

# CRITIQUE FROM A DISTANCE: A NEW APPROACH

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## Abstract

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching an art or design course online is replicating critique. Critique is the culmination of hours, days, or weeks of work on a specified task; it is an opportunity for students to share the reasons behind their creations and also secure feedback from the instructor and peers. Learning to talk about one's work as well as take constructive criticism is an extremely important skill and should not be overlooked when developing an online section of a design/art course. Several different options have been tried to replicate critique in the online environment; the researcher would like to propose a comparison study of these techniques to determine which option offers the most benefit to students. The study would compare a live synchronous session, an asynchronous discussion forum, and an interactive media space discussion tool for class critique in a foundation graphic design course. The areas of study will include student satisfaction, the ability of students to understand the comments in order to redesign their work for resubmission, and ease of use and support of each of the instructional tools as indicated by the faculty.

The benefit of critique is that students can work through their mistakes and use the suggestions of both the instructor and fellow classmates to redesign a final piece that becomes a valuable learning experience. The online environment should offer an option for critique that can mirror the face-to-face environment as closely as possible. This study will help to determine if there is an option for simulating critique in the online environment that is acceptable to both faculty and students.

Keywords: critique, online, art, design.

## INTRODUCTION

The design critique is the class situation where instructors make evaluations of student's work, teach and transmit some of the values of the design culture [1]. Presentation skills are essential for a designer to succeed in the selling of their ideas; if a student cannot express themselves with passion, enthusiasm, and one hundred percent confidence in their concept, chances are the idea will never amount to anything [2]. Many great ideas never reach fruition because the architect of the thought was unable to communicate the inspiration in a cohesive and understandable way. Presenting to a client quickly becomes a more emotionally charged situation for even the most composed student; presentations call for a set of skills and attitudes that do not always come naturally [3]. An important skill for any designer to master is the ability to communicate effectively with the client. Girard [4] explains that poor communication is a surefire way to damage any project or relationship.

An effective collaborative experience benefits both student and instructor if they are able to apply the lessons learned beyond the instructional setting [5]. By capturing students' interests and focusing their attention, instructors can affect the degree of learning [6]. The focus of teaching design follows a tradition of open-ended projects and structured conversations through a public presentation of work [7]. In a study by Meyer & McNeal [8], faculty that incorporated online discussions found that the format elicited more student interaction; the wallflower could not hide and students could take time to find the right words for an appropriate posting. Horton [9] maintained that group critique takes advantage of discussion forums to help learners learn from other learners.

Kuo, Walker, Bellan, Schroder, and Kuo [10] contended synchronous learning offers the advantage of real-time communication and immediate feedback between the instructor and the learners and also between the learners themselves. Synchronous learning communities offer a more social experience and avoid frustration by allowing questions to be asked and answered in real time [11]. Students who are able to engage in synchronous interactions with the instructor and peers develop higher order thinking skills [10].

Online courses can offer the opportunity for a highly social learning environment [12]. By embedding interactivity in learning, the instructor exploits the human need for socialization [13], which in turn offers another element to the learning environment. Instructors or course developers can design

activities that incorporate techniques, which favor a more interactive learning process; these interactivities and social opportunities allow all students to participate, share thoughts, and develop ideas [14]. The instructor can invite students to focus attention on the subject and encourage them to think deeply and broadly about what they are learning, adopting a new perspective on the subject [9].

Learning is not limited to a one-way linear path from instructor to student, learners want to connect to a network to share and find new information, modify their beliefs based on the new learning, and share these realizations [5]. Students want work that enables them to demonstrate and improve their sense of themselves as competent and successful people [15]; to that end this research study attempts to discover student and instructor preference for critique in the online learning environment based on positive feedback concerning improvements in design. Instructors need to integrate the technology that will allow them to customize the educational experience for their students. The interactive nature of critique allows the student to move beyond what they know and have experienced into how they will grow in learning and develop the ability to interact with others to produce better results. Continued focus and support of this technology-rich and innovation-driven learning experience can redefine the way our students learn from critique with the ultimate outcome of improved learning.

The literature stresses the importance of critique in a design curriculum but does not offer any guidance as to what modes have been found effective or ineffective, recommended or not recommended, nor the advantages or disadvantages. There are a variety of articles that examine discussion forums, asynchronous versus synchronous learning, and the need for engaging and interactive social activities as part of the online environment; but, there is a lack of research on teaching design-oriented classes that include a critique component and how the critique exercise is satisfied. This study would try to add to the individual knowledge base of several elements with the overachiever theme of critique as the focus.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study will compare three different modes of offering critique in an online class by requiring students to use each mode once during the semester: a live synchronous session, an asynchronous discussion forum, and an interactive media space discussion tool. Students must learn how to talk about their designs and take criticism to work in the industry and critique in class is beneficial because they can work through their mistakes by using the suggestions of both the instructor and fellow classmates to redesign a final piece that becomes portfolio quality work. The online environment should offer an option for critique that can mirror the face-to-face environment as closely as possible. This study will help to determine if there is an option for simulating critique in the online environment that is acceptable to both faculty and students.

### **Participants**

University students required to take the foundation graphic design course; no specific data is needed regarding age or gender for this study. The target number of participants would be two full class sections of fourteen students and two professors each semester. Participants will not be compensated for the study.

### **Collection Instruments and Modes of Analysis**

One of the three modes being studied is the use of the discussion forum for critique. The activity incorporates various asynchronous discussions in both small and large group formats. Each student would post their assignment final comp to a public post area in the course. Everyone will have the opportunity to view each student's work and then comment on the work in the discussion forum created specifically for critique of that assignment. The discussion forum is more practical than email because it allows other students to follow the "thread" of the discussion and offer comments as they feel inclined. This type of asynchronous collaborative activity will give students the opportunity to take their time to look at the work and also to formulate responses. Students will be instructed not to read others' comments before submitting comments themselves thereby giving the owner of the design a real sense of what viewers are seeing. If many students make similar comments about a piece, then there is a likelihood that a change needs to be made.

Another mode to be studied is the "live" online synchronous critique. This option will be scheduled in advance so students can plan their schedules accordingly. A video chat type tool will be implemented for this critique mode and all students will be instructed of the format to upload their piece when it is

their turn, explain the work, and listen for responses. Other students and the instructor will then have the opportunity to comment on the work.

The third mode to be studied is an asynchronous audio/video option that will allow students to post their work and comment on others using the computer's microphone. The files and audio comments will be stored on a cloud based system for students to access during the critique process. The requirements would be the same as in the other examples, with student comments on successful elements as well as items that could be changed with suggestions for changes required. This option will offer more flexibility similar to the discussion forum posts because it offers time to contemplate the best response or comments for each piece.

Data will be collected in the form of surveys. There will be a brief survey after each critique and one final survey after all modes have been explored. No personal data will be collected through the survey. The instructors will also complete a survey after each method is explored and an interview will be conducted at the end of the semester with the instructors to discuss the pros and cons of each option. The improvements in the quality of portfolio pieces will be the major determinant of success. Data will be collected for two semesters from two different sections, which will offer a small but representational pool of students.

## RESULTS

The preliminary results of the testing show a positive correlation between the posited outcome and the experienced outcome. The fact remains that additional and more exhaustive testing will be necessary to prove the validity of the study. As these further results are compiled, we can define the outcome and differentiate among the positive returns and the negative ones. There will be limitations in this study, including the technical proficiencies of students and the small participant pool, as well as the subjective nature of design. Determining success will require analyzing survey data for opinions as well as evaluating students' final comps for the correct use of elements and principles of design. There are no hard fast rules of design so the interpretation will be left to the instructors. The study will not prove success or failure; it will endeavor to determine the most preferred option of offering critique in the online environment based on the outlined parameters.

## CONCLUSIONS

Is there a preferred method of critique in an online design course? Is the preference related to ease of use, student and instructor preference, or the ability to retain a better understanding of techniques and suggestions? The study will compare three different modes of offering critique in an online class by requiring students to use each mode once during the semester. Students are not fond of having their work evaluated but critique is an important skill for a designer to learn; communication is imperative, students must be able to talk about their work, and comment effectively on others' work. All critique modes will be reviewed within a 24-hour period from assignment submission to finalized critique.

A study looking at different modes of critique in the online environment will benefit all areas of design that use critique as a teaching methodology. The instructor will assign the critique for each assignment so that all students will be using the same mode at the same time. Each critique will give the students the opportunity to learn from each other as well as the instructor but using a different format each time, the students will then have the option to use the suggestions given during the critique exercise to enhance their pieces and resubmit for a higher grade. The re-submissions will help the instructor gauge how much the student was able to absorb and understand from the critique exercise. Students would be instructed to identify one element that works well in each design they critique and select two items that could use changes. The two comments concerning changes must be accompanied by suggestions for improving those elements that need change. The designer must be able to offer opinion, criticism, as well as support, in order to become proficient in the give and take of design refinement. Although the true passion and spark that is critical to design will not be challenged, the practical implementation of the idea is typically collaborative, painful, and sometimes frustrating.

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