

©Learning from Design Critiques

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Learning from design critiques are different from other types of education. Design curricula are less structured and more intuitive than other professional disciplines. As a result, students come less equipped than others to get the most out of their education. Faculty intentions are not the same as student expectations, in understanding this process, especially among younger students. Rather than continue to dwell on how it is delivered by faculty, focusing on some of the inherent problems of learning from this process will make for provocative discussions and a constructive critique of process.

WHAT TO DO WITH CRITICISM

1. TAKE CRITICISM FOR WHAT ITS WORTH

Most students think about any design criticism they receive long enough to accept or reject it. Appreciating and understanding criticism takes time and a framework of expectations. You will learn more from design criticism when you let a faculty's comments sink in slowly after a crit.

2. MAKE CRITICISM USEFUL

It takes work to make criticism useful. Without the effort to understand, evaluate and apply it, criticism is merely encouraging or demoralizing. Your emotional reactions to criticism will diminish as you find more uses for the comments you receive on your designs.

3. COLLECT GREAT QUESTIONS

Its been said that creativity depends more on the quality of the questions you ask to define the problem, than the solutions you invent to satisfy your definition. Behind every criticism is a question that your critic asked about your design. You will become a better designer as you can use the questions that critics raise themselves.

HOW TO TAKE THE CRIT YOU GOT

4. TRANSFORM CRITICISM INTO CRITERIA

Design criticism has very limited value if it only applies to the one scheme being reviewed. Yet every design criticism has the potential to serve as a criteria for judging future schemes. You will take more criticism

constructively when you can notice what criteria are being offered for you to use on your other projects.

5. SEE WHAT YOUR CRITICS SEE

Most criticism is offered without all of the facts and insights about your scheme. Yet most criticism gets taken as if the critics saw the scheme as clearly as the designer. When you can notice what limited information the critics reacted to, you will be able to get more value out of the criticism they offered.

6. LET CRITICS HAVE THEIR OWN OPINION

It's difficult for most design students to see the faculty as peers when they receive criticism. Students overreact to their lack of design knowledge. As you can get a better perspective on yourself, faculty comments can be taken as opinions they're entitled to, rather than "absolute truths".

7. NOTICE THE METHOD OF CRITICISM

There are several different styles of criticism. Similar design comments may seem inconsistent to students who cannot recognize the style differences. When you can separate the content and style of the design criticisms you receive, much of what you get told will make more sense.

8. UNCOVER THE PREMISE

All criticism is based on its own premise of what constitutes good design. Without recognizing that underlying premise, students get pulled in opposing directions by criticism and get stuck trying to make their scheme satisfy different premises. The ability to take criticism well depends, in part, on being able to address the underlying premises in the comments by a critic.

9. LEARN FROM BEING DEVASTATED

There is much to be learned from a devastating experience besides how to avoid its reoccurrence. The more clearly you see how you interact with faculty, the more choice you will have about how you react to criticism. You will not be as devastated by strong criticism when you are prepared to learn from it.

10. TALK ABOUT HOW IT WENT

Most students dwell on what got said in a crit. Comments about the moves and reactions within the conversation are called process observations. You will get lots more value from a crit when you can observe the process as well as the content of your crit.

HOW TO GET THE WORK DONE

11. GO AHEAD, MAKE YOUR DAY

There is more to time management than meeting deadlines. Too many students do all their required coursework without making time to learn from their experiences. Your ability to challenge your own priorities, impose limits on yourself and uncover your personal patterns will contribute to the effective use of your time.

12. PUT AN END TO ENDLESS TASKS

Design schemes get better with long hours of refinement and rethinking. Most students turn this into an endless task that can never reach an acceptable outcome. Your ability to use criticism will increase as you learn to put a stop to your design efforts well before time runs out.

13. EASE UP WHEN YOU'RE STUCK

Creativity rarely flows by trying harder to come up with an idea. Yet there's a difference between "not trying" and "easing up". When you can take your mind off the thoughts that help you recognize a good idea, better ideas will flow again.

14. CURB YOUR VERBIAGE

When you offer a lot of words to describe your design scheme, it becomes difficult to tell if you are being criticized for your scheme or how you described it. The colorful language of design also tempts students to over-refine-their concept and neglects its execution. Striking a better balance between generating ideas and forms will make the criticism you receive more useful.

15. KILL NO SCHEME BEFORE ITS TIME

Out of desperation to come up with an outstanding scheme, we all fall into the trap of rejecting mediocre ideas too quickly. This pattern is called premature convergence. The quality of your creative thinking will improve as you get better at keeping your design options open.

16. LOOK AT YOUR LIFESTYLE

The quality of your designs depends on how hard you try. It is also affected by the food; exercise and sleep you give you body. When you improve your concentration, stamina and judgment by improving your lifestyle, your designing will get better without even trying harder.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR BEING CRITIQUED

17. REUSE YOUR CRITS

You can criticize both for what you came up with and how you got there. Design criticism usually dwells on the end result. When you can listen for ideas on how to improve your approach on the next design, the criticism will be more useful.

18. START WITH YOUR STRENGTHS

Some students set themselves up for a bad crit by thinking that they don't take any criticism well. Everyone has areas where they take being criticized more constructively than others do. The more you understand the variety of ways you take criticism, the easier it will become to take design criticism more constructively.

19. BE YOUR OWN BEST CRITIC

Faculty will give "alarming" criticism to students who appear to have no self-criticism of their designs. Students who are not critical of their own work are also more hurt by even the best-worded criticism. You will receive get better criticism and take it more constructively when you give yourself a good crit before you present your ideas.

20. BE THE FIRST TO CHANGE YOUR TUNE

Many students cannot admit the faults they see in their own design. Everyone is initially attached to their own creations. When we you can break that attachment before being criticized, you will feel less attacked and more supported by the crit.

21. ANTICIPATE THE QUESTIONS

It may appear that critics will ask about anything they want to. But it's not possible to prepare well with the perspective that anything can happen in your crit. By anticipating what questions you are likely to be asked, you can do a far better job of refining your design and preparing to present it.

22. PREPARE TO BE PROBED

Some of the best criticism you can receive will unravel the thinking that got you to your final scheme. It may be frustrating to answer questions about your process when you're prepared to present the final outcome. However, the easiest criticism to apply to all your future design efforts deals with the quality of your thinking.

23. WALK IN EVERY CRITIC'S SHOES

It's frustrating when critics cannot agree among themselves and you feel caught in the middle. Yet this

situation provides a valuable lesson in how different perspectives suggest different criticisms of the same scheme. The better you become at seeing your design from different perspectives, the more you can learn from conflicting criticisms.

HOW OTHERS CAN HELP YOU USE YOU'RE CRIT

24. SHOP FOR SUPPORT

It's not possible to maintain your perspective without support. It takes second opinions to learn from faculty comments and to see how you react to criticism. Finding the right people to support you will make a big difference in how much you get out of your design education.

25. GET CRITS FROM PEERS

Fellow students may not know as much design as faculty, but that doesn't mean their crits of your work cannot be valuable. Peers can take the points of view of different faculty members, ask friendly questions and offer suggestions that you're free to ignore. The more times you ask for a crit from your peers, the more you'll be able to learn from the subsequent criticism from the faculty.

26. ASK FOR AMBIVALENCE

The least useful criticism you can receive passes judgment on your design without ambivalence. What you need to hear is the pro and cons that the faculty perceives in your scheme. You will get far more out of critiques when you ask for comments that break it down into the considerations that led the critic to a final conclusion.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE CRIT

27. DESIGN YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Creativity depends, in part, on your passionate involvement in the problem. Detachment and objectivity can hurt your design. Yet a big picture of your design effort within the context of your education increases what you learn from your efforts. Keeping simultaneous perspective and passionate involvement will ultimately improve your designs.

28. LOOK FOR BREADTH AND DEPTH

Design is both creative and multidisciplinary, not a singular expertise. The quality of the criticism you receive only partially depends upon the depth of

professional expertise of your critic. You will learn more as you appreciate more of the comments that provide in-sights from other disciplines and priorities from larger design contexts.

29. SEEK REASONING BEHIND ANSWERS

Design criticism can be completely chaotic to students who are listening for what the faculty believe is "the right answer". Students are often misled by criticism that is worded as if it were "the right answer." When you are able to see the reasons behind a criticism, you will be much better at making sense of a faculty's comments.

30. LEARN DESIGN WITHOUT A TEXTBOOK

Learning design has been characterized as a process of guided self-discovery. Its intuitive nature makes it impossible to learn as procedural steps. The more you expect to learn design from your personal experiences within a design curriculum, the more value you will get from situations that seem ill-defined, contradictory or disorganized.

31. GET REALISTIC ABOUT THE FACULTY

Students who imagine faculty possess super-human insight are routinely intimidated or disappointed. You can learn the most from your faculty by respecting their opinion without exalting it to be the all-seeing, last word on the value of your design. You can make better presentations when you realize the faculty are human, too.

32. LEARN FROM A ROCK

The quality of your design education depends, in part, on what you're given to learn from. Most of it depends on what you do with it. When you increase your ability to learn from your own experiences, the idea of needing better instruction will stop distracting you from getting the most out of the design criticism you receive.

HOW YOU AFFECT THE CRITICISM YOU RECEIVE

33. FACE THE FACT THAT YOU'RE STRESSED

When students get concerned about their stress level, most address it as a general problem requiring some stress relieving activities. Although beneficial, these activities do nothing to change the specific causes of a student's high stress. As you become better at recognizing what events elevate your stress level, more effective options will be defined for managing it.

34. BE SERIOUS ABOUT YOURSELF

Most design faculty are very concerned about students who appear to not be serious about their work. Most severe criticism is aimed at getting those students to change their outlook. You can receive more even-handed criticism from faculty when you come across as taking yourself seriously.

35. NOTICE WHAT MAKES YOU TICK

We all have what psychologists call "hot buttons." When you are aware of what provokes you, you have more choices about how to take people's comments and what criticism to learn from. As you become aware of your own "hot buttons," you will also be more inclined to notice when you are provoking your design faculty to react unfavorably.

36. LIMIT YOUR OBJECTIVES

When students set themselves to take criticism as a crushing defeat, they seem to have unlimited objectives for what they want their design effort to prove. Successful use of criticism depends on limiting the effect it can have on you. The more you realize how you are driven to prove your worth as a talented designer, a friendly companion or a hard worker, the easier it will be to limit the objectives for what you can prove with your design efforts.

37. SEPARATE THEIR WORDS FROM THE WORDING

A lot of valuable design criticism is worded poorly and provokes defensive reactions by students. The distinction between what was said and how it was worded becomes very important. The better you get at noticing how the comments are worded, the more value you will get out of the intent of the design criticism.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR OUTLOOK

38. AVOID BECOMING OVERLY CRITICAL

With so much design criticism being offered, many students adapt by becoming overly critical of their own work and anyone else's. Instead of offering constructive suggestions, overly critical comments merely pass unfavorable judgment on a design. Keeping yourself from indulging in over-criticism of others will help you get constructive criticism for yourself.

39. ADMIT YOUR OWN BIASES

Lots of design criticism is aimed at getting students to become conscious of a design bias of which they don't appear to be aware. Often a student knows of the bias but doesn't admit it in order to appear more objective. You can attract more useful criticism when you admit your bias and show critics how it affected the design decisions you made.

40. CHOOSE YOUR FANATICS

Design training is filled with opportunities to become a fanatic about a style, a physical vocabulary or a conceptual framework. Fanaticism is very useful to spark the intensity of creative design efforts and very dangerous as a trap for becoming stale. When you can use fanaticism to push your design effort instead of compromising it, you will have more use for a variety of good design criticisms.

41. BE CAREFUL HOW YOU CRITICIZE

It appears that people who give excessive criticism also attract it. Part of this may be explained by the fact that most harsh critics are equally hard on themselves. Giving yourself fair, even-handed design criticism is a necessary step to enable faculty to make helpful comments to you.

42. APPRECIATE WHAT YOU'RE LEARNING

With the goal of graduation and the intense workload, many students fail to appreciate what they are learning as it happens. Unlike curricula with more structured content, intuitive learning requires that some time be taken to value the subtle progress being made.

43. BE WEIRD FOR A CHANGE

Design training creates a sub-culture with it to help students deal with the workload, stress and unstructured learning experiences. That sub-culture typically demands conformity to a lot of cynicism about the quality of faculty criticism. Getting the most out of your design education requires lots of personal initiative and insight that will brand you a "nonconformist" among your classmates. It's a price worth paying.

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[To OBTAIN THE MOST OUT OF THIS STUDIO
EXPERIENCE EMBRACE BRUCE MAU'S
MANIFESTO PRINCIPLES]

An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth
<<http://bruce mau.com/manifesto.html>>

Written in 1998, the Incomplete Manifesto is an articulation of statements that exemplify Bruce Mau's beliefs, motivations and strategies. It also articulates how the BMD (Bruce Mau Design) studio works.

1. **Allow events to change you.** You have to be willing to grow. Growth is different from something that happens to you. You produce it. You live it. The prerequisites for growth: the openness to experience events and the willingness to be changed by them.
2. **Forget about good.** Good is a known quantity. Good is what we all agree on. Growth is not necessarily good. Growth is an exploration of unlit recesses that may or may not yield to our research. As long as you stick to good you'll never have real growth.
3. **Process is more important than outcome.** When the outcome drives the process we will only ever go to where we've already been. If process drives outcome we may not know where we're going, but we will know we want to be there.
4. **Love your experiments (as you would an ugly child).** Joy is the engine of growth. Exploit the liberty in casting your work as beautiful experiments, iterations, attempts, trials, and errors. Take the long view and allow yourself the fun of failure every day.
5. **Go deep.** The deeper you go the more likely you will discover something of value.
6. **Capture accidents.** The wrong answer is the right answer in search of a different question. Collect wrong answers as part of the process. Ask different questions.
7. **Study.** A studio is a place of study. Use the necessity of production as an excuse to study. Everyone will benefit.
8. **Drift.** Allow yourself to wander aimlessly. Explore adjacencies. Lack judgment. Postpone criticism.
9. **Begin anywhere.** John Cage tells us that not knowing where to begin is a common form of paralysis. His advice: begin anywhere.
10. **Everyone is a leader.** Growth happens. Whenever

it does, allow it to emerge. Learn to follow when it makes sense. Let anyone lead.

11. **Harvest ideas. Edit applications.** Ideas need a dynamic, fluid, generous environment to sustain life. Applications, on the other hand, benefit from critical rigor. Produce a high ratio of ideas to applications.
12. **Keep moving.** The market and its operations have a tendency to reinforce success. Resist it. Allow failure and migration to be part of your practice.
13. **Slow down.** Desynchronize from standard time frames and surprising opportunities may present themselves.
14. **Don't be cool.** Cool is conservative fear dressed in black. Free yourself from limits of this sort.
15. **Ask stupid questions.** Growth is fueled by desire and innocence. Assess the answer, not the question. Imagine learning throughout your life at the rate of an infant.
16. **Collaborate.** The space between people working together is filled with conflict, friction, strife, exhilaration, delight, and vast creative potential.
17. _____ . Intentionally left blank. Allow space for the ideas you haven't had yet, and for the ideas of others.
18. **Stay up late.** Strange things happen when you've gone too far, been up too long, worked too hard, and you're separated from the rest of the world.
19. **Work the metaphor.** Every object has the capacity to stand for something other than what is apparent. Work on what it stands for.
20. **Be careful to take risks.** Time is genetic. Today is the child of yesterday and the parent of tomorrow. The work you produce today will create your future.
21. **Repeat yourself.** If you like it, do it again. If you don't like it, do it again.
22. **Make your own tools.** Hybridize your tools in order to build unique things. Even simple tools that are your own can yield entirely new avenues of exploration. Remember, tools amplify our capacities, so even a small tool can make a big difference.
23. **Stand on someone's shoulders.** You can travel farther carried on the accomplishments of those who came before you. And the view is so much better.
24. **Avoid software.** The problem with software is that everyone has it.

25. **Don't clean your desk.** You might find something in the morning that you can't see tonight.

26. **Don't enter awards competitions.** Just don't. It's not good for you.

27. **Read only left-hand pages.** Marshall McLuhan did this. By decreasing the amount of information, we leave room for what he called our "noodle."

28. **Make new words. Expand the lexicon.** The new conditions demand a new way of thinking. The thinking demands new forms of expression. The expression generates new conditions.

29. **Think with your mind. Forget technology.** Creativity is not device-dependent.

30. **Organization = Liberty.** Real innovation in design, or any other field, happens in context. That context is usually some form of cooperatively managed enterprise. Frank Gehry, for instance, is only able to realize Bilbao because his studio can deliver it on budget. The myth of a split between "creatives" and "suits" is what Leonard Cohen calls a 'charming artifact of the past.'

31. **Don't borrow money.** Once again, Frank Gehry's advice. By maintaining financial control, we maintain creative control. It's not exactly rocket science, but it's surprising how hard it is to maintain this discipline, and how many have failed.

32. **Listen carefully.** Every collaborator who enters our orbit brings with him or her a world more strange and complex than any we could ever hope to imagine. By listening to the details and the subtlety of their needs, desires, or ambitions, we fold their world onto our own. Neither party will ever be the same.

33. **Take field trips.** The bandwidth of the world is greater than that of your TV set, or the Internet, or even a totally immersive, interactive, dynamically rendered, object-oriented, real-time, computer graphic-simulated environment.

34. **Make mistakes faster.** This isn't my idea -- I borrowed it. I think it belongs to Andy Grove.

35. **Imitate.** Don't be shy about it. Try to get as close as you can. You'll never get all the way, and the separation might be truly remarkable. We have only to look to Richard Hamilton and his version of Marcel Duchamp's large glass to see how rich, discredited, and underused imitation is as a technique.

36. Scat. When you forget the words, do what Ella did: make up something else ... but not words.

37. Break it, stretch it, bend it, crush it, crack it, fold it.

38. Explore the other edge. Great liberty exists when we avoid trying to run with the technological pack. We can't find the leading edge because it's trampled underfoot. Try using old-tech equipment made obsolete by an economic cycle but still rich with potential.

39. Coffee breaks, cab rides, green rooms. Real growth often happens outside of where we intend it to, in the interstitial spaces -- what Dr. Seuss calls "the waiting place." Hans Ulrich Obrist once organized a science and art conference with all of the infrastructure of a conference -- the parties, chats, lunches, airport arrivals — but with no actual conference. Apparently it was hugely successful and spawned many ongoing collaborations.

40. Avoid fields. Jump fences. Disciplinary boundaries and regulatory regimes are attempts to control the wilding of creative life. They are often understandable efforts to order what are manifold, complex, evolutionary processes. Our job is to jump the fences and cross the fields.

41. Laugh. People visiting the studio often comment on how much we laugh. Since I've become aware of this, I use it as a barometer of how comfortably we are expressing ourselves.

42. Remember. Growth is only possible as a product of history. Without memory, innovation is merely novelty. History gives growth a direction. But a memory is never perfect. Every memory is a degraded or composite image of a previous moment or event. That's what makes us aware of its quality as a past and not a present. It means that every memory is new, a partial construct different from its source, and, as such, a potential for growth itself.

43. Power to the people. Play can only happen when people feel they have control over their lives. We can't be free agents if we're not free.