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Developing and Maintaining a Critical Friendship in Academia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the development of a critical friendship between two individuals pursuing careers in academia in Ontario, Canada. Over a three-year period, the relationship continued to evolve and change. Utilizing a narrative inquiry, this paper explores the professional and personal experiences contributing to the development and maintenance of this critical friendship in various aspects of early-career academia. Findings from this study are consistent with components of Baskerville and Goldblatt's (2009) developmental phases of a critical friendship. A reconfiguration of their existing conceptual framework, however, revealed that, for us, creating and developing a critical friendship is a cyclical and interconnected process.

Complete Text

We (Courtney and Taunya) share our story of three years of lived experience as aspiring academics. We have decided to focus on the support and knowledge we have gained together that has ultimately contributed to the development of our critical friendship. For the purposes of this paper, we define the term critical friend based on Baskerville and Goldblatt's (2009) interpretation; a critical friend is a practitioner who is reflective with a deep passion for knowledge and learning, who continues to establish safe and effective ways of working with a colleague to develop shared understandings that support, challenge, and further develop practice. Critical friendship is the foundation we utilized as the impetus for our study. We used this lens to analyze data and to develop further understandings of our specific critical friendship.

To begin, it is important to consider our professional backgrounds and how we came to work together. Both of us prepared as teachers in a concurrent education program (BA and BEd degrees pursued simultaneously). Courtney graduated in 2010 and Taunya in 2009. We both continued at the same university and completed our Master of Education degrees. Courtney completed her thesis in 2012 and Taunya in 2010. Our professional education was greatly influenced by the importance of reflective practice and we were exposed to many educational philosophies and methods. Within this extensive knowledge base, we had the freedom to be active in our education and to adopt influential teaching/learning philosophies into our own thinking and practice. At the time we met, Courtney was in the second term of her Master of Education program and Taunya was in her first year teaching as a part-time university instructor. We became research assistants for the same two professors and it was soon suggested that we work together on research projects as project demands increased.

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Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine the process and the relevance of having a critical friend in an academic environment. We commenced this project in response to the unique friendship we have developed as individuals committed to life-long learning while pursuing careers in academia related to education as an interconnected experience (Miller, 2008). The relationship we developed led us to reflect on how critical friendship has enhanced our knowledge and informed our practice. It was through our working relationship (attending meetings together, applying research methods, conducting literature reviews, performing data analysis, drawing conclusions, and constructing research reports) that we began the journey through the developmental phases of critical friendship described by Baskerville & Goldblatt (2009).

Critical Friendship

The term “critical friend” first emerged in the 1970’s (Heller, 1998). From that time forward, “critical friend” has been utilized in a variety of contexts within education as a method to assist with positive change by focusing on self-improvement in both practice and theory (Angelides, Leigh, & Gibbs, 2004; Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Colby & Appleby, 1995; Swaffield, 2004; Towndrow, 2007). Baron (2007) describes a critical friendship by stating that it “starts from the inside of one’s identity as an educator and develops into professional relationships that last a lifetime” (p. 2). Being a critical friend has been utilized in the field of education as a process of self-review to build strong competent relationships between colleagues (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Colby & Appleby, 1995; Hill, 2002; MacBeath, 1998, 2006; Swaffield, 2005).

Having a critical friend gives opportunities for critical discussions that both challenge and improve the practices of educators by focusing on supporting each other in an open and honest way to bring positive changes to the educational environment (Bambino, 2002). Furthermore a critical friend is a trustworthy individual who offers challenging questions from a different lens. It is important that these individuals are genuine and willing to invest time, thoughtful consideration, and critique toward anticipated goals (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield, 2004, 2005, 2007). As well, a critical friend offers clarity, strong listening skills, an ability to understand critiques and areas of improvement, and is an advocate for the desired success of the partnership (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Within a critical friendship, desired outcomes that may not be able to be accomplished alone become attainable (Towndrow, 2007). It is important to note that although critical friendship may be beneficial, challenges have been identified in creating a critical friendship. The obstacles

and tensions that exist within the development of a critical friendship have been identified as hesitancy, sensitivity, shyness, acceptance, trust, and power struggles. Over time, the continued reflection involved in critical friendship strengthens the ability to overcome the obstacles identified (Colby & Appleby, 1995; MacBeath, 1998).

As researchers have delved into the relationship between critical friends differing conceptual frameworks have been identified. For example, research by Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) led to the identification of developmental phases of critical friendship. The phases of Baskerville and Goldblatt’s critical friendship begin with *professional indifference* and then *tentative trust* where protocols are created. The next phase is described as *reliance*, which identifies both integrity and passion. Next is *conviction*, which includes mutual respect and interest in professional efforts. The final phase is *unguarded conversations* that foster critical analysis in open discussions between critical friends.

Trust has been identified as the key component to developing a critical friendship (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield, 2005, 2007). Costa and Kallick’s (1993) critical friend process begins after trust has been established. The learner describes her or his practice and asks for feedback. The critical friend responds with thoughtful questions to further clarify and understand the practice. The learner then identifies goals and the critical friend provides feedback for the learner that involves questions, critiques, and alternative perspectives. At the end of the process, both the participants reflect on their learning and discussions.

Swaffield (2007) suggests that critical friendship is dependent on three conditions: trust; both individuals being actively involved and dedicated; and having knowledge of the educational context of the critical friend. Within the critical friendship is a sound balance between providing both support and sufficient challenge. Swaffield’s (2007) findings are consistent with those of Swaffield (2005) and Costa and Kallick (1993). Atkin (1996) also includes the integration of reflection and discussion into the development of a critical friendship.

Methodology and Method

This study uses narrative inquiry as a way to explore the complexities of our research question: *How have we developed and maintained a professional critical friendship?* As a way to develop our inquiry, we use information and guidelines provided by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) who state, “Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience” (p. 20). To gain necessary data for this study, we decided to use our research question as the impetus for writing the history of our friendship. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note:

Narrative has become so identified with stories, and stories have such a particular unique sense about them—often treated as things to be picked up, listened to, told, and generally rolled around as one might roll marbles around—that narrative inquiry has, for some, become associated with story recording and telling. (p. 77)

We negotiated very basic guidelines for writing a story of our friendship such as: it could include milestones or events that we saw personally relevant; it could be as detailed or simplistic as we each saw fit; and we would not speak with each other about our friendship or our writing until we were ready to review and code the data. Separately, we wrote our own stories, from our own points of view, in our own spaces, and on our own time. When we were ready, we held a research meeting to exchange narrative texts with the understanding that the highest forms of respect were to be maintained with both the data and with understanding the views of one another. We vowed not to let anything from the data hinder our friendship in any way.

After reading and rereading each other’s data several times, we attempted to apply our writings to the framework proposed by Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009). Upon discovering this framework, it seemed like the most appropriate tool to capture our experience as it related to our research question. Consequently, we devoted one research meeting to review our own experience in terms of the phases of critical friendship identified by Baskerville and Goldblatt. The goal of this meeting was to arrive at shared understandings of what each phase meant for us so that we could code our own data with a similar interpretation of the framework in mind. We then individually coded, compared, displayed, and recoded our data, and drew conclusions resulting in the graphic conceptual framework in Figure 1.

Findings

We begin the findings section by briefly describing our shared understanding of the phases of critical friendship identified by Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009). We then turn to the findings that emerged from the coding of our own data.

The Baskerville and Goldblatt Phases

As indicated earlier, Baskerville’s and Goldblatt’s (2009) framework includes five phases, which take place sequentially before colleagues attain “critical friendship” in their relationship. These phases include: (1) *professional indifference*; (2) *tentative trust*; (3) *reliance*; (4) *conviction*; and (5) *unguarded conversations*. Our understanding of the *professional*

indifference phase was that, at that point, we knew of one

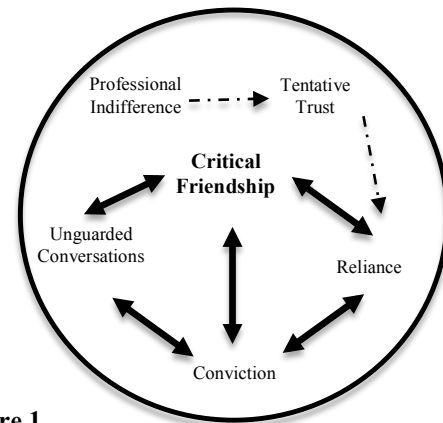


Figure 1

Process of Developing and Maintaining a Critical Friendship

another, may or may not have worked together and did not have a professional relationship. Our understanding of the *tentative trust* phase was that we were working together in some capacity and that there was a potential for a friendship to form, but no guarantee. During this phase, there seemed to be simply a contractual relationship between us that expired at the end of every work session. These two initial phases, *professional indifference* and *tentative trust*, did not seem to us to contribute to the development of our critical friendship, but did form a foundation for what could become one.

We interpreted the *reliance* phase as a time when we were working for the common goal of improving practice regardless of needing to identify our own faults or errors. In this phase, there was a shared respect for one another and a shared interest in the work being done, with the main goal being to produce high quality work. Any pointing out of flaws in one another’s work was clearly in relation to the production goal. The *conviction* phase differed slightly from *reliance* in that a sense of friendship was forming between us. Part of that friendship included increased mutual trust and respect wherein we could challenge each other about the work without the fear of negatively affecting our friendship.

Our understanding of *unguarded conversations* was that we had reached a fairly substantial friendship where focused discussions could take place without the courteous filters that were used previously. There was a potential for tension because conversations began to be about anything, even beyond the topic of the work being done. Baskerville and Goldblatt do not discuss the realm outside of work; however we thought that important conversations did take place between us outside of the workplace.

Findings from Our Data

According to Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009), the five phases are sequential and all are required for the formation of a critical friendship. Our interpretation of our own critical friendship is that it is based on mutual respect, passion for work, and a constant desire to improve. As indicated above, the Baskerville and Goldblatt framework pertains to critical friendships only in the workplace. Baskerville and Goldblatt acknowledge ‘corridor conversations’ as important in developing and maintaining critical friendships; however, in our case, our understanding of critical friendship and our use of conversations existed both within and outside of the workplace and the work mindset.

As we coded our data separately, we each made notes supporting the conclusion that Baskerville and Goldblatt’s (2009) framework did apply to our friendship; however the hierarchy (sequencing) of phases was not entirely supported. We agreed that this was likely due to Baskerville and Goldblatt’s study being primarily about workplace friendships, whereas we found our friendship could not be removed and isolated from the interconnectedness of our home and work lives. In the critical friendship studied by Baskerville and Goldblatt, the friendship was agreed upon before it developed into a critical friendship. There was a professional need to develop and maintain this relationship and the roles that existed for each person as mandated by a governing authority. In comparison, our friendship contained nothing that bonded us together except our own desire to form a friendship and the culture of our research project team. What we realized was that although the first two phases (*professional indifference* and *tentative trust*) did seem to operate sequentially, the remaining phases operated in an interconnected and cyclical manner depending on where each of us was in our own career.

We had many discussions regarding the Baskerville and Goldblatt framework and its relevance to the development of our critical friendship. We knew that the phases stood strong in our experience as categories to place data appropriately, regardless of their formation and connected or disconnected nature. The progression of our friendship, however, was not hierarchical and in that sense was more complex than the sequential structure offered by Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009). Thus, in an attempt to express our findings, we wrote down each of the Baskerville and Goldblatt phases on one piece of paper, and then drew arrows in all necessary directions to relate the phases to one another. What resulted was a reconfiguration (See Figure 1) of Baskerville and Goldblatt’s sequential framework. This reconfiguration brought relief to our coding process; it eased our analysis as it allowed the complexities and

blurred boundaries of our developing friendship to remain as integral components of a critical friendship that had enhanced our lives.

With our newly reconfigured framework in mind, we were able to develop and express key findings for each phase of developing a critical friendship. Excerpts from our narratives have been included in the following paragraphs to help illuminate these findings. Although our reconfiguration does not accept a hierarchical order to the phases of developing a critical friendship, we have presented our findings in the order that Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) originally proposed in an attempt to showcase each phase with ease and clarity.

In this critical friendship, Taunya is the more senior researcher and Courtney is the junior research assistant by one year. Our critical friendship began as two individuals commencing careers in academia but we were both at different phases in our professions. Taunya had already become a part-time faculty member whereas Courtney was still establishing her presence as a part-time faculty member. The differences created a disparity in terms of how our relationship evolved. Taunya had already become part of the faculty community and Courtney was entering an environment where norms had already been established. This situation required Courtney to rely on being accepted by Taunya and the greater workplace community to successfully continue on her professional path. This disparity may explain why, in Taunya’s narrative, there was no mention of *professional indifference* as a phase of developing a critical friendship. Courtney, however, writes about being nervous to meet Taunya and being initially slightly envious of her accomplishments.

By this time, we had only exchanged ‘hello’s’ and ‘goodbye’s’ in the hall and I had eavesdropped on a few of her meetings where she and the other professors discussed things that sounded important while I added quotation marks to transcripts. (Courtney)

Courtney also mentions her desire to get to know Taunya during this phase and her hope that Taunya would accept her as a co-worker and potentially as a friend as time went on.

Taunya begins her recognition of this relationship during the *tentative trust* phase.

The projects that both of the professors were completing required multiple RA’s (with Courtney) and it was suggested that the two of us work together. At the time I thought it was a great opportunity to work with someone who also enjoyed being a research assistant and to

be able to work alongside someone else.
(Taunya)

It is clear that Taunya approached this phase with optimism and positivity. Courtney, who was less experienced with research spent a lot more time in her narrative reflecting on this phase and approached it with more ambivalence and hints of skepticism.

I knew my place and I knew that transcribing went to the person at the bottom of the Totem Pole, but I actually liked doing it and I was happy to be included in something and also strangely happy that Taunya didn't have to transcribe. (Courtney)

In the *reliance* phase, Taunya again does not provide any data, which suggests that there are clear working goals that exist outside of a friendship situation. Courtney, on the other hand, explains in her narrative that there was a period of time when the main goal was work and the friendship component of the relationship was just starting to develop.

As time went on, Taunya and I kept being clumped together for research purposes. Taunya was still usually the lead, but the expectation became that Taunya and I did things together. From a logistical standpoint, the professors liked that we lived in the same city. . . . Our visits were friendly and we would have tea and treats and discuss things other than work. (Courtney)

This phase however, was relatively short for Courtney, unlike the *professional indifference* and *tentative trust* phases which were much more intense for Courtney than for Taunya.

The *conviction* phase showcased a turning point in the critical friendship for Taunya. Her understanding of when the friendship began was different than Courtney's understanding and it occurred earlier on in the relationship.

The first time Courtney and I got together outside of working together was when I had just come home from the hospital and Courtney came over for a tea. I don't know if either of us realized how this really was a definitive milestone for our friendship. (Taunya)

Courtney described this phase as time when the friendship and working relationship were starting to merge and were working very well in both contexts. Courtney also mentions how her role identity began to change at this point.

As we gained more fluency with our working relationship and as I became a team member and not just the new assistant at the bottom, Taunya and I began to work together...not just on the same project where we would hand in separate stacks of coded data, but actually work together. When we would have meetings, Taunya would express her opinion and I would express mine. (Courtney)

The first major turning point for Courtney was the *unguarded conversations* phase. It was at this point, according to Courtney's narrative, that Courtney and Taunya faced a situation that could have been a tension-filled crisis. Taunya was taking a leave from work and Courtney was going to take on the majority of the research responsibilities for a major project. There existed the potential for Taunya to display negative reactions and feelings of resentment (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009), which were even brought up by outsiders to the relationship. Because the friendship was well on its way from Courtney's perspective, and already in existence from Taunya's perspective, this situation ended up being a positive one for both. Furthermore the *unguarded conversations* during this experience contributed to solidifying Courtney's desire to remain committed to the relationship.

Taunya got sick and was not able to join in on all of the data collection. This is when I realized how great a team we were. I took the jobs that Taunya would have taken. . . . Even though Taunya wasn't physically present, she was never kicked off the team or even sat on the sidelines. . . . We struck a beautiful balance between keeping her on the team without bombarding her with work while she was off. When Taunya was able to return, the transition was seamless from my perspective. When you don't kick someone off the team, there's no worry about how they will adjust to their return—they were there the whole time. (Courtney)

Taunya also mentions a critical moment pertaining to the *unguarded conversations* phase involving her needing to take a medical leave; however, chronologically, this was a different leave than the one mentioned above and came much later in the friendship.

On my time away on a medical leave, Courtney was hired to instruct the course I was teaching. The research projects I had to step away from, Courtney took up and was able to increase her

responsibilities. This was a very interesting time in our relationship because I was “letting go” of all of my work responsibilities but it was fantastic to see Courtney embrace new challenges and opportunities. It really helped me see the positive aspects of me requiring time off. This was also a time I needed Courtney to work more and take on the responsibilities I needed time away from. (Taunya)

Taunya also mentions the trust that existed in the *unguarded conversations* phase and how conversations, whether related to work or not, were critical to the friendship; these conversations were able to take place because of the trust and respect that existed in the relationship. Had Taunya viewed Courtney as a threat to her future employment, it would have terminated the process of continuing to form the critical friendship.

The final outcome of the development process is “critical friendship.” Courtney and Taunya allocate more data to the outcome of the relationship than they do to any of the developmental phases, which may be a testament to the importance that the critical friendship itself holds for each. Courtney discusses taking on Taunya’s teaching job under “critical friendship”, although Taunya recorded it in the *unguarded conversations* phase of her account. This was another turning point for Courtney, as it validated the friendship as real and robust. A consistent aspect of her career was this friendship and from this friendship came opportunities and stability that could not have been achieved as a single person or as part of a friendship of a lower quality, where absolute trust and respect were not fully established (Towndrow, 2007).

Taunya and I became actual friends. We went to each other’s Christmas parties, we sent each other birthday cards, we talked about work, we did work together and work apart, we shared recipes, and we went shopping. It was a true friendship, just like all of my other friendships, except for one detail - Taunya and I were essentially each other’s competition. It wasn’t recognized or acknowledged by either of us, but we were applying for the same grants, the same scholarships, the same PhD programs. We had a great, never-mentioned system to ensure that this potential competition didn’t ruin our friendship. The system involved always being happy for the success of the other, always being upset at the shortcomings of the other, and always being honest about what activities each of us were engaging in. (Courtney)

Both Courtney and Taunya mention how their critical friendship exists within and beyond the workplace. It involves supporting one another during all the components of research while also committing to regularly socializing and supporting one another in various other components of life. The critical friendship is also useful in times of difficulty as well as times of success as each member has an unconditional support system.

What has been so wonderful about our friendship is that although there have been many positive happenings; we have also been there for each other in times of difficulty and when things don’t turn out how we hoped or planned. . . . I feel our experiences and friendship together have instilled in us the importance of having happiness in our career, in our lives outside of work and really how the two work together. (Taunya)

Discussion and Conclusion

This research study sought to investigate the development and relevance of our (Courtney’s and Taunya’s) critical friendship. We defined a critical friend as a professional who is reflective and committed to life-long learning. The critical friend finds safe and effective ways to support a colleague’s work efforts and foster growth, contributing to the development of shared understandings and challenging the colleague in her or his role as a practitioner (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009).

This research supports the work of Baskerville and Goldblatt’s (2009) in that the developmental phases of critical friendship they identify were supported in our data. We found, however, that the phases were not as sequential and hierarchical as Baskerville and Goldblatt suggest. The first two phases (*professional indifference* and *tentative trust*) did operate as hierarchical phases for Courtney but Taunya bypassed the *professional indifference* phase entirely and immediately entered *tentative trust*. As we each formed *tentative trust*, the following phases operated in an interconnected, cyclical manner (*reliance*, *conviction*, *unguarded conversations*) as depicted in Figure 1.

There was also an interconnection between our work and personal lives that coincided with the growth of trust, mutual respect and enriched communication. (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield, 2005, 2007). The process we created has an interconnected, all-inclusive nature as there are no boundaries between our work and personal lives. Our reconfiguration reveals that developing and maintaining a critical friendship is a cyclical process. Depending on the events and experiences that arise in our lives, we tend to revisit phases in developing and maintaining a critical

friendship at different times and for different purposes to make our goals attainable (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield, 2004, 2005, 2007; Towndrow, 2007).

Implications

The significance of investigating critical friendship in academia is that it is applicable to an international, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary audience. As the trend towards professional collaborative practice increases, it has become imperative to investigate strategies to enhance professional identity, professional relationships, and mutual trust. The implications of exploring the development and relevance of critical friendship in academia extend to countless diverse contexts.

This narrative inquiry captures the developing critical friendship of two early-career female academics. Different genders or career phases of participants may have significant effects on the dynamics of the developing relationship. Because this was a narrative inquiry, it was developed, analyzed, and written by the researchers. From the researchers' perspective it was essential that we solely produced and interpreted the data to maintain the integrity of context and develop shared understandings that remain as close to our experience as possible. For this reason, the researchers' biases cannot be expunged and are present throughout the account. Bias, is an essential component of narrative inquiry providing rich personal detail that enhances the reader's ability to interpret the story and invites others to investigate and share their own experiences.

Another implication is that the way in which a critical friendship develops is not only affected by the personalities of the participants but also the context within which development occurs. We judge that the context of our relationship likely influenced the reconfiguration of the theoretical framework provided by Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009). Although it was convenient for colleagues to have Courtney and Taunya work together, this relationship formed naturally and was maintained through intrinsic respect and trust rather than extrinsic requirements.

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SUBMISSION INFORMATION: The editors will review all articles to determine their suitability for this publication. In addition, at least two additional reviewers will conduct blind reviews of the article.

MANUSCRIPT REQUIREMENTS: Manuscripts may be submitted directly to the editors as Word files attached to e-mail. Manuscripts should be double spaced and leave wide margins. Manuscripts should not identify the author(s) of the work. A separate page should be included which provides the author(s)' details, including contact information (address and e-mail). In addition, an abstract of 100-150 words should be included, as well as up to six keywords which identify the central subjects addressed in the manuscript. Diagrams, tables, and figures should be kept at a minimum, appear in black and white, and follow the manuscript in numbered order corresponding to numbered placeholders in the text. Footnotes and Endnotes should be avoided whenever possible. References should appear in the following format: Stanley, R. J. & Hollander, M. P. (1992). Beyond the boundaries: The quest for knowledge. *Administrative Life*, 2(3), 36-49. References and citations should be in alphabetical order, and chronological within alphabetical order. The editor reserves the right to make changes to the manuscript to ensure that it conforms to the house style. Generally, manuscripts should be between 2,500 and 5,000 words in length. Prospective author(s) must include a statement which indicates they agree to the submission of the manuscript, and that the manuscript has not been published, and is not under consideration for publication, in part or in substance, elsewhere.