How Design Reviews work in Architecture and Fine Art: a comparative study

Dr Jenny Marie and Dr Nick Grindle

University College London

Introduction

Design reviews in Architecture and Fine Art occupy a key place in the pedagogy of both disciplines, and are valued by students as a vital form of feedback to help them progress with their work. Within the context of an interest in peer review across all academic disciplines, we became interested in design reviews as a specific mode of peer learning, as it seemed that it was a very high-stakes event for students in Architecture compared to those in Fine Art, although the mode of review, and the practice of studio-based work, is common to both subjects.

In this paper, we consider what makes peer review work well in Architecture and Fine Art, why students experience them differently in these two contexts, and what other disciplines can learn from both subjects. The paper is an interim report of work in progress, which draws on conversations we have had with staff and students in various disciplines and participant-observations we have done of design reviews in an internationally renowned school of Fine Art.

Architectural design reviews

The studio is at the heart of an Architectural education - here students are given guidance by a 'master' to work on a specific design project and receive feedback on their work via the design review (aka crit) process.

At the School of Architecture we are studying, design reviews are only done as formative assessment - in other words their sole purpose is to further develop the students' work and abilities via feedback and the activities the students undertake during the review. They play no part in establishing students' final mark for the module, which is awarded by a group of examiners at the end of the module, following a presentation of the students' work by their tutor.

Some of the difficulties that Margaret Wilkins (2000, pp.101-102) has pointed out as arising from crits' dual purpose of judging and teaching, are nevertheless still present. One of the Architecture tutors we spoke to told us that the biggest difference between the Art design reviews that we will discuss shortly and the ones in Architecture was that in Architecture it was considered important to make it clear how good the work was in the feedback, so that the students were clear about where they needed to focus their development efforts. Judgement thus remains very much a public affair.

In some ways, this gets to the heart of some of the difficulties in any kind of education - how do we motivate students, encourage them and help them build the belief that they can learn while also being clear about areas they can develop further? Furthermore, by giving feedback about what is good and bad, we reinforce the perception that Helena Webster (2005) found amongst first year students that there are absolute Architectural values. So how do we convey that while all knowledge and values are contestable, development within a discipline occurs by having a shared understanding of what should be taken as read and what can be disputed and discussed? Susan Orr (2010) has argued that in Fine Art, assessment is not purely subjective, because it is about an exchange of views, which carry the weight of accumulated expertise; nor is it purely objective, because the standards, criteria, and outcomes, are reifications of the community's own practices. Following Pierre Bourdieu and others, Orr suggests that the subject internalises a community's habits and practices, and this community in turn reifies its habits and practices. The standards, criteria and outcomes which underpin the 'crit' are examples of reified practice. We would like to suggest that Orr's analysis offers a good framework for thinking about the shared understandings that operate in Architecture also.

Using Orr's work, we would suggest that students learn about the Architectural community's shared practices as their work is discussed in 'crits' and reviews: what topics are raised, how and what is taken for granted. However, this only works, if students really do listen. Some of the tutors reported that students

were anxious (see also Duff, 1992 and Webster, 2005) and so failed to take in the feedback they received. Though students were encouraged to ask a friend to take notes for them, the inability to think clearly due to the stress and last minute working, will inhibit this learning about the discipline's mode of discussion.

We have observed that one way in which students deal with the anxiety of undergoing a crit is by over-preparing their drawings and under-preparing their presentations. One of the tutors we spoke to said they were thinking of introducing presentation skills training to tackle this. This seems helpful, since professional Architects have to stand up, present and defend their work, however, it is clearly treating the symptom rather than the cause. It may be more helpful to separate out the judgement of students' work, which is given in written form later in any case (but often much later) from the process of engaging in professional dialogue about work.

The Art design reviews we observed possibly have something to offer those wishing to reconsider the Architectural crits. However, when trialling new formats (Brindley, Doidge and Wilmott, 2000) found that both staff and students often reverted back to the original one. They recommended that if changes were to be made they had to occur from the start of the first year and that all staff (and any guests) had to be very well briefed.

Fine Art Design Reviews

Design reviews in Fine Art typically involve a cohort of 15 to 20 students, 2 to 4 tutors, and maybe visitors, who are usually other tutors or visiting artists. The session will look at the work of 4 or 5 students, and last between two to three hours long. This is the case for theory reviews as well as for practice-based sessions. The session is typically informal, with the only real structure being the move from looking at one student's work to another, which is sometimes marked by the move from one location to another. Tutors usually give the student the choice as to whether they want to speak first, to introduce the piece, or listen to what the others in the group want to say. One tutor described it thus: 'It's a bit like a Quaker meeting. There's quiet until somebody feels they have something to say'. The tone of the discussion is conversational, and can be impersonal, with the artist (who is necessarily present) sometimes referred to in the third person. As we observed with Architectural design reviews, judgement is a public affair. Comments given by both tutors and students will tend to gravitate towards feedback to the Artist about where they might focus their subsequent efforts.

Tutors take a facilitative role in crits, and have described their role to us as helping the students to explain their work better, to themselves as well as to others [sessions 1, 3 and 4]. This is an aspect of the Architectural crit, which could perhaps be further developed. Architects also have to be able to present their work and by describing what they are aiming to do, students become more aware of it themselves, which enables them to further improve their work.

At least one Fine Art tutor has said they want to preserve the 'rich culture of people' that characterised Art-school education in second half of the twentieth century, and to foster this culture in an environment where more and more colleges are turning their degrees into programmes of learning. At this Art school, staff act as tutors to groups of around 12 students, meeting them individually for one hour twice a term, as well as meeting them together. Reviews provide a larger, field-specific forum where work is shown and discussed. In reviews we saw that students were willing to comment on each others' work, to exchange and respond to comments given by each other as well as by the tutors. But this is a learned process: as one tutor noted, 'these are not by nature very co-operative people', and nor are they inclined to comment on each others' work. Other evidence suggests that this degree of having to work closely together begins as students have to share studio space, and at the other end of the scale, the end-of-year degree show requires the largest possible scope and scale of co-operation, for purposes as diverse as writing the catalogue and painting the walls. Another tutor said that the community formed among the group would continue to be important in the years immediately after the degree, they might work together, exhibit together, and so on. (Perhaps the most well-known instance of such co-operation, and of the way in which the structure of student learning anticipates the shape of professional life, is the *Freeze* three-part exhibition in 1988, organised by Damien Hirst with a number of contemporaries from Goldsmith's College. The exhibitors were all students. Tutors supported

them and also contributed essays to the catalogue, and well-known figures in the art world were invited to the exhibition, in one case being ferried there and back by Hirst himself). In our observations we noted that third-year students were more likely to contribute to discussion than second-year students; and graduate students in turn seemed still more at ease when contributing to discussion.

The 'rich culture of people' ethos in the Fine Art seminars seem to epitomize Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's (1991) thesis that 'opportunities for learning are, more often than not, given structure by work practices instead of by strongly asymmetrical master-apprentice relations' (93). Lave and Wenger's comments allow us to contrast Fine Art seminars with Architecture design reviews, which place more emphasis on the formality of relationships, as mediated through the contributions of 'experts' and the provision of feedback. For example, students and tutors exchange views in what is ideally a constructive dialogue in the Fine Art seminars, and students very rarely wrote down anything that was said. Architecture students, on the other hand, are encouraged to record the comments delivered by the tutor, or at least have a friend act as their scribe.

Comparison

A distinction can be drawn between students' prior experience in Architecture and Fine Art. Though most Architectural students have an art/design background, a number will not to have experienced the design review format of learning prior to university. Fine Art students, on the other hand, are admitted to university on the basis (in part) of the work produced on their post A-level Foundation Course, which is presented and discussed at interview. During the Foundation Course, the students will have already experienced reviews and got used to other students learning from their work. Their work will have been publicly displayed in their end of year show, which anticipates the larger and more widely-publicised end-of-year shows at degree level.

In our observations we saw that in the first term of their degree, Fine Art students were encouraged to attend and take part in seminars in which second and third year students showed their work. This was for the purpose of helping them choose their specialism (painting,

sculpture, fine art media) but it will have also helped them to have realistic expectations of what would occur and what it expected of them in terms of participation. In contrast, at the Architecture School we studied, first year students requested earlier formative feedback on their design work but the School was reluctant to provide this as they felt that the students were not yet ready to have their work scrutinised in public in this way. Whether this withholding of the review experience makes the reviews seem more important than they are (especially as they do not contribute to the marks) and thus increase the stress surrounding them is something we would like to investigate further.

Peer review in other disciplines

Peer learning is being increasingly used in other disciplines, where the review format has not been traditionally used. One Economics lecturer we spoke to reported concerns about the quality of feedback students receive from peers (in the primary school context Hattie, 2009, p.4 states: '80% of feedback a student receives about his or her work in primary school is from other students. But 80% of this student-provided feedback is incorrect!'). When asked about their opinion of peer assessment (not having experienced any) Maths undergraduates said that they didn't think it would work for their discipline "where there's right and there's wrong most of the time", as they needed to know from experts whether they'd got it right rather from other people also struggling to get to grips with it. There is therefore the impression that peer review is more suitable for disciplines where quality is contested. It is also possible that the written format of feedback in these disciplines causes a problem, because it appears more authoritative than the verbal and more tentative feedback given in a design review. As there is less recognition of the contested nature of values in Architecture, this also possibly explains the less comfortable position crits hold here in comparison to Fine Art.

While works of art are made to be seen by the public, this is not necessarily the case with Architectural drawings. The buildings themselves are for public consumption and thus the ideas within the drawings, but the drawings themselves are less designed for open viewing. In other disciplines, work at undergraduate level seems to be privately created for viewing solely by the author and examiner. This changes at

graduate level, when one begins to produce work for other audiences: research seminars, upgrade panels, conference organisers, journal editors, publishers, grant advisory councils, and so on. The research student becomes acclimatized to the fact that work produced in private is produced for public consumption: by peers, critics, and the public. In many disciplines, peer assessment at undergraduate level seems to anticipate a public-facing orientation of private work for which students are not sufficiently well-prepared. This may also be a key issue in success or failure to grasp the nature of graduate work, and to succeed at graduate level. Taking these observations, we might speculate that the quasi-private nature of Architectural drawings is a key reason why design reviews can prove to be stressful experiences, whereas this does not seem to be the case with Fine Art seminars.

Another key difference between the schools of Architecture and Fine Art we studied is that Architecture operates according to a modular system. The Fine Art tutor who wanted to preserve a 'rich culture of people' was conscious that many Fine Art degrees are turning into programmes of study. Modularisation presents two specific problems: first, it jeopardizes the rich developmental perspective that emerges as peers and tutors comment not only on a student's current work, but also its relationship to former work. Second, modularisation jeopardizes the formative-rich assessment environment that currently prevails in the departments we observed. Endorsement of pedagogies such as outcomes-based learning in the Dearing Report (1997), and the push for constructive alignment of learning, assessment and outcomes (eg. Biggs & Tang 2011), have shifted the emphasis away from assessing an entire degree on the basis of final exams. Yet the cost of these developments has been a drop in the quantity of formative assessment, and also, we would suggest, a deterioration of the contexts that make for a productive peer learning experience.

Conclusion

Peer review is deeply embedded in the culture of Architecture and Fine Art, to an extent not seen in other university subjects (possible exceptions in HE as a whole might be Music and Drama). Although we haven't yet investigated how studios work in any great detail, it is our belief that the studio practice, which prevails in both

disciplines, is a key reason why formative assessment is primarily characterised by peer review, as it teaches students to work in public. For Fine Art students and some Architectural ones, this is a natural extension of the way they worked during their Foundation course. However, this is not the case for all architectural students. Furthermore, the semi-private nature of Architectural drawings (as opposed to finalised designs, or actual buildings) may explain why public design reviews in Architecture can be an uncomfortable affair. This distinction is reflected in the different studios, which in Architecture seem to be private and professionalised spaces, compared to Fine Art, where something of an 'open door' culture prevails, where work is available for viewing, whether it is at a very early stage or is ready for display in a gallery.

It seems to us that another reason design reviews work in Architecture and Fine Art is because the aesthetics of both are contestable. For reviews to work well, students must appreciate that they have the right to an opinion on Architectural values, while recognising that their tutors also have a better understanding of which values are usually accepted as contestable within the discipline. This should be an explicit learning outcome for design reviews and the extent to which this is inhibited by the judgmental nature of them should be considered. Fine Art seminars, appear to be a more open forum for discussion, where tutors and students share ideas, rebutting some and accepting others. Interestingly, it seems from our observations that the participants seek to come to some kind of consensus about the merit of the work under review, and want to help each other understand it better. This means that not every view prevails: in at least one case we have witnessed, a student's work was judged by the whole group to be below standard, in spite of his claims about its worth, and the student in question was told by his tutor to work harder.

In spite of the formal similarities of studio practice and the use of peer review for formative assessment in both subjects, it is evident that the two schools we observed differ in their understanding of the practices and purposes of peer review, without compromising the integrity or the efficacy of the process. Further work is needed to explore some of these issues in detail and see what the culture of education in both

subjects can offer to other subjects in the University.

Notes

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