The missing Critical Friends' voices: An angel's heart or a beautiful mind?

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Abstract

The inclusion of Critical Friends in Action Research is often considered as providing a methodological warrant for the trustworthiness of the data and operating the study. Two Critical Friends, a male teacher educator and a female secondary school teacher were involved in the study which employed an Action Research approach as critical, collaborative and recursive. The details of the participation were negotiated before the data collection period.

This paper is to explore the identity of Critical Friends in research study using an Action Research approach. On the one hand, two Critical Friends tell their stories retrospectively in individual interviews. Summarizing, reflecting and evaluating their research participation is significant for enriching and refining the body of literature since the references of critical friendship in an Asian context are found almost missing. Moreover, these two Critical Friends are provided with opportunities for sharing their own stories. Thematic analysis is used for the narratives and conversations in the data. On the other hand, the researcher's ongoing reflections provide another window for reviewing the role and contribution of Critical Friends. All this is a useful base for exploring the identity of Critical Friend in Action Research and generating some methodological insights for cross-cultural investigations and gender awareness.

Introduction

In a common sense, critical friendship seems to be ambiguous in both its conception and practice. A person is a friend but does not need to be critical; a person is critical but may not position himself/herself to be a friend any more. Aristotle (1941) says, "What is just is not the same for a friend towards a friend as towards a stranger, or the same towards a companion as towards a classmate". Critical Friendship is sometimes considered as an oxymoron (Hill, 2002); and, commented as a dilemma posed by merging norms of friendship with those of critique (Achinstein & Meyer, 1997). The usefulness or significance for fostering critical friendship in educational research, in this light, may be doubtful. In my doctoral studies, I used an Action Research approach as critical, collaborative and recursive in which the involvement of Critical Friends was my necessary means to "triangulate" the data from the participants and to take ethical considerations into account. After the completion of the collaborative research journey, I have now come to a point that the identity of Critical Friend needs further systematic and in-depth study which in turn generates some methodological insights for cross-cultural investigations and gender awareness. This is the purpose of my investigation and presenting it to a wider group of audience in conference.

"Critical" and "Friend": A two-sided coin

The term "Critical Friend" may find its similar meanings in two Chinese words: "诤友". These Chinese words literally mean that critical friends give direct critique to another person's mistakes. In the literature of educational research, the Chinese authors often translate this
term into five Chinese words: "批判性朋友" (for example, Chan, 1998) or "批判的朋友" (for example, Choi, 2000). McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) define that "critical friends (also termed 'critical colleague' or 'critical companion') who may be one or more of the people you are working with. These critical friends should be willing to discuss your work sympathetically. You and your critical friend(s) choose each other, so you need to negotiate the ground rules of your relationship. This person can be your best ally, and you must never take him or her for granted. As well as expecting support from your friend(s), you must also be prepared to support in return. This means being available, even in unsocial hours, being able to offer as well as receive advice, even if it is painful or unwelcome, and always aiming to praise and offer support" (p.30).

Recently, Bambino (2002) involves in a Critical Friends Group which helps people involved with schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities. The work involves friends who share a mission, offer strong support, and nurture a community of learners. Bambino finds that Critical Friends Groups have been the catalyst for changes in the teaching, learning, culture, and climate of learning communities in a great variety of schools.

For qualitative research, I find that the literature of critical friendship is still very limited. The relevant literature so far may be categorised into two categories: a competency model and a problem-based approach. These two categories are not necessarily seen as compelling to one another but complementary in practice.

A Competency Model

Hill (2002) introduces a competency model for framing the Critical Friend's beliefs with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitude. Several categories of competency are conceived as learnable and practice-able in critical friendship. The knowledge the Critical Friend requires is knowledge about a critical framework and how assumptions underpin people's justification for their practices. The skills the Critical Friend possesses are skills about reflective responding, scholarly reframing, investigative reframing, facilitated silence, encouraging documentation, encouraging collection of data, scholarly reading, articulating an inquiry paradigm, big picture facilitation and encouraging publication. The Critical Friend's attitude is intricately linked to beliefs about one's provision of critical friendship, the value of reflection as a professional skill, and oneself.

The competency model mentioned above depicts some factors of successful practice in critical friendship. However, Zeera (2001) reminds that "critical social science views methodology as inherently political, as inescapably tied to issues of power and legitimacy" (p.58). Consequently, values enter into the practice of critical friendship within the methodological framework of qualitative research. The competency model which appears to take a deficit perspective and a general approach across various research contexts may be problematic because it is proposed without enough attention to cultural-specific problems and gender-based concerns.

McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) assert that "the critical friend, regardless of status or role, is expected to help the researcher achieve a critical perspective even though this may challenge the normal assumptions underlying the researcher's work" (p.85)

Given this competency model, how can a research study using an Action Research approach be methodologically justified to conduct a multi-layered inquiry across cultural
contexts and deal with emerging issues from localisation and globalisation? In this light, the competency model alone may be insufficient to deal with the diversity of education and development of nations in the world.

A Problem-based Approach

Critical friendship practices include when “a trusted person asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend” (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Due to the fact that past work on critical friendship has left many teachers ill-equipped to face the tensions involved in a merger of two sometimes incompatible goals, Achinstein and Meyer (1997) explore the dilemmas that arise from fostering critical friendship in a novice teacher learning community. In the study, they find that teachers have differing opinions of how critical friends should be and how friendly critics should be. Problems arise when teachers limit themselves to safe feedback or resist hearing criticism. It is because the traditional dichotomy and hierarchical relationship between friendship and critique make the notion of Critical Friends hardly plausible. However, teachers have strong emotional support within the group and could expose and explore vulnerabilities among friends.

Moreover, Achinstein and Meyer (1997) alert that Critical Friend networks (see Chapman, 1996) situated outside of a school may be like double-edged swords because uneven accessibility to a certain freedom at various sites and the emergence of many questions about the viability of these so-called “outside” groups prevail. Charting the course of investigation about critical friendship, in this sense, tends to adopt a problem-based approach for exploring more of the complexities and the needed supports for such endeavors.

However, this problem-based approach that attempts to continually address the potential problems of critical friendship may be more worthwhile when it is connected to a broader context which enables an emerging dialogue among civilizations (Hayhoe & Pan, 2001) within the inquiry paradigm of qualitative research, for example Action Research. Hayhoe and Pan (2001) hope that interactions come across as a true dialogue among ready listeners rather than as a struggle among contending interests such as Huntington portrayed in his clash of civilisations. In this regard, the cross-cultural perspective addressed below may have a role to play in establishing the identity of Critical Friend in a multi-layered inquiry across various sites (for example, Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland and Elliott, 1999).

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

In addition to the competency model and the problem-based approach mentioned above, outlining a cross-cultural perspective takes the challenge of crossing borders and exploring new frontiers in professional practice research (Macpherson, Aspland & Brooker, 2001) as far as critical friendship is one of the methodological concerns. Having said this, all culture will eventually converge to a global culture (see Inkeles, 1997; Stiglitz, 2002); and modernisation is about Westernisation (Zwingle, 1999). Cheng (2001) notes that "it is inevitable that the commonalities in societies have attracted more attention than the differences" (p.83). Apart from engaging in cross-cultural comparisons, taking a cross-cultural perspective in research study about change and transformation (for example, Action Research) presumably rejects the view that there is some kind of uniformity among nations in education and development. In this way, the attention to both the distinctiveness and diversity of societies may fit well with the justification of exploring the identity of Critical Friend from a cross-cultural perspective. It is possible that this cross-cultural perspective embraces the passion and responsibility of researchers and participants from various local
sites and overseas, and generates insightful ideas for critical friendship in qualitative research.

Emerging ideas from a competency model, a problem-based approach and a cross-cultural perspective outlined above set the conceptual framework for my inquiry about the identity of Critical Friend. Conceptually, "Critical" and "Friend" appears to be a two-sided coin that one side is always at the back of the other side. Two narrative accounts of those Critical Friends involved in a collaborative research journey with a group of primary school teachers and principals in Hong Kong about teacher curriculum decision-making are in the following:

Narrative accounts

In my doctoral research study, two Critical Friends worked with me (as the researcher) to review the processes of gathering the data, data analyses and the participants' evaluations of the impact and its significance. Thematic analysis is used to seek the commonalities and the differences of the emerging themes from the narrative accounts of these two Critical Friends, CF1 and CF2.

CF1

(A male teacher educator)

I wanted to walk "a new road" and try new things so I continued to study bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. When I was young, ongoing education was the only means of upgrading my family living standards. After marriage, my wife who is a traditional Chinese woman looked after the family so that I was at ease in my studies. I didn't have high expectations to my career. Neither was I ambitious of climbing up to higher ranks. My ongoing studies were due to my self-fulfillment. So far, I had a sense of satisfaction in my inner self.

I love Hong Kong. My journey of both part-time studies and full-time work exemplified the ongoing struggle of those in Hong Kong several decades ago. I would say that I am a capable learner. I am a caring and responsible person to my teaching and my family. Having said this, I have been seeking and finding something. I still do not know what it is.

I promised to be one of your Critical Friends simply because of your sincerity to work and your dedication to teaching and students that in a way I could not refuse your invitation. After signing the Acceptance Form, I came to know that I had a sense of obligation to the research study. In fact, I was on the way of my doctoral studies when being your Critical Friend. On the one hand, I trusted your methodology because it was well conceptualised by the literature. On the other hand, I believed in my own methodological choices by taking a phenomenological approach. Frankly, throughout my involvement as a Critical Friend in your Action Research study, I had not reflected on any aspects of research methodology. In our meetings, I helped to clarify your doubts in planning for each Action Step and data analyses with reference to the research question you set. I observed that you as a girl worked very hard in presenting your findings and analyses in conferences. It was a pity. I had a sense of sympathy to those mothers like you to work in this manner because of work requirements in upgrading the Institute. [Post-meeting conversation: CF1 added that he has never thought of meaning making in his research study in terms of social contribution or impact on education.]
Your research study appeared to be "very big". I did not understand it very well that confined me to take up an active role of Critical Friend. I just responded to your request and needs. I perceived my role to be giving you informed opinions of your research study. I shared with you as a colleague my informed opinion. I felt the tensions of work in staff. I saw the researcher's frustrations and agony. I also felt your dedication. To me, I reassured that life is a problem. Under the Institute's rapid changes, many staff have been pushed to meet those external requirements. Because life is full of conflicts, we have to move forward. It is indeed a challenge.

I had no reflections on my research participation as a Critical Friend until you now interview me. In this interview, I could recollect my experiences and tell you my thought and feelings. To be a Critical Friend is rewarding because you let me speak from my inner self. I like to tell other people my experiences. You are now my listener. You work and study seriously. I am in gratitude to you.

PhD degree is supposed to be the highest qualification in university programs. After completion, I found that it meant nothing except reaching a certain stage of academic standards. The title of so-called "Dr" looks vague because studying PhD is not related to any core values in education. However, we spend a lot of time in doctoral studies. These experiences actually do not help me to teach effectively. I do not deny that the doctoral studies could broaden my vision, deepen my understanding of some theories and become useful in some ways. However, the core value of education does not rely on the qualifications of a person. Upgrading the teachers to an "all graduate profession" does not imply to have effective teaching. Caring is more important. We talk more than action. I mean that research study is not the matter of "what"; it should be a lot more about educational issues of implementation. Overall speaking, my core value of gaining a PhD degree is to show other people that "I can do it"!

In other countries, teachers position to be their students' Critical Friends. Critical friendship helps students to advance, change and receive worthwhile comments. In research study, Critical Friends should have a common language of the field of investigation same as the researcher. Critical Friends should be more open and frank with own sets of criteria and a caring attitude. They should not expect for any remuneration or rewards in their participation. In Chinese culture, teachers are conservative and often mix up the argument between people and the problem itself. To be Critical Friends is not yet a culture of both teaching and research study here.

To conclude, the study like yours may include school staff on-site as Critical Friends in order to provide insiders' views other than those research participants.

CF2

(A female secondary school teacher)

I have been a teacher for nineteen years. It is very important for teachers to have ongoing improvement and feel the joy of teaching. When you
approached me, I found that your research study was very interesting. I felt that you trusted me to be your Critical Friend. In the beginning, I wished to learn from my research participation that improved my own teaching. After signing the Acceptance Form, I understood that I should be committed to my role as a Critical Friend because the research study was serious.

I am open-minded and a good listener. I like to explore new areas. In some ways of living, I am quite westernised. I was surprised when I heard some teachers' stories. I have never thought about that. The data in your study were really interesting. I somehow had a sense of empathy toward those research participants. I had similar feelings like theirs. Due to my ongoing reflections, I changed my attitude toward teachers. Before that, I just commented on what I saw and heard. Now, I always ask about the reasons of such teacher thinking and behavior. My ways of thinking changed.

I as a Critical Friend was not in a position to give my judgment to the data and data analyses. I reminded myself to be always a good listener and ask questions for seeking more information. I tried to imagine as if I were one of the research participants. I could then reflect my feelings to you as if I were one of them. In fact, our critical friendship was different from your relationship with the participants in the research study. My "imagined" feelings could help you understand the participants and the changing contexts more thoroughly. I recognised that my imagination to be one of the teachers in the participating schools provided you important feedback.

I was frank. I found no problem to say what I should say to you. I did not expect for any remuneration or rewards in my role as a Critical Friend. However, I did not expect that I could have some changes on myself. Firstly, I understood more about the spirit of qualitative research. In my previous studies, I came across this term but I had no practical experience. Although I was not a research participant in your study, I could somehow understand its spirit. What is the use of quantitative research? What is the use of those numerical data? On the other hand, the Collaborative Action Research study you conducted had its value. It was risky, too. In the beginning, I did not realise the risks it might have. It was because qualitative research include a lot of human interactions. Changes that follow might be beyond our expectations. Now, when I read research reports or hear conference presentations, I am very careful about the ways of researchers in dealing with the data. There are ethical concerns in educational research.

In the past, I trusted a lot in research findings. Now, I am very careful. Education really needs qualitative research rather than quantitative. I just finished a quantitative study and got a lot of numerical data. But, no one in the field responded to these survey results. Even to me, I just put the report aside after completion. I hope that research outcomes should at least inspire our reflections. [Post-meeting conversation: CF2 re-confirmed that she would be more than happy to be a Critical Friend again.]

The Collaborative Action Research broadened my vision. In a utilitarian sense, I benefited from my participation that I had changed my attitude. I knew that some people were engaged in a ground-breaking research study. It was commonly accepted that the Critical Friends should have similar experiences as the research participants. But, how about those are not in the field? Would it be better to include them as Critical Friends as well? We may
need someone who is completely out of the field, for example business people? This "outsider" may give us critical comments on the value of educational research. The "outsider" may query the researcher's justification on spending a great deal of time on educational research other than work and life. Critical Friends as "outsiders" will ask what is the impact of educational research on students; and what is its use to the society at large. Critical Friends are able to reflect other areas of concern which we may be seldom aware in our practices.

It seems that critical thinking does not require people to worry about the consequences. As a Critical Friend, however, one must give constructive opinions. Be a good listener and open-minded. Listen first before giving critical comments. It is important for a Critical Friend to balance different views and be empathetic. Be awake if the researcher is lost. Having said this, social status affects the relations between the Critical Friend and the researcher, for example senior and junior colleagues, teachers and students. This may be a problem in our culture. For example, I choose not to speak genuinely when my Critical Friend is my senior colleague. Gender is another area of concern. A male Critical Friend may not give adequate emotional support to a female researcher and so forth.

We need more Critical Friends in a research study in order to include a variety of values and different perspectives. By doing so, both the participants' and the researcher's voices will be heard clearly. I speculate that it is easier to find "outsiders" rather than "insiders" to be Critical Friends. It is because that there is a lack of research interest for those involved in educational practices. Time constraints, a lack of interest, and students' limited exposure to research study in teacher education programs affect the selection of Critical Friends. To conclude, Critical Friends should involve both sexes. Social status of critical friendship must deserve our attention.

Critical Friend speaks from the heart and is reflective. A Critical Friend must also accept own weaknesses.

Apart from individual interviews, these two Critical Friends had a meeting to share the research experiences and to comment on the initial "findings". The meeting time, however, was quite short because CF2 just changed her job that she was in a rush.

Critical Friendship in Collaborative Action Research

Both Critical Friends 1 and 2 found that their new experiences of engaging critical friendship in Collaborative Action Research were challenging and exciting. Some emerging themes from the narratives of and conversations with CF1 and CF2 are in the following:

- Philosophies of Critical Friends and values of critical friendship in Collaborative Action Research
- Value of educational research
- Reciprocal relations between Critical Friends and the researcher(s)
- Power relations and social status between cross-sex Critical Friends
- Life histories of Critical Friends
- Passion and responsibility of Critical Friends
Clarity of research protocols
Messiness and ongoingness

The emerging themes outlined above are worthwhile for further enhancing the contribution of Critical Friends to Collaborative Action Research. The Critical Friends involved in my study were caring and supportive. They echoed the statement, "to empower others is regarded as the Confucian Golden Rule" (Wong, 2001, p.315). Moreover, the politics and social status embedded in the relations between Critical Friends and the researcher deserved attention for further inquiry in an Asian context. In this regard, Mak's (1991) findings are noteworthy. Mak found that educational reforms affected women in China differently and suggested that the life-lines of the women were ultimately shaped by the politics rather than gender-based issues.

Having said this, some emerging themes from the Collaborative Action Research reflect gender issues, for example the reciprocal relations between Critical Friends and the researcher(s), and the ongoingness of research participation. Werking (1997) points out that "adult female relationships have been called "communal" in nature (Bakan, 1966) because of the recurrent finding that women's same-sex relationships tend to involve higher levels of emotional expression" (p.50). For both sexes, cross-sex friendship tends to provide new understandings and perceptions of the other sex (Sapadin, 1988). The involvement of Critical Friends in my doctoral research study was situated in a changing curriculum context in which the outcomes were transformative and reconstructive (see Koo, 2002). Similarly, Allan and Adams (1998) conclude that "friendship is a relationship embedded socially, economically, and culturally. Its forms and contents are responsive to those contexts, which operate at a number of related levels. As modern society continues to transform, so too dominant patterns of friendship will in turn be affected, changing to meet the new conditions of living" (p.193). In fact, to be a Critical Friend in Collaborative Action Research is a new attempt in our Chinese culture. Yet it has had some positive outcomes generated from the involvement of Critical Friends. There is still much to learn from the practices in other societies. Nevertheless, we need a set of criteria to justify the legitimacy of cross-cultural investigations in the face of critical friendship.

Some initial thoughts about the inclusion of Critical Friend in Action Research

Based on the emerging themes, I have come to a point that there may have nine orientations to involve Critical Friends or Critical Friend networks in research study using an Action Research approach across cultural contexts. The identification of these nine orientations will generate at a later stage some selection criteria of Critical Friends and establish some protocols of cross-cultural investigations in the face of critical friendship. All this helps to establish the identity of Critical Friend from a cross-cultural perspective and leads to "a large scale" of research study internationally. The nine orientations are in the following:

1. Indigenous viability
2. Ethical clarity
3. Cultural integrity
4. Contextual relativity
5. Gender sensitivity
6. Reflexive generativity
7. Methodological compatibility
8. Knowledge transferability
9. Educativc sincerity
Indigenous viability: Situated in the polar tensions of localisation and globalisation, people's life histories reflect indigenous heritage and contribute to establish the identity of Critical Friends. Cross-cultural investigations, therefore, are better positioned to encompass indigenous viability for critical friendship. This view has taken into account Smith's (1999) ideas about "researching back and disrupting the rules of the research game toward practices that are more respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful vs racist practices and attitudes, ethnocentric assumptions and exploitative research" (p.i).

Ethical clarity: Some ethical values are universal. However, there may have some distinctive ethical issues or problems in individual societies. Cross-cultural investigations necessitate ethical clarity in the way which Critical Friend networks provides methodological transparency and significant input.

Cultural integrity: Cultural issues and concerns are not segregated from other methodological considerations in a multi-layered inquiry using an Action Research approach. Conversely, individual cultures show mutual respect to one another that the issues and problems associated with them may be drawn to the core of framing research methodology. Cultural integrity, in this regard, might be a criterion contributing to the trustworthiness of the data in cross-cultural investigations.

Contextual relativity: Critical Friend networks reveal valuable data for informing contextual relations among various local sites and overseas. The life histories, philosophies and social dynamics of Critical Friends reflect the underlying issues or problems in the context of investigations. The commonalities and differences among various sites are significant for developing contextual frameworks of cross-cultural investigations.

Gender sensitivity: The involvement of both sexes to be Critical Friends is beyond the consideration of balancing different views. Gender influences our ways of thinking, our perceptions of reality (Lovat, 1992, p.76). Evans (1988) concludes that "the action-for-change in traditional gender-roles, urged by feminists, governments and unions, has had a minimal effect because the organization of everyday life in the schools, families, communities and wider society provides an 'unofficial', but strongly legitimated, curriculum and pedagogy of gender" (p.142). The same-sex and cross-sex critical friendship illuminates gender awareness, and confront issues and problems of equity and equality in education and research. Gender sensitivity encapsulated in cross-cultural investigations about transformation and reconstruction contributes to a better world in future for people of both sexes.

Reflexive generativity: Critical Friends trigger critical reflection in research study using an Action Research approach (see Mezirow, 1990). Critique of oneself is characteristic of some models of reflection, but extending this to critique of cultural and psychological taken-for-granted assumptions is unique to models promoting critical reflection (Lovat, 1992, p.263). Critical reflection on the issues and problems of a social context is reflexive to other societies from which the emerging voices generate further thinking and action in both the local and global arenas. Reflexive generativity implies a reciprocal relationship for those cultures involved in research study. In this regard, it may be recognised as a bonus to cultural integrity.

Methodological compatibility: A variety of methodologies can be used in research study. However, research methodologies which are expected to provide multiple methods in a multi-layered inquiry look for compatibility across cultural contexts. Methodologies with incompatible goals and research processes may be seen undesirable for cross-cultural investigations.
Knowledge transferability: Research study produces knowledge. The involvement of Critical Friends in cross-cultural investigations does not aim at producing traditional forms of knowledge; rather, it celebrates knowledge-in-action within the critical paradigm. Critical hermeneutics grounds a critical research that attempts to connect the everyday troubles individuals face to public issues of power, justice, and democracy (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p.289). The use of hermeneutic spiral in a multi-layered inquiry focuses on what Goldman and Papson (1997) and Hall (1997)'s claim for the production of meanings and representations that culturally situate human beings in general and textual interpretations in particular. It also seeks for the transferrability of knowledge generated from local sites to global arenas. This attempt is based on a shared agenda which seeks and confronts similar problems across cultural contexts.

Educative sincerity: In addition to the eight orientations mentioned above, the involvement of Critical Friends has to do with the notion of educative sincerity which embraces passion and responsibility of those involved. The concern is no more about whether "outsiders" or "insiders" should be the Critical Friends or not. A variety of critical views on educational research is indeed necessary in order to improve the quality of research outcomes and have significant impact on the educational settings and the society at large.

In summary, the purpose of change and transformation in research study using an Action Research approach is reassured by the Critical Friends' voices. In an era of uncertainty and problematic future, the nine orientations mentioned above contribute to map the way forward for involving Critical Friend networks in cross-cultural investigations. It seems that research collaboration and change effort are not only needed from within but also across the societies in the world.

Conclusions for now

This paper evaluates the participation of Critical Friends in research study using an Action Research approach. The missing Critical Friends' voices set a platform upon which nine orientations to include Critical Friends or Critical Friend networks are proposed. The paper argues that critical friendship in Action Research has new meanings when it is located in cross-cultural investigations. An angel's heart or a beautiful mind could be accessible when we consider the following statement:

"A real voyage of discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes but of seeing through new eyes."

Marcel Proust

Acknowledgement

I am thankful to CF1 who is a male teacher educator and CF2 who is a secondary school teacher. Their willingness to participate in my doctoral study using an Action Research approach as critical, collaborative and recursive is commendable. I am also grateful to them for having a sharing meeting together. It was not at all easy for having conversations with one another as a "stranger". Hopefully, their participation and this paper have generated some initial thoughts for informing literature about the identity of Critical Friends in research study within an Asian changing context.
References


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