CRITS AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING AT UAL

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BACKGROUND- WHAT ARE CRITS?

- Crits ("critiques") are a widely adopted pedagogical method employed at art schools as a form of group feedback.

- Typically there is very little preparation or teaching in place for crits in both running & participating in them, so they can feel extremely exposing and vulnerable for students.

ARTS SU INITIATIVES

- Several student groups have raised issues to the SU with the accessibility of crits as a teaching method (including LGBT+ students, disabled students, students of colour, and international students).

- 'Queer Crits' was an initiative spearheaded by the SU to provide a space for LGBT+ students to receive feedback from other LGBT+ students across UAL.

- For UK Black History Month 2021 a crit event was held by the sabb team at Arts SU for students of colour that participated in an Arts SU exhibition. The student feedback from the event showed that the participating students felt the space was safer and more comfortable than crits they had otherwise experienced

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

- In my experience as a disabled student and a care leaver who discussed these topics in my work, crits could become extremely emotionally charged. I was fortunate to have had a very small course of 8, and felt comfortable around most of them, but with little navigation from tutors on how to protect students' wellbeing within crits they very quickly became a regularly occurring emotionally exhausting part of our studies.

UAL STUDENT TESTIMONIES

"My first tutorial ever I cried in, and my tutor asked me to 'refrain from expressing emotion'. That set me up to have zero positive expectation.

Every crit you have to anticipate arguing that your work is even valid to be in the space. It's like game-face and it's exhausting.

I'm white, cis, and not disabled, and I find the atmosphere inaccessible and often unhelpful. Worst critics are students, enabled by tutors. None of my crits have ever been disastrous, however, I have witnessed the absolute slaughter of other students. The 'helpful' bits are limited. "

- current student, CSM, BA (Hons) Fine Art

WHAT DID WE FIND?

* **"The firing squad"**:

    Brown (2004): "surviving this ordeal [the crit] is seen as a rite of passage, something to aspire to, even though no systematic evidence demonstrates that this atmosphere is necessary for the training of professionals."

    Crossing of personal and emotional boundaries akin to going before a "firing squad" (Day, 2013). Arts school need to ask ourselves, why are we doing teaching like this?

    If crits did not exist, would we invent them in the way they are currently being delivered?

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- **Consent matters in how teaching is delivered and feedback is received**

"[The tutor] sat in my chair, erased my entire drawing, and redrew it to her liking and told me that is how to draw a still life". Other examples included "ceramics instructors breaking pots they did not want to critique or fire, drawing instructors who marked black Xs on students' drawings, a painting instructor who painted orange Xs on a student's canvas to mark deficiencies, and another who threw a student's painting out an upper floor window saying it would look better if it were flying." (Barrett, 2010)

By setting up defined boundaries (e.g. collectively setting boundaries at the start of the crit requiring consent before physically changing any artworks), both the tutor and the student will be clear on what can and cannot take place during the crit

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- **Reforming crits is fundamental to art schools' process of decolonisation**:

  Students of colour reported experiencing in crits:

  - ignorant comments made by those providing feedback

  - the exploitation of the student's perceived 'exoticness' by those providing feedback (for example, trying to tell the student that their artwork was tied to their background, even if the student had explicitly said it was not)

  - the unwillingness of more privileged students (particularly wealthy, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual men) to engage with the lived experience of marginalised groups, and how systems of power have excluded those groups.

NEXT STEPS

Recommendations in the report include:

- Establishing **collective ground rules and boundaries as a norm**; consent and respect being values central to crits; ask what the artist wants to get out of the crit

- training in **'how to participate in a group crit' is a skill** that students would benefit from, and it should be more widely integrated into the curriculum

- Facilitating **community-led crits**, learning from the model of Queer Crits; putting funding in place

- Conversations within the university around **decolonisation, inclusion and anti-racism should include the role of the crit**

- Have an open conversation in UAL about what is the purpose of crits. **If crits didn't exist, would we invent them now in the form in which they currently exist?**

- conduct **further research into the experience of minority and marginalised students and their experiences of crits**. Awarding Gap Review an opportunity for this?

NEXT STEPS

- University-wide working group on reforming crits (a partnership between the university and the Students' Union)

- Awarding Gap Review

- Decolonisation and anti-racism activity across UAL