The eLearning Coach Podcast #40
ELC 040: How To Improve Your Skills And Products With Design Critiques
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Hello everyone and welcome to episode 40 of the eLearning Coach podcast. In this episode, I want to make the case for using critiques as part of our design process. Whatever model you're using, design critiques can help improve the quality, ease of use and effectiveness of our products. Most design fields have regular critiques, where the designer states what he or she is trying to achieve and a selected group of people provide feedback, often in the form of questions. A design critique can focus on the user interface, the instructional design or the visual design.

So if you want to explore how to run or participate in an effective critique, then you'll enjoy this conversation with Adam Conner. He is coauthor of the book, Discussing Design and VP of Organizational Design at Mad*Pow where he designs and develops products, services, and strategies aimed at tackling challenges in healthcare, finance, and education.

Connie: Hi Adam. Welcome to The eLearning Coach podcast.

Adam: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Connie: You've written a great book discussing design that I thought was quite relevant to our field. Just to make sure we're all on the same page, how do you define a design critique?

Adam: I define a design critique as a form of analysis, a stepping back by a designer and their team or other folks, looking at a design and comparing it to its objectives, and determining whether they believe that the design will work towards those objectives and why or why not. Most often, between two or more people.

Connie: What in your mind is the greatest value of participating in a design critique?

Adam: Well, I think all design is iterative. Every time we create something to reach an objective, to solve a challenge, we have an opportunity to look at that and learn more from it, and see how that has changed the world, how do we think that might change the way someone behaves or someone thinks, or what they do.

            It's that iteration that gives design its power because we can then take a broader understanding of the challenge we're trying to solve, and we can refine our ideas, and we can strengthen them and we can extend them in certain ways. The value of a critique is in that iteration, so if we take the time to periodically step back from what we're creating, or if we've created maybe a couple of different options to solve a challenge or reach a certain goal, we take a step back and we analyze those, it helps us to make stronger decisions about which options to pursue or how to iterate further on things.

            That's just the value for the design itself. The value for a team working on designs together is that it improves their ability to collaborate, it improves their ability to discuss ideas effectively without getting bogged down in personal

preference and priorities. It has value to both the thing you are designing, as well as the team that's designing the things.

Connie: Great answer. Can you explain what a critique, a design critique looks like? Because I know that in my field, there are quite a few people who have never participated in one, so they might be wondering, "Well, what is this? What's it like?"

Adam: Yeah, absolutely. To give a little bit of context, one of the fields I work in is digital product design, so we design lots of apps and software, and what would happen in a critique would be towards the beginning of the project we've gotten together as a team to determine what are our goals for this piece of software, who's our audience, what do we need them to know, what do they need to do, what are the challenges we're solving for them. We create this set of objectives around what it is we're trying to achieve with our design. Then, at some point we started designing things, we generate lots of ideas, we pick from those ideas, we refine those, and then we have our critique.

In the critique, what someone would do is present the concept, the idea, walk through the experience that we want somebody to have using the software so, "When they go here, they'd look at this, they'd read this, they're thinking this, they click on this," walk through that. Then we would say, "Okay, well, how do we think this design relates to our goal of helping the user save more money on a weekly basis or helping the user pick the right doctor to see or decide whether to go see a doctor or go to the emergency room?" We do a lot of work in healthcare and finance. We compare together as a group. We go back to our original objectives, we look at the design we're examining, and we talk about which aspects of the design do we think will help reach our objectives, and which ones do we think won't or will work against our objectives, and why.

We collect that information, so there's a lot of dialogue back and forth, a lot of people asking questions to make sure that they're understanding each other correctly, and we collect all that information. Then, once we finish up that critique, we'll use that information either to, either the designer might go back and work further, or we might decide, "Hey, we've all got lots of ideas for how we might iterate on this, so let's run a brainstorm right now." We might use that critique to actually launch into a collaborative workshop.

Connie: When you start out, say when you have your first critique of a project, what form is the design in? Are you talking about sketches or prototypes or an actual coded app or website?

Adam: Yeah. We critique progressively all the way through, starting at the early stages where we're just talking about sketches. One of the activities that we like to use is called a "design studio workshop" and in that workshop people sketch lots of different ideas for an interface, for example, and then we'll critique them as a group and then they'll work on focusing on just one based on all the ideas they've seen and the critiques they've heard, but we're just sketching rapidly there. Those critiques at that end focus on broader concepts, on general structures, on overall tone and feel and experience. Then, as fidelity increases, as we start to

get more specific on layout, color, and language, then we start to critique those levels of detail.

We might be dealing with wire frames or a clickable prototype at that point. All the way up until we might have a code base prototype towards the end. As the project progresses, the level of detail that we're critiquing at progresses as well.

Connie: I do know that some people in our industry do this, but I think it would be so helpful for more people and more teams to work like this. There are quite a few people who work alone, and I can imagine them just trying to find someone, one or two people at their workplace, who can help in terms of giving feedback. Let me ask you this, let's say somebody is working in an organization that does not have critiques, perhaps they haven't even heard of them. How do you think someone can get started implementing them in their organization or company?

Adam: Well, the thing I love about critiques is that it can literally just be a conversation. You don't have to necessarily go through some formal process of getting it introduced to your team or your organization and calling very specific meetings for critiques. You can literally grab somebody who has a free 5, 10, 15 minutes and talk to them about your design. What makes that effective is how good you are at facilitating that conversation, focusing their attention, letting them know what your objectives are and focusing them on one part of the design or another.

That's in the book, Aaron and I talk a lot about formal versus informal critiques and so it's one of the things we love about them. You can totally introduce them formally and start out by just getting a small group of people together, maybe even just one other person, saying, "Hey, would you mind if we met on a weekly basis to just share our work with each other, offer each other some feedback, and then grow out from there?" Or, you can just casually do it while you go get coffee. It's a really simple thing that fits in in a lot of ways.

Connie: Yeah, that's a really good point. If someone were to get started doing this in a more formal way, what are some beginner mistakes that people make?

Adam: One of the challenges, the things that we see a lot of folks doing right off the bat, that can hamper things, is not being clear about what the objectives are. We just say, "Hey, look at this thing I designed. Can you give me some feedback on it?" Then, what's the other person supposed to say besides, "Oh, looks good," or, "Oh, my God, what did you do?" All they can do is really have a gut reaction, but if you start by reminding them if they were part of the project earlier.

Or, if they weren't part of the project, just letting them know, "Hey, I'm trying to design something that's going to get somebody to understand this concept or take this action," and remind them of what that objective is so that they have a frame of reference. Then, another mistake is in how you present the work. I don't know if this is exactly applicable to instructional design but I imagine it is. To put it in my world, if you think about an interface screen for an application, some people will present it and they'll just walk through the components and they'll say, "So up here is the title bar and on the right-hand side are the controls, and in the left, is the content."

They just walk through it like it's a map, as opposed to actually saying, "Okay, so if someone's going to come to this screen and their attention is first going to be drawn to this space over here, and then they're going to read through this content," and so if you talk through the experience and present your work that way, then that helps the person who's going to be giving you feedback think about, "Well, would somebody really do that? Would they actually look at that thing first? Would their attention be drawn in this direction?" That's really what we're after. We're trying to create an experience for somebody so that helps frame the discussion nicely.

Connie: The two examples that you gave of just showing it as a map or telling the purpose and the value of the design would make a really big difference. I can see that. Do you have a framework, a simple framework for a formal design critique that you can pass on?

Adam: In terms of thinking about critique and what it is, one of the things Aaron and I realized early on when we were researching this space is, and we've used the word here, the word that often gets conflated with critique is "feedback." Lots of people use the word feedback. "I'm asking for some feedback, let me give you some feedback." As we dug into that word a bit more, what we learned is that there are actually three forms of feedback. There's reaction, which is what I gave an example of earlier. "Oh, that's nice," or, "What the heck did you do?" It's that gut, like you see something, and then you just verbalize your reaction to it.

There's direction, which is, "Oh, have you considered doing this instead?" Or, "What if you tried this?" Or, "I think it would work better if X." That's sometimes can seem helpful but it's not really helping you analyze and understand the impact of the design you've created. It's just telling you what someone else's concept would look like. The third form is critique, and it's much more verbose. It starts with something along the lines of, "If the objective is to get the user to consider their bank balance before making a purchase," so there's an objective, "Then placing their bank balance at the bottom of the screen, at the same type size as all of the other content," there's an aspect of the design that we're talking about, "Isn't effective. I don't think it's going to be effective."

Why? "Because the information gets lost in all of the other content on the screen." There's four pieces to it there, and that's your basic framework. If you look at a design and you think, "What's the objective?" And then, "What are the elements of the design that I'm looking at right now related to that objective? Do I think they're going to work towards that objective? Why or why not?" If you follow those four questions, you will formulate a critique, you will give that person some very valuable feedback.

Connie: Oh, that's excellent. That is so applicable to what we do, where we might say, "I want the learner to look at this diagram first before reading the text, because it's a concept map and it will explain how these things are interrelated." That's the objective, and here's the elements. "I put it at the bottom of the screen in 9 point text. Do you think that's going to work?" You have talked about the different types of feedback.

Adam: Yeah, the other thing to think about is not just the feedback itself but the manner in which you ask or give it. One of the mistakes that ... It's not a mistake, it's actually something that we're all required to do, but it's an unfortunate thing, is we have to ask for feedback, say through email or something like that, right? We have send somebody our designs and say, "Hey, can you send me your feedback on this? I've got a meeting tomorrow," or whatever the case might be. Realistically, these kinds of conversations require us to ask questions of one another, questions to help us suss out what objectives actually were present, or what techniques were used, right?

Questions to help us make sure that we understand what feedback we're being given, what people are trying to tell us. There's a dialogue that has to take place, and so asking for feedback via something like email or giving feedback that way actually presents a lot of challenges. I'm sure you've probably even experienced that where you sent somebody your designs and asked for feedback and you get back an email, and you're reading it scratching your head and you're like, "What? I need to call this person because I just don't understand what they're trying to tell me."

Connie: Right. My favorite one is when you get one phrase. "Don't like it." "No, tell me what's wrong."

Adam: Yep, or we had a great question once. Somebody asked us, "How did you handle a situation where you send someone your design and ask for their feedback and then instead of getting feedback, they send you back what their design would be?"

Connie: Yeah, that's a good one, too. Now let's flip it around. What is the best way to receive feedback when it is that four-part feedback, or really any kind? What is the best way to receive feedback?

Adam: Well, I think receiving feedback is all about humility, restraint, and acceptance. As designers, we have to understand that our role is to create something that solves a problem, that meets an objective. It's not to be some brand creator that creates the most amazing things ever and that's what we're known for. A good idea can come from anywhere. We're not necessarily going to be the only person who has an idea or who understands a challenge, or who can speak to a challenge or a solution and why it will or will not work. We have to separate ourselves from our designs and be open to the feedback and want the feedback, and see bad feedback as key to making our creations better.

I think that's the first step, is just working on that level of acceptance and making this something you want, and not something that you're doing just because you feel like you have to do, if that makes sense.

Connie: Sure.

Adam: Then, from there, I think it's about active listening, and really making sure that you understand what someone is trying to tell you about your design. In the example I gave earlier about placing a bank balance at the bottom of the screen,

I would want to make sure that I understand that, "Okay, the challenges here are because the size of the type that I used or maybe the color, that it's getting lost, so my new objective when I go back to iterate on this is to make that piece of information stand out more, to call more attention to it." That's an important thing to think about, is how do I understand this feedback so that I can go act on it? Because if I understand it in the form of, "Oh, I need to make it bigger," or, "Oh, I need to change the color," yes those might work but there might be lots of other solutions, too. Maybe better solutions.

It's about reframing the challenge or setting the new challenge for that aspect of the design. The third thing I would say also to just be aware of the attitudes and the feelings, and maybe the trepidation of the people giving you feedback. Feedback can be a tricky thing. People can get scared to do it. They don't want to hurt people's feelings, so they might hold back, they might not give you all the information that might truly be valuable. One of the things that Aaron and I coach designers to do is to inner critique, take part in the critique, be ones of the critics.

Start to analyze the design yourself out loud with the other people in the room so that A, they see that, "Hey, this is something that we're really supposed to be doing. We're really supposed to be looking at this design and analyzing it and determining where we should iterate on it," and that helps them feel more comfortable with that process, but also, by critiquing it, it helps you separate yourself from the design because you start to put yourself into the mindset of, "Okay, if I'm going to push this forward another time, where am I going to put those efforts? What are the things that need the most work?"

Connie: Yeah, that's great, and when you detach yourself from your design, the feedback that you get is only going to make you a better designer. People are really doing you a favor, if you can improve. I mean, five years of design critiques, you're really going to improve a lot compared to how you were at the start.

Adam: Absolutely, yep.

Connie: But what about when things go bad? I know there are some company cultures where people are very competitive, there are political things going on. Sometimes people just don't have chemistry together. What do you do? I'm sure you've experienced this, when you're in the midst of a critique and you see things are going wrong, or going downhill?

Adam: Mm-hmm. Well, and the thing is there's lots of ways they can go downhill and so the strategies or the tactics that you employ are highly dependent on how things are going South for you. For one example, if you find that someone is just constantly giving you what we would call "personal preferential feedback" which is they're talking about what they would like to see, or how they feel about something, then one of the simple, or couple of the techniques that we tend to use are referring back to the goals, referring back to the audience. "I understand that this color is causing some issues for you. Our audience here, they're familiar with this brand, they're working in this environment, this is what we know about them. Can you talk a little bit more about how the color choices relate to our audience?"

You give them something to try to reframe their comments that is material to the design you're working on. Another technique that we like to use is called the "5 Whys" which is basically a root cause analysis tool that is all about asking the question, "Why?" repeatedly to get someone to drill into their statements further and further. You have to be careful about doing this, because if you just ask the question, "Why?" over and over again, you seem like a total jerk. But it's just about from a facilitation standpoint, asking them to explain themselves a little bit more. "Can you tell me a little bit about why you think that wouldn't work? Can you tell me a little bit more about why you think it might have that effect? Can you tell me a little bit more about why it makes you want to throw up?" Whatever feedback it is that they've given you.

If you do that enough times, you usually get one of two things. One is they start to relate it to something that is material to the design that you're working on and it's feedback that you can use, or they start to realize that, "Okay, this is really just my preference that I'm talking about here, and it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the design."

Connie: Well you know what, you mentioned a facilitator, and I did want to ask what the typical roles are, what roles you would recommend in a formal design critique. Also, just the ideal number of people that should participate, because I know if it gets too big, you can get just too many different opinions.

Adam: Yep. In a lot of settings, you don't necessarily have control over the number of people that are going to be present in a meeting where you might want to do this, but in the situations where you do have control, one of the rules of thumb that we like to use is no more than six people and the way to think about this is if you were to go out to dinner with a bunch of friends, how many people can you put around the table and carry on one conversation without it splintering off? There have been some studies around this, and around six is the magic number. I typically like to aim for three, four, or five, but no more than six.

Connie: I see.

Adam: Then, in terms of roles, we like to make sure that everybody who's present is critiquing, so there's nobody in the room who's not critiquing. There typically is somebody who's responsible for taking notes, and we want those notes taken in a public manner, a way that everybody can see what's being written down and there's a couple reasons for that. One is, if you've ever been in a meeting where you've taken notes, maybe on your own laptop or notebook, and then after the meeting someone sends out their notes from the meeting, and you compare the two and you're like, "Were we just in the same meeting?" Having that one shared record helps to eliminate some of that.

It also gives people an opportunity to clarify themselves. As they see what they're talking about being added to the notes, they can say, "Oh, that is what I meant. No, that's not what I meant." A third thing it does for us is we have a tendency to speak in incomplete thoughts, and just assume that other people know where we're going with our statements. By having someone have to write it down, they

have to figure out, "Okay, what exactly are you saying? How would I put that into words?" Because you didn't actually finish your thought. It forces that completion.

Connie: Nice. Are you talking about doing it on a whiteboard or doing it in a collaborative document like Google?

Adam: Yep, it can be any of those things, whatever works for your team. If you're all in the same spot, it could be a whiteboard or a Clip Chart. I've done ones remotely where it is a shared document. One of the things that I sometimes like to do is if we're looking at a design that I can export to say a PDF or something like that, then we'll look at it through Acrobat, and in Acrobat, I can just add stickies to the pages as we look at them through a screen share. That works really well. There's a note taker, and then there's the facilitator and the presenter.

            The person who's actually presenting the work, and the person who facilitates the conversation and honestly, you can use a separate facilitator in these discussions if necessary, but it creates a bit of an awkward situation sometimes when the presenter and the people doing the design work, they're the ones that need to collect the information, and the facilitators are guiding conversation. They turn to the presenter and they're like, "Okay, do you have what you need? Can we move on?" The presenter has to be like, "Oh yes," or, "No." It creates a weird breakup in what should be just a natural conversation.

Connie: Yeah, I see that. Good advice. What are some typical challenges that we could expect running a design critique?

Adam: One that comes up very frequently, it's hard for anybody to stop, is problem solving or people starting to generate new ideas or talk about new potential aspects of the design, as we're trying to critique the design. It's a challenge because if you think about a room full of people and everybody's supposed to be looking at this design, thinking about it, analyzing it, and talking about what aspects are effective and which ones aren't. Now, you've got somebody who's talking about changing the design or a new design all together, and maybe they're even drawing it on a board, but who knows? Now, the people in that room, some of them are trying to imagine this new design, some of them are trying to critique this new design. Some of them are still thinking about the design they're supposed to be thinking about and critique that.

            Some of them have just gotten so lost that they've given up all hope and are just waiting for the meeting to be over. You've got people all on different pages, and so the thing to do when that comes up is to try to facilitate away from it. It's not that you don't want the ideas, but it's that at that point in time, the ideas themselves aren't what we're supposed to be exploring. Often the things I coach people on are saying, "If you need to, you can ask the question, 'Can you tell me a bit more about how this new design you're proposing solves an objective that the design we're looking at doesn't?'" Get them to try to backtrack to the design that you're analyzing.

            Or, if you don't need to cover that because you already understand it, you can say, "Okay, so it sounds like you have some ideas on how we might address this

aspect of our design in our next iteration. Let's mark that you have those ideas on the board," so you can use maybe a parking lot, so to speak, "And after we finish our critique, we'll come back and we'll start to explore those solutions a bit more," so facilitate around it that way.

Connie: Yeah. That's a great idea. It seems like you have to be so experienced to remember to react and say these things at the appropriate time.

Adam: Yeah, it does take practice. This is definitely a skill and it's something that takes practice, but if you start small and you start just doing it with one other person, that can help a lot. Another thing to go into it is just if you're collecting feedback, the thing you always to keep in mind is, "Do I understand what I'm being told in a way that I can go further explore my design?" Because if I don't, because maybe they're not giving me that, maybe they're off exploring their own design and they're telling me about what their own design would be, then I know I have to do some work to ask questions to get to that understanding with them.

As long as I'm going through the critique and I keep thinking, "I want to understand what they think in a way that let's me go explore my design further," then that helps me just think about how I need to respond to the feedback that they're giving me. Do I need to ask more questions? Do I need to maybe facilitate away from this part of the conversation?

Connie: Yeah, that's a very good criteria or baseline to bump every question up against ... Yeah. Just to wrap up, I thought it was really interesting, at the end of your book you have an appendix with bad habits. Can you pull out two or three of the ones that you think are most likely to occur? Bad habits that can hurt a critique.

Adam: Yep. One of them I think that I see a lot is defending. It's that we haven't separated ourselves from our designs and so as soon as someone starts to tell us where they think a part of our design won't be effective, we start to give them all the reasons why it will be. Or, all the reasons why we had to do it that way because we didn't have another choice. That mentality, that approach can really shutdown a conversation pretty fast. Not talking about strengths is also another bad habit. We, as human beings, we're attuned to focus on the negative more than the positive because the negative is bad, it offers threats, it's the things that we need to avoid.

In critiques, we tend to focus on the negative things, but if we don't focus on the positive things, we run the risk of giving a designer all this feedback on things they need to take further and then the next time we see the design, all the things that were working well, they might have gotten lost because in the shuffle, they got changed. The designer never really knew that they were strong aspects and so they didn't really think much of changing them. We run that risk. Another reason strengths are very important is that as designers, one of the best tools or techniques that we have is to borrow things.

Look at how a solution works in one space and borrow it for another until we know an aspect of our design is working really well in one spot. We might be able

to use that same technique, that same approach in another spot to strengthen that. Not talking about strengths is another bad habit.

Connie: That's great. Do you have another thing to say?

Adam: Participating. I don't think I can emphasize that one enough. That's probably one of the biggest "Ah-hah" moments that I had working in this space, was just that seeing how much that shifts a conversation once the designer starts to actually participate in the critique and critique the work itself. It can take a discussion that is really struggling, people are really having trouble talking about things, and it can really turn it around really fast. That one I would highly recommend.

Connie: You mean getting the designer involved in the conversation rather than just sitting there and listening?

Adam: Exactly. Just waiting for the feedback, like don't wait. Start to critique the work yourself with the others in the room with you. I've definitely seen the behavior of people holding up their work and presenting it in front of them, almost like it's a shield separating themselves from the audience, right? You've got to stop that. You've got to bring yourself around to the other side of the design and look at it with a critical eye and talk about it.

Connie: Right. When I am designing with a team, I like to think of it as one giant mind talking to itself. Adam, thank you so much for taking the time to give us all your insights on critiques.

Adam: Oh, thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed the opportunity.