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Introduction

For the purpose of this paper I am going to discuss the notion of 'The Critical Friend' initially. I am then going to discuss my experiences as an observer in a critical friend scenario and follow this with my experiences of being observed in a similar critical friend scenario. I will bring this all together with my reflections on what I have learnt from this experience and what my strengths are as well as my areas for development.

In doing this exercise I have worked in a 'triad' arrangement with two of my colleagues at UCE. We have each taken it in turn to be observed and be the observer. The reason behind this was mainly one of practicality. A, B and myself have worked in the triad. A has been teaching in the Bartley Green area of Birmingham, whereas B has been working in Great Barr, and I myself have been working in Redditch, in a category D open prison. Due to constraints of both time and my secluded physical location it was not possible for A to come and observe my teaching, so this was done, by B. At the same time I was unable to visit B in return, due to the fact that we were both working at the same time so our diaries clashed, to this end then, A observed B's teaching. I then observed A's teaching as a critical friend as it was possible for me to attend his school, as he was teaching when I was not. This then completed the 'triad' critical friend scenario.

The Notion of the Critical Friend

As Costa, A and Kallick, B (1993) say, “A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a persons work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work”

In other words a critical friend is quite literally a friend who is both willing and able to critically assist you with your reflection in order to aid your personal development as a teacher; or indeed in many other professions. To this end the critical friend must possess certain specific qualities, those of trust, respect and a rapport with each other. On top of these ‘core’ qualities the critical friend must then also be able to listen well, to both what they are observing and whatever conversations are being had between friends; the critical friend must be fully aware of what it is they are looking for and to do so they must first listen to their partner in the exercise. In doing this they must clarify ideas with each other, one can undertake a task in order to attempt to prove a hypothesis or one can simply explore a situation, either way this must be clarified.

Also in this process of listening and clarifying, the critical friend can then fully understand what is being observed and in what context they are observing. This can then aid them to fully understand what the desired outcomes of the

activities are. Only when they are aware of this can they give an impartial judgement on whether the outcomes have been achieved and what issues have arisen in doing so.

On the flip side to this there are certain things that a critical friend should avoid doing during the partnership. Being negative is possibly the most important thing; there is no point in the exercise if the critical friend simply points out failings in their partner's (or partners') teaching ability. They are an advocate for change, not simply a critic and so to this end any issues that they may spot should be addressed with 'constructive' remarks that can lead to the bettering of teaching for both the reflective practitioner and possibly most importantly the student population.

As an addition to this issue of being negative, the critical friend must also avoid dishonesty and vagueness at all times. There is simply no point in having a critical friend if they are not going to tell the truth, no matter how hard that truth is to hear sometimes. This is not simply a case of avoiding playing childish pranks and saying there are areas for concern that simply aren't there but more seriously a case of trying to be kind to a partner in order to save face or even keep confidence levels high. Sometimes the old adage of 'you've got to be cruel to be kind' is simply true and none more so in case where critical friends do pick up on many areas for improvement; once again though as long as these issues are addressed constructively.

My Experience as the Observer

In order to undertake this exercise I liaised with A and arranged to visit his place of work and observe his teaching on the 20th October 2004. The lesson A was to teach was an A2 level, Media studies class at a Girls School and Sixth Form. As you will see I have broken the report of this lesson into two sections initially, the pre-lesson briefing and the lesson itself. I have done this to immediately be able to compare and contrast what was expected with what was actually observed in the lesson.

However both A and myself (and later B) decided that to use specific criteria for what was to be observed could well prove limiting and constrictive so to this end we decided to leave this open ended. Indeed as we are not trying to prove some hypothesis but merely 'explore' a scenario in order to aid both observer and subject's personal development as a reflective practitioner, a chronological observation seems best practice.

I have reported on the lesson in a chronographic manner, however for the purpose of this report I have not included every single incident noticed by the minute but simply the incidences that after later discussion A and myself saw as key incidences that could be developed on.

Pre-lesson Briefing

This is an A2 level Media Studies course, year 2, of a 2-year course. The lesson itself was the final lesson in the scheme of work and was to be a 'revision' lesson. The aim of this was to cover all of the course in summation in order to aid both the revision of the class for their final exams as well as giving the opportunity for students who may have missed parts of the course previously, to gain some understanding of topics they may have missed as well as at least make sure they have all handouts previously issued.

There are 10 students all aged 16 to 18 of a mixed race background, there are no known issues relating to any of the students, they are varying abilities and are all keen to work. The scheme of work for the course has been devised assuming the students have no prior knowledge of the subject. None of the group are regularly disruptive, however two are regularly late or even absent without notice. This has been brought to the attention of the head of department however it has been decided that no action is to be taken. The session is for 2hrs with no break, which has been agreed with the students at the start of the course in order for them to possibly leave earlier at the end of most lessons, however a five-minute comfort break is often given. The class takes place in a general classroom with a horseshoe layout of tables and chairs, enough for each student and a whiteboard at front with a working overhead projector provided for the use of the teacher.

The Lesson

At the very beginning of the lesson the students gave A a present and card to thank him for all of his help and teaching during the course. He also returned the favour with a box of chocolates for the class to share. It was obvious from the outset that there was an excellent rapport therefore between student and teacher, A to me was obviously a well liked and respected teacher.

However this did lead to a rather large amount of private conversations beginning within the class as A was attempting to ascertain which handouts each student had received during the course and who needed which handouts to complete their personal collections. I feel that it might have been an idea to try and control this by making comments such as “I hope you’re talking about the topics we’ve covered in the course” however A knows his students better than I do, and following the lesson I was assured that he didn’t consider this an issue himself.

Once each student was up to date with handouts from throughout the course, A began the ‘lesson proper’ so to speak. A could not find a board eraser to clean the whiteboard. There was not one present in the classroom or at least it couldn’t be found and so after several minutes searching, with the students simply talking amongst themselves, A had to leave the room in order to find an eraser. I felt this showed a slight lack of preparation but all teachers know that sometimes these things happen, it was maybe just bad luck that it was while being observed. However what I have suggested is that should

something like this happen again simply attempt to get the students to discuss something on the subject of the lesson whilst getting whatever is needed to carry on with the lesson 'pre-prepared' in the lesson plan.

A then went on to check the students' previous learning; he did this by simply asking questions on what they understood by certain 'topic titles' that had been used throughout the course. I felt this was a good way of doing the checking of previous learning, especially with the large amount of work needed to be gone through on this particular day, however I feel A could have given the students more time to actually elaborate their points to make sure they did actually understand the concepts they were explaining. Instead of this however when a particular student began to explain an understanding (on the topic of 'The Death of the Author') A too quickly interjected and gave his own definition before the student had even finished what they were saying.

Next A wrote on the board an essay title for a piece of work he wished them to do as 'homework'. Having previously been told the reason behind this work myself, I felt that it would have been the right time to tell the students that the concept of them doing this essay at such a close stage to their final exams was to aid revision and that even though this was the last lesson within the course that A would be teaching, he would still be going back to mark the papers and give them individual feedback. Instead of telling the students this though A proceeded to write a long essay title on the white board.

I could see that several students didn't seem to understand the logic behind doing this work and had therefore began to 'switch off' at the thought of writing a long essay. As well as this, as the physical writing on the essay title on the white board took so long this again spawned small private conversations. That said, A did explain the rationale behind doing the essay at a later time during the lesson, but I still suggest that when the title was being given out that then would have been the best time to explain why the students should want to do the work. I would also suggest that the title either be put on an overhead transparency or a photocopied handout and given to the students.

The students were then given a task to discuss some of the topics they had previously learnt about in small groups amongst themselves. This was done to change the activity and keep the motivation and interest of the student and to this end it achieved its aim. However, I felt that A could have given the students something more of a focus in the way the work was given out. Such as, I feel that if the students were told to discuss one of a few specific topics in order to present a short synopsis on the topic to the class, this would have given them more direction as to what to do. Each group could have been assigned a different topic in fact and presented their understandings using a flip chart or such like in order for the rest of the class to gain more knowledge themselves.

Overall the lesson was a success though and at the end A checked learning once again and it could be seen that learning had taken place. The pace of the lesson was very fast and I would suggest too fast for a normal lesson,

however as understood this was a revision lesson with a lot of work to be undertaken in a relatively short period of time.

I would however suggest that A talks less himself though and allows the students more time to express themselves. At the same time as this I have suggested to A that he does not hold his lesson plan while teaching the lesson, he should have it at hand but be somewhat more flexible than sticking rigidly to a lesson plan that is at most times physically in his hand.

Once again though as I have said to A directly the lesson can be seen as a success and it can also be seen that with A's undoubted excellent subject knowledge and a good rapport with his students that he appears to be a fine teacher with a good future in the profession.

My Experience of Being Observed

In order to undertake this exercise I liaised with B and arranged for her to visit my place of work and observe a lesson I taught on the 12th October 2004. The lesson I was to teach was an ABE literacy class at XXX; this is Category D, male prison. As you will see I have again broken the report of this lesson into two sections initially, the pre-lesson briefing and the lesson itself. Again I have done this to immediately be able to compare and contrast what was expected with what was actually observed in the lesson.

Again both B and myself decided that to use specific criteria for what was to be observed could well prove limiting and constrictive so to this end we decided to leave this open ended. Again I have reported on the lesson in a chronographic manner, however for the purpose of this report I have not included every single incident noticed by the minute but simply the incidences that after later discussion B and myself saw as key incidences that could be developed on.

It is human nature to be fearful of the unknown and for a teacher, especially a newly qualified or student teacher, being observed is a nerve-wracking event, to this end I too was nervous about being observed. It is something I have got used to with being observed by my ILP tutor as part of the PGCE course, however, the thought of being observed and critiqued by a peer was somehow more worrying, perhaps because it was the first time also.

Pre-lesson Briefing

This is an ABE literacy course, it is an open ended rolling course. There are varying numbers of students in the classes, on the particular date of being observed I was expecting 5 students all aged 21 or over of a mixed race background, there are no known issues relating to any of the students but they are of vary varying abilities, one being EsoL, two being Entry level 1 and two being Entry level 3; all are keen to work. None of the group are regularly disruptive or regularly late without notice. The session is for 2hrs with no break. The class takes place in a general classroom with a horseshoe layout of tables and chairs, enough for each student and a whiteboard at front provided for the use of the teacher.

The Lesson

As is more often than not the case with teaching where I do, before I even started my lesson I was informed I would have a new student beginning with me that day. This did make things slightly difficult as the lesson plan for the day included finishing off work that was begun in the previous lesson, however I was told the student was of an Entry 2 level so would have less literacy issues than some of the students I had prepared the lesson plan with in mind. I was to finish a discussion lesson about populating a fictitious new land and then begin a reading comprehension lesson, reading some passages of text on a fictitious email message and talk about the subject of inference there on.

The following report on my experience is based directly on the written report given to and discussed with me by B after she had observed my teaching for this lesson.

I started the lesson with a recap of what had happened last lesson, this was done as a general class chat, at which point I made a point of involving the new student. B stated I have a good rapport with my students, which is something I feel very proud of and is something that has been mentioned by other observers of me as well as other staff members I work with and even students.

I took time for the students to catch up with what had been done in the previous lesson and explained to the new student (as well as the others) why we were doing such a lesson in such a manner. I feel It is good to explain to the students why they are learning what they are learning, as some students, especially new ones often expect rigid, English grammar lessons. They can therefore be thrown by a discussion lesson and think they are not going to learn anything when confronted immediately with a lesson which may seem like a free for all of people simply talking.

B made comment as to how she saw that I listened to the students and tried to correct them without putting them down or giving them a negative learning experience. However she did also notice how a couple of times I used words that were very possibly of a higher level than they may have comprehended. This is something I hadn't previously considered let alone addressed. One

such example could be when I used the word 'empowerment' when talking about different political or governing systems. Had I observed this myself I would have quite confidently said that it was a word that the students at this level would not understand the meaning of, however it took my critical friend to notice this and to that end I am very grateful. Immediately I am now thinking more consciously, during my lessons, whether the words I use myself are words that may need explaining to my students

In fact I am trying to use this sometimes as a method of bringing more complex or longer words into 'everyday' use so as to widen the personal dictionary of my ABE literacy students.

We continued our discussion lesson, and B stated that she thought I controlled the discussion well in a "firm but fair" manner, letting all students have a say and make their points. At one stage I did feel the students were maybe getting too loud and talking over one another so I stopped the discussion to bring in the subject of creating some 'rules for our discussions' to assure this didn't get out of control. B also commented on how I was able to try to explain some concepts they may not have understood but without saying directly that what they had previously understood was wrong.

We then moved onto the comprehension and reading section of the lesson, this is deliberately structured so as to change the activity and keep the interest of the student in what can be a long session of 2 hours without a break, especially for students in a prison environment.

I asked the students at first to read through the passage and underline any words they didn't understand so as we could then as a group discover what they meant. B thought this was a good idea and I must admit it was the first time I had done this myself as it was more of a spur of the moment idea, but it is definitely one I will use again in the future and especially as it was complimented upon by my critical friend. Another good idea B had on this subject was to perhaps give them a similar piece of writing after a couple of weeks and see if the same people were still underlining the same amount of words or indeed the exact same words. With perhaps some more thought I think something of this nature could be invaluable in checking on the learning of my students, so again I am grateful to my critical friend.

Another point B noticed was when I tried to explain the differences between 'two, to and too'. The subject of homophones such as these is several lessons in itself and indeed a lesson that I very much enjoy teaching and regularly do. One of the methods I use to explain and practice homophones with the students is a series of gapped handouts with sentences requiring the correct word with the correct spelling to be inserted. However I didn't have these handouts with me so simply explained the differences by definition. B pointed out that a good idea would be if I had thought of a sentence using all three homophones then maybe the students would have understood better, but I didn't think of that myself at the time. i.e. – Two men went to the seaside and went for a swim too.

I definitely agree that it would be a good way of helping the students understand a complex subject and was quite kicking myself that I didn't think of it myself, nevertheless my critical friend has brought this idea to my attention and I feel that ideas like this will greatly improve my own ability as a teacher. On the whole the experience of being observed has had its benefits. In conclusion to her report B said she felt I am a good teacher with good abilities and she can see that I enjoy what I do. What I sometimes see as small things like my rapport and, my vocalising and ability to be heard and explain myself as well as even writing on the whiteboard have all been praised and this is something I feel we all benefit from as it has certainly given me a sense of pride and confidence.

B has also come up with some good tips on how I could act in certain instances as detailed above and finally that initial fear of being observed, especially by a peer, is subsiding daily and takes a big step to drifting into nothingness every time I am observed.

Reflections Upon My Strengths and Areas for Development

I know I still have a long way to go in my learning, and indeed as a teacher, this process will be one that I shall continue throughout my working life. I feel very confident of my abilities as a teacher now though and having being observed by a critical friend I feel I know my strengths and areas for development more.

I am a very good communicator in a classroom environment and the students appear to have a good respect for me as 'the teacher'. My interpersonal skills at this level have always been good in previous employment and to this end they have worked well for me as a teacher. My ability to 'think on my feet' has certainly helped me to differentiate to meet the needs of the learners, especially in such mixed ability classes also.

More specifically, I am able to plan and implement good lessons that address the needs of the students as individuals working along side their individual learning plans, which is not an easy task in a prison environment where the classes are such mixed ability ones. Indeed it has been reported by my critical friend that my lessons are well structured and timed, my handouts are well worded and set out in a good and suitable manner for the students and their abilities. My writing on the white boards is good with both size and character (i.e. neatness) and on top of this my flexibility and adaptability is also good.

There is also an art to being able to keep the students attention and interest during what are mainly three-hour lessons, I feel that I am much improving too in this ability, at first I think I was creating too much work to fill a time slot and then I have tried other methods such as less work but more in depth, however it now seems that, as my critical friend observed, the best way is to have several differing topics, and thus by changing the subject, the activities also change and make the students feel more invigorated and motivated and attentive.

However I do know that I still have a long way to go with my personal subject knowledge and already the wheels are in place for me to go onto my Level 4 subject specialisation qualifications. This is in my opinion my biggest area for development, and I have been helped by some great staff / colleagues at my current place of work in this particular area (another strength of mine being that I am more than willing to listen to help and advice and learn from it myself). As stated though along with this assistance and all that I am gleaning from books I do also need some more specific teaching based qualifications in this area.

Something that has been more brought about by the critical friend report is that maybe I am too familiar with my students, sometimes it feels to me that perhaps I treat them more as an equal at times. Even though I make a point of keeping my relationship professional and keeping the student / teacher dichotomy, B's comment about me unwittingly using words that sometimes they may not understand has most definitely struck a chord with me. I think

this is due to, as I say, the fact that sometimes in my own mind I see the students subconsciously as more equal and so occasionally fail to remember that their English literacy, particularly at the ABE level, is unfortunately far inferior to my own. I must therefore make more of a conscious effort to remember this when explaining things to my students in this class at this level, I may well have to also explain the meanings of some of the explanatory words I use. I don't want to simply dumb down the lessons though and only use words they understand because that then defeats the aim of increasing the students own personal dictionary.

Conclusion

In conclusion I have seen the benefits of the critical friend method in helping being a reflective practitioner. It is always good in many working environments to get a 'second opinion' from a peer. And to be able to get a friend to critically appraise you can be of huge benefit (barring in mind the criteria of a critical friend mentioned at the top of this work). I do however see the problem with this being one of simple economics and time, as unfortunately it is not feasible to continuously observe and be observed. It is though in my opinion only the most foolish of teaching practitioner who does not take full advantage of learning from ones fellow professionals (and indeed sometimes the students). Teaching is not a black art and you don't simply get a qualification that makes you a teacher and then teach for the rest of your career. The career of the teacher is one of continuous development, and using the concept of the critical friend along with reflection this career can be a very satisfying one.

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Appendix

The Following is the lesson plan for the lesson by Mr A Gallie, which was observed by myself on 20th October 2004.