The Process of Effective Critiques

Jana Whittington
Purdue University Calumet
whitting@calumet.purdue.edu

Abstract

Effective critiquing is a sound method for assessing, teaching and learning new technology. The processes and techniques that are critical to help students develop and evaluate their technical, aesthetic, written and verbal skills can be implemented at all levels of technical expertise and disciplines. Administering an effective critique does not begin at the completion of an assignment. It begins with the creation of the learning objectives and outcomes of a specific project.

The author is drawing on industrial, art and technical educational experience to prepare projects and criteria for effective critiques. This paper will point out several different methods and approaches in preparing and conducting project critiques along with examples of how to use this approach to assess an assignment and overall course learning objectives.

1 Introduction

Administering an effective critique does not begin at the completion of an assignment. It begins with the creation of the learning objectives and outcomes of a specific project, which is created by the instructor. When the project is introduced to the class, each student should be given the project criteria. This criterion includes learning objectives, learning outcomes, due date, critique presentation method and any other clarifying information deemed necessary to optimize a successful learning experience. The criteria also has technical, compositional and design objectives that need to be met.

2 Process

Upon project completion the students in the class should present their specific projects professionally in the appropriate format for the critique. Students are then given the opportunity to observe fellow classmates projects as a whole. Initial reactions usually encompass a range of emotions such as sense of accomplishment, wonderment, and intimidation. The most frequently asked question is "How did they do that"?

To "level the playing field" of reactions and maintain the learning process a list of written criteria is given to each student to use for evaluating and critiquing the project. This criterion is based on the learning objectives and outcomes set forth at the onset of the project. It is divided into technical, design and compositional sections which gives the students the opportunity to evaluate the project on various levels of expertise. This is done in writing first then in an oral critique. A critique criterion early in the semester is more structured and descriptive than in the latter part of the semester. Early semester critique criteria will ask the students to answer specific questions pertaining to the project criteria and require them to use a specific set of vocabulary words in their answers.

When the written critique criterion is complete the oral critique can begin. The instructor needs to make a point that the oral critique has the same critique criteria objectives as the written critique. This may need to be reinforced throughout the verbal critique process. The instructor can begin the oral critique process by asking specific and general questions that relate to those in the written criteria. The instructor may ask the student to pick three projects that the student believes have been successfully completed on all levels of the project objectives. When the instructor receives responses, he or she can ask for explanations and have the opportunity to expand on comments and concepts. Students may also be asked which project appears to have gone beyond the project assignment. This usually creates a good discussion on successful technical skills and design concepts and how to creatively take a concept to a new level. The instructor may then take one specific technical skill or design concept and ask questions about which projects have successfully completed that skill or concept. This provides a great opportunity to introduce each project and discuss the successful components of the project. If the project has some unsuccessful areas it is a good way to constructively discuss options that might make it more successful. Throughout the oral critique process the discussion is always directed towards the learning objectives using the appropriate vocabulary. Students are also asked to take notes on comments made about their project. All written critique criteria is turned in with the final project and is a part of each student's project grade. All comments, questions, and directives in the project critiques are directed in a positive, forward learning direction. At the onset of the critique criteria process, it is made clear to the students that all remarks are suggestions for improvements not absolutes. It is their responsibility to synthesize critique ideas and suggestions and apply them to future projects. Students are also given the opportunity to write responses to comments or suggestions made during the critique.

A second way to conduct an early semester critique follows basically the same critique criteria but a specific student is assigned another students project to evaluate. Students need to learn critique skills before they evaluate their own project because they tend to ignore project objectives and emotionally discuss failures. Justifying the saying, "We are our own worst critics". As the semester progresses instructor guidance reduces, student critique skills develop and students gradually work towards critiquing their own projects in a positive constructive professional manner.

When a project has a multipart component, critiques after each component can be beneficial to the student and instructor. It gives students the opportunity to readjust the first component and provides a better direction for the second component. The instructor has the opportunity to modify objectives if the critiquing assessment warrants project improvement. This is particularly useful if the instructor is trying out a new project or concept.

Working mid-project critiques can sometimes have undesirable results if not conducted carefully. Students often have not had the opportunity to explore their own creative options and tend to change overall conceptualized ideas to soon. This often times

delays completion of a project deadline and can inhibit creative ability.

To synthesize what students have learned throughout the semester and expand on any creative inspirations stemmed from previous projects, a final project can be assigned at the end of the semester where students create their own criteria and objectives. Project assessment results have revealed this final project to be a fun and rewarding for students. A second alternative for a final project is to give the student the opportunity to reconstruct a previous assignment executed within the semester that they feel they could now improve upon. They will need to clearly state their criteria and objectives in this altered assignment.

This type of critique criteria promotes positive reinforcement, constructive assessment techniques for the student and instructor and goal directional learning and a creative environment. It provides the students with the opportunity to improve written and oral communication skills as well as presentations skills. At the completion of each project, students should be well aware of successes and areas that need improvement. The student's quality of work improves with each learned skill and with the knowledge that their project will be critiqued and evaluated at the end of each project deadline.

The instructor benefits from this type of critique method because it provides a written accountable assessment evaluation from each student on each project. Questions that an instructor might ask during a critique can also help to assess the project and course. The following are general assessment questions an instructor might ask.
- What do you (the student) feel was your most successful concept of this project?
- What was the most challenging but rewarding part of the project?
- What new concepts were you able to synthesize in this project?
- Was there a particular required concept or technical skill that you feel was not relevant to this project?

In the latter part of the semester the instructor may ask for more course assessment type feedback.
- Did any project relate directly to another course you have taken or are currently taking? Were the objectives of the projects helpful in other courses?
- What aspects of a specific project helped you at work or in another course?
- Were there any new technical skills you felt you needed to complete the assignments?
- Are there any projects in this course that helped you accomplish a goal at your present place of employment?
- As a result of what you have learned in this project is there another new concept you would like to learn to build your skills?

For this critique method to be successful all comments, questions and directives in the project critiques need to be directed in a positive forward learning direction, that relates directly to the course and project learning objectives. The instructor should make sure each student is not flooded with too many comments or suggestions and highlight two to three suggestions for improvement. The instructor should be open to the students' goals and objectives and try not to impose personal biases. A critique is most useful when suggestions of changes are introduced and explored, which stimulates creative ideas for future projects. Questions and discussion from all students are very important to

the students' growth and evaluation of assignment objectives. The critique criteria changes with each project, but should consistently relate to the project, course and program objectives, providing the instructor and student important ongoing assessment criteria.

On the project completion date and before the oral critique begins, students are given a list of questions for written response. Once the students have completed the written review, the oral critique begins. Students are reminded to use appropriate vocabulary when responding verbally and orally, along with explanations to their comments. For example a student who states, "I like that! It is really cool", will be asked to explain their comment further. A more acceptable comment from the student would be, "The repetition of red rectangles that run across the piece diagonally really creates excitement and visual direction to the main communication element".

Students must acquire technical, business and aesthetic vocabulary skills to communicate effectively with peers, bosses, clients and the public. A well executed critique process designed to address specific objectives will educate the student in important communication processes to help be a successful productive designer, as well as provide the instructor with a quantitative assessment process to evaluate each course and assignment.