

Critical friendship in the function of teacher reflection and professional development

Who is a critical friend?

Critical friend is an independent external associate who provides support and an alternative perspective to the process of analysis, evaluation and development of individual professionals or organisations (e. g. schools). According to MacBeath¹, a critical friend needs to be a highly qualified professional, have experience with school improvement and expertise in working with different groups in different circumstances. According to McNiff², a critical friend (also called a 'critical colleague' or 'learning partner') is someone whose opinion you value and who is able to critique your work and help you see it in a new light.

The critical friendship approach is based on collegial support, open and stimulating discussion, and exchange of experience. The „critical“ component refers to the ability to see things from a different perspective, without emotional involvement or partiality, to shed new light on what works well, but also on what is not effective and what could be improved. It is not targeted at finding mistakes, criticising or evaluation. The „friendship“ component refers to the quality of the relationship based on openness and mutual trust.

A guide on the side, not a sage on the stage

The role of critical friend is **not to give advice**, but listen carefully, ask guiding questions and direct the conversation towards rational reflection and critical insight into a particular issue, thus enabling you to see the issue from different perspectives, and helping you find alternative solution(s). Critical friendship is most often an integral part of individual or team action research projects, and self-evaluation processes involving lesson observation.

The benefits of critical friendship



¹ MacBeath, J. (1999). *Schools must speak for themselves: the case for school self-evaluation*. London: Routledge.

² McNiff, J. (2002). *Action research for professional development: Concise advice for new action reserachers* <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.asp>

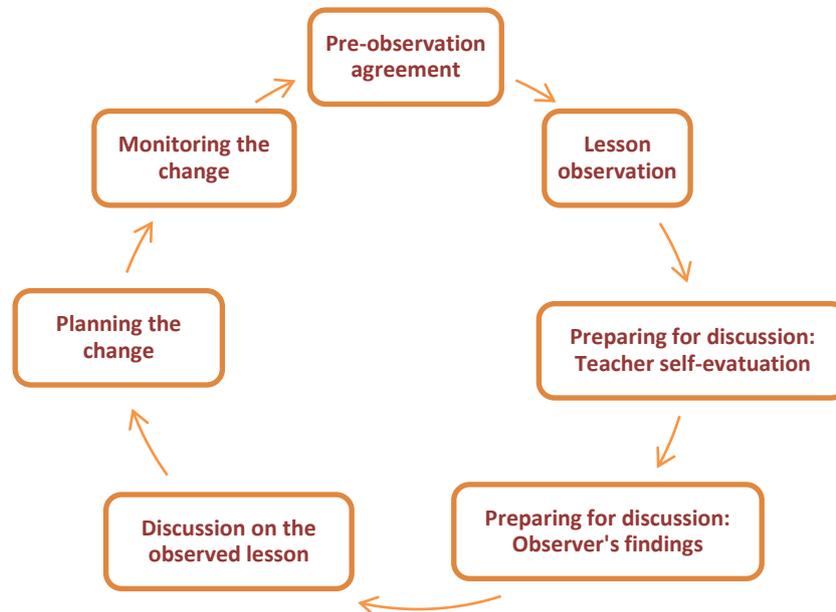
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Critical friendship and lesson observation

The process of lesson observation consists of three phases:

1. An agreement before the lesson observation
2. Lesson observation
3. Giving feedback – discussion after lesson observation



The principles of lesson observation:

- **Clear purpose** – What is being observed and why? Setting up a clear goal: Which aspect of teaching will be the issue in focus?
- **Development** – The improvement of one or other aspect of the teaching and learning process – looking ahead, not looking behind.
- **Confidentiality** – Lesson observation and discussions about it are conducted in the atmosphere of full confidentiality, with the aim of protecting personal and professional integrity of all involved in the process.
- **Constructive critique** – Giving feedback in a positive and supportive manner, highlighting positive aspects, and pointing clearly which aspect of the issue in focus can change and is worthy of change. Supporting the observed teacher in preparing the action plan to introduce and monitor the desired change.
- **Reflection** – Guiding the discussion in the direction of self-reflection, with the aim that the observed teacher reaches his/her own conclusions about the necessary changes.

Examples of questions in feedback after lesson observation:

In your opinion, what was the classroom environment/atmosphere? What are you satisfied with? What did you plan to achieve with this activity? Was there anything that did not go as planned? Were the reactions of students in accordance with your expectations? Were the desired learning outcomes achieved? What did you do that had the strongest impact on student behaviour or that made significant change in their behaviour? How did you/your students feel? What did you/your students think? If you could repeat this lesson, what would you do differently and why?