

Feeding Forward in Urban Design Pedagogy: A Critique Strategy

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Hesam Kamalipour, Ph.D. | *Cardiff University*

Overview: Critique sessions are integral to urban design education. This chapter discusses the design and implementation of a critique strategy developed to review a comparative urban design analysis assignment by drawing on the experience of leading the 2019–2020 Urban Design Foundation subject in the MA Urban Design program at Cardiff University. The strategy incorporates a series of desk-based review sessions in tutorials followed by a non-evaluative interim pin-up and presentation session to provide constructive and timely feedback on the work-in-progress before the summative assessment. Following a brief introductory background, the critique process is presented with a focus on the related instructions and outcomes. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which the strategy can effectively work as a way of feeding forward in urban design pedagogy.

Level: Postgraduate students starting the one-year MA Urban Design program.

Duration: The critique includes three tutorials (one per week) to provide oral feedback on the work-in-progress, followed by a non-evaluative interim pin-up and presentation session in the last teaching week (week three) before the summative assessment. The duration of the interim pin-up and presentation session is about four hours for eight sections, including a total of sixteen group presentations. The schedule includes a 15-minute presentation by each group followed by 15-minute oral feedback by two tutors.

Learning Objectives: The critique strategy was developed to support students working on the comparative urban analysis assignment, helping them:

1. Analyze urban fabric/tissue according to a range of urban design dimensions, themes, and concepts, drawing on the work of key theorists within the discipline.
2. Understand the influence of zoning policies or policies related to mixed-use development or streets on urban forms and fabric.
3. Graphically and verbally present findings from 1 and 2.

Background

The terms “critique,” “review,” and “jury” are often used interchangeably in architecture schools (Salama, 2016, p. 92). The aim of sessions such as juries is to communicate constructive criticism outlining the pros and cons of the presented work, provide instruction regarding critical issues, enable scholarly dialogue, and evaluate the extent to which the relevant knowledge has been acquired and applied (Salama, 2016, p. 94). “Critique” is adopted in this chapter to focus on the productive capacities of timely and constructive formative feedback as a way of feeding forward in urban design pedagogy. While feeding back engages with the progress

being made, feeding forward addresses the activities that need to be undertaken to enhance progress (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Opportunities for feedback in design education are often provided across different subjects. In studio-based subjects, feedback is typically provided during weekly tutorials, and then during final presentations in front of a jury for evaluation. Final presentations in conventional studio pedagogy often engage with evaluation and summative assessment. In addition to conventional studio critiques, Smith and Boyer (2015) argue that allocating one-on-one adapted feedback sessions following a mentor-trainee model can enhance the student experience and provide proper closure. Implementing this strategy in large cohorts can be challenging due to timing, workload, and resource limitations. This chapter begins from the view that effective critique strategies can play a key role in feeding forward in urban design education.

Drawing on the experience of leading the 2019–2020 Urban Design Foundation subject, this chapter focuses on the design and implementation of a critique strategy developed to provide formative feedback before the summative assessment. This subject is part of the MA Urban Design program at Cardiff University, a one-year program at the postgraduate level jointly delivered by the School of Geography and Planning and the Welsh School of Architecture. The program incorporates a mix of studio-based and lecture-based subjects followed by a research-based design project. Urban Design Foundation is the first subject in the program, and aims to provide an introduction to urban design analysis and thinking. Through assessed work, students develop urban analytical skills and communicate a comparative urban analysis in relation to critical concepts in Urban Design through visual and verbal presentations.

The 2019–2020 Urban Design Foundation subject included formative and summative assessment and feedback. The summative assessment incorporated a balanced mix of individual and group assignments. In a key part of the summative assessment, small groups undertook a comparative urban analysis using a particular theoretical framework; this was designed to provide opportunities for students to develop teamwork and presentation skills. Students were expected to critically analyze the selected case studies in relation to density, mix, access, public/private interface, and type, and communicate the comparative urban analysis in the context of the relevant literature, including Dovey (2016) and Dovey et al. (2018), among others. The critique strategy was initially designed and implemented to support students for this group assignment, and was based on knowledge of how formative feedback can improve learning by enabling students to reflect on their performance and monitor their progress (Sadler, 1989).

Process

The 2019–2020 Urban Design Foundation subject ran for four weeks at the beginning of the program, and teaching took place primarily during weeks one to three. Feedback opportunities included several desk-based tutorials followed by a non-evaluative interim presentation session in which students received focused feedback from tutors before the summative assessment. Weekly tutorials were scheduled for students to present their work-in-progress, receive immediate feedback, raise questions, and discuss weekly readings within small groups. The last teaching week (week three) was particularly designed as a critique session, in which student groups pinned up and presented a “submission-ready” draft of their work-in-progress and received formative oral feedback before the summative assessment.

As this critique strategy was initially designed to feed forward, it was critical to carefully schedule the interim presentation session with adequate time afterward so that students could effectively consider the provided comments and improve their work accordingly. Each group

was allocated a specific schedule for their presentation and feedback to ensure consistency across groups. The teaching staff for the critique session included two tutors, who provided formative oral feedback in turn. Interim presentations took place in parallel sessions in a studio setting where students could use the available pin-up space for presentation. Specific instructions were provided regarding the overall layout design to ensure consistency and enable comparison. The format was collaborative pin-up and presentation by different groups within a given time in parallel sessions (Figure 1). Groups and tutors were paired to encourage engagement and peer learning across different groups and tutorials. The subject leader could move across different sections to ensure consistency, address possible questions, and provide further support.



Figure 1. Collaborative pin-up and presentation by different groups.

It is critical to communicate timely and constructive feedback, with a reasonable balance between negative and positive comments (Ramsden, 2003). During interim presentations, the aim for oral feedback was to look ahead and comment on strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement in relation to structure, substance, presentation, and teamwork, supporting students in preparation for the summative assessment. Clarifying the criteria concerning the expected performance and enabling self-reflection are key in good feedback, which can facilitate self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). A detailed assessment guide was developed to clarify the related criteria so that everyone could critically reflect on the work-in-progress and effectively engage with the formative feedback.

Value

The completion of the subject was followed by critical reflection on how teaching and learning activities, including the critique strategy, played out, with analysis of subject evaluations and student feedback. In addition to the subject coordination, structure, lectures, and seminar discussions, undertaking the comparative urban design analysis within groups and developing the related skills—including communication and teamwork—were among the key aspects of the subject that worked well. Development of the related practical skills such as teamwork and time management were also considered some of the best things about the subject. Other positive comments noted the usefulness of feedback, group work, analysis and understanding of cities, critical thinking, teaching method, assessment, and subject structure. More presentation time and feedback have also been mentioned as a part of what some students would like to see changed.

The value of the critique strategy presented in this chapter is about its capacity to feed forward by looking ahead and providing constructive and timely feedback before summative assessment in the context of urban design pedagogy. This can potentially enhance the learning experience by enabling equal opportunities for peer learning, collaboration, and learning by doing in urban design education. This critique strategy works as a mock review, in which students can pin up and present a “submission-ready” copy of their work-in-progress within a non-evaluative and supportive critique setting. While conventional critique sessions in urban design education are often conflated with evaluation and marking, this critique strategy aims to feed forward with a focus on how formative oral feedback can most effectively work in relation to summative assessment.

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