



OVERVIEW OF CRITICAL FRIENDS MODEL

Introduction

The CCR SIA Student Work Protocol submits assignments currently in use for peer review and reflection, with the goal of strengthening their relevance to and alignment with the CCR standards. Using this process, instructors engage in planned, thoughtful conversations about standards-based education and professional learning. CCR SIA group members begin by setting guidelines for having a collegial conversation and for discussing what it means to be a critical friend. The following is additional information about being a critical friend in a professional learning community.

Background

The critical friends model is the product of a simple idea: providing deliberate time and structures to promote adult professional growth that is directly linked to student learning.¹

The critical friends learning community model is a professional development approach based on dialogue and reflection. Developed in 1994 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, its principles are rooted in K–12 school reform, but they apply to all levels of education. This model examines both curricula and outcomes reflected in student work to improve classroom instruction. Using a set of guiding and thought-provoking questions, group members provide tailored feedback to an individual instructor seeking assistance.

Definition of Critical Friends

Some practitioners have expressed concern that the “critical” in critical friends will lead to the disparagement of colleagues’ work. In this context, however, “critical” connotes “important,” “essential,” or “urgent”—in other words, instructors participating in this process are meant to provide crucial assistance to their colleagues. Through critique and analysis, they collectively develop strategies to improve student learning. Costa and Kallick describe a critical friend as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend . . . takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward [and who] is an advocate for the success of that work”²

Purpose

Using structured discussions, this model is a collaborative approach to professional development for instructors. Rather than attend one-day workshops focused on general classroom issues, instructors using the critical friends model engage in regularly scheduled group conversations to discover solutions targeted to their students’ needs. The collegial exchange of ideas is designed to expand participants’ knowledge. Through honest, open reflection on their own practices, instructors are encouraged to be innovative and to improve the quality of their teaching.

1 Cromwell, S. (2006). Critical Friends Groups: Catalysts for School Change. *Education World*. Retrieved June 26, 2008

2 Costa, A.L., and Kallick, B. (1993, October). Through the Lens of a Critical Friend. *Educational Leadership*, 51(2): 49–51. Retrieved June 26, 2008.

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Critical friends listen and ask insightful questions that encourage presenting instructors (those seeking guidance) to define and articulate the rationale and intended outcomes of their work. This refining technique has been called a “tuning process,” in which instructors adjust assignments to promote optimal learning gains for their students, much as musicians tune their instruments to achieve optimal sound quality.

Process

The Annenberg Institute used adult learning theory as the basis for the critical friends process—specifically, the principle that adults can engage successfully in autonomous, self-directed group learning. To promote such learning:

- The instructor who is seeking guidance asks a question or presents a challenge to the group and describes desired outcomes to guide the group’s work.
- The other instructors in the group ask questions and provide feedback, encouraging all members to gain new perspectives on their instructional practice.

Principles

- Examine teaching and student learning.
- Use data to inform the process.
- Share work so that colleagues can learn from one another.
- Commit time and energy to the group process.
- Be honest, reflective, and open to input from group members.
- Develop trust in, and respect and personal regard for, fellow group members.
- Recognize the competence and expertise that each group member brings to the process.
- Honor the norms established by the group

Structural Features for Success

- Groups are small (4–6 members) to allow open discussion and foster participation by all members.
- Meetings are facilitated.
- Meetings are held regularly (at least once a month, scheduled in advance) and for a substantial duration to maintain momentum and address pressing needs.
- Space is designated for the group meetings in a place convenient for instructors.

Guiding Questions for All Group Members

- What am I thinking now about my classroom and my teaching? What do I want to do to improve both?
- What am I learning about my teaching practice today?
- What strategies will I try in my classroom?