
A reflection on the pros and cons of the "crit" as a method for delivering feedback and conducting assessment: a case study

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Abstract

The 'crit' is a feedback and assessment method used in architectural education and many other art and design subjects. It is unquestioningly adopted as the singular method for formative feedback and assessment. This paper reflects on the 'crit' in light of contemporary teaching theory and identifies a number of its strengths and shortcomings. Reflection on practice is based on a case-study of the use of this approach in one programme area. Recognising that the 'crit' is unlikely to be supplanted by any other feedback or assessment method, reflection has generated suggestions as to how it could become a more effective learning tool.

Introduction

"The methods we use to assess students are one of the most critical of all influences on their learning."
(Ramsden 2003 p67)

The 'crit' provides a forum for feedback and assessment both during and at the conclusion of a design project. It has been the foundation of assessment within architectural education since the nineteenth century. Consequently it is often difficult to consider it objectively much less question its contribution to contemporary learning and teaching (Nicol & Pilling 2000). It might be the predominant assessment method used for design modules, but research suggests it is also the greatest source of student dissatisfaction (Anthony 1991).

At its best the 'crit' can be a powerful learning experience, providing the student with a critical and constructive evaluation of their work. At its worst it can be adversarial, subjective and undermining. Assessment is supposed to be transparent and free of bias (Brown & Smith 1997) but this is not always the reality.

Furthermore it is frequently and forcefully argued that assessment methods should be varied (Race 2001), but all too often the 'crit' is the default method of appraisal. It is vital, therefore, to 'crit' the 'crit', and contemplate to what extent it meets the objectives of contemporary higher education teaching theory.

A critical reflection of the 'crit'

The operation of this 'crit' in this case study involves each student presenting drawings and models before a small panel of tutors and an audience of their peers, and describing the ideas underpinning their work. The tutors - varying in number from two to six or more - then ask questions and provide feedback on strengths, weaknesses and areas for development while a peer records the tutors' commentary for future reference. A mark is awarded at the final 'crit', although this may be moderated at a Portfolio Review stage where the work of each student is re-examined by all the tutors for that level. This ensures parity and also provides a second tier of feedback.

Consistency and reliability

Assessment is generally divided between two methods of referencing: norm and criterion. Norm referencing involves establishing the relative position of a student within the given cohort, whereas 'criterion referencing uses predetermined 'criteria to judge an individual's ability independently of other students. In this case, the 'crit' is a criterion referenced assessment method.

Because it is a creative subject, architectural design is by its very nature a divergent, pluralistic process where there can be a very broad range of solutions to a given problem, limited only by the creator's imagination. Students develop individual, bespoke designs to a given project brief and assessment must be responsive to this range of alternative outcomes. Hence, "the notion of being correct gives way to other assessments of value, such as aesthetic appeal, originality, usefulness, self expression, creativity and so on" (Biggs 2003, p159). Logically, the methods by which a student's work is assessed should be capable of judging the broad spectrum of solutions that students present. If, as Ramsden (2003 p4) suggests, "*Learning [is] a qualitative change in a person's view of reality*", then any assessment of learning must involve a qualitative measure. The ability of the 'crit' to achieve this is certainly one of its key strengths. However, a frequent criticism of qualitative assessment is that it is subjective and unreliable. Biggs (2003, p163) identifies two facets of reliability vital to the criterion referenced method – *intra* and *inter* judge reliability. Intra-judge reliability refers to whether the same person makes the same judgement about the same performance on two different occasions? The implication in this case is that continuity must be ensured between formative judgements, made at interim 'crits', and the summative assessment determined at the final 'crit'. Conversely, inter-judge reliability considers whether different judges make the

same judgement about the same performance on the same occasion? Inter-judge requirements permeate throughout both formative and summative 'crit' sessions and it is in this area particularly that issues of consistency and reliability arise.

Due to the size of undergraduate cohorts in this case study, 'crits' are usually split between three or four panels of tutors assessing different groups simultaneously. There can be little certainty that different panels assess consistently to the same standards. While tutors within an individual panel will naturally confer, dialogue across the broader cohort only occurs at Portfolio Review stage at the end of each Semester, sometimes long after the initial 'crit', when comparisons are harder to make.

In addition to this, it is apparent that standards of inter-judge reliability often fall short due to a lack of a robust assessment framework. Biggs (2003) states that reliability depends on the ability of tutors to make consistent judgements and that they should therefore be familiar with, and know how to use, the assessment framework within which these will be made. In practice such a framework is either flawed or absent entirely, leaving tutors without an understanding of the required outcomes at each 'crit' and no direction as to what they should provide feedback on. As a result, the reliability of the 'crit' is weakened. Disappointingly, reflection suggests this often to be the case and is at the root of some of the issues explained below.

Outcome alignment and communication of assessment criteria

Two principal concerns regarding the effectiveness of the 'crit' are: the lack of alignment between learning outcomes and assessment criteria and poor communication of both to student and tutor alike. Cohen (1987) considers that a

critical feature of mastery learning, which is comparable to architectural design modules in many respects, is the creation of assessment tests prior to designing the programme, suggesting that this outcome-driven style of instructional design would generate more aligned teaching than traditional approaches. However the advantage of that outcome-driven process is surely lost if it is not communicated effectively to the tutors providing feedback, as well as to the students themselves? Some tutors participating in 'crits' may not even have read the design brief for the project in which the required outcomes are prescribed. These issues are by no means unique to LJMU - research undertaken by the universities of Sheffield and De Montfort has prompted the latter to revise and redesign project 'crits' to ensure greater structure and the provision of more explicit learning outcomes (Nicol & Pilling 2000).

The course framework does identify which learning outcomes relate to which assessment criteria, but these are often not in complete alignment, reducing the potential depth of learning. Constructive alignment (Biggs 2003) demands that curriculum objectives (learning outcomes) should state the level of understanding required of students. While there is mention of some higher order verbs within the assessment criteria (for example, 'assimilate', 'interpret', 'engage') and these function to encourage deeper learning, they fail to direct the tutor in how to determine the level of understanding and engagement reached. These outcomes are listed in widely available course documentation, but assessment criteria are only stated in the Assessment Record. Disconcertingly, the first time a student sees this, and thus the criteria, is when it is returned to them with written feedback *after* assessment has taken place.

A further serious issue is that the Assessment Record is not referred to in interim 'crits', with the consequence that tutors lack focus for providing feedback at the very stages where they could influence a student's final performance. In the absence of this, feedback is usually given on the basis of tutors' instincts and experience. Consequently, the student, unaware of the assessment criteria, uses this to develop their project in anticipation of the final 'crit'. Deviation from learning outcomes is thus inevitably exacerbated.

Farmer and Eastcott (1998) assert that students' knowledge of assessment criteria is especially important in subjects that employ criterion-referenced assessment and that without careful briefing students can become disorientated by assessments that demand displays of mastery and excellence. Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) argue that one of the most effective ways to influence students and direct their attention toward important elements of the course is to explain the mechanics of marking criteria. Transparent communication of information about assessment criteria is not only good practice, but also part of LJMU's *Effective Practice in Assessment* (LJMU 2008), which states that clear and consistent assessment criteria should be included in module handbooks.

Brown et al. (1998) recognise that unless there is crystal-clear, shared agreement of the objectives of the brief between design students and tutors, judgement is often based on subjectivity and 'gut reaction'. Whilst issuing assessment criteria with the design brief is a move in a positive direction, it does not necessarily ensure that they have been understood. They suggest that in order to overcome this problem, students should be shown a range of previously submitted work. By reviewing both good and bad examples of other students' work and, crucially, discussing how tutors arrived at their marks, students are more

likely to understand what is to be achieved and how they can achieve it. Of course some tutors may object to the setting out of assessment criteria as being too directional, and likely to inhibit students' creativity. This argument might also be levelled at the notion of demonstrating assessment methodology through previous examples of students' work. There is clearly a delicate balance to be struck between informing – but not leading – students.

Do we value process or product?

Interestingly, Knight (1998) argues that how we choose to assess reflects what we value and that exclusive reliance on the 'crit' might place disproportionate emphasis on certain values. This is not necessarily a shortcoming, depending on whether or not those values are aligned with, and reflect, desired learning outcomes. The assessment method should reflect the goals of learning (Ramsden 2003). Webster (2007) proposes that learning outcomes reflect what tutors truly value in the process of designing, including creativity, reflection and risk-taking. It follows that assessment criteria should be written to align with these outcomes.

However there are other values associated with the 'crit' (such as the ability to present effectively) which often receive more emphasis than, for example, the content of the presentation or the process a student experienced to arrive at it. Focus is then weighted towards the presentation as a product, as opposed to design process (Anthony 1991). Arguably, the design process is more important than the product it creates, and so greater credence should be given to it in both assessment and feedback. Whilst a product is a point of conclusion, the student's methodology is something that can maintain momentum, develop and evolve. Therefore rather than focusing on the design that has been produced or how it is represented, assessment criteria and feedback should be more geared towards evaluating the student's design process.

An immediate dialogue of feedback

Knight (1998) recognises that learning is dependent on feedback and that to be of maximum benefit it must be provided promptly. It is a tremendous advantage of the 'crit' as an assessment method that it provides immediate feedback and that there is opportunity for dialogue between student and tutor. That said, generic criticism of feedback frequently cites that it is so bound to the specifics of the task at hand that it fails to offer enough useful guidance for doing better on the next (Knight 1998). While this may be acceptable at an interim 'crit' (where feedback can be incorporated into the development of that specific design), at a final 'crit' feedback provided should 'feed forward' into subsequent projects, enabling students to reflect on what they have done in a way that will benefit future work (Gibbs 1988). This underpins the emphasis on process, not product, as identified above.

Positive versus negative feedback

To students, the 'crit' is often a source of fear and anxiety. Whilst it is likely that this is a complaint made of many assessment methods, it is an acute weakness of the 'crit' as it obstructs understanding and absorption of feedback. Students have the additional stress of presenting their work 'live' to tutors and in front of their peers. Their state of mind, in itself, can inhibit their ability to absorb and process feedback, but it is compounded by that feedback being delivered verbally because they have to absorb and understand it on the spot. This is particularly true if that feedback is overtly negative; "... [a juror] told a student to sit down and shut up in the middle of his presentation for final juries. He proceeded to spend 18 minutes tearing him apart" (Anthony 1991 p34). However, Knight (2002) remarks that when feedback includes both positive and negative elements, even the order in which the two are delivered affects the way it is received. For instance, increased self-esteem and a reduction in anxiety are associated with giving

positive feedback first. Falchikov (1998) argues that negative feedback has been found to lead to self-devaluative responses that interfere with the reception of information; feedback is not absorbed and in some cases sparks denial on the part of the recipient. Jacobs (1974) found that high levels of tension were associated with verbal delivery of negative feedback in particular. To be effectively received verbal feedback should be constructive and carefully sequenced with positive commentary and not perceived as purposefully destructive.

Student reflection

Race (1998) suggests that learners rarely have the time or opportunity to 'make sense' of the experience of assessment or feedback and that there needs to be an opportunity for reflection to digest both the 'crit' itself and the feedback received, to understand it and place it in perspective. The design project, as a form of Problem Based Learning, has parallels to Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning in which observation and reflection on experiences leads to the assimilation of new abstract concepts which can be tested, observed and reflected upon. Without the directed opportunity to reflect on all three strands – experience of the project itself, the 'crit' and feedback received – the learning cycle is broken.

Additionally, while feedback is given to students immediately there is little control over the effective and productive use of that information beyond the 'crit'. During the session numerous comments are made but, primarily because they are minuted by a peer, it is difficult to ensure that comments are weighted according to their importance and followed up in the interests of the individual student's personal development. However, the 'crit' ought to provide an opportunity for students to develop their own critical awareness skills through discussion of peers' work. The reality is that this does not

occur for although a student's peers will attend the 'crit' and minute feedback, they rarely contribute to conversations concerning each other's work, usually for fear of offence. One alternative approach that may help overcome this obstacle is the implementation of formal peer assessment – ideally at a formative stage in learning – perhaps with students evolving their own assessment criteria. It is reasonable to expect that as their capacity to reflect and self-criticise becomes more refined, students' abilities to relate feedback to Personal Development Planning (PDP) will improve.

Students should be actively encouraged to reflect on their experience and identify those elements that can be taken forward to enhance the design process in future. PDP does this to some extent, but it is not encouraged specifically following each 'crit'. Peer assessment has been recognised as promoting skills of reflection and critical analysis (Falchikov 1998) and therefore could help address this breakdown in the learning cycle by encouraging students to reflect on the work of both their peers and themselves in their personal development.

It is not only students that should be reflecting on 'crits'. Ramsden (2003 p177) argues, *"Assessment is about several things at once... It concerns the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning; it involves us in learning from our students' experiences, and about changing ourselves as well as our students."* Crits should be used as an evaluative tool for tutors to reflect on their teaching. If students are not achieving the desired learning outcomes, then teaching methods must be scrutinised to establish why (Biggs 1989). Crits then become more than a method of assessing students and delivering feedback, they also become a mechanism to reflect on and evaluate teaching.

Conclusion - Pros and the cons of the 'crit'

From this case study of the 'crit' as a method of delivering feedback and assessing students, the pros and cons may be summarised as follows:

Pros

- Highly responsive to diverse range of students' solutions to a given project
- Provides immediate feedback
- Feedback takes place as a dialogue – not monologue
- Can provide several different points of view simultaneously

Cons

- Can be perceived as subjective
- Inconsistency between parallel 'crit' panels
- Lacks transparency
- Can confuse students
- Generates fear in students
- Ineffective communication of assessment objectives and criteria, to both students and tutors
- Tutors' focus on presentation may fail to assess or provide feedback on objectives / desired outcomes

Considerations for evolving the 'crit'

The 'crit' in this case study evidently has several strengths but there are a number of fundamental shortcomings that need to be addressed to increase its value. How can the format of the 'crit' become less confrontational, perceived more as a forum for learning, become more engaged with determining the depth of understanding, and give greater credence to the design 'process' rather than 'product', especially in relation to the provision of feedback? It is essential that students and tutors alike perceive the 'crit' as an opportunity to learn as opposed to an assessment process, for as Ramsden (2003, p178) states: "*[Tutors] regard assessment as an addition to teaching, rather than an essential part of it. It is symptomatic of this view that assessment techniques come to be regarded as being more important than the subject matter that the methods are assessing...*" Analysis of the case study presents the following recommendations for improving the 'crit' as an assessment method:

Assessment criteria and their application must be explicit, transparent and well-known

It is evident that there needs to be proactive dissemination of assessment objectives to both students and staff and that criteria need to be more strategically aligned to learning outcomes. As Biggs (2003 p.162) states, "*[The students] should be more actively involved in knowing what the criteria really mean. They should learn how to apply the criteria, to themselves and to others.*" Race (1998) suggests that details of the assessment process and criteria should be built into course documentation, for example within the Student Handbook. However, students should also be shown a range of previous work, with tutors explaining how the criteria led them to award high and low marks, so that they understand both the criteria and how they are applied. This would address the former of Biggs' points - peer assessment could address the latter. Put simply, there needs to be much greater transparency in the assessment process so that students understand not just what projects are assessed against but more importantly, the rationale behind tutors' approach to assessment and feedback.

Crits and feedback should be structured with consistent reference to the assessment objectives

The criteria must be written so as to facilitate a consistent critique of the diverse range of work being assessed. Biggs (2003 p48) proposes a method that systematically describes how students' performance grows in complexity – the SOLO taxonomy. Not dissimilar to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning it uses a hierarchy of verbs to assess the depth of understanding and engagement reached. Assessment criteria should incorporate such a range of cognitive level verbs, thereby creating a framework of judgement capable of evaluating the level of understanding demonstrated by each and every student. It also needs to be sufficiently robust

and descriptive to maximise inter-judge reliability. As Biggs states (2003 p29), "In the constructive alignment model, the first step is to arrange these levels of understanding in a hierarchy that corresponds to the grading system that you use." He continues, (2003 p155; emphasis added) "...teachers need to know what is poor quality performance, what is good quality, and why."

Furthermore, interim feedback must be linked to the final assessment criteria to ensure continuity from interim to final sessions and enhance intra-judge reliability. An Interim Feedback Record could be devised that is similar to the Assessment Record used for final 'crits'. This would provide a structured framework for tutors to provide feedback and give students a qualitative indication of their current performance against stated and known learning outcomes

Feedback should seek to develop process skills, and not evaluate only the design product

At final 'crits', feedback should be process-orientated so that it develops the student's approach to design, which in turn will feed forward into subsequent projects. It is a principle within LJMU's *Effective Practice in Assessment* that there should be continuing emphasis on formative assessment at Level 1 (LJMU 2008 p13). There are instances in Level 1 where interim 'crits' do not occur due to time constraints; in such situations, the final 'crits' must deliver a formative function.

Feedback should be a considered sequence of positive and constructive comments

In all cases feedback must be considerably delivered, with particular attention given to the order of positive and constructive comments. Overtly negative feedback should be avoided. As Race (1998 p81), states, "The key to the use of assessment as an engine for learning is to allow the

formative function to be pre-eminent, by ensuring plenty of opportunity for detailed, positive, timely feedback, with advice on how to improve."

Increase peer assessment and reflection

Race (2001) identifies that peer and self assessment encourage deeper thinking about the learning task. Interim 'crits' could become peer sessions with the tutor acting as facilitator to ensure that key issues are covered and that sufficient depth of understanding has been achieved. Peer sessions could also be used to identify assessment criteria; tutors can then add additional criteria as required to ensure all learning outcomes are addressed and assessed.

Falchikov (1998) argues that peer assessment is useful and reliable, and that students perceive it to be beneficial by providing an insight into how peers approach a given problem. She concedes that there can be a tendency to over-mark, but if peer 'crits' are used at a formative stage where the objective is developmental feedback this will not be an issue. The requirement to provide feedback focuses the attention of the peer audience and makes their learning more active. Reflection and critical analysis become ingrained within the session thereby increasing its value as a learning experience. In final 'crits', students could be involved in the process of setting the weightings between criteria, if not the criteria themselves. This would integrate another recommendation of LJMU's *Principles of Effective Practice in Assessment*, which includes a policy that students should be more involved in the assessment process (LJMU 2008)

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