

How to Wrap Your Head around the Question of Relative Merit:

Teaching Students to Evaluate Their Design Solutions

Dori Griffin

dori.griffin@usm.edu

University of Southern Mississippi

Department of Art & Design

118 College Drive Box #5033

Hattiesburg MS 39406

Introduction:

It's final critique day in my upper-division design studio. The class of 22 students has spent four weeks working on educational card games for beginning design students. We've discussed the usual range of conceptual and formal issues: audience needs, communication strategies, use of type and image, composition. After brief individual presentations, I hand out ballots and ask everyone to rank their own solutions in comparison to the others. I explain that this entirely anonymous exercise has no impact on their grades. The ranking categories are: well above average, slightly above average, average, slightly below average, and well below average. The results of this exercise do not line up with the eventual grade distribution: Zero students rank their work below average, and 18 out of 22 rank their work as above average in some way.

How do we teach students to evaluate the merit of their own design solutions? This is a critical question, not only at the end of a project (or when grades are returned) but at every stage along the way. Which initial ideas are worth pursuing? When has a potential solution failed? How successful is a solution in relationship to its competition? These are difficult questions, and students need tools for learning how to ask – and answer – them in ways that are useful and productive.

This paper explores a range of critique strategies focused on teaching students to evaluate the relative merit of their design solutions. It addresses two primary areas of concern. First, what factors stand in the way of learning self-evaluation, and how can we as design

educators mitigate these factors? Second, what are useful strategies for critique at all stages of the design process, and how do these function in the studio classroom? Understandably, it can be difficult to engage in self-critique. This paper focuses on concrete strategies for facilitating the process of learning how to evaluate one's own work.

1: Obstacles to self-evaluation

Graphic designers are notorious for resisting criticism. There is in fact a whole branch of graphic design criticism devoted to criticizing our profession's resistance to criticism. Rick Poynor's keynote address at Blunt, the 2013 AIGA Design Educator's Conference, confronted precisely this subject, building on themes and observations familiar to his long-time readers. Criticism is difficult but necessary. As Poynor put it a decade earlier, "Any would-be critic who practices only the role of supporter and advocate, who never finds fault, sees nothing to contest, is not really a critic at all" (Poynor 2004). Explanations of our profession's preference for critics who play champion are familiar to all of us. Much design is commercial, and you shouldn't bite the hand that feeds you. Designers are underappreciated enough already, and we shouldn't add to the problem. And graphic designers don't read, anyway, so do we really need criticism after all? The very fact that professional designers and design educators struggle to accept that critics *criticize* should demonstrate to us that evaluation, critical analysis, and particularly self-critique are difficult activities. Yet an important task of studio education is to cultivate in students the ability to evaluate design solutions – both their own and those of others. It is helpful to be aware of how and why students find this task difficult. There are obstacles that stand in

the way of achieving the goal of teaching critical evaluation skills. Articulating these obstacles has been useful in finding critique models that are functional for my students.

Perhaps the most common obstacle to critical evaluation in the undergraduate studio classroom is emotional attachment. It can be difficult to separate one's work from one's self, particularly if the work centers around a dearly loved subject or includes an autobiographical element. As educators, we often engage students in assignments by making room for their personality to inform the work. For instance: "A typographer's education should include writing as a developmental process," advises an essay in *The Education of a Typographer*, a survey of typographic education centered around best practices as developed at leading design schools. "Typography students should attempt to write text that they will design. The autobiographical sketch will serve this purpose well" (Meyers 2004, 129). Autobiography is indeed engaging for most students, but it pays to realize that personal connections beget emotional attachment. To mitigate this factor, I try to ensure that the first critical evaluation exercise in each of my classes avoids intensely personal subject matter. Then, during later critiques when the stakes are higher, I can remind students that our conversation feels more emotionally charged but is in fact structurally similar to earlier, less stressful critiques. Sometimes, I will post a number beneath each solution, and during critique, no one is allowed to use the designer's name, only the solution's number. During these "anonymous" critiques, which are not really anonymous at all, we openly recognize the difficulty of this structure and its contrived nature. Being critical of the work rather than the person is difficult – perhaps most

difficult when the person is oneself – and finding some way to acknowledge this fact can be helpful.

Investment of time has been a major obstacle for many of my students. After devoting a week or a month or a semester to a project, it can be difficult to realize that the solution is not yet fully resolved. “If you’ve spent so much time on a project, you really want it to be good,” one student told me during a casual small group conversation about why critiques can be so difficult. She went on to say that it is also difficult to be critical of the work of a peer when you know that person has worked hard on a project or spent a lot of time on it. Process critiques, particularly those accomplished early and repeated often, can mitigate some of these difficulties – which is, of course, precisely why we engage in them. But the fact remains that at the end of a project, time spent is not always indicative of the most successful solutions. Rather than saying this in so many words, lest I plant the notion that spending time is not necessary, I make sure that every critique explicitly engages a set of specific criteria for success. Some of these imply an investment of time. For instance: Does a set of thumbnail sketches explore every possibility for solving the problem, or does it engage only the most obvious ideas? As the problem nears resolution, how many of the tiny details have been attended to and how many overlooked? But since investment of time alone does not ensure strong results, simple time spent is never a criteria by which we structure a critique.

Students can suffer from tunnel vision in other ways, as well. Choosing the right typeface is always important, but if the project requires a dozen photographs, then five hours with

FontBook is far less useful than five hours with a camera. If the project is to develop a single illustration, then one image becomes paramount; if the project is to produce a thirty-two page corporate report that includes illustrations, then the development of one image is far less important. As studio educators, we consistently teach the process of learning to set priorities and solve problems in relationship to the desired outcome. I encourage students to apply these skills to our critiques and to their own critical self-evaluation process. We return to two foundational questions over and over again. What are the parameters of the problem? And what are the formal and conceptual criteria by which the solution will be evaluated? For many students, repeated reminders of their end goal can help them avoid getting stuck on minutiae before they solve the crux of the problem. This seems extremely obvious, but for many of my students tunnel vision – aimed in the wrong direction – is a persistent problem and one that stands in the way of being able to usefully evaluate their own work. If you've isolated the wrong variables for analysis, then the evaluation, no matter how accurate, won't be very helpful.

Because design overlaps other visual arts, it can also be difficult for students to understand that some elements of a design solution can indeed be evaluated objectively. Mixed among relativistic and subjective criteria are things like usability and safety standards, multi-browser compatibility, or the physical parameters of a printing process. (It's easy to print white type on black paper in theory, but in practice it's going to be expensive.) Differentiating between more objective and less objective criteria is a critical evaluation skill that I have found it useful to address explicitly with students. Most solutions express something about their designer, but expressing oneself is rarely the

primary goal of design. The idea that self-expression is central to the design process can stand in the way of learning to evaluate one's own work in a useful way. Therefore, particularly outside the senior capstone project, I tend to emphasize problem parameters and object-oriented evaluation criteria.

Finally, I have found that a lack of exposure to a broad range of historical and contemporary work can be an obstacle to learning useful critique and self-evaluation skills. Without a broad, holistic framework into which students can place their own solutions, it can be difficult to understand how one solution is stronger or weaker than the range of other solutions to similar problems. This plays out on the local level when students have trouble understanding why the work of their peers is stronger than their own work. It plays out on a more global level when students fail to realize that decades or centuries of international design prefigure the work that they are doing. No doubt everyone has encountered students knocking off a knock-off that they found on Pinterest without being aware that the pinned image is itself derivative. This opens up an entirely different area of inquiry which is far too extensive to deal with here. However, it is worth noting briefly that learning to evaluate one's own work is difficult (if not impossible) without a wide-ranging and comprehensive exposure to the work of other designers, both historical and contemporary. Without a point of comparison, the already tricky task of self-evaluation becomes much more difficult.

2. Strategies for encouraging self-evaluation

Since self-evaluation is difficult, I ask my students to engage with it consistently. I spend a significant portion of our studio time on the task of critique, and since this is the case, I introduce a variety of strategies for structuring our discussions. This frustrates some students, particularly those who would prefer to always present their own work and then hear responses to that presentation. My pedagogical goal in using a variety of strategies is to encourage students to engage critically, rather than by rote, and to use critique strategies that can be useful in the future as students self-critique their own work. Since every strategy will not work for every student, I find variety to be helpful. The techniques I describe here are grouped into three basic strategies: ranking, imposing limitations, and engaging another medium. This is not an exhaustive or universal list, but is instead a descriptive account of strategies that have worked well for my students over time.

Perhaps the most obvious way to evaluate one solution in relationship to others is to rank the solutions. Students tend not to enjoy this activity, and I modify it in relationship to how long they have been working on a project and how emotionally attached they are likely to be to their work. For shorter, more formal or mechanical exercises, I ask students to arrange the finished solutions from most resolved to least resolved. Usually, I only use this technique once during the course of a semester-long class, because it takes a long time and it is very uncomfortable for students. First, we review the project parameters and the evaluation criteria. Once these are established, we work through the solutions in groups of three. First, we collectively establish the three most resolved solutions through a process of discussion. Individual students nominate works and present a justification for that choice in terms of parameters and evaluation criteria. I arbitrate the discussion and

(particularly for less experienced students) articulate which nominations and justifications are stronger and which are weaker. Once we have arrived at the three most resolved solutions, students vote by show of hands for the top solution among these three. Everyone must vote. The winning solution is hung at the far left of the critique space and marks the beginning of the most-to-least-resolved spectrum. Then, we entertain nominations for a replacement to bring the voting pool back up to three. We repeat this process until we reach the least resolved solution, which is hung at the far right of the spectrum. Once all of the solutions are lined up in order from most to least resolved, we discuss what differentiates the solutions at the left end of the spectrum from those at the right.

Since my grading rubric does contain a small percentage of points for engagement with process and manual craft skills, the spectrum we post in the classroom might not align exactly with the grade distribution, and I do remind students of this as we begin the exercise. I arrived at this procedure after discussing critique strategies with a colleague at another university. He related his success with a similar exercise, wherein he arranged the solutions from most to least resolved. Then, starting with his top two solutions, he asked students to vote on which they felt was the most resolved. The group then moved through the rest of the solutions in the same way. I prefer to have students arrive at the pool of contenders for “most resolved solution” through a process of critical discussion in which they must engage with the evaluation criteria and defend their choices in terms of the project’s goals. Particularly with larger groups, however, this can take a very long time.

Less grueling versions of the same activity feature regularly in process critiques. Instead of ranking solutions individually, I often ask students to group solutions into categories. For my students, the most successful metaphor for this process is the traffic light. (Yes, I allow them to speculate that I was a kindergarten teacher in a former life.) According to this model, green solutions are free to go ahead because the direction they have established seems both productive and appropriate in relationship to the problem. Yellow solutions should move ahead with caution and be prepared to stop and reconsider specific, problematic aspects. Red solutions should throw on the brakes and return to the drawing board. I buy color-coded garage sale dots, foil stars, and push-pins so that we can physically code the solutions. We usually discuss the work at the edges of each category in particular detail. Is a solution Kelly green or a light spring green? Pale yellow or a deep yellow-orange? I usually have students sort the work collaboratively, but potentially they could also place their own work into these categories. Other strategies I have used include sorting the work into neighborhoods, with the most desirable real estate being the critique board where the most resolved work lives, and using the language of above average, average, and below average. The latter is the least successful, in my experience. Students tend to have a difficult time understanding that if most solutions solve the problem in a functional way, then a functional solution is “average” and functionality is no longer a criteria for excellence. Sometimes, once a group of students has finished with a project, I will show them the solutions produced by a previous semester’s class. We usually identify the outliers in the group – the solutions that are outstandingly resolved and those that are not resolved. Potentially, we could also determine which group of solutions (present or previous) is stronger overall.

Ranking a group of solutions can be a very direct way to address the relative merit of individual solutions. One's own position within the spectrum is indicative of one's level of success in solving the problem. In terms of teaching self-evaluation skills, it can also be helpful to impose strict limits on the nature of the critical conversation. As with most difficult and complex tasks, learning to evaluate one's own work can feel more manageable when broken down into smaller, discrete tasks. A very quick exercise in this regard is to have students answer "one thing" questions: What is one thing your solution does better than most of the competition? What is one major shortcoming in your solution, compared to the competition? When there is more time to devote to the discussion, I sometimes have students fill out response forms – one for their own solution, and one for an assigned solution by a peer. These usually include four to six questions about the formal and conceptual success or failure of the solution. These might be far-reaching questions: How well does the solution communicate with its audience, and how might it communicate more effectively? Or they might be more finite questions: How appropriate is the designer's choice of media? Of typeface? The questions always target issues that are relevant to the project brief and relate to other classroom discussions engaged during the process of solving the problem. Answering specific, finite questions is a much more manageable task for most students than engaging in a critique without any guidelines.

Another form of limiting the discussion is to assign small groups of students to small groups of solutions. I usually make sure the group critiques either its own work, or –

more commonly – a set of work that does not include a solution by any member of the group. One group evaluates their assigned solutions in terms of formal resolution, another group evaluates conceptual resolution, and the last group evaluates the balance between form and concept. Generally, I have students arrange their assigned solutions from most to least resolved, considering *only* the variable they have been assigned. Then, when the whole group meets together, small groups present and defend their choices. They also speak to how their assigned variable informed their decision-making process. We use this exercise as an opportunity to discuss how formal and conceptual concerns can influence one another. But we also address how priorities can shift in relationship to evaluation criteria. In my experience, this can be a difficult concept for students, but it is absolutely critical to the process of self-evaluation.

To the process of ranking solutions and imposing limits on the critical discussion of solutions, I add a third kind of critique: engaging another medium. This can help students gain distance from their own work. One of the trickier aspects of self-critique is developing the ability to take a step backward and see the work with fresh insight. Taking time away from the work and coming back to it later is helpful, too, but can be difficult to manage in relationship to a crowded syllabus or a tight schedule.

Asking students to engage with another medium during the process of critique can help them learn to gain necessary distance more quickly.

One strategy that my students have found very useful is that of writing a 150 to 200 word critical review of their solution in the third person. Since many students are resistant to

reading and writing, I found this surprising, but the exercise is almost always well-received. To begin, I read aloud a published review and show images of the work being discussed. For this purpose, I have had luck with Rick Poynor's review of *Making Wet: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing* (2012). Its combination of pronounced criticality and mildly erotic subject matter appeals to the student imagination. Then, I have students discuss the form and function of the review. Is the reviewer a fan of the work, or not? How can we tell? Does the reviewer make a strong case for his or her assessment of the work? What kinds of evidence does the reviewer offer to support the critique? Is the review well-balanced, or does it point out only successes or only failures? Next, students write their review as an in-class exercise. This usually takes about half an hour. Finally, students share their reviews with the class. Those who are very nervous about reading aloud talk us through their review, using the written copy as a guide. Others simply read aloud. As a group, we discuss the relevance of each review. Did it mention the most important aspects of the work? Did it draw reasonable conclusions about the successes and failures of the work? Did it offer the audience a way to critically engage the work? Because the reviews are very short, students must prioritize the topics they address. Because we write them quickly (and I do not grade the writing), the focus remains on content rather than the nuances of form. And because they are in third person – which is a bit hokey, but in a way that seems to work – they offer distance from the solution itself.

During most semesters, I only use the written review strategy once. More frequently, usually once per major project, I have students present their work to the class verbally. The group pretends that we are clients. Before we begin, we briefly discuss what kinds of

information it will be important to include in the client presentation. Usually, this can be reduced to: What is the problem, and how does the proposed solution address it? For less experienced students, I often list the specific topics we discuss in writing on the blackboard. Next, students present their solutions, and we discuss the formal and conceptual issues that arise. At the end of the critique, we discuss the presentations themselves as entirely distinct from the work. What inspires confidence in the designer? In the solution? What information makes it easy to understand and appreciate the work? With very little direction from me, common themes emerge. Audiences respond to engaged speakers who addresses each aspect of the solution in turn and talk about the process that led to the solution. Using accurate vocabulary to describe formal and conceptual decisions inspires confidence. Offering context instead of assuming prior knowledge is not only helpful in a pragmatic sense, it also justifies the designer's decisions by offering a clear rationale. Again, this exercise offers distance from the solution as well as teaching a useful skill in itself.

Finally, I sometimes have students photograph their work (as if for their portfolio) and we critique the photographs. This works best with projects that have multiple or three-dimensional components, such as packaging or books. The photos can serve to mediate the relationship between student and work, offering physical and conceptual distance. Photographic documentation is a useful skill in itself, and we often discuss mechanical aspects of photography like composition, lighting, vantage point, and macro/micro relationships during these critiques. The photographic critique offers a chance to reiterate conceptual concerns, as well. It can be an excellent way to understand what facets of a

solution are immediately accessible to viewers/users and which are not. “You can’t really see it in the photo, but...” can be a good way to introduce conversations about hierarchy and how designers can guide users’ interactions with the work. This is of course a recurring theme during process critiques, but some students need to have the message reinforced at the end of a project, as well. Unlike written reviews and oral presentations, which can be useful at multiple points in the design process, the photographic strategy makes the best sense at the end of the project. Even when we don’t critique the photos as a group, I always have students turn in photographic documentation of finished projects. This gives me a pool of images to show to future classes when I introduce photographic documentation. This way, before students document their own work, they are exposed to more and less successful examples (usually of different projects, from entirely different classes). Once more, the exercise teaches a useful skill and offers students a chance to step away from their own work and view it more objectively.

Conclusion:

As I engage with the process of becoming a better design educator, it is consistently helpful for me to encounter specific examples of successful (and unsuccessful) pedagogical approaches. This discussion of teaching critique and self-critique strategies prioritizes descriptive accounts of my own practice. This is not because I believe my experiences to be either universal or particularly unique. However, specific accounts of the relationship between goals and outcomes can be useful in developing context-appropriate teaching strategies – whether this is by adopting a described strategy, or by

deciding that it is not appropriate to one's own context. In much the same way that I encourage my students to find points of comparison as they evaluate their work, I have structured this account as a starting-point for discussion and evaluation.

Citations:

Meyers, Chris. 2004. "The value of narrative in the education of a typographer." In *The Education of a Typographer*, edited by Steven Heller, 126-133. New York: Allworth.

Poynor, Rick. 2004. "The time for being against." Address presented at Looking Closer: AIGA Conference on Design History and Criticism, New York, February 24-25, 2001. Archived at https://www.typotheque.com/articles/the_time_for_being_against.

Poynor, Rick. 2012. Review of *Making Wet: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing*. *Eye* 83:21. Accessed Sept 2, 2013. <http://www.eyemagazine.com/review/article/a-disappointing-splash>.

Author biography

Dori Griffin teaches graphic design and design history at the University of Southern Mississippi. In addition to writing about design pedagogy, she also researches and writes about the visual culture of twentieth century domestic tourism. Her book, *Mapping Wonderlands: Cartographic Illustration in Arizona, 1912-1962*, was published by the University of Arizona Press in 2013.

Key words

Critique, self-evaluation, graphic design pedagogy

Abstract

Graphic design students often find it difficult to evaluate the merit of their own work. This paper explores a range of critique strategies focused on teaching students to evaluate the relative merit of their design solutions. It addresses two primary areas of concern. First, what factors stand in the way of learning self-evaluation, and how can we as design educators mitigate these factors? Second, what are useful strategies for critique at all stages of the design process, and how do these function in the studio classroom? This paper focuses on concrete strategies for facilitating the process of learning how to evaluate one's own work.