Transforming Pedagogies: Adapting art school peer group design critique (the 'crit') for the humanities

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Abstract
This article examines practice-based teaching methodologies found in the studio-based design critique ('crit'), and how they can be adapted to essay-based modules in the Humanities. Based on a small case study of a masters level module on film theory at a British university, the group crit was introduced as a mode of experiential learning in order to improve formative feedback. Structural and methodological changes were made to the module to improve student engagement, student writing, and the overall research environment. Changes resulted in an improvement in the students' essay-writing skills, and a high-level of student satisfaction in module feedback and quality, but the changes also increased student apprehension about the level of assessment as well as a fear for possible negative emotional responses in the crit environment. The article concludes with reflective strategies for mitigating challenges and future avenues of research into using the crit in the Humanities.

Keywords
Crit; formative feedback; reflective learning; art pedagogies; peer-learning.

Introduction

Formative feedback is an area of increasing importance in higher education. Defined as 'information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning' (Shute, 2008:154), it provides feedback when students are developing their projects before they are finally submitted. As such, formative feedback is differentiated from summative feedback, which summarises what has been learnt and is usually reported at the end of the course of instruction for purposes including the assignment of grades or the process of certification (Sadler, 1989:120). Formative feedback thus offers guidance whilst projects are forming, differing from summative feedback, which 'is essentially passive and does not normally have immediate impact on learning, although it often influences decisions which may have profound educational and personal consequences for the student' (ibid.:120).

This article examines a case study in which I adopted practice-based teaching methodologies found in the studio design critique ('crit') to a masters level module on film theory at a British university in order to add formative feedback mechanisms to the module. Specifically, I adapted methodologies used in a group crit, whereby students take turns presenting their own work in progress as well as giving feedback to their peers, and thus perform changing roles as students, colleagues, and instructors. In this case study, there were thirteen students in the module (twelve from the People's Republic of China and one from South Korea), who in addition to being English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students were also still adapting to the British education system. In previous semesters, I had noticed that some students often struggled with choosing essay topics and arguing their theses, and thus often began their research projects late. Furthermore, a recent student surveys at the university indicated that students often interpreted feedback as just being found in the comments that were listed after the grade, and not as an on-going process that continued throughout the module and programme. Since this module (along with other modules in the MA programme) had only one

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assessment – the final essay – I wanted to incorporate regular formative feedback mechanisms so that the students could receive more feedback and hopefully improve their work before submission.
Since I endeavoured to improve the students' access to formative feedback, I needed to introduce pedagogical and structural changes to the module so that feedback would be received throughout the semester, with the idea that this would guide and improve student work by stimulating students to begin their final essays earlier as well as improve their essay-writing skills by providing exercises to encourage reflective thinking. My hypothesis was that studio-based crit methodologies could be used in essay-based theory modules and that they would provide formative feedback which students could use to develop and improve their final projects. In doing this, I was inspired by my own previous experience as a student in art and design and the 'learning moments' I had had, and the support that I received not only from the instructor but from my fellow students. This experience had not only enriched my learning, but had also helped create a nurturing environment for creative experimentation, and I wanted to provide a similar experience to my students. Thus, I developed the idea of adapting the studio-based teaching methodology of the crit for essay-based modules on film theory in order to incorporate more opportunities for formative feedback, from both the instructor and from peers.

I intended these to not be separate one-to-one events or a 'one-off' practice, but as an ongoing group activity during the course of the semester, which I hoped would help form a 'conversation' about the students' research projects. Additionally, I hoped that the crit would enhance the students' critical awareness of their thinking and writing processes, and thus promote reflective learning. Furthermore, I also wanted to experiment in creating an environment where students could workshop ideas as they were forming and share resources. The studio is a creative environment where people work on individual art or design projects at individual desks or work stations, but in communal setting. When the studio is used for visual-based practices, such as art, architecture, and design, people can easily see what others are working on and how other projects are developing and discuss them; thus, this proximity encourages exchanges between creators. But essay-writing is different; unlike painting or sculpture, it does not leave a large visual footprint, usually being confined to a laptop screen or a notebook. Therefore, I needed to make changes in order to encourage this creative exchange of peer feedback. In addition to encouraging a creative space, I intended that the crit would help develop a peer-feedback mechanism; since these sessions were not graded, I hoped that they would encourage constructive peer feedback and discussion, thus helping to build an interactive peer-based research environment which had the potential to help these students in other modules as well as in writing their MA dissertations.

In this article, I examine the literature surrounding crit pedagogy and highlight elements that I adapted to a theory-based module. Next, I connect this with strategies to improve academic literacies and pedagogies of dialogic teaching in higher education. I then examine the results of my case study and conclude by considering how crit methodologies in theory-based non-art and design modules in the humanities and social sciences improve the modules' experiential-based learning. I argue that crits are not just limited to the studio arts but can be used in theory-based modules to improve and increase feedback, as well as overall student learning, engagement and satisfaction.

The Crit: A Literature Review

To explain the crit pedagogy further, the crit began in the 19th century, and is used in studio-based learning (such as art, design and architecture) as part of the formative and summative feedback process. Methodologically, the crit started as a 'Master-Apprentice' model, in which 'Masters' would give feedback to their apprentices during one-on-one and group critiques (Utaberta et al., 2011:94). In this model, the apprentices would be given tasks to complete, and the master would provide feedback. This would be an on-going cycle until the apprentices became proficient in their profession, and in turn became masters with their own apprentices. Its current use in the studio-based arts

include: desk crits (one-on-one feedback sessions with the student and teacher); formative crits (before work is submitted); summative crits (given for a grade); industry project crits (a panel with the teaching staff and industry professionals); group crits (where students present their work to the teacher and their fellow students); peer crits (students present their work to other students with instructor as a facilitator); and online crits (work is critiqued by other students online) (Blythman, et al., 2007:5).

The crit has been referred to as 'the glue that connects learning, teaching and assessment' (Blythman, et al., 2007:6), due to the fact that this single practice includes each of these functions. In the academic literature, the crit has been theorised as combining multiple learning approaches, providing multiple opportunities for feedback, and helping to develop increased student self-awareness of their own thinking and creative processes. Firstly, it offers multiple pedagogical methodologies, including learning by doing, learning through feedback, and reflecting on what has been learnt (Race, 2001:21-22). During the crit, students present their work, see how other students present their work, receive feedback, give feedback, and also experiencing how others are given feedback. This experience teaches students various skills, as it allows them the opportunities to practice presentation, communication, and team-building skills (Blythman, et al. 2007; White, 2007), and because it is a group practice in which everyone is encouraged to participate, it can lead to increased student engagement (White, 2007:180). Since it is based on doing, presenting, and reflecting on one's thoughts and practice, the crit allows for students to 'workshop' their projects, as it offers the opportunity for students to discuss and test their work and their ideas (Smith, 2011: 48-49; Blythman, et al., 2007), and can also inspire experimentation (Bartel, 2002).

Secondly, regarding feedback, the crit provides the opportunity to develop and improve projects before they are submitted; as Fusaro (2011) states, 'In-progress critiques allow for constructive criticism and suggestions right when students need it the most – when they have formed an idea and are in the midst of giving that idea form'. In addition to providing personal bespoke feedback, the group crit is a communal practice, and therefore creates the opportunity for students to learn from their peers' successes and failures, and thus benchmark their work with other students (Blythman, et al., 2007; Day, 2012). Thus, it has been lauded as 'a powerful example of formative self- and peer-assessment' (Horton, 2007: [2]).

Thirdly, the crit has been theorised as helping to develop critical thinking skills (Blythman, et al., 2007), self-reflection, self-awareness, self-assessment, and learner autonomy (Horton, 2007:2). During the crit, students do not only present their work, but receive feedback on it from students and teachers; furthermore, they are required to digest the feedback that is received as well as respond to it. This practice encourages student self-awareness, as well as provides an example of how to think critically about their work and the work of their peer group. Because it involves multiple feedback mechanisms, this repetition has the potential of increasing active-learning and lead to a deeper understanding of the functions of feedback, as well as how to give and receive it. Furthermore, it is a useful method for teaching problem-based learning (Simpson, 2012:68), and has been referred to as an exercise in metacognition (thinking about one's thinking), a type of reflective learning which is invaluable to the creation process. According to Dan Serig (2016:1), it can 'foster a certain kind of mindfulness referred to as metacognition: thinking about one's thinking. It involves planning, monitoring, and assessing understanding and performance, including a critical awareness of one's thinking and learning as well as oneself as a thinker and learner'. Ultimately, due to its genesis as a 'master-apprentice' methodology, the group crit endeavours to create 'masters' from the 'apprentices' through both individual and group practice.

The disadvantages about crit teaching methodologies include: students are sometimes unfamiliar with the process and do not know how to present as well as how to offer and accept constructive feedback;

it can be stressful if not managed properly, and can cause feelings of vulnerability, anger, resistance, defensiveness (Day, 2012); it is sometimes deemed to be adversarial, scary, and demoralising, and is associated 'with demoralising negativity, often devoid of constructive criticism and positive feedback' (Smith, 2011:51, 55); it can lead to resistance, as feedback is sometimes taken as personal criticism (Goldschmidt, et al., 2010: 285); it can be sometimes dominated by more extroverted students (Blythman, et al., 2007:9), and unequal power relations in the classroom can create competitive environments that lead to the 'fear of personal exposure, feelings of ridicule and shame, the destruction of self-esteem and lack of power in the feedback process itself', as well as the loss of 'respect' (Day, 2012). Thus, the group crit, although a powerful pedagogical tool, must be carefully managed and assessed in order to mitigate possible negative effects.

Academic Literacies and Dialogic Teaching

At the core of the crit is meaning making through on-site questioning and discussion, specifically as a group. In his analysis of teaching through discussion, Northedge writes that such a strategy is a transition from other methods which emphasize teaching didactically to one in which the instructor facilitates learning through conversation, thus 'making meaning jointly with others' (2003:173). Referring to this as 'intersubjectivity', he writes that it allows the teachers and the students to both frame knowledge as well as generate meaning together – teachers help introduce new concepts and navigate academic specialist discourse through 'opening up 'conversations' with [the students] and sharing in a flow of meaning', and that the students in turn 'join with their teacher in sharing meaning… [and] also share something of the frame of reference that sustains it' (173). This connects to the use of dialogic teaching in higher education, which uses dialogue between teachers and students in order to teach, learn and develop ideas. This strategy differs from a 'recitation script' in which teachers talk and students listen, and instead uses questioning and discussion to build knowledge, while also helping students improve their language and communication skills (Hardman, 2008). As such, it is a collective, reciprocal, cumulative, and purposeful experience, since students and teachers work together, share ideas, and build on one another's ideas, in order to meet an educational goal (Hardman 2008:32, referencing Alexander, 2006).

Methodology

As explained in the introduction, a recent student survey held at the university had reported that students interpreted feedback as the written responses they would receive on assignments and did not include the feedback that they had received in seminars or tutorials. Furthermore, students appeared to view feedback as something that only occurred at the end of the module, after the final assessments were submitted and graded. After considering these challenges, I turned to sources on 'experiential learning'. In experiential learning, people are believed to construct knowledge based on their personal experience (Kolb and Kolb, 2013:2). Thus, learning is viewed as a 'process' rather than an 'outcome', in which 'knowledge is modified and re-formed' in the experience of learning (ibid.: 6). To examine this further, Alice and David Kolb argue that knowledge is the combination of 'grasping experience' ('the process of taking in information') and 'transforming experience' ('how individuals interpret and act on that information') (ibid.:7). To illustrate this, they developed the 'Experiential Learning Cycle', which is 'driven by the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction' and includes four 'learning modes' – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation - theorising that 'learning arises from the resolution of creative tension among these four learning modes' (ibid.:8).

Inspired by this pedagogical theory, I endeavoured to modify the group crit for use in a module that was essay-based, not practice-based as found in architecture, art, and design. I wanted to create a dynamic learning environment whereby students could workshop their ideas with other students in order to create a peer-based feedback system as well as create a learning community to support students in the programme. To reflect on experiential learning further, in film theory modules,

students usually choose or create an essay question, prepare a literature review, develop a thesis, and argue it. Sometimes they are asked to discuss their research question and thesis with the instructor before they write the essay, but often there is little or no discussion beforehand. According to the cycle, this involves abstract conceptualisation (thinking about the theories and the secondary literature, etc.) and active experimentation (using the theories and the secondary literature and the author's thesis to write the essay). Introducing a crit component methodology to theory-based modules thus has the potential to improve learning by creating a space for concrete experience (by presenting their research and by observing the projects of other students and also how the instructor and other students give feedback), as well as reflective observation (during the crit, the student does not only present their research but also reflects on how their research developed, as well as reflects on the experience afterwards). Thus, crits offer a methodology to create an environment of experiential learning in the classroom.

Results & Discussion

In addition to one-on-one tutorials with the instructor, students were given two opportunities to 'workshop' ideas with the group: once as they were forming their ideas and possible arguments, and a second time after they had developed their literature review and thesis. Students were therefore required to communicate their project and enter a discussion with their teacher and fellow students. Using the crit during the time allocated for seminars logically made sense, as the seminar was a place to discuss and debate the module's reading; now, it could also be used to examine the students' own work. Furthermore, it was similar to a conference, in which one would present their research and then receive feedback as well as respond to this feedback, creating a dialogue not only about the research but also its criticisms, defence, and future possible adjustments. Finally, although it was a group crit, it was different than group work, in that ultimately the final product would be an individual written essay, albeit with feedback from the larger group as well as the instructor.

The structure and the instructions to the students included:

1. Group discussion of research projects underway. During this session, each student delivers a short presentation (5-10 minutes) on their research projects in progress, and answers questions from the class. Students may use visual aids if they wish (such as PowerPoint or film clips). This assessment is not graded.
2. Research Proposal submitted to the instructor two weeks later. This assessment is not graded.
3. Group discussion session of research projects underway (a month later). During this session, each student delivers a short presentation (5-10 minutes) on their research projects in progress, and answers questions from the class. Students may use visual aids if they wish (such as PowerPoint or film clips). This assessment is not graded.
4. Optional one-on-one tutorials with instructor
5. Final essay submission (a month later).

As indicated in the instructions, I highlighted that these activities were not to be graded; I did this in order to alleviate the fear and apprehension that the students may have felt from having many assessments for the same module. During the first lecture, I reviewed the structure of the module and its assessments, stressing that its structure and assessments endeavoured to create an ongoing 'conversation' about the students' projects, so that they would have the opportunity to workshop their ideas, improve how these ideas were communicated, and receive feedback on their projects before they were submitted. I stressed that these changes were made so that the module was more student-centred and hoped that it would encourage the development of a student-led learning community.

The first crit session presented some challenges. Students presented their work but seemed hesitant to comment on the work of others. In order to initiate the conversation, I tried to draw comparisons between student research projects, in an attempt to discuss common approaches or suggest how these projects could learn from one another. This worked to some extent, but I had to be careful to not dominate the discussion, since that would have lost the purpose of the crit and would have shifted the power dynamics. Furthermore, this intervention would have disturbed the aforementioned teaching through discussion (Northedge, 2003), and the very premise of dialogic teaching – using dialogue to develop ideas. After the first crit, I reflected on the students' reticence to discuss others' research projects. I discussed the crit process in the lecture and reminded the students that the purpose of the crit was not to negatively criticise, but instead to ask questions and create a discussion about the research project being presented. During the second crit session, students were less reticent and were more engaged; this could have been due to many factors, such as having already experienced a crit session and gone through that experience, or it might have been because they had been in the module longer and felt more confident. In the second crit, the discussions lasted longer than those of the first crit and required less prompting from me.

Outcome

Overall, the outcomes were positive: there was a marked improvement with student engagement with their projects and increased student discussion and participation during seminars; for instance, previously I had had to offer many discussion prompts during seminars, but the later seminars became increasingly student-led. The class average was an astounding 66% (four students received 'Distinctions' and five received 'Merits'), which contrasted with other modules in the MA programme that had averages in the 50s and low 60s. Furthermore, the student evaluations were very strong. During the final week of class, the university's end-of-semester form was circulated to the students anonymously. As noted in the introduction, since feedback had been highlighted as one of the areas that the university would like to develop, the first two questions of the university's form focussed on obtaining data in regards to feedback. The final scores for the survey were:

- Feedback on my work has been timely – 100%
- I have received helpful comments regarding my work – 100%
- Overall I am satisfied with the quality of this module – 100%
- Overall, I am satisfied with the module coordinator – 100%

In the survey, students were able to write comments, which included:

- 'feedback very useful'
- 'discussion is really helpful in changing ideas'
- 'the presentations help me to improve my argument'

Challenges & Reflection

Although the outcome was positive, during the crit process I learnt that I needed to better define the importance of dialogic teaching, and how teaching, learning, and developing ideas can be achieved through conversation and dialog (Northedge, 2003; Hardman, 2008), as well as explain the stages of the crit, as it was a method unfamiliar to the students. When we began, the students were not sure what was expected of them; additionally, I sensed that some of them were reticent to discuss their projects with the entire class, as they were unsure how developed the other students' projects were. In other modules, they had had previous experiences giving presentations on completed research, so being asked to present research in development was confusing for some.

Turning to the academic literature on the crit, as a form of peer feedback and assessment. Although academic studies have indicated that students appreciated the benefits of peer assessment (Gatfield,

1999; Hanrahan and Isaacs, 2001; Llado et al., 2014; Wen and Tsai, 2006), challenges were that it was also considered difficult to be objective and critical (Lindblom-Ylanne, Pihlajamaki and Kotas, 2006), and there were reported difficulties in students trusting their peers (Llado et al., 2014), especially if students were not trained properly on how to do peer assessment (Hanrahan and Isaacs, 2001). Further examining the academic literature on the crit and how it functions, several effective methods are given, which fall under the following themes: instructor roles and behaviour; the crit process; and the emotional component of the crit. In regards to the first theme of instructor roles and behaviour, the instructor should function as authority, facilitator, and 'buddy' (Goldschmidt, et al., 2010:286-7). Olweny (2020) developed a group crit practice titled 'Back Seat instructor', in which the instructor would sit at the back of the class in order to not be its visual 'leader', which was based on Nelson Mandela's philosophy of 'leading from behind', whereby leaders would shepherd from behind, interacting when needed. In this practice, reviews would be led by the students, who would give feedback directly to their peers, and instructors would only interrupt if needed in order to provide clarification or guiding the class back to the crit's objectives. Olweny found that this practice shifted the power dynamics of the room, in that instructors would no longer be the sole power in the classroom.

In regards to improving the crit process, it is advised explain the process and why the class is doing it before the crit begins (Day, 2012), and practice it in smaller groups before the larger group crit (Utaberta et al., 2011:101). Several researchers stress the importance of making it a student-centred process, not an educator-centred one (Utaberta et al., 2011:101) by maintaining student engagement through the group crit process (Blythman, 2007). If difficulties arise during the crit, the instructor should model appropriate feedback (Blythman, 2007), by beginning with positive comments about the project (Utaberta et al., 2011:101) and keeping the feedback specific and constructive; since the crit's purpose is to help the student improve their projects, it must be remembered that its function is to benefit and not denigrate the students (Fusell, 2016). A further strategy includes practicing giving and receiving feedback (Utaberta et al., 2011:101), while reminding students 'you are not your work' but rather that the work is a product that can be improved (Fussell, 2016). It is also important to give time for students to collectively unpack the critique discussion (Utaberta et al., 2011:101), and remember to 'feed forward', and 'finish the session with clear strategies to progress their work.' (Smith, 2011:53-54). Finally, feedback usually is given orally during a crit, but sometimes verbal feedback could be missed or misinterpreted by nervous students; thus, it would be stronger to also provide written feedback as well, perhaps by using a form (Bartel, 2012) or by written summaries (Olweny, 2020:389).

Finally, regarding the emotional component of the crit, many of the criticisms of the crit centre on negative emotional responses to the crit environment. To mitigate this, Bartel (2017) advocates for an 'empathic critique', which is defined as a 'collaboration, not competition' in that 'competition is replaced by mutual discovery'. In this method, instructors act empathically to 'affirm, catalyze, and provide the lubricants to keep learning processes moving, and to reduce impediments, frustrations, defeatism, pessimism, and any sense of badness'. The desired effects of this strategy is for students to help and support one another on their projects and their learning processes.

Conclusion and Future Areas of Inquiry

As previously noted, although the student evaluations were positive, applying this experience was not without its challenges. In the future, I hope to improve this methodology as well as better survey the students about their experiences in order to improve it. To mitigate the students' hesitance and use the strategies of the 'empathic critique', in the future I plan to change the approach of the crits: in the first crit, the students could present the ideas and research that they are currently considering and would be asked to highlight the sections that they felt needed the most development and feedback. This would change the atmosphere of the crit to becoming a group brainstorming/help session and

assist in creating an environment to foster the aforementioned 'empathic critique,' in which Bartel (2017) explains 'All participants are acting in their own best interest by being their naturally helpful selves. Competition is replaced by mutual discovery.' The second crit would include a reflective section on the feedback received from the first crit. This would include the feedback that the student personally received as well as the feedback given to other students that was pertinent to their projects, and explanation of how it affected their research project. This section based on reflection would provide the context of their thought process before the students presented their more developed research project. Additionally, I would request each student to send a reflective email after each crit, including what they learnt, what they were confused about, what changes (if any) they were planning on making to their project, and any additional information that they wanted to impart about their projects. Finally, I would send the students a survey after the first crit that they could anonymously return to me, which would ask them about their experience of the crit and what should change for the second crit. In conclusion, I intend to develop this learning practice, and revisit in the future to better assess its capacity to increase and improve student feedback and engagement, as well as measure if it can help in the development of a larger peer-learning community.

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