COMMON TEACHING SITUATIONS

Critiquing Student Projects

Working with student projects in a studio, going over the planning stages of a research project, or working with students putting together a business presentation are all examples of situations in which you may need to critique student projects. Critiquing provides an opportunity to share with students what you know, to enable them to see various options, or to identify flaws in their reasoning or design.

Be sure students understand the requirements of the project.

As students start a project, you must be sure they understand the goals, requirements and criteria for the project. Confirm that they understand by initiating discussion, asking questions, or brainstorming. Encourage students to express their understanding with statements such as: "Explain your understanding of the purpose of this assignment" or "Review with me the important criteria that you feel your project has to fulfill to be successful."

After projects are underway, having students work in pairs or small groups to provide feedback to each other helps keep students on track. However, it's also important that you provide feedback at key stages in the project as well.

Break the problem into manageable parts.

As students begin to think about their projects, focusing on all parts of a project simultaneously can be overwhelming. For example, in Landscape Architecture there may be as many as 25 variables (everything from soil quality to desired aesthetic effect) to consider in a project. Therefore, it can be useful, to walk students through a project slowly, encouraging them to consider distinct aspects of the project before deciding on a final approach.

As students work through projects in manageable parts, you can ask questions to see if they have familiarized themselves with the information relevant to the parts (e.g. colors and tones, soil types; discipline-specific conventions of the journal articles they are synthesizing; ways to construct a balance sheet).

Help the students move toward conceptualization.

Once students feel comfortable with the requirements of the project and with specific parts of it, they are ready to conceptualize an overall design. As they begin to combine elements for their overall conceptualization:

- Help students see every stage of the project in terms of its contribution to the realization of the final goal. ("What are the important factors to be considered in achieving your goal?" or "In what ways might you combine those elements to achieve your goal?")
- Assist students in determining which parts of the concept are/are not meeting the criteria for the project.
- Conclude each session with a summary of the aspects of the conceptualization you have agreed would be enhanced by reconsideration or revision.

Help students move from conceptualization to design.

Other Useful Links

Contact Us
The Graduate School
TA/RA Conference
Resources on Teaching
Mentoring Resources

It is not uncommon for students to resist the move from conceptualizing to designing, from modeling to actual data gathering, or from brainstorming their approach to working out its sequence and emphases. Therefore, it is useful to:

- Use questions or probing statements to assist the students, such as: "Just show me what you have so far," or "What would you do to begin this design?"
- Be sure to approach students who haven't approached you. Ask non-judgmental questions: "Given your concept, I see you've done this here and that there. What effect can you achieve with that kind of contrast?"

Help students move from design to production.

Since some students may spend too much time perfecting their approach and leave too little time for realizing the project, you may have to push students towards completion once the other major steps have been completed. One TA tells her students that neither the design nor the product will be evaluated as a lasting entity, so they should not place undue emphasis on perfection.

As you help student move through major stages of project development, the following additional ideas for constructive feedback may be useful.

- Acknowledge differences in students' backgrounds and preparations. Different students require different levels of explanation and prompting. Where you stop with some may be where you start with others.
- Be sure your students understand the format you will use in critiques. Some instructors prefer to begin the critique by having the students talk about specific strengths and areas for improvement. If you decide to do this, let students know beforehand.
- View the critique as an interactive process. It is often just as important to listen as to talk. The critique provides an opportunity for students not only to explain their thinking but also to use the language of the discipline as they talk about concepts, approaches, and ideas. Their talk about their projects helps them integrate course information and provides you with one more way of assessing how well they are applying what they are learning.
- Make ongoing references to the criteria used to evaluate students' work. ("Now when you are working on composition in your painting, remember that your project will be evaluated for balance, counterpoint, and weight. Let's talk about how your work is meeting those criteria.")
- Try to be descriptive rather than evaluative in talking about projects. One way to accomplish this is to describe your own reactions to the project. Another way is to be aware of the language that you and the students use during the critique. It is typically more constructive to talk about "strengths" and "concepts that worked" or "areas for improvement" or "points for further consideration." Especially when you are encouraging innovation and creativity, it is less helpful to make references to "weaknesses" or that which is "right" or "wrong."
- Be as specific as possible. Rather than saying, "I like the use of lines," it is more helpful to suggest that "The use of lines in your design provides a distinct emphasis and creates a better overall balance of the elements." Provide only the amount of information that your students can use. To overload students with feedback is likely to decrease the effect of information that could provide the most important insights for future use.
- Help students come up with their own solutions rather than being directed to solutions by you. If you have helped them articulate and sharpen their concepts and have discussed design alternatives and choices with them, then you have completed a major portion of your job. Students should base their work on informed choices, and they shouldn't come away thinking there is one "right" answer--yours--to a design problem, essay organization, experiment, or business presentation.
- Try to begin and end each critique on a positive note. Summarize and emphasize specific revisions or areas requiring elaboration or additional attention, but also single out those elements that show promise, even if they are limited to graphics or organization.
- Be authentic in providing feedback. Students can sense false praise or vague positive reinforcement. Be specific about what does work in the project and also about what still needs further development or consideration. Remember that constructive feedback opens the way for instructor/student relationships that lead to personal growth and learning.

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