they can confidently engage in the new situation, but to also make room for them to explore how to critique in a manner that is sensitive to their own interests and aims. Additionally, we also set an expectation that they should not only attend to their own interests but also respect the beginners' agency and ownership over their own work.

Figure 1

A job aid to prepare peer critics for the group critique process.

Group Critique Ideas

1. Work as a group: set the expectation that you are not lecturing, but want everyone in the group to contribute thoughts and ideas.
2. Clarify the purpose, rationale, and expectations students have for their project, before offering suggestions.
3. Involve the students to help clarify and add to the evaluation criteria for your group critique.
4. Examine the students' work—prototypes, design documents, or other artifacts from their projects.
5. Provide clarifying concepts, examples, and ideas from your own coursework and practical experience.
6. Practice "just-in-time" instruction: present ideas and suggestions when it becomes obvious they will be relevant for what the students are working on now.
7. Try to conclude your review by summarizing the discussion into a few guidelines or principles.
8. When giving feedback:
   - Describe what you see/hear/experience from the work being discussed;
   - Indicate the outcomes or other consequences you think will follow from what you observe;
   - Brainstorm solutions with all students in the group about how to address any shortcomings you see.
9. Remember, you are reviewing other students' projects and not your own. Help them be as successful as they can with the projects they've chosen and with the skills they have. Don't try to make them to do a project you would prefer to do.

We prepare beginners using a similar approach. We introduce them to the idea of critique, guide them to reflect on times they have received feedback on creative activities, and discuss what they think has made a difference for them in using feedback to improve their work. We then discuss a set of strategies that can help them productively respond to critiques, and use the feedback they receive to better accomplish their aims and goals for their project (see Figure 2). Readers will note how our strategies explicitly encourage beginners to use the critique process to help them better accomplish their own aims and goals – to press forward into possibilities that are important to them – and not merely accept the suggestions of their critics as directives they are required to implement. For instance, our final strategy is a heuristic for quickly judging the validity of feedback that critics offer. While we are not aware of research either confirming or refuting the idea that critiques are typically more valid in identifying problems in one's work than in offering specific ideas for fixing problems, it does seem to align with our practical experience in receiving critiques ourselves. It also seems to logically follow from a view that the beginners' personal investment in their projects offers them a perspective on addressing shortcomings in their work that is not available to a more detached, external critic (McDonald & Michela, 2020).

Receiving critiques

- Share your goals for the project and for this critique session
- Provide context and background to help others offer informed critiques
- Walk through your work and explain your rationale
- Take notes on the feedback
- Ask questions to make sure you understand
- Avoid being defensive
- You don't have to agree to apply all the feedback you receive, but you should at least listen to everything you're told
- When evaluating the feedback you receive, remember that
  - If someone tells you there is a problem they're almost always right
  - If they try to specifically identify the problem they might be right; consider their suggestions in light of everything you know about your situation
  - If they try to tell you how to fix the problem they're only occasionally right; but you can still learn from their suggestions if you consider them carefully in light of everything else you know about your project

Figure 2. Strategies discussed with beginners before they receive their first critique.

During the first critique we assign each critic three or four beginners to work with, depending on the number of students enrolled in the introductory and advanced courses. We have experimented with both persistent groups, where each critic works with the same beginners throughout the semester, and flexible groups, where beginners are assigned to different critics in later critiques. We prefer the persistent model, with minimizes the amount of time required for students to re-explain the context of their projects during critiques two and three. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, the expectation is that critiques will take place in class, in the form of a small group discussion lead by the critic. As each critique begins we offer a set of guidelines or criteria to help guide the critiques (see Figure 3), but critics (as well as other beginners in the group) are encouraged to offer whatever feedback they think will be most useful. Each critic prompts beginners to present their work, offers input, and solicits input from other beginning students in his or her group. Each of the critiques lasts 60–75 minutes.

Evaluating prototypes

- **Alignment.** Is the prototype aligned with the learning goals? Is it appropriate for the learner group?
- **Rigor.** Does the prototype show evidence of thought, work, and attention to detail (that corresponds to the needed fidelity)
- **Evaluation.** Was there a defined purpose for the prototype? What was hoped to be learned from it? How was it evaluated? How are evaluation findings being used (or planned to be used)?

Figure 3. Example criteria to guide group critiques.

After each critique we hold a short debriefing session with the students. With critics we discuss what went well, what they would like to change during future critiques, and what they learned from the process of offering critiques. With beginners we help them evaluate the feedback they received, but also discuss what they learned about critiques more generally to help them prepare for future critique experiences.

Outcomes of the process

We have carried out versions of our group critiques for four years, refining them slightly each year to respond to feedback from students, what we have learned from our research, and our own evaluations of the process. An early evaluation is reported in McDonald et al. (2019), and the findings there seem to have been strengthened as we have improved the approach. Beginning students typically report the experience as helpful because the individual attention gives them a number of new ideas and perspectives to consider for their work. They also report that they develop confidence as they see the capabilities of critics who are only slightly ahead of them in the program, believing it to be an achievable goal for them to develop similar skills themselves. Critics also typically report the experience as helpful. Offering critiques improves their self-evaluation of their own skills. They often begin the process skeptical that they have useful suggestions to give beginning designers, or believing that their own skills have not advanced since they took the introductory class themselves. But over the course of the three critiques they often see that their instructional design knowledge and skills have both matured, and they are more capable than they originally judged themselves to be.

The second author of this chapter (Esther) experienced both sides of the process as a beginner and, a year later, as a critic. We report her experience in her voice:

As a beginner I came to the design review with a lot of anxiety about how my ideas would be perceived. Though I had experience as a teacher, I had no specific training in instructional design or the studio setting. Receiving critique from

anyone was nerve-wracking and especially from advanced students who I viewed as experts, at least compared to me. The actual review session was much less stressful than I had anticipated. The advanced student (critic) asked good questions that I didn't have all of the answers to, but which gave me things to think about. There was no judgment. Outside of class, I had the opportunity to work closely with my critic on another project, building a working relationship over several months. I quickly grew to trust him and felt that I could ask him for support in any questions that I might have. I gained both professional design experience and network connections.

A year later I returned as the advanced student, an intimidating "expert" as I had previously supposed advanced students were, realizing that I now had only one more year of experience to offer, feeling woefully inadequate. I was presented with the four new projects by students I hardly knew, who had varying levels of instructional design experience and significantly more expertise in their chosen subject matter than I. I spent most of the time trying to understand the projects, but felt internal pressure to come up with some helpful insights or suggestions. As I might have anticipated, there were projects for which I could suggest specific design changes and others for which I could suggest very little. Afterwards, I recognized that though I had gained design insight over the previous year, I could still learn much more and that simply being exposed to the four new design projects had expanded my still growing understanding of design.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored the design critique as a way that students and instructors in the design studio navigate the complex worlds of significance associated with studio pedagogy. Our intent was both theoretical and practical. We reviewed research that explains what it means for studio participants to navigate their worlds of significance using critiques as a concrete process. We also presented a case study of a group critique process and described how it is sensitive to the worlds of significance of design studio participants. Our intent in sharing this process is two-fold. First, we hope readers find our description and associated materials to be useful, and that they are able to achieve similar outcomes by adopting or adapting them for their own circumstances. We additionally hope that framing our process as an example of how critiques can support studio participants as they negotiate their worlds of significance is equally insightful, and illustrates how theoretical work into the critique can be practically applied in actual practice. By structuring critiques in ways that align with participants' efforts to balance the various goods they aim to achieve, or help them take stands on possibilities they see being made available to them, we believe that readers will be better able to contribute towards studio environments that participants find to be fulfilling and rewarding.

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