Discussing Design

Enhancing collaboration at Discourse through thoughtful critique.
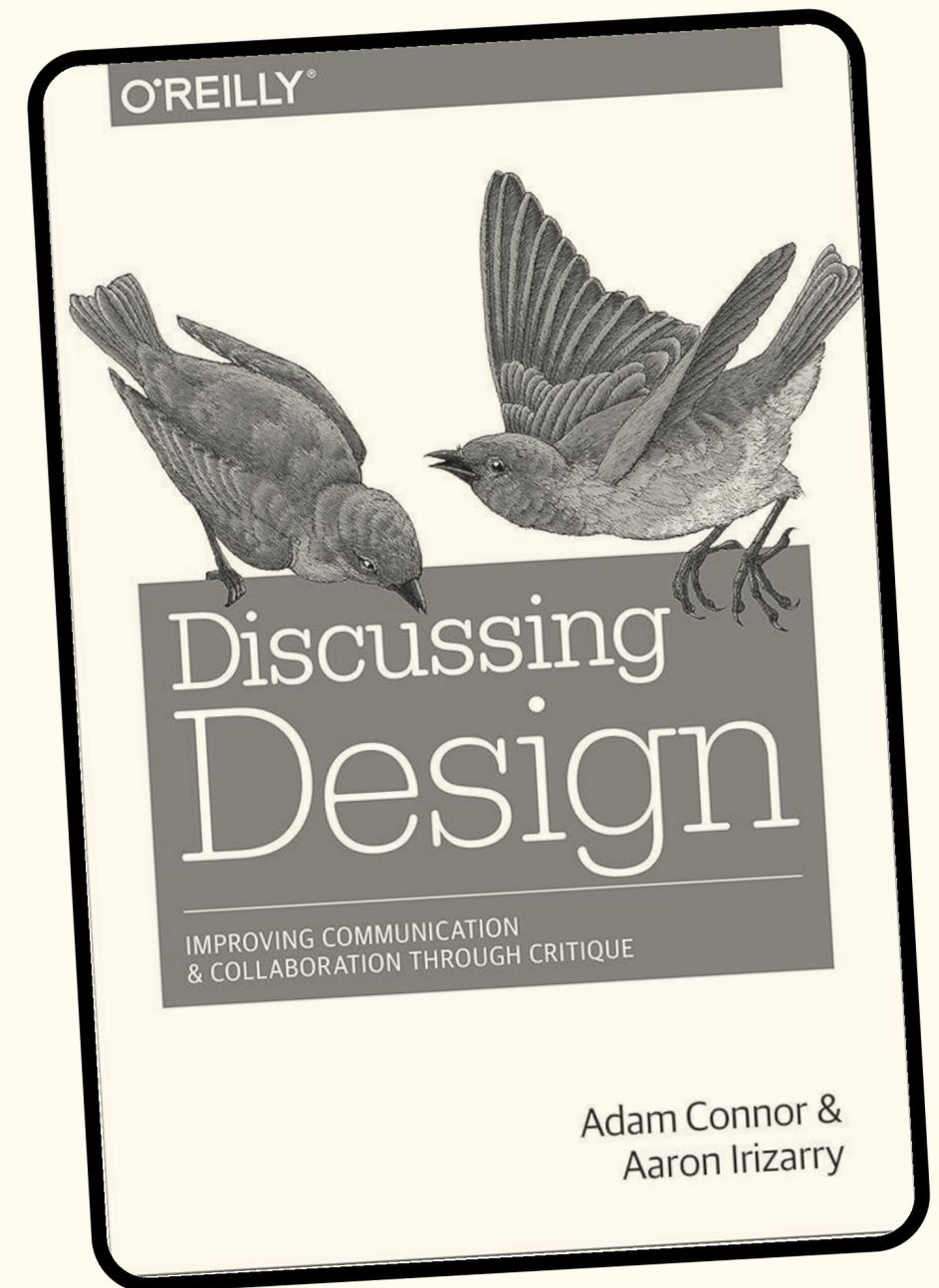

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Discussing Design

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION
& COLLABORATION THROUGH CRITIQUE

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Aaron Irizarry

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1. Enabling Critique

We'll explore critique, its benefits in product design, and fostering a supportive culture.
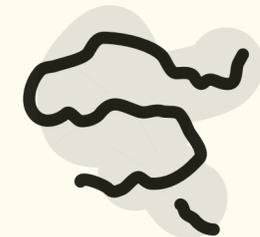
2. Incorporating Critique

We'll check out how to properly add feedback to our process at Discourse.
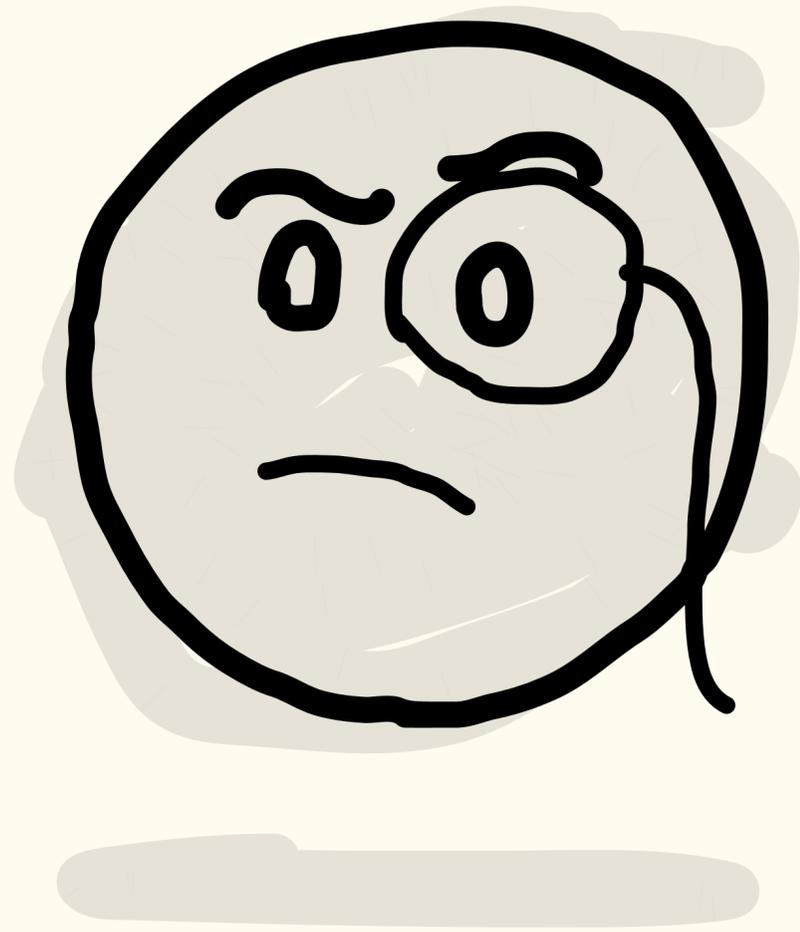
3. Summary

We will solidify that critique is at the core of great collaboration and product design.

Appendix

We will take a look at habits that can hinder healthy critique

1.1 What is it?

A framework...

What is the objective
of the design?

⬇

What elements of the design
are related to the objective?

⬇

Are those elements effective
in achieving the objective?

⬇

Why or why not?

Good critique is comprised of three elements

Identifies

It identifies a specific aspect or decision in the design being presented

Correlates

It relates that aspect or decision to an objective or best practice

Describes

It describes how and why the aspect or decision work to support or not support the objective or best practice
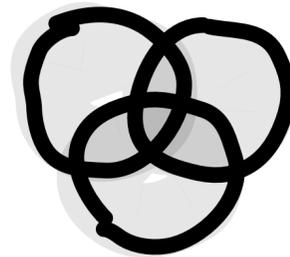
Helpful tips

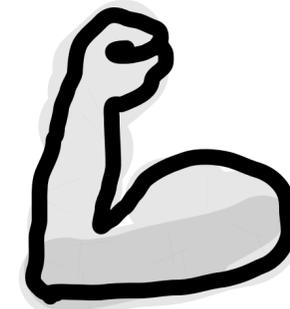## Ask questions

Questions bring clarity, while assumptions do not.

Use a filter

Hold on to your reaction, investigate it and discuss when appropriate.
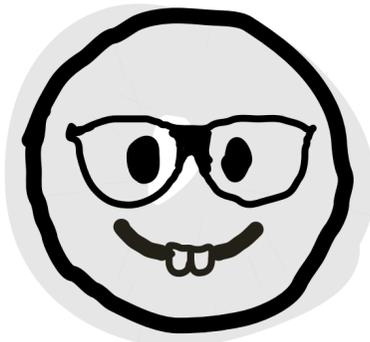
Call out strengths

Spending the majority of time on what doesn't work is detrimental.

Things to avoid

Preference

Avoid your own solutions or prioritizing your own taste.

Untimely
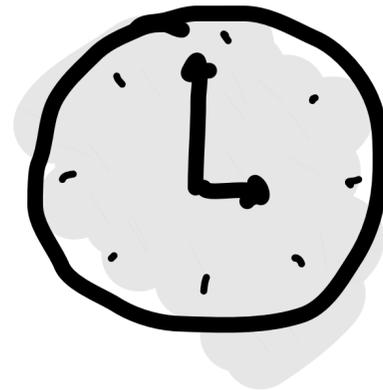
Uninvited critique leads to defensiveness & derailment.

Incomplete
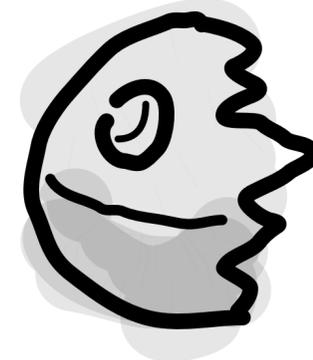
Avoid critique without a *why* of the problem; it should be actionable

When you don't have the words....

Look for examples

Look for examples in sites or apps you appreciate that are accomplishing the same goal

Ask yourself why

Is it the spacing? The color? Where is your attention being drawn? These are good starting points to get to the bottom of your "why"

Be honest

When you can't correctly describe why, just be honest about that, and still give your opinion.

Central idea

Critique isn't about judgement. It's about **analyzing designs/ideas** so that you can improve them. Receivers can participate in that analysis by **listening to the feedback** from others and relate it to the objectives of the product they are designing.
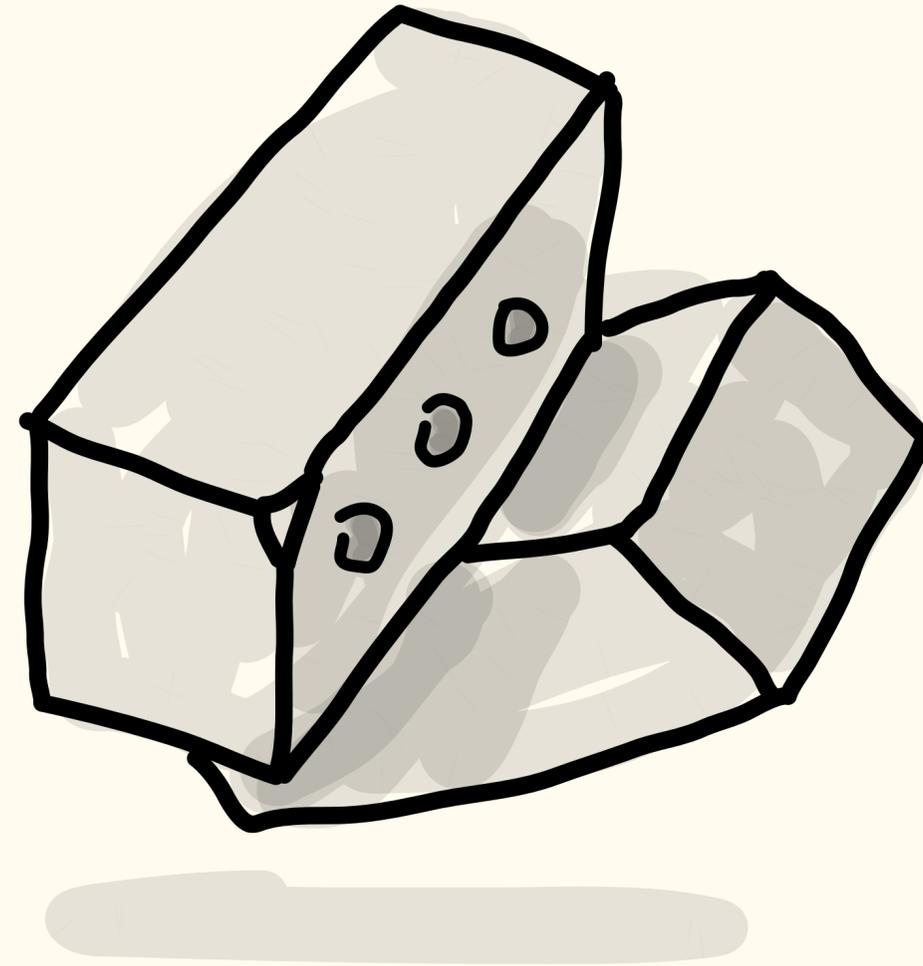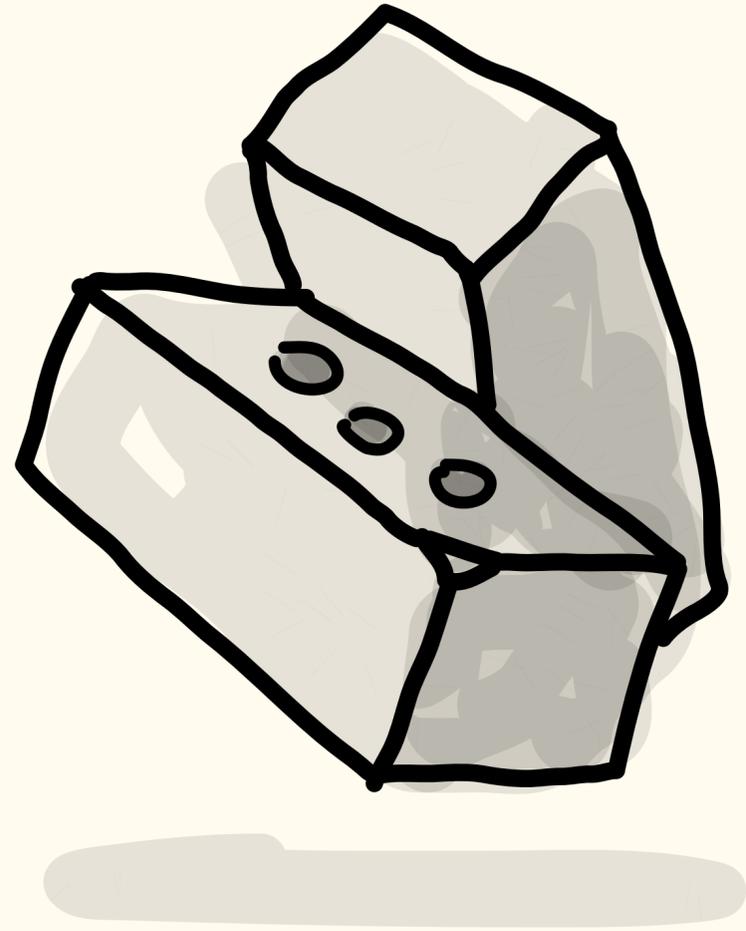
01 - Enabling critique

1.2 Foundations

objectives / goals are the foundation for good design & valuable critique

Setting a foundation

begins with

Personas

User archetypes that describe an individual's behaviors, goals, and expectations.

Scenarios

Situations and contexts in which a persona will be interacting with our design solution.

guided by

Goals

The desired & measurable outcomes that result from the product being used.

Principles

Qualities and characteristics that the product will exhibit in its content and behavior

Personas

These help us look at our design through the lens of:
- whose eyes are looking at this
- what behaviors or expectations should I be considering

The resourceful community manager

https://dev.discourse.org/t/customer-interview-michaela-staffova-make/119707

Michaela is a community manager for an active and successful community run by a creative SAAS company. .

She is a casual computer user who can get her way around but does not enjoy diving into the technical details of a product.

She enjoys that her community enables the product users to engage with one another and get their questions answered by other members of the community.

Consumption Behaviors

- Reads all of the activity happening on a daily basis
- Participates in meta when needing questions answered
- Appreciates an all in one solution for community members to need only one place to go

Misc Thoughts

- Discourse makes sense for technical communities, similar to how instagram makes sense for visual communities
- Quality and price of Discourse is why they chose the platform
- Folks who just drop in to get an answer won't care if anything changes
- Repeating users would be disappointed, they're used to it and they invest time regularly

Administration Behaviors

- Frustrated when settings are hard to find
- Finds text customization painful
- Cheering people and encouraging community participants
- Marking topics as solved when a solution is present
- Communicates bad news when it happens
- "it makes me incredibly happy when the community behaves in a self-sustaining manner and when folks help each other and I don't even have to step in, I bookmark all the "community love" posts"

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Scenarios

A scenario helps us think about our design within certain contexts a user may be coming from.

Michaela wants to change the scoring of actions in the gamifications plugin

Michaela receives a couple messages from users in the community that the leaderboard scoring seems to be a bit off. With the advice of her community members, she decides that she would like to change the way scores are calculated. She would like to be able to respond to her users by the end of the day that the problem has been solved.

She expects there to be settings on the leaderboard page as she is an admin, but it is not available. Her next step is to navigate to the admin area and search for "leaderboard" but that does not show up as well.

Consider the following

- Michaela has a hefty todo list to complete before the end of her day
- How does the plugin present options for editing it's settings to an admin?
- What language does the plugin use on both the admin side & user facing side?
- What happens if Michaela searches for "leaderboard" in the admin filter menu?

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Why they're important

I/You are not the user. Setting up personas & scenarios for your project help you stay grounded into who you are designing this for, giving you a base from where to guide your critique and analysis of designs being presented.

Goals

The desired & measurable outcomes that result from the product being used.

Should be achievable & meaningful, and best to **avoid binary or output based goals**.

Ex. Add "remember me to login page"
- Its binary in that it is either produced or not
- Better could be **"increase authenticated visits to our site by 15%"**

DESIGN GOALS

- **Increase number of users invited to new forums** *by 15%*

- **Decrease time forum exists without invited users** *by 15%*

- **Decrease time from clicking invite link → member sign up** *by 25%*

Design Principles

Qualities and characteristics that the product will exhibit in its content and behavior as people use it and interact with it.

Specificity helps you you retain the best ideas from generation exercises like brainstorms, allowing you to **better focus your efforts.**

As little design as possible

Enable users to see, understand, and act with confidence. Seek to simplify the interface by removing unnecessary elements or content that does not support user tasks.

Set consistent expectations

Clicking buttons, performing actions, and navigating to certain links should take the user exactly where they expect.

Anyone can use this

Everyone at all levels of experience should feel like they know how to use the product, regardless of how many features they use.

Central idea

Keeping critiques focused on what matters for the product means having a ==**mutually understood set of objectives**==. By working to uncover what these are, and ==**referencing them regularly**== throughout a project we not only have better critiques, but we begin to change the culture and dynamics of the organization to ==**better support critique and iteration**==, giving us a better product.

2.1 Four Guiding Principles

Everyone is equal

Leader's /stakeholder's opinions are not inherently true or more accurate because they are leaders. Everyone's observations & perspectives are listened to equally. Useful insights can come from anyone.

Everyone is a critic

Ensuring that everyone participates helps prevent situations where an individual might not say much during a session, but express concerns after the fact, leading to more work.

Avoid problem solving

Hardest of all the rules. It is a natural inclination for many of us come up with solutions as we see problems. Doing so though causes our brain to multitask, dividing resources best used for analytical thinking.

Avoid decision making

The output should not be a specific list of changes for the designer to make. After critique should come a time of exploration, using the new insights to generate possible solutions. If we make decisions in the critique, we may miss important realizations that come with time and exploration.

02 - Implementing Critique

2.2 Methods

What should we critique?

Everything is open to critique. Wireframes, prototypes, sketches, personas, scenarios, goals, etc. We can even open up processes and other methods to critique sessions. This is **not just for designers, but for us all.**

Where should we critique?

One-on-one

30 minute meetings between someone needing critique and a partner

Group critique

Organize a small standalone meeting to critique an idea or process.

Design sessions

Allow team members to sign up for standalone critique from the whole team with guests invited

Feedback topics

Create a feedback topic to invite critique & help frame what kind of feedback you are looking for.

Things to keep in mind

Start small

When incorporating critique into an org, its important to limit the sessions to a small group of people, sometimes as small as pairs.

As those involved get comfortable, expand to more people.

Active listening

Active listening requires focus. For discussions to stay focused on pertinent and useful feedback, we need to ensure that we understand what's being communicated before responding. This applies to both the giver and receiver of critique.

Who to include

Think about whether participants will help or hinder the discussion and critique at hand. Do not exclude those struggling to give better critiques, but think about how and why we put people together to maximize the benefit of a session.

Practice makes perfect

Critique is a skill, and **it must be practiced**. Do not expect perfection the first time you try it. **Find as many opportunities you can to do it**, and you will get better.

Appendix

Common pitfalls and how to avoid them

❌ Defensiveness

By focusing on what we think about our work, we take the focus off of the product and place it squarely on us. Critique is not about personal judgement. It's about analysis and improvement.

✅ Explain yourself

Explain the thinking behind your work and idea. Ideas & work are not under attack, it is being analyzed collectively for the team and product to benefit.

❌ Lack of structure

Critiques & discussions can quickly go off rails without a focus as to what the outcome should be. Everyone firing away their feedback for any part of the design, in any order they wish can lead to confusion.

✅ Use a template

Identify the specifics that we want feedback on and make sure the team understands them. Share the work to be critiqued ahead of time as well as the type of feedback you are seeking.

❌ No participation

Presenting your work, and then having only others critique could lead to "polite" responses or worse, no responses at all.

✅ Critique yourself

Presenters should participate in critiquing their work alongside their team. This helps break down the me-you mentality.

Actively critiquing our own work leads to less offense.

❌ Quick reactions

Reacting to designs / ideas with the first though that comes to your mind usually isn't helpful. It usually sets an unhealthy tone for the conversation.

✅ Thoughtful response

Instead of reacting with the first thoughts and ideas that come to mind, hold on to that thought & think about questions you can ask to help you understand what you are seeing/ hearing better.

❌ Lack of discussion

Critique is not a list of errors / revisions to be carried out. It is not a list of "demands" or a pointing out of all faults.

✅ Conversational

Critique should be a dialogue; an exploration and analysis of what is being presented. It is crucial for teams to talk about why something might or not might be working.