Critical Friends: some working definitions

The origins of the term ‘critical friend’ appear to lie in educational circles - especially in the ‘critical pedagogy’ of the 1970s. There several definitions, all of which imply a position lying somewhere between the extremes of challenge and support.

[A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.]


The Critical Friend is a powerful idea, perhaps because it contains an inherent tension. Friends bring a high degree of unconditional positive regard. Critics are, at first sight at least, conditional, negative and intolerant of failure. Perhaps the critical friend comes closest to what might be regarded as 'true friendship' - a successful marrying of unconditional support and unconditional critique.

[John MacBeath, Professor of Education Leadership, Cambridge University]

Other examples refer to:

- Janus – the god who looked both ways
- The creative tension between the roles of ‘hostile witness’ and ‘uncritical lover’
- ‘a natural critical friend acting with positive intent’
- a ‘candid friend’

My own experiences of critical friendship

In my own writing, Critical Friends have encouraged me to believe that I have something useful to surface and share, and to explore different ways of expressing it. They have also supported me in the dark days of my writing doldrums. As creatively critical friends, they have questioned and challenged my ideas and actions, provided me with prompt and honest
feedback, and opened me up to fresh ideas and perspectives to deepen and extend my thinking and practice.

As an editor of AMED’s journal Organisations and People, I’ve experimented with involving Critical Friends several times in the past in support of contributors. In an issue that I co-edited with Vicky Cosstick\(^2\), it seemed to work pretty successfully once we’d set up a simple data base, a matching process, negotiated some simple guiding principles (see Table 1 on the next page), and then trusted in the individual pairing relationships to work.

Based on this experience, I’m convinced that, in the proper circumstances, critical friends have an invaluable role in supporting each others’ writing. It seems to me that critical friendships come in various guises and have different life spans. A common characteristic, however, appears to be that of voluntary association, and of mutual commitment and responsibility.

Some propositions about critical friendship

1. Critical friendship can be regarded as ‘engaging in critical reflection within a friendly climate to support transformation of an individual’s or an organisation’s practices.’

2. It is not a hierarchical relationship, but rather one that is based upon trust. Critical friendship is entered into willingly and mutually by peers, and does not require subject/topic-specific expertise.

3. It involves a blend of challenge and critical reflection on the one hand, and the co-creation of a collaborative, friendly, supportive personal or professional learning-writing environment on the other.

4. It is marked by its intention always to be mutually constructive and developmental.

5. An uncritical friend offers unquestioning support, whilst a critical friend offers questioning support, when given permission to do so.

A health warning

That said, we need to beware of idealising the role of critical friends. We should choose our critical friends carefully, and negotiate with them how best to derive mutual benefit from our critical friendship.

Critical friends and you

Q: Have you ever experienced or practised critical friendship, in your writing or on other contexts? If so, (how) would you recommend it to others?

\(^2\) ‘Writing in Leadership and Change’, Vol 15, No 1, February 2008
Table 1: Some qualities found in critical friends

Critical friends are:
- Trustworthy and competent, or potentially so
- Able to lower their defences sufficiently to enable them to receive as well as to give constructive feedback
- Mutually supportive
- Reasonably available to each other
- Intent on helping each other to achieve a critical perspective
- Able to give the benefit of the doubt to each other’s learning, ideas, advice, experience and actions
- Able to monitor and re-negotiate their respective psychological contracts, (e.g. Guest and Conway 2001)
- Prepared to end their critical friendship at an appropriate point
- Capable of avoiding collusion, and able to resist being sucked into a counselling or therapy role.

Other forms of writing relationships

Q: What are your experiences of engaging with people other than critical friends, and with things, or with phenomena such as time, space or (critical) incidents?

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4 Alison (Donaldson) might use the term ‘striking moments’ instead of ‘critical incidents’