The review process

Dr Rachel Sara, University of Plymouth
Email: rachel.sara@plymouth.ac.uk
Dr Rosie Parnell, University of Sheffield
Email: r.parnell@sheffield.ac.uk

The Review: Description

Reviews (also known as crits and juries) are a key part of the architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning design studio, typically held as the culmination of a design studio project (although there may also be a number of interim reviews during the course of the project). Students present their work visually and/or verbally to a panel that might include tutors, visiting critics and fellow students, in order to receive feedback. Through this dialogue, a useful learning opportunity is created for the whole group, and in particular, students are expected to learn valuable lessons that can be taken through to their future work. In this way, reviews provide the opportunity for reflection on the project; the processes that the student used and the finished product. In addition, tutors often use these events as an opportunity to summatively assess (mark) students’ work.

At its best, the model provides a range of learning opportunities, including:

- opportunity for students and tutors to evaluate individuals’ work in relation to the rest of the studio, to consider individuals’ and the group’s rate of progress and evaluate the success of the studio programme;
- students can gain feedback on their work and processes;
- students have an opportunity to express their individual interpretations of the project;
- students can practise and build confidence in presenting to an audience, listening to presentations and developing questions – all useful professional skills;
- ideas can be tested in a safe environment that avoids the repercussions of the real world;
- students can develop their critical awareness;
- students can potentially be exposed to a wide range of viewpoints;
- it provides an environment where everyone in the group should have something to contribute but also something to learn;
- it can provide ‘closure’ to the project and a celebration of all the work that has gone into it.
Critique

Despite the crucial role that reviews play in the studio-learning model, the review (as described) also has qualities which are likely to limit learning. The nature of the review – as the culmination of the project – means that students will typically be getting by on limited sleep and thus will be limited in their engagement with the process (both as presenters and as listeners) as well as being in an emotionally weak position. The typical scenario also sees students working on the development of the project to the expense of their presentations of the project, consequently the presentations themselves are often hard to follow and understand. This, coupled with a limited time frame, has the effect of limiting the useful feedback that students hope to receive.

The physical arrangement of the set-up, with students often presenting at the front of rows of critics, can often mean that students feel that their work is on trial (as is implied by the term jury), and, since they are perceived as being there to defend their work, that they themselves are also being assessed. This model can see critics as attackers and students as defenders – establishing an adversarial relationship between presenter and listener, which is potentially repeated in the professionals’ dealings with non-architects (Boyer & Mitgang, 1996). It is a framework that brings out the worst in both parties, where a defensive attitude tends to lead to further attack, which in turn leads to a deeper retreat into defence. This is exacerbated by the typically competitive nature of the studio model. It is unsurprising that the established review model is not as successful at developing communication skills in students as tutors would like to think (Wilkin, 2000).

The relationship between presenter and listener is made more problematic by the unequal relations of power between the two. This is due to the unequal spatial arrangements, the number of listeners in relation to presenters and, also of course, the positions of authority that tutors and visiting critics have in relation to the students (not least because they tend to hold the power of assessment). This asymmetrical power relationship inhibits dialogue, (Willenbrock, 1991), meaning that limited numbers of students (both presenting and listening) truly contribute, ‘and if there’s no dialogue, there’s no learning’ (Dutton 1991, p94).

The shared discipline of the participants in the review can also restrict the possibilities for learning and idea development. Since the tutors, visiting critics and even students are already (to a greater or lesser degree) inculcated into the profession, the review can be seen to sanction the consumption of ‘hegemonic knowledge’ (Dutton, 1991, p165). This leads to the use of jargon (Cuff, 1991), which limits communication to those outside the profession and supports a socialisation of students, whereby they learn to like what their fellow professionals like, again further separating them from ‘lay’ people and potentially limiting the possibilities for creative cross-pollination (Wilson, 1996).

It is easy to think that these problems never occur in your reviews, but the authors’ experiences suggest otherwise. Despite being involved in rethinking many reviews and working hard at rebalancing the power relations, introducing others, promoting dialogue and making the experience a more positive one, we have still found in student feedback that elements of the experience were found to be negative by many students. It is this kind of feedback which forces us to go back, re-think, and challenge our assumptions: planning and implementing reviews needs to become a creative, flexible and reflexive undertaking.

Illustrations by Mark Parsons

continued over
Teaching and Learning Context

Although the review process as described is particular to the design professions, we need to be aware that it has a wider theoretical educational context. It can be useful to explore this context to inform and critique our practices and to be aware that we are not working in isolation. The following section, therefore, aims to suggest some of the theories that may have relevance to the review process and summarise the issues that they raise. The intention is to provide inspiration for further reading as opposed to providing a comprehensive summary.

The review process can be seen to be supportive of a constructivist view of knowledge in which knowledge is not passively accumulated, but, rather, is constructed as the result of active cognition (in this case through discourse) by the individual. Knowledge itself is seen as individual and contested as opposed to universal and fixed. Constructivists see learning as a self-directed process that affects the whole personality of the learner. As described by Fosnot:

‘Learning from this perspective is viewed as a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning-making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols, and further negotiating such meaning through cooperative social activity, discourse, and debate.’ (Fosnot, 1996).

Thus constructivist pedagogies suggest a learner-orientated review process, where the students themselves are seen as active, independent and responsible for their own learning. This learning happens by interacting with and transforming information in order to assimilate it with previous understanding, so as to create individual, subjective knowledge. The tutor’s role is, correspondingly, to enable this kind of learning, in particular in helping students to relate new knowledge and experience to their existing understanding. Therefore, the review environment needs to be flexible, highly exploratory and interactive. Engaging students as both presenters and reviewers is key, alongside creating an environment where tutors and students work cooperatively. How the latter might be achieved, plus the issues inherent, are particularly well explored by problem based learning (PBL) (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Boud (1985); Boud & Feletti (1991), discussion as a way of teaching (Brookfield & Preskill (1999), reflective practice (Schon, 1983, 1985, 1987; Hayward, 1992) and critical pedagogy (Dutton, 1991; Friere, 1970). Much of the rethinking of the review explored in this guide is inspired and justified by these theories.

In particular, they expose the need for the review event to be a democratic and collaborative experience that embraces and exposes a range of viewpoints. These are drawn upon to help students develop their critical skills, in relation to their work, the work of their colleagues, and the structures of power inherent in their relationships, the school and academy, society and the profession. The success of the process depends on the balancing of interpersonal relationships – thus an approach that works for one set of participants may not work for another (Austerlitz et al, 2002).
Good Practice: A variety of approaches

The next section provides a framework for good-practice in implementing reviews, a range of alternative formats and their potential benefits.

Good Practice Framework

- Establish a school/departmental protocol for the running of reviews, potentially including differing priorities at the different stages of education.
- For each individual review, establish the purpose and priority of the review (assessment, feedback, practising presentation skills, developing critical skills, viewing other students’ work) in relation to the project.
- Fix a submission date in advance of the actual review (to allow students to prepare and sleep!)
- Consider giving workshops to prepare for the review, such as preparing for presentations, developing listening skills, dealing with difficult questions, being open to new ideas etc.
- Consider separating marking from the review process, but, where the two are combined, ensure that all tutors are using the same marking criteria.
- Brief students (and reviewer/s) before the event as to the purpose of the review and who they will be presenting to.
- Rethink the physical arrangement of the event in order to encourage equal dialogue.
- Encourage an open, democratic discourse by bearing in mind the asymmetrical relationships of power between participants and take action to diminish these.
- Allow and encourage a range of viewpoints – potentially inviting others from outside the profession and academia to contribute to facilitate this.
- Consider the sizes of groups so that there are enough people to provide cross-pollination and variety but not so many that open discourse is stifled.
- Ensure that students have a record of the discussions surrounding their work (see review sheet at the end of this document).
- Promote listening (for understanding) as much as speaking.
- Allow time to study the work and prepare questions/comments between the presentation of work and the discussion of work.
- Make students feel safe to contribute and valued in their contribution.
- Find a balance between challenge and support:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HIGH SUPPORT</th>
<th>NO LEARNING</th>
<th>LOW SUPPORT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEARNING</td>
<td></td>
<td>Effort</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>concentrated on support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>criticism in a supportive environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criticism seen as attack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No energy in the occasion</td>
<td></td>
<td>NO LEARNING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Position the tutors as facilitators and more experienced contributors (as opposed to sole contributors).
- Allow a free discussion, but remind the group if they are stuck on one theme, or have missed important issues.
- Compromise between equality and flexibility in timing the reviews. Although the obvious answer is to give students strictly the same amount of time, occasionally it is useful to spend more time on a particularly interesting approach. The imbalance can often be avoided by giving students equal time to present, followed by a discussion of more than one student’s work and make comparisons between them.
- Provide time for students to reflect on the review in order to turn their experiences into learning. This might be in a structured format, where the whole project is reflected upon.
Typical Outline for a Review

A typical review outline might then involve a group of around 8 students, 1 tutor and 1 visiting critic (who might be a lay-person or from a different discipline, relevant to the project). The work will have been submitted a day before and the purpose and format of the review explained to those taking part. About 4 students present in sequence and are then given time to go and get a coffee, while the remaining students and tutors study the work without the presenters. The students are arranged into two pairs for the feedback and are asked to explore certain issues that were made explicit in the initial project brief, with a focus on constructive criticism - i.e. criticism that is useful. One student in the group is asked to record the discussion and comments made in the review for each presenter on a feedback sheet. The presenters are invited back into the room. Tutors invite the student reviewers’ comments and questions and work to encourage an open discussion whilst highlighting issues that have not been discussed. Tutors suggest additional work/changes that might be undertaken and the work might all be displayed with those changes at a later date, allowing the tutors an opportunity to mark the work. At the end of each session, tutors will ask the students to reflect on the review experience and the project as a whole and respond to key questions such as, what did they learn? what would they do differently? as suggested in the review feedback sheet at the end of this document.

Alternative Formats

In order to work toward achieving good-practice, it is necessary to also explore a range of alternative review formats. It should be noted that it is not possible to achieve all of the potential purposes of the review successfully in one event. It is much more successful if one issue - such as developing communications or critical skills - is focused on in each review. Once the principal purpose of the review has been established, it can lead to the development of a review format that is appropriate. The following section describes a range of approaches, which, of course, can be modified and expanded. This is only the beginning and the list should be treated as a source of inspiration for further development. A suggested key focus is summarised at the end of each review type.

■ Student-led
These are reviews where tutors are either not present, or are required to remain silent during the event. This approach can follow a range of formats but probably works best when students are given a clear structure to work within. These reviews clearly break down the power structures inherent in reviews and give students the confidence to get more involved. Feedback suggests that student-led reviews are found to be a powerful learning experience and that students feel that they learn more than in more traditional reviews. They may be particularly useful in the context of higher numbers of students and limited teaching time, as a number of reviews can be going on simultaneously with one tutor drifting between them.

Key focus: student involvement, critical skills, group learning

■ Reverse reviews
Reverse reviews turn the established process on its head by inviting local firms to present a project in progress to students and others in an open-house event. These reviews again clearly empower students and give them a chance to develop their critical skills without the added pressure of presenting their own work. Students and professionals both get the opportunity to review local projects and to discuss the differences between academic and practice-based work. This approach can also be undertaken within the school, where students from different years might be invited to present their work.

Key focus: student involvement, critical skills, exposure to different viewpoints

■ Present another person’s work
In an attempt to separate the skills of presenting from those of designing, students can be asked to present a fellow student’s work in the review. This diminishes the feeling of the review being a personal attack or defence and may mean that students are more able to become involved in the discussion. Another twist might be for the tutor to present the students’ work, to be reviewed by the students themselves. This clearly attempts a shift of power in the review format.

Key focus: presentation/communication skills, critical skills, student involvement

■ Role-play
Using role-play reviews can enable students to see the work from a different perspective. Members of the
Introduce clients and users
This is perhaps the most obvious way of introducing alternative viewpoints into the review setting and is something that is frequently requested by students. It is a common complaint that tutors try introducing lay-people into the studio but that their views are seen to be so ‘awful’ that they aren’t invited back. This perspective is endemic of a self-referential critique in which only the views of the profession are felt to be acceptable and is perhaps the hardest habit of all to break, as it is feared that the quality of the work will sink to that of populism.

Key focus: communication skills, presenting to a range of professionals/lay audience, exposure to different perspectives

Exhibition
An exhibition review can be used to separate the skill of verbally presenting the work to that of visually presenting. In this format each student/group of student submits a body of work that must be able to speak for itself. This is then presented in a gallery format. It means that the event can become an open one where members of the public, students, tutors and others are able to view the work and talk informally about both individual pieces and the relationship to the whole body of work. More formal feedback can be recorded by posting feedback sheets beneath each of the exhibits and assigning a couple of students to give feedback to each exhibit. Tutors and others can also add their feedback. If the work is to be marked at this event, then the exhibition needs to stay up for long enough for the marking to be undertaken. This format has the advantage of really freeing up the discussion, whilst also enabling more structured written feedback. It is particularly good for allowing larger groups of students to see lots of different work, although it can become quite time-consuming.

Key focus: non-verbal presentation skills, student involvement, critical skills

Selective review
The exhibition format can be used to allow a selective review where tutors select key pieces of work from the exhibition to illustrate certain points common to much of the work. This is used to initiate a group discussion and means that each individual does not feel so scrutinised, but that the important learning threads in the work can be exposed. Again, this may be useful for larger groups of students; however, it can mean that some individuals do not feel that they gain any feedback relevant to them.

Key focus: comparative analysis

Meeting agenda review
This review uses the format of an agenda-led meeting to allow students to lead the discussion to cover the points and issues that they are interested in/need to learn from and works better in small groups of up to about 10 students. Each student presents their key ideas in 2-3 minutes. They then state the issues that they want to discuss. The tutor acts as chair and arranges an order and priority to the issues, making sure that each student’s agenda has been discussed.

Key focus: student-led, learning focused

Video review
Videoing presentations enables individuals to see and evaluate their own skills. The videoing might take place at a review, allowing a further evaluation session later which focuses on presentation skills. Alternatively, each individual can make their presentation to a video camera prior to the review and the recordings can then be used as the basis for the main event.

Key focus: presentation and communication skills

Alternative media
Consider prioritising certain media for presentations, perhaps exploring some that are rarely used. Presenting using only models, a brochure format, in the form of a lecture or via video-conferencing etc. can simulate different kinds of presentations in practice and also has an impact on the appropriate numbers involved and the relationship between presenter and reviewer.

Key focus: preparing appropriate presentations, communication skills
**CHECKLIST**

Questions to ask before deciding upon the review format:

- Who is involved and how many are involved?
- What is the principal purpose of the review – what do you want students to get out of it?
- Where can it be?
- What would be appropriate to the project?
- When is the work to be submitted?
- How can you promote student feedback and participation?
- How can you promote reflection?
- Is it possible to separate marking from the event?
- How should the room be set up?
- How should students and other reviewers be briefed?
- How long will each presenter have and how much time is there for discussion?
- What record will students have of the event? (a review sheet template is provided at the end of this document – see Appendix 1).

---

**The Authors**

Both Rachel Sara and Rosie Parnell have been researching architectural education for the past five years. They were initially involved in the CUDE (Clients and Users in Design Education) project, which led to the co-authoring of ‘The Crit: An Architecture Student’s Handbook’ (Doidge et al, 2000) from which many of the ideas in this guide are developed. They have since written more broadly on architectural education and were individually awarded prizes in the EAAE (European Association of Architectural Educators) competition, Writings in Architectural Education for work which explores rebalancing the culture of the architecture studio (Sara, 2002; Parnell, 2003). Rachel’s doctorate was also in architectural education (Sara, 2004).

---

**Bibliography**


---

Cardiff University
Bute Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3NB
Tel: 029 2087 4600 Fax: 029 2087 4601

Architecture, Landscape, Planning, Housing & Transport: Cardiff University

University of Salford
Bridgewater Building, Greater Manchester M7 1NU
Tel: 0161 295 5944 Fax: 0161 295 5011

Construction, Surveying & Real Estate: University of Salford

Web: www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk Email: cebe@heacademy.ac.uk
APPENDIX 1

Review feedback sheet

Date:
Name of Student:
Project Title:

Observer’s summary of feedback and discussion during the review:

Student’s self-reflection notes after the review:

What went well?
What would you do differently?
What did you learn from your own work?
What did you learn from the other presentations?
What will you take into the next project?

Suggestions for additional work/changes: