02 Critical Writing Strategies to Improve Class Critiques

JILLIAN COOREY,
GRETCHEN CALDWELL RINNERT

ABSTRACT

A crucial part of a design student's education involves the class critique. In the traditional design studio, work is displayed, reflected upon and discussed. This method, used across many design schools, lacks the contemplation and thoughtful reflection design students often require. We propose the addition of critical and constructive writing to the classroom critique. To engage students in a deeper reflection and to provoke them to ask key questions and foster insightful discussions, writing components were added to design studio projects.

This paper discusses methods employed in the traditional studio classroom: post-it note critiques, online digital critiques, project documentation and round-robin writing critiques. While many instructors employ writing at the completion of projects, there are many benefits of incorporating a writing component into class critiques. Writing affords students the ability to pause and reflect. Writing allows for a deeper reflection, encouraging questions of the work's purpose: Does it communicate effectively? Does the concept fulfill the needs of the client? Is this an obvious solution?

Writing enables students to consider their position, ideas, ethical philosophy and design concept while employing the use of design vocabulary and principles. The more proficient design students become with their written responses, the more prepared they are in a presentation or classroom dialogue.

In the research collected, several methods are mentioned as ways to diversify and improve critiques including online critiques, diary entries, note-taking and small group discussion. Of interest to our study, are Blair's (2007) suggested techniques of providing written prompts and evaluations completed by students; yet there is no feedback on what techniques worked best. Numerous studies confirm the value of using blogs and online platforms in the classroom (Nyffenegger 2010; Blair, Blythman and Orr, 2007; Demirkan and Sagun, 2009). Using blogs encourages collaborative learning and offers a platform where students can exchange ideas and create a discourse (Nyffenegger 2010). In an online critiquing environment, students feel they could be more honest compared with face-to-face classroom interactions (Blair 2007).

WRITING IN THE DESIGN DISCIPLINE

Historically, design education has focused on artifact creation, and has neglected reading and writing components in studio classrooms.

Curriculum has centered on studio-oriented and practice-based content (Nyffenegger 2010). However, with the emergence of programs that encourage writing, research, and critical thinking, such as The School of Visual Arts MFA Designer, SVA's Author and MFA Design Criticism and The Royal College of Arts MA in Critical Writing in Art & Design, schools are paying more attention to verbal and written literacy (Burdick 1993). Publications such as the Looking Closer series have exposed us to critical writings about the discipline. Additionally, there are numerous online resources devoted to writing within the context of design including Design Observer, Smashing Magazine, UnderConsideration, and AIGA.

Interestingly, writing continues to be devalued at the undergraduate level as undergraduate programs have few, if any, written research requirements (Khoury 2009). In the article "Writing 101: Visual or Verbal," Ellen Lupton addresses the question, 'How are graphic designers learning to write?' Since the 1970s, a movement known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) has argued that writing should be taught in every course on campus (Lupton 2009). Kent State University embraces this movement through Writing Intensive Courses (WIC) designed to "assist undergraduates in becoming effective writers within their major discipline"(Kent website). Our school's WIC course is Graphic Design Perspectives, a design history course taken at the senior level. While this is a worthwhile initiative, a problem arises when writing courses are separated from studio courses. This encourages students to separate practice from theory and writing.

Based on this discovery, Condon and Kelly-Riley found educators must become transparent and demand critical thinking, otherwise students do not feel moved to think critically. Taking this into consideration, to encourage critical thinking our students were given prompts prior to the writing exercises.

For this study, critical thinking is defined as thinking that analyzes thought, assesses thought and transforms thought for the better (Paul 2007). "Critical thinking is the fundamental activity of designers" (Tippey 2008). Designers use critical thinking daily as part of the design process, whether they are analyzing, researching a problem, understanding an audience, generating ideas and concepts, or making strategic decisions. "What we understand as 'design' is beginning to extend beyond the confines of an aesthetic denotation and to encompass a broader way of thinking and solving problems. We will benefit from those who are trained to critically view, analyze and communicate. The critical perspectives they bring can enhance our understanding of the designed and the undesigned world, how it works and how it can work better" (Bowen 2008).

OUR METHODS

In developing new curricula, "design writing and critical engagement should be an integral part of a designer's education" (Icograda 2011).

We explored six methods to promote writing within the context of design. In utilizing writing strategies, the students took on two roles, one as the designer and the other as the design-critic.

The methods used were employed in two junior-level design studio courses. Forty-four students took the 16-week course that focuses on conceptual thinking and design research. All students completed three projects: a magazine article that includes an information graphic, a book design, and a branding assignment. Prior to this course, students had three studio courses that focus on design fundamentals, theory, and typography.

The main question we sought to answer was, will the quality and student participation during class critiques improve with the addition of writing components to the classroom? Prior to the writing exercises, students were often given prompts to analyze principles of design, ask questions of each artifact, or suggest ways to help a fellow student improve. The prompts provided a focus that jump-started the commentary, offering details and a starting point

and to the point, focusing on details allowing students critiquing the work to pinpoint specifics for the designer. The post-it note comments stimulated an oral critique providing talking points for class discussion. Post-it note critiques quickly provide students an abundance of feedback.

2 ROUND-ROBIN WRITING CRITIQUES

The round-robin critique was conducted towards the end of a project when students were familiar with the work of their peers. Each student was given another student's project, and had no classroom interactions, including talking, as students wrote comments to their peers. When the instructor stated "switch" the students would pass the work to the next person and critiquing would resume with another student's work. This method of written critique was used for a book design project and also for website usability testing. As students interacted with websites that classmates developed, they provided feedback by addressing issues of hierarchy, screen, legibility, and navigation as they interacted with the sites.

3 PROJECT DOCUMENTATION BLOGS

Process documentation blogs can be a reflective and informative space. In longer design projects, process documentation blogs serve students positively in many ways. Students are asked to update a personal class blog weekly, posting their progress through both text and images. Interactive commenting remains an option, and the students have access to each others URL's from a class website. Many students use Wordpress, Blogger or Tumblr. These spaces allow students a quick way to share their work with peers and teachers. Process documentation blogs provide a means of journaling trials, tribulations, and successes and as a forum for other students to provide comments and feedback. For the instructor it provides a dated log of a student's methods, development, inspiration, and feedback, and helps the educator to assess a student's work and intervene in the design process if necessary. Process blogs can facilitate competition, as many students use it as a space to perform, showcase, and flaunt their design work, progress, and innovative techniques.

These artifacts are highly effective and telling, but require complete dedication by the student. Process blogs worked best with seniors and graduate level students since they take dedication, and additional time to reflect on the design work. Typically, freshman, sophomores and juniors are early in their design education and grow weary of the additional commitment a process blog requires. Seniors and Graduate students often use the blog as a cathartic outlet for more in-depth projects that require complex research and sophisticated visual solutions.

"Our culture has become obsessed with external evaluation...teachers must encourage students to reflect upon their learning. If teachers do not require students to assess their own work, students will become dependent on outside feedback."

5 PEER ANALYSIS

Following the completion of a project, students provide another classmate with a 1-2 page assessment of his work. Students are given several days to complete this assignment. This allows deeper insight into their design thinking and what information, principles and values they prioritize. It provides an avenue to practice profess-ional writing skills, as opposed to the casual language that can appear in other written exercises.

6 CRITIQUE AS A METHOD OF DESIGN INCEPTION

In some instances, critique can be the starting point for a design studio project. Students selected an artifact, process, or system and critiqued its methods and means. Students were to consider how they would improve its ethical nature from a visual perspective. The assignment was to develop concepts and then write a 3-5 page paper and develop visuals in the form of sketches, photos and drawings that describe their ideas. Students finalized the assignment with a presentation to the class. The act of writing is embedded through the project from beginning to the end.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Our findings are presented in two sections: (i) completed student survey results, (ii) analysis of writing samples. Our analysis focused on gauging the students experience with writing in the design studio environment.

SURVEY RESULTS

The students completed anonymous online surveys using the platform Qualtrics. The survey (Appendix I) was emailed to the students and consisted of 13 questions — 12 multiple choice and one open-comment field. Forty-four students completed the survey for a 100% response rate.

- When asked if "using post-it notes to provide classmates feedback during class critique was a helpful exercise," 82% of students agreed with this statement.

experience. However, a common thread connected those students who did not enjoy the writing exercises.

All indicated they favored oral critiques for the reason, as they stated, they could defend their decisions.

Some students expressed frustration in receiving conflicting messages and had trouble knowing which comments to accept and which to disregard. One student stated: "The post- it notes were nice, but classmates jump to conclusions when writing and there isn't a chance for dialogue to explain choices made." While this student is venting a valid frustration, it's important to recognize the two underlying lessons: First, students had to negotiate the criticism they received. Second, students had to learn the importance of comm-unication in a text-based format. Clarity can be difficult, but is essential in our current society that demands email and text based communication. Many students will work from home and communicate online with clients and co-workers. In many ways, the post-it note critique offered a practice session for future client communication that may be more casual in nature.

The most compelling results came from the simplest question we asked our students: "Select how you plan to use writing in your professional design communication." Students were offered the following answers and could select more than one option:

1   In developing design briefs: 91% responded yes.

2   In contracts that I will present to clients: 72% responded yes.

3   Through correspondence/email to give and accept feedback: 88% responded yes.

4   By invoicing my clients at the completion of a project: 70% responded yes.

5   Through the promotional materials and marketing of my business: 79% responded yes.

It is incredible that some students do not foresee using all of these writing strategies in their professional career. As a college student, one lacks professional experience; but following graduation, reality will set in, and many students will find the need to craft most, if not all, of these documents.

In the future, we plan to implement the following changes:

1   Practice more professional writing examples, i.e. design briefs or written proposals

Written Analysis	Organization	Interpretation and Evaluation	Design terminology	Criticism	Writing
5	Paper is well organized, easy to follow, clear start, focused paragraphs, conclusion	Comprehensive, develops reflective interpretation, shows insights into design decisions and understanding, demonstrates knowledge of strengths and weaknesses	Demonstrates an excellent understanding of design terminology	Provides a thoughtful analysis of personal/peer project, addresses issues of intent, decisions, content, aesthetics, audience, criticism is constructive, provides suggestions for improvement	Writing is clear and correct, reveals a proficiency of appropriate vocabulary
4	Paper is organized enough to be understood	Shows a good ability to interpret and evaluate decisions made, some components are overlooked	Demonstrates a good understanding of design terminology	Provides a good criticism of the work discusses intent, decisions, content, aesthetics, audience, yet some components are overlooked	Writing is clear and correct, shows appropriate vocabulary
3	Paper is somewhat organized but difficult to follow, choppy	Design decisions and ideas are adequately described, but perspective is limited, does not reveal connections to thought process or reasoning for decisions	Demonstrates an adequate understanding of design terminology	Criticism is adequate, does not go much beyond the surface (aesthetics) of the work	Writing is fundamentally correct and what is expected at a college level
2	There is little organization and confusion occurs	Narrow analysis, without context or interpretive depth	Shows some understanding of design terminology but there are consistent errors, does not use well	Narrow critique of work, lacks depth	Writing contains numerous errors
1	Paper lacks any organization, consists of random thoughts	No content/concept to analysis	Does not show any understanding of design terminology	No critique given	Lacks a focus, incoherent

FIGURE 4 Rubric developed to gauge strengths and weaknesses of student writing samples

In reviewing the variety of writing samples collected from our students, connections emerged in their writing and in-class critiquing abilities. Growth and a stronger comprehension of the design process transpired as the semester progressed and written analysis improved. An emerging theme from our coding was reflection. As the written analysis were reflective in nature, samples included statements related to areas of growth, strengths and weaknesses. Critical thinking was evident in their commentary on their personal practice and skills. As this student reflects in her personal assessment, she is able to identify problems with her process and learn from them for the future:

I over-research during projects, as I did with the Times 100 book (previous project) and with this one. I end up with an abundance of information that I don't even use…Overall, I learned a lot about design and the habits of mine that I need to work on changing to be more efficient. (anonymous)

Based upon Condon's (2004) assessment of critical thinking, this student demonstrates the ability to identify a problem, assess the issue within appropriate context, and offer alternative solutions. In analyzing the round-robin critiques, a majority of the criticisms were on the aesthetics of the work. As shown in Figure 5, this example of a website critique revolves aroun-d legibility, typography, imagery and color issues. One comment "the roll over on the menu page is awkward and unclear" addresses an issue of interactivity. While this critique format is convenient for usability testing, this method did not lead to detailed, in-depth critiques that the peer-analysis method revealed.
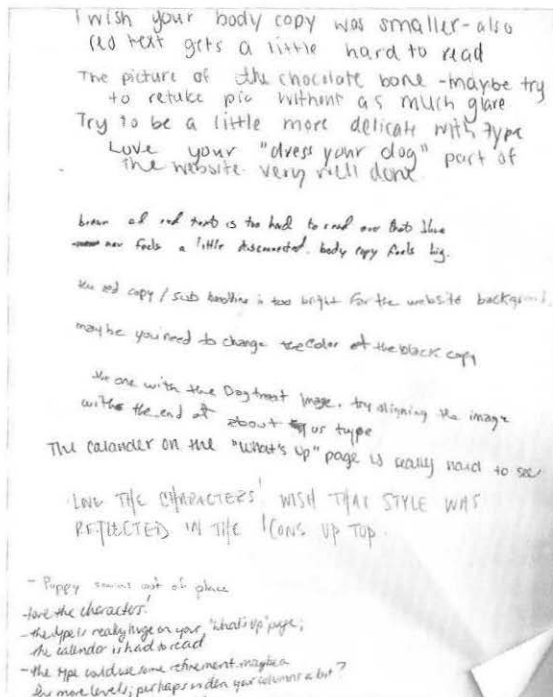

FIGURE 5 *Student samples from a round-robin critique on a website design*

Peer-to-peer dialogue was a unique and unintended outcome of a round-robin writing critique. As shown in Figure 6, students began commenting on each othe'r's feedback, stating if they agreed or disagreed. This example is from a typography project where the main objective of the assignment is to properly set type, control the hierarchy, and create. an interesting composition. Writing critiques incorporated into typography assignments strengthen student's awareness of typesetting. Many of the student's notations were about

face-to-face.' This reiterates the findings of Blair (2007) that stated students feel they could be more honest in online environments compared to face-to-face classroom interactions.

As students became more comfortable with writing throughout the semester, written commentary improved. Although it is not evident if one semester of writing exercises improved the quality of the design work, students did become more mindful of their writing by developing more in-depth explanations, correcting grammatical and spelling errors and taking pride in the written content of their projects.

This study demonstrates methods to design educators looking to integrate writing critiques into their pedagogy. For our students to be successful, it is imperative that they become strong and articulate writers. If we continue to focus entirely on the visual, it will be detrimental to our students and their development as professional designers. We must place emphasis on the written word and how we verbally and textually communicate, so students' visual communication skills can improve.

In helping our students hone their writing while developing a design voice, we are helping to build a designer that, not only creates design artifacts, but can also present them, write about them and defend each creative choice and idea they use.

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APPENDIX I: SURVEY GIVEN TO STUDENTS

Using post-it notes to provide classmates feedback during class critique was a helpful exercise: Agree, Disagree

I feel my writing skills are: Very Strong, Strong, OK, Poor, Very Poor

I think writing abilities are an important skill for designers in the future: I agree, I disagree, No opinion

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jillian Coorey is an Assistant Professor in the School of Visual
Communication Design at Kent State University where she teaches
foundation through upper-level design courses. Her research
interests encompass design pedagogy, concept development and
design processes and typography. Her interests extend to K-12
design education, which led her to develop and serve as Co-Director
of Inspire, a summer design program for high school students.
Jillian earned her MFA in Graphic Design from the University of Illinois
at Chicago. She received her BFA in Graphic Design from The
State University of New York at Fredonia and has additionally studied
in Basel, Switzerland at The Basel School of Design. She has
spoken at numerous national and international design research and
education conferences including AIGA, DRS, TypeCon and Cumulus.

Gretchen Caldwell Rinnert is an Assistant Professor in the School
of Visual Communication Design at Kent State University. She graduated
in 2008 from North Carolina State University's College of Design,
with a Master's in Graphic Design and from The Ohio State University
in 2003 with a Bachelor of Science in Visual Communication
Design. In the past her work focused on the intersection of design
and education as a way to improve engagement, participation,
understanding and comprehension. She teaches classes for graduate
and undergraduate students that focus on participatory culture,
learning spaces, digital tools, iPadapplications, motion graphics, and
time-based media. She has presented at various national and
international conferences, exhibiting her research and scholarly activ-
ities at conferences such as DRS, UCDA and AIGA Educators
Conference. Gretchen's most recent work focuses on designing patient
centrictools that communicate personalized medical protocol,
billing and process. Website: http://www.flyingtype.com

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AUTHOR CONTACT

Jillian Coorey
Assistant Professor Kent State University
231 Art Building Kent, Ohio 44242
jcoorey@kent.edu

Gretchen Caldwell Rinnert
Assistant Professor Kent State University
231 Art Building Kent, Ohio 44242
grinnert@kent.edu