

“Fly on the Wall”

Can the presence of the student during the assessment process help in their learning?

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ABSTRACT

The Design studio learning system within most Tertiary Design Schools has a unique critique method, (often called “The Crit”). The Crit event itself is rather a “veiled” process and has been analyzed and written about extensively. There has also been a lot of negative feedback from students that this form of critiquing process is not necessarily a good type of feedback process. Is there a method that protects the student’s privacy related to his or her own design work and at the same time maintains the Design School’s integrity of supplying reasoned and fair assessment within the wider Profession? A field trial scenario was designed and arranged with a group of volunteer design students, so each in turn, could sit-in and witness their own assessment / feedback session. This paper reports on this field trial, (timed to occur after the critique). The paper analyses this experiment, exploring the field trial responses, looking for links within a wider Educational literature base to the ground this “Fly on the Wall” scenario within known pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution, the Ecole Des Beaux Arts, (School of Fine Arts), in Paris, set up an architectural educational system where the “learning by doing,” (Anthony, 1991:09), superseded the pertaining lecture system. Students were put into “ateliers” or studios, which were led by “patrons” or Masters. The evaluation of the student work was done via a “behind-closed-doors jury” system. Students got back their work and marks with little or no comment from the assessment jury.

Today, studios in Design Schools around the world are places of learning incorporating rigorous iterations of drawing, model making, and debate with those students working on a common design problem.

The review or critique, (commonly called “The Crit”), of the student work is a “pin-up” of all the work, then each student in turn, stands up and presents their work to both peers and the “jury,” (which often contains outside practicing Designers as well as the Studio Tutors). This Crit session can

form the basis of the assessment. The assessment is done after the Crit, usually by the Studio tutors only. The marks are then released publicly so the students can see how they have performed relative to their cohort. The Studio tutors also write up a comment sheet for each student, which forms the feedback aspect of the process.

I. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The findings of this paper are based on a small field trial set within Unitec, Auckland, New Zealand. A call for volunteers was made to a group of second year Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students. Six agreed to take part in the trial. This field trial took place shortly after a Final Studio Crit.

One at a time, each student entered the assessment room and sat behind the tutors, each was allowed to watch and listen to the tutors as they discussed that particular student’s drawings. The volunteer could therefore see and hear “first hand” the tutors as they worked out that individual’s feedback comments and the associated grade for the work.

The volunteer was not allowed to speak during the assessment process.

Following the event, and related only to this author’s field trial, each student was asked to comment on something which was “good” about the process they had witnessed, something which was “hard” to hear about their work / performance and any other “learning’s.” The data forming the basis of this paper was gathered via a written questionnaire which was triangulated by the verbal responses recorded by the author. The written questionnaire incorporated various questions related to the event and also asked the student to rate his / her reactions to the usefulness of the event, (on a scale from 1 to 7). This questionnaire was filled out, (privately and in a separate room), by each volunteer following his or her assessment event.

The received comments seem to evoke four educational themes:

- **Direct Learning**
- **Wider life-skill Learning**
- **Positive performance reinforced**
- **Deep Learning**

II. ANALYSIS

The comments received from the field trial become the data, which was then analyzed to look for linkages between this feedback and the wider realm of research literature. The four educational themes evoked from the data are now discussed in greater detail:

A. Direct Learning

The time taken to look at, consider and grade each student's work, (comprising 4No. A1 sized sheets of detailed drawings), generally took about 10-15 minutes for each.

During the process it was apparent the tutor's behaviour was modified, (compared to current versions of this assessment process), for example: no swear words were used. The tutor's comments were specific, (yet sensitive, as they knew the student was indeed present), the tutor's discussion went straight to the heart of the work. (One tutor had a master comment sheet which was marked up and amended - for later typing up and returning to each student, as a record of the oral feedback). Each tutor offered up their own personal views of the work. These views would vary, but the student could hear the range of opinion and associated complexities with assessing and grading the work. The comments and grade were both considered at length, (often back and forth between the tutors), and eventually some agreement was reached. These characteristics fall into line with some of Boud's thoughts about "offering good feedback." Namely, "[the tutor's] did not use fancy words or abstract language," and they were "consciously non-judgmental," (1991:31). Care and consideration were shown in relation to both the feedback wording and the decided upon grade. "It is up to the...[student]...to accept or reject them," (Boud, 1991:31).

This transparency, literally like being a "fly on the wall," is immediate and direct, there are no proxy methods for information transfer, it is a "*here-and-now concrete experience*," as cited by Kolb, (1984:21). In addition, it is apparent that this technique can expose the so called "hidden criteria," aspects that Tutor's may have. "For example many teachers dislike errors in spelling and punctuation...they may admit to their colleagues that such factors influence their response to their students' work...[but] the students may not realize the effect they have on [their] marks," (Gibbs, Habeshaw & Habeshaw, 1998:155).

B. Wider Life-Skill Learning

A comment received from one participant: *More information about what its like in the professional realm*, seems to acknowledge that learning goes beyond the mere Studio setting. Kolb confirms, "the casual observer of the traditional educational process would undoubtedly conclude that learning was primarily a personal, internal

process requiring only the limited environment of books, teacher, and classroom. Indeed the wider 'real world' environment at times seems to be actively rejected by educational systems at all levels," (1984:34). This technique addresses this perceived imbalance, by making available: experienced, professional designers critiquing student work, giving a glimpse of what it is like "out there," whilst still within the confines of the Design School.

During this field trial, another participant noted, how pleased that her involvement in the subject was noted and taken into account during the assessment - this was a surprise to her, as she says: *Unique opportunity to learn more about things discussed in marking an assignment other than the technical requirements of the brief - i.e.*

Attitude

Scale

Commitment

Interest in Landscape Arch. etc.

Yet, the tutors felt they were just doing their job, it seemed natural to think about this person as a potential professional Designer and as an individual, to pass comment on her other special attributes seemed normal and valid. Again, Kolb affirms, "Learning is an holistic process of adaptation to the world...it involves the integrated functioning of the total organism - thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving," (1984:31).

As Kolb further adds, "the central [important] role...experience plays in the learning process," (1984:20). This "Fly on the Wall" scenario is an "event," albeit with some acting type qualities, (by the tutors), however with just minimal rules to govern it, it is an experience.

C. Positive Performance Reinforced

As tutors, we always try to work from a "positive" angle, we are always trying to find something worthwhile about any particular student's design work, and there always is something to praise. By the identification of talents, positively encouraging a student, one hopes to build up their confidence. By bolstering individual skills or leanings, the tutor also hopes that the individual will feel "good about themselves," and feel their approach to design is "special" and is as valid as anyone else's.

"Strength Based Learning" or "Strengths-Based Development," (Hodges & Clifton, 2004:256), involves a similar technique to this "Fly on the Wall" concept. As a method it can be described as: "rather than spending time helping their associates become 'well rounded,' many...managers have instead invested time in learning about individual talents of each of their associates, and managing with those unique talents in mind. This concept not only applies to managers, but to educators, [and] students," (Hodges & Clifton, 2004:256).

A 2003 Gallup worldwide poll question asked: "Which do you think will help you improve the most? Knowing your strengths or knowing your weaknesses? The poll result being: "people think focusing on weaknesses will help them improve more than focusing on strengths." Following this poll Hodges and Clifton reiterate: "there is clearly a need to educate the world about positive psychology in practice and the importance of understanding and focusing on strengths," (2004:257).

The positive comments received back from the volunteers include: *The whole process was a good learning experience. Definitely beneficial. And its nice to hear positive feedback.* A commitment of both the assessors and each learner to be in the same space, at the same time, focused on the potential of that one learner seems to be precious. Comments spoken openly about the talents of that particular person, each learner is being privileged to hear first hand positive comments that may will bolster that person's "well being" and encourage them to consider their own "road ahead" and how they might modify their own behaviour for that journey.

D. Deep Learning

From this field trial the idea that "deep learning," (as apposed to "panning" or memorizing information), is in fact sought by the student learners, was elicited by: *I think it will help to make one's work evolve or develop more.* Design as a field of endeavour, is not right or wrong type subject, it's subjective, and the learning required to grasp its multiple faceted nature is part of a long progression. For example: one finds out about the history of Design and its impacts, the construction techniques and methods required to "put something together," its contractual and legal aspects - these are just a few examples of some of the many issues that need to be assimilated over a lifetime. That this participant above, is thinking long-term about their evolution reflects this educational theme.

Another feedback comment was: *Gave me a much better understanding of the design processes.* As Knight & Yorke, intone: "Understanding, (as a term, [is] preferred to 'knowledge' because of its implication of depth), is the key outcome of higher education," (2003:09). The design process has to be engaged with, it has to be encountered, felt out by trial and error, it is simply not just knowledge in the sense of: 'who was the first man to land on the moon?' And, as Sullivan adds: "Research has indicated that deep learning is linked to providing a stimulus in a way that leads students to focus more clearly on their particular topic, and then giving them the opportunity to reflect on and respond creatively to their chosen topic so that they can claim ownership of it," (2002:127).

This idea of "ownership" or preference of a way of working around and through a Design problem is important at this time for a student, because what the tutors' are really trying to do is help students to find their own individual "voice." Schools of Design and the wider Profession are always trying to encourage individual responses to new social issues of the day, as humanity continues to evolve. This development of characters or personalities within the design profession reflects what Rowntree says: "what grades, [alone], don't do is tell all that is known about the student's performance or abilities. Information is lost... feedback or 'knowledge of results', is the life-blood of learning," (1987:68 & 24).

And so after, (generally), 5 years of intense reflecting-in-action, and multiple "re-actioning," the Design Studio's protégé's are released from the School to take on the new design issues of the day.

III. COMPARISONS OF THE "FLY ON THE WALL" TECHNIQUE WITH RESPECT TO CURRENT TYPES OF ASSESSMENT

A. Comparison relative to "The Crit"

One student stated: *It was very similar to the crit process that we already go through before hand-in, without the stress of having to verbally explain in front of the group.* Although it might sound paradoxical, (viz. by listening only, as being seemingly more engaged), but by the removal of other communication devices, this enables the student to fully concentrate on the verbal messages because he / she is just listening and reflecting on their own performance.

B. Comparison relative to Written Feedback

One student said: *Far more thorough and [in] depth. When you just receive a paper slip and can find it hard to understand where the marker is coming from.* It would also seem by allowing students to witness their own assessment events directly has the potential to cut through perceived conventions about marking, (misconceived or otherwise), and avoid confusion of double-meaning readings of written English.

IV. WHAT WAS NOT HELPFUL ABOUT THE "FLY ON THE WALL" TECHNIQUE

The received students comments centred mainly on logistical matters: time waiting, timetabling, time taken, these were totally valid and are also vitally important when considering the expansion of such an assessment / feedback event to encompass an entire studio class.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Rather surprisingly the Fieldwork feedback responses and grades were overwhelmingly positive, e.g.

An in depth analysis on [the] paper and verbally of how the work was marked.

Do this, because it keeps you in touch with the reality of your work, instead of kind of forgetting about it once it's handed in.

I think it is better than handing it in, waiting 2 weeks, then receive a grade, because this time gap separates you from your work and your grade. The direct marking of your work is of greater benefit.

In an effort to make it a "win-win" type scenario: a way of further refining this technique could be to use the marking schedule or "common feedback comments sheet" during the assessment but in a slightly different manner. Namely: during the tutor discussions, those comments that don't apply are struck out, (with a large felt-tip), and any additional comments are written on the sheet by hand. The tutor then signs it, a scan is then made of the final comment sheet version, (this scanned version then becomes a copy for the School's records), and the original sheet is given to the student as he / she leaves the room. Assessment, mark allocation, (un-moderated mark only), and feedback all done in one neat package.

VI. LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The “types” of students who volunteered to partake in the field trial were the “keen” students of the class.

However: does this scenario work with the assessment / feedback of a student who is about to fail the course? (Or, does not get as good a grade as they thought they would get?). How would the comments / grade be received in such an intimate environment? Would that student be able to remain silent, (or possibly burst into tears?). What pressures would be put on the tutors in handling such a delicate situation in front of the student? These scenarios remain untested and leave the way open for more trials.

This was a small sample of people, (6 out of a possible 22). Having said that, the author feels the warm support shown by the volunteer participants and associated staff, (together with the high student ratings supporting the concept), makes one feel that this “Fly on the Wall” technique has some potential.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

“Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot, (by definition, if they want to graduate), escape the effects of poor assessment. (Boud, 1995:35).

As interviewed and quoted by Anthony, Architect: Charles Moore says: “One of the legacies of the Beaux-Arts that we still have with us is that secrecy, the business of retiring into a room where nobody could see what you were doing...To keep people from copying each other is presumably why this secrecy was set up. Yet so much of practice is indeed copying each other, building on each other’s ideas, and keeping other people interested in what’s going on,” (1991:204).

This paper attempts to show how a learner can be a “Fly on the Wall” for a time, inside that room, and potentially glean something meaningful about themselves, about their

potential, and something more about the Design process by witnessing their own assessment and feedback event.

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