



How does teaching in a studio differ from traditional classroom teaching?

As students develop their project(s) will they expect to be given a set of guidelines to follow?

What is an effective peer critique?

### **The Learning Environment in a Studio Classroom**

In a studio course, the processes of learning and creating are as important as the product. Often students work on their assignments during class time. Learning evolves over time in successive cycles of action and reflection. Students might rework an assignment several times, to learn and to practice techniques and skills, both during class and on their own. Through discussions and critiques students learn how to talk about and evaluate their work.

A studio course typically includes some work days – that is, days when the students work on their assignments during class. Before the work day, establish guidelines for how the time will be used:

- Emphasize that the students need to attend class.
- Tell the students what preparations they need to make for the work day: do they need special supplies? Do they need to bring research to class?
- Indicate the assignment's objectives and immediate goals.
- What process they use in completing the assignment is as important as the product. For you to evaluate that process, you must be present to witness it, because most creative processes are not documented as experiments in a lab notebook. It is advantageous for both you and the students to be able to talk about the process during the experience, rather than after the fact.
- Students should be told if the assignment will be critiqued and what the topic of the critique will be.

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### **Critiquing the Assignment**

A distinguishing feature of studio classrooms is the practice of peer reviewing or critiquing. Before you bring your students together for a critiquing session, share with them the general goals of the critique and the specific requirements and guidelines that they should focus on for each project. Effective peer critiquing requires planning on your part. First-year students, in particular, may find the idea of publicly sharing their projects or their writing intimidating or confusing. Forethought on your part will help you avoid sessions that become unproductive or frustrating.

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The timing of critique sessions may need to be determined in advance. A critique session could occur at the intermediary stage of the first major project: students' peers and you can give some direction for further revision and reshaping to be completed before students submit a finished assignment. Alternatively, it could be scheduled at the end of the first major project, when students can reflect on the project as a whole and consider alternative and future directions. Finally, midterm and finals are other times to consider critiquing: these are good points at which to consider an instructor-student conference, so that you can give individual attention to a student's work.

### What Type of Critique to Use

Critiques can be structured in a variety of ways: large-group sessions, small groups, one-on-one formats, and either oral or written feedback. Each type has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on the type of project to be critiqued, how familiar students are with critiquing, classroom dynamics, and the time available.

- Large-group critiques:

Involve the entire class. They can be especially useful if you want to model the process itself. The particular advantages of large-group sessions are that many viewpoints can be expressed and you can facilitate discussion more readily. However, large-group sessions take longer, so time considerations may require you to use small groups (groups of three or four) instead. Another disadvantage is that some students will be less assertive and less at ease speaking in large groups.

- Small group sessions:

In addition to encouraging quieter students to participate and managing classroom time more efficiently, small-group sessions have the advantage of being more intimate, in that students oftentimes respond more candidly to one another's work. Be aware that small groups function less effectively if the members are friends or if they all tend to be quiet. Appointing a group leader to facilitate, or working out good "mixes" of students, will help avoid such problems.

- One-on-one sessions:

Using student pairs for one-on-one sessions is effective for students who would benefit from having just one other student act as a sounding board, observer, and listener in helping them solve a troublesome problem or approach. Student pairs can reduce the anxiety of large-group sessions and allow students to concentrate on just one other project. One-on-one critiques between the student and you allow the student to understand the project.

- Oral or written feedback:

Whether you decide to use oral or written critiques, or a combination of both, will depend on the time constraints, whether the critiques are intended to be formal or informal, whether you think students will benefit from having a record of the discussion, and whether written critiques could help students to articulate the cognitive processes in addition to their personal reactions.



### **Participation Guidelines**

Fostering an atmosphere of mutual support, trust, and respect is key to a productive critique, but it requires some ground rules and guidelines for participation. Make students aware of these rules prior to the session. Some guidelines to consider are the following:

- Everyone should be expected to participate.
- Both strengths and weaknesses of the assignment should be discussed.
- Comments should never be personal, but instead directed at the work.
- Disagreements will develop and some comments will be subjective, but critiques are discussions, not evaluations.
- In large-group sessions the critique should be focused and relatively brief.
- If the class becomes too divided over an issue, or if a situation of class-versus-instructor develops, try to refocus the discussion by asking questions; or end the discussion temporarily, and indicate that you will return to it later but that the class needs to move on.

### **Summarizing the Objectives**

A summary and self-evaluation are important components of critiques. The following concluding steps may help students in summarizing the assignment's objectives:

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- You can prompt a brief summary at the end of each student's critique by asking the student what she or he thinks are the particular strengths and weaknesses of the project and how it might be revised.
- Solicit responses from the student about the assignment – where did he or she have difficulties and what worked successfully? It might be beneficial for you to solicit a critique of the assignment itself from the entire class.
- Ask students to relate the current project to future assignments and goals. This will help them recognize that the particular processes, skills, and knowledge they applied on the current project are a foundation upon which to base their next level of learning.

### **Critiquing a Tool for Learning**

There are several ways to collaborate with peers in a studio environment:

- Students begin to develop a self-reflective response to their own work. As they receive constructive feedback they redirect or revise their approach to their project, so they can continue with the next steps toward completion.

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- Peer critiquing can strengthen the skill of critical judgement in that students will learn to make informed responses to a variety of aesthetic approaches. Furthermore, peer critiquing contributes to the affective aspects of learning. As students begin to understand their roles and responsibilities in critiquing, they likely will become more self-confident, more independent, and more open-minded in their responses and attitudes toward enquiry.
- The emphasis on learning as a process (and not merely as a product) is enhanced as students begin to recognize learning as successive cycles of action and reflection.

### Source

Barbara Walter and Jane Hendler (1996), "The Studio."  
University Teaching – A Guide for Graduate Students (pp. 37-43).  
Leo M. Lambert, Stacey Lane Tice, and Patricia H. Featherstone (Eds.).  
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

### TIPS ON...

#### Grading the Studio Assignment

Grading in many studio courses is less objective than in courses where grades are based on written tests. In a studio course, grades are given based on a variety of criteria. Since the creative process itself is also important in many studios, the product is not the only variable:

- Include your criteria for grading in the syllabus, then stick to them.
- The same criteria should apply to everyone in the class; you cannot change them from individual to individual.
- What progress the student makes from the beginning to the end of the semester might be important.
- Work ethic, attitude, effort, and risk taking might also be factors.