

Tentative Tips for Better Crits...

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- Work to quickly build a psychologically-safe environment:

People need to feel safe before they will speak or speak honestly.

Do not use sarcasm.

Be an attentive and responsive listener.

Do not ask rhetorical questions or questions to which you already know the answer.

Thank people who respond.

Do not criticize responses so as not to suppress further responses.

- Predetermine the purpose of the critique:

1) To reinforce the learning objectives of the lesson?

If so, tell the students this is your purpose for this critique: that you want to use the critique to reinforce what you are trying to teach them. List what you wanted them to learn from the assignment. Have them identify successfully completed assignments. Ask them for reasons to support their claims. Of course, you can also identify successfully completed assignments: but remember that students are asking for reasons for your judgments.

2) To admonish the lazy?

If so, then decide if the whole class needs admonishment, or just a few individuals. If it is individuals, then perhaps talk to them individually. If the whole class needs admonishment, then be direct and firm as well as kind. Tell them what you expect. You are the instructor: Make your expectations clear to your students.

3) To motivate the whole group? To motivate an individual?

If you want to reach an individual, perhaps do it privately. Students have repeatedly been quoted saying that they do not want to be embarrassed in front of the class.

4) To assert your authority? To redirect attitudes?

If so, then perhaps tell the students directly that you feel a need to exert more influence on the class. Tell them that as their instructor you feel a responsibility to teach certain things. Tell them directly what you want in the class and what you don't want.

5) To determine grades?

If so, then do not expect the students to be honest and forthcoming in their comments. Students' desire for good grades and peer pressure will militate against open communication. If you want interactive critiques, separate grading from critiques.

6) To celebrate students and the work they have done?

If so, then defer any negative comments to another time. Be celebratory! Allow only positive comments from yourself and from the students. Save any negative comments for another time and place.

7) Is the critique for the critics or for the artist?

8) Is the critique a chance for the viewers to become more articulate about images in general?

10) Is the critique to help the artist make better images?

11) Is the critique for the artist to become more articulate about his or her images?

These are not mutually exclusive purposes, but they are different purposes, and if you know your purpose, you will have a better chance of achieving it. If you are trying to help students become articulate about artworks, then figure out strategies to accomplish this. Tell them that, in this critique, you are looking for good thinking about images, that you are after a good group conversation, and that you want to hear their ideas about images.

- Consider if, when, and for how long the artist should speak during a critique of his or her work.

In large part, the answer to this question depends on the purpose of the critique. Do you want to use the critique to have the maker be more articulate about what she has made? Then let the artist speak. If you are trying to help all of the students become better critics of all imagery, limit the role of the artist whose work you are talking about.

- Determine the role that artistic intent will occupy during the critique.

Will the parameters of the critique be determined by the intent of the artist who made the work?

Will the parameters of the critique be determined by the intent of the teacher who made the assignment for the work?

If what the artist intends is not what shows up in the art, does that mean it is not a good art?

If your goal is to develop better critics, don't let the student critics rely on the artist's intent to frame the conversation. The artists have already made their images, they have done their creative work. Now let the interpreters do their work of interpreting what the artist has made.

If, however, you want the artist to be more articulate about what it is that he or she is doing, then perhaps do start with the artists stating their intents. Does the statement of intent, in itself, make sense? Is it an intent worthy of pursuit? Is the intent accomplished in the work?

- Do you want to dominate the critique, or do you want the students to do most of the talking?

It is perfectly all right to lecture, just tell them that you are lecturing and do not pretend that it is an interactive critique.

If the students are talking, perhaps let them continue to talk. Stay in the background. When the conversation lags, then step in with a new question, or a different strategy to get the students talking again.

Monitor whether you are talking more than you want, and adjust accordingly.

If you ask a question, do not answer it. Wait for the students to answer it. Wait as long as it takes.

- Decide beforehand whether all the works in the critique will be covered during the critique.

You need not talk about every work in every critique. If you do this, your critiques will either be very long or very shallow. Perhaps, rather than trying to talk about everyone's work every time, instead make sure that you eventually talk about everyone's work during the quarter. Tell the students beforehand that it is very unlikely that you will cover everyone's work. Invite them to ask that their work be covered today, if they want feedback that day. Invite them to see you individually if there was not time to get to their work and they want your comments.

- Decide whether the group of critiques will attempt to influence the artist to change the work, or to accept it as it is.

You might want, occasionally, simply to accept the works of art as they are, and not try to get the artist to “improve them. Occasionally, keep the critique descriptive and interpretive and let the artist just listen. Later the artist can decide if he or she thinks the work should be changed based on what was heard in the critique.

- Decide whether the critique will be primarily descriptive, interpretive, evaluative, theoretical, or a combination of these.

Description itself constitutes criticism. If one of your goals is to help students “see,” description is a good way to accomplish this.

Critiques need not be judgmental. You can keep them descriptive and interpretive.

You might use a critique to discuss theories of art, identify assumptions about art that students seem to have based on the work that they make. To do all of these activities all the time--describe, interpret, judge, theorize--in each critique is likely too much of a challenge for anyone.

- Work shown in critiques need not always be a surprise to you.

Ask the students to turn in work well before the critique so that you have time to consider how you will run the critique and to determine what points you would like covered.

- Try new things.

Drop what does not work. Try something else. Keep yourself motivated. If you are engaged, it is likely that your students will be too.