

# Critical friendships for coaching and mentoring in writing

Bob MacKenzie



*Critical friendships are generous yet rigorous relationships that can create a more emergent, formative quality of coaching and mentoring in writing, and in the writing itself. Through such interactions, critical friends naturally engage in mutual learning experiences which involve and develop insightful conversations and more informed decisions. First, I introduce the notion of friendship. Then I explore some distinguishing features of critical friendships and qualities of critical friends. Next I address the particular nature of critical friendships from my perspective of commissioning, editing and writing for AMED's journal e-Organisations & People (e-O&P). Following some important caveats, I conclude by*

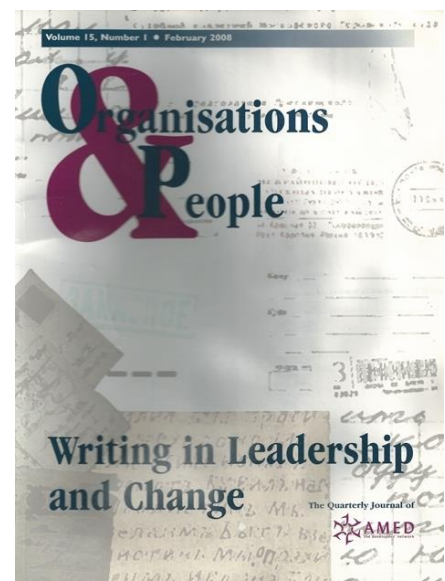
*considering how critical friendships might contribute to the quality of coaching and mentoring in writing, and to the writing itself. By including some live hyperlinks and a select bibliography, I offer some resources for delving deeper into the theory and practice of critical friendships.*

**Key words:** writing, critical friends, critical friendships, coaching, mentoring, peer review, peer-to-peer review

## Introduction

Over the years, we have been developing critical friendships as an approach to publishing AMED's online pdf journal [e-Organisations and People](#) (e-O&P). In my own writing and editing, critical friends have encouraged me to believe that I have something useful to surface, explore and express in different forms, formats and styles of writing and speaking. They have also supported me in the dark days of my periodic writing doldrums. They have questioned and challenged my ideas and actions, provided me with prompt and honest feedback, and introduced me to fresh ideas and perspectives to deepen and extend my thinking and practice. Likewise, I try to do this with others.

Friendship and critical friendship are related and problematic concepts, and are variously understood. As a consultant who uses words, language and writing as interventions for development and change, I try to practise and facilitate them wherever possible e.g. (MacKenzie 2006). The publication of a special issue of O&P on 'Writing in Leadership and Change' (Cosstick and MacKenzie 2008) explicitly introduced this collaborative way of working



between authors, editors and other critical friends, although the practice had been at work informally, if less explicitly, some time before then. By and large, my e-O&P editorial and writing experiences of engaging in critical friendships have been positive, once we'd identified suitable volunteers, set up a simple data base and optional matching process of authors and critical friends, and then trusted in the respective parties to work.

There are four main sections of this article. First I sketch some aspects of friendship. Then I go on to explore some distinguishing features of critical friendship and the qualities of critical friends. Next I address the particular nature of critical friendship as I understand it within the context of e-O&P. Finally, mindful of some important caveats, I consider briefly how critical friendships might contribute to ways of coaching and mentoring for good writing

## Meanings of friendship

There are many types of friendship, each of which has potential benefits and disadvantages. A yearning for friendship has always been strong in most human beings. It can be understood as an interpersonal relationship, often formed through an implicit 'contract', which is characterised by an emotional and intellectual affinity. Friendships are expressions of trust and intimacy between certain people, and are demonstrated differently in different periods, cultures and contexts.

There is a vast literature on friendship, stretching back to the works of the classical Greek philosophers and beyond. A recent series of BBC radio broadcasts surveyed the shifts and expressions of friendship over the last 500 years (Dixon 2014), and Mark Vernon has written a fascinating book about the philosophy and meaning of friendship (Vernon 2006). In the age of the internet, with the proliferation of social networking, friendships are increasingly enacted via digital and social media, rather than face-to-face. So it's relevant to consider how we develop our respective critical friendship 'contracts' in both virtual and direct interpersonal interactions.



Image: Achilles binding his friend Patroclus' wounds (Art Resource), File:Akhilleus Patroklos Antikensammlung Berlin F2278.jpg

Downloaded from Wikimedia Commons:

## Critical friendships

Much of the more detailed research on critical friendships arises from formal education settings. For example, there is an illuminating piece of small-scale qualitative research conducted with a sample of academic librarians in Sweden, supported by a helpful literature review ([Özek, Edgren et al. 2012](#)). This makes an important distinction between critical friendships for formative and summative assessment

(Biggs and Tang 2007), and identifies 'the central characteristics of relationships between friends, including mutuality, awareness of care, engagement and trust', citing (Gibbs and Angelides 2006). Critical friendships come in various forms, and have different life spans. Different people may also know them by different names, such as 'support and challenge partner' (Greene 2006). A shared characteristic, however, appears to be that of mutual commitment and responsibility. In critical friendships, as I understand it, 'critical' can mean variously 'key', 'crucial', 'scrupulous', or 'constructively challenging', whilst 'friendship' denotes the well-meaning, generous, intimate intentions of those relationships. Thus critical friendships can be regarded as *'engaging in critical reflection within a friendly climate to support transformation of an individual's or an organisation's practices'* (after Achinstein & Meyer 1997). Critical friendships are not in themselves hierarchical relationships, and they require certain skills and values from all parties concerned. As a rule, the content of conversations between critical friends is confidential, although there may be occasions when their insights, conclusions and proposals are brought to wider attention in order for new knowledge and practices to be shared.

Critical friendships involve a blend of challenge and critical reflection on the one hand, and the co-creation of a collaborative, friendly, supportive personal or professional learning and development environment on the other. Hence, there appear to be two apparently conflicting roles at play in a form of paradox or creative tension. One concerns friendship, and the other relates to a creative, positive form of criticism, which is distinguished by its *intention* to be constructive and developmental.

If critical friendships are embodied by critical friends, then who are such people?

## Critical friends

The term 'critical friend' appears to originate in educational circles – especially in the 'critical pedagogy' of the 1970s. Swaffield (2007: 251) maintains that "The freedom to be intellectually subversive and challenging of received wisdom lies close to the heart of the critical friend's value and purpose" (Swaffield 2007). There are other definitions, all of which imply a position lying somewhere along a continuum of challenge and support, for example:

*'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.'* (Costa and Kallick 1993).

*'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, cited in Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_friend](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_friend)).

Definitions of the term are generally specific to particular contexts, such as education, professional, business, academic, or writing development. There are programmes for becoming a ‘thinking partner’ (Kline 2009; 2011), or more vernacular notions of a ‘thinking buddy’ or ‘buddy system’, such as in the military or in sport. In academia, critical friends or critical colleagues can also support people working through action research (McNiff, Lomax et al. 1997). Critical friendships can be a formalised process e.g. (Özek, Edgren et al. 2012). They can also be expressed in spontaneous, informal or semi-formal acts, such as in Action Learning Sets. They embrace a wide range of processes, each of which is contextualised by a specific discourse or community of practice. It’s also possible for the same person to offer or experience both uncritical and critical friendships at different times, as circumstances dictate. This flexibility suggests the complex dynamics that are implicit or inherent in these relationships.

### Discovering critical friends

In my view, good critical friends are highly prized, and worth cultivating. Sadly, in my experience, critical friends are not always easy to find. So how can we spot and engage with them? Table 1 below suggests what we might look for.

**Table 1: Some qualities of critical friends**

Critical friends are:

- Trustworthy and competent in subject and/or process, 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
- Capable of understanding critical incidents (Tripp 1993), or of noticing ‘arresting’, ‘striking’ or ‘moving’ moments (Shotter 2011)
- 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)
- Able to engage sensitively in dialogue (Schein 1999: 201-12)
- Open to ending their critical friendship at an appropriate point
- Careful to avoid collusion, or of being sucked into a counselling or therapy role.

### Critical friendships as voluntary engagement

It follows from Table 1 that critical friendships cannot be imposed. To be effective, they require open rather than closed minds on the part of everyone involved. However, their formation can be facilitated, and – within resource constraints - this is what we seek to do wherever possible in publishing e-O&P. That said, essentially, each of us must identify our critical friends for ourselves. This may involve expressing our interests to likely candidates, being open to their offers, a period of trial and error at the early stages, and engaging in a shifting network of critical friendships as one another’s focus, interests and needs gradually

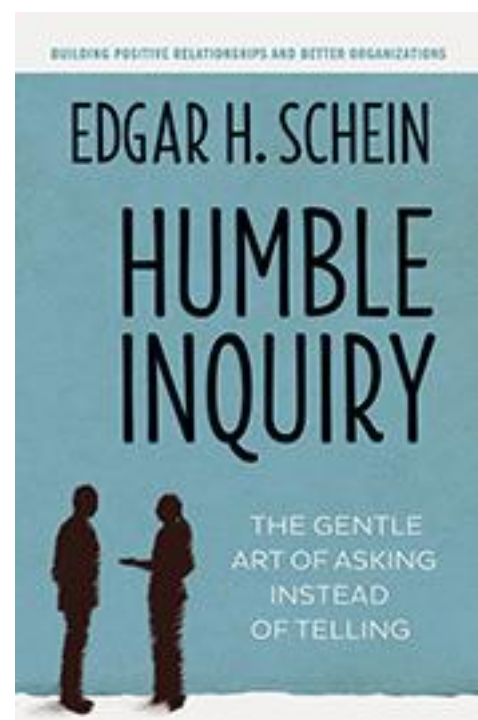
emerge and change. There is an incremental quality of critical friendships, developed in testing the water, and sensing what kind of comments are likely to be most constructive *for the writer*, rather than simply expressing the intentions and beliefs of the commentator.

Clearly critical friendships resonate and overlap with aspects of coaching and mentoring. However, in the context of writing, there are also some clear differences between critical friendships and the more extreme aspects of peer review.

### Critical friendships and peer review

Both critical friendships and peer review represent a potential form of collegiate quality assurance in writing for publication, and embody certain common characteristics. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, aspiring, first-time authors in particular can experience single- and double-blind peer review (which are, according to [Taylor & Francis Author Services](#), the most common forms in the academic press) as daunting, and it is not possible to engage in open dialogue with peer reviewers, who remain anonymous.

In the single-blind peer review, the author does not know the reviewer's name; in double-blind peer review, neither party knows each other's name. By contrast, critical friendships probably approximate most closely to 'open review' and 'post-publication open review', with a greater emphasis on developmental informality and reciprocity. I don't think that it's possible to overstate the value of peers agreeing consensually to become critical friends, where mutual exchanges enhance one another's learning. At e-O&P, we do not require, but rather encourage, authors to work with and as critical friends. It's also perfectly possible to work with more than one critical friend, as each might have something different to offer – ranging from subject-specific expertise to facility in making helping interventions such as [process consultation](#) or [humble inquiry](#) (Schein 1999; Schein 2013).

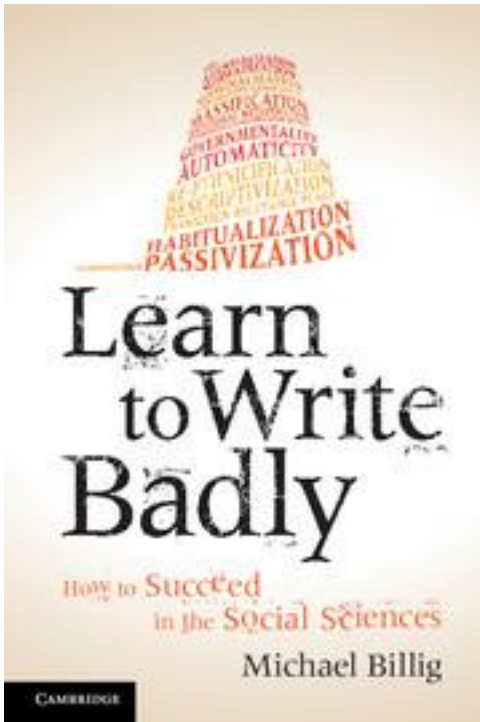


### Critical friendships in writing for e-O&P

*'The critical friend approach and the 'collaborative/collegiate' approach between editors and authors working on the articles is a key differentiator that e-O&P has from other offerings in the market space. It is important to emphasise this,'*

(personal communication from Pauline Willis, lead guest editor of e-O&P Winter 2014 and Spring 2015 editions, 4/3/15; my emphasis)

In a strict sense, the quality assurance of e-O&P articles is not one of peer review, but rather one of open challenge and support through critical friendships. Everyone involved in contributing to e-O&P is an unpaid volunteer, who is committed to achieving the highest possible standards of writing and presentation that circumstances permit. Personally, I take my cue from Michael Billig's inspiring and challenging book '[Learn to Write Badly. How to Succeed in the Social Sciences](#)' (2013). Billig argues that there is a glut of poor



writing in the social sciences which consistently dehumanises and erases people from the discourse (he uses the expression 'depopulated text', and bewails the preponderance of nouns over active verbs). He implores us to avoid writing over-hastily in a way that is obscure, unconsidered or self-promoting. In our efforts to transcend divisions between academics and other practitioners, at e-O&P we aspire to become one of those 'outposts of independence' (ibid: 208), free from the worst excesses of the Research Excellence Framework or the 'publish or perish' syndrome that shapes much academic research and the publications that result. (Warner 2015).

We aim to encourage authors who feel they have something worthwhile to say to experiment, and to write carefully and engagingly. 'Slower writing' sits well within e-O&P. We also arrange pre- and [post-publication gatherings](#), convene bi-monthly workshops of the AMED Writers' Group, and stress

the importance of Acknowledgements. It is in this reflexive context that we try to facilitate and augment wider and deeper discussion of writing for personal, management and organisational development.

In these writing, publishing and conversational spaces, we encounter all kinds of writers, who are sometimes in a state of 'writing paranoia'. Some are unconfident; others may be vulnerable to charges of lack of rigour, or fearful that their forming ideas might be misappropriated without acknowledgement before they have had a chance to formulate and claim their unique contribution. Yet others are chronically anxious, and continually withhold their writing from public scrutiny. In such cases, critical friendships can encourage such authors – particularly in their formative pre-writing and drafting phases - to gain confidence in writing to an acceptable standard and schedule.

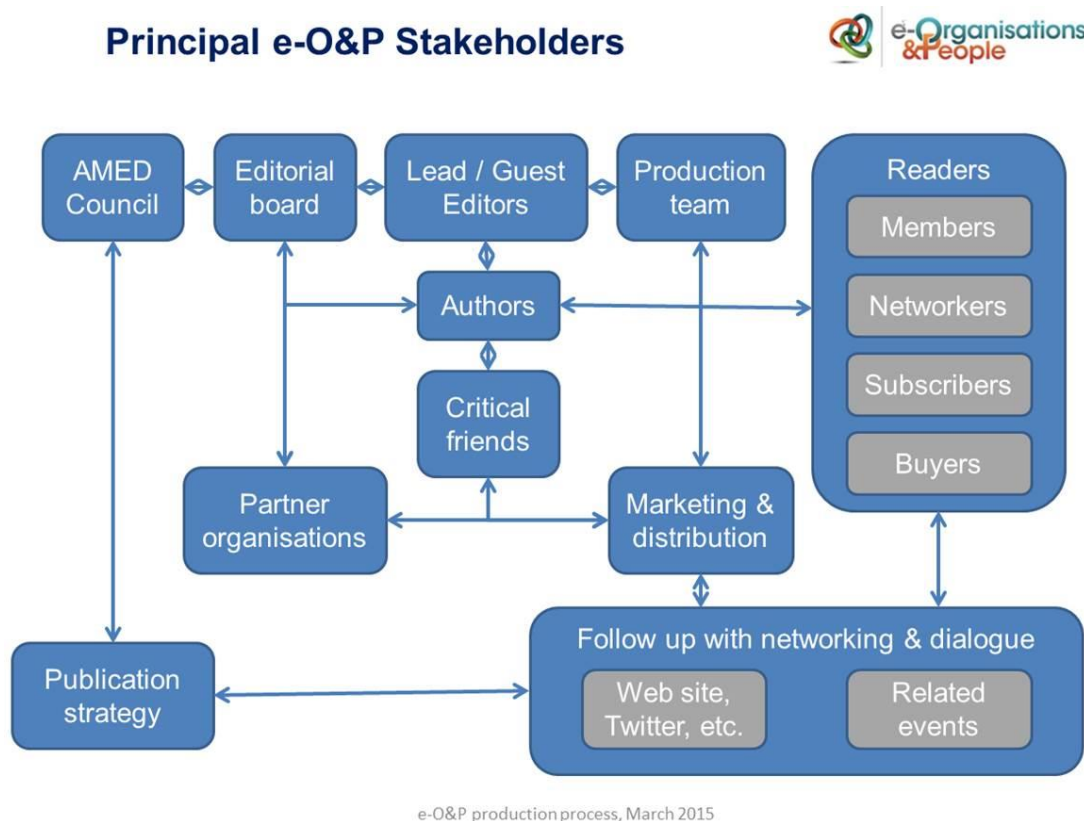
Thus we actively encourage (but of course don't insist upon) the formation of critical friendships. The [Invitation to contribute](#) to the two recent special editions of e-O&P on coaching and mentoring includes the following note to prospective authors:

#### **What support can you expect?**

If you have ideas, we can help you to shape them into publishable content. The e-O&P Editorial Board and the Guest Editors of this edition will support you in any way we can in developing your contribution to co-create a vibrant, exciting and unusual publication. Resources we may be able to offer include 'critical friends' to help you with informal writing support, a form of editorial coaching or mentoring if appropriate, access to the AMED Writers' Group, and generally a friendly, understanding and supportive presence.

The flowchart in Figure 1 below suggests key stakeholder roles in e-O&P's writing and publication process. It's worth noting that one person can play more than one of these roles.

Figure 1



Acknowledgements from e-O&P authors often attest to the veracity of this claim, as you can see at the end of my own and other contributions to this edition. Another example is a story volunteered by a contributor (Warwick 2012) to the Spring 2012 issue e-O&P on [‘Making the invisible visible’](#).

*A few years ago I completed my doctorate in healthcare policy. It was a couple of years after that when Alison mentioned that she was guest editing a special edition of e-O&P on ‘Making the invisible visible’ and we had a lively conversation about her topic. I was playfully turning the topic on its head when Alison suggested that I should write an article. I used a part of my doctorate to make a good case about the staid performance of policy groups when presenting their findings compared to the messiness and power play of how they work behind the scenes. The paper was good but it was the conversations I had with Alison and Bob that made it better. There was a challenge to come up with some actions that people could do differently to improve their practice. I was adamant that it wasn’t about identifying a few techniques. But in the process of challenge and a couple of redrafts I saw the situation slightly differently. I came to realise that it was legitimate for a person to ask ‘what would I do differently?’ And in answering, I became clearer in my reasoning. It was this gentle critical friendship that enabled me to shift my thought, in a way that might not have been possible in a more adversarial engagement.*

(Rob Warwick, personal communication, 16/3/15)

## Coaching and mentoring in writing

Formal coaching, mentoring or tutorial arrangements do not in themselves constitute critical friendships, although they may evolve into such relationships if the interpersonal chemistry and conditions are right. For me, critical friendships are characterised by shared values, generosity, a thirst for intellectual and practical excitement, sharing various forms of communication, and relishing the sheer fun and pleasure of being in the real or virtual company of other critical friends. They can also help to develop 'writing courage', and the ability to surmount the small wounds encountered in any criticism that can actually *build* and strengthen such a relationship.

Table 1 above implies that informal critical friendships share many characteristics with coaching and mentoring. And of course, it is also possible to negotiate a more formal, professional 'contract' of critical friendship, involving some form of payment. However, here, I concentrate on critical friendships expressed as unpaid, informal helping relationships that all parties enter into freely, and from which they all benefit in different ways. Moreover, in their own right, coaches and mentors, like other practitioners, are making increasing use of the internet and mobile communication technologies to self-publish their ideas and practices. Websites, blogs, digital articles and the social media seem to be crowding out many of the more traditional forms of edited print-based publications. However, even web postings can benefit either behind the scenes or in related online discussions from some form of critical friendship.

## Keeping critical friendships clean

*'I think that somewhere the danger of collusion resulting from the more general friendship (above) needs to be acknowledged and explored. It appears to me that CF stands in contrast to the adversarial system so prevalent in so-called centres of Educational and Publication Excellence. But I think it would be helpful to acknowledge that, without careful contracting, and re-contracting, the approach could become at worst a kind of shared solipsism!'*

(personal communication from Peter Martin, 16/3/15)

As the extract above from one of my valued critical friends illustrates, critical friendships have potential to go wrong. Like any relationship, we must continually be on guard against unhelpful collusion and cronyism. We need to beware of idealising or being uncritical about the role of critical friends. There has to be a willingness to change or scrap the writing or the relationship if necessary. Not all relationships are healthy or desirable, in that they can consolidate or encourage inappropriate practices, or create unhealthy dependencies. In inexperienced or inappropriate hands, attempts to offer or accept critical friendship can be detrimental and damaging. Without clear boundaries, they can get out of hand in terms of time, resources and commitment. If imposed rather than willingly embraced, resistance and unhelpful restriction will occur. It is not an easy role to play, requiring skill and sensitivity from all parties. And we need to adapt our practice of critical friendship to suit specific individuals, contexts or discourses. Different critical friends will behave more easily and effectively in some circumstances than in others. So we must choose our critical friends carefully, and negotiate with them how best to derive mutual benefit from our relationship. This process emerges as an intuitive or explicit contract. Critical friendships are not a panacea. But, in suitable conditions, they can make a positive difference in our practice.



## Conclusion

Despite such caveats, I am a strong advocate of critical friendships, because good critical friends have made such a positive difference to me, and because I have seen them at work to wonderful effect. In the correct circumstances, sensitive and wise critical friendships that offer safe and honest critique to the writer enhance the quality of writing, as well as, reflexively, the coaching or mentoring experience.

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