

Collaborative self-study as a means to understand practice: the role of critical friendship

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Research context

Motivated by an interest in developing a deeper understanding of his own practice across teacher education and sports coaching contexts, the lead author has used a collaborative self-study approach to explore teaching, coaching and learning within a number of qualitative projects over the past eight years.

These projects have centred on his teaching and coaching in a university context and have been underpinned by structured critical friendship relationships with a colleague in his own university, along with colleagues in two different universities.

The four researchers are teacher educators in three Irish universities. As teacher educators, we are committed to critical reflection in order to develop practice (Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers 2016).

The collaborative nature of our self-studies, and the support provided to each other by being "co-conspirators and critical friends" (Hostettler et al., 2016, p. 61) helped us to interrogate and "reframe" our understanding of our practices (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015, p. 259). We realised the importance of openness and critical honesty (Butler et al., 2004)

Collaborative Self-study and Critical Friendship

Researchers who adopt a self-study perspective seek to improve, or develop a better understanding of, their own practice. There is a clear focus on self-in-practice, and self-study research frequently involves interaction with critical friends. Guided by the work of LaBoskey (2004) and Samaras (2002), this poster outlines how collaborative self-study, underpinned by critical friendships, guided the researchers' exploration of their practices. Our collaborative self-studies were:

- Self-initiated and self-focused
- Aimed towards improvement and/or deeper understanding of practice
- Interactive, involving critical friendships
- Informed by a variety of qualitative data sources

Critical friendships are "a way to escape the isolation and loneliness of teaching and ultimately reduce a teacher/teacher educator's distance and isolation from students" (Russell, 2022, p. 15).

A central component of engaging in critical friendship is inviting a "trusted colleague to be a critical listener and observer, ready to offer alternative interpretations and new ways of examining practice" (Russell, 2022, p. 23).

This trusted critical friend "can help you to uncover elements of your practices that you may not see on your own" (Richards & Ressler, 2016, p. 293).

Our Critical Friend Roles

This poster outlines *how* our critical friendships supported our teaching, coaching & research as we collaborated in face-to-face and online environments. It highlights the impacts of our collaborations on our practices.

Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer (2022) define a range of critical friendships along a continuum. In our context, we experienced the following:

- Richard and Anne collaborated as critical friends while they coached a university sports team **together**.
- Richard and Anne involved two **external** critical friends to discuss their reflections and "challenge the niceties" (Fletcher et al., 2016).
- Richard, Tony and Maura used critical friendship to support their implementation of a pedagogical innovation in teacher education courses that they taught in three **different** universities.

Like Carse et al. (2022), we suggest these collaborations have enabled us to develop deeper understandings of our practices, individually and collectively. The process helped us to understand our selves in the context of what Ives and colleagues (2019, p. 13) describe as "the intersectional and fluid nature of identities and their associated management".

What we have learned about Critical Friendship



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Associated Publications

- Bowles, R., Sweeney, T., & Coulter, M. (2023). Using Collaborative self-study to support professional learning in initial teacher education: developing pedagogy through Meaningful Physical Education. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2023.2282369>
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