

Calibrating for Kindness

A Pedagogical Encounter with Video Essay Students

I have chosen to write this reflection in the first person. I appreciate that this is not generally the mode of address adopted for an academic/scholarly paper; however, given that this discussion develops from my own experiences as both a student and lecturer within the higher education system in the UK, I felt it was important to present these thoughts as transparently as possible.

This paper develops from a roundtable discussion I participated in during the symposium «Videography: Art and Academia. Epistemological, Political and Pedagogical Potentials of Audiovisual Practices» which took place in Hannover in November 2022. For the roundtable, entitled «Field Reports by (Artistic) PhD Candidates», I chose to offer some thoughts on my experience with feedback on my videographic PhD practice. Since 2019, I have made a number of video essays as part of my research, and I have been lucky enough to have some of these published in peer-reviewed journals. In my comments at the symposium, I suggested that the title of the roundtable rightly highlighted the artistic nature of video essay making within scholarly research practice, but in doing so it also raised a question (for me at least) about how this art might be critiqued by peers, tutors, and supervisors. For my own part, I have become aware of the fact that I respond differently to feedback on my video essays than I do on my written work. As I seek to explore and experiment with the form of the video essay, I am finding my work incorporates more artistic elements, and perhaps a greater personal investment, with the result being that any negative feedback on the work immediately feels more personal, even if it is not intended as such. Indeed, I initially found it difficult to respond positively to otherwise well-meaning feedback, which has led me to wonder at the feedback I have given to others on their video essays, and how it might have been received. It has taken me a little time to calibrate my response to feedback on my video essay work, and I suggest that this is in part down to the fact that I did not anticipate how personally invested I would be in the creative practice, in the making of these video essays, instead seeing it as something I could, and would engage with from a critical distance. Acknowledging the artistic imperative in video essay making is to also acknowledge that there is very likely more at stake for the maker of such works, more of themselves invested in the work. That is, the work itself expects, indeed on occasions it will require them to immerse (as opposed to simply engage) themselves in it, and as such, they are taking feedback and critique on something which they might have a significant personal and emotional stake in. In this situation, I do not believe it is possible, or even conscionable, to expect an undergraduate student to shoulder the sole burden of unpacking this feedback conundrum, and to strive to not take

it personally. In this paper, I would like to offer some further thoughts on calibrating the delivery of feedback, and also calibrating to receive it, but this time from the perspective of the tutor rather than the student, as I now find myself leading a module teaching audiovisual essay making to undergraduate film students.

Context

The module in question features a relatively even split between theoretical discussion of the subject and the practical making of an audiovisual artefact (a video essay). Several exercises are incorporated into the early part of the module (over the first six weeks) and these are modelled on the «Middlebury Method»¹ referring to the workshops on videographic criticism which have been hosted at Middlebury College by Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell. The latter part of the module is given over to the making of an individual audiovisual artefact with each student defining the subject and scope of their own work. It is in this latter part of the module, where the students transition from prescriptive exercises into the much broader scope of their own artistic practice, where I feel I need to redefine what form my feedback to them might take.

To Reinvent the Wheel

My decision to review the form and method of delivering feedback on this module is not presented as a criticism of any other existing feedback method. Indeed, my research regarding the process of feeding back to students on video essay making in particular has turned up very little in the way of a definitive process which might be followed. Where the «Middlebury method» has provided me, as a novice video essay tutor, with a selection of tried and trusted exercises to work through with my students, there is little discussion of the way I might provide feedback to them on the success (or otherwise) of their efforts. Given the relative novelty of the video essay as a subject taught within the academy, and indeed reflecting on the somewhat nebulous nature of the form itself, it is perhaps not surprising to find that this aspect of delivery has been overlooked, or perhaps it has been taken as read that pre-existing feedback mechanisms can be used. So why reinvent the wheel?

This new form also raises issues of medium-specificity in a context of long-established academic assessment standards and practices: for example, should we be aiming to «translate» the (often unspoken) norms and traditions of written film studies into audiovisual versions, or should we embrace from the outset the idea that we are creating ontologically new scholarly forms.²

I suggest that the «long-established academic assessment standards and practices»³ noted here by Catherine Grant must include the nature of the feedback process that

compliments this new scholarly form. And that this feedback mechanism should take account of the different personal investment that an undergraduate student might make in their video essay practice, where Johannes Binotto suggests there is coming together, and perhaps even a clash, of artistic and academic skills and potentials.⁴ This is not to suggest that all the students I teach (or indeed any of them) might embrace this stance in their making, but my intention is to encourage them, as I was, to invest themselves in the work, in the material of their study, and to see themselves as filmmakers who create work which answers their artistic impulse as much as it does their academic imperative. To respond appropriately to this new scholarly form, a feedback method needs to not only anticipate this best-case scenario, but also encourage students towards it.

Feedback or Critique?

In their article «Kindness in Educational Critique»,⁵ Caroline Yoon and Sarah Penwarden identify the tendency for tutor feedback to be corrective, often seeking to close a perceived gap between the student's current level of understanding as demonstrated by their work on a particular task, and the desired (or required) ultimate goal for that work.⁶ Within the context of an undergraduate assignment such as the one I am discussing here, there is indeed an element of correctness which needs to be adhered to by the student makers. But this can be a loosely defined set of acceptable parameters for the work, based on less creatively informed elements such as length of video essay, source material, engagement with academic discourse, and awareness of the larger body of videographic work. These parameters help shape a «right» for the end product, providing sufficient scaffolding for the student to feel safe in exploring their artistic impulse, whilst retaining creative wiggle room. But these parameters don't, and ideally shouldn't, overly constrain the final shape of the creative work itself. Indeed, if there is any scholarly output which appears to be able to flex and adapt to new approaches, it is the video essay. So, in this context feedback should be less about ensuring that students get it right, and more about helping them recognise where it might be getting interesting. Yoon and Penwarden suggest then that the term «critique» be employed for this kind of specific interaction with students, suggesting that a critique «seeks to nurture the growth of some creative work: not by prescribing what that growth must look like, but by nurturing the emerging capacity of the creator to extend their work». ⁷

Function Meets Form

Using the term «critique» makes for an easy and perhaps obvious association with the «crit», a teaching and feedback method used in art and design education, where students present their work to a tutor, a panel, their peers, or a combination of all of these, and engage in a discussion about the work.⁸ In the context of art and design practice, the crit is

part of the iterative design process, not unlike the latter stages of the video essay module I am delivering, where students are working on a weekly basis towards the completion of their audiovisual artefact. It is important to note that the crit is not a passive process of feedback reception for the student. A crit offers the opportunity for a presentation and potentially a defence of the work, rather than the disembodied, and somewhat one-sided process of written comments or feedback on work being emailed or shared. As such the success of the crit, for both student and tutor, is dependent on the student's ability to engage fully with it, to be able to do their work justice within the dynamic of the crit. To employ the crit as part of my teaching method implies that it is incumbent on me to ensure that students understand the purpose of the crit and are sufficiently prepared to make best use of it.

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To make this more than simply an exercise in semantics, where feedback is now critique, and desk tutorials are now crits, I need to also submit to my own revisioning, where the language of the traditional feedback encounter is re-written, re-calibrated for a kinder engagement. It is worth noting that the term kindness is not used here as a surrogate for leniency, and to seek to bring kindness into a pedagogical encounter is not to suggest that errors will be overlooked.⁹ Rather it is a shift in perspective on the part of the tutor, to «actively soften the typical power structures ... that enable their control» and to give «themselves over to the mood of pedagogical humility, and not only employing techniques that mimic it regardless of what they feel».¹⁰ The phrase «you can take or leave this feedback» is often tempered for the student by the corrective (sometimes instructive) language employed in its delivery and the fact that there is a clear tutor/tutee dynamic where a very real consequence (grades/academic achievement) is at stake. The softening of power structures within the crit process, and the dialogic nature of the encounter with their tutor, helps position the critique in such a way that the student feels empowered to respond to it in a way that is most useful to them, and to the development of their work. When viewed from this perspective it is possible to discern a clear distinction between the corrective nature of the feedback process (and the specific language that accompanies it) and the critique which reflects an encounter with the artistic work (and the artistic student). And in the specific case of the video essay, where I am encouraging my students to explore their own personal encounter with the material of their study (film in this case) why should I not expect my critique to be anything other than another form of personal encounter, «a necessarily subjective one».¹¹

I am aware as I conceive of this process of video essay critique, that the ideals found within this text might yet warrant further revision. I am most keenly concerned that a process like the one I have suggested here might ultimately prove to be less useful to certain students, and that elements of corrective feedback may still find a place in student encounters. I can also not lose sight of the fact that this process must work in the best interests of, and for the benefit of the student. Where its sensibilities clash with the best outcome for a student within the context of the module, then individual adjustments should be made. As such, it is my kindest intention to continue to calibrate this process of critique, and my own engagement with it, to each new encounter with my artistic students.

1Liz Greene: Teaching the Student, Not the Subject: Videographic Scholarship, in: The Cine-Files, Fall 2020, www.thecine-files.com/teaching-the-student-not-the-subject/ (20.2.2023).

2Catherine Grant: The Shudder of a Cinephiliac Idea? Videographic Film Studies Practice as Material Thinking, in: ANIKI: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image, vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 2021, 49-62.

3Ibid.

4Johannes Binotto: Accenting the Accidental: Video Essay Research as Experimental Practice, at THEORY & PRACTICE OF THE VIDEO-ESSAY, 22.9.2022 UMass Amherst.

5Caroline Yoon & Sarah Penwarden: Kindness in Educational Critique, in: Knowledge Cultures, vol. 9, no. 3, 2021, 169-183, doi: 10.22381/kc93202110.

6Ibid.

7Ibid.

8John Healy: The Components of the «Crit» in Art and Design Education, in: Irish Journal of Academic Practice, vol. 5, no. 1, doi: 10.21427/D7RB1V.

9Sue Clegg & Stephen Rowland: Kindness in Pedagogical Practice and Academic Life, in: British Journal of Sociology of Education, vol. 31, no. 6, 719-735, doi: 10.1080/01425692.2010.515102.

10Jason McDonald & Esther Michela: This Is My Vision: How Students Depict Critiques along with Themselves During Critiques, in: Journal of Design Research, vol. 18, no. 1/2, 57-59, doi: 10.1504/JDR.2020.10033227.

11Yoon & Penwarden: Kindness in Educational Critique.