CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP AS A PIVOT IN TEACHING INTERVENTIONS

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It is only when you change the lens through which you view student learning – or your own practice – that you discover whether a new focus is better or worse. But if you never change the lens, you limit your vision (Costa & Kallick 1993, p. 49).

INTRODUCTION

Researchers at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, are currently involved in designing and implementing a large number of teacher and teaching intervention programmes in Singapore schools and colleges. At first sight, this work involves observing and then attempting to change the way teachers approach and enact their work. Sometimes, teachers are amenable to modifying what they do because they can readily identify and use strategies and resources that can be turned into benefits for both themselves and their students. At other times, change is resisted or blocked for a multitude of reasons that are not easily articulated or appreciated in a brief conversational exchange or cursory appraisal of a classroom situation.

Based on the assumption that it is not possible to refine learning environments without an understanding of how and why things work (Bielaczyc 2006), I seek: (i) a definition of teaching interventions that captures their spirit and intent for teachers, researchers and educational policy-makers and (ii) usable, actionable and adoptable methods for creating products, artifacts or processes that potentially improve teaching and learning over the long-term (cf. Bannan-Ritland 2003). My method involves laying the groundwork for a pedagogy of teacher professional development interventions that is robust, meaningful and productive for all parties concerned.

This paper explores how a teacher and a researcher can work together to support and encourage each other to achieve outcomes that neither partner could have achieved by working alone. One way of doing this involves deliberately introducing a critical element into the relationship that is intended to raise awareness, promote noticing and change practice for the better. This might seem to
be an unconventional and impracticable notion but it is possible to show and explain why critical friendships work. I also discuss hindrances to the development of critical friendships and suggest some ways in which these can be overcome. I finish with a definition-cum-characterisation of teaching interventions as reconsidered through the lens of critical friendship.

TOWARDS NEW WAYS OF SEEING AND BEING

According to Luke (2005) interventions are systematic, structured attempts to generate desired or preferred change in the core business of curriculum, teaching and learning and thereby to shift patterns of educational outcomes and effects. This definition is clear enough but experience shows that attempting to generate desired or preferred change is not always a straightforward matter.

Elsewhere (Towndrow, 2005) I have described three types of reaction to innovation in educational practice by teachers in Singapore involved in curriculum intervention work. Briefly, rigid teachers perceive their job as consisting of the delivery of a predetermined scheme of work that they had little or no part in constructing. Given the ever-present need to prepare students for high-stakes assessments, they opt for well-structured tasks (Jonassen 1997) and conduct their work according to well-established and mechanical procedures.

The second type of teacher reaction to innovation is prudent-confident. Prudent-confident teachers implement a scheme of work that was decided in advance but there is some room for manoeuvre concerning the way things are done. A serious sticking point is that these teachers are also successful in preparing learners for their tests and exams and cannot find compelling reasons to change what they do best and what they are rewarded for in annual performance reviews.

The third group of teachers are prudent-willing. Prudent-willing teachers are most comfortable implementing well-structured tasks but they can be persuaded to experiment with more open learning task designs and flexible student-interaction patterns so long as these actions are done with the intention of improving learners’ performance in quizzes and final tests.

Originally, these profiles were presented as fictional, but they are not far-fetched and they might be useful in understanding why innovations according to Luke’s definition fail to shift patterns of educational outcomes and effects in large measure. However, a weakness of this work is that the characterisations were not co-constructed with informants in the field and there was no additional data available to validate the characterisations. In fact, this material was the product of simply doing an intervention on teachers. For intervention work to be effective and lasting, I now realise that a research methodology is necessary that problematises practice, deals with it productively and, then, leads to a radically different way of seeing and being in the teachers involved.

Conducting an intervention ‘with’ a teacher

In 2006, I spent the whole year working with a lower secondary physics teacher in a Singapore school. We met regularly for pre- and post-lesson discussions and spent a long time viewing and analysing data collected from her laboratory
sessions. One of our goals was to review the instructional material she used and generate improvements for future lessons. To give a flavour of the kind of exchanges that occurred, Figure 1 includes an extract from a post-task interview where the merits of the intervention in curriculum and task design were mentioned. Particular reference is made to two laboratory activities: (i) an experiment where students had to determine the differences in density between a boiled and uncooked egg and (ii) an experiment in calculating the pressure exerted by a person standing on the ground compared with a person doing a handstand.

Researcher: What’s been good too is that you’ve also been able to suggest ways in which you can modify the tasks for yourself and not just simply relying on the suggestions that other people make but you actually know what to do too which is good.

Teacher: But I guess it actually comes with a lot of our discussions together. But if not it wouldn’t set me thinking in those directions. I think especially about the egg experiment.

Researcher: Yes, we’ve spent a lot of time talking about that.

Teacher: But I didn’t have time to redo the egg experiment.

Researcher: No, but the good thing about those conversations was that they actually helped us when we were talking about the other things.

Teacher: So from that, actually, it’s brought into other activities.

Researcher: Yeah, I think so. And I think the improvements you’ve suggested to the pressure task are ones that would be worth trying. Eventually, we could get to a point where we created another worksheet that incorporated those new features.

Teacher: Maybe in another topic.

Researcher: Yep.

Figure 1. Extract from a post-task interview with a physics teacher.

There are several points that could be drawn from this interview extract but I want to highlight how the teacher (as shown in her final comment) had been stimulated to think about how she could transfer what she had learned from one context to another.

I also have more recently recorded interview data (collected by a colleague in my absence) with the same teacher where the egg experiment was mentioned again; she says:

… actually I worked with Prof Towndrow, he actually started off the part, he keep asking, that kind of, I was quite taken aback because a very simple experiment, a very simple activity, he actually tweaked it and let me see it from different points of view, what if, because when I am doing, it never
occurred to me, its just like that, you just do it, but then you know, when you look at different points of view, you see things in a different light, so this year when I read, I redo the same activity, I you know, I actually put whatever I discussed and it actually becomes more effectively, and it saves some time.

When I read these comments, which were unprompted by me, for the first time I was delighted because I believed I could see evidence of the birth of a new ontology based on the exploitation of what might be termed an insider-outsider perspective; that is, the viewpoints I (as a researcher) had brought from the outside had had an effect on the teacher-researcher relationship itself as seen from one of the partners within it. Furthermore, I sensed an emerging catalytic effect: the demonstration of purposeful action and an impetus to transfer learning based on ideas discussed and field-tested in a setting intimately tied to the teacher’s personal circumstances. The next section attempts to explain how I think this progress occurred.

CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP AS A PIVOT

One way in which teachers and researchers can collaborate is to deliberately introduce a critical element into a teacher-researcher relationship that is intended to raise awareness, promote noticing and so change understandings and practices on both sides for the better. Grounded in the diverse literatures of organisational change, school leadership, action research and reflective practice, critical friendship has been adopted by educators as a form of support for colleagues who wish or need to make improvements in what they do.

Critical friendships can arise in response to a variety of factors and can take different forms. Koo (2002) places critical friendship approaches into two broad categories: competency and problem-based. Based on Hill (2002) the competency approach is based on the assumption that knowledge, skills and attitudes are learnable through scholarly and investigative reframing provided by an expert outsider (the critical friend). Arguably, as Koo points out, the competency approach presents a generalist model of (deficient) practice that cuts across and can even ignore cultural-specific problems and gender-based concerns.

Alternatively, the problem-based approach to critical friendship is situational, relational and highly specific. Seen in this light:

A critical friend is 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 & Kallick 1993, p. 50)

I propose, next, to show how Costa and Kallick’s longstanding characterisation of critical friendship can be operationalised in programmes of teacher professional development. Two illustrative frameworks are given.
**Two illustrative problem-based critical friendship frameworks**

As shown in Figure 2, the first critical friendship exchange occurs between two people: A who is a teacher and B who is the critical friend. The critical friendship begins with A who describes a practice or circumstance and asks B for some feedback. At this point, B in the role of critical friend can ask some questions if clarification is needed on any point in A’s recount; for example, What do you mean by …? Can you give me an example of …? Crucially, A is the person who sets the outcomes of the discussion to follow and can say, for instance, “This is what I’d like to find out about my situation and can you help me do that”. Once B knows A’s objectives, he or she can offer his or her interpretations of the event and can raise further questions and give a critique of what happened as necessary. At the end of the conversation, which can go back and forth a number of times, both A and B reflect on their exchanges. B could think about whether A’s concerns were adequately addressed and A could assess the usefulness of B’s interpretations and critique. Collectively, these thoughts can provide the input for a new conversation at a later time.

![Figure 2. A prototypical critical friendship exchange framework between two people (from Towndrow 2007).](image)

Once a critical friendship is established, Figure 3 shows that both A or B can initiate exchanges and either partner can seek clarifications from the other. Next, either A or B or A and B can set outcomes for the discussion that follows. Figure 3 also allows for situations where a single person acts as a critical friend to a group of colleagues (cf. Swaffield 2004) or where a group of colleagues act as critical friends to an individual or another group of colleagues.
Either A or B describes a practice or circumstance and asks for feedback/reactions

Clarification(s) are sought from one or both sides

Either A or B, or A and B set outcome(s) for the discussion(s) to follow

Interpretations, questions and critique(s) offered

Reflections

Figure 3. A framework for established critical friendship exchanges (from Towndrow 2007).

Hindrances

Having proposed a number of ways in which problem-based critical friendships can start and develop, it is necessary to deal with some of the ways in which critical friendships can be frustrated and rendered ineffectual. Five major hindrances to critical friendships are:

– Falsely equating personal criticism with critique
– Misunderstanding the purposes of feedback
– Dishonesty, lack of trust and openness
– Lack of empathy
– Resistance to change

There are some important distinctions to make in the first two items in this list. Firstly, strange as it may seem, a critical friendship is unlikely to flourish if there are personally critical elements in it. If critical friendships are to be lasting and not offensive and terminal, comments made must remain at the level of suggesting ways in which practices, seen as tasks and task enactments, can be improved and not attempt to address personal failures.

Secondly, when comments are made of the slash and burn variety, the purpose, of the commentary, whether stated or not, is to destroy one thing and impose another element that is deemed correct in its place. However, giving feedback is all about helping people improve the things they already have.

Thirdly, when critical friends dialogue they must be honest with each other. Often, when critical light is shone on a particular issue, unexpected and perhaps
even unwelcomed aspects of enacted practice are revealed. It needs to be recognised and accepted that the dynamism in a critical friendship is sometimes attributable to the tension that exists between old and emerging practice. Yes, critical friendship discourse can be persuasive but it should never be manipulative or intimidating. Potentially threatening situations can be disarmed through reciprocity, trust and openness. It is accepted that these attributes of professional practice are difficult but they are achievable over time.

As far as empathy is concerned, Costa and Kallick mention that a critical friend is an advocate for the success of the other’s work. This is a crucial point. A critical friendship cannot function effectively if there is any lack of understanding and unwillingness to share the feelings of the other.

Finally, the whole point of entering into a problem-based critical friendship is to seek practical solutions and bring about change. While, it’s accepted that changing a teacher’s beliefs and practices is a complex matter, a can do rather than a cannot mindset is absolutely necessary for successful intervention work based on critical collaborative inquiry to occur.

Keeping critical friendships on track

Critical friendship is not an oxymoron; it is entirely possible for a friendship to include a productive critical edge so long as the relationship is participative, mutually-informing and collaborative. In a teacher-researcher critical friendship both partners need to research and reflect together. When teachers become researchers and researchers become learners, something special occurs. For me, and above all else, carefully crafted intervention work must provide opportunities for noticing to occur (Mason 2002). Teachers, I contend, develop in intervention contexts when they operate as close to the bleeding edge of professional practice, as possible. They need opportunities to see, note and see anew and that is what a researcher’s job is in an intervention context.

In an attempt to substantiate these claims, I propose to briefly examine another piece of spoken data (see Figure 4) with an upper secondary biology teacher; this conversation conforms for the most part to the framework given in Figure 3, above (also cf. Baker & Johnson 1998). Immediately prior to this exchange, I (the researcher) asked the teacher (whom I knew well) to describe a laboratory activity she had conducted with her students recently. She recounted how the class members had dissected a farm animal’s heart and recorded their observations on a worksheet. Some benefits related to working with fresh specimens were mentioned and I made it a point to prompt the teacher, based on her experiences, to think about how this activity could be improved if she were to do it again with another class. Without hesitation, she told me that vital preparation for the laboratory would now include studying the lungs and respiration, in detail. This, she considered, would help students draw connections in the laboratory between the functions of the heart and lungs. I was impressed by this flexibility and realisation and asked her to reflect immediately on her task modifications.
Researcher: So how did you have that realisation?
Teacher: If I could do it differently?
Researcher: No, what happened for you to think about those improvements?
Teacher: Because you asked for improvements.
Researcher: So are you saying you never thought about it before?
Teacher: Not really until like a few moments ago when you just said now, it just suddenly struck me.
Researcher: That’s fast thinking!
Teacher: Thinking about doing things differently, I realised that because I don’t teach from a fixed set of resources that I have, I realised that it gives me the ... ok, for example, like certain teachers they have a fixed set of resources and for every class they use that fixed set of resources and they just go through the fixed set of resources but personally I don’t do that. Because I want, I need to force myself to make sure that my approach is different for each class that I take. Like certain classes, I don’t write everything on the board because they [the students] are able to take their notes very quickly but certain classes I do write a little bit more even though I am covering the same thing.

Figure 4. Extract from a critical friendship exchange with a biology teacher.

This episode, I submit, illustrates the power of discovery by changing the lens through which student learning and teacher practice is viewed. As for me, my conviction that all teachers have the capacity to design, implement and modify learning tasks in support of larger curricula objectives (Towndrow 2005) was reaffirmed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper explored one way in which teachers and researchers can work together to support and encourage each other. It was suggested that outcomes in teaching interventions were best achievable on the basis of problem-based critical friendships. This stance privileges the individual and relies heavily on teachers’ implicit knowledge and teaching experiences. Additionally, the material and data presented in the paper should give teachers a good idea about what it is like to participate in a teacher-researcher partnership that is organised along these transformative lines.

One question that remains to be dealt with concerns evaluation: how is the effectiveness of interventions based on problem-based critical friendships measured and assured? This is a vital matter for teachers, researchers and educational policy-makers because interventions and funded critical friendships are expensive, time-consuming and just a little uncertain in the sense that specific outcomes cannot always be predicted in advance. That said, I maintain that researchers will know that they have done their job in a teaching intervention when their teaching partners’ power to act tactically (Guba & Lincoln 1989), increases.
That is, when teachers mobilise resources to change what they do within the school system in ways that make sense to them and for the better, then progress has been made. Researchers will also know that lasting change has occurred in teaching intervention work when they are able to *perturb* teachers’ work with diligence, grace, sensitivity and precision.

Based on these particular thoughts and the material presented in the paper, in general, I return to Luke (2005) and offer my own reworking of his definition of interventions as reconsidered through the lens of critical friendship:

Interventions are systematic, structured and client-centred attempts to co-generate desired or preferred change in the core business of curriculum, teaching and learning and thereby to shift patterns of educational outcomes and effects in ways that are usable, actionable and adoptable. Interventions are effective to the extent to which they assist teaching professionals in seeing, noticing and acting on the world anew and tactically in order to change educational practices for the better.

It is my intention that this viewpoint will prompt further discussion about what teaching interventions are, why interventions are undertaken and what some of the outcomes might be in return for the investments in time, effort and funding that are made.
REFERENCES


