

ENRICHING THE REVIEW: CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM AND PEER REVIEW

This workshop was developed as a way of countering low student participation in reviews and resultant over-reliance on the tutors' feedback. It has been used most frequently in reviews where there is no summative assessment.

Time required:

One and a half hours. The workshop is most effective when run within a few days of a review

Aims:

- To improve the value of interim reviews by increasing student participation, thus contributing more ideas to individual schemes still at development stage
- To develop the skills needed for giving useful criticism of one's own and fellow students' work
- To get students to think about the importance of clear presentation – visual and verbal – when seeking constructive feedback.
- To get students to invent a framework for reviews which will ensure maximum contribution and equal attention to students' schemes.

Outputs

- By the end of the session students will have:
- Started work on the presentations to be given at the review.
- designed and agreed a framework for the review, including an agreement on the role of the tutors – to what extent will they participate and what contribution the students would like them to make.

Step 1: introduction (5 minutes)

The workshop tutor explains the reason for the workshop and what will happen during it.

- The aim is to increase participation in the forthcoming review which provides an opportunity to get suggestions/feedback from peers at a stage when schemes are still developing.
- The workshop enables students to start preparing the presentations in order to help the reviewers give them the feedback they need.

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- The workshop looks at what is involved in giving constructive criticism.
- Students will devise the framework for the review and agree what role they want the tutors to take during it.

Step 2: constructive criticism (30 minutes)

The workshop tutor gives a short input on the importance of skills in constructive criticism, explaining that being 'constructive' doesn't simply mean being unchallenging. Challenge is vital but needs to be offered within a supportive framework if it isn't to result in defensiveness and inability to listen. (see graphic) (5 minutes)

Tutor briefs students on the first task: to devise three rules for giving constructive criticism, based on their own experience.

The tutor asks them to start by thinking individually about a piece of useful criticism they have experienced and try to analyse why it was effective – e.g. timing, relevance or usability of what was offered, how it was given, etc. Then, in small teams (4/5) they share the 'why's', without describing the event, refining their shared experience into three 'rules'.

Tutor takes one 'rule' from each group and writes these up on a flip chart or overhead so that the students can see what other students have suggested

Tutor offers additional summary (on OHP):

- Identify something specific and authentic you have liked about the project as presented.
- Check your understanding of anything unclear before commenting on it.
- Express negative criticism as wishes for specific changes and suggestions for action (25 minutes)

Note: CUDE's experience was that students were helped by the structure of the agreed process for giving criticism. Without this, they were uncertain how to start.

Step 3 designing the review framework (30 minutes)

The purpose of this step is to get students to think about the objectives of the review (increasing levels of participation in order to increase the range of feedback offered) and how best to set it up so that these objectives are achieved. Things they need to consider include:

- How to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to present their scheme and get feedback and that everybody has an opportunity to give feedback

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- What do they want the tutor to contribute and how can this be achieved so that the tutor doesn't dominate.
- How much time will they have available and how can this be divided.

Note: CUDE's experience is that where students have invented the review framework, they have more of a commitment to making it work.

This session can be run in one of two ways depending on the time available. Either, subgroups make proposals which are then synthesised through discussion in the large group with the tutor. Or, students work individually for 5 minutes to note down their own proposals for how to run the session, then the tutor or one of the students invites people to proffer ideas and draws these together as an agreed plan.

Note: Review frameworks devised by students appear as Appendix B

Step 4 - Developing The Presentation

Tutor reminds students that the more clearly they are able to present their proposals, the easier it is for the audience to give them useful feedback. Because they will only have a short time for their presentations, it's vital for the key messages to be identified and conveyed.

Tutor briefs students to spend five minutes individually summarising their key ideas and trying to identify areas in which they would like specific suggestions or feedback.

When this has been done, tutor asks the students to work in pairs to refine these key ideas, as follows:

1. Student A summarises his/her key ideas
2. Student B listens and paraphrases what s/he has heard.
3. Student A listens to the paraphrase to check that the key ideas are the right ones and have been conveyed in the right order.

The process is timed so A knows how much additional time s/he will have to amplify the key points.

Roles are reversed and the process repeated.

Note: The pair exercise – outlining key ideas, listening and paraphrasing what has been heard – is much valued by students and is a good preparation for the listening they will be doing during the review. The exercise improves both clarity of presentation and effectiveness of listening.

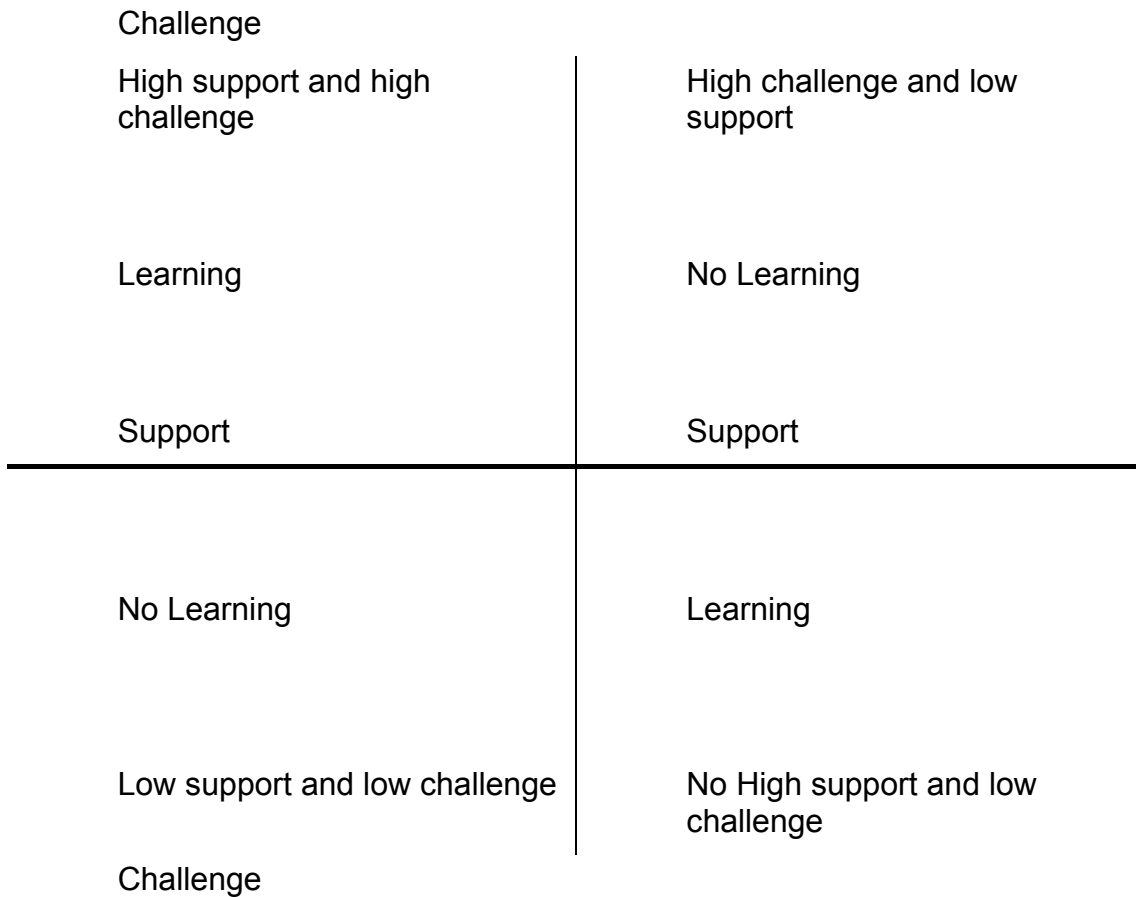
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Taking part of a workshop session to prepare the presentation, means that students have at least spent some time preparing – which experience suggests they don't often do!

Appendices

- A Graphic: Learning from feedback – challenge and support
- B Review formats devised by students
- C Report on a review preparation workshop and a peer review with student comments
- D Further reading

Appendix A:
The importance of challenge and support for learning



Appendix B

Review frameworks devised by students have included the following features:

- Breaking the year group into review groups, so that no more than 12 students are present in any one review session. This enables more contribution.
- Delivering four presentations consecutively without break. Then the four are reviewed together, allowing reviewers to bring out points of similarity or difference.
- Discussing each presentation in a small group, with the requirement that everybody makes a contribution, before conveying the group's feedback to the student who has presented. This is in contrast to the more usual practice of randomly firing off comments at the presenter.
- Setting strict time constraints on how long for presentation and how long for feedback, with the aim of giving each scheme equal time. (Students find it unfair that some schemes get 50 minutes feedback when others get hardly any.)
- A requirement that everybody speaks. An attempt to make sure that everybody is paying attention and the review isn't dominated by the more voluble students.

Appendix C

Report on 2nd year peer review, Portsmouth School of Architecture, March 30 2000

Summary

This was an experimental student led interim review of a housing project, based on work developed by the CUDE* project. 44 students of the 100+ in the year took part. Student response was very positive and an analysis of their feedback suggests there may be benefits in developing the experiment further in the particular context of the Portsmouth School.

The School attracts large numbers of students and both tutors and students said that as a result, students spend relatively little time in the studio. Although there is no formal evidence for this, it might be expected that reduced amounts of time together on the studio reduces the opportunities for learning from informal discussion of each other's work. It may also lead to lowered motivation - the shared experience of the student group in architectural education has been described as central to the drive to work hard. In the Portsmouth context then, the peer review may be a particularly valuable strategy to pursue in that it encourages students working in small groups to look closely at and discuss each other's work. This both acts as a bond and enables them to see the multiple solutions necessary for individual development as a designer. The peer review, appropriately used, reduces the burden on tutors to provide all the feedback and encourages students to take more responsibility for their own learning.

CUDE experimental peer review

Background: As traditionally carried out, the 'crit' is a powerful vehicle for learning in architecture. An individual student's work is pinned up and described by the student and then discussed by tutors, visiting critics and fellow students. However, during the CUDE project, staff and students at the consortium schools (Sheffield and De Montfort) said that the learning potential of the review or crit was not being fully realised. Two main reasons were given:

- Increased student numbers: Students find it physically difficult to see the work under discussion, hear the comments, or participate. Tutors are exhausted by having to comment on large numbers of schemes.
- The impact of assessment: Although not all reviews result in the giving of a mark, the culture of assessment was thought to permeate the review process. Students in particular felt that this prevented open discussion and led to defensive attitudes.

CUDE devised an experimental student led review as a way of recovering some of the learning potential offered by the review's opportunity to look closely at other students' work. The review was run and evaluated on several occasions at Sheffield during the course of the CUDE project before being experimentally run in the different contexts of Birmingham and Hull.

Learning theory underpinning the design of the student led review

The design of the review is based on current research on learning in HE. In broad terms this indicates that students learn best when they understand the relevance of what they are being asked to do, are active rather than passive and work for some of the time in authentic learning groups. Being part of a collaborative learning group exposes students to multiple viewpoints, allows the development of individual learning and develops motivation; people are motivating to people.

Peer review principles

- Use an interim review for the experiment. At this stage, students' ideas are still developing and other students' suggestions can be very helpful. In addition, there is not usually any formal assessment at this stage.
- Reduce numbers present at any one review to enable everyone to speak. It is difficult for any except the truly confident or those vested with authority to speak up in a group of over a dozen. Run several small group reviews in tandem rather than one long review with everybody there.
- Encourage all students to contribute by creating a framework for the review which requires everyone to speak. If you know you are going to have to voice an opinion, you will look closely at the work you have to speak about.
- Persuade tutors to remain silent. This is to encourage the students to speak. Where tutors dominate, students will usually not contribute. (There are ways in which tutors can contribute wisdom once the students have had their say.)
- Collectively devise an agenda (or process) for how the review will be run which everybody agrees to follow. This prevents a free for all, or a slavish following of how things are usually done. It can also ensure that each scheme gets an equal amount of time. Invite one student in each review group to take responsibility for seeing the agenda is followed.

How the Portsmouth experiment was run

The review was run with second year students in the second semester of academic year 1999/ 2000. The review chosen for the experiment

was the first of two interim reviews during the project. Kate Baker organised the event.

Preparation: Two x two hour preparation workshops were run on March 22 by CUDE co-ordinator Angela Fisher, Kate Baker and Sheffield PhD students and part time tutors Rachel Sara and Rosie Parnell. Kate Baker briefed other Portsmouth tutors, who did not attend the preparation workshop, on the purpose and aims of the experiment. During the preparation session, students devised ground rules for giving constructive criticism, prepared 5 minute presentations of their work to deliver during the review and agreed an agenda for running the review.

Review: The review was run on the morning of March 30, with eleven (?) review groups running simultaneously with between 6 – 12 students in each. Students were allocated to panels of four so that during each review session, each student was reviewed once and had the experience of reviewing fellow students work twice. Tutors were present in some but not all reviews but were asked not to contribute. 44 of the 90+ students in the year attended.

Feedback: Written feedback was collected from the students after both the preparation workshop and the review. Angela Fisher observed one of the review groups in action. Kate Baker held a feedback meeting with the students who had agreed to act as co-ordinators for the review. Angela Fisher also attended this meeting.

Student response

Students felt strongly that the review increased student participation, improved skills in asking for and giving constructive criticism and to a slightly lesser extent improved their presentation skills. (These had been specified as three objectives of the session in addition to the expected benefits of subjecting work to the review process.)

The review appeared to make students more conscious of their learning processes. A sample feedback sheet shows one student reflecting on this:

Question: To what extent did the review increase student participation?

Student: 'Being more active made me understand everyone's ideas more and made me work more at my own ideas.'

Question: To what extent did the review develop skills in presentation, including asking for feedback?

Student: Helped me understand how the reviewer feels.

Question: To what extent did the review improve skills in constructive criticism

Student: Made me think about other people's ideas more and how I talk about them and fully understanding them.

Question: Anything you particularly liked about the review?

Less stressful atmosphere. More relaxed, able to take criticism more easily

What students liked about the Peer Review

Students were asked to comment in the written feedback on what they liked about the review. 37 positive comments were made, with only one negative (*'NOTHING!'*)

- **Everyone got involved.** Good discussion resulted. They heard more than one opinion and the views of people in the same position as themselves.
- **The opportunity to help each other with ideas.** 5 comments specified this.

'Being able to help each other. Leads to thinking of more ideas and increases options.'

- *'Allowed to discuss everyone's work and help each other with ideas.'*
- **The atmosphere**, described as *'constructive', 'positive', 'less stressful', 'more relaxed.'* There were 10 comments on how the atmosphere helped students to learn.
- **'Listen to advice better, more relaxed atmosphere.'**

'More positive feeling about our work. Less rushed and less feeling of interrogation.'

'Using other people's views and evaluating with a chance to defend and be listened to.'

- **Learning from looking at each others' schemes**

'We learn from looking at the work of other students.'

'Felt that reviewers and reviewees got a lot out of taking part.'

'We all got something from one another's schemes

- **Small groups**

'Our group of just 6 worked well as it was intimate.'

What they suggested should be done differently

- **More involvement by the tutors.** 13 out of the 25 comments concerned this. Students identified the need for the tutors' knowledge, informed input and more experienced eye.

'On occasions we felt we couldn't give improvements as we were unsure if these would work ourselves.'

'Using the tutor as a means of referencing any problems – more specific informed advice'

'We needed a tutor around all the time to help with some questions.'

'Perhaps have some overview by tutors but not involvement.'

At the same time, they acknowledged that the over dominant tutor can close down student contributions

'Everyone felt more relaxed and could speak without the pressure of tutor's presence'

'The lack of a tutor meant that students were able to communicate their own thoughts without any fear.'

'We didn't have a tutor and I think this was the key element to our success.'

- **Take this approach more often.** Students recommended doing more reviews like this. Students gained in confidence as the reviews went on

'At the end people were really starting to develop their criticisms and useful points on how to design

They suggested using this approach, with increased student participation in final reviews.

In particular, they wished that all students could be involved.

- **'Encourage all to attend as everyone would benefit'**

Appendix D Further reading

Wilkin, M. Reassessing the Design Project Review in Undergraduate Architectural Education with particular reference to Clients and Users, published by The School of Architecture, De Montfort University (1999)

Doidge, C. Sara, R. and White R: The Crit published by Architectural Press (2000)

These materials were originally generated by the Clients and Users in Design Education (CUDE) project which was funded from Phase 1 of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning.

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