

Crippling the Crit: **Exploring the inclusivity of** **crits and presentations at** **through the lens of** **Disability Studies**

Carys Kennedy (c.kennedy@arts.ac.uk /  [/CarysKennedy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/CarysKennedy))

About me

- Senior Lecturer in Creative Education at University of the Arts London (UAL).
- Worked in UAL's Disability Service for 10 years.
- PhD student at the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds.



Research questions

- What barriers do disabled students encounter in crits and presentations?
- To what extent is the crit as a mode of assessment underpinned by ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness?

These research questions were inspired by a recent legal case (University of Bristol V Dr Robert Abrahart), and the sad death of Natasha Abrahart.

“

The crit is a model of learning whereby artists present their work to a group in order to gain feedback on how that work is being ‘read’ and ways that they might develop it further. Though they might be called different names and take on different formats, crits are a part of almost every art course at further and higher level education throughout the UK

”

Q-Art, 2013, p.11

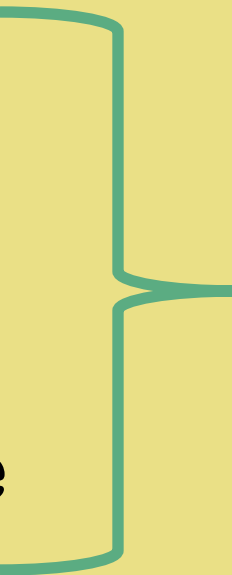
Theoretical frameworks

- Critical Disability Studies (see Goodley, 2013; Shildrick, 2019)
- Crip Theory (see McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013)
- Mad Studies (see Snyder, 2018)

Each of these theoretical frameworks challenge ideas of 'normalcy' and how this is constructed – not solely in relation to disability.

Thematic analysis

Used the **social model of disability** to examine the barriers encountered in crits and presentations.

- Timing
 - Feedback
 - Group size
 - Language and culture
- 
- Stress

Timing

“We were the last team to present so we didn't have time [...] If we have a 2-hour session and we are seven people, and each person gets to present for 15 minutes [...] I mean just calculate it. You maybe get a one-minute feedback and not everybody gets it because there's no time.”

Timing

- Crit sessions can be long – up to 3 hours.
- When time is short, feedback can be rushed.
- Time pressure can disproportionately impact marginalised students.

“Assessments on a tight time would produce allied benefits, for example, for learners who are carers, who must work, and for whom English is not a first language” (Jain, 2023, p.33).

Feedback

“Usually one of the teachers asks if anyone has a question or if anyone has some kind of suggestion [...] People sometimes don’t actually say anything. So you have your classmates in the room and, like, no one speaks. So that feels a bit awkward. But I guess people also don’t feel too comfortable to speak [...] And then, after that, the tutor gives his point of view on it.”

Feedback

- UAL colleagues reported that ‘peer feedback’ was the most important aspect of crits.
- However, several student interviewees indicated that they did not always receive peer feedback, and when they did it was often not critical or developmental.
- Students also reported not being able to remember feedback: “You’re so stressed that you’re not even listening.”

Group size

“The first presentation we had was in front of everyone in the auditorium. That was horrible.”

“If it’s a massive audience, like if it was something on stage or something like that, it would probably be a lot worse [...] the groups that we do in sixes, sevens, those are probably much, much, much easier. So like usually the smaller the group is, I guess the more informal it becomes, the more formal it is, the less easy it becomes.”

Group size

- Large group sizes cause stress and anxiety.
- Large group sizes also result in longer sessions, which can be disabling in their own right.
- Increasing student numbers and resourcing issues lead to a disconnect between desired and best practice and current realities in art and design education (Dineen and Collins, 2005)

Language and culture

- Non-dominant speakers of English and disabled students may encounter barriers to verbal presentations and providing verbal feedback.
- Marginalised students may also be reluctant to share ideas as a result of assumptions or discrimination.
- There is an onus on international and disabled students to adopt UK communication norms, rather than for British staff and students to adapt their communication or modes of assessment.

Summary of research findings

- Crits and presentations present barriers to inclusion for disabled students.
- Sector guidance - and law - isn't always followed, particularly in relation to anticipatory adjustments.
- Colleagues often want to create more inclusive crit environments – but experience barriers relating to workload, staffing, timetabling, etc.

“

The neoliberal academy amplifies the difficulties disabled people face in relation to academia: both entering and participating in it successfully.

”

Nishida, 2015, p.152

A decorative pattern at the bottom of the slide consisting of several overlapping triangles in shades of pink, blue, green, and grey.

“

It is often the most precarious faculty (untenured, disabled, adjunct, and/or temporary) who end up performing access labor that is better performed by institutions

”

Minich, 2016, p.4

A decorative pattern at the bottom of the slide consisting of several overlapping triangles in shades of pink, light blue, teal, and grey.

Institutional recommendations

- HEIs should invest in mandatory staff development focusing on disability equity.
 - New courses, or those undergoing revalidation, should be (re)designed with disability equity in mind.
 - Steps should be taken to mitigate against the impact of increased workload and reduced staff to student ratios.
- 
- A decorative graphic at the bottom of the slide consisting of several overlapping triangles in shades of pink, yellow, light blue, teal, and grey.

Course level recommendations

- Embed the teaching of crit and presentation skills into the curriculum.
 - Offer all students a choice of how to share their work in crits and presentations.
 - Facilitate structured peer feedback, which includes different ways to give feedback.
- 
- A decorative graphic in the bottom left corner consisting of several overlapping triangles in shades of pink, purple, blue, and green.

Supporting inclusive and developmental crits

- These research findings fed into a recently published UAL guidance document, [Supporting inclusive and developmental crits](#).



Thanks for listening. Any questions?

Carys Kennedy (c.kennedy@arts.ac.uk /  [/CarysKennedy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/CarysKennedy))

References

Goodley, D. (2013) 'Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies', *Disability & Society*, 28(5), pp. 631-644. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.717884>

Kafer, A. (2013) *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

McRuer, R. (2006) *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press.

Minich, J.A. (2016) 'Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now', *Lateral*, 5(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.9>

Nishida, A. (2016) 'Neoliberal Academic and a Critique from Disability Studies', in Block, P., Kasnitz, D., Nishida, A. and Pollard, N. (eds.) *Occupying Disability: Critical Approaches to Community Justice, and Decolonizing Disability*. New York: Springer, pp. 145-158.

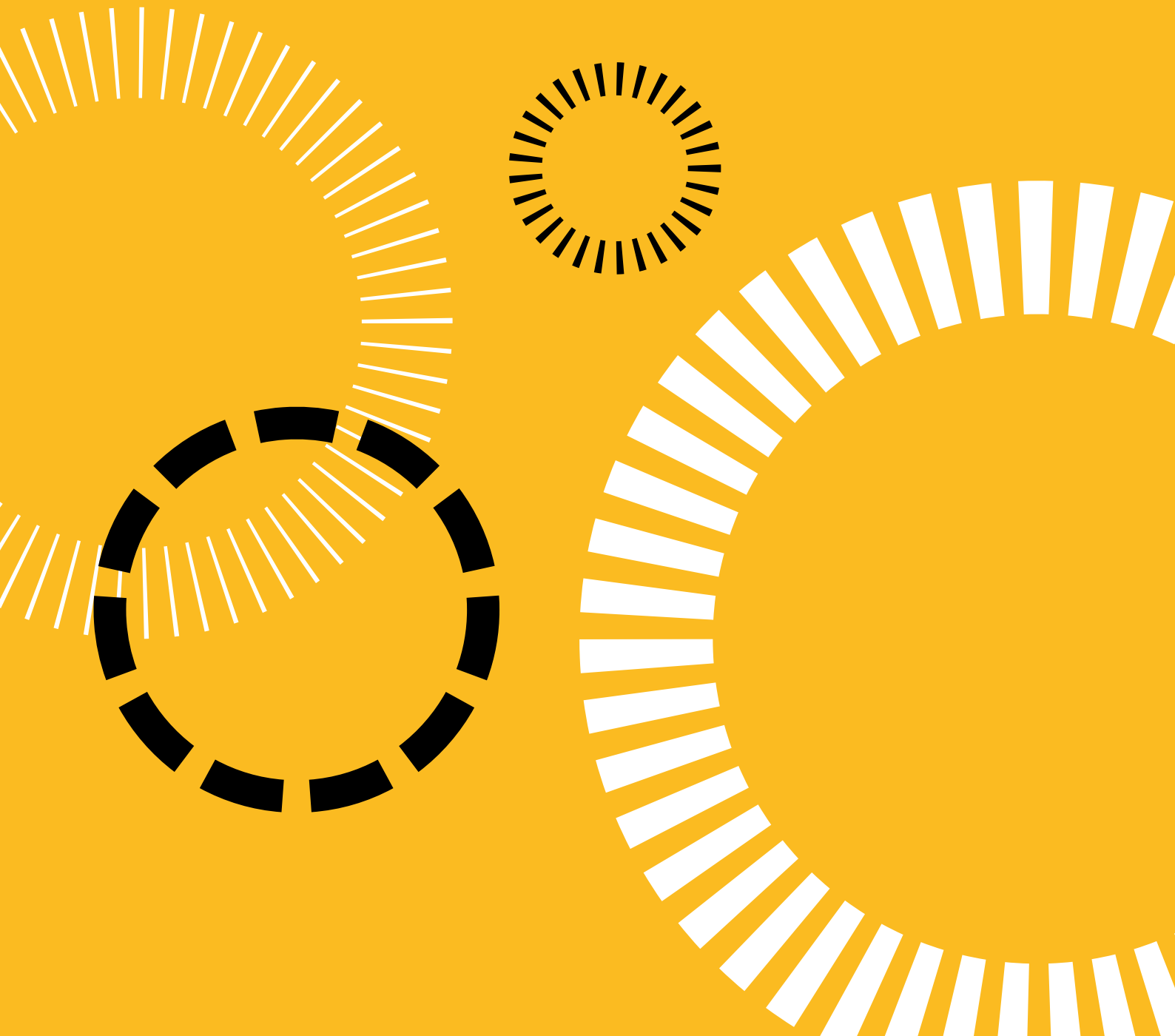
Q-Art (2013) *Art Crits: 20 Questions*. A Pocket Guide. London: Q-Art.

Schalk, S. (2017) 'Critical Disability Studies as Methodology', *Lateral*, 6(1). Available at: <https://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-methodology-schalk/> (Accessed 16 April 2023).

Shildrick, M. (2020) 'Critical Disability Studies: rethinking the conventions for the age of postmodernity'. In Watson, N., and Vehmas, S. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Snyder, S.N., Pitt, K., Shanouda, F., Voronka, J., Reid, J. and Landry, D. (2019) 'Unlearning through Mad Studies: Disruptive pedagogical praxis', *Curriculum Inquiry*, 49(4), pp.485-502. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2019.1664254>

Supporting inclusive and developmental crits



Supporting inclusive and developmental crits: a guidance for staff at UAL

UAL is committed to *Critique* as a valuable and established process for learning within creative subjects.

‘The Crit is a key site for the creation of value’ [Orr and Shreeve, 2017, 40].

Crits, or Critiques, are opportunities for discussion and peer feedback on a student’s work. They take place in different ways, varying in size and mode.

Crits provide space to develop critical thinking, presentation and feedback skills. The nature of a critique is analytical focus on creative outputs by others, and the wellbeing of those sharing work should also be considered to ensure a proactive and inclusive learning environment.

Critique is described as “one of the most valuable components of a formal art and design education. It is also one of the most difficult [...] Critique is a collaborative activity that takes quite a bit of time to learn — both in terms of how to *give* feedback, and how to *accept* feedback” [[How to Crit](#)].

This staff guidance aims to support consistency in the delivery of inclusive and developmental crits.

‘A’ Principles

Agree ground rules: for respectful and constructive questioning and feedback. Collectively developing and agreeing ground rules can help foster a compassionate learning space where students feel safe to share and discuss. Establish an understanding of what a UAL crit looks like, which may look different for students with previous educational experience. [Ground rules can include seeking consent before touching work of others]. Ensure that regular breaks are offered to support student concentration.

Ask the individual: Personalising discussions by asking what an individual would find most helpful in terms of feedback helps ensure focused and constructive comments. This also recognises their agency in the space and help flatten the hierarchy.

'B' Principles
Balance feedback: Commenting on strengths alongside areas for development ensures individuals receiving feedback will have rounded comments to work with. Feedback may also come in the form of questions, to be framed respectfully.
Bring in all voices: Facilitators to ensure all voices are heard, maintaining time for all participants to engage. Recognising lived experience of students is also important.
Build up: It can take students time to build confidence in and understanding of the crit process. Provide scaffolding for students, in terms of how to present and give feedback, and support them to build up skills incrementally over time.
Be open to learning: Crits are a learning opportunity for students and facilitators. While students will likely expect tutors to provide feedback regardless of expertise level, tutors expressing a willingness to learn alongside students flattens hierarchy and opens dialogue.

'C' Principles
Critical thinking: Deconstruct and reflect on existing knowledge, show respect and encouragement for the expression of self through work shown. Champion multiple ways of knowing. Connecting discussions to Learning Outcomes and assessment criteria can help focus Crits, so they are productive and positive experiences. [Although Crits are formative in nature, they are unlikely to be a format for a final assessment].
Choice: Equality Act 2010 requires us to make anticipatory adjustments. Proactively offer students a choice of ways to participate in Crits. This might include the choice of presenting in groups, online or via video recording, or providing a text summary over verbal description. When feeding back, this might include allowing students to feedback in Post-its, in pairs or online.
Concept and cost: Acknowledging the impact of cost of living on students helps focus discussion on concept rather than material choice/production quality.
Capture feedback: Explore different ways feedback can be captured for students receiving comments on their work [e.g. written summary, audio recording], subject to consent of all involved. This relates to the earlier point of agreement of ground rules.
Celebrate: Despite the name, Crits offer a rare opportunity to collectively appreciate student work and student voice. Spend time acknowledging strengths of the work, its articulation and/or the debate.

Acknowledgement

This guidance document has been brought together by UAL and Arts Students' Union and has been co-authored by Minna Ellis (Arts SU CSM Sabbatical Officer 2022-2024), Calum Sherwood (Arts SU Policy and Research Officer) and Danielle Tran (UAL Director of Education). We would also like to thank the Arts programme and Sabbatical Officers at Arts SU and colleagues at UAL who have fed into this resource. Finally, we would like to thank the many students who bravely shared their experienced of Critiques as students at UAL. Without this insight, this work would not have been possible.

Resources

- [Compassionate feedback](#): Ideas for prompting reflection on compassionate approaches to feedback, Academic Enhancement team.
- Disabled Students' Commission (2020) [Three months to make a difference](#): key areas of challenge for disabled students requiring urgent action from institutions and policy makers in HE.
- legislation.gov.uk, [Equality Act 2010](#).
- Goldstein, Mitch, [How to Crit](#), (2023).
- Orr, Susan, & Shreeve, Alison (2017), *Art and design pedagogy in higher education: Knowledge, values and ambiguity in the creative curriculum* (London: Taylor and Francis).
- [Q-ART CRITS](#) (2008-2019).
- Sherwood, Calum, [Crits and Inclusive Learning at UAL](#): An Arts SU discussion paper.
- Yilmaz, O. & Gelmez, K. (2023), 'How can I say this politely?': Remodelling peer critiquing in design education and revealing compassionate critiques, *Journal of Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 22(2), pp. 277-296.
- Quick guides on [managing conflict on the Student Services web pages](#), accessible by staff.