

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 26

SEEKING NETWORKS, CRITICAL FRIENDS, AND FEEDBACK

The Social Aspect of Writing

The critical friend is a powerful idea, perhaps because it contains an inherent tension. Friends bring a high degree of unconditional positive regard. . . . Critics are, at first sight at least, conditional, negative and intolerant of failure. Perhaps the critical friend comes closest to what might be regarded as “true friendship”—a successful marrying of unconditional support and unconditional critique. (MacBeath and Jardine 1998, 41)

If writing is part of a conversation, it is sensible to ask one or two critical friends to look at what you have written before you submit your ideas for publication. The combination of qualities John MacBeath and Stewart Jardine note in the quote above is indeed what you need in someone reading drafts and revisions of your work. We have mentioned the importance of critical friends at several different points in this book (e.g., [in chapter 24](#)). Some colleagues find it helpful to join a writing group, which provides not only dedicated time for writing but also the opportunity to give and receive feedback from colleagues ([see chapter 7](#)). This chapter explores different ways that you can establish a group of critical friends and how to encourage them to give you supportive but also critical feedback.

Networking

Although we recognize that for some the term “networking” sounds too business-y and instrumental and that the writing relationships you form should be about developing long-lasting relationships (Cheng 2019), others see such work as critical for a successful career in academia (Hubrath 2008). Networking is a common topic in researcher development workshops and programs. For example, the University of Bristol (n.d.) has produced a [six-part guide to networking](#) on their researcher development website. There, they note that: “In the academic sector, the increasing value placed on collaborative partnerships and the emergence of the impact agenda have heightened the need to have a broad professional network.” Building networks through social media is also important to enhance learning and teaching, research, professional practice, leadership, and career development (Rowell 2019; see also chapters 21 and 29).

Communicating about your work with others through your professional networks is part of building your identity as a learning and teaching scholar. Mick recalls how his economic geography and geography in higher education networks were largely separate in the 1980s and 1990s, though he did persuade them to come together when he co-edited two symposia on teaching economic geography (Healey and Clark 1994a, 1994b). Then, at the turn of the century, he had to develop an additional, largely new network as he began to participate in general higher education conferences and write pieces for transdisciplinary higher education journals (e.g., Healey 2000, 2003b). It was in part through effective networking that he achieved success in winning teaching awards and grants for higher education research and development, receiving funding for travel and participation in conferences, and greatly extending his national and international networks, which included some who became his critical friends.

Critical Friends

Özek, Edgren, and Jandér observe, “The critical friend method, which entails being a friend as well as having one, has proven to be a powerful

tool to facilitate the process of continuous improvement in teaching” (2012, 70). There is an extensive critical friend literature (e.g., Costa and Kallick 1993; Moore and Carter-Hicks 2014), much of it focused on the role of critical friends throughout a project (e.g., Kember et al. 1997). Here we focus on the role of a critical friend in supporting writing, particularly commenting on draft manuscripts.

Identifying potential critical friends can be quite daunting if you are new to scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and pedagogic research. Such friends might come from several sources, depending on what role you want them to play. Unless your institution allocates you a mentor (e.g., if you have been chosen to apply for a national teaching award), most will come from your professional network and will be people you already know and whom you choose to approach. They may be colleagues or peers at your university; people you have met in courses or at seminars, workshops, and conferences (see chapter 17); academic friends you have met through social media (see chapter 21); or other friends or relations. Most frequently, they will be people working in the same field as you, and they will be able to identify gaps in your argument or key sources you have not mentioned. Some will be the kind of people whom journal editors might ask to referee your work; others may be potential readers who are new to the topic area. You may request some friends to help you primarily with the clarity and style of your writing. Critical friends made during doctoral studies often remain in this role in your later academic life, and what started as a face-to-face relationship may move online (Morris and Cudworth 2018). If you are co-writing a piece, your co-authors will usually provide the first round of critical comments, but because of their role, co-authors may be too close to the subject. It is therefore helpful to have other critical friends who are not familiar with the topic comment on your writing. Networks of critical friends are even more important if you are writing on your own.

Care is needed in choosing appropriate critical friends, as it is in choosing potential co-authors (see chapter 7). The critical friend relationship is an emotional one, and you need to respect each other and be prepared to give and receive critical comments, as Rebecca

Hogue notes in Reflection 26.1. Sometimes these relationships are reciprocal, and you will in turn act as a critical friend to someone who took on that role for you. Every so often the experience of working together as critical friends can lead to you becoming co-authors. To an extent this is how the three of us came to write together. Sometimes this iterative process of being critical friends can lead to long-term writing partnerships, such as Mick developed with Alan Jenkins over twenty-five years, and Pat Thomson has experienced with Barbara Kamler (see chapter 7).

Reflection 26.1

What makes a good critical friend?

“I didn’t really understand what it meant to have a critical friend or really what type of person makes a good critical friend until I found one. So I thought I’d share a little more about what makes a good critical friend.

“First and foremost, you need to find someone whose opinion you respect. If you don’t respect their opinion, then you are wasting both their time and your time.

“Second, you must feel comfortable sharing your naked writing with your critical friend. Sharing first drafts can make you feel rather vulnerable, as you are exposing your unpolished work. You need to be comfortable enough to ***accept feedback from this person without emotional attachments***. Anyone who is responsible for evaluating your work does not make a good critical friend.

“Third, you cannot be in a competitive relationship with this friend. This is why peers in the same academic year or program are not always your best choice for critical friends. When there is even the slightest sense of competition, then the review process becomes about comparing, rather than about providing authentic feedback (even if it is subconscious). You must both feel that there is no sense of competition for the critical friend relationship to work.

“And finally, your critical friend must be willing to be critical of your work and you must be willing to take the feedback (see my second comment about accepting feedback without emotional attachments). In an academic setting, it is often useful to have a critical friend who is from a different field, that way they can point out when you are making assumptions in your writing (this is always a concern when you are an expert in your field).

“I am lucky to have found the perfect critical friend. I deeply respect her and I am grateful for all the help she has given me. She helps me see the weaknesses in my arguments, and pushes me to improve. And although I am not emotionally attached to the feedback she provides, I feel a huge sense of accomplishment when she compliments my writing. Thank you critical friend!”

Source: Hogue (2012). Reproduced by permission of the author.

In writing this book our most important critical friends have been each other, as well as those whom we asked to read drafts of our text. Our experiences of writing are, of course, not transferable to all. You may be writing on your own, and you may not yet have developed an extensive network of critical friends. If that is the case, joining a writing group may be an attractive alternative (see chapter 7).

Giving Developmental Feedback

A theme running through this chapter is the desire to enhance our writing through giving and receiving developmental feedback. This feedback may be oral or written, but the challenge is the same: how to give critical feedback in a way that will help the recipient develop as a writer and not be perceived as criticizing them personally.

The context in which the feedback is given varies with the role you are playing. In some forms of the critical friend model, it is more like a mentor-mentee relationship (Johnson 2007), in which an experienced individual mentors a less experienced person; such relationships are highly individual and need to be negotiated between each pair (Carmel and Paul 2015). In contrast, in the context of a

writing group, the role has more in common with a peer-support model (Healey et al. 2014), albeit in a group context. In both cases the providers of feedback need to be sensitive to how their feedback is being received. A good place to start is to ask the recipient where they are with their writing and what kind of feedback would be helpful to them at that stage in the process.

Keep in mind that it is very difficult for experienced writers to imagine what it is like “not knowing.” Therefore, you want not only expert advice but also insights from those who are less experienced and who may use your work. Keep in mind, also, how tough some people find getting challenging feedback, especially when they’ve worked hard to write what they think is a final draft. There is also a lesson here in seeking feedback early rather than waiting until you feel you’ve almost finished.

Barbara Grant (2008, 61-2) suggests that when providing feedback to another writer, the following questions might help you to devise helpful responses:

- What is your immediate impression after reading this piece? Pick a few key words or images to describe your response.
- What are the immediate strengths you see in the piece? List at least two, and be as specific as possible.
- Is the focus/thesis clear? Are you able to tell the writer succinctly what the focus is?
- How well is the focus/thesis developed? Is supporting information clear, relevant, and presented in an orderly fashion? How well does the writer integrate primary/secondary source material, data analysis, and so forth?
- Where might there be problems?
- Has the writer’s intent been clearly communicated such that non-specialists in the area might understand it?
- Has the writer’s voice come to life for you? Can you describe where their voice is most alive and powerful? Where is it weak? Every writer must find their voice in their words. It is often difficult to create an appropriate tone in academic writing, given the constraints on the form.

We present in Table 26.1 some advice offered by several authorities, integrated with our own perspectives, regarding what to do, and what to avoid, when *giving* feedback and what to do when *requesting and receiving* feedback (a copy is also [available in the online resources](#)). If you are asked to give feedback to a colleague on their writing, or if you request that someone gives you feedback, this guidance may help you have a thoughtful dialogue. Sometimes you may give each other feedback and it may be iterative rather than a one-off occurrence. We include further discussion of responding to feedback in [chapter 28](#).

Table 26.1: Giving and receiving effective developmental feedback

What to do when giving feedback
When possible, ask what the author would like feedback on, and what stage of development the manuscript is in.
Start by identifying what you think is working well and why and acknowledging what you think the writer is intending to do.
Give specific and substantiated praise and criticism and be precise regarding how you think the text might be enhanced.
Distinguish between macro-level issues (e.g., the clarity and consistency of the argument, and structure of the piece) and micro-level concerns (e.g., grammar and punctuation).
Suggest areas that might be cut or condensed as well as what to add; this is important when the piece is close to, or exceeding, the word limit.
Always respect the author, adopt a developmental approach, and make recommendations rather than judgments; consider how you would feel if you received this feedback.

What to avoid when giving feedback

Avoid concentrating on what is not in the piece; although it might be necessary to point out critical omissions, focus on improving what is in the piece.

Avoid making general or vague judgments to which it is difficult to respond; rather, be specific and action-oriented.

Avoid being obsessive about the author's bibliographic sources; although it is helpful to point out missing voices and perspectives, no one can cite everything on a topic, nor should you expect them to cite lots of your references!

What to do when you are requesting and receiving feedback

Tell the reviewer what kind of feedback you need and what stage you are at in the writing process.

When appropriate, offer to provide feedback on their writing.

Separate the delivery from the message; stay calm and avoid taking any comments personally.

Listen, don't talk; avoid defending your work instead of listening.

Reflect carefully on the advice received; take advantage of the opportunity to clarify your ideas.

Take ownership of your own writing; only make changes that make sense to you.

Source: Drawn in part on material in Belcher (2009, 223-8); Grant (2016, 87); Moore (2018, 123-4); Murray (2009, 163); Murray and Moore (2006, 49); and Thomson and Kamler (2013, 173-5); from where further guidance may be sought.

Over to You

Developing a network of critical friends is key to making your writing both more effective and more enjoyable. As you learn from your critical friends, expect in turn to provide critical but supportive

feedback to others. Consider the questions below as you think about the role networking, critical friends, and feedback play in your writing process:

- Whom among your professional network do you respect and trust to act as critical friends? Which of these people could you approach to comment on drafts of your writing?
- Which of your critical friends might you consider co-authoring with?
- How do you give developmental feedback to colleagues, and how can you encourage them to do the same for you?