Critting the Crit: New pedagogy in architectural education

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the role of the standard method of assessment for architectural students internationally, known as the 'crit'. It examines the pedagogical theory underlying this approach whereby students pin up their work and make a presentation on it, and receive verbal feedback on it, in front of a room of their peers and academic staff. Recent critiques of this hundred-year old approach are also discussed, and the reality of the 'crit' is examined through analysis of practice. This leads into a discussion of a semester-long piece of action research in this academic year in which academic staff have piloted new methods of formative and summative student-centred assessment without a 'crit'. Feedback from students and academic staff has been extremely positive, and is discussed along with the lessons learned from this pilot semester. The next steps in this ongoing piece of action research are also briefly outlined.

Keywords: Pedagogy, architectural education, action research, student-centred learning.

1. Introduction

The 'crit', short for 'criticism', is an assessment practice central to the education of the architect, internationally. It has its roots in Piaget's 'constructivism framework'. It aims to place the student at the centre of the learning experience and allow them to develop critical thinking and creative skills through learning-by-doing. The 'crit' aims to foster a culture of learning and reflective practice as described by Schon (1983), so the student gains agency over their education. I have re-examined several assumptions about this method of education, and through action research outline how a more reflective, student-centred, intrinsically motivated education is possible.

2. What is the 'crit'?

The 'crit' system began in the 19th Century Beaux-Arts where the 'Learning by Doing' model led to juries of tutors assessing students' work behind closed doors, this 'closed jury' system (Anthony 1991) becoming an 'open jury' in the 20th century, where tutors commented on work in front of students, so that all could learn together. *'Crits are an opportunity for the student to present the process and solution to a design problem. The crit should be .. providing the student with encouragement as well as stimulus to continue exploration..'* (Anthony 1991). Schon (1980) argues that conversation about architecture – the 'crit' - is the essence of the design education process. In the 'crit' the student presents their work in a public setting with the work reviewed by a panel of up to six 'experts', normally internal and visiting external academic staff, and/or practicing architects. In this format all students hear feedback on each student's project, in order to learn about their own work. Schon sees the 'crit' as an equal debate between student and tutor, or an exchange of learned opinions rather than delivery of facts.

Figure 1: A 'crit' in practice

3. What is happening in practice?

Reyner Banham's essay, A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture (1996) compares this teaching method to a tribal long house, and argues that in practice the ideal of inclusion into a new society of equal learning is replaced with enforcing a code of conduct, establishing attitudes and values that are then played out in the profession. Students absorb aesthetic, motivational, and ethical practices as well as language and even dress (Dutton 1991) - broadly speaking what Bourdieu (1990) refers to as habitus i.e. embodied manners of seeing, acting and thinking.

Stevens (1998) expands on the roles that tutors and students act out. Students may regard the tutor's approval as indicative of approval by other powerful groups in society on which they are dependent for status and earning capacity. The student sees the tutor's approval as a sign of progression and guarantee of future success – reifying the tutor's opinions.

This is far from the ideal of the student being at the centre of a shared learning experience. It places the tutor as the person knows 'the' correct solution to every difficulty in the 'crit' process with the crit seen to endorse 'acceptable knowledge' (Dutton 1991). Often students only show up for the discussion of their own project and do not hear or see anyone else's work being discussed. The 'crit' moves motivation from intrinsic (coming from the student) to extrinsic (delivered by the tutor - Hennessey 2010). Student-centered learning clearly does not happen when the student sees the tutor/student relationship as that of master/apprentice. Dutton (1991) proposed that true dialogue requires equal participants – a situation that does not exist in the 'crit' power structure. Farrell (2014) correctly identifies this as one of the issues at the core of architectural education, in that this master/apprentice model informed the origins of schools of architecture. It is thus not surprising that these origins continue to reverberate in education today.

4. So what can we do to address this?

The Farrell (2014) report on the future of education in schools of architecture describes how we are now in an era of vast layers of information: construction, materials, specification, performance, energy efficiencies, behavioural data, cost of construction and energy performance in the future. Access to information is no longer a problem for students, the challenge is critical judgement or the need for *'Strong Doubt'* (Till 2005). This requires academics to provide students with opportunities for ethical and critical reflection and practice. This challenges students to progress to a deeper level of learning so that they do not become 'traditional experts' but rather 'expert learners'. A range of authors have advocated the use of collaborative learning and communities of practice to support

deeper learning, including tutors, students, and external partners (Lave and Wegner 1991; Hunter 2012; Buchanan 2012). But the 'crit', it appears, is not the best way to support this.

If the crit is no longer fit for purpose, any new system of assessment and feedback needs to establish clear criteria for success. Based on Anthony's *Design Juries on Trial* (1991) and Mc.Carthy's *Redesigning the Crit* (2011) I developed the aims in the table below.

FEEDBACK TYPES IN TERMS OF AIMS	Crit	Round Table	Written	Pin up	End Review
Sharing the **power-base** more equitably		■			■
Being more **time** efficient			■		
Greater **variety of feedback**	■	■	■	■	■
Reducing **stress** to promote **productivity**		■		■	
Involving **active-learning** techniques		■			
Feedback which **prepares** students for profession	■	■		■	■
Peer review and engagement	■	■		■	■

Figure 2: Identification of aims of traditional crit system and possible alternatives (After Mc.Carthy 2011)

5. Piloting an alternative approach to assessment – action research.

By re-examining teaching methods and assessment I propose that we can change the power balance to a more student-centred inclusive approach. In 2017/18 I proposed a pilot model, delivered in collaboration with colleagues, where third year architecture students in Dublin Institute of Technology were taught and assessed for a full year without a traditional 'crit'. By trialling new formats we encouraged the students to discuss each others' work on a more equal footing with tutors, and understand how the collective can work in a creative manner. The new model has four distinct stages designed to support the student through the design process, based on McCarthy (2011), Sara and Parnell (2000) and Anthony (1991)'s goals of specific tailored feedback at each learning stage.

1) Round Table Review: For the first stage using the Harkness (Barton 2016) method the tutors sat alongside the students in groups of six to discuss and, crucially, draw different approaches to designing their scheme. The emphasis was on the group's collective knowledge, so students and staff drew and spoke as equals in the learning process, with a direction for the design emerging from an exchange of opinions. This co-creation of knowledge involved an often messy process, with opposing opinions being expressed not only among students but also amongst the staff themselves. The discussion of the student's work was the learning tool for the whole group and the design process itself was explored. Drawing as feedback is endorsed by Eggink (1991) as the most immediate and understood form of feedback, as he argues it is a universal language.

Figure 3: Stage 1: Tutors drawing alongside students in small groups

2) Submission: Closed Juries & Open Feedback. The second stage used feedback as a reflective tool. Cameron (2014) refers to the value of written feedback as a means of providing a more in depth assessment of the students work and the need for staff to give time to work to review, reflect and then offer opinion as part of an equal dialogue. Students were given a deadline to submit work, which was subsequently reviewed by tutors in teams of pairs, both marking and providing written feedback at this interim stage. Marks and written feedback were issued to students, who were asked to reflect on the feedback, and then meet individually with tutors to discuss the feedback and the work submitted. Students were encouraged to ask questions. This meant students and staff could review the feedback in a less pressurised situation than a traditional crit (Cameron 2014, Anthony 1991).

Figure 4:Stage 2: Tutors viewing work and agreeing feedback in pairs.

3) Review of work in groups: In the third stage students pinned up their work, including drawn examples of relevant typologies and ideas for how the project could progress, and described and discussed it in small groups of eight. This was to establish a community of learning, where students and staff support each other through the learning process (Lave and Wegner 1991; Hunter 2012). Staff and students first described the work, then the presenting student discussed their intentions. The crit is reimagined as a discussion between all the staff, the students and the person whose work is being discussed, reducing asymmetrical relations of power (Dutton 1991). The student does not stand in front of the work but views it alongside staff and other students to give a literal distance from it, reducing the spatialised imbalance of power (Foucault 1980; Anthony 1991).

4) Selection of Final Work for Discussion: The fourth and final stage is assessment of completed project work. Based on Cameron (2014) & Parnell and Sara (2000) approach

Figure 5: Stage 4: Exhibition of work to class, marking by tutors, discussion of 6 projects.

students and staff viewed an exhibition of all the students' work (unlike in a crit where each student's work is pinned up and then taken down in turn) and were invited to place one red dot on the scheme that they most wished to hear discussed. Cameron (2014) describe this as student-led discussions, arguing that selecting a number of works to review is more likely to support student learning, as it focuses on learning outcomes and problems encountered by the class rather than on one person's work. Tutors marked submissions in pairs. The next day the six schemes with the most red dots were discussed with the whole class. Students were advised that the presented work had to speak for itself as they were not allowed to contribute to the discussion of their own work, but all the other staff and the students could comment. The emphasis was on a celebration of the completed project with a conversation involving all the students on what was learned. Students received marks and written feedback later that day.

6. Evaluating the pilot model

This new model has just been piloted for less than one year, so is in its infancy. Students completed an anonymous evaluation of the process. The main benefits they identified were:

Clarity of feedback: *'Constantly know where we stand.' 'Assessment was made clear, feedback sheets were incredibly helpful.' 'I think the feedback is also clearer.'*

Stress reduction and productivity: *'Not having to stress about pin-ups and instead using the time to actually do the work.' 'It is more of a conversation… I have discussed this with many people in the class and we all agree this is helping us work continually but in a less stressful way…' 'Less draining than a crit.'*

Peer learning: *'Seeing other students working process and how their schemes are progressing.' 'Like a conversation.' 'It's less stressful and less formal and having other students critique can give a completely different perspective and the whole thing becomes a proper discussion rather than a presentation.'*

Changing the Power Imbalance: *'The simple positioning, seated around a table of work, is something I find makes me less nervous and equal or level with a tutor.' 'The discussion between students and teachers was good and very engaging, because generally, in crits, you don't interrupt.'*

4 out of 60 students gave negative feedback: *'I prefer the pin up crit.' 'The new round table format was sometimes daunting.' 'It takes some getting used to, to allow the drawings to describe the concept alone.'*

A comparison of the last three years of student surveys shows significant change in Feedback and Assessment, which is evidence of the impact of the new model.
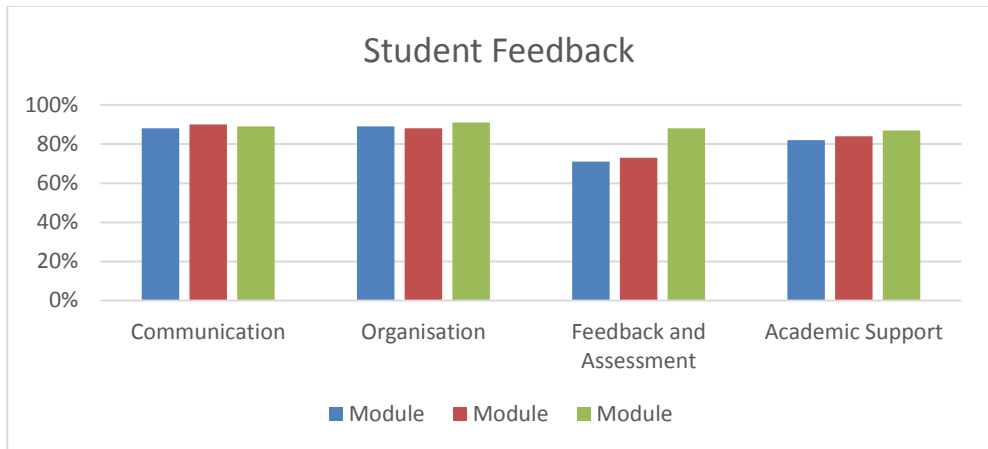

Student Feedback

Figure 6: Student Survey Results for last three years

Staff and external reviewers believe that the new system has allowed them to rethink the design education process. Stages one and two in particular have been very successful in producing a higher standard of work and a more inclusive atmosphere in the studio. *'The students were more engaged with the process and there was a good discussion'; I do like the round table review system and was particularly impressed by [students'] willingness to offer constructive feedback on each other's work. Good to see that level of student engagement.'* One negative comment was that it was *'Sometimes hard to get a sense of all the students work'.*

The third stage was possibly the least successful in that students and staff seemed to move into a more familiar 'crit' mode where tutors gave instruction and students listened. This could be because the space and pinning up of work resembled a traditional crit. Some staff found this regressive however others thought it could offer a way forward: *'Could the future be a combination of round table reviews with a final presentation on the wall?' 'We could adopt the round table review but it still seems to me to be good training to present for*

a wall crit in preparation for future presentations to client bodies etc.' In the second semester we have allowed more time for these discussions, and changed the learning space which has allowed students to get a sense of the overall work.

7. Conclusion

The pilot model has already delivered useful findings. Each stage of the design process benefits from different methods of customized feedback, which can emphasise specific learning outcomes. Reducing stress surrounding assessments can have a positive impact on the rate of design progress. Peer learning and evaluation impacts on the student's overall ability to improve their critical judgement. The traditional crit can be retained in a modified version to maximize its benefit. In this alternative to the crit the student is empowered to have an ability to adapt to uncertain roles. Judgement and reflection are key to this agility, the core of architectural education.

Acknowledgements

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