



Using Technology to Improve Student Experience with Critique

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Introduction. Technology has radically changed the way educators can exchange information and interact with students. While higher education teaching systems have adapted to changes in technological innovation, the fashion design studio, organized in traditional Beaux-Arts format, remains constant in its face-to-face, active-learning experience approach (Bender and Vredevoogd, 2006). An emerging teaching format is blended learning, that involves both traditional face-to-face instruction, as well as communication via the Internet. If well-guided, an online environment used in conjunction with an existing studio class provides an alternative medium for improving communication, supporting creative collaboration and open interaction (Craig and Zimring, 2000). Critique is a central feature of fashion design education, serving as both a structural mechanism to provide individual feedback, and as a culminating assessment event. Research findings reveal that there are several inhibitors to the effective function of the design critique, one of them being the dissonance between the communication modes of the critique, as a formal evaluation event, versus the informality of the design process (Gray, 2013; Ma, 2008). It was also acknowledged that, creating a conducive environment for informal peer critique, where iterations and mistakes are acceptable, is vital in encouraging learners to explore and take risks without real-world risk, improving student experience with critique overall (Gray, 2013).

Purpose. Two fashion design instructors used online web-based platforms as tools to promote informal peer critique, engaging students in communication outside of the formal studio pedagogy. The aim was to make the critique an engaging social process rather than a culminating judging event, using online externalizing of design thinking and peer judgment as a collaborative communication building tool. The purpose of this paper is to present two different strategies, outcomes and findings.

Implementation and Outcomes. Aside from having access to the online environment, both instructors conducted the studio in a normal fashion. One instructor used the online informal peer critique for an introductory patternmaking class of sixteen sophomore students, while the other instructor used it for the senior apparel design capstone class of fifteen students. In both cases, coursework took place during Fall 2016 semester, and students met in class roughly six hours per week, spending much of the time either watching demonstrations, short lectures, working alone, talking individually with the instructors or participating in informal class reviews. Each student was responsible for developing a single design concept over the course of the project. As part of the development process, they were required to research the concept they chose, experiment with abstract solutions as applied to fashion garments, and, in the end, produce a fairly detailed digital (online) concept board.

In the patternmaking class, the online platform used was a shared Google slides document, where each student was assigned one slide to use for uploading their concept images, and prompted to comment on everybody else's slides. There was only one common deadline for a formal in-class critique, aiming to review everybody's work. As students opened the Google slides document at various times, they saw each other's work in different completion stages. The instructor observed alterations of original concept uploads, as students self-edited, commented and inspired each other. Most students waited until close to the deadline to post their comments on peer slides, therefore students who uploaded their images early on received more peer feedback. The studio atmosphere at the final in-class critique was engaged but relaxed, as each student already received preliminary peer feedback. Students reported increased engagement, with some of them commenting on improved learning outcome and social interaction.

In the capstone course, the students were required to post five consecutive assignments building up to the final collection concept critique on a Tumblr blog. A unique aspect and advantage of this blog roll is that when posting new assignments to the group Tumblr, the participants must scroll past and view all the groups' prior entries. Furthermore, the deadlines were staggered and flexible, so students posted and commented on each other's work at different times, and the review experience was ongoing. This process also provided the opportunity for the assignments to be mixed in and amongst other assignments, creating a dynamic, creative critique process. The students' peer feedback early in the course was both longer and more frequent, and this set the pace for the many subsequent critiques and discussions to follow. Students yielded better focus and resiliency during the final development and production phase. Also, the students were more calm and prepared for the final critique compared to previous classes that did not use the informal peer critique process.

Plans for Continuity. The findings confirm the importance and benefits of student engagement outside of the studio environment. The critique is a final learning goal assessment tool, however, if critique is implemented as a process, the learning occurring before the final event is amplified. While this study was preliminary, both instructors plan on continuing using the web-based platforms for informal peer critique in other courses too, as well as collecting comparative data to be used for a larger, more comprehensive study.

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