Why the ‘Critique’ Fails: Constructive Alignment in Art and Design Assessment Practice

Arno Verhoeven

Lecturer, School of Design
Sr. Tutor, Edinburgh College of Art
University of Edinburgh

a.verhoeven@ed.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper examines the role the critique plays in a constructively aligned, student-led curriculum in studio based teaching. It is suggested that during ‘the crit’, conversations structured around reflective practice need to explicitly align learning outcomes and grade criteria to the practice of artifact generation in order to help students develop a deeper understanding of their own learning. The critique presents challenges to promoting deep reflective learning, since the traditional ‘crit’ structure is perceived by students as being biased, political and emotionally stressful. Through an action research methodology, this paper attempts to understand the perceptions of a cohort of students to a critique variation aligning it more closely to assessment strategies used by academic staff in the grading of student work. First Year students in Art and Design were asked to assess a collection of their peers' work using a colour coded grading scheme. Half the cohort were asked to do a self-assessment of their work prior this exercise, while the second half of the cohort were asked to self-assess following the exercise. A questionnaire was given to all students requesting them to report on their understanding of the learning outcomes and its relationship to the project after all assessments had been completed. Wordle, an online tool that visualises the frequency of word usage in text, was used to generate word clouds of student responses to questionnaires. It is suggested that greater frequency of particular words used can be correlated to deep understanding, structured around Grice’s concept of conversational implicature. Results suggest that the traditional ‘crit’ format would benefit from more explicit alignment to learning tasks, rather than generated artifacts.
Introduction

“…for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

Hamlet, Act 2, scene 2, 239–251

For a lecturer in an Art and Design institution, there are a number of ambiguous features in how teaching is delivered. In most instances, it is difficult to communicate to students about what makes “good work,” and even more difficult to assess it. Factors such as personal aesthetic judgment invariably play a significant role in teaching and assessment. Indeed, there is a strong pressure in the UK Art and Design Higher Education sector to align personal research and work directly with teaching and student experience. In many cases, exposing students to a variety of methods, techniques and practitioners allows them to align their own personal judgments to the work they undertake. The use of constructive alignment through learning outcomes and structured grading criteria has helped to focus teaching towards student-led learning. But unlike other academic courses, Art and Design usually focuses on the end result: the artifact.

How the artifact is to be judged is often done in the traditional critique format, where students present work to lecturers and panelists, more often than not, experts in their field of practice [connoisseurs] who can provide detailed knowledge about the success or failure of student work involved. The ‘critique’, however time-honoured and cherished, presents many problems to the lecturer, particularly in a diverse foundation course that has students pursuing a variety of study specialisms and outputs. In what regard is any work good? If tutors do not like it aesthetically, how can they help a student improve it, without the work becoming something that they want to see, rather than the student demonstrating their learning? What, in the end, is a tutor reinforcing in a critique that concerns student learning, rather than the achievement of a desired output? How does the pressure of presenting work, in a non-structured critique situation, affect students’ ability to communicate what they have learned? In what sense can we prevent students from seeking tutor approval and pursue work and learning that they want, rather than pursuing good assessment grades?

The critique in its present structure and use highlights many problems with the alignment of summative and formative assessment in Art and Design education. Formative assessment is the primary method of assessment practice, since summative assessment usually occurs at year-end during portfolio submission. Given the amount of feedback, discussion and review that students receive over the academic year, and particularly from a variety of tutors and professionals, all with significantly differing opinions about “good” work, it seems of particular importance that this feedback is constructively aligned to the learning outcomes and grading criteria that informs student-led learning. It is within this paper that a review of the traditional critique structure will be investigated, and possible alternatives to its use and approach discussed, based both on professional and student perceptions, with an eye to aligning the discussion directly to the constructively aligned learning environment.

Background

Most Art and Design institutions in UKHE have some form of Foundation Year – a first year where students are exposed to a host of techniques, processes and practices, in order to prepare them for specialist study in subsequent years in most Bachelor programmes. In some cases, the drive to a diagnostic approach requires students to try many different things, in order that they may be able to make informed decisions about their own interests, strengths and weaknesses. The first year of study at the Edinburgh College of Art engages students through a project driven approach, providing students with ambiguous themes that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, allowing them to
develop research, studio and professional practice skills. Students are encouraged to try a variety of approaches in each brief, and outcomes should reflect student interests, focusing perhaps on an intended area of specialist study in higher years. The briefs are relatively quick, forcing students to focus intently on the task at hand, and to develop strong decision making skills in regards to selecting research themes and studio outputs. This results in a variety of works created for each particular brief, and outputs even within one studio can range from an art-based or design-based approach, 2D or 3D, physical or virtual. The variety of these outputs requires specialists teaching these sessions to be very open-minded in their approach, often pushing them as tutors to develop new strategies for teaching and formative assessment practice. The biggest challenge in this environment however, lies in the end of week discussion, usually termed ‘the critique’

Many practitioners, have been concerned about ‘the critique’ but are also aware of neglecting to try variations in the process, because of a concern about consistency in teaching. How much variation can take place in a critique, without compromising a structured approach, has always been of concern. The paradox remains however, in that the traditional critique does not work very effectively, particularly in an environment that encourages constructive alignment.

“To me the irrationality of critiques epitomizes the irrationality of art teaching. In effect, they are simply too complicated to understand.” Elkins (2001), p112.

Pedagogical training has provided an opportunity to review how this paradox can be investigated. Action research is a methodology, which allows for an intervention to take place that provides direct access to student thoughts, and an insight into personal teaching practice and how it can be improved. Within this context, it was decided to take a risk and re-structure a critique scenario. This aimed to answer the following questions:

- what changes can be made?
- what kinds of benefits can be retrieved from attempting to align the critique discussion directly to learning outcomes?
- how is work assessed and graded within a general first year program, where student projects are diverse and artifacts are not restricted to one particular field of enquiry?

Though students generally anticipate feedback on how to make their work better, it is a difficult challenge to provide this sort of formative assessment in a large studio consisting of students working towards specialist streams, which range from animation and illustration, product and interior design, as well as sculpture and painting. Structural alignment also presents challenges in a large first year studio where a variety of specialist tutors are teaching. How do the comments and feedback from these tutors affect students’ perceptions of their achievements and progression of learning, when different styles of teaching, different emphasis of specialist practice and gender may cause significantly different experiences from week to week? In this paper, it is proposed that a more structured critique can indeed alleviate many of these issues, particularly when the critique is closely aligned to work, evidence of learning outcomes and the grading criteria.

**Overview**

The current literature deals with a variety of aspects of the critique, ranging from the emotional trauma students face during these forms of assessment practices (McKillop, 2006; Davies, 1997), the power relations played out between tutor and academic (Blair, 2006), and questioning the validity of the critique as a constructive form of assessment (Anthony, 1991). Elkins (2001) goes so far as to say since the critique itself is
idiosyncratic, biased and more often than not comparable to a legal proceeding it simply cannot work.

There would appear to be a prevalent bias in the literature that the critique is about ‘the work’. Davies (1997) reports students “have reported how humiliated they have felt by such a public scrutiny of their work…” Cowdroy and Williams (2006) are much more explicit in their account:

“…we had to acknowledge that it was the tangible work produced we were assessing, which may have inferred creative ability in a student, but we were not actually (directly) assessing the intellectual creative ability of the student.” p98

Percy (2004) acknowledges that for the critique to be considered a successful learning and teaching tool, it requires that academics admit that the process itself needs to be taught. Elkins (2001) suggests, however, that this may be difficult, since there is “no good definition of ‘art critique’ – no model, no history, no guide.” (p112)

Without an established model from which to work, it presents challenges to understand how the critique is to be improved as it presently stands. Alignment, incorporating the format of the critique as part of the cycle of learning and teaching, allows it to be viewed not as an event to dread, but a significant point of structured formative assessment. Pryor and Crossouard (2007) discuss the relationship between convergent assessment and divergent assessment strategies. It can be argued that the present construct of the understood ‘traditional critique’ can be seen as a convergent assessment model (something teachers ‘do’ to students). A constructively ‘aligned critique’ would be classified as a divergent assessment strategy, indicating that students were coached by helping questions, where it was clear that the teacher themselves did not have answers to these questions.

Biggs (2003) suggests, “It is easy to see why alignment should work. In aligned teaching, there is maximum consistency throughout the system.” (p27). That alignment should structure consistency is key, since the critique, as discussed again by Elkins (2001), is by nature, idiosyncratic. Lecturers and panelists are never consistent, and the work presented is never the same. Other authors (Blair, 2006) also discuss that the emotional states, both of tutors and students, play significant roles in the success or failure of the critique structure. It presents significant challenges then, to understand how the critique can be changed, and structured to provide a better learning opportunity for students, through formative assessment, particularly since there seems to be no clear way to understand if and how improvements have taken place due to any structural change.

In what way then, can an ‘aligned critique’ be constructed that allows students to understand the alignment between their work, the learning outcomes, and the grading criteria upon which they are assessed, while still providing a forum for discussion of the qualitative aspects of their work and room for improvement? How can the ‘aligned critique’ shift from an idiosyncratic, tutor led discussion, to a constructively aligned, norm-referenced assessment strategy that gives students insights into their own learning? How, if any changes are made, will we understand if they’ve been successful or not?

McKillop (2006) provides an interesting approach to understanding student feedback regarding their experiences of the critique through soliciting drawings based on students’ perceptions of the experiences. Such a novel method is required to understand exactly what students perceive the critique experience to be, allowing an insight into how improvements can be made. Grice (1991), through his work on linguistic structur and implicature, may provide some opportunity to understand a similar novel approach. If
feedback is solicited via questionnaire from students, in what capacity can we ever know that they are being honest with their commentary?

Strategic learners may provide commentary that is seen to be favourable, or biased, towards a tutor’s expectations, since the feedback being solicited is in direct relation to their learning and teaching assessment practices. Following on Grice’s notion of implicature, we need to determine a way understand what is meant, implied, or suggested, distinct from what is said. Rather than relying on analysis of actual commentary, the method proposed in this paper for understanding student feedback is based on word-frequency analysis. It is proposed that the number of times a word appears in a solicited series of statements implies the message that is trying to be conveyed.

**Method**

In order to test whether constructive alignment to learning outcomes was a viable option for student discussion during critique sessions, a paradigm was set up to test impact based on student feedback directly given in response to a self-evaluation exercise.

Students were expected to complete self-evaluation in stages, 3 times over a semester, in response to their project portfolio and their understanding of their achievement based on learning outcomes. This self-evaluation exercise is identical to assessment practices conducted by academic staff at mid-session, and final summative assessment at year-end. Students were given copies of the College’s academic grading criteria, and the 9 learning outcomes spanning 3 modules of learning, namely: Research, Studio and Professional Practice. It was expected that students may encounter difficulties in this practice self-evaluation exercise, since many, if not all, had not previously encountered structurally aligned learning outcomes, and many of the students have an unrealistic interpretation of their achievements in relation to these outcomes and the grading criteria.

Two groups of students, following a two week project, prior this exercise, were selected to undergo an ‘aligned critique’ that focused only on discussions of the relation of their work to the learning outcomes. A second set of two groups of students were then asked to undergo the same ‘aligned critique’ following a two week project, that took place after the initial self-evaluation exercise had been completed. Experience between these two groups was determined based on direct written feedback from students involved in these two exercises. The total number of students involved in this exercise was 70, representing 50% of the First Year Studies cohort. Submission of feedback was an optional exercise, and 17 responses were received.

The ‘aligned critique’ exercise involved providing students a copy of the learning outcomes and the grading criteria used for assessment by academic staff within the First Year Studies Program. In place of letter grades associated with each of the grading criteria, coloured swatches were used, and students provided with corresponding coloured post-it notes. At the start of the sessions, students were asked to display their work appropriately, and to include their final artifacts as well as their research materials. Following this installation, students were asked to view all work of their classmates and to evaluate it based on the 9 learning outcomes, against the grading criteria. Students were asked to select 3 works and to place a corresponding coloured post-it next to the work, indicating their evaluation based on grading criteria provided.

The discussion that followed (the ‘aligned critique’) involved not discussing the work, per se, but encouraging students to discuss the 3 grades given to a selection of the completed projects in the studio. Projects that received 3 similar colours (at whatever corresponding criteria) were less interesting for discussion, since it could be stated that there was consistency in evaluation of that particular work. The discussion revolved
around works and artifacts that received 3 distinct colours (representing an inconsistency in assessment), or had a widely varied grade associated with it. The discussion in this regard probed students to interpret these discrepancies: how did the group feel about this discrepancy (i.e. which grade criteria was actually the most representative?), and where did this discrepancy come from (i.e. interpretation of research, studio work, presentation)?

Discussions arose in the critique sessions that began to highlight student interpretation of the grading criteria in relation to the learning outcomes they are expected to evidence. Emphasis by some students on technical proficiency vs. conceptual content, presentation of ideas vs. aesthetics of artifact, research practices and methods in place of studio work became major discussion points throughout the morning. Students were encouraged to defend their positions in the evaluations made, but to continually make reference to the learning outcomes and the grading criteria, and how the work under discussion exemplified these particular grades.

Feedback forms were given a few weeks later directly to students, asking a variety of questions about their experience in regards to critiques in general, and this exercise in particular.

Data collected from students was collated into a text file and then analysed using Wordle (http://www.wordle.com), a word frequency analysis program. Frequency of usage of particular words results in a graphic output that makes the most frequently used words larger font sizes. In this regard, these frequency maps allow for quick visualization of what students are actually saying.

Results and Discussion

Student feedback analysis has revealed some interesting patterns in student thinking. Visual responses generated by Wordle (http://www.wordle.com) can be found in Appendices 1-7. In response to the initial question from the feedback, as based on the aggregated feedback found in (Appendix 1), students predominantly believe the critique is about the work. On a secondary level, students generally feel a critique concerns: chance, feedback, see, ideas, others. Few students, however, articulated the ideas of: improve, communicate, think, or learning. This highlights that predominantly; students believe that the end result, the ‘work’ is the object of attention during the critique. Though it is to be expected that feedback is a word that appears relatively frequently, learning is not. This may lead to the conclusion that students find difficulty with understanding in what way the critique is aligned to their learning, rather than the quality of the artifact they have produced.

Appendix 2 highlights 3 major words: work, learning, and outcomes. Taking into account that these 3 words also appear in the question, it is assumed that the words are highly frequent since they are re-iterating the question being asked. More interesting are the words: research, important, help. Less frequently used words from the sampling include standard, improve, and better. The word alignment, and its variants, does not appear in the list. From this list, it can be inferred that students find it a particular challenge to relate the learning outcomes to their working process, and more critically, that they see no alignment between their work, method and summative assessment as practiced in the critique.

In Appendix 3, again discounting for high frequency words that appear to be re-iterated from the question, the key words students appear to be using include: yes, research, think, feel, different. Use of the word research highlights a students understanding of the importance of research, which is also one of three modules used within the learning taxonomy, containing 3 learning outcomes. The other two modules of learning (studio
and professional practice) appear very infrequently, and not at all, respectively. This discrepancy highlights an apparent issue in how the learning outcomes are either communicated, or understood by students. Based on this analysis, it appears that students understand only one aspect of the alignment between learning outcomes, and the expectation of the tutors need to see them demonstrated in project work.

With Appendix 4, significant words that appear in response to the question, excluding re-iteration, are think, helped and understand. What is a significant omission in this regard is any negative, such as no, not, or didn’t. From this omission, it can be understood that students who were involved, as described in the method, positively received the exercise conducted. This exercise, which allowed project work, learning outcomes and grading criteria, is a step towards a structured critique discussion that enables students to understand how to structure their own learning based on formative feedback from tutors and academic staff. Though this exercise may have been informative, and helpful for students involved, alignment will require that this format remain structured in some sense throughout the students learning career.

In this regard, the 5th question posed to students involved how the exercise was related to a self-assessment task related to their own performance, based on using the grading criteria against the learning outcomes. 50% of students were involved in the exercise prior this self-evaluation task, and 50% were involved in the exercise after the self-evaluation task had been completed. The hypothesis in this regard is that students who were involved in the exercise prior to self-evaluation would be able to transfer their experience to the evaluation task, and find it much easier to assess themselves than their peers who had received no training in how grading criteria related to learning outcomes and resolved work in an assessment exercise. Appendix 5a shows the responses from students pre-evaluation, Appendix 5b outlines responses from students post-evaluation task.

Omitting high frequency words that appear to be re-iterated from the original question, students who engaged in the critique exercise prior to self-evaluation tended to use words including yes, good, grade. Perhaps more interesting, relatively frequent usage of words like evaluate, properly, made, and confident, underlines that this exercise was positively received by students and did enable them some understanding of how the alignment of the resolved work, learning outcomes and grading criteria could work. Colleagues who conducted the critique exercise following self-evaluation made use of similar words in their accounts. Perhaps most interesting, is the decreased frequency of the word yes, and the relatively high frequency usage of the words know and understanding. This finding could be interpreted to mean that students did understand that the initial critique discussion would have benefitted them in completing their self-evaluations, had the relationships between work, learning outcomes and grading criteria been made more explicit. The lack of use of a negative in any sense (no or didn’t) would lend support to this fact, that students actually did find value, retrospectively to the exercise and its relationship to their self-evaluation.

When students were asked about their experience of other critiques that they had undergone, with different tutors, in different situations, the three recurring words again found high frequency usage (work, crits, learning) in Appendix 6. Of more interest are words that appear with moderate frequency: everyone, different, long, tutors and good. The lack of a negative (no, don’t, didn’t) again implies that students valued differing opinions and approaches in their discussions, however, the use of the word long is curious, particularly when the frequency of the word short is relatively low. This may imply that some students feel the process, as structured, is time-consuming. Reviewing the direct responses confirm that a number of students did indeed feel the process of one student speaking in turn makes the critique too long. However, those students who
mentioned short, in the direct responses, indicate that given the number of students involved, their own individual time to present is too short. Both of these responses imply that there may be alternative structures to the critique process that potentially be investigated, where constructive alignment can play a role.

Appendix 7 outlines student responses to the final question, of how the critique could be improved. Once again, discounting certain words as being re-iterated due to the questioning, 4 words appear of relatively high frequency and have not appeared in other responses: people, groups, breaking, and time. The usage of these words can imply that students may see some benefit of group discussions, and the use of the word breaking may imply that perhaps smaller groups, or splitting up, may also be of benefit in the perception of students. Again, this insight can be inferred due to the lack of any negation (no, don’t, can’t) associated with the feedback provided.

Conclusion

Students involved in this aligned critique exercise were first year students, many of whom had never endured any form of critique previously, but did arrive with preconceptions about what the critique was, primarily, feedback about their work and how that could be improved. The concept of a structured learning environment, which embraces constructive alignment, was relatively new to the majority of students interviewed. This can be seen in their own testimonials as collated in the raw data. The exercise proposed, where the critique discussion is structurally aligned to the system of learning did allow students to see the relationship between their own resolved work, the learning outcomes they are expected to demonstrate and the grading criteria used to assess them. However, many students still focused on the idea that a tutor led critique would enable them to understand exactly what they needed to do to improve their own work, which underlies a surface approach evident in the critique process. Deeper learning can be evidenced by the alignment of the critique structure more directly to the learning outcomes and grading criteria, as evidenced by student declarations about their ability to transfer this experience directly to a novel situation involving independent assessment of their own work. Students did perceive, however, that a standard was lacking, which clearly represented what the grading criteria were linked to in terms of best practice. Implicitly, the question most commonly asked by students is not “Am I demonstrating the learning outcomes in my work?” but rather, “Am I doing good work and how can I improve?” This implies that students still require a better understanding of the relationship between learning outcomes, grading criteria and the evidencing of their performance, and that clearer learning outcomes and grading criteria should be developed that explicitly highlight the relationships involved in Art & Design Higher Education teaching and learning. This should clearly be reflected in structurally aligned formative assessment practices, most commonly found in the critique.

The students engaged in this exercise were enrolled on a common course. In year 2, students are required to align themselves exclusively to one of the eleven specialist programmes of study across the School of Design within the institution. Many of these students already intend a particular specialist study upon arrival, and have prior expectations of what they will be doing while studying on course. However, the overarching first year structure is intended to provide students with a broad range of experience that applies to all programmes, and as a result, the learning outcomes used in all exercises with this year group are highly generic. This may lead to ambiguity in students understanding of the aligned relationships between learning outcomes, particular tasks, and their individual ambitions relating to future study. It is unclear whether or not young students, at an early stage of their academic career have had ample opportunity to fully understand that generic learning outcomes are intended to provide students with freedom to interpret and evidence their learning through a variety
of methods possible. The generic learning outcomes, such as those used in this exercise, do not take into account any specific approaches to design practice, and it may be that students are unclear how the generic approach can be applied to their specific future intentions.

It could be argued that ambiguity may also be evident in the research findings reported, since the use of Wordle highlights only the frequency of word usage across student responses, not necessarily intended meanings or implicatures (Grice, 1991). The use of Wordle provides a very quick, visual overview to the analysis of textual data, however, it is significantly less rigorous than other analysis methods, such as Conversation Analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). It could be argued that using a tool such as Wordle provides researchers with very quick results to data analysis, which can allow educators to adjust their teaching approaches quickly, responding to real-time pressures evident in classroom delivery. This speed of analysis, however, needs to be balanced against the rigour of the results achieved.

Though this exercise was conducted during a single, short project, and preliminary results did indicate that engaging in an aligned critique did help students to understand what is expected of them in any subsequent self-evaluation exercises, it is unclear as to whether a single event is enough to re-enforce a student’s understanding of the alignment between their learning, the learning outcomes, and the assessment tasks. The critique in an Art & Design institution is an event that, as Elkins (2001) points out is difficult to define, never the same, and has no consistent criteria. If a critique were solely based on criterion referenced measures, it could be anticipated that this would lead to surface learning approaches, where students simply need to evidence a predetermined threshold of achievement through a consistent format. Normative based measurement, however, leads to inconsistencies since we are dealing with a diverse group of individuals in a socially oriented situation. It is proposed that a compromise between these two approaches needs to be struck, where students are clearly aware of particular norms that will consistently apply to everyone during assessment (grading criteria, learning outcomes, required studio outputs) but that they are encouraged to establish their own criterion within these norms, and defend in which way they have evidenced these achievements within the norms. Additional longitudinal studies with students would be required in order to determine whether a thorough understanding of aligned assessment in the critique has been established as such.

Further questions remain then, particularly, how the alignment of the critique fits into progression throughout a student’s education practice. The QAA framework outlines various levels of progression through a student’s undergraduate career, outlining an incremental increase year over year that informs and requires students to acquire and demonstrate that they have increased their knowledge base, and that their learning has become more sophisticated and complex through annual development. At present, and beyond the scope of this paper, a full investigation of a level appropriate critique may be necessary. Such research would ascertain the effectiveness of a critique related to student progression year by year, and how that fits into a constructively aligned education structure, providing students with more complex and level appropriate forms of formative feedback and an increased ability to critique and reflect on their own work.
References


Blair, B. (2006) "At the end of a huge crit in the summer, it was ‘crap’ – I’d worked really hard but all she said was ‘fine’ and I was gutted.", *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 83-95.


Appendix 1

Student response to Question 1: In your opinion, what is the purpose of a ‘crit’?

Courtesy http://www.wordle.com
Appendix 2

Student response to Question 2: In what way do you believe the Learning Outcomes contribute to the development of your work? 

Courtesy http://www.wordie.com
Appendix 3

Student response to Question 3: Do the Learning Outcomes have a clear relationship to the project briefs and the intended outcomes? Can you explain?  Courtesy http://www.wordle.com
Student response to Question 4: In our first “crit”, we did an exercise that tried to relate the learning outcomes to the development of your work. Did you find this exercise helpful? If yes, in what way? If no, what was missing?  Courtesy http://www.wordle.com
Student response to Question 5a: In week 3 you were asked to complete the first self-evaluation form based on your work to that point. Our “crit” [based on Learning Outcomes] took place before that evaluation. Do you think it was helpful to have the “crit” about Learning Outcomes before this self-evaluation? Please explain. Courtesy http://www.wordie.com
Appendix 6

Student response to Question 5b: In week 3 you were asked to complete the first self-evaluation form based on your work to that point. Our ‘crit’ [based on Learning Outcomes] took place after that evaluation. Do you think it would have been helpful to have the “crit” about Learning Outcomes before the self-evaluation exercise? Please explain. Courtesy http://www.wordle.com
Student response to Question 7: How do you think the “crit” structure could be improved?  Courtesy http://www.wordle.com