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Improving Studio Critiques
Terry Barrett, The Ohio State University

This presentation reports on selected results of an informal, on-going, and open-ended survey of studio instructors and graduate and undergraduate students, from 25 large university and smaller college and art school programs, over a period of about ten years. Topics include definitions of critiques, attitudes of instructors and students toward critiques, statements from both instructors and students about what counts as "a good critique," and what instructors and students do and do not want during and from critiques.

Instructors report difficulties with running critiques. The most common is the challenge of getting students to talk during critiques. Students say they want fuller participation from all who are present in a critique. Many instructors and students express a strong desire for more interpretation in critiques. Both groups have a general disdain for overly negative and personally cutting critiques. Students frequently express their fear of being publicly humiliated by instructors during critiques, and provide examples of when and how they have been humiliated. In general, instructors and students have similar desires for critiques, including: full involvement, more articulate instructors and students, positive attitudes about art dialogue, good will, a fair distribution of time, and more inclusion of interpretation and art history and theory.

Based on the findings, the presenter offers tentative, non-dogmatic suggestions for improving critiques. Suggestions include articulating positive attitudes about critiques; suggestions for how to effectively include more people in discussions; deciding whether to deal with a topic publicly in the group or privately with the individual; making critiques more descriptive and interpretive and less exclusively judgmental; identifying different kinds of critiques; determining goals for particular critiques; managing time equitably during critiques; and distinguishing between a spontaneous lecture by an instructor and an exploratory discussion by the whole group.

The basic presupposition behind this presentation is that critiques are challenging for both instructors and students; that both groups consider critiques an essential studio practice; that critiques should foster independent student artists rather than students who inadvertently become dependent on the instructors' and peers' judgments and suggestions for what art to make and how. Successful critiques ought to result in students wanting to make more art, better; to make art more thoughtfully; for students to desire verbal interpretive responses to their work; and through critiques for all to become more confident and more articulate contributors to meaningful dialogues about art.