

Critical friendships: colleagues helping each other develop

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This paper reports on a critical friendship between two colleagues (an EAP teacher and the author) in Singapore. The teacher initiated the process, chose her preferred methods of reflection, selected the lessons to be observed, and decided on the cycle of observation which related to her chosen sequence of a cycle in a process approach to writing. The author's designated role was to observe lessons, talk with the teacher after the process, read and interpret her journals, and manage the process in general. The teacher then authenticated the author's interpretations. Although not without its problems, this critical friendship contributed to the mutual development of two colleagues. However, teachers wishing to carry out similar methods of reflection may have to build in some ground rules before the critical friendship begins. These may include defining the roles of the participants, deciding time frames, and discussing the teacher's readiness for reflection.

Introduction

In recent times teachers of English as a second/foreign language [ES/FL] have been asked to reflect on their work (Richards and Lockhart 1994). One obvious starting place for a teacher is self-reflection. This involves teachers in making regular assessments of what they are doing in the classroom by completing checklists, and/or making audio/video tapes of classes, and writing transcriptions of segments of class communication for analysis. However, such self-reflection is not easy to do alone, since teachers may find it difficult to confront themselves with any noted inconsistencies (if indeed they are noted) when they come to prepare their self-reports. It may, therefore, be necessary for them to have another person, a 'critical friend' (Stenhouse 1975), as an observer who can talk about teaching in a collaborative undertaking. This paper reports on one such critical friendship dyad between two colleagues (an EAP teacher and this researcher) in Singapore. The teacher initiated the collaboration, chose her preferred methods of reflection (observation of practice and journal writing), selected the lessons to be observed, and decided on the classes she wanted observed. The paper starts with a brief discussion of critical friendship, followed by an outline and a discussion of the process of the critical friendship.

Critical friendship

Critical friendship was first discussed by Stenhouse (ibid.) when he recommended another person who could work with a teacher and give

advice as a friend rather than a consultant, in order to develop the reflective abilities of the teacher who is conducting his/her own action research. By way of definition, Hatton and Smith (1995: 41) say that critical friendship is 'to engage with another person in a way which encourages talking with, questioning, and even confronting, the trusted other, in order to examine planning for teaching, implementation, and its evaluation'. They argue that it can give voice to a teacher's thinking, while at the same time being heard in a sympathetic but constructively critical way. For the purposes of this paper, I define critical friends as people who collaborate in a way that encourages discussion and reflection in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This collaboration incorporates Schrage's (1990: 40) depiction of collaboration as 'the process of shared creation' wherein 'two or more individuals with complementary skills [interact] to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own'.

The word 'critical' in this friendship does not connote negativity, as it tends to do in everyday conversation; rather, it is used in its original Greek meaning of 'to separate' and 'to discern'. In the present context it refers to separating teaching into its parts, and discerning how those parts work together (if they do), and how teaching is related to other areas of life. Also, my use of the term 'critical friend' does not mean that I was involved in a 'help my less experienced colleague' type of situation, as would have been the case if I was acting as a mentor (Farrell 1998). Instead, I followed a policy of non-intervention in the process. As the teacher had initiated the process, I was prepared to let the 'friendship' unfold naturally.

The critical friendship Background

This critical friendship consisted of the author and an experienced female teacher of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Both of us teach in the same institution, the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. The teacher (Poh, her real name) teaches academic writing in an Intensive English Program for scholars from The People's Republic of China (PRC). The observer teaches in the English Teacher Education program. Poh asked me (the author) to observe her classes. She later sent me an e-mail stating why she had invited me to observe her class:

The reason that I invited you to come to visit my class is that I would like to have an outsider's view of my teaching practices besides my own perspective and that of my students . . . I look upon this as more of a way of sharing your perspective than an evaluative observation.

My gain would be to add to my experience as a researcher promoting reflective inquiry for the purpose of teacher development. Additionally, I had wondered what role I would play as an observer in this type of teacher-initiated reflection. Data were collected by: (1) classroom observation notes; (2) individual meetings; (3) audio recordings of meetings, and video recordings of classes; (4) the teacher's written reactions to her classes (and the process in general) and e-mail correspondence.

The teacher asked me to observe an Academic Writing Skills class of mixed-ability grouping. Poh said that she uses the process approach to teach writing. She defines her interpretation of this process approach as follows:

Implementing the process approach means not only that the students go through the cycles of pre-writing, drafting, and revising. In the process approach, it is important for students to view writing as a thinking process in their construction of meaning in the text. It is the thinking, rethinking and commitment to ideas that are meaningful to the students.

The process

Poh decided that I should observe one cycle within her process approach to teaching writing. I actually observed seven of her classes (each lasting two hours): the first three were pre-writing activity classes, the fourth was a peer-response class, the fifth was for writing and typing the first draft of the essay, while the sixth was for revising the first draft. The seventh class I observed was the first of a new cycle. For this observation Poh asked me to 'observe any changes you see from the first cycle'. She did not ask me how or what to observe in any other of the classes. Thus, no specification of my role as a visitor was ever made explicit.

After the first classroom observation I could see that this teacher was an experienced practitioner in search of self-development. I also realized that she could probably ask and answer many of her own questions about her teaching. As Day (1998: 268) has correctly pointed out, most experienced teachers have 'already found their own personal solution to perceived problems'. The pattern that developed was that I would document my observations within each phase of the cycle. I did not share these observations during the process, and was not asked to do so. However, I can now discuss what happened during this critical friendship. Table 1 summarizes the classroom events, as observed by the critical friend and the teacher.

A striking pattern emerges from this summary: the teacher and the observer had similar comments to make about each class, even though we did not compare notes until after the last class. One example of this pattern concerned classroom interaction. It turned that both of us had made similar observations and comments about the interaction in her classes (e.g. classes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 in Table 1).

We found that there was a dramatic change in student–student interaction in the seventh class (compared to her first class). The summary in Table 1 outlines how she was setting up these changes in interaction in her classes. For example, Poh wrote in her journal that she had deliberately changed the classroom seating arrangements for her third class:

Today I arranged the class differently which I didn't for the other classes because there were no tables in the class and it was easier to rearrange the seating arrangement of the class. I asked the students to sit in such a way so that they could face each other.

Observer's Notes	Teacher's Journal Entry
Class 1 – Individual responses—some students (the same) responded. – Groups better for this cycle?	* New cycle—textbook-driven topic. * Would groups have been better? * Same students participating—I call on them. * Maybe I should ask for volunteers?
Class 2 – Group work—observed one group. – Spoke only Chinese. – Use dictionaries constantly. – Some students silent.	* I did group work. * Students had not read article. * Students used dictionary all the time. * Groups didn't do too well.
Class 3 – Horse-shoe shape in seating space—set-up on purpose? – Increase in student participation.	* Changed seating arrangements for more participation. * 75% participate.
Class 4 – Groups for peer-response. – Students write a lot. – Not much talking in groups.	* Peer-response; students formed groups. * Last cycle I set up groups—now students do it—less teacher-talk * I allow students to speak Chinese in class.
Class 5 – Computer lab-writing papers.	* Students writing drafts on computers.
Class 6 – How to write introductions and paragraphs. – Sudden Grammar lesson—why? – 20 minutes of grammar instruction—students listened—no written activity. Hmm . . .	* Introductions/develop paragraphs. * Grammar teaching—some essays in the previous cycle had pronoun reference problems. * Rushed lesson/not feeling well.
Class 7 – New cycle—pre-writing. – Observed one group. – All group members active—spoke English most of the time.	* Groups to decide the focus of the topic. * Good interaction in one of the groups—all spoke in English—big change.

TABLE 1
Summary of observer's notes and teacher's journal entries

Poh evaluated her class as being successful because more of the students participated than in her earlier classes. She reflected on this as follows:

Some students volunteered to share their views, while at times I directed the question at other students. Overall, I felt the students were relaxed in their participation. At the end, I would say at least 75% of the students shared their views . . . I think this was the first time that the students felt at ease in participating in class discussion. I was so glad that students were beginning to speak up more in class. Maybe I didn't give them much opportunity in my earlier classes.

These journal entries show that Poh was constantly reflecting on her students' learning, and trying to create opportunities to maximize this learning by increasing student–student and teacher–student interactions.

By the seventh class Poh was also being more pro-active in the friendship. Before this class she sent me an e-mail saying that she had decided how she would approach the next new cycle of writing. She set down the various changes she wanted to encourage in order to increase student–student interactions in the new cycle of writing:

I'm going to involve more student-to-student interaction in the prewriting activities in my class. In fact, I'm [also] going to try another way of conducting my [next] peer-response class. In my previous peer-response classes I started with group work and gave review sheet. However, I've observed that students did not interact and discuss the essays among themselves after responding to each. Most of them read what the reviewers had written. To encourage more interaction among the students, I want to try pair-reviews instead.

Indeed, in this new cycle pre-writing class, the student-to-student interaction (all in English) had changed dramatically from the first class I observed.

Discussion

From a reflection point of view it is interesting that Poh addressed most of the issues I raised without having seen my observation notes. This was not planned, but it seems likely that this delayed reflection (in the form of regular journal writing and the use of e-mail) gave Poh an opportunity to initiate her own changes to her teaching behaviours, based on her reflections. As a critical friend, I took on a proactive role of promoting reflection within our friendship by acting as a catalyst for Poh to look at her teaching; however, she would take responsibility for any teaching changes within the classroom.

It may be that a teacher needs time to let the experiences of the class actions and emotions sink in before being asked to articulate any reflections. This delay can take the pressure off both 'friends' from having to 'come up with' some explanation for something they are not ready for. Also, when there is a certain delay in reflections, the teacher can reflect in a more relaxed way in order to make sense of his/her emotional reactions to the class. Alternatively, the delay that occurred may have been an attempt (by both parties) to avoid the confrontation that Hatton and Smith (1995) suggest may be necessary for a deeper examination and evaluation of teaching. On reflection, it may be that I did not confront Poh during the process because I was unsure of our relationship. This may have been because we were and are working in the same institution. As such, I (and Poh) may have been afraid that tension could have arisen as a result of any confrontation. For example, I wondered about the value of the sudden grammar intervention in class six, but I did not ask her why she had done this. Consequently, I now think that even though the delay in reflection revealed interesting comparisons of what was observed by the friend and the teacher, it may also have weakened the process of Poh's reflections.

I am also inclined to speculate that when one enters into a critical friendship with colleagues from the same institution, certain constraints may already exist in relation to issues of equality, ownership, and ethics. All of these need to be defined and negotiated before such collaborations begin. So far as equality is concerned, the main issue relates to the rights of the people involved. In the study presented here, although we did not specifically articulate the principle of equality, we thought of ourselves as being equal. However, I now wonder if it is truly possible to have equality with participants from within the same institution.

The fact that there was no confrontation in this case study could also have been related to the issue of trust. It is important to be sensitive about the relationship in a critical friendship, and to realize that trust takes time to build up. It is possible that Poh and I did not have sufficient time to reach that point of trust at which we could share (and confront) our observations of her class. It would seem to be imperative, therefore, for researchers to make transparent how the written-up accounts of the research are to be used. I explained to Poh that I would share my paper with her, for her authentication. However, I agree with Golby and Appleby (1995: 159) in wondering how far it is possible, even within a supportive and trusting relationship, 'to articulate what normally remains within the private domain'. Trust of this nature may take a longer time to develop than both parties are willing to endure.

As a consequence, it may be necessary to build in some ground rules before the critical friendship begins. In this study we did not verbalize the role of the visitor, however: since none of the ground rules are verbalized, there is a possibility of drifting aimlessly. It is important to consider time frames for two reasons. Firstly, since reflection takes time, the reflective period should be carried out over a longer rather than a shorter period of time. Secondly, having a fixed period in which to reflect allows the participants to know what period during the semester they can devote wholly to reflection.

This type of collaboration requires teachers to embark on reflection; however, not all teachers are ready to reflect (Moon and Boullon 1997). Therefore, the readiness of the teacher should be considered before the process begins. Since critical friendship means self-disclosure and some process of change, the person who is reflecting should be in a good personal psychological state in order to be able to confront any inconsistencies that may occur. It should be understood that reflection can cause doubt, and that for this reason some people may not want to face any further uncertainties at this stage of their life. So reflection may not be for everyone. This issue should be recognized and discussed by the people concerned before they undertake such a project. Poh, a confident and experienced teacher, was already reflecting on her work, and only wanted an outsider's view of what she was doing in her classroom. She seemed to be quite comfortable with her teaching, and so was in a strong psychological state to allow someone to observe her classes. All she needed was some support from a colleague to get her started in more intensive reflections.

Conclusion

This study gives some insight into the reflective/change process by means of a critical friendship. Although not without its problems, this form of friendship contributed to the mutual development of two colleagues. The teacher got further insights into her teaching of Academic Writing, while I (the 'friend') also gained in the process by furthering my understanding and insight into the reflective/collaborative process. The next step for this EAP teacher is to convert her reflections into a publication so that other teachers (who may be less confident than Poh) may be encouraged to enter this process of self-reflection. The process outlined in this paper is unusual in that the teacher initiated the critical friendship, chose the methods of reflection, and then authenticated the interpretations of the data that this author made. The whole process was characterized by principles of volunteerism (the teacher invited me to work with her), equity (I hope), and mutual respect.

I propose that other critical friendships could have a deeper reflective experience if the teachers involved realize that sufficient trust needs to be established (especially amongst colleagues from the same institutions) for healthy confrontation to be tolerated. This means that some rules need to be negotiated, and that the teacher needs to be ready to reflect. Teacher development of this sort encompasses Underhill's (1992: 79) ideas of self-direction, within a process of collaboration: 'For teacher development is no different from personal development, and as such can only be self-initiated, self-directed and self-evaluated. No one else can do it for us, though other people can be indispensable in helping us to do it.'

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