

# Criticism as an educational tool *in architecture*

Criticism is the basis of all education

Critical thinking

comparison

multiple answers

questioning what is told

search for better explanations

speculation

Where is criticism in education?  
architecture education  
and specifically in the studio?

1: Transformation in education  
started 25 years ago to become the norm

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**Learning not Teaching**

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Information becomes knowledge only then



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## **Learning not Teaching**

New methods to facilitate learning

problem based learning  
flipped classroom  
peer instruction  
blended learning

## 2: Effects of this transformation on architectural education

**Lectures**

**Studio**

Juries

Desk critiques

### 3: Lectures

Starting with Beaux Arts architecture education is divided into studio and lecture: real design problems / theory  
That separation did not change much:

Separation is not very efficient, especially in technology courses -

Need for integration

Criticism is essential

## 3: Lectures

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Interaction between student – student  
student– professor cannot be simulated,  
that is where we need to allocate resources

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New methods to facilitate learning

problem based learning  
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first step <b>Classroom</b>	second step <b>Home</b>	third step <b>Placeless</b>
Lecture (information)	Study (skill building)	Criticism indirect (hope of honing skills)
first step <b>Home</b>	second step <b>Classroom</b>	
Lecture (information)	Study + Criticism interactive (skill building + hope of honing skills)	



## 4: Studio

Juries  
Desk critiques

Architecture education uses problem based learning as its signature pedagogy (Shulman) – studio!

Inherently, it is ready by default to adapt new approaches of education

Perfect example of problem based learning

## 4: Studio

### Studio process

problems (real life, hypothetical or any degree of imaginary) presented to the student.

The student develops designs she thinks relevant.

Instructor criticism (mostly) oriented towards development of the project

Control of the process (freedom of the student to pursue her ideals vs the instructor's) varies greatly but this is not the main axis of discussion.

Main discussion is the goal of criticism.

## 4: Studio

goal of criticism in the studio: do not fix the design, fix the student!

**Criticism in the studio is easy:** so many problems in inexperienced students' designs very easy to point out – that is a shortcut, not essential kind of criticism.

**Criticism in the studio is difficult:** all students and all projects are different. A different methodology is required for each student; you need to understand and feel what the student is trying to achieve. Most of the time, even themselves do not know exactly what they are trying to do.

Criticism that is oriented towards honing distinctions between the made and that which could have been made better is problematic. That is a false dichotomy. Criticism needs to be oriented towards the methods student is using (or not using) while trying to develop her design further.

## 5: Juries and criticism

Not only Architecture has juries.

Case dialogue procedures in law education  
Clinique rounds in medicine.

### **Typical format:**

After working on an assignment students are required to present their finished projects (typically in the form of drawings, models and slideshows) and receive feedback from an audience made up of professors, fellow students, and practicing architects.

## 5: Juries and criticism

### **Pedagogical justification:**

Interim juries offer **opportunities for formative feedback** as opposed to grading

**Interlocking reasoning processes** - may help to develop critical thinking skills

**Interactive critical environment**, may help to develop interactive communication skills

**Public student performance** is essential. Raises emotional stakes of pedagogical encounters and produces a deep level of **engagement**

**Learning how to** handle possible negative evaluations

A site for learning **disciplinary skills, beliefs and values**

Mirrors **real life** situations of presenting a project to a client

An occasion for **learning**

An occasion of **celebration of achievement**

## 5: Juries and criticism

### **Problems with criticism in juries:**

**critic centered** - coerces students into **conforming to hegemonic notions** of habitus

Seldom interactive - **asymmetrical power structure**; distorts pedagogic outcomes

Juries do not necessarily mirror real life events - **different settings** altogether. Student work is not intended to be transformed into real - world structures; where architects and clients work in collaboration

Jury members do not have any idea on the **process** of the project - they can only criticise what they see

Students are under great stress and they cannot recall most criticism thus not benefiting from it. They are exhausted after presenting their work preventing them listening to others

## 5: Juries and criticism

### Problems with criticism in juries:

**Too much focus on form** – easy to see and respond to; the tendency to emphasize the physical characteristics of design solutions

They tend to minimize or ignore **social and political issues**

Development of a **myopic disciplinary culture** which focuses inward – very limited jargon and concerns

Research data: majority of students recall their jury experiences as **de-motivating, competitive, not a learning experience** - they do not even recall the criticism

Learning what a critic likes or dislikes does little to help develop a critical spirit in a student

goal of criticism in the studio: do not fix the design, fix the student!

## 6: Studio and criticism

goal of criticism in the studio: do not fix the design, fix the student!

Very unpredictable environment – instructor needs to develop coping strategies – expertise

First and foremost; understand and feel - insight

Criticism should focus on what the student is aiming to do without judging that goal

**Criticism in the studio cannot start unless the student states her goals**

This is very hard and frustrating for the student at times but you cannot implant ideas

At times students have difficulty starting. Then, the instructor needs to find crumbs of ideas and **translate them back** to the student



## 6: Studio and criticism

Criticism should not try to, nor should it be limited to distinguishing the good from the bad

Criticism should open avenues of **dialogue**

Discuss methodologies, inexperienced student

The instructor is a **record keeper** of her intentions and is there not let her navigate away from the direction she defined herself

Since the student has little experience and can confuse important decisions with unimportant ones, criticism needs to focus on the establishment of **hierarchies**

## 6: Studio and criticism

The instructor through criticism should control the process not the eventual design – end product. This is very hard to do, you can only push the student as far as her ambitions.

Thus; another important task of criticism: **motivate** to fulfil her potential (not the design's potential) and if possible, surpass it.

Ideas may look very simple and primitive to the student - she needs to be persuaded the those can actually lead to interesting design - dig deep as archeologist

Easy to find endless mistakes and technical problems in student projects. Criticism should not primarily focus on mistakes. You cannot develop successful designers by only criticizing the mistakes but only robots. This is not to say technical issues are not important, they are secondary. For more experienced students (fourth year) that balance would shift.

## 6: Studio and criticism

Criticism as creativity

Imaginative criticism

Criticism as translation

Criticism as record keeping

Criticism as dialogue

Criticism as archeology

Criticism as motivation

## 6: Studio and criticism

It is critical for the student to take the criticism seriously so she can learn. Unless she trusts – respects the instructor that is not going to happen. Then, if there is too much respect, she may focus on satisfying the instructor instead of pursuing her goals, creating a counterproductive learning environment. This is a delicate balance the instructor needs to keep.

Your criticism must show insight **(by discovering what the student actually is trying to do)**, you must show **knowledge** (details, precedent...) you must **remember** all the stages of her design and recite them back if she takes a wrong turn.

Also you should show that you can err as well. It is counterproductive to learning if you seem to be a superhuman. You should look like Achilles who is strong but vulnerable.

The test of investigation (*criticism*)  
must have two capital defects;  
it must be **narrow**, and it must be **uncertain**

Sir Joshua Reynolds