

## The Design Untangled Podcast

### Episode: DU032 – Design Critiques

#### Host: Chris Mears and Carla Lindarte

(00:16) **Chris:** Hello. Welcome to Design Untangled with me Chris Mears and Carla Lindarte. How are you doing?

(00:22) **Carla:** I am very good. How are you?

(00:24) **Chris:** Good tired. I have been practicing ninety songs on my ukulele all weekend, so my fingers are very tired out.

(00:34) **Carla:** Wow, that is cool. I did not know you could play that.

(00:37) **Chris:** Still quite amateurish but I can strum along to a few cheesy pop tunes. That is all you need really.

(00:44) **Carla:** Good. One of my resolutions is to go back and play guitar again. So yeah, just I am finding it hard to get motivated in January. I think everyone does.

(00:54) **Chris:** Yeah, I did not know you played the guitar.

(00:56) **Carla:** Yeah, I used to play it quite well, but just forgotten. I think I am just getting old, forgotten everything. So I want to remind myself how to play guitar and read music and stuff. Yes! So today we are going to talk about something that a lot of people hate, which is design critiques,. Listening to people criticizing your work. Have you experienced that before, Chris?

(01:29) **Chris:** No, because my work is always excellent. So there is nothing to be criticized about it.

(01:35) **Carla:** Oh my god. You are such a liar. Wow. I actually think, to be a good designer you

have to be humble and you always have to listen to other people, Chris. I am not sure how good of a designer you are then, if you do not like people to give you feedback.

(01:59) **Chris:** Well, I do like hearing about how good my designs are. I welcome that feedback. Anything else they can keep it to themselves though?

(02:08) **Carla:** That is a gift. And well, I am not like Chris, I have actually being criticized quite a lot about the work I have done before, and actually thank people who have done that. Because it is great to get feedback from peers, from people who have more experience than you. Believe it or not, I think is great to get feedback as a UX designer from UI designers and developers. Because you see things in different ways, like the vision center will see it more from a brand perspective. The developers would potentially have better ideas of how the interaction could be done, from a front end perspective. So showing your work is important and being able process the feedback is also really important.

(03:02) **Chris:** And I read quite a good article recently from Jared Spool about some of the best practices that the people doing the critiquing, could follow, to make the process a bit more effective. And I think that is definitely worth a read and we can probably talk about some of those on this episode as well. Some of it is just letting the person take you on the journey, which is a phrase I love so much that I always put it in air quotes. You, as a critiquer, you need to kind of elicit from that designer what their thought process was, what alternatives they looked at to produce the design, and just understand kind of how they arrived at their end solution. Some people who are a bit more seasoned presenting back their designs will be able to deliver that story as part of the presentation of their design. As a critiquer you can also help the designer by sort of stepping them through their thought process a little bit.

(04:01) **Carla:** That is super important. And not just when you asking for feedback but also when you are pitching or just overall presenting your work to stakeholders, it is great to show the design process and the thought processes you said. I actually used to work in an environment where feedback was not a thing. People just did the work, and because I was not surrounded by

a lot of designers, things got approved or done quite easily. If you think about it, because I did not have much senior people around me really looking at the design. And I actually think that is really bad for you as a designer. You always need to be seeking that, and even if you do not like it, because you obviously might get some positive feedback as Chris does, always very positive. But when you get negative feedback, you might not like it, and as you said, take it personally, et cetera. Buy I really, really recommend all designers to go out there and show their work. If you are working in a team environment, just create a kind of a ritual, you can go and perhaps every Friday showcase your work, to different people with different peers. Or if you are more comfortable with one-on-ones, try to book a meeting like once a month with someone who works with you or someone outside as well. You can find mentors. You can find people outside your work to be able to give you feedback because you always see things from one perspective and it is really good to gather people to talk about your work.

(05:52) **Chris:** Yes, I guess you are out of your head a little bit, I think. And the thing people are scared of is standing in front of a group of people showing what you have worked laboriously on for, however long it is, and then just getting torn to shreds. Basically, that is kind of like the public speaking fear, really, is it not? And I think the takeaway from that is, okay that might happen, but if it does, it is a sign that either the people doing the critique are not doing it in a constructive way, which is a different issue, not related to you personally. Or it is a sign that maybe you need to just develop how you are presenting that design back, so that you can lead people through your whole thought process and design process. And communicate to them a bit better, why you have done things the way you have. So take it as a learning experience I would say. And not just go home and cry.

(06:50) **Carla:** In my experience pitching in the past, for example, when you go and pitch an idea to win a project or in the design consultancy space, when you have very disengaged people, you would normally do not get much feedback. So it means that you just present the work and everything. Everyone is yeah, yeah, very good. It is just because I think, in my

experience, people are not really engaged with that. And they just like just want the meeting over. So sometimes getting hammered by a client, or a person, asking lots of questions and questioning you and your thought process, is potentially a sign that they actually really like it, and are really engaged with what you are doing. So just focus, if you have a thorough process in your mind and you can explain and justify your design decisions and also be open to change, and listen to what people are saying to you and capture that feedback and be able to action on it. I think that you should keep thinking positively that you have done your best to deliver it, what you just delivered. And that might mean also, that the person like looking at it, it is actually quite engaged, with the work.

(08:17) **Chris:** And I think the other kind of positive way you could look at it is by receiving that feedback, assuming that it is actually constructive. You have moved the design on and it is better than it was before you went in. So although your original stab at it maybe was not the optimal solution, at least from the critique you have received, you can take all that input onboard and actually make it even better. And ultimately it is you as the designer that will make those changes. So just take everyone's points onboard, fold into your own design process, add your spin on it, and you can still have ownership of it. But I think having all those other inputs actually is a good thing as well.

(08:59) **Carla:** Yes, you do not have to change it all because that looks as if you are not very sure about what you are doing. If you just say yes to everything and try to adapt it to whatever the person is talking to you about is saying. I think also it shows some kind of immaturity as a designer because you do not trust yourself and you do not trust you the quality of your work. So it has to be a fine balance between listening to feedback that you think is constructive and it is going to make your design be much better, but also making sure that you stick to your own, I do not know how to say that in English, your own thoughts. Stick with it, rather than just giving up, if you are being criticized, you have to be stronger. I think humble designers but also the ones that can really believe in their decisions are the most successful ones. If you just try to please

everyone, your design is never going to have consistency.

(10:08) **Chris:** Yes. I think being able to say no is definitely one of the more advanced levels of receiving a design critique. And ideally, that no should be backed up by logical reasons, not just because you do not like the look on their face and you do not want to do it. It should be based on actual design decisions with design rationale behind it. Yeah. Ideally that would be stuff like user testing, or data, or whatever, rather than just a blanket no. But yes, being out to stand up for yourself and your designs is definitely another aspect of it.

(10:43) **Carla:** Definitely, just spot on, not using user testing feedback, but a way of justifying your decisions, especially when you have difficult stakeholders, or like if you have a creative director trying to change your work or something like that. It is also using the feedback data to back it up. You are really spot on, that is really useful and the more you know about your users and what they want, and what they are looking for in the design you are putting together, the more likely you are going to push your designs through. I think it is also important that you as a designer critique all the people's work as well. So you get used to the process, both ways. And if you do not have the opportunity to critique all the work or because for example, you are a junior in a team and do not have anyone that you have been asked to provide feedback to. You can also start doing a lot of app critics. That is really, really common in companies like Facebook and also Google. Just going and say, let us do a design critique a week, as an exercise, as a team. And, then you get to specify how you make it better or you get in a [inaudible 00:12:09] of how you make it better. That is really useful as a designer. So you start like getting used to critiquing design and also practicing for job interviews because they can ask you to do that as well, in some interviews. So I think that is another way. I think it has to be both ways. You have to be good at critiquing other people's work as well as receiving the feedback.

(12:32) **Chris:** What do you think about for instance, a junior designer critiquing a senior UX designer's work?

(12:39) **Carla:** I think the more you do that, the better. In my experience, as you start getting

older and as you start doing less and kind of managing more and doing more meetings and stuff like that. And the young people, in my opinion, sometimes I actually am more up to date, or know about things you do not know about, or the more innovative, or have very good ideas. So you should not close yourself off as a manager or some mid-level designer or senior designer to not listen to the junior's feedback, because, I think everyone's feedback should be welcomed. Everyone. And I do believe that truly and when I was managing design teams, I was always hoping from everyone's feedback because I think everyone is really talented, and if you surround yourself by talented people, you might as well listen to them. Otherwise you will never learn. And I actually think that a lot of the things I have learned in my life has been from junior people. People who for example come from different backgrounds and just started in design or people who used to run their own business and startup, and then started in a design consultancy or something. They bring different perspectives, I think you should listen to everyone. Do you not think?

(14:07) **Chris:** Absolutely. To be honest, I have never experienced where a senior designer is presenting something and a junior designer critiques and the senior designer drop kicks him in the face. I have never seen that. I think a lot of people's anxiety over critiques is probably a lot in their own head, as long as you are not in a rubbish company obviously. But generally speaking, my experience has been quite positive and they have been quite safe spaces I suppose to just discuss design. UX designers I think, as a species, we have got at least, a little bit of empathy, hopefully because of the role we are in.

(14:47) **Carla:** I also think that there sometimes I have experienced, not personally, but I have seen a lot of friction sometimes from between visual designers and UX designers, when you have a big team. Because visual designers, we have a different opinion and blah, blah, blah, and then sometimes it gets a bit personal. That happened to me when I was at Sapient, once, actual designers competing with the design, stuff like that. I actually say that like really negative to the outcome, if that makes sense. I think the more you collaborate and work together, the

better you get, the better the outcome is going to be. If you just start competing and like showing, who is right. Am I right? Are you right? Or no, I read these user testing feedback in a different way and I think you are wrong and my design is the winner. I think that attitude is not great for design. Design is all about collaboration and listening to each other and trying to do the best for the user. It is not about showing your egos to other people.

(15:56) **Chris:** So in terms of these things actually happening, have you got any suggestions for how you could introduce them to an organization that does not really currently do very much of this?

(16:07) **Carla:** Well, I kind of mentioned an example before, you could start creating these idea talks about rituals in terms of design. So it is things that you do constantly, to kind of show your work, or show what you are passionate about. For example, at Sapient we used to do every week, we used to do breakfast meetings, and every week someone would talk about what inspire them. For example, if you do not want to talk about specifically, your own work, you can start slow by just presenting about stuff that you like and then people talk to you, give you feedback, ask you questions. And then slowly you can then say, okay, I had developed these in that same meetings and trying to do it constantly, and openly, and invite everyone to slowly do the same. So then people start getting more used to it. If it becomes a big thing, as something that you do, a review rather than a feedback process, or a feedback exercise, I think that is when you get more anxious about it. What I would encourage people to do is just create that safe space that it could be around a cup of tea every Monday morning, or lunch and learn kind of thing, or something that is a bit more constant. So people get used to that, and do not see it as a big thing that you have to get together and prepare for, people to have a look at your work. I think that is the best way you can kind of start creating that culture.

(17:46) **Chris:** Yeah, I think that is key. The regularity of it as well, just gives you more exposure to it, which reduces the panic like you say, and the anxiety of having to do it. And it also lets you see how other designers present their work, so that you can learn from them as well, as with all

of this stuff that once it becomes part of the culture of the company, it is just not really a big deal anyway and it is just part of your job and not something that you wake up in sweats about.

(18:15) **Carla:** Yes, exactly. You actually start looking forward to it because you want to show you are proud of what you are doing and you want to see what people have to say about it and then you learn something as well. If you think about it the different perspectives that you could have to make your time better, that should be a positive and you should look forward to it. I know it is difficult at the beginning, but, the more you do it, the more you get used to it. I also think if you are in an agency, or a design consultancy, or something like that, when there is an opportunity to pitch work, or get involved in pictures, I think that is great, it is sometimes harsh, but a great way of learning to get feedback, and seeing what clients are actually expecting.

(19:06) **Carla:** Of course if you are in a company and you are the designer of a company is different, because obviously you need to pitch your ideas and you need to show your designs to your senior stakeholders or decision makers. But still, if you are in an agency putting together a concept, going and presenting it and getting feedback from a client. I think that is where I have learned the most, really because it is very powerful to see how people could potentially destroyed your ideas. But at the end of the day you learn a lot.

(19:43) **Chris:** So it is been quite a long time since I have done any actual pitching, but it was quite rare that we got any feedback sort of in the room. It always came back, after they have reviewed other company's pitches and stuff like that. So yeah. Has it been your experience that you present something and then they just rinse it at the end?

(20:03) **Carla:** Yeah, well as I was saying before, in my experience when I pitch an idea concept or a user journey, a prototype, whatever, to a client and they did not engage much. They did not ask many questions, it meant that either we knew that we were going to win the work anyway, and the pitch was just a formality, or it was because they did not like it. Or they did not think it was good. The times that they grill with like lots of questions. I remember I did a pitch for MMS. I think you were there, that time. I thought that was the worst pitch I have ever done in my

life because they asked me so many questions. I said, but what about this? What about that? What about that? And then we won it. It was because the stakeholders was really interested and they wanted to find holes in your design. Then they were basically testing whether or not we thought about all the different angles of the problem. So I think it all depends on the kind of pitch or depends on the client. But most of the times I have always had lots of questions. They are not necessarily critique, per se. They would not say I do not like the green there or I do not like that button is too big. There will be just asking you questions about your thought process. So that is going back to your point before, of like making sure, as a designer or at least try to know as many angles as possible from the design process that you follow. The more prepared you are going to be for that grading at the end of the pitch.

(21:43) **Chris:** And there was one of a kind of side benefit to these things I was thinking of, which is if you are in a larger team, you might not always be aware of some of the stuff of other teams are working on. So it is actually where there is just critiquing some designs, it is also a good way sometimes just to see what everyone else is up to and see if there is any alignment you can have between your projects. So there is that aspect of it, which is quite positive.

(22:09) **Carla:** Yeah, definitely. And you learn their ways of working as well. You might find out that people are doing something following a process that it would save you lots of time, or they created a new set of design system that you could actually reuse for your project. So I think sharing is one of the most important things in a design studio environment and is actually [inaudible 00:22:40] are really hard to achieve. If you obviously work for a big agency or a big organization, the sharing is really hard, but the more you try to encourage it as a team and try to book those meeting and trying to really seek feedback and find all the things, the richer is going to be your design in the future.

(23:04) **Chris:** Absolutely. So I think that is all I have for design critiques, because it is 26 minutes long.

(23:12) **Carla:** Oh yes, twenty-six minutes, okay, well that is all I have too. Again, if you have

any questions or feedback, go to the Slack group or just find us on LinkedIn or whatever. We are happy to answer any questions.

(23:28) **Chris:** Until next time.

(23:29) **Carla:** Okay. Bye, bye.

(23:30) **Chris:** Bye.

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