



## The Benefits of Studio-Based Education and Expert Reviewers for Critiques

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### Abstract

*The studio is many things. It is a space, a class, and a method of instruction. Studio-based learning is the preferred pedagogy for art and design education. It is where students integrate knowledge with application, and prepare for their profession upon graduation. Students often are given an ill-defined problem to solve, one that has multiple acceptable solutions. Several iterations of a design solution will be done, to narrow down the final solution. Each iteration is meant to be an improvement on a previous thought. Students are given a limited time to explore the design problem and present their solutions at a final presentation. This is done at the end of the semester in a public juried event known as a critique or “crit”. A crit differs from a single act of criticism because it is a community event meant to help the student improve his work. The instructing faculty invite a group, or jury, of experts to form a collective judgment of the work and provide opportunities for students to learn the knowledge and attitudes of a design discipline. This critique relies heavily on the judgements of these invited reviewers who are assumed to be disciplinary experts. Yet what qualifies them as an expert? Seldom is the jury process and reviewers questioned or challenged. This study investigates how design instructors select their studio reviewers. In a case study at a large design school in the United States, studio instructors in architecture, industrial design, interior design, landscape architecture, and graphic design responded to open-ended questions about how they, and their colleagues, determine studio reviewers. Benefits to using a studio-based learning method will be discussed; results of the case study will be conferred; and suggestions will be provided for how faculty can better select expert reviewers to aid in student assessment.*

**Keywords:** Pedagogy, Art and Design, Studio Education;

### Introduction

Architecture, art and design rely upon the studio as the central pedagogy in higher education. The studio is many things. The studio is a space, a class, and a method of instruction. It is similar to a scientific laboratory in the hard sciences where students work closely with peers and a professor in one location. It is a unique setting, a learning laboratory, in which students experiment and prepare to practice their profession upon graduation. “The relationship of the design studio and academic course work is a crucial issue in linking theory to practice” [1, p. 40].

Students receive feedback from their instructor every week in class. In addition, special times of the semester such as midterms and finals warrant additional feedback sessions. These feedback sessions are called design reviews or “crits”. Short for critique, the crit is a distinguishing characteristic of studio learning. It was inherited from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and French Academy models [2]. To replicate professional practice, students present their design solution to the proposed project before a “jury” of peers and respected disciplinary practitioners. The instructor organizes and facilitates the review process. Students present their work; the jury praises the project solution’s strengths... and criticizes the project solution’s weaknesses. Students receive feedback from the jury and can reflect on these comments in order to make changes to their design or to improve future design decisions. A more thorough investigation is needed into the various aspects of the crit [3]. Because the studio instructor selects the jurors, who then can aid in assessment of student learning, the studio instructor plays a prominent role as gatekeeper in this process. Ilzor [4] believes the organization and configuration of the review jurors is a problem. This paper addresses the jury selection process.

### The Crit and the Juror

The crit is an opportunity for the student to receive criticism from outside designers and educators other than his studio instructor. The crit is a special event and is treated with high regard. It occurs at the middle of the term and at the end of the term. The final reviews at the end of the term are the most final and the most serious, as the design is in its most complete form. Well regarded designers and even clients are invited and may come from a great distance to participate in the activity. Special

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presentation spaces are set aside for these formal presentations and dialogs. Food and drink are often a part of this event, as it can be also seen as a time to celebrate learning and the end of the formal design process.

The juror is considered an expert. A variety of practitioners provides more perspectives when evaluating student work. In the past, crits were despised by students. They complain that critics do not provide good constructive feedback, and even try to display their power as a “master” designer”. As stated by Lawson [5], the crit is “a place of reckoning, where the classroom authority blesses or disparages an object in which the student has become personally invested” [p. ix]. People with a high level of expertise have several characteristics:

- a. They have acquired formal training and education [5].
- b. They possess domain-specific knowledge [6].
- c. They have a sustained level of productivity [7].
- d. They have 10 or more years of experience [8, 9].
- e. They have a respected industry reputation [10].

## Methodology

The current study was conducted in one design school using a case study methodology. All instructors follow a standardized studio review protocol. The studio instructor is responsible for selecting appropriate jurors. Each instructor may invite four practitioners, with some local and some coming from out-of-state. It is unclear how these studio instructors select their jury members.

The school under investigation includes architecture, industrial design, interior design, landscape architecture, and visual communication design. Sixty-eight studio instructors were identified as potential study participants (43 male and 25 female). Voluntary participation was acquired via individual email sent by the researcher. Two study questions guided this research. They are: 1) How do you determine jurors for your final studio review? and 2) How do you think other instructors determine jurors for their final studio review? Data were analysed using inductive reasoning and typological analysis. Typological analysis is a framework of three stages: reducing data, determining thematic categories, and drawing conclusions [11]. The survey data was reduced to units of analysis and sorted into thematic categories.

## Results

Results from Research Question 1 suggest 13 themes characterize an instructor’s individual juror selection process (see Table 1).

N	%	Theme
16	20.25	Discipline Specific Knowledge
10	12.66	Experience
8	10.13	Personal Connection to Instructor
6	7.59	Alumni (Education + Connection)
6	7.59	Reputation of Individual or Firm/School
6	7.59	Future Networking/Collaborating Opportunity
6	7.59	Others Selected Jurors for Instructor
5	6.33	Availability/Convenience
5	6.33	Professional Credentials/Title
4	5.06	Attitude
3	3.80	Gender
3	3.80	Past Juror
1	1.27	Education



Results from Research Question 2 show a comprehension of what criteria faculty colleagues use to select their jurors. This data is evident in eight themes (see Table 2). Four participants omitted a response to this question.

N	%	Theme
13	35.14	Same
10	27.03	Personal Connection to Instructor
3	8.11	Others Selected Jurors for Instructor
3	8.11	Reputation of Individual or Firm/School
2	5.41	Different
2	5.41	Discipline Specific Knowledge
2	5.41	Availability/Convenience
2	5.41	Future Networking/Collaborating Opportunity

### How one selects a juror

The first research question was “How do you determine jurors for your final studio review?” Having a disciplinary knowledge base is most important in finding an expert juror.. Experts in a domain have the ability to differentiate and remember many concepts and principles within their field and have the highest face validity. Expert designers are those who have mastered a highly developed form of thinking about design and problem solving [6]. In addition, a juror’s work experience is significant. Expertise is developed over time. Domain experience is considered the base level of knowledge to understand one’s discipline. Being an expert can take 10 years or more [9].

A personal connection between an instructor and juror is important. Some work with previous jurors, while others seek the opportunity to meet new practitioners. The juror’s education level was not as important as stated in expertise literature. Past research has shown an expert should have four to eight years of college education [5]. It is also noteworthy that the attitude of the juror was a factor. The juror is selected because he has a willingness to mentor the students, rather than offering criticism without discussion. A positive attitude is an unusual criteria for an expert, but more a requirement of studio education. Criticism is frequently given in studio and then at the crit session. Jurors must deliver criticism to students in a professional yet caring manner.

### How others select a juror

The second question was “Do studio instructors believe other studio instructors determine their jurors in the same manner as they do?” Study results show the majority of instructors (35.14%) believe other instructors select jurors the same way they do. The criteria most frequently stated is a personal connection to the instructor (27.03%), followed by the reputation of the individual or firm/school (8.11%), and having other instructors select their jurors for them (8.11%). It was assumed by study participants that everyone uses the same criteria. A difference of opinion was provided by those who thought the instructor relied heavily on past personal relationships. Finally, it was noted that a juror’s title and credentials could impact their selection.

### Conclusion

A crit can impact the studio learning climate. Some believe the crit can be confusing for students and inadequate for assessment [12]. The design review experience, along with jury, should support the larger educational outcomes of the studio.

While the focus of this study is the critique and its juror selection criteria, the findings are equally applicable to other classroom settings. Faculty who invite experts into their classroom, as guest speakers or reviewers of student work, have the responsibility to bring qualified individuals. Experts who have domain knowledge, 10 years of work experience, some education and a positive attitude should all be considered during the selection process. As an exploratory study, this study provides information that can be used to gain a better understanding of how instructional decisions can influence student learning.



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