TOM RUSSELL
Queen's University

SANDY SCHUCK
University of Technology, Sydney

How Critical Are Critical Friends and How Critical Should They Be?

The notion of critical friendship is central to self-study (Loughran & Northfield, 1996). A critical friend acts as a sounding board, offers opportunities for reflection, is a co-learner, and asks challenging questions. In this paper, we consider ways of being an effective critical friend, giving particular attention to just how critical a critical friend can and should be. A case study of one author's self-study of his practice and the second author's role as critical friend provides the context.

The authors of this paper are teacher educators in Canada and Australia, both concerned with studying and improving their teaching. Tom is a professor in science education in Queen's University's Faculty of Education and Sandy is a senior lecturer in mathematics education in the Faculty of Education, University of Technology, Sydney. We share an interest in self-study of teacher education practices. In Tom's ongoing self-study of his teaching practices, he enlisted Sandy's aid as a critical friend for one semester. Tom faced an unexpected teaching challenge when he took over three secondary science method classes from two other teachers at the midpoint of an eight-month postgraduate pre-service teacher education program. Weekly e-mails were exchanged over a five-week period.

THE ROLE OF A CRITICAL FRIEND: PROBLEMATIC ISSUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

One problematic issue of self-study concerns the difficulty of assessing one's own practice and reframing it. Personal practice has grown out of the practitioner's belief system and thus tends to be comfortable. It is often difficult to make changes or to ascertain if those changes have improved practice (Russell, 2002). Hence the need for the critical friend to act as described below:

> A critical friend, as the name suggests, is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique 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)

It is our shared view that a critical friend is essential if self-study is to involve critiquing existing practices and rethinking and reframing practice; a critical friend also provides essential support and maintains a constructive tone.

When Tom approached Sandy to act as critical friend, she was pleased to do so. The project had several aims. For Tom, there was a desire to enlist the aid of a critical friend to assist with his self-study. Sandy brought an interest in enhancing her skills as a critical friend and an interest in what she could learn from Tom's experiences and apply to her own teaching. Over time, several implicit assumptions became problematic for Sandy.

The first problematic assumption was that Sandy fully understood Tom's expectations of his critical friend and the role she should play. While Sandy was interested in the role of critical friend, she was not completely sure of the expectations Tom had for her role in the project. She had acted as critical friend to a colleague in the past and both had found that the role raised problematic issues (Schuck & Segal, 2002). She was also approached to act as a critical friend to a colleague in another university, and the guidelines given to her in the latter case were very clear. In contrast, Sandy often found that she was unsure how to meet Tom's expectations. She was aware that the role of the critical friend was to encourage reflection and act as a sounding board, but this seemed a passive role. The problematic area for her concerned challenging Tom's practices, for she was uncertain that Tom was expecting this of her.

The second problematic assumption was that Sandy would be able to carry out this role without difficulty, even though she perceived herself as having lower academic status than Tom. In the two earlier instances, this difference had not arisen. In the case discussed here, Sandy was not sure that her role in critiquing Tom's practices and encouraging him to reframe his practice was seen by Tom as being of much value given their shared understandings of their differing statuses as academics.

Thus Sandy was eager to learn from the experience of being a critical friend and would have welcomed feedback from Tom about any shortcomings as a critical

friend. Indeed, what she required was a critical friend who could inform and challenge her in her role as critical friend. Although participating in the project was a valuable learning experience for Sandy, she was unsure as to what she was contributing as critical friend to Tom.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS: A TEACHER EDUCATOR IN CRISIS AND IN NEED OF A FRIEND

In hindsight, Tom should have anticipated the complex challenges of taking over from two people who had taught the first half of the chemistry and physics courses. First and foremost, teaching is a relationship. Student teachers frequently report the challenges they face when taking over from the experienced teacher who is the "real" teacher in a practicum setting. Tom quickly felt himself in crisis, struggling to get to know his students and to let them get to know him. His initial reflexes from many years of full-year teaching seemed inappropriate. Having Sandy as a critical friend quickly became invaluable; she was sympathetic and would comment constructively!

Data were created in files sent weekly by Tom to Sandy, who replied as quickly as possible to each file. Data concerned reactions of students to Tom's practice, including their angst in some cases about not being told what to do and also their emerging insights into Tom's beliefs about teaching and learning and how and why these differed from their previous teacher. Tom set up his reflections in tabular format, leaving a blank column for responses by Sandy. These tables were exchanged quickly as email attachments.

Examples of data illustrating the problematic nature of the critical friendship follow:

In week 3, Tom discussed ways in which he challenged his students' views about teacher education courses. He invited a former student to talk to the group:

Megan spoke for an hour about the experiences of being a new teacher. Very well received. Megan and I talked back and forth a bit after the break, as I wanted them to hear her sense that [our] program provided neither enough "theoretical" (as in I really can read and think) nor enough "practical" (this is exactly how you do X). (Tom, week 3).

And Sandy critiqued his reflections:

This emphasis always disturbs me somewhat – I know I mentioned it before. I don't see the point of establishing that the teacher education program does not achieve enough in either the theoretical or practical sense. Does any program? Is it realistic to raise the expectation that the program will supply all the answers? Shouldn't we be emphasising that learning is life-long and only a taste can be provided in the program, and more gathered from experience in the classroom. In my work with beginning teachers I see that no matter how much we do in certain areas, it is never enough because of the context—they are not actually teachers in a classroom. When they realise this, they develop useful strategies to help themselves,

rather than develop a blame culture which is not useful. (Sandy, week 3)

At the time, Tom did not comment on Sandy's response. Almost one year later, recalling this discussion reminded Tom how many approaches there can be to this fundamental issue of "theory and practice." His personal view is that teacher education programs already have problems with perceptions of their quality (Segall, 2002). Tom hoped that by signalling that he knows the program is less than perfect, his students would explore more fully how theory and practice interact. Tom accepts Sandy's view as an alternative and does not intend a culture of blame, as Sandy inferred. This issue reminds us that we are not only individual teacher educators but also individuals working in different contexts that shape our assumptions and beliefs.

Over a five-week period, Tom sent emails to Sandy and received responses from her that were either supportive or challenging. At week 3, Sandy emailed Tom asking for his reactions to her responses as critical friend and received an enthusiastic reply:

Love to get some reactions from you (I know it is ever-growing to write, get feedback and respond to that....). (Sandy, week 3)
Your comments on my teaching notes have been wonderful—they show me so much and they keep me hanging on!! (Tom, week 4)

After week 4, Sandy attached some questions to her responses so that she might draw some conclusions about her role as critical friend:

Now for my So-What? questions: How has my feedback fitted into your framework of learning about your teaching and reflecting about it? Has it changed anything? Was there any value to it? How can I improve my role as a critical friend? (Sandy, week 4)

Tom replied as follows:

Sandy asks some good questions... relevant ones and also ones that I've been thinking about. Her file came back so quickly that I've printed it and underlined the phrases I like best—it's impressive that I have the opportunity to read this before starting the week's classes—this being the last of five weeks, with two more to follow in April.

I like Sandy's comment about needing time for the new relationship to build. I wonder how I would have done it differently if I had realized how big a hurdle we all had to leap. I was probably feeling several things—a need to establish some sense of competence in their eyes and a need to get going quickly because I had so little time with them. Both of those probably interfered with relationship-building.

I'm very glad that Sandy flagged the issue of "HOW one finds the balance between telling and discovering—I can already see that this week will have a pace that could interfere with any progress on that front. At the very least I should signal the value

of their keeping that issue in mind as they move into two three-week experiences in different [practicum] settings.

Yes, Sandy—there's a big So What to your replies. We seem to value self-study for similar reasons, which in itself is very refreshing. (Tom, week 5)

OUTCOMES
What Tom learnt
Having a critical friend forced Tom to maintain a reflective journal and document his weekly experiences in teaching, even when he was tired and could easily have postponed his writing.

All I want to do is go home and collapse... I have to be here at 9 a.m. for ChemB. But I also know I need to WRITE. (Tom, 27 January 2003, 9:35 PM)

Sandy's responses provided insights into the situation that enabled Tom to take positive actions that might have been impossible otherwise. This exchange also illustrates the potential of critical friendship with respect to self-study of teaching. After his fourth meeting with one class, Tom's report to Sandy showed him working to establish an overall agenda as well as teaching approaches.

It was only yesterday in ChemB that I was able to get a clearer sense of what is happening when they work in groups like this. The class is so small that they worked in only two groups. I was struck by the fact that they sound like teachers engaged in group planning. Why shouldn't they sound like teachers? Sure, there are the side topics that inevitably arise— that's human nature. Why shouldn't they work this way while they are in "teachers college"? At the same time, this is only our fourth class and they naturally have questions about where we are going. (Tom, Week 2)

Sandy's response framed a tension that has long concerned Tom: How much should he determine the course agenda and how much should he ask students, soon to be teachers, to learn to set their own agenda for learning to teach? This was a significant issue for students who had been accustomed to other teachers who did set the entire agenda.

I am interested (and a little surprised) that you have not given the students an outline of the program. They are working to your agenda to a large degree (and quite justifiably as you have a better idea of what is valuable knowledge in this area) so I think they are entitled to know what that agenda is and how you expect to achieve it. After all, teaching them how to learn through their activity and reflection is what you have decided is important and you have chosen the processes you will use. Interesting that in our courses we are putting more emphasis on our outcomes and program. This leads to the paradox of needing to be responsive to students' needs but also wanting to accomplish our own agenda. This raises the expert-

novice contributions dilemma again. We value what they know but we do have more expertise and have spent more time thinking about this. What are our roles here? (Sandy, Week 2)

This early comment from Sandy generated a focal point for Tom's continuing deliberations about his teaching, initially inspiring discussions of these issues with his students and ultimately leading to an explicit focus on self-directed learning in his physics course in 2003-2004.

What Sandy learnt
Sandy gained ideas for her teaching from reading Tom's descriptions of his teaching and reflections. Tom wrote reflectively after week 3:

University education certainly sends a message that learning happens in lectures. . . . Even though lectures are criticized for being tedious and boring, there is little or no discussion of the quality of teaching and learning, with the result that alternatives to telling appear empty, inefficient and unproductive. Classes are meant to be planned well in advance without learner input. Alas, I've taught myself over 25 years that I must reduce the structure my teaching provides—to ensure I am not providing too much and also to encourage self-directed learning—a goal that many new teachers seem to believe is appropriate for the students they will soon be teaching. It simply will not happen in schools if we cannot experience it here, feel it, discuss it, learn from it, and develop strategies for helping students begin to make the transition. (Tom, week 3)

Sandy responded enthusiastically:
This section hits the nail on the head and has provided me with a lot of thought for my own teaching. I find the structure that I offer the students is valued by them, and we do little or no lecturing or telling. Most of it is done with activities in which students collaboratively engage. However, the tension between providing too much structure and encouraging self-directed learning is present. (Sandy, reply to week 3)

She also learned more about the process of being a critical friend by participating explicitly in the role and through writing this paper. She learnt that trust, support and flexibility are essential elements of a critical friendship. She also appreciated the importance of frank and comprehensive discussion about roles. In writing this paper, an opportunity arose for discussion of the critical friendship and it appears now to Sandy that her contribution to this friendship was more in the area of offering support and encouraging reflection than in challenging and provoking Tom's practice.

How could this critical friendship have been improved?

Perhaps the greatest constraint on this critical friendship was the short duration of the project. Tom was teaching for only seven weeks, and only the first five

were the focus of this study. The remaining two occurred after a practicum break of seven weeks, and continuing the study would have been a case of 'too little, too late.' Electronic mail itself is also an obvious constraint on the quality of our communication; had even one face-to-face observation and discussion been possible, we expect the quality of our critical friendship would have improved considerably.

The process of critical friendship could have been improved in several other ways. Frank and thorough discussion *before* the start of the project makes it possible to explore expectations and concerns of both parties. The friends' relative status and levels of experience in the field should also be considered. Lastly, a third dimension can be added to the project: In addition to the practitioner reflecting on and deconstructing his or her own work and the critical friend critiquing it, the practitioner could provide feedback to the critical friend on how his or her needs are being met. Thus the critical friend can learn from the experience and improve practice as a critical friend.

CONCLUSIONS
These insights emerge from our data:
1. Personal friendship and shared assumptions about teacher education provide a strong beginning but are no guarantee of a successful critical friendship.
2. A critical friendship works in two directions. It is not solely for the person whose teaching is being studied; the critical friend also expects benefits.
3. A critical friendship becomes an additional layer of self-study and should be documented and revisited just as one studies teaching.
4. Critical friends need to regularly test the relationship as it proceeds, checking for clues about the level of critical commentary with which each feels comfortable.
5. While written records are essential and can be shared electronically, a critical friendship may be more successful and mutually satisfying when it includes face-to-face interaction as well as electronic communication (which provides a valuable trail of discussions).

Because self-study is an inherently critical activity that seeks to challenge one's fundamental assumptions about personal professional practice, we believe that a critical friend should take risks and be as critical as possible within the context of "reading" the comfort level of one's friend. While self-study is inherently risky and potentially threatening, the point of self-study is lost when one starts to neglect relevant data and perspectives. A critical friend is a significant part of a self-study; both practitioner and critical friend should push each other to ensure that all relevant perspectives are brought to bear on the self-study.

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