

# "It was just too much": Exploring the learner's experience in Fine Art crits

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## Abstract

This study employs discourse analysis and showcases the voice of the learner to discover the experiences of the Fine Art critique (crit) in relation to Boud's (2001) approach to peer learning. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the following questions are examined:

What is the experience of a crit from the learner's perspective?

What can be put in place by facilitators to improve crit participation?

The data illustrate that group size, the role of the facilitator and how various learning models are performed or resisted by the cohort can affect learner confidence.

Keywords: learner's voice, crit, group critique, participatory learning, discourse analysis

## Introduction

The 'crit'<sup>1</sup> is a core component of the curriculum for most higher education Art, Design and Architecture courses. This paper investigates the group critique (crit) on Fine Art courses in Higher Education in the UK. It should be stressed that every crit is different and institutions have a range of approaches that can shape how the session will run. Broadly speaking, the crit will involve a group of learners and one or two facilitators coming together to discuss a selection of students' works. The student whose work is discussed is present. A crit session should provide an opportunity to receive (and give) feedback about current practice and concerns. In particular, our interpretation and analysis look at how learner participation is affected by session structure and group size. This study has provided an opportunity to interrogate how:

[p]eer learning represents a major shift in focus from what is being taught to what is being learned, and transfers greater

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1 Different learning institutions also refer to the 'crit' as studio critique, convenor, group critique.

responsibility for knowledge acquisition, organization, and application from the teacher to the student. (Cooper, 2002: 54)

The voice of the learner is therefore central to this study, and the use of discourse analysis (Cameron, 2001; Gee, 2014; Tannen et al., 2015) differentiates this study from previous scholarly work on the crit. Gathering data directly from participants in crit sessions and interpretation of transcripts enabled us to gain a unique insight into the various barriers and motivators as experienced by them. The data we have gathered have helped us investigate the following questions:

- What is the experience of a crit from the learner's perspective?
- What can be put in place by teaching staff to improve participation?

### **Literature Review**

Healy (2016) positions the crit used in design education in relation to the history of Western art education and analyses the crit structurally, which provides a useful overview. The crit session as a site for assessment and feedback is explored in the literature (Blair, 2007; Smith, 2011), however it is not the intention of this paper to focus on this aspect. Research on the crit as it is manifest in architecture and design courses has also been drawn on here as these disciplines have generated relevant literature. White (2000) and Sara & Parnell (2013) explore how the crit session heightens anxiety for students. The architecture crit model is different from the Fine Art sessions observed in this study. Day (2013) also investigates students' confidence (or lack thereof), emphasising the impact on students' experience which the crit can have. Language use in the crit is a focus of a report by Blythman *et al.* (2007). Their interviews revealed that crits can be experienced as tests of verbal skills, and anxiety can lead to learners being incapable of listening productively to feedback (2007: 4). Contributors to Rowles' anthology (2013) also comment on students' anxiety, in interviews with academics. Macdonald (2017) examines the structure of the crit, urging institutions to reframe it as a form of 'new criticality', a kind of gift that's shared (2017:196). Macdonald and Lee echo insights by hooks (1994: 39) on the value of the learner's voice and the potential for group learning to be non-hierarchical. Lee (2017) focuses on the operation of power. Seen through this lens, the institutionalized method (and language use) of the crit and hierarchical structures at play (who can speak, and how) are perpetuated and acted out in the crit. The same power structures

that exist in the art world are repeated within the dynamics of the crit (Lee, 2017:147). It is timely now to attend to the learner's voice.

### **Methodology**

This study draws data from four crit sessions in the UK, across three different learning environments in formal Higher Education Institutions, and a non-formal alternative art course. The study had ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University in 2017. The observations took place between November 2017 and January 2018. Every crit session is different (Rowles: 2013), however we noticed aspects that each crit included. These were the presentation of artwork; a pre-arranged time and place for the session to take place; the attendance of the presenting learners' peers and a facilitator.

The participants, who are all anonymous, include undergraduate Fine Art students; learners from a non-formal arts course; postgraduate Fine Art students (learners), as well as lecturers, visiting lecturers and permanent members of staff, sessional lecturers and hourly paid arts practitioners (facilitators). In total, 31 participants took part in this study and we observed four crit sessions. The participants include a range of ages, ethnicities and genders. Their prior experience of crit sessions varied. Some of the participants had recently joined a course and had little previous experience, whereas some had already gained an undergraduate qualification and they had regularly participated in crit sessions. The crit sessions in this study ranged from one hour to one working day. The average length that a participant's work was discussed for was 45 minutes. Two of the sessions we observed were used by staff as a form of summative assessment. It is possible that when learners were aware that they were being assessed, their behaviour changed (Smith, 2011).

This study uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data were collected through participant observation; note taking; audio recordings with detailed transcriptions of the sessions; and individual and group interviews. We gathered quantitative data with a participant questionnaire that was completed directly after each crit session (see Appendix 1, below). These questions focused on the relationship between the participant's confidence and group size; crit structure; and the amount of autonomy given in the crit.

The broad themes that have emerged from analysing our data are:

Pedagogy, structure and behaviour:

- learning models used (crit techniques and formats);
- the facilitator as expert and rule maker;
- the facilitator as lead interrogator;
- behaviours and beliefs that have been shaped by the institution such as session structure.

At the start of each session, the participants were asked if they would prefer the researcher solely to observe the session, or to observe and participate. As a result, the data have been collected using a combination of these two approaches.

Ella McCartney (EM) methodology:

Working as a fine art lecturer I frequently lead crit sessions with undergraduate art students. I also have personal experience of taking part in crit sessions as an undergraduate and postgraduate art student.

My approach in this study was to observe sessions (outside of my workplace), with a shift in focus away from the artwork being discussed and directly onto the conversation and behaviours within the group. I attempted to estrange myself from the situation in order to reflect on how the crit session operates (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Silverman, 2013).

Fiona Lake (FL): The analysis of discourse is concerned with the study of how language is used in the real world to communicate (Cameron, 2001; Gee, 2014; Tannen et al., 2015). This approach is applied here to the genre of the art crit, with its unspoken 'rules' of engagement. The close textual analysis of language can allow patterns and themes to emerge. Of course, meaning is also communicated when there are breakdowns in the orderliness of discussion, for instance when there is resistance to the (pre) established order, and expectations shift. The selections from recorded crit sessions included in this study follow transcription guidelines, using the orthographic method to indicate turn taking, intonation and pauses (Wray and Bloomer, 2006). The symbols can be found in Appendix 2. Interview quotes are in bold.

This collaborative approach gains insights from an artist practitioner and from discourse analysis to acknowledge the dependence on the verbal within the fine art crit.

## Research Findings

The quantitative data have been collected with a written questionnaire <sup>2</sup> and indicate the following:

- Group-sizes directly impact the learner's sense of confidence in a crit. Our data show that group size is the most significant factor in relation to what makes learners feel most at ease;
- Almost all participants prefer to work in group-sizes of 10 or fewer;
- Our data show that the majority of learners feel more confident when a tutor or facilitator is present, in comparison with a purely peer-led session. Almost all of the participants have stated that they prefer to have a tutor or facilitator present;
- When asked about which learning model they prefer, 95.45% of participants selected the model that their institution uses. The model that we observed being used the most was for the crit group to respond to the artwork before the (artist) presenter speaks;
- More learners find speaking with a tutor about their work after the crit more useful than speaking with a tutor before the crit;
- Knowing what to expect before the session starts is valued more than knowing the other participants;
- The data collected in the questionnaire and interviews suggest that confidence levels are not increased if the group members already know each other. To paraphrase, learners value getting feedback from people who are not already familiar with their work.

## What Are the 'Rules' of a Crit?

The 'rules' of the crit can loosely be described as the 'crit model' or 'structure' and will determine the running order of the discussion, for example the group might respond to the work before the artist-presenter speaks. In most cases, the 'rules' have been implemented

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2 The paper questionnaire included 9 questions with multiple choice answers and sections for additional comments. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather feedback directly from individual learners at the end of their crit session. Learners numbered statements in relation to each question, for example 'Please rank the following according to what would make you feel most at ease when participating in group-learning discussions'. In addition to the questionnaire, we conducted individual and group interviews. We have gathered data using a number of different approaches both quantitative and qualitative, which has generated individual comments for us to analyse but also helps us identify patterns across the entire study.

by the institution (Lee, 2017) and most crit sessions within the department will adopt a similar model. We also observed how the models imposed by the institution were reinforced verbally during the crit by the facilitator, and in some instances by the learner. Macdonald (2017) notes that it can also be the case that '[f]aculty fail to commit to words a clear rubric of the format and purpose of a crit.' (2017: 197).

There can be difficulties if there is little structure or forethought, as one participant group acknowledges:

Participant C: do you remember when we went to [place]↓  
 Participant D: yeah that wa::s  
 Participant C: and you and [participant] had crits(.)  
                   and like we didn't really feel like we got  
                   =anything done cos  
 Participant E: =that was a mess  
 Participant D: =yeah  
 Participant C: what was the matter  
 Participant D: we weren't sure what you wanted to(..)know  
                   about it so we were all just sitting and  
                   watching your lovely films [laughs]

This small group co-construct the short narrative (Cameron, 2001) of the crit that was a 'mess', ending nevertheless with the positive evaluation, 'lovely films'. Even a communicatively co-operative group of peers can fail to get across the 'point' of a crit when there has been no prior negotiation of a session shape.

### What Is Learnt in a Crit?

Having a group of individuals present for the crit discussion has the potential, ideally, to produce various different perspectives on the artwork presented. As Macdonald (2017: 198-199), argues, however:

[m]eaning shouldn't be excavated by one person alone (i.e. teacher as authority figure) but rather take place at the time of the critique so all the requisite aspects of duration, location, and group dynamic, get included - in other words the 'site of the critique.'

There are demands put on the learner including: to present artworks to an audience; and to share their reflections about each other's work. There is an expectation that the learner can develop and perform a vocabulary in relation to their own (visual) artwork and the work of the other individuals in the group. However, not all learners

will have the skills required to meet these demands. For many, the crit session can be an anxious and stressful experience. This echoes a study conducted by Blair (2007:85) where the pressure of presenting was a recurring complaint from students:

[w]ithout exception, every student interviewed commented on how difficult they found the experience of standing in front of a large group and presenting work.

One participant in our study commented:

**'It can feel quite brutal'**

Vulnerability, we argue, is also demonstrated in this extract from a crit:

Presenter G: I was (.) I also wondered e::er  
(3 second silence) now it's a  
photo that I could print that  
then could be as a (...) text but  
that is not necessary that is  
something ↑else or do I need  
↓video (..)

Facilitator A: to me that's ↓not as ↓interesting (.)

Presenter G: ↓yeah

Stud peer B: and (.) to ↓me that's a little  
too ↑obvious

Facilitator A: it's ↓not a criticism but it was  
quite disjointed (. . .)

Presenter G: =dis

Facilitator A: =disjointed you know

The facilitator appears to close down the presenter here, with quite a brusque comment: 'to me that's ↓not as ↓interesting', emphasised by the repetition of 'disjointed'. The qualifying phrases, 'to ↓me' and 'it's not a ↓criticism but' announce that the Facilitator's negative evaluations are subjective. These softening phrases, however, may be read in the context of the facilitator's positioning as 'expert' in other responses during the crit. The facilitator has most of the turns and talking time throughout this session, and is the only one in the group who refers to the work of other artists from the canon. One has to feel sympathy for the presenting participant, arguably, when one of the peer

group immediately supports the facilitator with their critique of the presenter's work, albeit softened: 'that's a little too ↑obvious'.

The master and apprentice dynamic has perhaps persisted throughout the history of art school education (Swann, 1986; Flynn, 2005), although there was evidence in our data of the learner's experience being responded to with sensitivity too:

Presenter 1: I er (...) yeah I've been looking quite much quite (...) at masculinity↑ and erm but also er (4 second pause) in a way (...)it is for (indistinct) but then I looked for more erm kind of personal interest but not personal but to which can I relate myself through empathy (.) a::and er (...)and what I mean (.) not to say too much now about myself because I also don't know now (...)I wonder about ↑this er

Facilitator(F): mmm

Presenter 1: since this is the beginning and how much does it lack of (...)↑content and er to extent is it generic in the =sense

Facilitator(F): =mmmmmm

Presenter 1: of missing yeah the content or like a situation (.) or a erm reference not as reference like erm (...) a psychological dimension or something and er

The presenting participant (Presenter 1) appears to struggle to express himself here, as evidenced by the hesitations 'er' and pauses (...). This is even referred to with a meta comment by the presenting participant: 'what I mean (.) not to say too much now'. This form of hedging can be read as defensive (Cameron, 2001). It is noted that the group and facilitator allow this presenter a relatively long turn here, except for the short interruption to demonstrate understanding: 'mmm'. There is, perhaps, sensitivity to the evident difficulty of self-expression, as well as the real doubt expressed about the artwork on show. The presenter is vulnerable. As hooks (1994: 39) suggests:

[i]t is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or a lack of student engagement.

Some students remained silent throughout the crit session. In every crit session, we observed that at least one learner was absent from their own crit. Not all of these absences were due to learners wanting to avoid the session, however from experience of working in higher education, many of the cohort feel unable to attend sessions due to the level of stress prior to the crit session. In many cases throughout this study the 'rules' of the session were not open for discussion. There is perhaps an assumption that learners are already aware of what is expected of them and in agreement about the structure or model that will be used. Two of the institutions in our study had provided their learners with a written guide or briefing about crit sessions at the beginning of the term. However, we found in interviews that from the learner's perspective the 'rules' of the crit are learnt through direct experience:

***'you learn just through practice.'***

***'at the start we had a year meeting when they encouraged us to speak our mind and that the worst thing you can do is not say anything. You kind of get little bursts of input about opening up but it is just a learn by doing sort of thing.'***

Lee (2017: 146) suggests that:

'Crits' and workshops, the staples of fine arts and writing programs, are part of larger sociopolitical arenas that regulate whose experiences are made legible and illegible.

The questions in this study are therefore framed to gain a better understanding of how confidence levels are affected in relation to group size, information provided, crit models used, and the level of autonomy given to the group. As Lee (2017:149) argues:

[w]e need to draw attention to what is left out of dominant pedagogical frames so that we can engage with power, privilege, and agency in all of its elusive and complicit forms.

Can absence or silence be re-evaluated as forms of resistance to the dominant frame? An extract from a crit session brings this question to mind:

This crit was opened and initiated by the facilitator with a markedly long turn:

Facilitator: so when you introduce this do think about is there anything (.) obviously giving us a little bit of context that you think will would be helpful for us to know about the work (.) do think about what I said (..) what am I hoping what am I trying to work out for myself with this project and so what can I put in our minds that we might then be able to help you with in terms of our feedback (..) in terms of what you're trying to figure out as well as (.) erm (.) you know what you think the work is↓ (3 seconds) or you don't need to say that much in the case of if you don't want to say =that much

Presenter 4: = ye::e

Facilitator: to let us look then that's fine (.) you know it's your time (.)

Peer learner: I'm just thinking about why is that pink↑

Presenter 4: so I prefer not to say anything before I show (..) ok↑

Facilitator: ok↓ [whispered]

Here the presenting learner (PP4) resists both the guidance outlined and emphasised by the facilitator and the short questioning commentary from a peer. This presenting learner continues to be silent for almost seven minutes under some pressure until she says:

PP4: I don't want to tell

It could be said that this resistance forms part of the performance of this crit.

We have placed an emphasis on the perspective of the learner in this study with an aim of finding practical aspects of the session that can be adapted by the facilitator and even the learners themselves. A minimum of 12.5% of the cohort did not attend their own crit session throughout this study. There are many complex and varied

reasons as to why learners avoid taking part, too many to attempt to outline here. Feeling unsure about the situation can lead to reduced participation or avoidance.

Our data from interviews support this:

**'the toughest one was when we had a crit in a gallery and there were around 20 students whose work we had to discuss, and it was just too much. You skim the surface and there's about 70% of the group that don't speak, because it is such a big group and it's harder to speak out in front of more people and it's just dominant people that talk the whole time, and people drop out. It's better to have a smaller group where everyone is invested in it'.**

**'if it was a big crit and there was loads of people then I would rather talk to someone about it beforehand, but if it was a smaller one and it was kind of relaxed, non- judgemental setting, then it's quite nice not to have that because you don't want to talk about it again and again. You can just hear what people think about it for the first time in the crit'.**

There was also evidence from interviews of important ways of tackling pre-crit nerves, as these participants suggest:

**'I used to get very anxious. The way the (visiting practitioner) did it when we had a chat and seemed so warm and open and that really set the tone. When we introduced everyone, the (visiting practitioner) was very positive and very down to earth, and also said this should be a constructive thing and that set the tone for the day.'**

**'it was quite a small group as well which lowers anxiety.'**

**'timings really affect the mood of the group, usually you are really exhausted and drained by the end of it and you have been traipsing around the studios but it didn't feel like that today because it was shorter and at the start of term as well.'**

To summarise, there is a struggle to verbalise; and some learners show forms of resistance such as silence and absence. What may be being learnt is how to perform a crit.

### Responsibility and the Learner

In many of the sessions we observed learners were not clearly informed about what the crit would entail and what is expected of them. We observed very few sessions that included an open discussion among the group about what would take place in the session or how it could be shaped. Our data show that learners value knowing what to expect in the session more highly than knowing the others in the group. Therefore, exploring the purpose of the crit with the group, from the perspective of the learner, can increase confidence levels and a willingness to take part.

Enabling the group to take part in the formulation of the 'rules' appeared to build confidence in the group and increase participation, but this structure must be approached with caution. The following transcript perhaps demonstrates how power and authority can be implicitly debated during a crit in which the introduction was made by the presenting participant (PP3):

PP3: erm this is my space erm (..) people  
wanna like (.) shall we just look  
Facilitator: yeah yeah  
PP3: best just to look and I can talk maybe  
  
Facilitator: yeah  
PP3: okay

It may be important that the crit took place in the presenting participant's studio. Perhaps the status of being host supplied the confidence and the legitimacy to take the initiative. It is notable that the suggestions are modal ('shall we', 'I can talk') and thus open to challenge, and a sense of inclusive group work is communicated by the use of the plural 'we', contrasting with the earlier use of the singular 'my space'. It is the facilitator and not a peer, however, who, perhaps significantly, signals assent for this way of organising the crit: 'yeah yeah'. This perhaps re-establishes the authority of the facilitator. In the event, the facilitator appears to ignore the presenting participant's suggestion for the conduct of the crit by almost immediately asking a series of questions about the work. The facilitator, arguably, also attempts to wrest power from the presenter / host with a suggestion to the whole group, framed as a question:

F: do (.) people want a closer look (..)

This is followed by guidance aimed at the presenter:

Facilitator: maybe you should ask us if there are any  
↑ questions that you have  
PP3: = erm  
Facilitator: = that we could help =with  
PP3: =yeah

The presenter attempts to re-establish herself with a proposition re-orienting the group to the artwork:

PP3: yeah so maybe we could start with this  
one so this one is finished

Perhaps unusually, the facilitator's response is laughter, which is difficult to interpret.

For peer learning to function there is a shared responsibility that everyone in the room must be enabled to take (Boud et al., 2001; Cooper, 2002). However, as this transcript shows, when the student-presenter takes the initiative, the facilitator can undermine the peer learning process by reinstating their own position of power.

### **The Facilitator as Expert and Rule Maker; Student Involvement**

Our data show, nevertheless, that learners place a significant value on the role of the facilitator; the majority of learners feel more confident when a tutor or facilitator is present in comparison to a purely peer-led session.

The data we collected through interviews with participants indicate that the role of the facilitator can provide reassurance that the conversation may be kept relevant to the work, remain constructive and prevent comments from peers from getting personal:

**'if someone really starts going at your work, and being mean for no reason, the tutors are there, authority figures you know? They will probably be like – hold on a bit, slow down. They structure the sessions.'**

In contrast, the behaviour of the tutors also received criticism from participants who felt the facilitator could dominate:

**'sometimes they (tutors) direct the conversation too much' and 'sometimes they get into it and are just working off each other.'**

Most of the sessions we observed had been pre-arranged by staff as part of the core timetable. In most cases, the selection of learners in each crit session had been put together according to their tutor group. In contrast to this, one session we observed included learners who had signed up for the group crit because of a shared interest in the research area of the visiting practitioner. The group members were not familiar with each other's work prior to the session. This method of grouping has a number of advantages because it brings together learners from a range of pathways and tutor groups. Each learner was invested in the session because they felt the discussion would be specifically relevant to their own practice and interests. As a result, the group showed more motivation to participate in the session compared to groups who had been allocated a session. We observed that all of the participants contributed to the discussion throughout the five-hour crit session.

***'I was really excited to speak to (the visiting practitioner). I picked her from a long list and she might be the only one I get to speak to. That's the same for everyone, they wanted to be there whereas for example in other crits you don't have a choice and it was very long – all day.'***

The role of the facilitator is important to the participants in this study. However, when learners have choice their participation increases.

### **Behaviours and Beliefs That Have Been Shaped by the Institution**

Each 'crit' session was structured differently. We observed one or a combination of the following models being used: the learner showing their work does not introduce their work before the group discusses it; or the learner showing their work listens to the group discussion but does not speak throughout the session; alternatively, the learner showing work speaks after the group has discussed their work.

When asked which crit model they preferred, 95.45% of learners from a Higher Education Institution<sup>3</sup> selected the model that their institution uses. We draw from this that learners are unlikely to adapt the session in a direction they think would suit their work or generate the feedback they need at a specific point in their learning. The group opt for the model they are familiar with. Many of the participants in our study had only experienced one model and only a small percentage had experience of more than two different crit models. Not having a

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<sup>3</sup> This statistic does not include participants from the peer led group because we did not observe a defined institutional model that could be used as a comparison.

repertoire of different approaches to select from may therefore impact their willingness to adapt the structure of the session.

### **Informal Peer Learning**

Peer learning does not only take place in formal learning sessions (Boud, 2001:1). For example, in the majority of institutions where our observations took place, the learners were required to work together to install their artworks alongside each other in preparation for the crit. This activity is an example of peer learning that did not usually involve staff but provided an opportunity for participants to share ideas and gain informal feedback from each other. One participant commented:

***'I speak about it (the crit) with my own circle of friends, there is never any formal after-session.'***

The formality of showing and discussing their work as a group encouraged students to conduct their own informal and impromptu peer learning sessions before and after the crit session. Another comment from a participant suggests that discussing the experience of the crit afterwards could be useful:

***'I want to know more about what it was about and what it actually means, (after the session).'***

This suggests that the formalized conversation that takes place within the parameters of the crit need to be de-coded through a different use of language and context. The informal activities that stem from the crit session are an important aspect of peer learning that was observed but will not be extended further in this paper. It remains a potentially fruitful site for further discursive research.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The two main questions that this study aimed to answer were 'what makes a learner most likely to participate in the crit discussion' and 'how can the teaching staff improve a crit session'.

We believe it is important to continuously explore and reflect on our behaviours within learning contexts (both learners and facilitators) in order to better understand the processes and activities that take place, to question our role <sup>4</sup> within this and find a range of practical solutions that some groups may find beneficial. These principles

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4 EM: This study enabled me to reflect on the behaviours that I have developed and the impact of the institutions where I have developed them.

inform our approach to the data we collected in this study and include aspects of ethnomethodology. Our approach has been to prioritise the voice of the learner in an attempt to understand the experience of those taking part in the sessions. We also acknowledge that what a learner prefers or finds less challenging may not be the kind of learning that is transformative.

Findings from this study can be applied beyond the discipline of Art and Design. Confronting hidden power dynamics within any learning context, as performed through language for example, has the potential to engage learners. Naturalised behaviours (also manifested within the institution) can be internalised and performed by both facilitator and learner, therefore it is the responsibility of the group to try to recognise, acknowledge and interrogate this. We argue that this may enable the learner to take more ownership of the learning process. For example, at the start of a crit session the group members may benefit from discussing their assumed roles and responsibilities. Time to reflect on the 'unsaid' rules and expectations may also act as a motivator to draw closer to a community model of learning (Macdonald, 2017).

In summary, crit sessions place a greater responsibility on learners than purely tutor led sessions. There is an expectation for learners to generate comments and feedback *in situ* that will contribute to each other's learning. Peer learning therefore places pressure on the learner. This study illuminates the crucial importance of language use in the crit as a potential site for a peer learning community. The negotiation of power is performed through the use of language and brings awareness of the struggle to verbalise in the crit context.

This study identifies two practical aspects that can be implemented that can increase confidence in the learner:

Firstly, the data clearly indicate that confidence is increased when group sizes are restricted to 10 learners or fewer and will likely lead to more participation by all members of the group. Secondly, provide the group with an introduction about what to expect in the session and what is expected of them.

The crit format inevitably suits some learners more than others. The majority of the groups opt to use the 'model' most frequently used by their institution. This provides a consistent framework that may help learners know what is expected of them. However, this risks pacifying learners and disengaging them from the process. Providing

learners with a wider set of approaches that can be utilised in the sessions may enable a greater sense of autonomy and increase motivation. Furthermore, involving learners in the process of defining 'the rules' for the session may make the experience more relevant. Most importantly, learners need to be supported throughout the (ongoing) process of exchanging knowledge.

- Learners may feel more prepared when session structure remains fairly consistent;
- Facilitators can engage the group with an introduction to the session, incorporating learners' intentions and expectations of the crit;
- Learners benefit from having a set time to reflect on the discussion after the session. A session after the crit can help 'decode' what was said and address aspects of the discussion that may have been misinterpreted. This could be peer led or facilitated;
- Crit sessions should be nuanced to benefit individual groups and their current objectives at different stages of their learning, for example establishing structures of conversation in year 1 or focusing on presentation and installation in year 3;
- Opting in to a crit session generates a different motivation and focus in the discussion. Additional 'sign up' crit sessions offered to learners could be specific to areas of research. Learners may also find common areas of interest by attending these sessions that can lead to further informal peer learning.

#### **Future Development of the Research**

- Broaden the research to include a wider pool of participants, taking into consideration factors such as gender, class and ethnicity which could be explored more in relation to the power dynamics;
- Further investigate peer learning internationally.

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## Appendix 1

Data collected from individual questionnaire results:

*What makes you feel most at ease when participating in group learning discussions?*

(Most important factor, first preference)

Working in groups with less than 15 people: 34%

Speaking about my work individually with a tutor or a person outside of the group **after** the session: 29%

Speaking about my work individually with a tutor or a person outside of the group **before** the session: 21 %

The discussion group only includes students or peers (no tutors or staff are present): 17%

*What makes you feel most confident when presenting work in a group discussion?*

A tutor or someone outside of the group being present: 23%

The group discussing my work before I speak: 23%

Knowing what to expect before session starts: 22%

Knowing the other students: 17%

Introduce the work before the discussion: 15%

## **Appendix 2 Transcription symbols**

Adapted from Wray & Bloomer (2006):

Turn taking is indicated by the (anonymised) initial of the speaker, to the left of the speech

↓ falling tone

↑ rising tone

(...) short pause

(3 seconds) a longer, timed pause

:: a word has been stretched out

= overlapping turns of speech