

## Learning to be a critical friend: from professional indifference through challenge to unguarded conversations

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This paper explores the nature of a critical friendship between two education advisers within a nation-wide New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE, 2006–2008) research and development project. Over 18 months the relationship developed through evolving phases. This paper identifies and discusses the factors, circumstances, conditions and analytical tools that contributed to these changes; reviews appropriate literature; and responds to five questions that develop further understandings and insights into critical friendship. Findings from this government initiative (extracted from field notes, transcribed conversations and interviews) provide evidence to inform a model for the developmental phases of critical friendship that has international application within educational professional development.

**Keywords:** adviser; critical friend; INSTEP; inquiry into practice; reflective practitioner

### Introduction

New Zealand (populated by just over four million people spread over three islands in the South Pacific) has one governing education system. This Ministry of Education (MOE) funds, oversees, implements and evaluates educational initiatives, and contracts universities to employ educational advisers to provide professional development in schools. The focus of their work is on three key education strategies (MOE, 2003–2008):<sup>1</sup> excellence in teaching; quality community engagement in education; and quality providers. This work with teachers aims to raise student achievement and reduce disparity.

Timperley, Wilson, Barrah and Fung (2007) assert that although the MOE acknowledges advisers' critical role in effective teacher learning, there is a paucity of evidence regarding the explicit qualities of effective adviser practice. Consequently, a national research and development project named In-Service Teacher Education Practice (INSTEP, 2006–2008) was established. The assumption of this research was that improving advisory practice improves teacher practice. The MOE allocated funding nationally to over 350 research participants. These advisers, facilitators, tutors, resource teachers and in-school leaders of professional learning (hereafter named advisers) worked in 12 regional teams throughout New Zealand during 2006 and

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2007. The aim was to work with teachers to raise student achievement through identifying effective adviser practice in schools.

We (Delia and Helen) now tell the story of the 18 months lived experience of two advisers within one regional team during two distinct phases of the INSTEP Project: the *Exploratory Phase* and the *Expansion and Refinement Phase*. During the *Exploratory Phase* we each worked in five teachers' classrooms. Through professional readings we developed analytical tools to affirm, examine and identify problems of advisory practice. These foci were trialed with teachers in classrooms and then peer reviewed by the regional team of six advisers simultaneously deprivatising their practice. This peer review process – the presentation, discussion, and suggested modifications – expanded our understanding of advisory practice and informed our professional development. The findings of this phase informed the second *Expansion and Refinement Phase*. By focusing a lens on two advisers supporting each other to deprivatise their practice, we offer a model that explains the developmental phases of critical friendship. We define a critical friend as a capable reflective practitioner (with integrity and passion for teaching and learning) who establishes safe ways of working and negotiates shared understandings to support and challenge a colleague in the deprivatisation of their practice. Critical friendship was the lens through which we viewed the data and offered fresh insights, and questions to validate practice. In this way an evidence-based approach to the work was strengthened. We begin by explaining our teaching backgrounds and how we came to work together.

## Background

When we trained as teachers Piagetian theory influenced our thinking. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, working as advisers, sociocultural theory reframed our perceptions about teaching and learning. Vygotsky's theories influenced this repositioning. Higgins and MacDonald (2008) trace these changes within the New Zealand context.

Delia was a secondary school (Years 9 to 13) drama specialist. She was appointed as an adviser and lecturer to implement the drama discipline in the arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (MOE, 2000). During this time Delia experienced the concept of a critical friend when the national facilitator of the project observed her teaching in the classroom and, along with the classroom teacher, reflected on her classroom practice. Delia saw the potential of critical friendships to enrich the INSTEP work. Helen's classroom experience was in the area of junior primary with an emphasis on students entering the school system on their fifth birthdays. She presently works on the Numeracy Project (MOE, 2007). She understood that reflecting on issues that arose in practice was important to her development and success as an adviser.

We entered this project with established work ethics and attitudes as life-long learners. We assumed that reflection and critical friendship would enhance our practice. We sat together in meetings prior to this project and passed pleasantries. We define this beginning phase as *professional indifference*. We were appointed to INSTEP, and through the process of this work, our relationship developed. This then is the story of the change in our working relationship from *professional indifference*, through *challenge* to *unguarded conversations* as we learned to be critical friends.

We now examine literature in the field of critical friendship to justify the compilation of our conceptual understanding of what it is to be a critical friend.

## Critical friendship

The term 'critical friend' originated in the 1970s in the context of self-appraisal, attributed to Nuttall (Heller, 1988). Critical friendship has been examined in many contexts within schools (Angelides, Leigh, & Gibbs, 2004; Colby & Appleby, 1995; Dallat, Moran, & Abbott, 2000; MacBeath, 1998; MacBeath & Mortimer, 1994; Senge, 1990; Swaffield, 2003, 2004, 2007a, b; Towndrow, 2007) to ascertain its use as a potential structure to elicit positive change, with a focus on self-improvement to raise standards. Many school systems that perceived themselves as learning organisations, and understood feedback was prerequisite to learning, introduced the role of critical friend (Senge, 1990).

The critical friend relationship between school leaders and advisers has been explored as a school self-review process (Swaffield, 2005) to build leadership capability (Leitch & Williams, 2006), as have the dynamics of such relationships (Colby & Appleby, 1995; Hill, 2002; MacBeath, 1998, 2006; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005), and the workings of critical friendships with colleagues between schools (MacBeath, 2006). Bambino (2002) suggests critical friend groups provide opportunities for colleagues to challenge both their peers' and their own work to improve their teaching practice. In this way, shared vision, strong supports, nurturing and honest self-review bring about the changes schools need.

According to Costa and Kallick (1993) a critical friend is defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data for examination through an alternative lens, and offers critique as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to examine the context, fully understand the work and the desired outcomes, and consequently the critical friend is active in promoting the work, an advocate for the work (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and genuine (Swaffield, 2002). Dean (1992) and Ainscow and Southworth (1996) describe the critical friend lens as a fresh pair of eyes, Dimmock (1996) suggests that introducing another perspective is important for viewing a situation in a new light, whilst Towndrow (2007) explored how teachers and researchers supported each other to reach outcomes that would not have been achieved working alone. Another definition suggests observation as an internal process, and reflection as an external one (West, 2000). This view is supported by Baron (2007) who explains 'critical friendship starts from the inside of one's identity as an educator and develops into professional relationships that last a lifetime' (p. 2).

Colby and Appleby (1995) collaborated in a reflective partnership as academic and teacher. They identified hesitancy; sensitivity around role definitions and responsibilities; initial shyness; respect; empathy; and team building as tensions and practical constraints of critical friendship. The collaboration between an insider and outsider to the institution and their reflection through critical friendship were the strengths of this project. MacBeath (1998) also explored the complexities and difficulties of the critical friend role. Within the context of a two-year research and development project in 80 Scottish schools with teams working in paired critical friendships, MacBeath identified obstacles. These were: acceptance; trust; negotiation of role; symbolic acts; hidden agenda; power struggles; openness or resistance to learning; and a demystifying of the role. He also offers a positive process suggesting a number of stages when developing relationships with schools.

Hill (2002) provides further insight with the suggestion that a critical friend understands about how assumptions underpin people's justification for their practices. He identified the skills of a critical friend as an attentive, reflective listener, an articulate,

visionary scholar who encourages data collection, and a scholarly inquiry approach to reframing current practice. Likewise, Swaffield (2005) asserts that the factors contributing to an effective critical friendship are 'trust, shared values and purposes, personal qualities, communication and practical action' (p. 44). We suggest that reflection and discussion around values and beliefs (Atkin, 1996) was a necessary precursor to developing our critical friendship. This is supported by Baron (2007) who describes this as 'highly likely' (p. 57) as when a school's values and beliefs are clearly understood, critical friendships are the natural development.

Achinstein and Meyer (1997) claim there is an 'uneasy marriage' in the merger of critique and friend as 'The traditional dichotomy and hierarchical relationship between friendship and critique makes the notion of critical friends hardly plausible' (p. 5). However, as Watling, Hopkins, Harris and Beresford (1998) and Swaffield (2007a) suggest, a critical friend provides an appropriate balance between support and challenge. The relationship is neither relaxed nor conniving, but rather one that promotes productive analysis and where trust, engagement and commitment need to be present for the term critical friendship to be accurately applied (Swaffield, 2007a).

The positioning of critical friend relationships is being applied worldwide: Northern Ireland (Dallat *et al.*, 2000); the US (Bambino, 2002; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Norman, Golian & Hooker, 2005; Olson, 1998); Canada and Australia (Schuck & Russell, 2005); the UK (Swaffield, 2005, 2007a; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005); Singapore (Towndrow, 2007); and New Zealand and the UK (Swaffield, 2004). However, Swaffield (2007a) suggests that although there is an increased usage of the term critical friendship, much remains to be researched and understood 'both generally and in specific contexts' (p. 206).

This is particularly pertinent for current developments in England where the School Improvement Partners (SIP) have (since April 2008) been attached to schools to advise the governing bodies and head teachers how to improve standards. The SIP role provides these leaders with support and challenge to evaluate the school's performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan for effective change. This critical professional friend will support schools to build their capacity to drive their own improvement. Early indications are that SIPs, and the head teachers they work with, are able to overcome the tensions and contradictions created by the way the government set up the SIP role by bringing personal qualities to a professional relationship (Swaffield, 2007a). Our story may provide insights for SIPs and lead teachers in their collaborative work.

In this paper we will engage with five of the 10 'provocative questions' (p. 268) Swaffield (2004) posed for discussion in relation to critical friends within a narrative to explain our experience. Extracts from field notes, transcribed analysed conversations, and reflective worksheets will illustrate our findings.

We will now explain the research design (action research), data analysis and our research question.

## Methodology

The origins of action research (according to Denscombe, 1998) are found in the work of social scientists during the late 1940s when they made links between social theory and solving immediate problems. More recently, action research has grown in popularity as a methodology for professionals using research to improve their practice (Berg, 2004; Denscombe, 1998). This notion is supported by Mutch (2005) who states

that action research ‘focuses on one’s own practice for the improvement of teaching and learning or management purposes’ (p. 113). We undertook this flexible, relatively unstructured methodology (Druckman, 2005) and collected data over time about the changes in our critical friendship.

We were to identify and examine a problem of practice with a view to strengthening an evidence-based practice approach to our work. Our action research project was exploratory, investigating contemporary events, and was reliant on the peer review of video tapes of adviser practice, analysed transcribed adviser and teacher conversations, and adviser field notes. Together these analytical tools were used to develop a picture of the social interactions occurring during our lived experience. The ethical issues anticipated included voluntary participation, participant understanding of the purpose of the research, the right to withdraw, anonymity, and permission to use data for conferences and academic papers. Our aim was to investigate the impact of critical friendship on adviser professional learning. To achieve this, a research question was framed:

- In what way can critical friends enhance each other’s professional learning through inquiry into problems of practice?

We now use five of Swaffield’s (2004) questions for deductive categorising in our data analysis. ‘In a deductive approach, researchers use some categorical scheme suggested by a theoretical perspective and the documents provide a means for assessing the hypothesis’ (Berg, 2004, pp. 272–273). We were looking to identify the factors, conditions and frameworks that contributed to changes in our critical friend relationship.

The five questions providing a structure to investigate our research question follow.

- (1) Who is the critical friend working with and for?
- (2) What are the necessary preconditions for successful critical friendship?
- (3) What can critical friends do to help establish a climate in which they can be effective?
- (4) How can critical friends be best matched with colleagues?
- (5) What should you look for in choosing a critical friend? (Swaffield, 2004, p. 268)

We now discuss our data in relation to these five questions.

### **Who is the critical friend working with and for?**

Within this INSTEP context we were allocated time to reflect and explore analytical tools with a view to improving adviser practice. Through an action research inquiry into practice (McNiff, 1996) we were working as critical friends to discover what effective adviser practice (that raised student achievement) looked like. Although we were aware we were working with the MOE, our colleagues, and other teams of national and regional advisers throughout the country, we were also aware we were working for ourselves. We recognised this offered an opportunity for us to do something we were stimulated by (reflecting on our own practice) and to develop analytical tools for the second phase that would support other advisers to reflect on their practice.

### **What are the necessary preconditions for successful critical friendship?**

The established ways of working that provided a context for us to become effective critical friends during the first phase of this project are discussed in the following sections: purpose, time allocation and protocols.

#### *Purpose*

The pre-determined goal to raise student achievement through identifying effective adviser practice in schools was explicit and understood by all participants. The already familiar context (of raising student achievement) embedded in our adviser practice solidified our commitment to this project. We were ready and willing to participate.

#### *Time allocation*

Implementation of the two phases of this project was planned for 18 months. A generous allocation of time was given to each participant. Meeting times were scheduled for Phase 1 and time was taken to build a process and protocols to be followed.

#### *Protocols*

The six member regional team negotiated a shared understanding of ground rules that underpinned future work. Other researchers (Fuller & Fisher, 2000; Musella, 1988) emphasise the importance of developing a shared understanding of role and clarity of objective. Olson (1998) too supports this notion with the suggestion that a highly structured process (containing several protocols) is designed to assist educators in scrutinising their work in a safe environment. We agreed to maintain confidentiality and committed to honest and open dialogue. We consented to give and receive helpful, constructive advice. We acknowledged the need to be explicit in our clear communication of what we meant.

During this time (through this negotiation and adherence to our shared understanding of identified protocols) we opened up and began to build trust and develop respect for each other. Block (2001) describes trust as a key feature of effective relationships while Costa and Kallick (1993) and Swaffield (2005) state the importance of trust, particularly to a critical friend relationship. Our relationship shifted. It appears we had addressed sensitivity of role definition, responsibilities, initial shyness (Colby & Appleby, 1995) and negotiation of role (MacBeath, 1998). We moved past the *professional indifference phase* because we recognised each other's personal integrity and passion for teaching and learning in the prepared artefacts of our practice (video clips, transcribed teacher and adviser conversations and questionnaires). Helen describes this after viewing a video of Delia's post-teaching conference with a teacher:

In watching Delia's artefact, I recognised a stab of professional curiosity. Within this picture of practice I could see there was something that I could learn and grow from. There is depth here to explore. (Helen's field notes, 19 May 2006)

We name this the *tentative trust phase*.

We will now discuss the work and the environment that enabled us to develop our critical friend relationship.

## What can critical friends do to help establish a climate in which they can be effective?

### *The process*

The working process we developed was idiosyncratic to this particular project and was later applied to other adviser practice. During our discussions we reflected on professional readings that provided approaches and assisted in the development of analytical tools to trial during this first phase. As Costa and Kallick (1993) explain, it is only when we change the lens through which we view our own practice that we discover whether a new practice is better or worse. We selected and prepared artefacts (for collective examination) to identify a problem of practice for further inquiry. These are described in the following section.

### *The artefacts*

Delia was first to deprivatise her practice using a video clip from the learning conversation between her and the classroom teacher following the lesson Delia had taken with the class. Delia presented this artefact to the group. She wrote:

I chose this video piece because it showed a moment when I challenged the teacher to resolve a problem of practice – an unsafe teaching and learning environment. I gave each of my colleagues a specific focus question for feedback. These were:

- What has the teacher learned about her students by observing the adviser teaching?
- What challenging has occurred during this discussion?
- In what ways do the teacher's ideas take centre stage? Find examples.
- Where does the adviser actively steer this discussion?
- How does the adviser use questioning to push the teacher to think harder?

(Delia's field notes, 18 May 2006)

During the feedback session Helen commented:

I'll tell you what most impressed me was your silence. You were absolutely non-judgemental, just letting her talk. Then when she had finished you came in with a question, or a prompt. You weren't saying, it was bad. You were just prompting her to come out with it. Your questions were so focused. And the stillness... I'd have trouble sitting still. (Transcript of adviser's conversation, 18 May 2006)

Even with focused questions, the team did not have the skills, knowledge or understanding of critical friendship at this stage to challenge, so viewed the video as exemplary practice. This concurs with Eisner's (1991, cited in Swaffield, 2007a, p. 206) view that 'Learning to see what we have learned not to notice remains one of the most critical and difficult tasks of educational connoisseurs. Everything else rests on it'. Because a problem of practice had not been identified, Delia became her own critical friend (Heller, 1988). She wondered how she might identify an aspect of her practice that required improvement. This situation is incongruent with Schuck and Russell's (2005) findings as they claim there is a problematic issue concerning the difficulty reflective practitioners face when they attempt to assess and reframe their own practice. This is due to the personal understandings and images of appropriate practice developing simultaneously with personal practice, and hence the need for critical friends. Delia turned to professional readings to find a possible opening. During this time Helen was developing a respect and interest for Delia's work, initiative and ability to reflect perceptively on her practice.

We later identified this as a significant moment, because in viewing Delia's practice Helen reflected on her own. Helen looked at evidence through a new lens. She asked the question: 'Am I providing the space and guidance to give teachers time to reflect on their practice?' Through this honest reappraisal we were cultivating constructive critique (Swaffield, 2007b).

### *Artefact 2*

Helen's artefact was a transcript of a conversation with a teacher concerning the teacher's and students' verbal exchanges and actions during a teaching session. The transcript design was differentiated to show the type of conversation. For instance it revealed an apparent occurrence of a question and answer session, and reflection and analysis within the interchange. Helen wondered if there was evidence in this transcript of her giving the teacher space and guidance to reflect. Helen's conversation analysis presented her dominance in talking and the lack of space given for the teacher to reflect and respond. Helen was surprised at this evidence and asked the team to suggest strategies to redress this ratio. Delia suggested Helen write down the questions to give both her and the teacher time to reflect. The feedback was noted and acted upon. This is as Bottery (2003) describes 'practice trust' (p. 249). Helen too turned to literature to develop analytical tools.

Our mutual interest and respect for each other's work pre-empted the occurrence of spontaneous *corridor conversations* that (had they been recorded) may have provided further evidence of the subsequent change in our relationship. It is the mutual interest and respect for each other's work at this stage of the process that is worth noting. We describe this as the *reliance phase* which links with O'Neill's (2002) description of 'trust in the individual' (cited by Swaffield, 2007a, p. 206) and Bottery's (2003) 'identificatory trust' (p. 249). We realised our *corridor conversations* were *learning conversations* (Annan, Lai, & Robinson, 2003).

### *The challenge*

Our relationship developed naturally over the period of defining and clarifying the protocols and articulating our views and opinions. However, it was in the presentation of Delia's questions around values and beliefs that an opportunity presented for the first challenge (from Helen) and there was a consequent shift in our way of working together and our relationship.

Today I presented the values and beliefs questionnaire as my first analytical tool offering to the group. I was surprised by Helen's strong reaction. She thought the questions were invasive. I checked myself. She didn't have to like them. I wanted her to, because I valued her opinion. (Delia's field notes, 20 June 2006)

These questions (Atkin, 1996) were designed to assist teachers to articulate their values and beliefs and for advisers to work in a considerate manner. At the next meeting Helen offered a reframing of these questions as statements and explained she could trial them in this form.

We discussed the potential, and personal challenges for teachers involved in answering the questions. This is, as Dimmock (1996) suggests, another perspective to shed new light. We suggest this moment was significant in the development of our

Table 1. Analytical tool: Teachers' values and beliefs.

Values and beliefs questions	Values and beliefs statements
What experiences have shaped you as a teacher?	The experiences that have shaped me as a teacher are...
What beliefs have you gathered about teaching and learning on the way?	The beliefs about teaching and learning I have developed are...
How does your school environment impact on my practice?	The school environment impacts on my practice through...
What is important to you when teaching in the classroom?	The things that are important to me when teaching in the classroom are...
What do you believe about your effectiveness as a teacher?	My effectiveness as a teacher may be attributed to...
What assumptions do you carry about your students?	Some assumptions I have about my students are...
What are your beliefs about raising student achievement?	I believe to raise student achievement I...

relationship for several reasons: we respected each other's opinions; Delia did not take criticism of the analytical tool personally; time was taken apart to reflect; and Helen offered a possible alternative. In managing the potential conflict, and dealing openly with difference, there was a new source of energy (Bolman & Deal, 2002, cited in Swaffield, 2003).

We suggest our initial *professional indifference* had shifted through discussion, negotiating a shared understanding of protocols that underpinned our interactions, to a developing respect for each other's opinion (*tentative trust phase*) and sufficient interest in each other's work (*reliance phase*). Helen trusted in the strength of our relationship and was able to challenge Delia's ideas. We name this stage of our critical friendship the *conviction phase*. These were not conscious thoughts at the time; however, with the privilege of hindsight, it is now a realisation.

### ***Developing analytical tools to structure reflection***

In the following section we share two of the analytical tools that structured our reflection: the *critical friend reflection worksheet*, and the *analysed transcribed conversation worksheet*. The *critical friend reflection worksheet* provided data which elicited reflection through two lenses: being a critical friend, and being supported by critical friends. Table 2 provides an exemplar.

A second analytical tool was used when we recorded and transcribed our conversations. We reflected on the transcript and then discussed our written comments. A section is shown in Table 3.

We consider that these analytical tools have supported us to address the tensions, practical constraints, and obstacles of critical friendship as described by Colby and Appleby (1995) and MacBeath (1998).

### **How can critical friends be best matched with colleagues?**

During the initial exploratory phase of INSTEP, we posed questions to each other and gave and received feedback. The comments offered were helpful in presenting

Table 2. The critical reflection worksheet.

Critical friend reflection worksheet	
Being a critical friend	Date: 19/03/07
In what ways were you a critical friend today?	I helped to complete an analytical tool to support one of her advisers in advancing her thinking. I listened to X's plan and questions. I supported her to sustain her focus on and complete the task. In this way the work was removed from the personal to a professional level of reflection. I set a good pace. I found a model for us to adapt.
What questions did you ask to help your critical friend see a different perspective today?	What are this adviser's struggles and successes? How can you challenge this adviser?
How did you stimulate others' thinking today?	Asking questions to support to order and clarify her thinking. Supporting her to align her work with her values and beliefs.
Being supported by a critical friend	
In what ways did your critical friend support you in reflecting on your practice?	Validated my way of working. She appreciated my attentive listening. She affirmed my tenacity, and stimulated me to probe deeper.
What questions were you asked?	Could you help me with this problem? How can I structure this work in a way that will support the adviser to reflect further?
How did others stimulate your thinking?	Offered me a problem to solve. It was a creative experience. I had to think on my feet. I enjoyed the challenge of just being one step ahead.

alternative ideas that supported this inquiry into practice (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Hill, 2002). It was from this initial showing of interest that circumstances and our critical friendship arose naturally. Helen's comment below provides insight into our experience at this time:

I think that instinctively you probably find a critical friend who actually fits your emotional predisposition to learn as well as your intellectual framework, or mind set or vision or what ever it is. (Transcript of Helens's conversation, 2007)

Table 3. Analysed transcribed conversation.

Transcribed conversations worksheet	
Transcript	Simultaneous reflection
Delia: I think working with someone who has similar values is important too. I think you and I both really value honesty, integrity, and working respectfully. We are also very aware of potential power imbalances in relationships. Equal power is important to both of us, so there is some rich, common ground we share philosophically and intellectually.	Helen: We have realised our common philosophies and intellectual similarities. Delia: There is congruence in our values and beliefs. This is important to a functioning critical friendship.

Readings enhanced our understanding of critical friendship and the phrase became explicit in our work. We moved from professional friendship to critical analysis going beyond the surface features, as evidenced in the following field notes:

Helen was preparing for a particular meeting with an adviser in her team with the goal of moving the thinking from the theoretical to a tool for presentation. I listened attentively to Helen's plan and questions. She mentioned a reading that might provide a tool to assist this adviser's examination of practice. She identified the maths book and the year it was published. There were boxes of these particular issues over several shelves near us. I began the treasure hunt. Helen appeared distracted. I persevered and eventually found the research paper and got Helen interested. I am too eager to help sometimes. (Delia's field notes, 10 March 2007)

The vignette above indicates that there were contributing factors and conditions taking our critical friend relationship to a different level. Helen's notes (regarding this same situation) were also revealing:

It was good to have Delia's intense interest in my thinking. She listened as I went over the structure of my plan to lead an adviser from espoused theory to a form that the group could look at and give feedback on. I was concerned about the balance between protecting (supporting) the adviser and pushing her thinking to a deeper practical level, that she could use in her work to evaluate her practice.

Delia kept probing, making me clarify my thinking, and made connections to my values and beliefs. I wanted to mull it all over, think about the approach more but Delia just persevered. Once I had mentioned a paper that supported our thinking she didn't let up till we had it. We had a draft analytical tool for me to discuss with the adviser before I went home. I can think about things too much sometimes. (Helen's field notes, 10 March 2007)

There is evidence of commitment, shared purpose, and desire to solve a problem of practice, questioning, attentive listening, and knowledge of supporting resources, perseverance, support, challenge and care. These personal qualities are also described by Swaffield (2005, 2007b). It appears we were supporting each other in our leadership of other advisers. It is interesting to note how the subtext of our work was not clarified at this stage. Helen's need to think and Delia's interest and desire to support the work had the potential for tension; however, the relationship sustained these opposing intents at the time. Our scholarly inquiry approach to reforming current practice (Hill, 2002) was emerging.

Situations like these impacted on our relationship and work. We committed to the work. Our relationship was strengthened in that we abandoned pleasantries, as respect, trust and engagement grew between us (Swaffield, 2007b). We had surpassed a readiness and willingness to work, entered the work quickly, and immediately identified our progress and the current pressing, challenging issues we faced. With our separate teams of advisers we then made recommendations to assist each other in the work. We achieved outcomes that could not be achieved working alone (Towndrow, 2007). Our critical friendship was deepening within the context of this research project. We name this stage the *unguarded conversations phase*.

### **What should you look for in choosing a critical friend?**

The choice of a critical friend arose naturally as a result of a team of people working together towards a common goal. Our individual backgrounds were diverse as were our interests, personalities and aspirations. What drew us together was the rapport that

developed as we worked through the protocols and explored personal and professional values and beliefs, and respect for each other's passion for teaching and learning. A respect for both the diversity and excitement of the commonalities within the individual approaches led to intense conversations. Often these were conducted informally as *corridor conversations*. These conversations developed a trust in the ability of our critical friendship to be honest and forthright during these exchanges.

The passion for self improvement was respected by both parties, and the common project gave us the knowledge to challenge. We were self-selecting, and once our compatibility evidenced itself we committed to the role of critical friends in the second phase of the project. Research uncovered Swaffield's work and the conversations were given a structure to advance thinking and develop an analytical tool to apply in a practical situation. This was when our formal inquiry into the nature of critical friends began. At this stage of the process we made the decision to be critical friends, and chose to use the developed analytical tools to monitor our conversations and interactions during the second phase of the project.

We now summarise our findings regarding our work as critical friends.

### Discussion of findings

The following section discusses our findings in relation to the timing and reasons for the shifts that occurred in our critical friendship, and the impact on our practice.

Our critical friendship evolved over an 18-month period. We needed this time to develop trust, unguarded learning conversations, and the ability to go very quickly beyond the surface features. There were several contributing factors – establishing protocols, acknowledging each other's integrity and passion for teaching and learning, developing a mutual interest and respect in the work, challenging ideas and critical analysis – that pre-empted the shift from *professional indifference* through *challenge* to *unguarded conversations*. We had encouraged reframing and reflection creating new understandings for ourselves (Swaffield, 2007b). It appears that through this process we developed the ability to question the validity of another's suggestion. Therefore, we identify the actual shifts that occurred as:

- (1) Establishing a professional relationship by negotiating ways of working and a shared understanding of professional values and beliefs.
- (2) A mutual deprivatisation of a problem of practice.
- (3) Challenge of a framework that was accepted.
- (4) Separate reflection supported by offering an alternative view.
- (5) Mutual respect of each other's commitment to improvement in teaching and practice.
- (6) Naturally seeking out of one another's opinions concerning further identified problems of practice.
- (7) Unguarded, immediate engagement of inquiry into practice.

However, certain factors were in place that were pivotal to the development of this particular critical friendship: an explicit agreement to work as critical friends, supporting analytical tools to record, monitor and reflect on our interactions; and a time allocation to reflect concurrently on our practice. We negotiated a shared understanding of protocols and ways of working, so we were both ready and willing to deprivatise our practice. An interest in, and respect for, each other's work developed. Integrity

and passion for teaching and learning were mirrored. Consequently, due to the developed trust and respect, we were able to conduct honest, accurate reflections (on our own) and our colleagues' practice.

We found the strength of this project was not in one person's work but in the critical friendship that developed. Evidence-based inquiry into our practice challenged assumptions and confronted realities. We both analysed our approach and began working in different ways with teachers. Delia began to use stimulated recall. The teacher was filmed teaching. The teacher and Delia viewed the video. During the post teaching conference Delia questioned the teacher around her already identified values and beliefs and then asked if these were evident in the teaching recorded on the video. In this way Delia challenged the congruence between the teacher's espoused theory and her theory in use in the classroom. Delia commented:

Through this project I have experienced the theory coming into practice by participating in an action research approach and learning and gaining insights through the on-going cycles of planning, action and reflection. By trialling one aspect of my practice, then getting feedback guidance from my critical friends, and constructing analytical tools, I have been able to think past previous thought processes. In this way I have been able to reflect on my practice, be contextually responsive to teachers and challenge teachers in their practice more effectively. (Delia's field notes, 8 November 2006)

The teacher's comment confirms Delia's perspective of the situation:

You keep coming in with different ways of doing things, or asking questions that are sometimes uncomfortable, but that are making me think in a different way than I did last year. This approach starts with me, by examining my own way of doing things, and my own assumptions, reflecting and refining, and trying new things out. I just wouldn't do this otherwise. (Transcript of interview between Delia and the teacher, 19 July 2006)

By reflecting on Delia's artefact Helen recorded and transcribed her conversation with a teacher. She identified the silences, the questions, the prompts, the proportion of time each person was talking and the types of questions asked. Consequently Helen changed her approach so the teacher was more reflective and active in the conversation. Helen selected and prepared a new framework of appropriate questions to elicit reflective and responsive analysis from the teacher (Glickman, 2002).

Figure 1 shows the five phases involved in developing our critical friendship and the qualities of each of these phases.

We entered this project with prior knowledge, established values and beliefs, work ethics and attitudes as lifelong learners. Preceding this research project the phase of our relationship was defined as *professional indifference*. We sat in meetings and passed pleasantries with each other. Through establishing protocols and ways of working our critical friendship entered the second phase – *tentative trust*. In recognising each other's integrity and passion we were able to enter the *reliance phase* of our friendship. Next, during the *conviction phase* we challenged each other's ideas. Finally, in the *unguarded conversations phase* we were able to immediately enter critical analysis of each other's work. We were now critical friends.

### **Possibilities for further investigation**

We are now interested in examining critical friendship in different contexts. How might a critical friend apply to the secondary classroom context? In what ways would

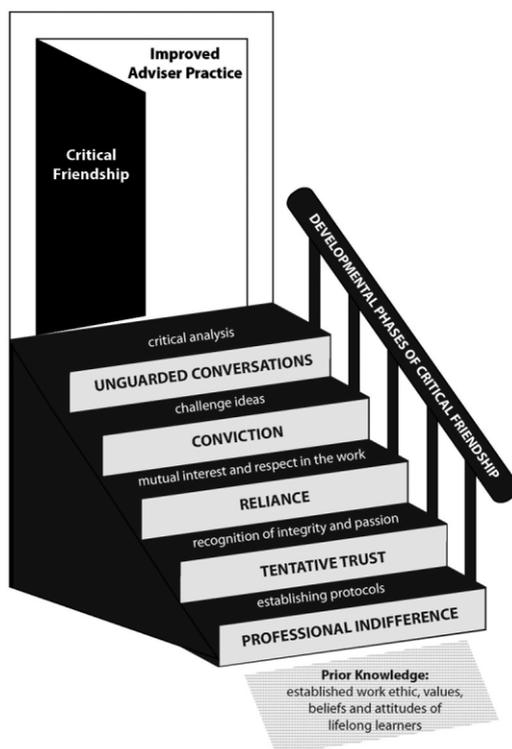


Figure 1. Developmental phases of critical friendship.

the self-selection of a friend support another student in their learning? Would critical friendship develop? In what ways would students be able to provide feedback that would enhance learning? In what ways would a critical friend support individualised e-learning for pre-service teachers? How might self-selecting primary teachers form critical friendships to identify, examine and improve a problem of practice? How does trust develop and change as the critical friendship develops?

## Conclusion

Our critical friendship supported us in our leadership roles when we worked with other advisers, reflecting on and evaluating their work in schools. The tension between friend and critical was explored throughout the developing friendship. We suggest from a position of mutual respect, a professional friendship evolved. The respect grew from what we learned about each other as we worked as part of a team exploring and clarifying values and beliefs and de-privatising our practice. The critical aspect of the relationship developed over time. Schuck and Russell (2005) support this notion with their claim that the critiquing aspect of critical friendship for analysis and integration needs to develop sensitively and slowly. Protocols for giving feedback on aspects of practice were important. These protocols needed to be revisited as we developed the language and the demeanour to enhance feedback and effect changes in behaviour and approaches.

We suggest in our critical friendship there was equal commitment, intellectual sparring, acknowledgement of each other's strengths, and contextual responsiveness to each

other's needs. The unexpected and unpredictable formation of our critical friendship would appear to have enhanced the initial purpose of our INSTEP work and to have developed in unexpected directions through combining diverse curriculum areas and levels of the curriculum. Our critical friendship developed through the phases of *professional indifference, tentative trust, reliance, conviction, to unguarded conversations*.

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