Was It Something I Said?

The Art of Giving (and getting) Actionable Critiques

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Let’s Talk!

@emmajanehw
#crit #oscon
Hi, I’m emmajane!

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“in a culture of optimism good honest criticism seems to be dying out”

Tim Brown

The dilemma we face today is that in a culture of optimism good honest criticism seems to be dying out.

http://designthinking.ideo.com/?p=18
Let me set the scene of how I came to love critiques. I’m the daughter of a hacker. But not a computer hacker: a craft hacker. This is a picture of my dad standing in front of a lathe he built. Yes, that’s a tree trunk on the lathe. My dad revolutionized wood turning in the 1960s and 1970s. Pun not actually intended.
This was our living room growing up. The chairs and the table are solid wood and turned on a lathe. These chairs are now in the permanent collection at the Yale University Art Gallery and Minneapolis Institute of Art. Growing up, the design process—and especially the design REVIEW process—was a big part of my life.
Growing up, I learned at that good feedback wasn’t about saying “Oh that’s nice.” In fact I learned at a pretty young age that there were different kinds of feedback. When I wanted positive affirmation, I’d ask my mum what she thought; but when I wanted a review of my work, I’d ask my dad for a critique. Through his feedback, my dad taught me how to give feedback as well.

These are a few of the pieces my father and I have collaborated on. Left: hand bound books (covers by Stephen). more photos at www.stephenhogbin.com
Right: Pink Cymbella (electron microscope photography by Emma)
The **crit** is an exercise in critical thinking.

So **what is a critique?** “Crits”, as they’re known in design school, are group reviews of a work-in-progress. The critique helps students to separate themselves from their work and trains them in the important skill of explaining the reasons behind their solutions. The critique is a basic exercise in critical thinking.

When someone says “critique”, we sometimes hear “critical” and assume that it has to mean something negative. But that’s not the case!

http://www.aiga.org/guide-whatgoeson/

Another aspect of design education is the group critique. “Crits” take place at different stages in a project and provide an opportunity to step back and reflect on the project, to exchange critical or supporting ideas, to clarify intentions, and to develop the ability to discuss or even defend one’s own work—a necessary skill that will later be important with clients. The critique helps students to deal openly with criticism while it trains them in the important verbal skills of explaining the reasons behind their solutions. They must go beyond “I like it” or “That stinks.” Critiques help students to internalize standards of excellence, to develop a shared vocabulary for discussion, to learn to incorporate useful suggestions from others, and to evaluate their own and others' performances. This process helps students to separate work from self and to acquire the maturity and perspective needed in order to benefit from intelligent criticism. The critique is a basic exercise in critical thinking.
We know that code reviews are a good thing. Reviewing code makes us better communicators and better coders. A strong review process makes our software better. For the critique to be a POSITIVE experience though, three elements need to be in place.
1. There must be a **framework**
2. The **reviewer** must be objective
3. The **creator** must separate themselves from their work.

Normally we think of feedback in terms of only the **reviewer’s delivery**. Let’s take a look at some good ways to give feedback, and some “bad” ways to give feedback.
Good Feedback

• Is limited to the scope of the work.
• Is actionable.
• Is specific.
• Is timely.
• Acknowledges the time spent by the coder.
• Is thankful the issue is getting attention.

Apparently Chef sends thank you cards (in the MAIL!) to everyone who lands a patch to core?
Bad Feedback

- Extends the scope ("while you’re there...")
- Has unclear outcomes ("this is ugly")
- Confuses personal preference with objective worth ("I prefer....")
- Is outside of the issue scope ("you’re solving the wrong problem")
- Prolongs discussion ("what if ...")
- Lags ("if I want a review, I have to sleep")
Some projects even have templates for the review process which help us to structure our request-for-review in a useful way.
FOSS projects use templates to structure the feedback process

- LaunchPad - http://lb.cm/tmplt-launchpad
- Drupal - http://lb.cm/tmplt-drupal
- Symfony - http://lb.cm/tmplt-symfony

Using the issue queue: http://drupal.org/node/317
Issue queue etiquette: http://drupal.org/node/1839650
Reporting problems: http://drupal.org/node/314185
Issue templates: http://lb.cm/tmplt-drupal
- Problem/Motivation; Proposed resolution; Remaining tasks

Templates:
LaunchPad – http://lb.cm/tmplt-launchpad
Drupal – http://lb.cm/tmplt-drupal – Problem/Motivation; Proposed resolution; Remaining tasks
Symfony – http://lb.cm/tmplt-symfony
Drupal Core Gates Act as Checklists

- Documentation
- Performance
- Accessibility
- Usability
- Testing

[http://drupal.org/core-gates](http://drupal.org/core-gates)

Drupal extends these templates even further with gates for core issues. These are essentially "checklists" that can be used to evaluate a patch's readiness, by both developers and patch reviewers/core committers.

So if we have these templates in place, and we know how to give good feedback. **So why do things get derailed...why do we have bike shedding?**
A critique reveals information not just about the work, but also about the reviewer.

So if we know how to give actionable feedback; and we have templates in place; why do people still get derailed during the feedback process. Let’s dive deeper into how we bring ourselves to the review process.
The reviewer tells us about themselves.

When we ask for non-expert reviews, we must tell the reviewer how to frame their feedback otherwise we end up with your classic opera review “I’m no expert, but I think opera sucks.”

http://barczablog.com/2013/02/25/pageants_of_powe/

“When a reviewer makes a strong statement I believe there are usually two conversations going on, that are inter-connected. The reviewer is telling us about something. The reviewer is telling us about themselves.”
Thinking Strategies

Creative
- challenge
- envision
- brainstorm
- reframe
- flash of insight
- flow

Analytical
- scan
- structure
- clarify
- tune-in
- empathize
- express

Decision
- crux
- validate
- experience
- conclude
- trust your heart
- values-driven

Generate; Analyze; Decide
There are two types thinking creatively: **Thinking** and **Intuition**. Creative thinking involves “muscling through”. It includes: brainstorm, challenge, reframe, envision. Creative intuition “just happens”. It includes: flow and flash of insight.
The two types of analytical thinking: Understanding **Situations** and Understanding **People**. Analytical thinking (situations) includes: scan situation, structure information and clarify understanding. Compassion thinking includes: tune-in, empathize, express feelings.
Decision thinking breaks into three categories: Critical Thinking, Values-driven thinking (belief-based decisions); and Intuitive thinking (gut-instinct decisions). Critical thinking includes: getting to the crux, conclude, validate the conclusion, rely on experience. Belief-based thinking and Gut-based thinking are single strategy mind-sets.
Take my feedback with a grain of (analytical) salt.

This screen shows you my personal operating style and preferred mindset profile. You can see from the charts that I prefer to gather information. I’m a “yellow” thinker, followed by “red” and then “green” and then “white” (think of the white as my amplifier..I don’t go to ‘eleven’ very often). Within the four dimensions, I am more likely to use creative intuition than creative thinking. (I don’t enjoy muscling into new ideas: but solutions often JUMP out at me.) Given a choice, I’d rather analyze data than people. And finally, you can see I’m more likely to rely on gut-instinct when it comes to decision making. In other words: I spent forever analyzing a situation and then I JUMP to a conclusion. Some people might interpret this as “impulsive”. It’s interesting, isn’t it?
Have you seen these preferences at play?
So if people have personal operating preferences...

What state are we in?
Where do we want to go?
What are the blockers?

- creating a better "ask" that results in the kind of feedback you actually want to receive

Seeking (Family) Feedback: When I wanted affirmation, I’d ask my mom. When I wanted a critique, I’d ask my father. Are asked in a timely manner. (Don’t start writing code until you have buy-in on the direction.)
...how do we switch modes and get everyone working from a common language?

What state are we in?
Where do we want to go?
What are the blockers?
Framing the Question to Generate Actionable Reviews
What do you have.
What do you want.
Frame Your Question

Creative:
challenge
envision
brainstorm
reframe
flash of insight
flow

Analytical:
scan
structure
tune-in
empathize
express

Decision:
crux
validate
experience
conclude
trust your heart
values-driven
Decision Making
Outcomes

Use these when you want:

• Advice and recommendations
• Critical assessments
• Conclusions and decisions
Ideas to Decision

Use It When:

Time is tight and you need to make a decision quickly. Brainstorm new ideas and then make a decision.

How to use this process:
- select the type of outcome (advice, recommendations, decision)
- share information on the problem for one minute.
- brainstorm ideas.
- eliminate ideas or recombine to ensure the best option is selected
Facts to Decision

Use It When
You’ve presented information (e.g. a report) and you want a critique, advice, recommendation, or decision.

Share information; Make decision.
Decide ahead of time what type of “red” you need. e.g. advice, recommendation, decision.
Creative Thinking
Outcomes

Use these when you want:

• Idea generation
• Reframing problems
• Future scenarios
Information to Options

Use It When:

You need fresh input and a broader number of options, alternatives, or ideas on how to solve a problem before you choose which one is the right one.

Describe the situation; reframe + brainstorm.
Determine Crux then Brainstorm Ideas

Use It When:

A team member needs fresh ideas on how to deal with a challenge.
Analytical Thinking

Outcomes

Use these when you want:

• Information and clarification

• Analysis and a plan

• Appreciative understanding
Facts to Understanding

Use It When:

People need to understand the situation better.

Share information; clarify understanding
Possibilities to Structure

Use It When:

You have a complex problem and want to start by looking forward with fresh thinking and end with a plan.

Envision possibilities; scan the situation; conclude; plan and organize.
In Summary

There are three conditions needed for a positive critique experience:

- Framework must be present
- Reviewer must be objective
- Creator must uncouple
Preferences are at play
So make your “ask” clear.

Creative

Analytical

Decision
Provide Good Feedback

- Limit feedback to the scope of the work
- Make it: Actionable, Specific, and Timely
- Acknowledge time and effort
- Give thanks
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Reveal your thinking preferences.

Feedback welcome.

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http://drupalize.me

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