Rethinking the Crit
A New Pedagogy in Architectural Education

Patrick Flynn
TU Dublin

Miriam Dunn
SAUL, University of Limerick

Maureen O'Connor
CIT Crawford College of Art & Design Cork

Mark Price
School of Architecutre, UCD, Dublin

INTRODUCTION

The 'crit', short for 'criticism', is an assessment practice central to the education of the architect, internationally. It has its roots in the psychologist, Jean Piaget's constructivism framework which at its core aims to place the student at the centre of the learning experience and allow them to develop critical thinking and creative skills through learning-by-doing. The 'crit' also aims to foster a culture of learning and reflective practice as described by Donald Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner - How Professionals Think In Action*, 1983, so the student gains agency over their education.

Because crits take place in architecture and art schools, it might be assumed that they serve these educational ends. However, there is a great deal of evidence – both empirical and critical - to suggest that crits encourage conformity rather than creativity, and that they serve dominant cultural paradigms rather than the ideal of open-ended learning.

As the architect and academic, Helena Webster describes it: "The research undoubtedly brings into question the hitherto accepted intention that the [crit] is a collective and liberal celebration of individual student creativity and achievement. Rather, the collective findings suggest that the [crit] plays a central role in the design studio pedagogy, derived from a pre-existing 'apprenticeship' model, which results in the reproduction of dominant notions of architectural habitus."[1]

We have re-examined several assumptions about this method of assessment and review, and through action research we are proposing a more reflective, student-centred, intrinsically motivated education. In particular the assessment method is re-imagined to inform deeper learning.

This has taken the form of a pilot programme run for the last two years with 3rd Year at TU Dublin Bolton Street, from which traditional crits have been replaced with studnet-centered learning and dialogue. With the benefit of a recent funding award from The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, we propose to extend this pilot to other architecture and art schools, including CIT Crawford College of Art & Design in Cork, UCD in Dublin, and SAUL in Limerick.

WHAT IS THE 'CRIT'?

The 'crit' system began in the 19th Century at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where originally juries of tutors assessed a student's work behind closed doors; this 'closed jury' system became an 'open jury' in the 20th century, where tutors commented on work in public in front of the student's peers. The main advantages of this format is that all students can hear feedback from reviewers on each other's projects, in order to learn about their own work, and that students gain some experience in presenting their work.

Accoridng to Kathryn Anthony in *Design Juries on trial, 1991,* 'Crits are an opportunity for the student to present the process and solution to a design problem. The crit should be .. providing the student with encouragement as well as stimulus to continue exploration..'[2] Donald Schon argues that conversation about architecture – the 'crit' - is the essence of the design education process.

Schon sees the 'crit' as an equal debate between student and tutor, or an exchange of learned opinions rather than delivery of facts.

THE CRIT IN PRACTICE.

We consider that in practice, these ideals are in conflict with the reality of the student experience whereby the negative aspects clearly inhibit learning. Anthony talks about the physical barrier between the students and their classmates that is formed by the staff. Also, the same form of crit is used in the formative and summative assessment of the student's work. The crit model is time-intensive and often attended by students who are inattentive due to the repetitive nature of the presentations.

Figure 1. The crit in practi e, Dublin School of Architecture, 2018

Critically, Reyner Banham's essay, 'A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture' compares this studio teaching method to "a tribal long house,"[3] and argues that in practice the ideal of equal learning is replaced with enforcing a code of conduct, establishing attitudes and values that are then played out in the profession. Students absorb aesthetic, motivational, and ethical practices as well as language and even dress as outlined by Thomas Dutton's *Voices in Architectural Education, Cultural Politics and Pedagogy, 1991* - broadly speaking what the philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu refers to as "habitus"[4] i.e. embodied habits of seeing, act-ing and thinking. Students may come to regard the tutor's approval as indicative of approval by other powerful groups in society, on which they are dependent for status and earning ability.

In practice, therefore, the crit places the tutor as the person who knows 'the' correct solution to every difficulty, with the crit being seen to e ndorse 'acceptable knowledge'[5] In a ddition to increasing stress and inhibiting learning, which may impact more depending on gender and ethnicity, the potentially adversarial structure of the crit reinforces power imbalances and thereby ultimately contributes to the reproduction of dominant social structures.

This paper looks at the attempt to change the dynamic of the crit into a d ialogue. D utton pointed out the main problem with the traditional crit format is that it is not dialogical and because of the structured asymmetrical relations of power. The crit is reimagined as a discussion between all the staff, the students and the person whose work is being discussed. This also explores Foucault's ideas on the spatialisation of power which were referred by Karen Anthony in her work *Design Juries on Trial,* 1991.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADDRESS THIS?

In Milton Cameron's *The Jury's Out: a Critique of the Design Review in Architectural Education*, 2014, and Anthony's *Design Juries on Trial,* 1991, their research indicates that the most successful design studios are those where traditional power relationships are broken down. These are studios where the students become actively involved in the process, and where they have the opportunity to discuss their work with jurors and with each other, all within an environment of mutual respect. The most successful variations to the traditional jury format, from the students' point of view, are those where they are more involved in the process.

Assessment in architecture schools has traditionally adopted a 'one size fits all' approach by using the crit throughout the design process. The crit also focusses on verbal feedback with little or no space for written feedback. Crucially, the social and time pressures involved mean that crits don't allow for collaborative or peer learning.

Our proposed feedback system attempts to address these core issues by being cognisant of the different design stages during project development, and by aiming to provide a more student-centred, equitable, and collaborative approach to learning.

Based on Anthony's *Design Juries on Trial,* 1991, and Christine Mc Carthy's *Redesigning the Crit*, 2011 at Victoria University we developed a series of aims to achieve this new method of assessment and review. Alongisde each aim, outlined in the table below, different methods were proposed such as round-table feedback, written feedback, online review or 'red dot' review

FEEDBACK TYPES IN TERMS OF AIMS	Crit	Round Table	Written	Pin up	End Review
Sharing the **power-base** more equitably					
Being more **time** efficient					
Greater **variety of feedback**					
Reducing **stress** to promote **productivity**					
Involving **active-learning** techniques					
Feedback which **prepares** students for profession					
Peer review and engagement					

Figure 2. Identifi tio of aims of traditio al crit system and possible alternati es (A er Mc.Carthy 2011), author: P. Flynn.

PILOTING AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT AND REVIEW THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

Based on the table above, we ran a pilot model, delivered in collaboration with colleagues, of these new feedback methods over the a full academic year with third year architecture students at TU Dublin Bolton Street. This comprised four stages designed to support the student through the design process over a semester:

1) Round Table Review: For the first stage we adopted the Harkness method, established in 1930 with a gift from Edward Harkness at the Philip's Exeter Academy. as described by John Barton in his presentation at the seminar, "Rething the Crit", 2016 wherby tutors sit alongside the students in small groups of six to discuss and, crucially, draw different approaches to designing their scheme. The emphasis was on group collaboration, so students and staff were encouraged to take part as equals in the learning process.

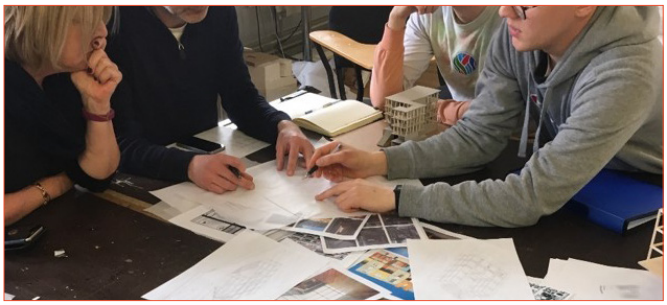

Figure 3. Round table review; Co- creatio of Knowledge Du on 1991 & Barton, 2016; Dublin School of Architecture, 2019.

2) Submission: Closed Juries & Open Feedback. The second stage focused on assessment as a reflective tool. Students were given a deadline to submit work, which was subsequently reviewed by tutors in private, after which they provided both marks and written feedback. This was issued to students in private giving them time to reflect, and was then followed by a meeting where the students met individually with tutors to discuss the feedback as outlined in Milton Cameron's *The Jury's Out: a Critique of the Design Review in Architectural Education*, 2014, and Anthony's *Design Juries on Trial,* 1991.

Mc.Carthy and Cameron both identify the importance of the students working to a specific deadline and also the need to all staff time to work towards in depth feedback and allow time for both staff and students to reflect and consider. The architects and researches Rosie Parnell and Charles Doidge, co-authors of *The Crit: An Architecture Student's handbook*, 2000, with Rachel Sara and Mark Parsons, refer to the value of written feedback as a basis of reflection and progression.

3) Online Learning : In the third stage the student's work was presented on the internet. Students were asked to upload their project to an online community in groups of ten made up of the students, staff and external practioners. Comments were invited and the online learning provided for greater debate and ensured it was not bound by a specific time and place. The students then summarised the online comments along with their drawings in a presentation.

Online leads to seeing the work together as a dialogue. Staff and students speak first to describe what they see and then the student discusses their intentions.

4) 'Red Dot' Review: In the fourth and final stage, based also on Cameron's method and also Doidge, Parnell, Sara and Parson's approach in their book, *The Crit: An Architecture Student's handbook*, 2000, students and staff viewed an exhibition of all the students' work. Based on Professor Ledewitz's approach, the students and staff were then invited to place one red dot by the scheme that they wished to hear discussed.

Doidge and Parnell describe these broadly as student led discussions. They argue that a selection of a number of reviews are more likely to form a better learning example for the year in that it is less about the individual's work in turn and more about specific learning outcomes and problems that all the class encountered. The staff mark the pinned up work in pairs and separates the marking from the final review. The student gets marks and written feedback at the start of the day so as to aid their reflection.

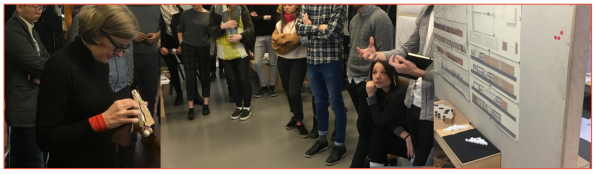

Figure 4. Red dot review day, Dublin School of Architecture, 2019.

EVALUATING THE PILOT MODEL

Following the pilot scheme, students completed an anonymous evaluation of the process. The main benefits they identified were:

1] Clarity of feedback: 'Constantly know where we stand;' 'Assessment was made clear, feedback sheets were incredibly helpful.'[6]

2] Stress reduction and productivity: 'Not having to stress about pin-ups and instead using the time to actually do the work;' 'It is more of a conversation;' 'Less draining than a crit.'[7]

3] Peer learning: 'Seeing other students' working process and how their schemes are progressing;' 'Like a conversation.'[8]

4] Changing the Power Imbalance: 'The simple positioning, seated around a table of work, is something I find makes me less nervous and equal or level with a tutor.' 'The discussion between students and teachers was good and very engaging, because generally, in crits, you don't interrupt.'[9]

Staff and external reviewers believe that stages one and two have been successful in producing a higher standard of work and a more inclusive atmosphere in the studio: 'The

students were more engaged with the process and there was a good discussion'; I do like the round table review system and was particularly impressed by [students'] willingness to offer constructive feedback on each other's work.'[10]

The third stage was possibly the least successful in that the time given for practitioners was perhaps too short for comments online. In the presentation stage the students and staff seemed to move into a more familiar 'crit' mode. Some staff found this regressive however others thought it could offer a way forward: 'Could the future be a combination of round table reviews with a final presentation on the wall?'[11]

The fourth stage was seen as more successful from a staff and student point of view. 'Interesting discussions;' 'Students were engaged in looking at all the work'. 'Student partiticpation was high'.[12]

The pilot model has delivered useful findings. By adapting each stage of the design process to different methods of feedback, this emphasises more usefully specific learning outcomes for students and better teaching practices for staff. In addition, by customizing feedback, participation increases and stress levels are reduced due to more transparency and equality between tutors and students: The students' work and process is at the centre of the learning and not the presentation or outcome. Reducing the stress of assessments also has a positive impact on design progress.

CONCLUSION

The pilot model for 'rethinking the crit' demonstrates how peer learning and evaluation impacts on the student's overall ability to improve their critical judgement and empowers them in their learning. Reflection, critical evaluation and an appreciation of the participation and contribution by all, are key to this alternative mode of assessment and review, the core of architectural, artistic or any equivalent design-led education.

McCarthy, Cameron and Anthony to a degree argue that a reformist approach is called for, rather than wholesale change. An approach that recognises the relevance of a variety of review methods for different teaching contexts, rather than the adoption of one model to cover every situation.

By adopting this current model, we believe a reform of the crit can make educators and students engage in an open dialogue, centered on mutually engaged learning and can thereby develop a new pedagogy in architectural education.
As described by the artist, Kurt Ralske, 2011, in "The Crit", our core aim should be in education, as in art:

"Meeting as equals on the playing field of art, all participants leave the encounter a bit richer." 13

Notes

1. Helena Webster, "A Study of Ritual, Acculturation and Reproduction In Architectural Education," Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 4: 3, (2005) p.265-282
2. Kathryn Anthony, *Design Juries on trial* (London: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991), 2.
3. Reyner Banham, "A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture' in *A Critic Writes: Selected Essays by Reyner Banham*, eds Mary Banham et al, (California: Uni. of California Press, 1996), 295
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Culture and Society* (London: Sage Publishing, 1990), 1.
5. Thomas Dutton, *Voices in Architectural Education, Cultural Politics and Pedagogy* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991), 29.
6. Various students, interviewed by Patrick Flynn, Dublin School of Architecture, Dublin May 2018.
7. Ibid,
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Various staff, interviewed by Patrick Flynn, Dublin School of Architecture, Dublin May 2018.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Kurt Ralske, 'The Crit,' *Kurt Ralske,* May 2011, retnull.com/index.php?/texts/the-crit/ (accessed .08.13.19)