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# Librarians as critical friends

## Developing a sustainable peer observation process

Librarians at the University of Washington-Bothell and Cascadia College Campus Library engage in information literacy instruction offered in targeted courses across the curriculum. A focus of these targeted courses is multiple sections of 100-level college introduction and research writing. Most classroom instruction happens by a single librarian in front of a group of students and a faculty member. With approximately 15 librarians engaging in an average of 10 to 12 instruction workshops each academic quarter, our instruction program is robust and dynamic but lacks a built-in mechanism for observation and feedback.

We began a peer-observation project in 2016 when the three of us saw an opportunity to improve our teaching practices while relying on our peers. Though reviews and promotion documentation are regular and required parts of our positions, observation of our teaching practice is not required. Seeing this gap, we sought a low-impact addition to our instruction that employed a “critical friends” model and would provide timely feedback that we could employ either the same quarter or in future ones. Each librarian observed the other two librarians, meaning that we were each observed twice during the first year.

The peer observations proved successful not only for in-the-moment feedback of one’s own instruction, but also the opportunities to view and learn from colleagues. Peer observation is also an exercise in vulnerability for all participants. We learned early on that

both giving and receiving feedback is an unfamiliar process that requires trust and open-mindedness.

The success and utility of these observations encouraged us to turn this into an ongoing program, with additional librarians joining in the past year.

### Examining the critical friends model

In establishing a structure for our peer teaching observation, we drew guidance from the framework of critical friendship, which has been primarily advanced by education scholars and practitioners. We take our definition of the *critical friend* from Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick: “A critical friend, as the name suggests, is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend.”<sup>1</sup> (As we explain our peer observation structure in the following sections, we will use *critical friend* to refer to the individual who observes teaching, and *learner* to refer to the individual whose teaching is being observed.)

Key to understanding the critical friendship

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framework is an understanding of critique. As noted by Costa and Kallick, critique does not always have to carry a negative connotation; indeed, critique is part of the “evaluate” section of Bloom’s original taxonomy.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, both the critical friend and the learner have to approach this process with openness and trust.

While much of the literature on critical friendships comes to us from the education discipline, there is crossover between the language and framework used to describe this process, and the language and processes more commonly used by academic librarians to mentor and advise one another.

A group of teaching librarians in Sweden provide one of the only direct applications of the critical friend method to a library setting. After creating a critical friend group of teaching librarians within their organization, Yvonne Hultman Ozek, Gudrun Edgren, and Katarina Jander describe a variety of benefits.<sup>3</sup>

Some benefits tied back into the participants’ own work, such as increased self-awareness while teaching, and an increased interest in incorporating peer-learning practices in the classroom. Other benefits were more interpersonal, like increased trust<sup>4</sup> between colleagues, and the opportunity to reaffirm shared values around teaching.

Scholars writing about critical friendship often highlight the reflective nature of the process, for both the learners and the critical friends. (In most scenarios, individuals will have the opportunity to fulfill both roles in this process.) Successful critical friendship requires not only the free and open exchange of ideas between two colleagues, but also introspective work on an individual level to process and incorporate the results of those discussions.<sup>5</sup> In developing our own peer observation process, we incorporated opportunities for the critical friend and the learner to engage in individual reflection, as well as collaborative growth.

### **Developing the peer observation process**

We initiated this peer observation project with a low-impact process that could be

easily adapted to our one-shot instruction model. We started by compiling examples of peer observation techniques from other libraries, including the Claremont College Library and Eastern Kentucky University Library.<sup>6</sup> We then selected instruction evaluation questions to help frame quick and substantive peer observation feedback. This review of other peer observation models helped create a flexible and adaptable observation feedback outline that any instructor at our institution can implement.<sup>7</sup>

The peer observation process we created includes pre- and post-observation meetings to gather context and create opportunities for meaningful observation feedback. The pre-observation meeting allows the critical friend to get information about learning goals, activities, assignments, and general context for the course. The learner then identifies specific areas of instruction that they want the critical friend to focus on while they are observing the class. The post-observation meeting provides the learner and the critical friend a chance to debrief on the session and discuss the observation feedback. This meeting is also an opportunity for the learner to reflect on how they thought the session went and compare their impressions with that of the critical friend. The last step in this peer observation process comes in the form of a letter written by the critical friend. The letter includes highlights from the observation feedback, such as planning, classroom actions, and reflections.

### **Benefits and value of peer observation**

Engaging in a peer observation process has multiple benefits, value, and impacts for a librarian’s teaching, pedagogy, and classroom presence. We found the following to be the most significant.

This process was integrated into work we are already doing, and it combines the benefits of assessment-driven feedback with one’s daily/regular teaching practices. Additionally, it provides low-stakes feedback that can be applied iteratively, as

well as quickly, into upcoming instruction sessions.

When preparing for a workshop, peer observation requires deliberate intent regarding one's goals and learning outcomes for the session. Also required is communicating goals and outcomes to the critical friend in a way that will contribute to their understanding of the session's context.

Peer observation provides exposure to other librarians' teaching practices and style that we normally would not experience. Ideally, we are able to apply what we learn from them to situations in our own work.

Finally, this process provides a setting for more structured conversations about one's teaching goals as well as a space for individual post-instruction reflection, which ideally leads to a continuation of reflection practice beyond structured peer observation. Christopher Day notes the "necessity for all teachers who wish to improve their practice to engage, routinely, in inquiry."<sup>8</sup>

A deliberate action to increase this work's benefit included us each writing post-observation summary letters to the other two participants in order to provide written documentation of the process. These letters from our peers provide evidence of not only one's instruction successes, but our work toward iterative reflection and improvement. The letters can also serve as compelling artifacts during a librarian's promotion and tenure process.

### **What's next?**

Since running an initial round of observations during the 2016–17 academic year, we expanded our critical friends circle to other interested librarians within our department. In 2018, there were six librarians involved. To remove the logistical burdens of scheduling and oversight, we created a spreadsheet to allow librarians to post their own teaching schedules and to sign up to observe colleagues. At the beginning of this larger cycle, we met as a group to set some norms: how many observations everyone will commit to, what type of deliverable/

artifact we want to create each time, how we will communicate to set up pre- and post-observation appointments. There have also been discussions within our department about making this observation model a more formalized part of our departmental instruction program. Regardless, it will remain open to all who are interested.

So far, our anecdotal experiences have echoed what surveys of the literature have found—mentorship programs are more popular with, or more frequently designed for, early career librarians.<sup>9</sup> Our process complements and supplements the current onboarding experience that new librarians have at our library, by allowing individuals to self-select into additional opportunities when they are ready.

### **Conclusion**

By establishing a peer observation program, we satisfied the goal of finding a sustainable way to incorporate reflection and feedback into our instruction program. The critical friends model served as an approachable framework for pre- and post-observation meetings, with trust and open-mindedness grounding these interactions. Three librarians served as initial participants, though expanding the observation program to a larger group served as a way to see more instruction styles and receive feedback from a variety of colleagues. We see applicability of this model to our library's value of leading-edge practices in teaching and learning, as well as the model's flexibility to be applicable in a variety of institutional settings and instruction programs.

### **Notes**

1. Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick, "Through the Lens of a Critical Friend," *Educational Leadership* 51, no. 2 (1993): 49–51.

2. Benjamin S. Bloom, David R. Krathwohl, and Bertram B. Masia, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (New York: David McKay Company, 1956).

3. Katarina Jander, Gudrun Edgren, and Yvonne Hultman Ozek, "Critical Friends and Collaborative Partnership," *Nordic Journal of Information Literacy in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2013): DOI 10.15845/noril.v5i1.198.

4. For more on the value of trust in critical friendship scenarios, see: Sandy Schuck and Gilda Segal, "Learning about our teaching from our graduates, learning about our learning with critical friends," in *Improving Teacher Education Practices Through Self-Study*, ed. John Loughran and Tom Russell (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2002): 88–101.

5. For more on reflection and critical friendship, see: Michael Golby and Rosemary Appleby, "Reflective practice through critical friendship: Some possibilities," *Cambridge Journal Of Education* 25, no. 2 (1995): 149; Christopher Day, "Teachers as Inquirers," in *Developing Teachers: the Challenges of Lifelong Learning* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Falmer Press, 1999): 22–47.

6. We consulted multiple examples from different institutions while developing our peer observation process. See Cindy Judd,

Kevin Jones, Sue Samson, and Karen Gilbert, "Hot to PROT: Enhancing Instruction Skills through Peer Review," Eastern Kentucky University Libraries, <https://libguides.eku.edu/hottoprot>; Char Booth, "Three-Question Reflection Template for CCL Teaching Librarians," Slideshare, <https://www.slideshare.net/charbooth/claremont-colleges-library-3qr>; Jaena Alabi and William H. Weare Jr., "Criticism is not a four-letter word: Best practices for constructive feedback in the peer review of teaching," Proceedings of the Fortieth National LOEX Library Instruction Conference, <http://hdl.handle.net/1805/4915>.

7. An outline for peer teaching observation developed by UWB/CC librarians is available at <https://tinyurl.com/yaqt4vat>.

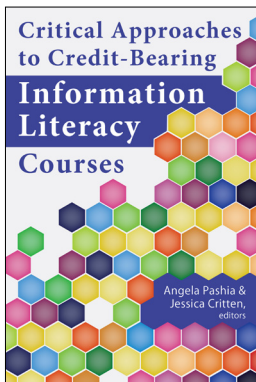
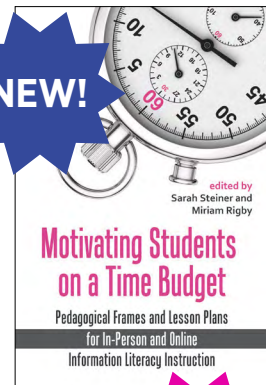
8. Christopher Day, "Teachers as Inquirers," in *Developing Teachers: the Challenges of Lifelong Learning* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Falmer Press, 1999): 22–47.

9. Diane L. Lorenzetti and Susan E. Powelson, "A Scoping Review of Mentoring Programs for Academic Librarians," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 2 (2015): 186–96. *zc*

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