Improving Public Reviews: Critiques, Juries and Other Presentations of Students' Work

What is the pedagogical value of public reviews, critiques and/or juries?

It is imperative to the learning process that our students have opportunities to receive feedback, including that which is negative, and incorporate that feedback into further understanding and/or performance. How we provide that feedback is equally important to assure that our students do, indeed, hear, process and use what we say as they continue to develop. Constructive criticism, performed effectively, is a productive educational activity.

What are the goals of public reviews, critiques and/or juries?

As faculty we need to make the purpose of any public review explicit to our students. Obviously the purpose will change based on such things as when the review is held (e.g., mid semester or end of semester) and what level the students are (e.g., first year undergraduates vs. seniors). However, there are a variety of reasons we may use public reviews as part of our pedagogy.

What is the role of the faculty member in charge?

The role of the faculty member in charge is to situate the review, for both the reviewers and the students, within the context of 1) the course and 2) the scope and objectives of the project.

What are the responsibilities of anyone assuming the role of a reviewer?

The reviewer should use her/his expertise to help the faculty member meet the course and project objectives through critical and constructive feedback of student work.

How can I prepare students for the review?

In secondary education students rarely learn how to accept and respond to criticism, so in the early undergraduate years they must develop and hone these skills.

How can I assure students get the most out of the review?

The stress that public reviews can cause in students can mitigate the value of the review unless they are able to accurately recall comments, criticisms, and suggestions to use in their current or future work.

What are the challenges, problems and things that can go wrong in a public review?

Hopefully our thoughtful attention to goals, roles and responsibilities, and preparation of students and reviewers will minimize problems. However, even the most thoughtful preparation may not completely eliminate difficulties.

What is the pedagogical value of public reviews, critiques and juries?

All of us use constructive criticism as a valuable pedagogical tool to help our students in a variety of ways: to broaden their perspectives, to deepen their understanding, to improve the quality of their work, to motivate reflection on their process, etc. It is imperative to the learning process that our students have opportunities to receive feedback, including that which is negative, and incorporate that feedback into further understanding and/or performance. How we provide that feedback is equally important to assure that our students do, indeed, hear, process and use what we say as they continue to develop. Constructive criticism, performed effectively, is a productive educational activity.

In many disciplines, criticism and feedback are delivered privately, e.g., comments on papers, grades on exams. In other disciplines, however, students receive feedback and criticism in public settings, e.g., design juries, project presentations. The public nature of feedback, particularly criticism, complicates how effective it is as a form of pedagogy; we don't want defensiveness and embarrassment to get in the way of our students' learning from these reviews. Equally we do not want embarrassment or strictly personal criticism used as pedagogic tools.

The nature of the public review varies as a consequence of a number of factors. These include:

- when the review is held (e.g., half way through the project vs. end of the project);
- the level of the students being reviewed (e.g., first-years vs. seniors);
- the purpose and objectives of the review (e.g., to get students to reflect on their creative process vs. to challenge students' creative boundaries); and
- who the reviewers are – internal (e.g., the course faculty member and/or students in the class) and/or external (e.g., other faculty from the department, faculty outside the department, practicing professionals).

Based on these factors, the instructor needs to, for each review, develop and refine among reviewers and students a shared understanding of the goals, scope, and evaluation criteria.

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As faculty we need to make the purpose of any public review explicit to our students. Obviously the purpose will change based on such things as when the review is held (e.g., mid semester or end of semester) and what level the students are (e.g., first year undergraduates vs. seniors). However, there are a variety of reasons we may use public reviews as part of our pedagogy. For example, these reviews can:

- Provide feedback that both individual students and the rest of the class can use to stimulate their continued exploration and to drive their progress on the project (if it is an interim review) and their future work (if it's a final review).
- Give our students an opportunity to present their work and thus hone both their presentation skills and the use of language and concepts that are specific to their discipline.
- Give our students an opportunity to be reflective about their work as they describe their process, e.g., goals for the assignment, how they interpreted it, what decisions they made and why, etc.
- Provide our students with new ways to think about their work through questions that challenge their perspective and broaden their understanding.
- Help our students learn how to reconcile and integrate conflicting perspectives when feedback differs among reviewers.
- Help our students learn to respond to criticism.
- Help our students learn to respond to questions about their work.
- Use our students' work as a springboard for discussion, for example, to connect theory to practice.
- Teach our students to critically question existing conventions through review of their own and others' work.
- Help our students learn to critically evaluate others' work in order to enhance their own work. This includes peer's work as well as exemplary works in the field that are often referenced by the reviewers.
- Evaluate our students' work against a clearly articulated set of criteria previously shared with students.
- Acculturate our students to the values and sensibilities of the professional discipline.
- Help our students to understand that there are often multiple acceptable solutions to a problem.
- Showcase and celebrate our students' work.

Once you have determined your goals, it is helpful to articulate them in terms of what students should be able to know or do by the end of the review. These goals, if carefully written, can help you to more easily measure students' performance. For example, by the end of the review we might want our students to be able to:

- Articulate the concepts, theories, principles, etc. used in the design of their solution.
- Identify concrete ideas raised by the reviewers to assist them as they continue to develop their solution or design.
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of their solution or design based on feedback.

- Use the language of the discipline to describe and discuss their project.
- Articulate the rationale guiding their choices.
- Distinguish between criticism of them and criticism of their work.
- Evaluate the degree to which their work meets the objectives of the project/problem.

What is the role of the faculty member in charge?

The role of the faculty member in charge is to situate the review, for both the reviewers and the students, within the context of 1) the course and 2) the scope and objectives of the project. The faculty member in charge should provide external reviewers (e.g., other faculty from the department, faculty outside the department, practicing professionals) with:

- a copy of the course syllabus, the project description and the criteria for evaluation to assure that all reviewers have the same background material and are addressing the same set of issues. Otherwise, reviewers may address issues not covered in the studio, not relevant to the course or project, etc. Some faculty members ask their reviewers to arrive early in order to brief them in advance of the review.
- a clearly stated set of goals for the review <link> to help frame and guide the conversation between reviewers and students so that everyone is addressing the same goals within the constraints and criteria provided.
- an articulated set of “ground rules” for the review (e.g., who can speak, about what, when) and for appropriate discussion and feedback. For example, do you want the reviewers to:
- talk to the student, the class and/or other reviewers?
- debate or challenge each other’s comments? build on each other’s comments?
- provide both positive feedback as well as feedback on what isn’t working? Students can learn just as much from what they’ve “done right,” with an added value that it builds their confidence in certain aspects of their work. However, reviewers frequently have a tendency to focus on and emphasize the negative aspects of a project and fail to leverage the positive features when making recommendations.
- balance questions with comments during the review to get students to be reflective about what they did, why they did it, etc.? This is particularly important if your goals include helping students learn to be reflective about their work and to become better at extemporaneously responding to questions about their work.
- avoid vague comments because even when positive, they offer little to guide students toward improvement? This is generally true unless the vague feedback is accompanied by probing questions or discussion that facilitates collaborative exploration that leads to more concrete feedback. For example, a reviewer’s comment such as “something is not quite working” can generate discussion among the group and lead to insight about what’s not working.

The faculty member should provide students with:

- a set of criteria the students will be expected to address when presenting their work to help them hone their presentation skills;
- models or examples of an effective presentation;
- opportunities to practice (particularly early on in their first year) presenting their work and give explicit feedback on how well they presented and discussed their project;
- insights into how to reconcile, prioritize, synthesize, etc. differing and/or conflicting perspectives from the feedback; and

- advice on how to step away from their work and join the analysis, particularly if one of the goals is to help students learn to analyze and discuss theirs and others' work (e.g., you may want to draw on your own experience and the strategies you use to depersonalize feedback).

What are the responsibilities of anyone assuming the role of a reviewer?

The role of the reviewer should be clearly defined by the faculty member in charge, based on the purpose and objectives of the course, project and specific review. In essence, the reviewer should use her/his expertise to help the faculty member meet the course and project objectives through critical and constructive feedback of student work. To do this effectively, the reviewer should:

- Carefully listen to the presentation. Withhold comments, questions, feedback and evaluation until they have carefully examined the work and listened to the complete presentation. This means that it is not appropriate to interrupt a student. Some faculty members suggest to their reviewers that they take a few minutes to reflect on both what the student said and the project before beginning their comment/conversation.
- Evaluate the work, not the student. Make comments, suggestions, criticism and compliments specific to the work. In other words, it is more effective if your feedback does not begin with “you didn’t accomplish . . . ” but rather uses language like “this design doesn’t accomplish . . . “ or “this piece lacks . . .”
- Make sure to address students at the appropriate level. For example, first year students are less knowledgeable than forth or fifth year students, and do not yet have the concepts or language that they will develop throughout the curriculum. It is sometimes difficult for reviewers, both faculty who do not teach first year students and practitioners, to remember what they knew and could do when they were first year students.
- [For external reviewers] Know and abide by the “ground rules” for appropriate discussion and feedback. For example,
- Should the reviewer talk to the student, the class or other reviewers?
- Is it appropriate for reviewers to debate or challenge each other’s comments? Build on each other’s comments?
- Should the reviewer provide both positive feedback as well as feedback on what isn’t working? Students can learn just as much from what they’ve “done right,” with an added value that it builds their confidence in certain aspects of their work. However, reviewers frequently have a tendency to focus on and emphasize the negative aspects of a project and fail to leverage the positive features when making recommendations.
- Should the reviewer balance questions with comments during the review to get students to be reflective about what they did, why they did it, etc.? This is particularly important if your goals include helping students learn to be reflective about their work and to become better at extemporaneously responding to questions about their work.
- Are there time limits for initial responses to students’ work?

Think about how you ask questions (http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/discussions.html) because questions are an important pedagogical tool to help students reflect on, interpret, evaluate, extend or articulate what they’ve done. How a

question is asked (e.g., tone, word choice, positive/negative framing) can potentially scare, embarrass, alienate or put students on the defensive. For example:

- A challenge question can help students to broaden their perspective and thus serves a valuable intellectual function. However, if not phrased carefully, and depending on tone, students can interpret this type of question as an indication of disapproval or dislike of their work, and thus become defensive.
- An exploratory question can probe students to articulate their process or the rationale for a decision they've made. However, if asked poorly, it can result in students becoming embarrassed if they believe you are questioning the appropriateness of a decision they've made or process they've used.
- A hypothetical question can get students to think about variations on what they've done. However, students new to the review process can easily be confused by such a question because the hypothetical situation was not part of the criteria for the project. These types of questions can help prepare students for the unexpected situations that often arise in professional practice.
- A contextualizing question asks students to situate their solution or design within the appropriate concepts, theories, principles, etc. This forces students to connect theory to practice, an important part of the intellectual process. However, students new to the review process may not see the relevance of this type of question until they are sophisticated enough to reflect on and recognize the role of theory and concepts in their own process.

How can I prepare students for the review?

In childhood, the current generation of students often received a trophy, ribbon or plaque even if their team finished last. As a consequence, they are accustomed to frequent praised and may be particularly uncomfortable with criticism. Thus, the public nature of the review can be very intimidating and confusing for students. In secondary education students rarely learn how to accept and respond to criticism, so in the early undergraduate years they must develop and hone these skills. Often students receiving public feedback are looking and hoping for approval, so processing negative comments is particularly difficult. These same students often fail to understand that criticism can be a valuable and important tool for generating better work. As a result, we need to:

- Share the goals, objectives and expectations of the review with students.
- Explain the role of the reviewers with students so that they understand that reviewers may ask questions that challenge them, probe their decisions, etc. in order to help them further develop as professionals. In other words, remind students why the review is an important part of the educational process and the discipline. Reinforce the idea that the general objective of the review is to provide information to students so they may improve the quality of their work.
- Discuss with students the different “type” of reviewers based on their history, experience, personality type, etc. In other words, tell students that some reviewers are more blunt, argumentative, overly negative, etc., and that they should focus on what is being said, not necessarily how it is being said.
- Discuss the different types of potential questions that students should expect. These varying types of questions are meant to help students think more broadly, deeply, across contexts, in a hypothetical situation, etc. By preparing students for the range of questions to anticipate, they are less likely to become defensive, embarrassed, angry, or distressed.
- Discuss with students the distinction between criticism of their work and of them.
- Discuss and, if possible, model how to reconcile differing views on certain aspects of the design or solution.
- Discuss and model how to take specific comments and feedback, connect them to theory, principles, etc., and then generalize in order to be able to use the theory, principles, etc. in different contexts.
- Discuss with students the role of risk-taking and failure in the creative process because experiences with failures often result in deeper learning. Framing failure in this way may allow students to “get the most out of bad reviews” because they hopefully will see the value of negative feedback.
- Prepare students for the unexpected because adaptability and flexibility are important not only in the creative process but also in professional life where, for example, a client can enter the review process somewhere in the middle and introduce unexpected criteria which may be deemed relevant after the fact.
- Suggest to students that they prepare in advance for the review by getting a good night’s sleep, thinking about (and perhaps jotting down) what they want to say as they introduce their project, and anticipating questions the reviewers might ask.
- Suggest to students that they pair up with each other to “practice” presenting their work and responding extemporaneously to questions about their work. If students

are new to the experience of public review, we may want to require that they do this in advance of the first presentation and review.

- Model an example of an effective presentation (preferably one that you've presented recently).
- Video a few public reviews, maybe of upper-class students with more experience, and share those videos with students so that they see examples of effective presentations, etc. We might also video a few students' practice reviews so that they can evaluate themselves and hone their presentation skills.

How can I assure that students get the most out of the review?

The stress that public reviews can cause in students can mitigate the value of the review unless they are able to accurately recall comments, criticisms, and suggestions to use in their current or future work. Consequently, think carefully about ways to assure that students actually hear what is being said about their work. For example,

- Ask students to summarize, in writing, the feedback they received and, if it's a midterm review, discuss how they will integrate the feedback into their work.
- Pair students up and have them take notes for each other during the review.
- Take notes of reviewers' comments, questions and suggestions. Provide students with your notes as a model of how to identify and synthesize important feedback (this is most appropriate in the early years when students don't have much experience with public reviews and are less sophisticated at extracting the important feedback in the review).
- Ask reviewers to provide students with a written copy of their comments, when appropriate.
- Debrief with students, especially those who received a lot of feedback so that students learn how to prioritize feedback as they move forward with their work.
- Explicitly follow-up with the students, particularly those whose projects received consistently harsh reviews or who appeared to be unnerved or distressed about the review.

To assure that all students in the room learn from the review if, indeed, we think of it as an important aspect of our pedagogy, we can:

- Ask each student to write a one-page summary of consistent comments they heard (either positive or negative) either across reviewers or student projects.
- Have our students summarize the review of one other student.
- Ask our students to write a one-page response to a review they disagreed with.
- Provide a summary of the reviews' findings both for the entire class (global) and for each student (individual). The latter can come in the form of individual meetings held subsequently.

What are the challenges, problems and things that can go wrong in a public review?

The previous sections proactively address a number of issues that often cause problems in public reviews. Hopefully our thoughtful attention to goals, roles and responsibilities, and preparation of students and reviewers will minimize problems. However, even the most thoughtful preparation may not completely eliminate difficulties. So, be prepared to deal with:

Students who may

- become defensive, argumentative, or emotionally upset. All of these reactions interfere with the amount and quality of learning that takes place. It may also set an uncomfortable or negative tone for the rest of the review. In part this is why we need to prepare students for the review in advance <link>
- "freeze" due to nervousness and hence not provide a strong introduction to their work, not respond to questions adequately or at all, etc. This is why modeling and practice are important: students can learn by watching upperclassmen in similar situations, and by practicing with peers in their own class.
- not understand that content, appearance and presentation are all important in successfully presenting their work. As a consequence, students may complain about "unfair" evaluation because peers whose work is less substantial end up "stealing the show" because of their visuals and/or presentation skills. Conversely, students with great designs can be graded more harshly because they lack the communication skills to effectively discuss their work.
- work right up to the final deadline and be stressed by their inability to access shop equipment, printers, computers, etc.

Reviewers who may

- go down the wrong path, for example, commenting on things that were not part of the assignment, reminiscing about their own work, etc. While this may be interesting and even educational, the question of relevance is important given the time constraints under which reviews are held.
- show up late or not show up at all.
- be argumentative, too blunt, too negative, inattentive, etc.
- misunderstand your goals for the assignment/project, and not reinforce them. For example, if you want students to take risks, go out on a limb, etc., the reviewers need to applaud that exploration even when they are dissatisfied with the final solution.
- subscribe to the philosophy that "trail-by-fire" is a valuable pedagogical technique and be overly harsh in their reviews.

Administrators who may

- not provide sufficient resources to allow us to invite external reviewers of high quality to final reviews.

- not provide review space with sufficient acoustic and functional privacy to conduct a review without spurious interruptions and concentration of participants. There is merit to publicly accessible yet well focused settings.