

# A Model for Critique at the Design Studio for Higher Education

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## Abstract

The article describes a step by step approach to effective critique at the design studio. The study was conducted at the Department of Communication Design, Faculty of Art- Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. This study exploits the potential of using a model for the teaching and learning of critiques in the art and design education. The use of a model is developed so that lecturers and students offering studio courses and are practicing critiques can adapt in similar instructional delivery. Exploratory and participatory action research approach was adopted. The research tools employed were; questionnaire, observation and interviews, to examine students and lecturers' knowledge and understanding of critique, preparation before the practice at the studio and if there is a need for a guide to help students in effective critiquing. Literature was reviewed on criticism, the design studio, design appreciation, models of criticism, forms of critiques, the language of critiquing, and how to conduct an effective critique sessions in the design studio. The data analysis revealed that there is still a need for a model to serve as a guide for students for effective analysis of design works. This helped to improve critique responses, communication and interactivity, creativity and collaborative skills among students at the studio.

**Keywords:** Critiques, Art criticism, Design studio.

## 1. Introduction

The art criticism teaching model was designed to lead students through productive experiences within the response domains of art education. The art criticism teaching model addresses the teaching of art criticism, aesthetics and art history in the art aeducation.

Treib as cited in (Graham 2003; p. 85) states that "Criticism is essentially an optimistic enterprise. No matter how scathing the comments, there is still the underlying belief in the perfectibility of human activity, with some assumption that if we can just understand the picture more completely, we can design in a better way". Graham (2003) includes that, recognizing the student made certain decisions and questioning what one sees would then instigate the critical inquiry needed to give criticism in a design critique session the necessary attention.

Therefore, viewing or observing a visual image should be more than just looking and reacting without much thought. Viewing is an interaction between the viewer and the art object. Although most art and design works are constant, the interaction varies with each viewer because of the viewer's own varied perspectives and associations. Thus, why critical discussions around design is as important as the design process itself, and this is termed as critique.

Oliver (2009) stipulates that the process of observation is not necessarily orderly; as one looks at colours, shapes, rhythm, etc. one might be mixing the processes of perceiving, thinking and feeling and are unlikely to have a coherent, all-comprehending statement to make at the end. This is what the famous art educator, Edmund Feldman, recognized and specified that:

There is a systematic way of acting like a critic, just as there is a systematic way of behaving like a lawyer. For lawyers there is a form for presenting evidence, refuting adversaries, citing precedents, appealing to jurors and so on. Although art criticism does not have the form of legal debate, it does have form. Therefore, to do criticism well, and consistently, we need a form or system that makes the best use of our knowledge, intelligence and power of observation (Oliver 2009; p.2).

Feldman (1987) proposed four basic steps to his visual arts students in criticism in order to serve as a guide for them when critiquing a work of art. This includes description, analysis, interpretation and lastly evaluation. He stated in his disposition that, these four steps are applicable to observing the other forms of arts. He suggested that each step is necessary to the ones that follow, and for that matter should be undertaken in order. This means that thorough and accurate description is the basis for all other aspects of criticism; judgment and opinion need to be withheld until the end of the process.

Various authors in the field of art education and criticism have come out with models, steps and frameworks concerning how a work of art/design work should be analyzed for effective communication and understanding (Dewey; Barrett 1994; Bates 2000; Guttonson n.d; Broudy 1990 & Feldman 1994). Moreover, the ability for students to confidently articulate their ideas intelligently, and to project their understanding

concerning a design work should be a systematic approach through a guide and continual practice of critical discourse in the studio. This helps to sharpen students' knowledge, skill and ability of viewing a design work critically to give a substantial analysis.

Based on this, the researcher aims to develop a model which is based on the various art and design models developed over the years to help enhance critiquing responses at the studio for a better teaching and learning experience. The underlying call to action is this: Are there any models guiding critiques at the design studio and how can critique responses be made better?

## 2. Materials and Method

The participatory action research method under qualitative approach was used for this study. The following topics were reviewed – criticism, design studio, aesthetics and appreciation, models and forms of critique and theories that support the practice and use of models as a guide in the design studio. The learning theories in the design studio and learning management systems were adopted for effective online critiquing. The idea was to bring variety into the practice of critiquing apart from the verbal and written forms of critique and also to help break boredom in teaching and learning at the studio. Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used to select one lecturer and 185 students from the second year level because of convenient accessibility and proximity to the researchers and also they were the appropriate participants for the study since they were practicing critiques (Given 2008).

### 2.1. Population for the Study

The population for the study was lecturers and undergraduate students at the department of Communication Design at the Faculty of Art, KNUST Kumasi as Table 1. brings to bare the details. The accessible population for the study was second year undergraduate lecturers and students, teaching and offering practical design studio courses and were practicing critiques, in the department of Communication Design, KNUST.

Based on the population, the researchers sampled all the 185 undergraduate second year students. There were 8 courses being offered in the second year with 5 of the courses being studio oriented. Out of the five courses, only 2 were practicing critiques and these two courses were taught by one lecturer. Therefore, the two courses were sampled with the lecturer in charge. With reference to that, 185 copies of questionnaires were distributed, 150 were retrieved. However, 10 contained missing values. As such a total of 150 questionnaires representing 81.1% of the total number of questionnaire administered, was used in the analysis. Unstructured interviews were conducted on the lecturer and 30 students in and out of the design studio in the Department of Communication Design.

Table 1. Population for the study

Academic Years	Number of students	Lecturers
Year 1	158	7
Year 2	185	6
Year 3	182	7
Year 4	100	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>625</b>	<b>27</b>

## 3. Results and Discussions

This section consists of the results and data analysis obtained from the study using the qualitative data analysis approach. The various responses given to the researchers are categorized into various themes based on the questions asked. Below outlines the responses given by students and lecturer.

### 3.1 Students' difficulty in verbal critiquing

Students were asked if they find it difficult verbalizing their ideas and the reasons why. The following responses were obtained from the interviews, observations and questionnaire administered to the students. It was noticed and confirmed that 70% of students find it difficult to express themselves and their ideas concerning their works. This was due to the following reasons and reactions in the studio during critiquing: shyness, fear, lack of self-confidence, lack of guide, anger, taking of responses personal, ignorant of what to talk about, the use of offensive and impolite words in comments and feedbacks, lack of vocabulary, forgetfulness, lack of design history and good research information, a sense of failure, defensive of ideas, disappointment, resistant to take advice and the inability to achieve the standard of work required and also inability to apply previous knowledge.

#### 3.1.1 Availability of a guide for talking about students' work

Students were asked if they were given a guide to help them as they critique their works and the works of others. The following responses were given: Out of the 150 questionnaires retrieved 74 students representing 49.3% ticked yes, 44 students representing 29.3% ticked No, and 32 students representing 21.3% failed to respond. Those who ticked "yes" were unable to write a criteria down that shows that, there is a guide or criteria they

follow to explain their works. For the 44 students who ticked “No” to the unavailability of a guide or criteria, their responses were as follows:

- They are not spelled out clearly as a guide or criteria which guides us in talking about our works but to follow in doing the work.
- A guide or criteria should be known to all students, but in this case it is not known.
- If there was a guide, we would not have sat quietly anytime we are asked to talk about our work.

### 3.1.2 Sampled students’ opinion on criteria availability

Sampled Students were asked their opinions if there were to be a criteria for them to follow in analyzing their works. Ninety percent of the students in the second year undergraduate design studio stipulated that it would be very helpful and necessary if a model is spelt out for students to follow. This was made known when they were asked to respond to the questionnaires distributed and through the interviews conducted.

### 3.1.3 Sampled Students’ opinion on how design studio critique could be improved

Students were given the opportunity to suggest ways, as to how their responses to studio activities and critiquing could be improved. The opinions and suggestions provided were categorized into six different sub headings, namely: Provision of Guidelines/criteria, Teaching and delivery; Attitudinal changes, Exposure, Studio condition and Motivation. (See Table 2).

Table 2. Students’ opinion on how design studio critique can be improved

Themes	Labels
Provision of Guidelines/criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A guide should be put in place for students to follow when criticizing their works.</li> <li>• Guidelines to criticism must be taught to students.</li> </ul>
Teaching and Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecturer’s delivery must be clear and precise in order to grasp the concept. This way, students will not hesitate to talk about their works.</li> <li>• Design critique must be taught in detailed and explained for better understanding.</li> <li>• Students should be given a foreknowledge about the practice.</li> <li>• The thorough study of the course itself (design critique and aesthetics) should be taught as a course to prepare students for positive critique responses.</li> <li>• Regular oral presentations to boost students’ confidence and the provision of terminologies to enhance students’ vocabulary in critiquing.</li> </ul>
Attitudinal changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must be loyal, acceptance of flaws, students must be more responsible, open minded in critiquing, passionate and affectionate.</li> </ul>
Exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposing student’s to graphic design in the industry.</li> <li>• Presentation and demonstration of various design works that has been through criticism and their outcomes.</li> <li>• Frequent practice</li> </ul>
Studio Condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of design tools, materials and equipment at the studio.</li> <li>• Improvement of studio conditions</li> <li>• Availability of internet access</li> </ul>
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critiques should be encouraged.</li> <li>• Rewarding students who actively participate in studio activities.</li> <li>• Making critique fun and involving to practice.</li> </ul>

### 3.1.4 Sampled Lecturer’s opinion on how design studio critique could be improved

The sampled lecturer’s opinion on how design studio critique could be improved were the following:

- When students are passionate about graphic design and the course they are pursuing.
- Constant practice and acquiring of knowledge by surfing for information in their field of design to enhance their vocabulary as they present their ideas.
- Being inquisitive in the design world to find out the emerging trends in design.
- Students’ setting for themselves objectives they would want to achieve at the end of their study and every semester as they work hard to achieve those objectives.
- Reviewing the curriculum to add some more important courses like design history to make students

more knowledgeable in the field of design.

### 3.1.5 *The Designed and developed criteria*

The researchers developed the model by taking into consideration the opinions and suggestions given by students and lecturers, researchers' experiences, experts and art educators in the field of graphic design and studio critiques. But the models developed by Guttormson (n.d.) in the institution of Saskatchewan Design Department and Graham's framework of criticism (2003) were adopted and restructured with some modifications added. Based on these two models, the researchers came up with a seven step model that has the likelihood to be used in a design critique. The suggested model consist of the following processes:

- Insight
- Motivation
- Description
- Analysis
- Interpretation
- Guidance
- Informed Evaluation

**Insight:** 'Insight' comprises of the background information about the evolution of the design studio and the practice of critiquing. Educating design students by adequately preparing them into the practice that they are about adopting in the studio in order for them to be well equipped in knowledge. In simple terms, preparing their minds for maximum understanding and enthusiasm for the activity in the design studio.

**Motivation:** Discussing with students on the various influences that cultures have on students' responses to criticisms. Watching videos on critique sessions in other design institutions to motivate them and to learn from. Also students are given the opportunity to view design works of exponents in the field of graphic designers to compare, contrast and interpret in their own opinions the ideas behind their works and what the designer is/was communicating. This the researchers believes will help students gain a better understanding into the designer's life and style of execution of ideas. Moreover, help students to make references to them as they view and analyze their works. In other words, doing a basic research before beginning a design work.

**Description:** This is the third step of the model which is basically, the stage of taking inventory. At this stage, it is required that the student responding to his/her work, mentions he sees in the work. Verbally and vividly giving an account of what one sees and one's responses to the design work. Guttormson (n. d.) states that simply stick to the facts. According to Graham (2003), there are three things that affect how a critic describes an object or a design work: the critic's own perception, different ways of describing and the sharing of different aesthetic experiences. The various elements that constitute a description, includes: form of art, (whether architecture, sculpture, painting, printing or one or more minor arts), medium of work, size and scale of work, and elements of general shapes in the composition.

**Analysis:** This is another objective activity to contemplate how the characteristics of the work that have been identified and described are organized. This is a long and a detailed section. The analysis stage is where the elements and principles of design are critically examined in the design work.

**Interpretation:** It is an accurate assessment of the formal qualities in a work of art which is critically discerned. The emotions and thoughts evoked by contemplation of the work and this should be based upon what can actually be observed. Interpretation consists of explaining and clarifying the meaning of the design (Graham, 2003). Interpretation helps to explain the meaning of the work, forms or style, based upon the critic's own beliefs, culture, values and experiences. It may also include the critic's emotional or intuitive response to the design work (Hopkins, 1994).

**Guidance:** This is the stage whereby suggestions and corrections are offered for future design decision to inform the student. This section differentiates the aspect between criticism of a work in a gallery and criticism given to a student. Graham (2003) added that "No matter how scathing the comments, there is still the underlying belief in the perfectibility of human activity, with some assumption that if we can just understand the picture more completely, we can design in a better way" (p. 85). The guidance a student obtains from lecturers and colleagues goes a long way to help improve students design ability. This will instill the faculty for self-criticism in a student.

**Informed Evaluation:** Most of the pioneers in art education normally used the term "Judgment" and it sounded a bit scary as to what one's fate in a design work is. Informed Evaluation is simply a knowledgeable summary of a design work in order to ascertain a value or worth total of a student's design work and to help others form an opinion (Darracott, 1991 and Bates, 2000). The researchers agree with Graham (2003) on the fact concerning evaluation, where he states that "the stage of evaluation should not occur during a public situation of a jury for the various reasons she outlined: which one of them was the fact that "a critique of students' work in a jury happens too quickly and spontaneously to adequately evaluate the students project" (p.86). The researchers confirmed this fact in the study as it was experienced due to the large class sizes at the studio. Also verbal

pronouncements given to students demoralizes them and prevents them from appearing before juries. Therefore the researchers buttresses Graham's point of giving out written and informed evaluation to students after jury sessions.

The above criteria was restructured on a two page sheet of paper to serve as a guide for students and lecturer as they conduct and verbalize their analysis concerning their design works in the studio.

Specific Benefit to stakeholders: Students and instructors can share ideas, problems and build strong problem solving skills through execution and quality discussion through verbal articulation and good writing skills. It will also guide learners to construct meaning for themselves. In other words explaining verbally through critiquing helps students to understand each other's work. In this case, the instructor becomes a facilitator in the studio as he brings to bare information and assist students as they work on their ideas.

In using the model, the lecturer and students can:

- Acquire as much knowledge in design history since it is not taught as a course
- Boost their confidence in speech by using the technical terms
- The ability for students to express themselves using the language of the design profession
- Help students to be critical thinkers and intelligent in viewing design as a whole
- Develops students in their profession
- Groom students and lecturers to pitch for bigger and beneficial contracts that will help improve the design department.
- Get students to interact and socialize through teaching and learning
- Also boost students' argumentative skills.
- Help students to construct meaning for themselves as they work in the studio.

As part of the study, the researchers developed an activity plan for both lecturer and students to follow in order to implement and introduce the criteria in the teaching and learning of critiquing at the design studio. The activity plan developed for both lecturers and students can be seen in detail in Table 3 and Table 4 respectively.

Table 3: Activity Plan for Lecturer/ Researcher

<p><b>Course Objectives</b>                  Upon completion of this course the student should be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify, define, and solve problems</li> <li>2. Locate and critically evaluate information</li> <li>3. Have mastered a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry</li> <li>4. Communicate effectively with visuals</li> <li>5. Develop an understanding of the language of graphic design, which includes critical theory, critique, history, technology and craftsmanship.</li> </ol>	
<p><b>Weekly Schedule</b></p>	
<p>Week One</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction, Syllabus, Course Overview</li> <li>• Review Supply List</li> <li>• Discuss classroom procedures</li> <li>• Reading assignments</li> <li>• Define set of terms and turn in next class</li> </ul>
<p>Week Two</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Presentation: Research and Concepts</li> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Begin Project One</li> <li>• Work in class: on project one</li> <li>• In Class critique</li> <li>• Reading assignment</li> </ul>
<p>Week Three</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Presentation: Sanitation; Ebola; Use Energy Wisely</li> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Begin stage two: Concept development</li> <li>• Work in class: on project two</li> <li>• In class critique</li> <li>• Reading assignment</li> </ul>
<p>Week Four</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Presentation: Concept development</li> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Begin project one</li> <li>• Work in class: on stage three- Prototyping</li> <li>• In class critique</li> <li>• Reading assignment</li> </ul>
<p>Week Five</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Presentation: Final Designs</li> <li>• Discussion: In class critique</li> <li>• Assessment</li> <li>• Reading assignment</li> </ul>



Table 4. Activity plan for students

Objective: Understand the design Process	
Presentation: Group Presentations	
Team Work: Research and reading activities on design process	
Experience: Team building and Interaction	
Activity for the day	
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the design process</li> </ul>
Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group presentations</li> </ul>
Team Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research and reading activities on design process</li> </ul>
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team building and interaction</li> <li>Research Skills: Looking for information, selecting exemplars as learning materials</li> <li>Setting assessment parameters and criteria</li> </ul>
Team Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team presentation on design process: Team discussions what they discovered and learned through team discussions and learning.</li> </ul>
Topics Shared among groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic of research</li> <li>Linear reasoning/ lateral thinking</li> <li>Exploratory drawing</li> <li>Visualizing ideas</li> <li>Theories of image and text</li> <li>Audience, markets and concepts</li> <li>Scheduling, organizing and finalizing</li> </ul>
Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General class discussion on new projects and other relevant issues to be raised</li> <li>Questions, answers and contributions from instructor and students.</li> </ul>
References	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Google Search</li> <li>Graphic Design School. The Principles and Practice of Graphic design (5<sup>th</sup> Edition)</li> <li>A Century of Graphic Design- Graphic Design Pioneers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Art E-book) - Jeremy Aynsley</li> </ul>

After the activity plan was done and implemented using the model as a guide for both lecturer and students, some few challenges were encountered by some students due to absenteeism, but Figure 1 outlines the number of students who had difficulties and those who did not.

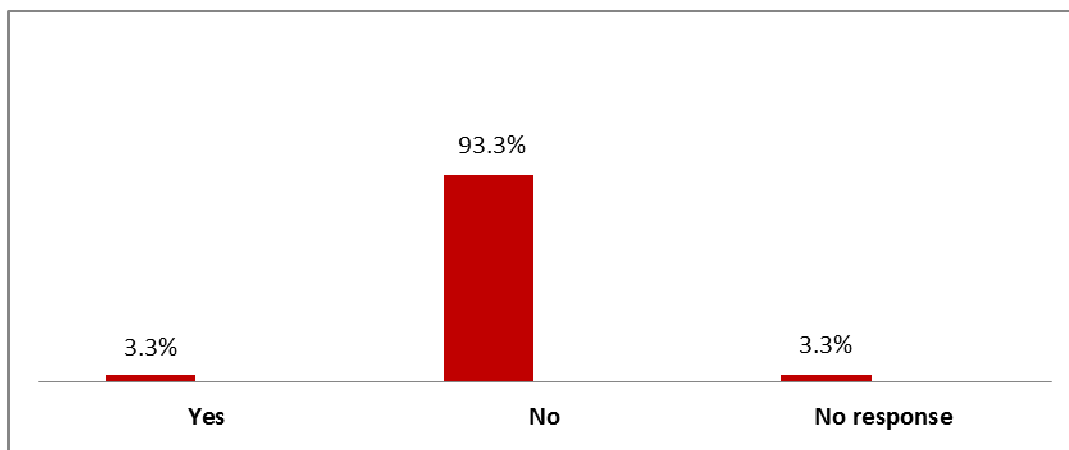


Figure 1. Challenges faced by students

Figure 1. Shows challenges students encountered in following the criteria developed. 140 students representing 93.3% had no challenges following the criteria developed, 5 students representing 3.3% encountered some few challenges and 5 students representing 3.3% did not respond. The few students who had challenges were due to the following factors outlined: Absenteeism and the fact that it involves much writing. In conclusion, it could be said that the proposed criteria was effective in its use by students and it did help improve on their critiquing skills by verbally expressing themselves.

Notwithstanding these few challenges, there were some positive impacts that were impacted to both lecturers and students by adapting the model as a guide in critiquing, and the impact of the model on students critiquing skills are presented in detailed in Figure 2 and Table 5 to be precise. Also, the lecturer's responses on

the use of the developed model are as follows:

- Teaching and Learning became interesting because it engaged and challenged students to come forth with responses to each other’s design work;
- Increased collaboration among students in a sense that every idea presented by a group member was critically scrutinized and analyzed before the final decision was made;
- It gave students the confidence they needed to express themselves in the language of the profession.
- Improved students’ argumentative skills, communication, interactivity and open-mindedness, in their assessment of each other’s work, valuing each other’s unique skills and problem solving skills.
- The online critique platform gave lecturer a different feel of the actual studio atmosphere, and saw the impact it had on students who were shy and timid during actual studio critiquing sessions coming out of their shell to comment and to upload their works.
- Lecturer decided to use the opportunity to begin working on how to expose students’ works to the outside world and to introduce professional contract pitching in the design studio.

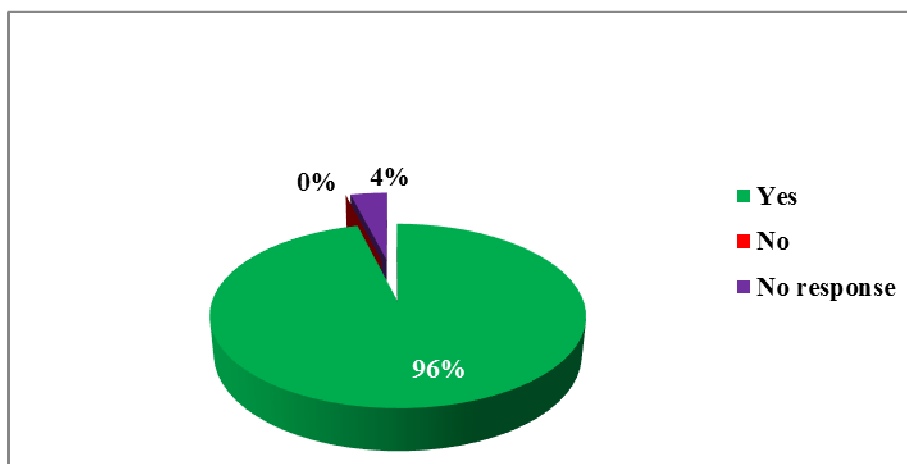


Figure 2. Impact of the criteria on critiquing skills

Figure 2. Brings to bare the percentage of students who were impacted by the use of the criteria on their response to critiquing in the studio. Ninety-six percent of the students clearly stated that the criteria helped them to know what to look out for when asked to talk about their work and that of others. The remaining 4 percent said they were not impacted by the criteria. Hence zero percent for no response.

Table 5. Students’ responses to the impact of the criteria on their critiquing skills

Theme	Label
Acquired skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learnt how to talk as a professionals and writing skills improved,</li> <li>• Broadened their scope of design and critiquing, improved their public speaking and confidence, critical thinking, the use of appropriate vocabulary in communicating.</li> </ul>
Improved performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved skills (thinking skills, research, knowledge, team work, patience and the best way to tolerate people.</li> <li>• Constructive criticism, technical terms in speech and writing, communication and problem solving skills, conceptual and fascinating ideas are now expressed and explained well.</li> <li>• Answering questions in a short time accurately; they know what to look out for when working on their works; no more the usual phrase “this is my work or your work is nice”.</li> <li>• Increased confidence level in answering questions;</li> <li>• Conscious of class activities and prepare their thoughts and ideas before critiquing, made them time conscious because each student wants his/her work to be critiqued and work on schedule in order to meet deadlines.</li> <li>• It has helped to become more pro-active and critical</li> </ul>
Boost in interactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraged students to contact lecturers and other colleagues for clarification and assistances, socializing, has improved tremendously, boredom is broken, when difficulties encountered studying course materials; Made it easier to contribute in class and respond as design students should, built strong friendship</li> </ul>

Lastly, one other thing that made the design studio critique effective was the additional motivation proposed by the lecturer. He latter proposed that whenever a student makes a contribution or respond to his or



other students' design work, he or she will be awarded some marks. This motivated students to read and learn a lot about the layout styles in design, design history, terminologies and the appropriate language of the profession to help enhance their speech as they communicated verbally through group or individual presentations and in writing as they explained their ideas. Also, the online platform encouraged students who could not come out to express themselves through the typing of their ideas for positive responses. All these mentioned above, brought about positive vibes in the studio. Honestly, this strategy got most students involved in studio discussions and critiquing sessions and enhanced teaching and learning.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the art and design educational system models are structured and used to enhance teaching and learning at the studio. Various models of criticism exist and are in use by most instructors in various institutions and in other areas. However when it comes to students, their exposure to these models are limited even though they serve as a guide to enhance and equip them in their learning skills.

Based on the research findings, it is evident that both students and lecturers at the Department of Communication Design have an idea about the practice of critique and the importance of using a model as a guide for critiquing design works at the studio. Lecturers who teach studio courses and critique at the department are using the model in teaching and learning, but the same cannot be said for other lecturers. Besides, not all lecturers have mastery over aesthetics and criticism. This is so because of differences in fields and specializations. Hence, lecturers teaching studio courses can adapt the skills of critiquing to enhance their creativity of instructional delivery. In view of these findings, the researchers recommended the introduction of aesthetics and criticism as a course at the Department of Communication Design and the Faculty of Art.

The use of the model has become an effective guide for both undergraduate students and lecturers at the Department of Communication Design and the Faculty of Art, in terms of teaching, learning, interacting and assessments of students' art and design works.

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