



Co-creating group critique as feedback: a case study on reimagining 'crits' with students

Marianne Greated

University of Edinburgh, UK

Magnus Quaife

The University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an experiment in collaborative pedagogical design in which students and staff at two art schools in Scotland and Finland worked together to redevelop approaches to group critique (crits). They focussed on how students might better understand the feedback they receive: asking what kinds of feedback are valuable and how the crit might better facilitate this. A workshop was developed that encouraged participants to reflect on previous experiences of group teaching, explored a range of models, and facilitated the collective imagining of possible alternatives, which were then tested and reflected upon with the same staff and students.

Group crits are a 'signature pedagogy' (Orr and Shreeve, 2018, p.88) in contemporary higher art education and exist in various forms, from the infamous 'convener' at Goldsmiths to 'studio seminars' at the Academy of Fine Art in Helsinki, and are often an important part of assessments in the United States. There have been several publications addressing different aspects of the crit in the past decade however despite this, literature aimed at students suggests there are still problems. The question arises as to how much meaningful change the analysis on crits has led to, and how to look for new ways to develop group teaching.

There is a significant potential for group critique to be understood as a key moment of formative feedback. We argue that by offering students agency and deepening their understanding of pedagogical processes, the co-creation of group critique can help us better realise this.

Keywords: fine art; contemporary art; education; critique; crit; feedback; co-creation

Introduction

This study presents an outline of the first stage of an experiment in collaborative pedagogical design in which staff and students from Fine Art at the Glasgow School of Art (GSA) and the Academy of Fine Art (KuvA) at the University of the Arts Helsinki worked together to redevelop approaches to group critique (crits). We asked: how might students better understand the feedback received in group critiques (referred to as studio seminars in KuvA) and recognise it as a key to the development of their practice?

This shared concern arose from different contexts: GSA was considering approaches to formative feedback as students were not always recognising crits as a mode of feedback; while at KuvA feedback is typically *only* delivered through studio seminars and studio visits (the name given to tutorials). Students' recognition of crits as feedback is therefore important. We believed that if students were able to better identify and value the significant feedback offered by staff and peers in critiques this would help their development. Attempts at GSA to signpost students towards the crit as a feedback moment in briefings, communications and course documentation had not made a discernible difference to where feedback was understood to occur within the curriculum.

We speculated that the levels of reflection required by approaches of pedagogical co-creation offered a potential solution because, to paraphrase Neil Mulholland (2019), only when students pause to observe their learning might they awaken to what they have learned. We set out to test whether, through offering agency and deepening understanding of pedagogical processes, co-creation of group crits could help students and teachers to better realise the potential of this aspect of teaching and learning.

Whilst the central role of feedback is well documented and considered the most powerful single influence on student achievement (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Hattie, 2009), feedback literacy and student understanding of feedback opportunities are key barriers to effective feedback (Carless and Boud, 2018). Acknowledging the gap between the importance of feedback for student learning and student understanding of feedback has

led to utilising co-creation as a methodology. Carless and Boud's (2018) framework for effective feedback suggests peer feedback and discussion of exemplars as the key enabling activities, which are central tenets of a group critique. Furthermore, the framework cites four key themes: appreciating feedback; making judgments; managing affect; and taking action. Co-designing the crit as a feedback activity enabled students to discuss and recognise the importance of these different elements of feedback as embedded within the group crit structures developed.

Context

Crits are a signature pedagogy in contemporary higher art education, they have origins in 19th-century architecture education at Beaux Art in Paris (Healy, 2016), and may have been first used in Fine Art education in the United Kingdom in the 1960s (Newall, 2019). 'Critique is a forum where students are expected to speak honestly and knowledgeably about their work and the work of their peers' (Dinkins, 2021, p.197); they are 'a public revealing of a private activity, conferring a hybrid status on the closed space and intimate production of the individual studio' (Moran, 2009, p.37). A 'standard procedure at art academies throughout the world' (Madoff, 2009, p.273), that exists in different forms which are often associated with institutions, such as the 'convener' at Goldsmiths, or with individuals, such as Michael Asher's crit class at CAL Arts (Thornton, 2008). In the U.S. it is common for crits to be part of summative assessment while in Europe they are more often an aspect of studio teaching.

Numerous publications and essays have addressed the subject of crits over the last fifteen years. Elkins (2011) provides a detailed analysis from a U.S. perspective and includes five different models of crit as well as advice to participating staff and students. Five aspects of crits are also outlined by Armstrong and Doren (2023) including student-centred crits and the critique of crits themselves. Despite this, literature aimed at students suggests that problems remain. There is a student manual (Barret, 2018) promising to help the reader get more from crits; a paper that describes how to make the experience of participating in a crit less scary (Day, 2013); and a 'survivors guide' (It's Nice That, 2017). Collectively they suggest that, without prior inside knowledge of how to engage, the crit can fail as a learning opportunity and become something to be endured. This idea is reflected in Fine's (2018, p.141) analysis, the crit, he tells us, 'feels like a masculine initiation rite'. Madoff

(2009, p.274) claimed the crit does not 'level the hierarchy between teacher and student but affirm(s) the faculty's authority', while Smith (2011, p.44) tells us 'little attention has been paid to students' perceptions of the process or to understanding how and what they learn from it'. Then there is Newall (2017, p.17), who says that 'crits promote a 'kind of *pluralism*' and 'tend to do so regardless of the intentions of the teachers who run them', highlighting a potential disparity between the facilitators' intentions and the actual learning that takes place.

Significant work has been done to address these and other issues with group crits. Rowles (2013) includes several compelling approaches. Roddy Hunter outlines methods for building the confidence of new students by, for example, having them rehearse the crit by presenting the work of established artists before they get to the point of presenting their own (Rowles, 2013, p.46). Beyond these published outcomes we are also aware of the work of colleagues who are developing the pedagogy of the crit in GSA, KuvA, and the wider academic community. This ranges from well-known examples such as the DAS Theatre Method (Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2014) to those we have encountered through our networks undertaken by colleagues internationally. We have identified practices in which staff have workshopped the development of the crit from student perspectives (Blair et al., 2007) but we have not encountered methods which engage the students in processes of co-creation or attempt to deepen their understanding of the process as feedback.

This research was further influenced by previous work together, both through Teaching Painting, and more recently the conference On Not Knowing: How Artists Teach, which took place at GSA in the summer of 2023. The conference, which took inspiration from co-convenor Rebecca Fortnum's (2014) book explored how ambiguity, uncertainty, improvisation, and intuition are integral to aspects of the pedagogy of Fine Art. Both of us had engaged separately in research and development work around feedback crits. Greated has worked with GSA colleagues Robert Mantho, Thea Stevens, and Emily Salines from University of the Arts London. (Greated et al., 2023) on the 2021 QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, 'Belonging Through Assessment: Pipelines of Compassion', in which the three participating institutions – University of the Arts London, GSA, and Leeds Arts University – reflected on how considering assessment through the lens of compassion can help address social justice, belonging, and inclusion so as to build resilient learning communities. Findings from this research around the emotional

dimension of feedback have underpinned principles of the project including co-creation, feedback being done with rather than done to, and consideration of the whole self (Greated et al., 2023). In 2022 at the KuvA research days Quaife presented findings of his research which critiqued the over-reliance of oral dialogical modes of teaching and called for other pedagogical approaches (since published as *The Oscillating Art School* in Quaife, 2024).

The Workshops

To test the premise that, through offering agency and deepening understanding of pedagogical processes, co-creation of group critique could help students to better realise the potential of this aspect of teaching and learning, two action research workshops were developed. This was done following a plan, act, observe, reflect cycle (Mertler, 2009), offering authentic engagement and agreeing upon motivations with stakeholders (teachers and students), addressing power relations in and through the work, and developing a culture of safer spaces for teaching and learning (Stringer, 2019). Versions of the workshops ('Crit the Crit' and 'Test the Crit') were delivered in the two institutions with the aim of developing the understanding of pedagogical processes as a way to support feedback and engage students in co-creating their own crits.

The participants who took part in this study were students from across year groups and with varied backgrounds. Attainment in or engagement with the programmes was not taken into consideration. Within the groups, there was a range of prior educational, work and life experience, which participants brought to the discussions. The project was undertaken in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where group dialogue and live feedback were limited due to physical restrictions in institutions. Although the context of the pandemic has not been directly reviewed, there have been a number of student comments that point to the lack of group dialogue during the COVID period.

Workshop 1: Crit the Crit

The first workshop, Crit the Crit, encouraged participants to critique the group crit itself by reflecting on previous experiences of group teaching and feedback, exploring a range of

existing models of group crit that then facilitated the collective imagining of possible alternatives.

The workshop was structured in two parts, with part a) being a reflexive activity, where students actively engaged with questioning and sharing experiences of crits and group teaching experiences in relation to feedback. Students discussed what worked and what did not work, and a range of models of crits were discussed, leading to an exploration of what the group saw as good practice in group feedback. The students then moved into part b), co-creation, where they worked in small groups to develop shared understandings of crits, working together to develop their own crit models.

Workshop 2: Test the Crit

At the end of the first workshop and in preparation for the next, students were invited to individually develop their own crit models. They were asked to reflect on the initial workshop and their experience of co-creation as stimuli for developing their own crit model. The outlines developed were submitted digitally in advance of Workshop 2: Test the Crit so the student's own alternative crit models could be tested by the same participants.

Workshop 2 took place at KuvA around one month after the initial workshop to test students' co-created crit models and as a way of gaining feedback on them. The alternative crits were carried out with the students who designed them and were then reflected upon.

Findings

There was a range of themes that emerged from Workshop 1: Crit the Crit, which fell into three broad categories: expectations and experience, roles and behaviours, and structure and timing. A range of models was created that saw different levels of experimentation, including different structures, timings, roles and behaviours of the participants, allowing students to actively engage in creating their own learning opportunities and direct how they received feedback. The importance of the form the feedback took was considered,

including more or less structured and directed feedback as well as nonverbal forms of feedback, and the idea of commenting through action.

What was understood as the role of the crit and expectations of how it impacts learning ranged widely between students, with differences particularly notable in relation to their prior educational and work experience. Where students were already engaged in art school education there were sometimes high expectations about what group crits could achieve, as well as attention given to when this was not perceived to be the case. Where students, undergraduate or postgraduate, were new to art education or had less direct experience of crits, there was a broader questioning of the role of group dialogue in their learning, with students often citing other group experiences and how they might be utilised in gaining feedback. Recognising students as individual learners (rather than a 'hive mind') with their own life experiences has been key to the development of this project and was seen as key to good practice in developing crit models.

The behaviours and roles of the participants were a focus, with discussions often citing feelings of belonging, behaviour and respect. The sense of belonging of the participants, as explored through the Belonging in Assessment project (Greated et al., 2023), is key to student engagement in their learning, and aids students to fully benefit from and engage with feedback. In the groups, how active people were in the group setting was widely seen as key and as a sign of success or value of the crit system. The group providing consensus, or approval, to help students arrive at a shared meaning as discussed by Newall (2019) was key to student understanding of the success of a crit. Ensuring this is equitable and inclusive was seen primarily as the responsibility of the facilitator (or staff member), and their ability to engage and facilitate the discussion was seen as pivotal to enabling a successful crit.

As well as the research taking place in institutions in two different countries there were also international students involved in each. Some international students spoke about a lack of prior experience with the crit or similar approaches to teaching and how engaging in processes of co-creation had helped them to better understand what was involved in the process, and understand expectations that were previously tacit. This suggests co-creation might function as a leveller through sharing the prior experience and expectations of students as part of the process. There were also differences between institutional

approaches across the international contexts. This includes the nomenclature: in Helsinki, although the format is remarkably similar, the terms 'crit' or 'group critique' are not used, and these sessions are referred to as 'seminars'. Anecdotally, based on the lived experience of the researchers, this difference is reflected in the more gentle manner, even politeness, of students in the Finnish context, and the desire expressed by some students in Glasgow for greater or harsher criticism. We acknowledge there are likely deeper cultural contexts at play here, without having the possibility to explore them further in this case study.

Many of the suggestions for the crits were bound to the structures and timings to ensure the crit was as useful as possible. Crits were seen as a central and valued part of the learning and much focus was given to when they were situated in the student journey and creative processes as structured in an educational setting. The students recognised the importance of the timing of feedback and how timing can affect its purpose in the student journey. This echoes research by Molloy et al. (2020) which suggests that feedback at the end of a project can instil a notion of 'feedback as telling', suggesting feedback as being done *to* rather than done *with* students. Students were particularly clear that there needs to be different forms of crits taking place at different stages of learning, often relating this to the forms of feedback that are useful at different stages of learning and creative processes. Discussions on feedback centred on the need for constructive feedback, 'feed-forward' as well as 'feedback', the need for criticality, and how to frame feedback so it is not damaging to the individual.

Outcomes

This research utilises the process of co-creation to foreground and help students benefit from the crit as a key moment of feedback within their learner journey. It proposes the co-creation of the crit as a model to ensure students can be active in their learning and prepared for engagement in group learning and the resulting feedback. The crit has a key role in teaching students to make meaning in work, and it is acknowledged that receiving feedback is the primary purpose of the crit. Jheni Arboine states that despite all the names and formats that crits might have, the term 'crit' refers to when someone making art shows it to a group of people to receive feedback (Bunch, 2013). Developing the students'

understanding of the crit as a feedback moment aims to ensure they are enabled to fully engage with the process of feedback.

The co-creation of crits aims to remove barriers to participation and introduces new students to crits as part of their entry into art education. As well as ensuring parity of experience and supporting student inclusion, co-creation can help to de-mystify the crit and allows for participatory feedback models that support feedback literacy to be used across cohorts. As Bovill (2020b) suggests, in her text discussing whole class co-creation, the importance of approaches being rolled out across cohorts is key to the co-creation integral to students' programmes and courses of study.

The need to work with students entering art education - either those in Year 1 undergraduate or starting postgraduate education with a range of prior education - to find meaningful ways to gain feedback through group dialogue has emerged as a key area of focus. Preparing students for crits has been explored through numerous avenues, such as Hunter's Year 1 'famous artist' workshop (Rowles, 2013), or the models developed through the DAS Theatre feedback approach (Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2014) mentioned earlier. This research builds on those to utilise partnership models of co-creation to enable whole cohorts to engage with their learning and feedback. Bovill and Felten (2016) define co-creation as staff and students working collaboratively to create components of curricula and/or pedagogic approaches. Bovill (2020a) argues that this is different from active learning because students have decision-making built into the process and students' active participation in the models themselves holds the potential for partnership and belonging in learning.

The aim of this study is to enable models that can be used with different groups to give students time to reflect on their own learning and a safer space to gain critical feedback. The model of co-creation of crits can engage with whole cohorts in their learning, giving students agency in their own learning and allowing for the participants to be fully engaged with their feedback.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Saastamoinen Foundation. The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

References

- Amsterdam University of the Arts (2014) *Feedback Method*. Available at: <https://www.atd.ahk.nl/en/theatre-programmes/das-theatre/study-programme/feedback-method-1/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).
- Armstrong, E. and Doren, M. (2023) *Let's Talk About Critique: Reimagining Art and Design Education*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Barret, T. (2018) *CRITS: A Students Manual*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- Blair, B., Orr, S and Blythman, M. (2007) *Critiquing the Crit*. Higher Education Academy.
- Bovill, C. (2020a) 'Co-creation in learning and teaching: the case for a whole-class approach in higher education', *Higher Education*, 79, pp.1023-1037. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w>
- Bovill, C. (2020b) *Co-creating learning and teaching: towards relational pedagogy in higher education*. St Albans: Critical Publishing.
- Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2016) 'Cultivating student–staff partnerships through research and practice', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), pp.1-3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1124965>
- Bunch, G. (2013) *Art Crits: 20 Questions. A Commissioned Artist's Video*. Available at: <https://q-art.org.uk/portfolio/art-crit-video> (Accessed: 25 June 2024).

- Carless, D. and Boud, D. (2018) 'The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), pp.1315-25. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354>
- Day, P. (2013) 'The art group crit. How do you make a firing squad less scary', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 5, pp.1-15, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i5.178>
- Dinkins, S. (2021) 'Inside-Out', in T. Doud and Z. Charlton (eds) *Out of Place: Artists, Pedagogy, and Purpose*. Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, pp.191-198.
- Elkins, J. (2011) *Art Critiques: A Guide*. Washington: New Academia Publishing.
- Fine, G.A. (2018) *Talking Art: The Culture of Practice and the Practice of Culture in MFA Fine Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fisher, E. and Fortnum, R. (2014) *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. London: Black Dog.
- Greated, M., Mantho, R., Salines, E., and Stevens, T. (2023) 'Compassionate feedback', in *Belonging through assessment: pipelines of compassion*. QAA Enhancement Project, pp.76-94.
- Hattie, J. (2009) *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203887332>
- Hattie, J. and Timperley, H. (2007) 'The power of feedback', *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), pp.81-112. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Healy, J. (2016) 'The components of the 'crit' in art and design education', *Irish Journal of Academic Practice*, 5(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7RB1V>
- It's Nice That (2017) 'The crit: a survivors guide and how to make the most of feedback'. *It's Nice That blog*, 25 April. Available at: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/the-graduates-2017-crit-advice-040517> (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

- Madoff, S.H. (2009) 'States of exception', in S.H. Madoff (ed) *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.271-285.
- Mertler, C.A. (2009) *Action Research: Teachers as Researchers in Classrooms*. London: Sage.
- Molloy, E., Boud, D. and Henderson, D. (2020) 'Developing a learning-centred framework for feedback literacy', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(4), pp.527-540. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1667955>
- Moran, B.D. (2009) 'Aesthetic platforms', in S.H. Madoff (ed) *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp.33-37.
- Mulholland, N. (2019) *Re-imagining the Art School: Paragogy and Artistic Learning*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Newall, M. (2019) 'Cries, consensus and criticality: making artists in the contemporary art school', in C. Brisbin and M. Thiessen (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Criticality in Art, Architecture and Design*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp.14-31.
- Orr, S. and Shreeve, A. (2018) *Art and Design Pedagogy in Higher Education: Knowledge, Values, and Ambiguity in the Creative Curriculum*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315415130>
- Quaife, M. (2024) *The Oscillating Art School*. in F. Brümmel (ed) *Applied Non-Didactics*. Helsinki: Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts, pp.39-64.
- Rowles, S. (ed) (2013) *Art Crits: 20 Questions*. London: Q-Art.
- Smith, C. (2011) 'Understanding students' views of the crit assessment', *Journal for Education in the Built Environment*, 6(1), pp.44-67. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.11120/jebe.2011.06010044>

Stringer. E. (2019) 'Theory in educational action research', in C.A. Mertler (ed) *The Wiley Handbook of Action Research in Education*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, pp.139-160.

Thornton. S. (2008) *Seven Days in the Art World*. London: W.W. Norton and Company.

Author details

Marianne Greated is Head of the School of Art at Edinburgh College of Art, part of the University of Edinburgh. Previously she was Head of Fine Art and Head of Painting and Printmaking at Glasgow School of Art. Her research interests are underpinned by sustainability in relation to contemporary art. She has held solo exhibitions in India, Denmark, Greece, Belarus, Spain and the UK and has curated and written extensively on painting, feminist methodologies and compassionate pedagogies.

Magnus Quaife is a professor of artist pedagogy at the Academy of Fine Art, the University of the Arts Helsinki where his research explores the values and assumptions that underpin how artists teach contemporary art. He is a painter, researcher, and academic. He has been described as a conceptual artist interested in paint and his practice as an archaeologist of the modern and contemporary.

Licence

©2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open-access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).