

## To be and to have a critical friend in medical teaching

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**BACKGROUND** In order to stimulate reflection and continuous professional development, a model of critical friends evaluating each other was introduced in medical education.

**OBJECTIVE** To investigate whether the critical friend concept can serve as a pragmatic model for evaluation of medical teachers and as a fruitful tool for enhancing self-knowledge and professional development among medical educators.

**METHODS** Three pairs of critical friends were formed, consisting of experienced medical teachers ( $n = 6$ ) at the Karolinska Institutet. Each teacher was assigned to give 1 lecture and 1 seminar in his or her specific research or clinical field. The critical friend evaluated the performance in class, acting as an observer using a pre-formed protocol. The evaluation was communicated to the teacher during a 45-minute session within 48 hours after the teaching session. Each of the 6 teachers was criticised and gave criticism within the pair configuration. The outcome of the process was evaluated by an experimenter, not participating in the process, who performed a semistructured interview with each of the 6 teachers.

**RESULTS** Each teacher had a different way of reflecting on teaching after the project than before and made changes in his or her way of teaching. We also noted that being a critical friend may be even

more effective than having one. The majority of the feedback provided was positive and valuable.

**CONCLUSION** To be and to have a critical friend is worth the extra workload. Therefore, the critical friend concept should be made part of regular teaching practice.

**KEYWORDS** education, medical, undergraduate/\*methods; teaching/\*standards; clinical competence/\*standards; staff development/\*methods; feedback; self-evaluation programmes.

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### INTRODUCTION

In medical education professionals often teach without any teacher training, viewing teaching as an individual pursuit. Professional knowledge can be defined as knowledge which includes science-based and intuitive non-verbal knowledge. This knowledge enables individuals and teams to act appropriately in professional situations which are unique and always include moments of uncertainty and instability. We have all experienced that professional performances lead, as Donald Schön wrote,<sup>1</sup> 'to surprises, pleasing and promising or unwanted' to which we may respond by reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Reflection-in-action is described by Schön as 'research in the practice content'. Someone who reflects-in-action, constructs 'a new theory of the unique case' defining means and ends, thinking and doing, science-based and intuitive knowledge as interactive parts of the process. Reflection-in-action hereby places scientific problem solving within a broader context, linking 'the art of practice in uncertainty and uniqueness to the scientist's art of research'.

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## Overview

### What is already known on this subject

The concept of critical friends was introduced as a model for reflection in medical education.

### What this study adds

We investigated whether the critical friend concept can serve as a pragmatic model for evaluation of medical teachers and as a tool for professional development. We could demonstrate that all teachers had a different way of reflecting on teaching after the project than before and made changes in his or her way of teaching. We also noted that being a critical friend is even more effective than having one.

### Suggestions for further research

Future research will show whether the model is able to represent a valuable instrument for sustainable and continuous quality development in teaching.

In a beautiful essay, 'On Teaching the Rudiments',<sup>2</sup> Lev Nikolayevitch Tolstoy wrote:

The best teacher will be he who has at his tongue's end the explanation of what it is bothering the student. These explanations give the teacher the knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods, the ability of inventing new methods and, above all, not a blind adherence to one method but the conviction that all methods are one-sided, and that the best method would be the one which would answer best to all the possible difficulties incurred by a pupil, that is, not a method but an art and talent.

Therefore, as Donald Schön<sup>1</sup> wrote, an artful teacher sees the student's difficulty in learning not as a defect in the student but as 'a defect of his own instruction'; so he must find 'a way of explaining' the student's problem. 'He must do a piece of experimental research, then and there, in the classroom'.

Whereas reflection-in-action takes place during an ongoing professional situation, reflection-on-action is

an investigation of a past process that includes reflective inquiry on reflection-in-action. Both forms of reflection can give birth to knowledge and stimulate professional development, especially when teachers are involved in reflective dialogue. A spirit of inquiry engaging all teachers enables them to express and share norms and values, which are the prerequisites for the formation of strong professional learning communities. Reflection also strengthens the bond between action and theoretical knowledge, between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, respectively, according to Ryle.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of critical friends was introduced originally by Stenhouse<sup>4</sup> describing dialogues between academic colleagues involved in research projects, who try to identify and analyse problematic aspects of teaching. In 1996, Gunnar Handal<sup>5</sup> revitalised the concept of critical friends as a model for reflection and continuous professional development in medical education. In Handal's model, pairs of critical friends consisting of two colleagues with comparable educational background evaluate each other. The relationship should rely on friendship and mutual trust, which add new dimensions to the reflective process that are not necessarily present in an ordinary peer review model. Costa and Kallick<sup>6</sup> define a critical friend as:

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. (ibid., p. 50)

There are two points in the quotation that are of particular importance for the present study. First, it is emphasised that the role of a critical friend is to be critical and to be a friend in equal proportions. The word 'critique' is often considered to have a negative connotation. However, according to Bloom,<sup>7</sup> critique is an important aspect of evaluation, the highest order of thinking and, as Costa and Kallick pointed out, is an integral part of the process of developing quality. In contrast to peer review, a critical friend does not only point out weaknesses, but he is also eager to emphasise the strong features of his colleague's style of teaching. Therefore, critique given by a friend is, in its deepest meaning, positive and edifying. As Costa and Kallick wrote, a critical friend serves as 'an advocate for the success of that work'.

Secondly, to observe, for example, a teaching session 'through other glasses' is a means of making it possible to *decentre* from one's own perspective and, thus, to become aware of characteristics of one's teaching style that has hitherto not been made an issue of reflection because it has not been visible.

Johannes Itten,<sup>8</sup> the famous Bauhaus teacher, wrote:

Knowledge of human nature appears to me to be a gift essential to the true educator, who needs to recognize and be able to develop the natural talents and temperaments of those in his charge. A teacher who communicates to his students nothing but the syllabus laid down by the authorities, using methods he learnt/.../can be compared to a dispenser of pills made up according to prescription, who can never be a true physician. (ibid., p. 5)

A critical friendship, which is based on knowledge of a friend's personality, may have a specific power to develop both self-knowledge and the capacity of the educator to liberate creative forces and talents in the students. Therefore, we performed a pilot study in order to obtain answers to the following questions:

- Is the critical friend concept a pragmatic model for evaluating medical teachers?
- Is the concept of critical friends a fruitful tool for enhancing self-knowledge and professional development among medical educators?

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## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to evaluate the effects of being and having critical friends, we formed 3 pairs of friends who were all experienced medical teachers ( $n = 6$ ) at the Karolinska Institutet and who had known each other well for several years. Each teacher (2 male, 4 female) was assigned to give 1 lecture and 1 seminar in his or her specific research or clinical field. The setting was 24-week elective courses. The courses were held for the first time and none of the teachers knew any of the students. The students were at different stages of their medical training (semesters 3, 7 and 11), and therefore had different experiences of health care and clinical studies.

The teacher was told to discuss his or her preparations for class with the critical friend for the purpose of clarifying objectives and intentions. The critical friend evaluated the performance in class,

acting as an observer, and his or her presence was explained clearly to the students. The evaluation was based on a pre-formed protocol, constructed by the critical friends group, and it included key issues such as interaction, presentation, structure, content, effect and teaching style (Table 1). Emphasis was put on subjective and individual impressions and reflections. The evaluation was communicated to the teacher during a 45-minute session which was held within 48 hours after the teaching performance. No evaluation was given directly after the teaching session. Each of the 6 teachers was criticised and gave criticism.

The outcome of the process and the accuracy of the discussion were evaluated by interviewing each of the teachers. The interviews were performed and recorded by an experimenter not participating in the process and not related to the Karolinska Institute (LOD). The interview was semistructured – the dialogue was directed by a small number of questions, that were similar for all interviews (Table 2). The answers obtained were followed-up by other questions, depending on what issue had to be elucidated further. The experimenter created the follow-up questions. The recordings from the interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed in order to identify and describe themes and views obtained from the experience with critical friends.

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## RESULTS

### The feasibility and relevance of the observation criteria

All informants except one were satisfied with the criteria and found them suitable for structuring the conversation after the teaching sessions. The informant with a differing opinion did not object to the usefulness of the criteria, but rather to the value-loaded character of some of them.

### The image of one's own teaching style

The interviews showed that the participating teachers already had quite extensive self-knowledge from the start. However, all of them declared that their self-image had become clearer during the course of the pilot study. In several cases, they became aware of rather subtle features of their teaching style.

Then I got comments about my body language. I know that I move a lot, both during lectures and in



Table 2 *Experimenter's questions. The Critical Friends Project, Karolinska University Hospital Huddinge*

- 1 How did you find the instructions for the role as a critical friend? Could you apply the criteria?
- 2 Do you have an image of your own teaching style? How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
- 3 Do you learn anything about your own teaching by observing someone else teaching?
- 4 Is there any difference between what you learn when you observe and when you are observed?
- 5 Did you find it difficult to criticise a colleague in his role as a teacher?
- 6 What about the proportions between negative and positive critique?
- 7 Did you refrain from bringing up certain issues because of concern for your partner? What kind of issues?
- 8 Have you made any changes in your teaching style as a result of your experiences from the Critical Friend project? What have you changed?
- 9 Did you discover anything about yourself as a teacher during the project that you were not aware of?
- 10 Have you adopted any features of your partner's teaching style?
- 11 Are the benefits of being a critical friend worth the extra effort?
- 12 Are there any risks or problems involved in having a critical friend?
- 13 Should the critical friend concept be a part of regular teaching practice?

is created in which the observer becomes more aware of his or her own teaching skills.

Listening to someone else giving a lecture is a real bonus. You often have no idea of that it may be done in a different way. (Informant no. 4)

#### **Difficulties in the role as a critical friend**

All interviewees appreciated that the observer was a friend. A critical friend is believed to have no intentions to hurt or humiliate.

That's exactly why it was so liberating, because I could say exactly what I wanted to say. If it was an ordinary workmate, I would not have been able to do that. (Informant no. 5)

Someone, however, pointed out that observing a friend might limit the critique.

You have to be very cautious with your critique. If you are dealing with a good friend, I think that the margin for hurting is a bit tighter than otherwise (Informant no. 1)

#### **The proportions between positive and negative critique**

All informants report that the positive elements of the critique had dominated. This fact is not regarded as a problem but an advantage. It always feels good to receive positive professional feed-back.

I think one learns a lot from positive critique. It strengthens you as a teacher improving your

positive sides. Feeling comfortable is a success factor. (Informant no. 4)

#### **The impact on teaching from having and being a critical friend**

Almost all interviewees report that they have made changes in their teaching style as a result of the experiences from the project. One of the teachers reported an experience that developed her dialogue-inspired style of teaching.

I learned to invite them to take part in a discussion. To do so rather than just saying, 'do you have any questions?' You also have to pause and be silent for a while which hopefully will make them start talking. (Informant no. 3)

The insight made by the informant quoted above is probably also of great significance for her development as a teacher in a longer time perspective.

#### **The benefits of having and being a critical friend**

A central question for the whole project is, of course, whether the benefits justify the extra efforts required being critical friends. The answer from all informants to that question is definitely 'yes': partly because they do not consider the project to be particularly demanding and partly because they think that the benefits are well in proportion with the effort. There is no hesitation among the interviewees that it would be a good idea to make critical friends a part of regular routine. It is vital, however, that such an implementation is carefully prepared and planned.

There is a risk that the assessment will be superficial but by having criteria for the observations, you can focus on certain things that you perhaps would have missed otherwise and that could be very fruitful. (Informant no. 2)

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## DISCUSSION

In summary, the main findings of the pilot project are:

- The participants found it relatively easy to apply the evaluation criteria. With one exception, they also found them applicable for the purpose for which they were intended.
- All teachers reflected on their style of teaching in a different way than before and made changes.
- To be a critical friend may be even more effective than to have one with regard to more subtle features of one's own teaching style.
- A majority of the feedback provided is positive and shows that this was a valuable experience.
- To be and to have critical friends is worth the extra workload and should therefore be made part of regular teaching practice.

The critical friend concept may serve as a powerful instrument to stimulate elicitation of professional knowledge – even in experienced teachers. Teaching is a complex social phenomenon and research available in this field indicates that non-focused observations of such situations are of very little value. The participants in the critical friend project at Karolinska University Hospital had spent considerable time and effort on joint discussions, formulating the aspects from which the observation was to be made. Almost all interviewees felt that their professional self-knowledge increased, which resulted in changes in their teaching style. This fact demonstrates that a reflective dialogue between friends not only gives rise to intellectual processes but also to actions.

The experience of using the criteria was affected by the fact that the 3 pairs knew each other fairly well and had been teaching together. This made it possible to add other aspects not included in the original criteria during the evaluation process.

As many educational organisations today struggle against deteriorating financial resources, it is important to mention that this model does not require any substantial infrastructural investment. In addition, because a pair of friends are evaluating

each other reciprocally, the model is time-saving and time-effective, and can be implemented easily on a larger scale in medical education. This makes the critical friend process practical, pragmatic and easy to apply in a variety of educational environments.

The outcome of the critical friend process is doubly effective because each teacher both observes and is observed. The teachers were asked about what they learnt from seeing each other teach and what they learnt from being observed themselves. Surprisingly, in the role of observer the teacher learnt more about his own teaching style than he did when being observed.

This concept can also provide 'good examples' of teaching. When we experience features of good teaching, we try to explore what these features consist of, and we can then discover parts of the teaching process which are of great importance but not yet included in the normative curricula of the medical school.

One concern might be that the critique given was mainly positive. However, positive critique may have a unique capacity to stimulate professional development. As Johannes Itten pointed out, negative critique often paralyses students. In contrast, positive feedback can increase self-confidence and self-belief.<sup>9</sup> We made the same finding in this group of critical friends. Although these teachers were well-reputed and appreciated by their students, all of them found that positive peer review provides more support and confirmation than student-based ratings and this is essential for powers of endurance. In addition, as the personality of the teacher and his individual and unique charisma are crucial components of successful teaching, peer review given by a friend who has not only a professional, but a deeper personal knowledge of the teacher, can clarify professional processes in a unique and highly valuable way.

Opinions differ with regard to how friendship affects the degree of openness in the critique. There may be several reasons for this, but the social pre-history of the pair is certainly of significance. Therefore, differences regarding the degree of openness should be allowed.

There are some circumstances that should be considered when assessing the credibility of the present study. First, the pilot study includes a limited number of subjects ( $n = 6$ ). Secondly, the participating teachers all share a documented

interest in teaching and their teaching skills may be above average. Nevertheless, these teachers responded to a critical friend-based evaluation by improving their skills further. Therefore, a critical friend concept used in medical education – and in other areas of the education system – may also create knowledge elicitation in less experienced teachers and represent a valuable instrument for sustainable and continuous quality development in teaching.

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*Contributors:* all authors except LOD have participated in the pilot study as evaluating and evaluated teachers. LOD performed the semistructured interviews and analysed them. All authors participated in planning the study, defining observation criteria and evaluating the results of the study. All authors participated in writing the manuscript.

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