

Grant: Otis Assessment, Research and Scholarship (OARS) Grant
Subject: Final Report/Grant Narrative
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Purpose

To investigate and analyze how class critiques affect the quality of student learning, classroom experience and grades in an LAS writing class.

Background

One of the biggest problem I have as a teacher is motivating my students to learn from their mistakes. The Otis students I know often see mistakes as failure and are unwilling to try harder. They give up easily, shut down and get stuck in a rut. How do I energize these passive students of mine? How do I teach them and motivate them to see mistakes as a pathway to a solution to their problem? How do I teach my students not only skills but how to think critically and express it clearly? How do I motivate them to create a learning community, a lab of ideas and experiments? I found the answer to these questions often (but not always) when I engaged my students in class critiques where work was examined and discussed openly in class.

Critiques are common in Otis studio classes, but not so in LAS classes. However, I conducted critiques in all my LAS classes. These were based on the writing workshop critiques I had experienced for the last 35 years, first as a playwright, then a screenwriter and today, as a novelist.

So, what was it about critiques that opened up and motivated my students? Previously, my best experience of class critiques was the first Branding Otis class I taught in Spring 2012 to a second semester Sophomore class (ILM 200G). In this class, students from different departments collaborated in teams to create marketing and branding designs and copy for the new Otis website. It was a highly successful class where the critiques exemplified what George Kuh in *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access To Them, And Why They Matter* calls, “collaborative learning.” As he wrote in his influential book, “Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one’s own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences.”

With the OARS grant, I decided to recreate this experience of “collaborative learning” via critiques in an LAS writing class.

LIBS 314H Business Writing

Business Writing was a pilot class for the upcoming Entrepreneurial Minor and tailored to teach junior art and design students how to write effective business communications. The class focused on cover letter emails for job applicants, elevator pitches, product copy, including naming, headlines, taglines and product description, a market research report and for their Signature Assignment, a proposal and design presentation.

The Signature Assignment was a collaborative project where five teams of four students (each from a different department) worked with Jeffrey Perkins, VP of Communications and Marketing, and his office to conceptualize the new Student Life section of the rebranded otis.edu. The main audience were prospective students, with their parents coming second.

Among the seven Learning Outcomes targeted in this class, three of them in particular depended on critiques:

- Demonstrate critical thinking skills by learning to improve on writing assignments and by participating in class and group critiques, sharing constructive ideas and providing analysis and assessment of the work.
- Demonstrate public speaking skills by creating and presenting a design presentation.
- Examine the role of communication and writing as a designer and artist.

Every class, including the first, engaged in a class critiques. I began by laying the ground rule, "Be honest, direct and always respectful." Students were encouraged to present their work and their peers were encouraged to discuss the work, keeping in mind, ways to make the work better. In the first three classes, I modeled how to assess the work and discuss it. During the critique, the student authors were encouraged to take notes and after, use the notes to revise his/her work. Then the whole process of presenting, critiquing and reworking was repeated until the work was finalized.

Four of these critiques were graded. These were:

- Critique 1: Assignment 2 Elevator Pitches conducted on Week 4 Feb 8, 2017 worth 2% of their grade.
- Critique 2: Assignment 3 Product Copy conducted on Week 7 March 1, 2017 worth 3% of their grade.
- Critique 3 & 4: Assignment 5 Proposal & Design Presentation (Signature Assignment) conducted on Week 11 April 5 worth 2% of the grade and Week 13 April 19 worth 3% of their grade.

Following is the rubric I used to grade them:

BUSINESS WRITING CRITIQUE RUBRIC

Frequency of Participation (20%)	A – 2 points: Contributes at least 3 times with enthusiasm.	B – 1.5 points: Contributes at least 2 times.	C – 1 point: Contributes at least once.	D – 0.5 points: Does not contribute.	F – 0 points: Is disruptive, talks to others, does not pay attention, sleeps.	
Listening Skills & Attitude (20%)	A – 2 points: Listens attentively to the material and zeros in on the crux of the issue, building an insightful comment based on this. Always cooperative and supportive of others' ideas.	B – 1.5 points: Listens attentively to material and gives comments based on this. Cooperates and is supportive of others' ideas.	C – 1 points: Listens and makes comments.	D – 0.5 points: Listens to material but does not make a comment.	F – 0 point: Ignores discussion and/or puts down others' ideas/comments.	
Level of Engagement (40%)	A – 4 points: Offers insightful, constructive criticism with ideas/questions/solutions that demonstrate critical thinking, addresses the crux of the issue and attempts to help the author.	B – 3 points: Offers constructive criticism with ideas/questions/solutions that demonstrate critical thinking and attempts to help the author.	C – 2 points: Offers comments and questions that demonstrate a degree of critical thinking and illuminates some part of the problem.	D – 1 points: Makes no attempt to engage in the discussion or help the author.	F – 0 points: Hinders any attempt engage in the discussion or help the author.	

Language and Delivery (20%)	A – 2 point: Makes a point clearly in an audible voice. Original/specific/appropriate examples are delivered with clarity and vividness, free of grammatical and pronunciation errors.	B – 1.5 points: Makes a point in an audible voice. Examples are chosen with care and delivered mostly free of grammatical or pronunciation errors.	C – 1 points: Makes a point in an audible voice. Isolated errors in grammar, pronunciation and/or word choice reduce clarity.	D – 0.5 points: Makes a point in a non-audible voice. Many errors in grammar and pronunciation; word choice provides little to no clarity.	F – 0 points: Makes no point.	
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10 points = A

7.5 points = B

5 points = C

2.5 points = D

0 points = F

Some Data From the Critiques

- Before Critique 1, I went through the rubric in detail, this resulted in 18 out of 19 students participating, many of them very enthusiastically.
- Before Critique 2, I did not go through the rubric and this resulted in 12 out of 17 students participating and the level of enthusiasm decreased.
- Before Critique 3, I went over the rubric again and this resulted in 18 out of 18 students participating, again, many of them very enthusiastically.
- Before Critique 4, I did not go through the rubric and this resulted in 17 out of 19 students participating. Again, the enthusiasm was high.

From this, I can surmise that going through the rubric before critiques raised student engagement but over time, more students became more comfortable in participating in the critique.

Also, at the end of the semester, I asked students to rate and reflect on the Critiques. Following is the survey:

Class Critiques: Rate Statements and Write a Reflection

These are statements about our class critiques in Business Writing. Please rate them according to your experience. 1 is YES. 5 is NO. 2-4 is everything in between.

1. I was comfortable having my writing critiqued in class. 1 2 3 4 5

2. I was comfortable critiquing others' writing in class. 1 2 3 4 5

3. When my writing was critiqued, I learned from it and my writing improved. 1 2 3 4 5

4. When my classmates' writing was critiqued, I still learned from it and improved my writing.
1 2 3 4 5

5. I found the critiques motivated me to do better in my writing and improved my classroom experience. 1 2 3 4 5

Write a reflection (100-300 words) on the question below:
Did class critiques raise the quality of your writing, learning and classroom experience? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Results of this survey were:

- Out of a class of 19 students, 16 completed the questionnaire.
- Out of 16 students, 10 rated all the questions 1 for "yes."
- Out of 16 students, no one rated any question lower than a 4. Only 1 student rated Ques 4 (When my classmates' writing was critiqued, I still learned from it and improved my writing) a 4.

From Student A who rated all the questions 1, she had this to say:

"I would definitely say that class critiques improved my writing and my overall experience in the class. Normally at most, I will only do two drafts of any given document, and will usually only receive feedback from my professor and my mother (who is a professional writer, but still.) However, in Business Writing I found myself constantly coming back and improving my pieces because of our group critiques. I liked hearing from my peers and getting their perspective. I always felt supported and that the feedback I received was constructive and on topic. Giving feedback was also one of my favorite parts because I love helping people improve their writing. It's something that I think is essential to being a truly great creative force. If you have a good idea, but aren't good at expressing it, how will anyone ever be able to understand what you're talking about?"

From Student B who also rated all the questions 1,

"As for the critiques, I found them extremely helpful, since hearing other people's thoughts on my writing opened my eyes to any flaws my writing had, and how I could improve. It also helped having such a good class, since I can't recall a single time where I thought anyone's criticism was unfair, or deconstructive. I think having a class that was already so good at critical thinking was extremely helpful in that regard."

From a Student C who gave 3 to questions 1 and 2, expressing discomfort in receiving and giving critiques:

"The class critiques were a crucial part of business writing. Although I was a little nervous putting my writing out there and giving people thoughtful responses required a bit of effort, the experience overall was rewarding. It was nice being with a group of people that could honestly tell me how they felt and what they thought about my work in a respectful manner. A lot of the input from my instructor and classmates helped me minimize flaws in my writing and helped me expand on the stronger points in them. I personally feel as though this exercise helped me become a better and a more confident writer."

From a Student D who gave a 3 to question 2 and expressed discomfort in giving critiques to other:

"I found that the class critiques definitely aided in learning how to improve my work and motivate me to do better. I usually find that peer editing/review doesn't normally work because generally most peers don't give thoughtful enough responses and are not motivated enough. In the past when peers would critique my work just by filling out a form, it's been incredibly impersonal and often lazily done.

However, I was pleasantly surprised when I found that in this class, whether it was just because we had a driven group or we just really pushed ourselves, the students gave very insightful feedback. Learning to communicate and give feedback is a skill in itself, which I think we all improved as well. Additionally, I think it helped the class grow closer together and feel more comfortable around one another.

I found that being given feedback immediately and face to face after sharing was the best part of the experience, especially since you could collaborate or ask questions much faster/easier. It was also nice to see other student work because it often inspired me to try a new or different approach or see what was working or what wasn't working."

She also astutely pointed the short-comings of the critiques in a class where the pace was very fast:

"There was always such a rush to give the feedback that I often didn't get the opportunity to share all or any ideas during a specific critique. This was often because we would already be moving on, which also made it difficult to meet the requirement of 3 or more responses during the critique. So sometimes I felt like when I was receiving feedback during class it was because a student just wanted to meet their daily requirement and not actually give insightful feedback."

Student Evaluation

The Student Evaluation score was 6.57. Question 21 asked, "Please describe any course activities that most enhanced your learning in this course and/or were least helpful to your learning in this course. Many of the comments mentioned how much they learned from critiques, including these:

"Ahn is amazing. She challenges you and has strong critiques that will make not only your work strong but change you to think critically."

"Class critiques helped us a lot to understand what others' opinions and suggestions are."

Conclusion

Grades

There was an improvement in grades.

- The average grade of the class was a 3 or a B.
- There was a dip from the students' last English writing class – Writing In the Digital Age (WITDA) – taken in Foundation, for the average grade was 3.41.
- When compared to the scores from the Junior Assessment conducted in April 2017, which was 2.36, LIBS 314H at 3 was higher.

Learning & Classroom Experience

From the Reflections, we can surmise the students took ownership of their opinions and ideas and backed them with work and statements that articulated their point of view. It was harder to hide and be mediocre when they had to present their work publicly and have people judge it. Also, people giving the feedback could not just say, "I don't like it." They had to articulate a reason why. Since writing, more than anything, is about communication, taking part in these critiques sharpened communication skills.

Also, as students became more used to the critiques, they regarded the criticisms less as a personal attack and more as a chance to get feedback on how well they were communicating their ideas and the actual worth of their ideas. This opened them up to engaging with their classmates and audience. And the classmates and audience, including myself, where able to provide a solution if not an insight into their problems.

There is a synergy that happens in groups and as Aristotle said, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." This is what happened with this class. Somehow the barrier between students from different majors who did not know one another broke and they were able to not only work individually, side by side, but also work together in collaborative projects. What happened? I believe it was the critiques that broke this barrier. This energized the learning and brought a vitality to the classroom experience. They also felt invested in this class because the subject was relevant – business writing – which they knew they had to learn to do compete in the professional world.

Edward Hootstein in "*Enhancing student motivation: make learning interesting and relevant*" identifies the following strategies to make learning interesting and relevant to students, which were fulfilled by having open class critiques:

- Stimulate curiosity by asking thought-provoking questions
- Provide challenges by giving moderately difficult tasks
- Give students a sense of control
- Help students connect learning to their needs and interests.

George Kuh in *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access To Them, And Why They Matter*, identifies ten "High-Impact Activities." Of these, six "high-Impact Activities" were practiced in this class through critiques.

1. Common Intellectual Experiences
2. Learning Communities
3. Writing-Intensive Courses
4. Collaborative Assignments and Projects
5. Diversity/Global Learning
6. Service Learning, Community-Based Learning

Examples of Student Work:

https://ospace.otis.edu/business_writing11/Signature Assignment1/edit

Going forward, I would like to delve deeper into how critiques work in a classroom. In Fall 2017, I will be teaching two Capstone classes and if I am able to secure an OARS grant, I would like to further investigate how critiques can improve classroom experience, learning and grades in these classes. One will be a control group where the class will be taught as a traditional Capstone where individual one-on-one sessions will be the norm. The other Capstone class will have open class critiques where the whole class will participate in the creation of each other's work.

Works Cited

Kuh, George D., and Carol Geary Schneider. *High-impact Educational Practices: what they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008. Print.

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