

Critical* Friends Group / Scholarship Development Circle

Whatever you call it, peer intellectual groups can provide encouragement, insight, and accountability for your goal-setting, research, drafting, revising, submitting, and presenting scholarship work. You may have worked, formally or informally, with such a group during your graduate studies. This group of collegial peers can offer an informal accountability checkpoint outside your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, and/or P&T to help you set scholarship goals, develop project ideas, keep on task, identify and overcome challenges to completing projects, and/or completing projects in a timely fashion. Functioning outside the boundaries of official review processes, they report to no one except the other group members.

*In the "critical" friends model, "critical" is meant as important, essential, key, significant, etc., as in "critical care".

Various scholars in education have identified the need to develop a professional learning community that will foster rigorous critical dialogue within a supportive environment.

Characteristics of an Intellectual Community

- Shared purpose, in the commitment to help members develop into the best scholars possible
- Diverse and multigenerational, including multiple viewpoints and healthy debates
- Flexible and supportive in encouraging risk taking and supporting opportunities for growth
- Respectful and generous, with members acting with civility and respect

Members are generous by sharing opportunities, resources, and connections. Generosity derives from the assumption that all members of the community ought to be helped to succeed, and, indeed, that other community members bear a measure of responsibility for helping foster that success.

Ideal group size: 4-6

Membership: deliberately multi-disciplinary and intergenerational, to provide varied non-discipline-specific informal feedback, with individuals you trust to share your scholarship goals, anxieties, challenges, roadblocks, & successes

Meeting frequency: regularly, whether it's weekly, every other week, or once a month

Meeting duration: 40-60 minutes

Roles: assign roles in advance, rotating facilitators and presenters in the group

Begin with: identifying one or two concrete scholarship development goals to make measurable progress towards by your group's next meeting. You might also make note of group members' goals as they are shared. Include with the goals you're sharing what would constitute successful progress towards achieving the goal by the next meeting. Use the standard meeting protocols for a Critical Friends professional development group listed on the back of this sheet.

The Standard Protocol for Critical Friends group meetings consists of six steps:

- 1) an overview in which the facilitator describes the focus of the session;
- 2) a presentation of the artifact, observation, or issue by the presenter (who is different from the facilitator) in which the presenter explains what is to be “tuned,” in other words what questions or concerns should focus the feedback;
- 2) an opportunity for participants to ask clarifying questions of the presenter;
- 3) discussion of the artifact or issue during which the presenter remains silent, listening and taking notes;
- 4) the presenter reflects on the feedback; and
- 5) the facilitator debriefs the session.

Overall the session lasts 35-40 minutes.

Participants are directed to give positive or “warm” feedback and constructively critical or “cool” feedback that is focused on the tuning question(s) (the presenter’s questions or concerns stated to focus the feedback). It is also important that the participants give practical and actionable suggestions to accompany their feedback (For more information, visit the National School Reform Faculty website, <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/faq.html#1>).

Members of a Critical Friends Group develop a work plan outlining their project goals broken into weekly objectives, which serves as an agenda for the semester. This work plan is revised at the end of each semester so that members may reflect upon what they accomplished during the semester. Members are required to present an artifact at least twice to a CF session. The weekly/monthly/semester deadline encourages members to be productive.

Critical friends are peers or colleagues who ask probing questions and offer helpful critiques. While they may be independent of the project/task/issue, their role is to ask probing questions to enable those involved to gain fresh insights into their work. Critical friendships begin by building trust. Critical friends must listen well, offer value judgments on the learner's request, respond honestly and promote the work's success - Costa and Kallick (1993).

Source

Costantino, Tracie. (2010). The Critical Friends Group: A Strategy for Developing Intellectual Community in Doctoral Education. *i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5*. Retrieved from: <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol1/iss2/5>