

Wisdom of the Crowd: People You'll Often Find in Group Critiques

Stephen Knudsen (revised ©2014)

Critic and Sr. Editor/ ARTPULSE Magazine
Professor of Painting/ Savannah College of Art and Design

I know colleagues who have so lost faith in any merits of the art school group critique that it has been eliminated from their art programs. For twenty years, I've led group critiques in the university, and I know critiques can truly test one's faith. But I still believe the critique works more often than not when care is taken to understand some of the sociological aspects of the critique. In part one of this essay we look at "giver characters" in good and poor form in the group critique. Part two looks at "the receiver" characters (those being critiqued), both in good form and poor form. Part three describes additional "giver characters."

To anyone ever subjected to the group critique it is no wonder why it is precarious even as it is so potentially helpful. Here it is worth recalling Pulitzer winner Edward Albee's recent commencement address at an art college, in which he said, "to receive an education is to receive a wound."¹ Yes, knowledge wounds ignorance. We all know the benefit of well-placed toughness and its production of a healthy wound. But in critique, as in other forms of education, individuals often so overshoot the gravity of the exercise that they become reckless with their toughness—not only in mean-spirited critiques, but also in tough critiques with good intentions but bad applications.

On the other hand, fear of making a wound of even the good kind turns some critiques into Voltaire's foil, where the work is always the "best of all possible worlds." Such critiques are hardly deserving of the designation "critique" since simple ego boosting—like a pep rally—is rarely educational.

So how do we get the critique right? To start with, a critique has a better chance of being effective if there is comprehensive understanding of some of the character types in the group. With this in mind, the following is a list of a variety of characters you will often find in an art school critique. I will attempt to illustrate common characters.

We all tend to lean toward a character type (or a mix of character types) in critique—students and professors alike. But my hope is that once we all can recognize both the good and bad qualities that various personas might have, peer pressure and understanding can better promote a constructive and effective critique. Other authors, such as Barbara Martinson², James Elkins, Kendall Buster, and Paula Crawford³, have written elsewhere on this topic as well. I encourage adding readings by those authors to what I have written here. My take is unusual in that I dwell on both good and bad forms of each persona, and my remarks could implicate anyone in the critique group, not just professors.

Ten Giver Characters: (Both professors and peers who make critical remarks)

1. The "Doctor"

The main traits for this type are to diagnose the problems in the student's work, make a prognosis, and then prescribe solutions. When the "doctor" is in good form, he can be of great help, especially to students learning the nuts and bolts of their art: drawing correct proportions in a life class, for example. Especially at the graduate school level, he will often speak to the periphery when it comes to fixing problem works of art. This is done to create better conditions for the students to find their own exact solutions.

But in poor form, the "doctor" takes prescriptions too far, in which case the student may not feel ownership over the idea and it becomes a dead end. And if the whole group follows the lead of a poor doctor, the student may leave the critique with notes that read: "add twenty cats, drag the painting behind your car, and paint a rainbow coming out of the guy's head." Even if a good solution comes out of these pile-ons, the student may not feel ownership over the idea and it becomes a dead end. Specific suggestions should leave room for "drawing out" rather than "forcing in."

2. The "Nurturer"

The main traits for this type are to care for, encourage and reward. The "Nurturer" is helpful when he gives unfavorable feedback with nuanced diplomacy and offers constructive comments on even the most problematic work without dispiriting its creator altogether. He is enthusiastic, offering praise where it is warranted, and includes solid and detailed reasoning behind both positive and negative comments.

But a poor "nurturer" often resembles a politician's spinmeister bent on smothering all harsh criticism with heaps of empty praise, keeping the conversation upbeat no matter what. Selling something as good when it is bad is one of the best ways to kill a critique. When work that is clearly inadequate is praised with no real argument, others can easily see through. It can derail a critique especially if the poor nurturer is the critique gatekeeper and/or is aggressive enough. Flattering platitudes bore and defocus, but, even worse, if this cheap praise is taken as truth by a receiver then motivation to improve can be snuffed out. The poor nurturer might also enable the student, while in critique, to blame weak work on some external issue. For example, a student might explain in all earnestness that his progress was slowed when his roommate accidentally threw the first painting away, thinking it to be trash. There may be a place for some form of commiserating when deserved, perhaps in a private conversation with a clearly insecure or troubled student, but when it plays out in front of the group it simply lowers the bar for everyone.

3. The "Drill Sergeant"

The "Drill Sergeant" type, whose main traits are to instill, pressure and train, believes in rigorous training, academic discipline, objective aesthetic principles, and an uncompromised work ethic. The drill sergeant understands the power of pressure—from peers and professors—in academic training. This type is at her best when she offers analysis that is robust, concise, unfiltered, and frank. If the receiver has slacked off, the drill sergeant is willing to express in no uncertain terms that this lack of effort is unacceptable and is wasting the time of the group.

But this type can be unhelpful and even cruel when she believes that the principles and theories are immutable and absolute. And if the sergeant's advice is not followed, or if the receiver seems unreceptive, punishment is dispensed. Sometimes that punishment from a poor "Drill Sergeant" is immediate: an unnecessarily harsh attack (from foul language to cheap shots of all kinds). And sometimes it's a slow boil: dismissive treatment in future critiques and cutting comments in class. And, of course, the "poor form drill sergeant" feels no obligation to offer explanations for criticisms. Do not ask "why" of poor form drill sergeants. They are just there to be heard and obeyed. The approach is despotic—it aims, fires, but does not justify.

Note on a renowned "Drill Sergeant":

Before Robert Hughes died in 2012, he was quite possibly the best-known 21st century art critic. He did for criticism what Shakespeare did for the stage. He was sound and fury speaking in a booming voice while just barely opening his mouth. He was notorious for his occasional poor-form drill sergeant remarks, especially toward certain celebrity kitsch artists who came into his crosshairs. (Though he was often in good form as well). When his poetic grit was in poor form he dismissed work without thorough explanation. It was an exercise that was entertaining and brutal but not educational, at least concerning the work.

In the film series *The Mona Lisa Curse*, Mr. Hughes walks alone in the courtyard of New York's Lever House and delivers judgment on its infamous Damien Hirst sculpture. Hughes, leaning back and looking up at the enormous work, remarks: "Isn't it a miracle what so much money and so little ability can produce? Just extraordinary. You know, when I look at a thing like this, I realize that so much of art—not all of it, thank God—but a lot of it has just become a cruddy game for the aggrandizement of the rich and ignorant. It has become a kind of bad but useful business."⁴

Hughes was simply unwilling to expand his biting wit into evaluation in this case—formal, conceptual, or otherwise—that might explain his disgust and perhaps even give pause to those who disagree. There is no doubt that he was capable of such a nuanced evaluation (e.g., justifications for his dislike of Barnett Newman's works in his text *American Visions*).⁵ But when Mr. Hughes indulged in the occasional omission of justification, it left his professional judgment naked. His brutal fluency then signified little beyond the thumb pointing down.

It is hard to imagine the effectiveness of such extreme un-contextualized critiques in academia, but still bad Sergeanting shows up there frequently. Perhaps this happens because it is an easy way to get a reputation of being tough. Perhaps it happens because of the theory that work perceived as bad does not deserve full discourse. It certainly does not show itself to be educational. I am all for furious judgment as long as there is furious evaluation to go with it. Hughes more often did both. And that is precisely why he should have been forgiven for his classic lapses into bare judgment. In academia, however, with students on the line, such lapses in evaluation do too much harm to be forgiven.

4. The "Storyteller"

The "Storyteller", whose traits are to narrate, illuminate, and ruminate over works of art, is most helpful when he or she is able to reinforce important points with anecdotes that may be personal, historical, or even fictional. These stories create "memory pegs" that help the receiver—and everyone in the group—understand and retain the analysis, much of which can be abstract.

But the "Storyteller" falters when he tells stories simply for the love of the art form—to entertain the group, win laughs and pique intrigue and hear himself talk. This inevitably leads to rambling anecdotes that are only tangentially related to the topic at hand, or not at all. Though it may be a more enjoyable way to spend an afternoon than enduring a nerve-wracking critique, it is hardly educational. The student

(the receiver) might even be insulted if it seems that the artwork is not worthy of the group's full attention.

5. The "Synthesizer"

The successful "Synthesizer", who encapsulates, contextualizes, and gives scope, is a great assembler of critical details into the big picture. The successful "Synthesizer" is able to articulately incorporate disparate comments from the entire group in a way that encapsulates even the most digressive or argumentative discussions. This sharpens the tone and key points of the critique for everyone involved.

But when the "Synthesizer" falls short, she spends a lot of time rehashing others' comments or stating what is patently obvious—without framing a meaningful picture and forming new insights. She may just repeat what someone else said in slightly different terms so it seems like she's contributing something.

6. The "Church Mouse"

The "Church Mouse" is most happy to simply listen and watch. He might speak...maybe. In good form, he may speak up occasionally, usually requiring a long pause of silence to jump in. In the best scenarios, the "Church Mouse" carefully chooses a few sentences to articulate a profound insight that is not lost in a wash of extra verbiage and a gratuitous number of contributions. It's important to point out that some of the most profound statements can come from a "Church Mouse" type since they spend so much time listening and choose moments to speak carefully.

But this type is in poor form if he never speaks up. Sometimes in an undergraduate critique, you can have a whole room full of such types, particularly if fear enters into the dynamic.

7. The "Authoritarian"

The "Authoritarian", who will often be the type to lead and prioritize, has such a status because of achievement (advanced degrees, top gallery representation, high level curatorial experience, professional academic writing achievements, awards, etc.). The best types of "Authoritarians" deliver judgments with the only intention being to help the receiver become a better artist in the hope that the receiver's success will rise above the success of the authoritarian. Often, the good "Authoritarian" will clearly vocalize evaluations and negotiate checks and balances on the group critique. This does not mean, though, that a good authoritarian must always run the critique verbally: In some cases, this type may let long group critiques play out until she even makes a remark, which can be a powerful tool in such discussions.

But the "Authoritarian" may be unsuccessful if she takes on an air of authority without having the success, credentials, and/or wisdom to back it up. This type may also not succeed when she delivers judgments in a critical, competitive spirit with hopes that the receiver's success will not outpace the authoritarian's own.

Note on an a very unusual and effective authoritarian:

The Late CAL Arts Professor Michael Asher was renowned for his five- hour- per- student daylong critiques called his "post-studio critiques" (bring food and cushions). Hours would often go by before he made a single short remark, often no longer than a sentence.⁶This, of course, was the stage that he as authoritarian set to let a performance play out—one that requires that students of a sound-bite culture to think about and discuss a work for what seemed an eternity. It was an effective rite of passage critique that makes a point about slowing down to think.

8. The "Psychoanalyst"

The typical traits of this type of person are to listen, uncover and personalize. In good form, she wants to know the person—not just the art. There is a true concern for the individual: Where the artist comes from, his or her thoughts or beliefs, and the personal significance behind the work. By bringing out such

details, the "Psychoanalyst" tries to validate and understand the attempt and specific intentions (and sometimes psychological motivations) to make good artwork.

But the "Psychoanalyst" is in poor form when she crosses a line that would only be appropriate for a one-to-one therapy session, but not for a group academic critique. Once the psychoanalyst starts to feel that every intimate detail of the receiver's life is fair game, there is a problem. Also, in such cases the artist becomes the object of the critique instead of the artwork.

9. The "Contrarian"

This type in a group critique will often go against the prevailing argument or discussion, and, of course, popular opinion. The "Contrarian" is essential in academia to push others to double-check their analysis and judgments. The best contrarians stay collegial and diplomatic in articulating contrasting viewpoints. The comments stay directed at the work and not pointed at another critique member.

But "Contrarians" can be problematic when they introduce viewpoints that sound like junior high-school students, such as, "Your view is completely wrong—here is my view." Such contrarians may also take the opposing view as his standard practice, making it an empty exercise.

10. The "Humorist"

"Humorists", who will often joke, entertain and lighten the mood in a critique class, are at their best when they use any form of humor in a good-natured way for a number of good reasons. Let's face it: A laugh can break the tension of an emotionally difficult moment, and can make a good point about a work more palatable and memorable. It can also unify the group if everyone shares in the laugh. The good humorist seizes moments of humor that everyone else misses.

I am reminded of the professor who had just finished the last critique, and it was time for his closing remarks to end the course and send the students onto summer break. The artwork critiqued was a painting that a student had done based on her mother's old high school yearbook. After the professor gave his usual collegial wrap-up and encouragement, he said, "I only have one more remark to add—rather profound, if I do say so myself." He asked the student if he could borrow the yearbook. Paging to a note written in the yearbook, the professor read it aloud: "Well, we made it through another year. It was fun hanging out with you. Sorry about that accident in chemistry class with the Clorox. But that wasn't too bad. Have a great summer. Love Ya." The course ended on a laugh that helped make everything in that critique and course more memorable, especially the yearbook painting.

However, the "Humorist" can have a downside: he may use a laugh in a self-serving or vindictive, even cruel way. The humor is often at the expense of someone else in the group, frequently the artist (the receiver).

Six Receiver Characters: (Those receiving critical comments)

1. The "Apologizer"

The "Apologizer's" main traits include self-deprecation and backing down. This type in good form does not try to get sympathy, but simply says, "I know my work needs some frank criticism for its failures, so please do not hold back, as I want to do better and need your help." What one hopes for in this case is that the apology will encourage the group: This can be especially effective in turning a group of bad church mice and false nurturers into good drill sergeants, detectives, prophets, and directors.

In poor form this type starts a critique with a long apology and description of the inadequacies of the work usually to gain sympathy and to attempt to get others to go easy on him. Such an apology can deflate the critique. If apologies go long enough they can take up most of the time that should have been used for actual critique of the work by the “givers”.

How to Help a Poor- Form “Apologizer”:

A critique character can come to the rescue and try to segue the apology into critique by others. She might say, “Thank you for your frankness and giving us permission to be candid.” Then, hopefully, the good drill sergeant will show up with some toughened, but reasoned, judgments. If the apology continues to be brought up endlessly an authoritarian may need to show up—the professor, perhaps—and cut the critique short. This prevents time from being wasted and sends the message that a poor work ethic and fawning apologizing have consequences beyond just a bad grade.

2. The “Defender”

As the name suggests, “Defenders”, arm against, shield from, and counter comments or criticism.

“Defenders” in good form keep themselves in check. Some defending can be positive. For example, if the artist wants to steer the critique away from unproductive tangents and left-field analysis then defending has its place. This seems to be productive only if the “Defender” has the floor for relatively brief periods for concise and precise remarks.

“Defenders” are in poor form when they act like defendants in a courtroom. They will guard themselves and their work with an intention to win the case, not thinking about the possibility of some aesthetic wrongdoing or ill-conceived idea that needs correction. This type of artist will often talk more than all of the other participants combined. The result is that little progress is made in gleaning any constructive criticism or judgments from the group. In fact, the poor-form “Defender” will often interrupt others, stealing much of the judgment time.

Helping a Poor-Form a “Defender”:

To tone down an over-talkative “Defender” the detectives should stop asking loaded questions and perhaps questions all together. Asking questions, though good in moderation, may need to cease in such times. The authoritarian might say, “Now let’s move out of the question phase and just focus on the group’s pure responses and judgments regarding the work.”

The best way to collegially and permanently correct poor form defending may be for the true authoritarian (the professor) to address the problem in a private meeting or to set some new ground rules for critiques (although this should be done by speaking generally to the group on a different day).

3.The “Resonator”

The “Resonator” is receptive to criticism. Such art students learn from it, and then “retune” their ideas, concepts and artwork. Upon receiving advice, the resonator takes in every nuance, sleeps on it, and often responds to it through the work, an experiment, or some serious daydreaming that entertains the suggested advice. The energy of the advice is picked up much like one vibrating tuning fork transfers part of its resonance to another.

The “Resonator” can go wrong and become confused and unproductive if every shred of advice from a group, advice that is often contradictory, is considered equally important. In this case, the student’s own inner directives and impulses are drowned out, leaving no room for problem solving with some facet of

creative independence. When in good form, the resonator takes suggestions and processes them with creative independence, finding rhythms and solutions that she can own.

4. The “Resistor “

The “Resistor” is cautious in validating; accepting, and trying suggested ideas or ways of working. He considers individual comments about his work suspect until they pass tests of corroboration with others and, most importantly, with his own inner voice. Resistors, sometimes rightfully so, can resist compliments as much as negative feedback.

The “Resistor” in good form, though suspicious, stays open to voices, even those that may seem singular and odd. The good “Resistor” will occasionally say, “Even if it goes against my grain and the grain of the group, what do I have to lose?” This might lead to little experiments to test suggestions. This type of “Resistor” does stay suspect of input, does not become a slave to it, and can easily shake off advice that does not fit, and moves on.

The “Resistor” in poor form never tries anything that does not have the stamp of approval of his inner voice. The poor resistor can also, if left out of check, spend so much time defending work that the givers can hardly get in a word, and valuable criticism never gets delivered.

5. The “Stonewaller”

“Stonewallers” tend not to disclose information or ideas about their artwork. This type of art student feels that it is important to withhold verbal or written information about his work in order to allow the viewers to have a pure response without the interference of artist’s intentions or interpretations. It is rare, but some student stonewallers will even refuse to write an artist’s statement the entire time they are in graduate school.

It should be noted that stonewalling has benefits, as an exercise, especially if the professor orchestrates it and everyone has a turn as a stonewaller. But as a long-term stance in the academic environment, stonewalling subverts the potential for sustained and meaningful feedback from peers and professors. The stonewaller has little place in the academic environment where one of the main aims is to help the work rise to the maker’s intentions. The stonewaller’s stance might be better suited for the professional arena, especially after a reputation of artistic excellence has been created. However, even in that environment, stonewallers are rare.

The positive effect of stonewalling in the professional realm is to create an enigma that actually enriches the variety of critical and theoretical interpretations of the work.

An Iconic “Stonewaller”:

Throughout his career Marlin Brando rarely appeared on talk shows, and if he did, he shunned questions about his films, his craft, and his intentions and would rather, as he put it, “talk about something important.” (See the Brando/Cavett video clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAPDQ5MILxE>)

Helping a student “Stonewaller”:

The easiest way to correct an art student who has become an academic stonewaller is for a character (usually the authoritarian) to simply point out the stonewaller’s mistake about context and concede the point that there may be a time, later, in the professional context to put the stonewalling talent to use.

6. The “Crier”

The crier in poor form is really an actor making tears to garner sympathy and is manipulative. The crier in good form does it out of an honest human response.

Emotional outbursts like crying can occur when the psychoanalyst pries too deeply, when the drill-sergeant barks too loudly, or just simply after a profound quip from a church mouse. Although making a receiver cry as a goal in and of itself is always in poor form, honest crying can be okay. Sometimes, depending on the personality of the art student, it may be uncontrollable, and when it happens, it reminds everyone in the group of the sanctity of what they are doing: That comments can be remembered for a lifetime, and shape an individual's path, artistic or otherwise.

We all know that critiques can get emotional. But how should you respond when emotions rise to the surface in a group critique? My advice is that it's best to assume that the crier is honest and to respond accordingly with empathy. But unreserved sympathy can be a bad idea, as it can call undue direct attention to the emotional release. When emotions of distress are high, it is best for characters, especially the authoritarian, to acknowledge emotions as good and to steer any needed corrections. This is best done with subtlety, on the periphery, not targeted directly at the crier or the character that precipitated the response.

An authoritarian can diffuse a situation involving rising emotional distress by crafting a validating pause in the critique. He can say, "This is one of the few places in the world that people with utterly different ideas share and actually listen to one another, and that can get emotional and that is all right because in the end we strengthen one another." This is not a diversion, but rather a validating pause that works to remind the group of the goal and to let emotions settle down, so talking about the work can resume.

With this approach, the group continues to talk about the work in safety, knowing that emotions are valid and are often part of the critique, both in the open and under the surface—as long as it is all framed in a constructive manner.

Ten Additional Giver Characters: (Both professors and peers who make critical remarks)

1. "The See-er "

The "See-er" in good form can memorize seemingly every particular of a work of art. The "See-er", more than anyone else, usually gets out of the chair and looks at the work from every possible angle and distance. If the group were to turn and face away from the work of art, the see-er would be able to recall detail that even the maker may not remember. The see-er likes to get fully acquainted with a work before passing judgment and finds first impressions to be somewhat suspect, though not always wrong. Truly looking and savoring the details of a work is the seer's forte. In critique, the see-er will often focus observations and will create "ah ha" moments as she points out aspects of a work that no one else could see. The "See-er" in best form will be able to attach those observations to judgments about the work in cause/effect analysis.

The "See-er" in a lesser form, though still valuable for describing, does not put the skill of deep seeing to the task of expressing nuanced cause /effect evaluation and judgment.

2. The “Multi-tasker”

The “Multi-tasker” in good form might interject pertinent announcements in a critique. For example, it may play out like this: “Friday, a Joseph Albers retrospective at the MOMA opens, and there might be something to be gained in understanding the work that we are looking at here if we go.” The good multi-tasker might use a phone to Google a term or find a picture to make a central point about a work. ESL students may be multi-tasking using a phone app to learn an unknown word spoken in a critique.

The “Multi-tasker” in poor form interrupts the critique, and possibly his/her own point about the work, to say something like, “Oh, before I forget to remind all of you, my friend, Bo Bartlett, has a show opening on Friday at the P.P.O.W.” Of course, such unrelated interruptions break flow and possibly will insult the critique receiver. Announcements are best made in other contexts. Many of us have witnessed even greater multi-tasker sins: balancing a checkbook, texting, studying for an exam, or walking out to take a call during a critique. Such activity, even if it seems under the radar does lasting damage to the sanctity of the critique in the context of that group.

3. The “Orator”

The “Orator” often has the gift of gab and can turn a phrase as easily and eloquently as a talk show host.

The “Orator” in good form watches the body language of the group to make sure that he is not usurping the critique. The good orator often has comments that are insightful and significant but is careful not to go too far, giving fair time to others in the group. Of course, fair time does not mean equal time, and there are occasions where the orator should speak more than others. (On occasions, it is expected of the professor.)

In Bad form, as when the “Orator” talks excessively, others stop listening and some resentment builds. Sometimes everyone else becomes church mice and the group genius is subverted. William Strunk’s “omit needless words” is a good mantra for the orator.

4. The “Director “

The “Director” in good form has specific suggestions about changing habits, processes, subject matter, formal qualities and/or even content to improve the artwork. It is done, however, in a manner where spoon-fed directives are not the modus operandi. The suggestions are delivered with enough openness to various possibilities so that the receiver can come to the nuanced conclusions themselves and therefore better own the decisions that will improve the work. (Much like the doctor in good form.)

But The “Director” in poor form bombards the receiver with long, unsubstantiated litanies of exactly how to change content, process, and formal qualities to make the work better. If the director in a graduate critique is coming so close as practically picking up the brush and doing the work for the artist (even in spirit), then we have the analog to the infamous line- reader theatre director: “Here...say it like this.” The director becomes even worse when no reasons are articulated for these proposed changes. Sometimes non-authoritarian “Directors” also get overbearing in trying to direct others on how they should critique.

5. The “Prophet”

The “Prophet” in good form is able to see and articulate virtues and potential in the work that the receiver has no or little understanding of. The comments might focus on heretofore-unarticulated essences and potentialities of the work. The good prophet can also see the dead-end that will be coming if the receiver continues on a present path with work possibly ill-conceived, empty, and un-engaging.

But the “Prophet” in poor form can subvert the identity of good work and of the receiver with words that are intended to completely transform the work into the personal vision of the prophet. This can work in the favor for some if the vision is strong and happens to resonate with the maker, but it can be detrimental to others.

6. The “Detective”

The “Detective” in good form poses questions to uncover the essences and nuances of the artist’s intentions. The group can then better determine if the work matches those intentions. If the work falls short, the group can suggest improvements but again without subverting the maker’s identity. The good detective leaves the questioning and the judgments as two separate processes. Judgments will form, but the judgment should not be delivered as a question. A good detective avoids loaded questions that can make the receiver resistant to share.

The “Detective” in poor form poses loaded questions to make veiled judgments. Example: “Is not making an effort an aesthetic strategy for you?” These are usually judgments that have no analytical back up since they are couched as questions and not full analytical remarks. It is best to leave questions as fact gathering and to put judgment elsewhere in the process.

7. The “Eraser”

Eraser philosophy goes back to the old academies and was particularly prevalent in the 19th century French academy. The idea was to wipe the slate clean in a student and then inculcate that student into strict protocols to promote classical ideals in form, drawing, brushwork, subject matter, and content.

Today a good form “Eraser” is rare. This would be someone who would be bold enough to tell a peer/student that what is being done is probably a dead-end and explain why. Rarely do we ever see an eraser arise to challenge the untouchable: a person’s content. But sometimes that deserves criticism, as well, and if an eraser can get a peer/student to start something fresh with a clean slate, it may be a great favor in the end. Of course, the eraser would go into bad form in pushing someone into what the new content should be. That cannot be taught and students must find their own way on the general content

issues in order to truly own the work. Certainly, after that the group genius can assist in the nuances of that content.

Today, poor-form strict “Erasers” are also rare. Even in foundational courses where strict criterion is called for, often the student is allowed to steer the work into content and even subject matter of choice, especially in out-of-class independent projects. In the pluralism of graduate studies today, a 19th century eraser would be crucified, so it is rare to see the kind of eraser that today would be called poor-form “Eraser.”

8. The “Diplomat”

The “Diplomat” in good form makes skillful negotiations in understanding and delivering the truth. Sometimes a group reaches a momentum in one particular direction that builds too rapidly. Say, in the first five minutes of a critique, the tone is excessively positive or excessively negative. The diplomat can slow the momentum so rather than clear-cutting to the truth, the group selectively cuts. Possibly no one ever wrote so eloquently of diplomacy as Emily Dickenson in her poem about truth:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—Emily Dickenson

Imagine a group that has told the truth with such robust enthusiasm that the artist in five minutes has been told how the work fails in five different ways. A diplomat in good form might ask, “What is there to like about this work?” Or the good diplomat might offer insight that reminds the group that what we should look for now is the small virtue that needs to be validated to make the critique fair and equitable and to make sure that the small virtue can become that harbinger of better work to come. The diplomat can also be the advocate of the balanced truth when a very strong work is not getting the respect of having its small points of inadequacies voiced. A diplomat in good form is also sensitive to the clock. Interventions are chosen carefully and kept in moderation.

But the “Diplomat” in poor form does not respect the limitations of time and takes up too much of it in an attempt to smooth out all the rough edges of a critique.

9. The “Team Player”

The “Team Player” in good form keeps a good outlook no matter how problematic a critique may become. This type does not give up on the critique or anyone in the group. The goal of a collective effectiveness—helping the receiver—stays primary.

The “Team Player” in poor form is fixed to herd mentality and leaves unvoiced any thoughts that go against the dominant flow. Human nature or not, if the whole group gets overly homogenized, the great premise of the university is subverted: diversity.

10. The “Poet”

The Poet has a gifted tongue, leaves behind memorable words, and makes criticism an art. Having this type in the group can be an absolute pleasure. History is loaded with talented critics being poets, many with work that weathers time: (19th century critique by Charles Baudelaire), (20th century critique by Robert Hughes), and (21st century critique by Peter Schjeldahl and Barry Schwabsky). These are just four of the many poet/critics in recent history. If the good “Poet” shows up, count your blessings. In good form, the remarks will be more than just memorable word-smithing and will cut to the heart (or a key peripheral issue) of the work. Often this kind of criticism is a work of art in itself. This is not a bad idea: a work of art critiquing a work of art.

The “Poet” in poor form may be great to listen to but creates such a great work of art in the speech itself that really the critiqued work is just a prop in an eloquent talk from the ego. For instance, a tangent, as lovely as it may be, may not come back to the work and the chief end of student critique.

How Understanding and Acceptance of Critique Characters Fosters Better Group Critiques

Everyone has tendencies of one or more of these characters (and/or a character not listed).

Improving Group Critiques by Understanding the Characters

Everyone has tendencies of one or more of these characters (or with additional characters not listed in this essay). Knowledge of characters combined with positive peer pressure gets participants and the whole critique into good starting form. Individuals can build versatility by playing other characters at their very best while being sensitive to the best way a receiver might take in information. For example, it brings everyone to attention when a student who usually is a church mouse lets loose as a drill sergeant with a remark like , “it is unfortunate that this painting is clearly not finished.”

The story goes that Groucho Marx once remarked, “I did not like the play, but then I saw it under adverse conditions—the curtain was up.” Hopefully with some scrutiny on the common performers in a critique, we can come to a healthy vision of what a good critique can be. Then having the curtain up and letting the show go on won’t seem so adverse.

Addendum

I have used this essay as required reading to prime many critiques. At other times, I have not used it. The primed group always has less gunning from the ego, more empathy, and more good humor. And with that in place the chief end of the critique usually shows itself: to truly help one another.

- 1) Albee, Edward Commencement Address, Savannah College Of Art And Design, 2003
- 2) Martinson, Barbara, *Alternative personae: An Irreverent Look at the Role of the Instructor in Critique Sessions* From the FATE in Review 21, pg. 42-45, 1999.
- 3) Buster, Kendall and Crawford, Paula , *The Critique Handbook: A Sourcebook and Survival Guide*, Prentice Hall, 2006
- 4) Hughes, Robert, *The Mona Lisa Curse*, 2008, (award-winning documentary film : see this film clip at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw1neeF_GNc)
- 5) Hughes, Robert, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.
- 6) Thornton, Sarah, *Seven Days in The Art World*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Stephen Knudsen is a professor of Painting at Savannah College of Art and Design, and he exhibits his work in galleries and museums throughout the United States and Europe. He is a senior editor and art critic for *ARTPULSE Magazine*, and he is a contributing writer for *The Huffington Post*, *Hyperallergic*, *The SECAC Review Journal*, *Notes on Metamodernism* and the *artstory.org*.