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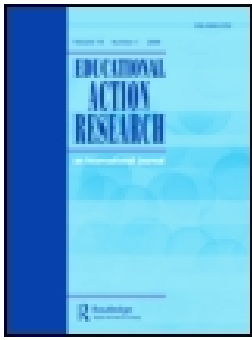
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Critical friendship as a contribution to master's-level work in an international programme of study

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This article reports on an action research project in which the value of critical friendship for students doing research and writing their dissertations within an international master's course has been explored. This course is run jointly by Roehampton University (London, UK), Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic) together with Fontys OSO (Tilburg, the Netherlands). It describes the process and the results of working with the concept of critical friendship in this master's course since its start in 2005. Data were collected by means of various qualitative instruments and data sources: evaluation forms after tutorial sessions, reflective logs and focus interviews. The results show that the process of engaging with the research they did was enhanced and supported by the development of critical friendship groups. A number of recommendations have been formulated, such as the importance of discussing the concept of critical friend and its philosophy with the participants and of defining roles and tasks as clearly as possible.

Keywords: critical friends; master's course; students' research process; multicultural students' group

After their six-month stay at Fontys-OSO, students reported to the programme board in June 2006 that they: '… have gained personally and professionally from the process of developing as critically reflective practitioners and independent learners. It has been a life changing cross-cultural experience … feelings of being much more tolerant and reflective, … better researchers and team workers …. ; …. are going to be change agents when they return home …'

Introduction

A master's programme in special educational needs (SEN) should in our view be shaped as a 'platform' where all members collectively develop knowledge on the subject of children with special needs, where students, parents and teachers cooperate, where the position of the pupils is debated, and where all participants work together for the continuous improvement of their practice (van Swet, Ponte, and Smit 2007). The platform is more than a learning environment; it refers to the infrastructure of the course as a whole: its goals, the organisation, the curriculum and the participants. Such a platform takes account of the views of all the people involved; pupils, their parents or representatives, interested associations, and policy-makers (Smith 2000). Knowledge

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is developed interactively and the platform requires that teachers and students take joint responsibility for the learning process of all participants and for the professionalisation of SEN as a whole (Ponte and van Swet, 2004; van Swet, 2008).

We believe that critical friendship and working as critical friends could be a powerful ingredient of such a platform. This article reports on a small-scale action research project in which we explore how the idea of critical friendship could be used and taught explicitly in a master's course, and especially in the area of the research work and writing dissertations. What elements of critical friendship contribute to the master's level, how can critical friendship best be incorporated into a master's course and how does it add to the level of critical thinking students should achieve to be awarded a master's degree?

At Fontys Opleidingscentrum Speciale Onderwijszorg (OSO) [Fontys University of Applied Sciences, Teacher Training College of Special Educational Needs] we have been engaged, since September 2005, in a one-year Erasmus Mundus academic master's course in SEN, which is a joint programme between Roehampton University in London and Charles University in Prague. In our part of the programme at Fontys OSO we have incorporated working as critical friends into this master's course, and we have done action research on the process of implementing it since then. This article is one of the reports on that study (for example, van Swet et al. 2009).

The instructional design of the programme has been diverse and consists of lectures, workshops, roundtables, working as critical friends, individual and group presentations, tutorials and self-study. From the beginning we expected that elements of critical friendship would make a valuable contribution to one of the learning outcomes of the course in particular: developing a critical academic attitude. In practice, for example, we have observed that students are able to critically reflect on practice, to develop a complex, critical academic argument and to evaluate practice critically.

Student groups consist of about 26 students each year, from a wide range of countries all over the world. To be awarded the master's degree, students have to gain 90 credits under the European Credit Transfer System, of which 30 European Credit Transfer System credits are for conducting small-scale research and writing a dissertation. The three universities involved have developed the content and the form of delivery of the course collaboratively and they offer the programme collaboratively. The programme system fits into the regulations set by the Bologna process and corresponds to the second cycle as described in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Agenda.

Critical friends in the context of a master's course

At Fontys OSO we feel strongly that, within master's-level study, knowledge should be developed interactively (van Swet, Ponte, and Smit 2007). Professionals doing a master's course should learn to develop their own knowledge and should gradually develop into critically reflective practitioners and researchers. That demands genuine debate (Kemmis 2007); and in order to acquire that competence, students are encouraged to learn to be each others' critical friends (Hatton and Smith 1995; Knowles 1980; van Swet and Ponte 2007; Yost, Sentner, and Forlenza-Bailey 2000). Cooperation also seems to be very important to improving the quality of research, especially of practice-oriented research, outside the context of master's courses. It could, for example, add to the validity of the research. The idea that researchers should

cooperate and involve others in their research is not new and has been stressed by many authors (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen 1994; Feldman 2007; Herr and Anderson 2005; McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead 2003; Somekh 2006; Whitehead and McNiff 2006; Zeichner and Noffke 2001). Many authors also mention that in practitioner research it is important, and maybe even necessary, to make use of critical friends (Altrichter 2005; Capobianco 2007; Etherington 2004; Herr and Anderson 2005; Kemmis 2007; McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead 2003; Ponte 2002a; Vloet 2007; Zeichner and Noffke 2001).

In this Erasmus Mundus master's course, students come from different countries and different cultures and they have widely differing values (Hofstede and Hofstede 2007), learning histories and learning styles. We anticipate that especially in groups like these the concept of critical friend may not be self-evident for all students. Research on this concept in such a students group should lead to a better understanding of the concept. This led us to formulate the following main research question:

- In what way and to what extent do students and tutors, in dissertation tutor groups in a multicultural master's course for experienced professionals in SEN, become each others' critical friends and make use of each other as critical friends for their dissertation? How can this process of becoming critical friends be promoted?

The concept of critical friendship

Despite the widespread use of the term, the research literature did not clarify, for example, who can be each others' critical friends or what procedures are helpful in becoming critical friends. We therefore decided to explore the concept further in this article. We have chosen Costa and Kallick's definition as a starting point, because it seems to be a rather complete one and because it is relevant for our study:

> … A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (Costa and Kallick 1993, 50)

Several aspects of critical friendship can be identified in this definition. They will be addressed in the following section and will lead to the secondary research questions for this study.

Offering critique as a friend

Many authors stress the issue of the optimal balance between being critical, in asking provocative questions and offering critique, and at the same time being a trusted person and a friend. There should be place in discussions for critique (Bloom et al. 1956) and at the same time the relationships should be safe and trustful (Taylor 2000). Some authors, such as Watling et al. (1998), stress that there is a continuum from 'total friend' to 'total critic', but what the optimal balance should be or how to achieve that optimum is not very obvious. Others stress that a master's course where knowledge is created collaboratively should be especially careful to ensure that it creates a critical context and does not just offer a 'comfortable meeting place' (Groundwater-Smith and

Somekh 2007; Kelchtermans 2007; Kemmis 2007; Ponte 2007). Whitehead and McNiff (2006) offer some more practical instructions about how that could be done. For them it should be a combination of being supportive and available to listen and of offering thoughtful responses, raising points that perhaps the other has not thought about.

Examine data through another lens

A second aspect in Costa and Kallick's (1993) definition is expressed in the words 'to be examined through another lens'. Many authors stress that this process of looking through another lens could add to the validity and reliability of the research. They all give different names to this process, each stressing a different aspect of it. Ponte and Zwaal (1997), for example, use the words 'cross-cultural reflection', while Etherington (2004) speaks about 'critical external reflection' and Damen (2007) about 'public reflection' as opposed to 'private reflection'.

This process is so important because experiences are always contextually bound, always have a potential for distortion (Larrivee 2000). Furthermore, our world is always an experienced world (Prosser and Trigwell 2002) and there is always an invisible filter that influences how we perceive and evaluate things (Matsumoto 2000). We are not aware of our beliefs (Argyris 1990) and our 'mental models' (Senge 1990). Before they can be given a role in interactive knowledge development, we need to become aware of them and to critically check them (Etherington 2004). According to Mezirow (1991), this is especially necessary in adult learning, where the presuppositions of prior learning need to be justified or validated. Especially in a group with experienced professionals from diverse cultures, as in this study, it could therefore be helpful to make use of critical friends (Taylor 1994).

The process of asking questions and offering critique

A third aspect in Costa and Kallick's definition concerns the process that goes on when 'a critical friend offers critique of a person's work as a friend' (1993, 50). Critical friends should ask provocative questions, should offer critique and should take the time to fully understand the work. The way critical friends communicate with each other has been emphasised by many authors. In her research, Ponte (2002a, 2002b) distinguished five functions of the critical friend in which she covered most of the communication and interaction that takes place between critical friends:

(1) *Exploration*: questioning each other critically in order to clarify themes, contributing to critical analysis and interpretation.
(2) *Informing each other*: giving tips, advice and suggestions.
(3) *Encouraging*: putting fresh heart into people to continue, giving them recognition and showing appreciation.
(4) *Exchanging ideas*: talking about experiences in a neutral way.
(5) *Modelling*: learning from each other how things can be done.

She found that in the early stages of an action research process, informing, encouraging and exchanging ideas were dominant; and in subsequent stages, exploration and modelling became more apparent.

Roles and tasks of students and tutors

In tutor groups, participants have different roles and tasks, and these roles and tasks may not always be clear. Students are expected to gain credits for their dissertations, and the tutors are their supervisors and assessors. Tutors and students do not contribute equally, they have different roles and responsibilities (van Swet and Ponte 2007), making it questionable whether it is possible to combine the role of critical friend and assessor in one person. McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead gave advice on working with critical friends:

> … You and your critical friends choose each other, so you need to negotiate the ground rules of your relationship. … As well as expecting support from your friends, you must also be prepared to support them in return. This means being available, … offering as well as receiving advice, even if it is painful or unwelcome, and always aiming to praise and support. (2003, 38)

The effect of cultural backgrounds

In a multicultural master's group almost nothing is self-evident. Decisions have to be made explicitly about group rules and ways of interacting. With the term 'multicultural master's group' we are simply referring to the great variety of countries from all continents that the master's students came from. Because culture is an abstract concept, attributing the diversity to culture is no more than a label. In a group, culture will not be visible and it can only be inferred that cultural differences underlie the various behaviours (Matsumoto 2000). Matsumoto's definition of culture clearly expresses the complexity of this concept:

> a dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviours, shared by a group but harboured differently by each specific unit within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable but with the potential to change across time. (2000, 24)

The students involved in this study had come to Europe to get a European master's degree. One of the objectives of the master's course is to enable collaborative and cooperative exchanges of knowledge. The handbooks for the master's course give some further information about what is understood by this, such as: by emphasizing that in assessing the students' work, high marks are given to work that gives evidence of critical evaluation, that uses practice to critique existing theory and through theory reflects upon practice in a general and specific sense (Rose, van Swet, and Šiška, 2006a, 2006b).

However, the learning outcomes as stated in these handbooks are not self-evident for all students. There are cultures that discourage students from extending their capacity for critical reflection and discourse (Mezirow et al. 2000). Cultures differ, for example, in how they value students taking initiatives in discussions or whether they expect teachers to 'tell the truth' (Hofstede and Hofstede 2007). Some students may lack the competences for real collaborative and cooperative exchange of knowledge required for functioning as critical friends. This all makes it crucial that tutors and students are sufficiently aware of the cultural diversity within the group. Some authors stress that tutors have a specific responsibility and need specific competences to function in multicultural environments (Kasl and Elias 2000), that they should initiate

discussions with the students about issues such as gender, class and ethnicity (Taylor 2000), and that good teaching should always be based on an awareness of cultural diversity (Prosser and Trigwell 2002).

The above aspects of critical friendship lead to the following five secondary research questions for our study:

(1) How do students and tutors experience the balance between being critical and being a friend in their critical–friend relationship during the dissertation process?
(2) To what extent does cross-cultural reflection on beliefs and mental models occur in the programme? What are the implications of this for the dissertation-writing process?
(3) In what way do students in a master's course communicate and interact as critical friends? What functions of critical friends do they perform?
(4) What roles and tasks are performed by students and tutors as critical friends in the dissertation-writing process and how are these performed?
(5) How do participants assess the effect of cultural backgrounds on becoming and acting as critical friends in the dissertation process?

Implementing the critical friendship strategy into the master's programme

The implementation of the critical friendship strategy started in the first study year of the master's programme (2005/06) and was continued in the next year with adaptations based on first-year experiences and findings. In that second year, the three participating universities agreed to integrate this concept of critical friendship more into the whole programme; in particular, during the period that all students resided at Fontys OSO (Tilburg, the Netherlands) from mid-September until mid-March. Also, two tutors conducted action research on the issue of finding an optimal coaching strategy for their tutor group (consisting of three students each) that aimed at letting students develop critical friendship skills and attitudes.

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the action research process and the key characteristics of the instructional design and data collection techniques, separately for the first and the second study years. The remainder of this article is focused on the second study year (2006/07).

Method and data analysis

In the second study year (2006/07), data on the experiences and opinions of the participants in the action research study (six students, two tutors) were collected by means of various qualitative instruments and data sources (see Table 2).

The focus group interviews were shaped according to Krueger and Casey's (2000) instructions. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The reports of the interviews were presented to the students and tutors in order to check their content and to give additional comments (member checks). Aspects were derived from Costa and Kallick's definition of a critical friend and served as a framework for the subsequent data analysis. In the focus group interviews, students were asked to describe their ideal tutor group and to rate the actual tutor group on a 10-point scale, representing the extent to which the group had met this ideal. Students were asked to clarify the reasons for their negative or positive ratings. In addition, interviewers asked questions such as:

Table 1. Characteristics of the course and the action research process, and key findings of the first course year.

	First course year, 2005/06: start of implementation of critical friendship in the course	
	Description	Details
Student group	24 students from 18 countries	Stayed at Fontys OSO, Tilburg. Student support groups of five students and a tutor
Course activities	Introduction in critical friendship	Two group sessions on critical reflection and workshops on multicultural cooperation
Monitoring methods	Reflective logs of tutors	
	Reflective group sessions with the tutors	Tutors acted as each others' critical friends
Findings	Trust is important	Trust can be improved by investing in group agreements about rules and procedures, and by practicing competencies for critical friends such as questioning each other
	Stimulation of active participation in the discussion is needed	Preparation before sessions is important
	Critical friendship skills need to be practiced	Students, especially the students from Asian countries, reported that they had to learn to express their own views
	Tutors play an important role	Especially in creating an encouraging atmosphere and in modelling the desired competencies
	Students expect tutors to take a leading role	Even though the students agreed that the student support group has a shared responsibility, they still expected tutors to have an active role: checking the group process, suggesting topics, helping students to grow

Table 2. Characteristics of the course, the research group, and the action research process; second course year.

	Second course year, 2006/07: integration of critical friendship in the course and action research in two tutor groups	
	Description	Details
Student group	27 students from 17 countries	No student support groups, because the concept of critical friendship was integrated more into the whole programme
Course activities	Introduction in and practicing critical friendship	Group sessions; inter-sessional group tasks, discussions in round tables, web-based environment
Research group	Two dissertation tutor groups, each consisting of three students and coached as a group by two Dutch female tutors	Group 1: male Indian, female Chinese, female African. Group 2: female Caribbean, female Chinese, female Indian
	Students and tutors matched on the basis of the content of their research	
	No free choice of group membership	
	Students sent their material plus a specific question or discussion point	For each group tutorial session, at least five days in advance
	Five or six group tutorial sessions	Between January and July 2007. During the tutorial sessions, the tutor tried to activate the students and to promote discussion amongst the students, before reacting herself
Monitoring methods	Critical Friend Evaluation Forms[a] of students and tutors	At the end of each tutorial session, by all participants
	Reflective logs of tutors	
	Focus group interviews with students	Qualitative analysis: verbatim transcription, member checks, open coding process, second phase member checks
	Focus group interview with tutors	Qualitative analysis: verbatim transcription, member checks, open coding process, second phase member checks

Note. [a]The questionnaire covers: (1) personal focus as a critical friend; (2) preconditions for the critical friend session; (3) functional communication as a critical friend; (4) balancing critic-friend, content-process, support-guidance.

'Does anyone see it differently?', 'Has anyone had a different experience?', and 'Are there other points of view?' While analysing and coding, critical remarks were reported separately and supporting remarks were checked against the opinions of the other participants.

All data were qualitatively analysed using an open coding process,[1] in which themes derived from the definition were supplemented with codes that emerged from the data. Data from the different data sources were jointly included in the analysis, while preserving the link to the respondent group (student or tutor) and to the documents from which the data came. The resulting significant text segments and their assigned codes were presented again to the participants (second-phase member checks), who were asked for feedback by email. The tutors and some students responded, all positively: they agreed with the report and found it interesting.

Action research project findings

Offering critique as a friend

The struggle to achieve the right balance between being critical and acting as a friend in the collaborative relationship emerged from all data sources. In both tutor groups, this issue demanded a great deal of attention and tact from the tutors in the first group meetings. The students were not used to exchanging course work and letting other students read what they had written and criticise it. Sometimes, much discussion was required before students agreed to do so; and throughout the whole course period, continuous training and coaching in being a critical friend remained necessary. It was found that a feeling of trust is a prerequisite for opening up to each other, but also that the students had to learn what to expect of a critical friend, and how to give critique and feedback in such a way that it supports the research and dissertation-writing process of their fellow students (see Table 3).

Another important issue arose in this study; namely, the fact that for students it obviously was important to choose their own critical friends freely, even outside the tutor group. Some students found support in the other tutor group, in an individual fellow student, or in colleagues in the home institute. Two reasons have been given for this: the special expertise of critical friends outside the tutor groups, and the special and trustful relation they experience with those critical friends outside the group. The tutors had not expected this to happen, but they evaluated it positively and even thought this strategy could be used more explicitly (see Table 4).

Examine data through another lens

Generally, the students and tutors acknowledged they had been confronted with perspectives that differed from their own. By receiving comments and questions about their work from the critical friends, they were encouraged to see things differently from the way in which they were used to seeing them and they became aware of the relativity of held views and opinions. In the experience of tutors and students, the multicultural characteristic of the groups helped in widening the perspective and in seeing other perspectives and viewpoints. Some felt it was a personal enrichment and an eye-opening event to be exposed to such a range of ideas and viewpoints (see Table 5).

Table 3.   Illustrative tutor and students quotes: achieving the right balance between being critical and acting as a friend.

Tutor quotes	Student quotes
My tutor group was perfect (8 points out of 10) as regards atmosphere; overall it was a 6. I would have liked more playing around with academic values, the real content; going into the real depth. In other groups with Dutch students I have that experience; those students read each others' work in depth and can really ask critical questions. (Tutor 2)	I think that critical friendship will go on and work when people in the group feel comfortable about the way that others discuss or talk. Sometimes I really cannot feel good when the others talk to me in a tough way. Now I realise that no matter how many times critical friends discuss together, if the discussion happens in a harmonious way, although we just discuss once, it helps a lot. (Student 1-1; email to her tutor)
	In an ideal tutor group initially we have to create rapport between tutor and students, which in the long term builds up an understanding of each other, that leads to a level of comfort zone and is essential. (Group opinion of students 2-1, 2-2, 2-3; focus group)
	They look at your work and can give you positive and negative criticism. (Student 2-1; focus group)
	My learning focus was to accept my strengths and weaknesses and share them with others in a learning process. From a professional, I became a student again, and I learned that the way I think could be changed. During the process of finishing my dissertation, I was learning all the time. In my work in India, I am going to implement this with my colleagues. It helps me to grow. (Student 2-3; focus group)
	Acceptance has been growing in all stages of my dissertation in what critical friends are saying of me. I got more acceptance as a professional and in other situations. The learning process has been very important to me. Now I accept people as they are. Proper reciprocal responses matter. (Student 2-3; focus group)

Note: The quotes are marked with identifiers that distinguish the two tutor groups, students and tutors within them, and the data source of the quote. For example: 'tutor 1; focus group' is a quote of the tutor of tutor group 1, made in a focus group interview; 'student 1-2; CF evaluation form' is a quote of student 2 from tutor group 1, made in a Critical Friend Evaluation Form.

Table 4. Illustrative tutor and students quotes: importance of choosing one's critical friends freely.

Student quotes	Tutor quotes
I always have discussions with some people from the other group, and also I discuss with them [fellow student As] a lot. (Student 1-1; focus group)	Sometimes, one prefers to involve a critical friend from outside the tutor group. … That was new for me. That, in fact, they had shifted their strategy to outside the tutor group. (Tutor 1)
If you choose him or her, he or she will be a real critical reader … so some has been chosen for you as your critical friends and that will not work … we stopped reading the work of each other and therefore stopped working as critical friends. (Student 1-3; focus group)	Then you really get the idea of a platform. The buddy school, OSO [the institute], China, they drag in everything. Great! I should have done much more with that. It means they have integrated the concept well. If they call it critical friendship, I should have gone into that much more. Should have stimulated more, could have said 'Find critical friends'. I did not see the great value of that. That they look upon it that way. And that those persons sometimes bring more than the tutor group. (Tutor 2)

Note: The quotes are marked with identifiers that distinguish the two tutor groups, students and tutors within them, and the data source of the quote. For example: 'tutor 1; focus group' is a quote of the tutor of tutor group 1, made in a focus group interview; 'student 1-2; CF evaluation form' is a quote of student 2 from tutor group 1, made in a Critical Friend Evaluation Form.

Table 5.   Illustrative tutor and student quotes: being confronted with perspectives that differed from one's own.

Tutor quotes	Student quotes
I don't know if the effect on the dissertation can be the same in the 'normal' group sessions as in these critical friend tutor sessions. Students showed a really different, more critical attitude, reflecting on the actions of the others, not taking these for granted. That is different. (Tutor 2; focus group)	In the meeting I get two feelings at the same time: 'Oh, I have to think about what was said to me; it was not my idea, it confuses me.' Most of the feeling is thinking: 'How do I come out of this confusion?' After the group session I am confused and I am in need for individual support. (Student 1-1; focus group)
The atmosphere is always good, even though at times it gets quite heated. I think one of my strengths is to let them experience how pleasant such an adventurous encounter can be. (Tutor 1; focus group)	I can be more at ease now with people from other countries. I was in a tunnel. But now it is good … (Student 2-1; focus group)
We talk about the properties of dialogue: listening and forgetting your own convictions for a moment, really trying to get the others' perspective. (Tutor 1; reflective log, March 2007)	It takes more time, but is very good and benefits you personally and professionally to be in a multicultural group. It widens your perspective, experiencing so many differences. (Student 2-2; focus group)

Note: The quotes are marked with identifiers that distinguish the two tutor groups, students and tutors within them, and the data source of the quote. For example: 'tutor 1; focus group' is a quote of the tutor of tutor group 1, made in a focus group interview; 'student 1-2; CF evaluation form' is a quote of student 2 from tutor group 1, made in a Critical Friend Evaluation Form.

The process of asking questions and offering critique

Earlier in this paper, we referred to five functions of critical friends: exploration, informing, encouraging, exchanging ideas, and modelling (Ponte 2002a, 2002b). All these functions were being practiced in the process of critical friendship in this study, with an emphasis on exploration, informing, and modelling. These functions that critical friends can have were highly appreciated, because they clearly improved the quality of the work and helped to reduce uncertainty about the way to proceed. At the same time, students and tutors reflected that acting according to these functions had not been easy (see Table 6). For some students the acceptance of criticism was difficult. Others mentioned how they tried to control their tendency to give advice or to talk too much.

Roles and tasks of students and tutors

The students indicated that in order to take full advantage of working as critical friends right at the start of the tutor group, the concept of critical friends should be made clear and the expectations of a critical friend should be discussed and negotiated. These regard both expectations toward more concrete rules of conduct and agreements and expectations towards tutoring in general and the content of the discussions. Students and tutors described how their approach to communication and its content changed over time. At the beginning of the research process and the work on the master's dissertation, the main focus was on the process and the research question. At that stage the tutors were mainly trying to accomplish an attitude change. Later, the

Table 6.   Illustrative tutor and student quotes: functions of critical friends.

Student quotes	Tutor quotes
At the beginning it helped to narrow down my focus. … When I was invited to talk about my area, I realised that it was too broad, it was not manageable, they asked questions and I had to reply and it took me time to realise that I had to change my mind. (Student 1-3; focus group)	The curious attitude towards the work of the other. Asking questions, communication in such a way to make the other think. … As a tutor, you sometimes give concrete advice or offer materials, but even then modelling is required. If you can make someone think by asking questions, pull out what is inside already, that is the trick. … Then the students see that this really works. (Tutor 2; focus group)
Expressing my ideas to others was of great help. The way we talked to each other; others reading my work and saying 'this is not clear, etcetera' helped me a lot. More specifically: choosing which topic to do out of a choice of two was easier with the help of my critical friends. (Student 2-2; focus group)	Maybe I should point out to the students more often when they have succeeded in becoming a real critical friend. At those moments, I could stop the conversation and draw attention to what is happening. That might be the difference between coaching, supervision, a solution-focused approach, and working according to the concept of the critical friend. With critical friends you focus more on teaching the students to support each other, to follow each other's process. The emphasis is slightly different: critical. (Tutor 1; focus group)
Expressing how they will use the information from their data also allowed me to think beyond what I was intending to do. (Student 2-1; CF evaluation form, week 21)	
Another student deliberately sought to tackle these kinds of remarks rather differently: 'I concentrated on listening. That was new for me. Generally I am good at giving ideas and now I can be good at listening. No matter whether I agree or not, listening is helping the others. (Student 1-2; focus group)	
By explaining it to others, I became more clear. (Student 1-2; CF evaluation form, week 28)	

Note: The quotes are marked with identifiers that distinguish the two tutor groups, students and tutors within them, and the data source of the quote. For example: 'tutor 1; focus group' is a quote of the tutor of tutor group 1, made in a focus group interview; 'student 1-2; CF evaluation form' is a quote of student 2 from tutor group 1, made in a Critical Friend Evaluation Form.

students became more oriented towards completing the dissertation and they needed more feedback on content. They were not very confident about giving each other feedback, because they felt that they lacked this content knowledge, which to their opinion a critical friend should have.

As the research developed, students were less inclined to send course work and dissertation drafts to each other, because they did not receive enough useful reactions. The students realised that they themselves were not keeping agreements and that this made being critical friends difficult. They expressed a need for stricter agreements and supervision by the tutor of those agreements (see Table 7).

Table 7.   Illustrative tutor and student quotes: roles and tasks.

Student quotes	Tutor quotes
Ideally, participants should have a research topic in the same area. (Group remark students 1-1, 1-2, 1-3; focus group)	Our task is balancing attaining the dissertation goals and learning as critical friends. (…) This brings a lot of tension: their wish to get product-oriented support versus my effort on the process of becoming critical friends. (Tutor 1; focus group)
There should be time to focus on the research; no rushing with other projects. (Concluding remark of students 2-1, 2-2, 2-3; focus group)	The next objection, so they [the students] say, is that they have no knowledge of each other's topic. I parry this: you don't need knowledge of the topic. For me, as a tutor, basically this would be the same. As a critical friend, you assess the clarity of the problem definition, the match with the theoretical model, in short: the what, why and how. (Tutor 2; focus group)
Later on, we did not always have enough time to read everything in detail beforehand and then it became more difficult to help each other. (Student 2-3; focus group)	Sometimes during the sessions we reached the depth we wanted, but then we had to move on to the next student's dissertation.… It is give and take. Are students willing to take on the extra work of reading each others' work, printing it and giving comments? (Tutor 1; focus group)
But the process has to be monitored. What were we saying the last time? Was it helpful, etc? Something has to be done on the organisation, the monitoring and reporting of the last meeting – how it helped you. (Student 1-3; focus group)	Now, as the process [of writing the dissertation] moves forward, my role of assessor, marker, becomes more prominent, so I have to look at results with more distance, more objectively. (Tutor 1; CF evaluation form, week 25)
I was very satisfied if I could move to the next chapter. I prefer to work chapter by chapter; if one chapter is ok, then I continue with the next chapter. (Student 1-3; focus group)	No matter how friendly and warm-hearted, I am the tutor. As a tutor I can show many aspects of a critical friend, but I am definitely not a critical friend. (Tutor 2; focus group)

Note: The quotes are marked with identifiers that distinguish the two tutor groups, students and tutors within them, and the data source of the quote. For example: 'tutor 1; focus group' is a quote of the tutor of tutor group 1, made in a focus group interview; 'student 1-2; CF evaluation form' is a quote of student 2 from tutor group 1, made in a Critical Friend Evaluation Form.

The dual roles of the tutors, the combination of guiding and supporting the students with assessing and supervising them became problematic, and the balance between these two shifted towards the latter as the course progressed.

The effect of cultural backgrounds

Differences in culture were reflected in language and in the ways students and tutors think about society, human existence, education, personal interaction, rules of daily life, and so forth. In many cases, these differences were seen as sources of learning and personal enrichment. Tutors and students became aware that each student uses a different frame of reference when talking about seemingly similar issues and that interpretations of behaviour and statements were based on cultural systems, of which they were not always fully aware (see Table 8).

Table 8.   Illustrative tutor and student quotes: effect of cultural backgrounds.

Student quotes	Tutor quotes
We are all human beings and that is the same, but the differences in culture can make things more difficult to understand. You have to learn more about what a person really means, because your frame of reference differs. This enriches you. (Student 2-3; focus group)	Here I have been introduced to the group and I have learned to constantly check my assumptions. Coding from our own cultural background. I probably ran into this while tutoring [student 1-1], who at first presented herself as a victim. I was aware that this was a judgment stemming from our context. (Tutor 1; focus group)
The major point of the session was the reminder of trying not to impose one's personal approach/ style to others work. This was timely as we sometimes forget that experiential background and cultural experience makes styles different. On the other hand it is good to be exposed to the way others are engaged in doing research. This experience of sharing can be rewarding. (Student 2-2; email to her tutor, April 2007)	The tutorial reports have been distributed, but in the weeks since then it appears that no one is using them. At the second meeting too, I did not get any questions. Amazingly, no one is writing anything down. Is this going to be okay? It is not giving me sufficient feedback. (Tutor 1; focus group)
People are the same all over the world, there are common elements in all human beings. This was not a big issue in this dissertation group. It helped us to develop more maturity; it helped us to reorganise ourselves and to know where exactly we stand and where others stand. (Student 1-2; focus group)	
Cultural difference does not have any special impact on the attitudes of the critical friends. We came across differences on our topic, but this had no connection with cultural differences. (Conclusion by students 1-1, 1-2, 1-3; focus group)	

Note: The quotes are marked with identifiers that distinguish the two tutor groups, students and tutors within them, and the data source of the quote. For example: 'tutor 1; focus group' is a quote of the tutor of tutor group 1, made in a focus group interview; 'student 1-2; CF evaluation form' is a quote of student 2 from tutor group 1, made in a Critical Friend Evaluation Form.

In the beginning, tutors expected students to actively engage in the course, to show self-regulating learning behaviour by asking questions, taking notes, giving feedback, and using the educational materials, such as the tutorial reports, but they learned that in this respect they had also underestimated cultural differences in student learning styles.

In contrast, especially, some of the students thought that cultural aspects were not so important in these tutor groups and in working as critical friends. They focused more on the similarities between human beings and on the issues they were dealing with, than on their differences in views and beliefs.

Recommendations for integrating critical friendship into the programme

Despite its limited scope, this research study shows that working as critical friends in the process of doing and writing a dissertation can be a valuable approach, which can

be helpful in improving the quality of the research and the resulting dissertation, in attaining master's level and in developing a critical academic attitude. This study has helped us to better understand and implement the concept of critical friendship.

This study describes the process and the results of working with the concept of critical friendship in this master's course since its start in 2005. We have systematically gathered data, evaluated them and used the results to improve our way of working. This study presents an appraisal of the concept and shows its working elements, which helps us to improve our procedures. We have found that working as critical friends demands knowledge, skills and a supportive attitude for all involved. It demands a well-planned pedagogical design, where expectations of critical friendship and its underlying philosophy and rationale are discussed together and where everyone's tasks and roles are clear. In fact, one could say that these discussions help to establish a shared culture, a mix of the cultures and backgrounds from which the group participants (students and tutors) come, which relates to Matsumoto's (2000) definition of culture: 'a dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, … involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms and behaviours … relatively stable but with the potential to change across time.'

We found that in the first phase of setting up research it seemed to be easier to make use of critical friends than in later phases. One of the reasons for this seems to be the lack of time for students to read one another's work properly, especially in the later stages of the research. However, we think that critical friends could be very useful and important in those later phases where students are analysing data and are formulating the conclusions of their study.

The students and tutors who took part in this research reported the problems and the helpful elements that they came up against, and they reported that this way of working had an enormous influence on them. From these experiences we believe that working as critical friends could, and maybe should, be made an element in similar master's-level programmes, especially those that want their students to become reflective practitioners and reflective researchers.

Further research on this topic would be very useful. Questions that have not been fully answered in this study are for example:

- How can critical friends be really critical and friendly enough at the same time? Especially, being critical seems to be an important and yet difficult skill.
- Is specific subject knowledge a condition for being a critical friend?
- Can a tutor be a critical friend? How does a tutor combine the coaching role and the assessor role?
- Should the role of critical friend be assessed; and if so, how?

A number of recommendations for working with critical friends can now be formulated. These can be accomplished partly in the tutor groups themselves, but it would be important to pay attention as well to critical friendship in the curriculum as a whole. Our recommendations are:

- *Make the concept of critical friendship explicit and make use of modelling ('teach as you preach'):*
  - Discuss the concept of critical friendship, bearing in mind the participants' life histories, cultural background and focusing on issues such as trust and critical debate.

- Discuss the philosophy behind the idea of the critical friend, the reasons why critical friendship is important and why this tutor group is working with this concept.
  - Discuss the fact that students may also look for critical friends outside the tutor group and talk about how to deal with this.
- *Negotiate about and practice with collaboratively working as critical friends:*
  - Keep critical friend groups small (three students is ideal), so that reading each other's work and discussing it in the groups does not take too much time.
  - Pay explicit attention to all the participants' expectations regarding working with others in the critical friend group, focusing on the different stages that the group will go through and the different positions that may be adopted.
  - Define everyone's tasks and roles as clearly and specifically as possible, placing particular emphasis on the role of the tutor: guardian of the process, provider of support on content, assessor, and critical friend.
  - Practise critical friendship skills and make use of modelling as much as possible.
- *Include assessment of critical friendship:*
  - Include the concept of critical friendship in the report writing and in the assessment of the dissertations.
  - As part of their dissertation, the students could report on how they used their critical friend in their dissertation, what was their aim and what was the result, and reflect on this.

It is a challenge now to come up with a description of a critical friend that can be applied in critical friendship groups in a master's course, where students are being supervised and coached in the process of writing their dissertations. It should be remembered that there are also critical friends outside these groups to whom a different description will apply:

> A critical friend is a student in a critical friendship group who helps a fellow student to do his or her research and write a research report. He or she does this by asking critical questions, contributing his or her own perspective to the discussion, providing information or offering advice. The critical friend takes responsibility neither for the content of the research, nor for the report or the research process. A critical friend reads drafts of chapters and comments on them, helps the student researcher to think about the research question and the research design, helps with data analysis, and so on.

Normally, the tutor is not a critical friend to the student. His or her role is to foster the process by which students act as critical friends to each other. The interaction between the tutor and student may, however, display some characteristics of critical friendship.

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