

**AUTHOR:** Terry Barrett

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IN THE MULTIPLE VOICES OF ART INSTRUCTORS and students in their classes, this article explores the thoughts and feelings of instructors and students when students display their work for critical response. While the subjects of these critical discussions are works of art made by students, the findings and recommendations are applicable to most presentations of student work in classroom, laboratory, and studio spaces. Both instructors and students find aspects of these presentations troublesome. In the article I offer notions of mentoring to help remedy detrimental aspects of crucial opportunities for teaching and learning.

Studio critiques are essential to college art courses, at beginning, middle, and advanced levels, for undergraduate and graduate students. Critiques (or more colloquially, "crits") are usually conducted by art instructors, with students, about art works--paintings, drawings, sculptures, prints, photographs, and glass and ceramic objects--that students are in the process of making or have finished making. Critiques always involve an artist, artwork, and one who critiques the work. Often an audience is present, usually the artist's classmates, but critiques can be private, instructor-to-student interactions. Critiques are held for whole studio classes during class time, during time allotted for final exams, and sometimes in the evenings as special events.

Students who are graduating from an art program often have critiques of an exhibition of their work in the gallery with their committee. At the end of a term, it is common for instructors to ask students to display portfolios of the artworks they have made during the term for a summary critique and evaluation. These critiques usually have a direct bearing on grades, implicitly or explicitly. Critiques can be held for groups of students from different classes after class hours--perhaps a once-a-week evening meeting for graduate painting students with painting faculty, or a gathering of graduate students working in different media with graduate faculty. The frequency of critiques varies according to an instructor's wishes.

Individual critiques are common. Instructors may critique a student's work during a class while the rest of the students continue with their own artworks. Students sometimes initiate individual critiques when they feel the need for feedback. Guest artists and critics invited to visit a school are commonly asked to conduct critiques for groups and individual students. Critiques are so common in college art courses that a

parody of a painting critique was published in a journal for art instructors with no accompanying commentary as a self-explanatory, fictional, one-act play with 12 characters (Roth, 1999).

In this article, I quote art instructors and students about their notions of studio critiques and particularly their positive and negative experiences with critiques. After examining critiques from the differing vantage points of instructors and students, I explore how critiques might be improved if instructors adopted some principles of mentoring while conducting critiques.

I obtained the views of instructors and students through surveys I designed with open-ended questions about critiques. I asked faculty to complete these five sentences: "A critique is ... The main objectives of critiques are ... A good critique is when ... A bad critique is when ... Difficult aspects of critiques for me are ..." I asked students to complete these three sentences: "My best experience in a critique was ... For me, a good critique is when ... For me, a bad critique is when ..." My expressed intent for conducting the surveys was to eventually offer recommendations to art instructors and students in order to make critiques better experiences for all involved.

Eighty-four instructors from 17 public and private universities, colleges, and art academies in the United States, Canada, and Australia participated in the survey, and more than 1,000 students responded over a 3-year period.(FN1) The project is part of an ongoing program of research and publication to improve art instruction at all levels of education through studied considerations of art criticism. This article follows publication of a book on studio critiques for students K-12 (Barrett, 1997) and two textbooks for college students that examine professional art criticism for applications to art learning (Barrett, 2000a, 2000b).

Although the focus of this article is on group critiques in college art classes, many areas of instruction utilize similar instructional methods. Critiques are common in dance, design, and architecture, and "reviews" are common for music students in performance and composition classes. Critiques are also utilized in high school instruction, where high school teachers often replicate the methods of college instructors. What is common to art critiques is similar to what students and instructors experience when anyone's work is put before a group for public reflection, whether that be in an engineering demonstration or a writing seminar.

## **INSTRUCTORS' DEFINITIONS**

Studio critiques take a variety of forms and are conducted for different reasons (Barrett, 1988). Definitions of studio critiques offered by instructors in my surveys had much in common, although some differences were evident. Representative definitions included: "an opportunity for students to receive feedback from their teacher and peers regarding the aesthetic, stylistic, creative, and innovative aspects of their studio work"; "an opportunity for artists to solicit informed opinions regarding their work"; "usually a collective group exchange between students and professors of ideas about technique,

form, concepts, production, theory, iconography"; "public discussion of an individual's aesthetic ideas and tangible results with commentary both by the maker and the viewer"; and "an event during which the artist finds out viewers' responses so that the artist can evaluate how the image is interpreted and judged by others."

Critiques are dialogues between instructors and students that engage the different perspectives of the instructor, the student whose art is being critiqued, and the student artist's peers. The talk is sometimes interpretive (What is the work about?) and often evaluative (Is it a good work?). The talk is impromptu and spontaneous, usually begun by an instructor, but sometimes initiated by a student.

The main purpose of some critiques is to judge the students' progress. Sometimes critiques are based on the criteria set by the instructor when giving the assignment, and in other critiques the agenda is less clear. Some critiques are dominated by the instructor while in others the instructor says little. How much information is requested or offered by the student artist whose work is being critiqued varies from little to much. The artists usually talk about their intent in making the works. In some critiques, the artist is asked to assume a posture of listening after making introductory remarks. The amount of feedback from the artists' classmates varies greatly.

### **STUDENTS' BEST AND WORST CRITIQUES**

When asked to recount their "best" and "worst" studio critique when they were students, respondents readily offered memories with vivid recall, sometimes 30 years later, often with emotion. These are three memories of negative experiences students have had in the past 5 years:

I was a sophomore and had about ten faculty members look over my portfolio. The head of the graphics department totally embarrassed me by announcing how bad an artist she thought I was. Then she asked me what made me believe I could be one. I did not have much to say as my tears started to roll.

I was a sophomore in a painting class and made a landscape and the instructor looked at it and laughed at me, long, with no comment, and shook his head and walked away.

When I was a junior in a drawing class, a teacher said that my still-life was not to her liking, and she sat in my chair, erased my entire drawing, and redrew it to her liking and told me that is how to draw a still life. I dropped the class because I was so embarrassed.

The third account raises the issue of the invasion of physical boundaries. Other respondents offered parallel examples, such as ceramics instructors breaking pots

they did not want to critique or fire, drawing instructors who marked black Xs on students' drawings, a painting instructor who painted orange Xs on a student's canvas to mark deficiencies, and another who threw a student's painting out an upper floor window saying it would look better if it were flying.

Respondents also had positive experiences to tell:

The best critiques I had were from a painting professor when I was an undergraduate. He met individually with each of us weekly. The student began the critique with an explanation of what he was trying to communicate, and why it was worth communicating, and how he was attempting to communicate it, vis-à-vis formalist principles and the history of art. The professor actually took notes that he used in subsequent critiques throughout the quarter, and we were required to keep a written journal of our critiques and responses to his queries and suggestions.

My professor does traditional critiques where the work goes up on the wall and is discussed by the whole group. The artist who is the focus of the group's attention speaks last. The instructor's manner of asking questions had all the delicate accuracy of a talented therapist. There was objectivity to her manner, and a non-threatening way of pointing out strengths and weaknesses that gave each person in her class a feeling that she had a tremendous amount of respect for us all. No matter how we may have failed in certain areas or succeeded in others, we always trusted her because we knew she respected us as human beings.

Some of my best critiques were as a junior in college. We put our work prints on the wall. The instructor opened the discussion by asking how we felt about our photographs, and we would have to talk about the feelings they provoked, and then other members of the class would join in, but the instructor never said another word. This made me feel ultimately responsible for the prints. This structure encouraged me to produce huge amounts of work and develop a style that I am comfortable with to this day.

### **INSTRUCTORS' COMMENTS ON "BAD" CRITIQUES**

Instructors, as well as students, have positive and negative experiences with critiques. As commonplace as critiques are in the teaching of art studio classes, instructors find them challenging to conduct. When asked to describe "bad" critiques, a recurring complaint concerned instructors being too dominant. One instructor lamented critiques that became "an opportunity for the instructor to impress the students with the disparity between his or her experience and ability, and theirs." Another wrote that "the process of reflection is stifled by an assertive and aggressive teacher whose own

personal needs dominate the critical dialogue." A common complaint iterated by many instructors is when "no one talks, the group is apathetic, the audience waits for the faculty to feed them, and then parrots back that response."

Instructors identified the problem of students leaving a critique with a sense of defeat when they are "left feeling discouraged without a sense of how to move beyond the frustration," when "students end up feeling bad about their work or themselves," when "the student feels unworthy, does not feel excited about the process of making art," and when "frustration or shame occurs."

Another area of difficulty identified by instructors concerns lack of participation in critiques when "students, for whatever reason, are not receptive to my comments or to those of their peers," or there is "a lack of interaction among those present," when "participants become alienated and communication stops," when "no one in the class will interact," and "when there is an unsafe atmosphere for give and take."

### **STUDENTS' COMMENTS ON "BAD" CRITIQUES**

When asked about their negative experiences with critiques, some students responded similarly to instructors, identifying problems of instructors dominating critiques, critiques leaving students discouraged, and especially students being emotionally hurt by critiques. One student wrote that a critique was ineffective when "the professor functions as the almighty one, damning some works and glorifying others as though he or she is God, and this is the word from on high." Another wrote that a critique is "bad" when "the criticism results in undermining my efforts in a destructive manner."

A different student wrote "nothing but bad comments are flying out about my art work. It totally knocks out any self-esteem that I have and I despise showing my finished products." Others responded that a critique was bad when "a teacher humiliates a student in front of the whole class," and when "the comments are negative and mean."

Some students' responses indicated that they wanted corrective feedback, as when one student wrote, "[the] professor is afraid to tell me when I am screwing up." Some identified lack of interpretation of the meaning of their work as a problem in critiques, when "no one attempts to understand what the work is about," and when "only a judgment is given."

### **INSTRUCTORS' CRITERIA FOR "GOOD" CRITIQUES**

Instructors' responses to the question, what is a "good" critique, echoed some of the desires of students about critiques listed above. Some instructors are aware of the possibility of humiliating students during critiques and wish to prevent that from happening. For example, one instructor wrote that a critique should be a "learning event, not an exercise in either humiliation or negativity."

Some instructors want to have students leave a critique with renewed enthusiasm

for making art, not discouragement. For example, one instructor wrote that "the student should get new ideas, new energy, enthusiasm, self-confidence, and a sense of her own progress and accomplishment." Another wrote that "excitement should be generated for further investigation and refinement."

Instructors, as well as students, would like to have lively and honest interaction among all those participating. A critique is good when "the conversation is animated, energetic, attentive, thoughtful, specific, and professors don't talk over--by interrupting--the students" and when it is "honest yet positive, critical of weaknesses, yet praising of strengths."

Instructors also wrote that they wanted cognitive content to emerge during critiques, writing that a critique is effective when "the student leaves the experience better informed, slightly more literate in the language of criticism and aesthetic analysis, and a stronger artist." Some instructors expressed a desire for both cognitive and affective results of critiques, for example, when "the student and the teacher both learn about the student's work, the student feels heard and empowered, the student is able to return to the work with benefit of a different point of view, the student begins to take the viewer into account in the conception of the work."

### **STUDENTS' CRITERIA FOR "GOOD" CRITIQUES**

Students' responses to what constituted good critiques paralleled those of instructors, but the students more frequently requested emotionally positive and supportive critiques. For these students, a critique is good when "I feel OK afterwards, regardless of criticism," when "it is a non-threatening environment," when "the instructor can inspire you without demeaning your worth," when "I feel capable after it's over," when "no one is badly hurt or embarrassed," and when "I leave class feeling good about my work."

Students, like instructors, also expressed a desire for cognitive content in critiques, when "everyone learns something and everyone knows more about the project," when "I get multiple points-of-view about my work," when "I learn about what I am communicating to others," and when "people offer more input than 'I like it,' 'I don't like it.' I want to know what emotion it conveys or does their eye get stuck anywhere and is that powerful or distracting." Another student expressed a desire for historical information pertinent to the art being critiqued.

### **GENERAL CONCEPTIONS OF MENTORING**

For the purposes of this article, I am considering mentoring in two senses: traditional and emerging. Both conceptions can add information for instructors to consider about critiques and impetus to change if change is called for.

Classical conceptions of mentoring (Merriam, 1983) hark back to ancient Greece when Odysseus entrusted his house and Telemachus, his son, to a man named Mentor. It was a father-like relationship between a young man and a wise old man.

Such a relationship entails a strong emotional bond between an older and younger person, and a relationship in which the older member is trusted, loving, and experienced in the guidance of the younger. Frequently mentioned examples of such relationships are those between Socrates and Plato, Freud and Jung, Lorenze de Medici and Michelangelo, Haydn and Beethoven, Boas and Mead, and Sartre and de Beauvoir.

In her review of mentoring literature, Merriam (1983) identifies others' definitions and notions. Levinson's (1978, as cited in Merriam, 1983) concept of mentor includes being a teacher, sponsor, counselor, developer of skills and intellect, host, guide, and exemplar. Shapiro, Haseltine, and Rowe (1978, as cited in Merriam, 1983) offer a continuum of relationships in business communities that range from peer to pal, guide, sponsor, patron, and finally, mentor. Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977, as cited in Merriam, 1983) identify four successive stages: apprentice, colleague, mentor, and sponsor. Other names for mentors are helper, rabbi, godfather, role model, information provider, and door opener (Merriam, 1983).

Gehrke (1988) explains mentoring to be a matter of the heart that is widening, affirming, unifying, and deepening. For her, mentoring sustains humility by finding a new question, not the answer. Gehrke advises that a mentor should not dictate that the relationship occur but rather provide conditions under which it might not be stifled.

Some scholars sympathetic to feminism (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995) are modifying classical notions of mentoring, and are explicitly resisting conceptions of mentoring that indicate a presumption of superiority of one over the other. They also resist classical notions that the mentor has a superior knowledge, that mentoring is only initiated by the mentor, that only the mentor may set the agenda for the relationship, that the mentor should always be older and male, and that the benefits run only in a single direction from mentor to mentee. Instead, these scholars actively foster a more fluid relationship between mentor and mentee, one of co-mentoring, where roles change depending on circumstances.

Diamond and Mullen (1997) foster mentoring that results in partnerships among intellectual friends who share a professional identity. In their view of mentorship, people tell and respond, question to seek understanding of experience, and support rather than restrain one another. For them, the relationship between mentor and co-mentor is a form of collaborative learning that is reciprocal, mutual, and supportive.

### **APPLYING MENTORING NOTIONS TO CRITIQUES**

If these notions of mentoring were applied to studio critiques, some of the problems experienced by students and their instructors might disappear. The characteristics of beneficial critiques that students and instructors identified are clearly in line with both traditional and emerging notions of mentoring.

Critiques that are helpful to one person might be less effective for another, depending on many factors including personality type, learning style, level of

maturation, and need for information. But a common thread in students' stories of their best experiences in critiques is a sense that the instructor cares about the individual students, fosters a spirit of good will, protects students from humiliation, and leaves students inspired to do more and better work. Students also say they want more than judgments from instructors; they want to hear multiple interpretations from both students and the instructor, and they want reasons for judgments when judgments are given. They also want to leave a critique feeling encouraged to go on and improve their work. Instructors' responses do not contradict those given by students and frequently reinforce them.

Many of the problems identified with critiques could be solved if instructors were more cognizant of their teaching and its positive and negative effects. Simply admonishing instructors to be better teachers, however, will not likely cause much change. Offering instructors the option of putting on a new mantle called "mentor" might, however, provide them the impetus to reflect on their past teaching and make improvements in the future.

Traditional notions of mentoring might be particularly attractive to instructors who have been teaching for many years. Mentoring as "fathering" should be expanded to "parenting," and "older male" should be replaced with "elder" to explicitly acknowledge women as mentors. Notions of wise elders, adopting parenting postures with which to approach their younger students, could be a gentle and attractive impetus for instructors to consider anew how they are handling critiques and how they might run them differently as parenting figures who are older, wiser, and loving.

However, asking instructors to take on parenting roles when critiquing work of students is not sufficient: We are painfully aware of the effects of dysfunctional parenting in society. Nevertheless, to consider traditional mentoring might prompt instructors to think about what kind of parenting they would like to have had in critiques when they were young, and what kind of parenting they might provide in critiques now that they are older and have accumulated years of experience in academe and life.

Two common complaints of students about their experiences of critiques are having been embarrassed in front of their classmates by instructors and leaving critiques discouraged rather than motivated to make more art. Some instructors reported that they themselves did not want to embarrass their students and wanted students protected from humiliation by other instructors. Both classical and contemporary notions of mentoring as loving, affirming, caring, and nurturing relationships might guide instructors away from words and actions that could diminish a student's sense of self-worth and undermine the student's confidence to continue to learn.

Emerging notions of mentoring advocate a reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee, based on mutual respect, care for one another, and a belief that both parties have benefits to offer one another. Emerging notions also foster collaborative

learning and sharing responsibility for learning. Students say they want to be heard, instructors say they do not want to be the only voice in a critique. Students and instructors quoted earlier expressed desires for sharing responsibility for critiques when they said they did not want critiques that were dominated by instructors, and they wanted to hear multiple perspectives about their work from peers and not just pronouncements from instructors.

Instructors complained that often in critiques no one speaks, and that they are uncomfortably left with the burden of solely filling the silence. Were instructors to adopt notions of mentoring that call for sharing responsibility with students for setting agendas for critiques, then the lively give and take that students and instructors say they want would be more likely to occur.

When conducting critiques, I have successfully shared responsibility with the student artists whose work we were critiquing, for example, by asking each artist to write a single question about their work that they wanted answered that day. I briefly told them that this critique was an opportunity to obtain serious reflection about their work from interested and knowledgeable artists, and that they should think carefully of how they would like to use our expertise and time. I collected the questions from each artist, and then we went from artist to artist, I read the artist's question, asked the artist to listen and not to talk, and we answered the question the artist had written. It was up to the artist to listen, consider, and privately accept or reject or modify what the group had to say about the artist's work. We made it clear that it was their work and their decision as to what, if anything, to do with their work in response to what they had heard.

The notion of mentoring as shared responsibility can provide reciprocal benefits to both parties if mutual respect is apparent. Students can benefit from the experience of the instructors, and instructors can benefit from hearing perspectives younger and different from their own. Instructors would be relieved of some of the burden of feeling the need to be "right" during critiques, and the pressure of finding a single solution to a problem. Students would be presented with the challenge of shaping their own education, and both instructors and students might then enjoy a supportive community rather than experience alienating isolation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Notions of mentoring vary, problems of facilitating critiques are complex; experiences of having one's work critiqued are individual and unique. Mentoring will not solve all troublesome aspects of critiques, but ideas about mentoring can provide instructors motivation to reflect on their critiques and change ineffective and counterproductive practices.

Were students to know and feel that their instructors were trying to mentor them rather than criticize them, students would likely respond more positively to and engage more readily in critical discussions of their work. They would be less likely to assume defensive postures when their work was being discussed, even when remarks were

made to rectify perceived deficiencies in the work.

Ideas about mentoring can provide indications to instructors of ways they can change. More powerfully, mentoring can inspire instructors to make attitudinal changes which in turn might cause them to voluntarily try to improve an important area of teaching that both they and their students find challenging.

#### ADDED MATERIAL

Terry Barrett is professor of art education at The Ohio State University.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. Faculty and students from the following schools participated in this study: Boise State University, Colorado State University, Moore College of Art & Design, Mount Mary College, Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, The Ohio State University, Old Dominion University, Portland Community College, Pratt School of Art & Design, Redeemer University College, Waterloo, Canada, Southern Connecticut State University, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, The University of Arizona, The University of New South Wales, Australia, The University of Northern Iowa, University of Toledo, and Webster University.

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