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How can we get faculty to use constructive criticism to improve teaching just as we do to improve research?

Consultation Using Critical Friends

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Criticism has always enjoyed a strong position in the academic world, both in rhetoric and practice. A common element of scientific work is a critical approach to accepted interpretations and explanations. Without criticism of existing knowledge we would experience almost no scientific progress. Thus criticizing other researchers' reports and publications is an accepted activity. It is carried out by means of comprehensive refereeing procedures in the case of scientific and professional publications and conferences. Another ritualized example is the thesis defense, a key element in the evaluation and approval of graduate degrees. This is how the critical tradition is passed on in academia. New members of the academy are socialized into this central aspect of academic culture by acting as spectators or personally taking part in a rite of passage.

At times such criticism can be merciless—particularly between competing or antagonistic groups or between different schools of researchers. More often, however, it is not. Good criticism is generally relevant, argumentative, well documented, and instructive. There are many times when criticism is very positive.

This is why some scholars prefer the French term *critique*. This connotes the type of criticism that takes place in the arts, where a connoisseur in the field comments on the positive and negative aspects of an artistic work (a painting, book, play, film), based on his or her professional judgment and usually in a public forum. Learning to live in an academic culture entails, among other things, tackling the roles of giving and taking criticism in ways that are accepted by this culture. To a varying degree, we are all masters of this genre, and those who are really proficient receive high esteem.

We might say that this is one of the skills that scholars within the university system must develop to gain recognition as competent members of the academic profession. Practicing criticism professionally can be done in various ways, but there are clear (albeit local) limits for acceptable forms, limits that must not be transgressed if you wish to retain the profession's respect and loyalty. Further, the content of the criticism put forward must be rooted in the accepted and valid norms within the culture (the department, discipline, or research community).

Criticism of Research—and of Teaching

Why do I write so much about research in a book about university teaching? Because I believe that we lack corresponding traditions in academic culture when it comes to teaching. Educators engage relatively rarely in systematic appraisal of their colleagues' teaching in the form of a critical evaluation that is carried out publicly, as in the case of scholarly criticism. In keeping with the reigning culture, it is not wholly acceptable. University-level teaching is more or less the private property of the individual instructor, and any commentary could be construed as meddling.

Among the questions we posed in an interview survey carried out among the participants in a faculty development course some years ago was this one: "Do you often talk with colleagues about their teaching?" One of the participants answered in horror, "No, that would be comparable to speaking to them about their personal hygiene."

Of course I know that this is not a universal response. Some university lecturers do communicate with their peers about one another's teaching. I also assume that the situation in colleges and universities in other countries could differ from that in my own (Norway). Still, I contend that the description is reasonably valid for much of university culture worldwide.

In many parts of the world the past decade has seen increasing public criticism of the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Student evaluations of teaching, common for many years in North America, have found their way to Europe and Australia. Here it is the "users" of higher education who are offering the criticism, rather than colleagues. And in some cases the evidence from these evaluations is rejected on the grounds that the criticism is essentially unprofessional.

Other more comprehensive assessments of university teaching and curricula have been undertaken at a program- or institution-wide level, often initiated and controlled by government agencies (Jordell, 1992). Although these evaluations are often made by academics serving on assessment bodies, these individuals may have been conscripted to do so and are not primarily offering criticism on behalf of the academy. In some countries (such as the Netherlands), universities have taken on the task of carrying out nationwide evaluations of entire disciplines, but this happened mainly to prevent the Ministry of Education from doing the task itself.

Why So Little Criticism of Teaching?

Assuming it is true that the academic culture is often reluctant to practice internal, collegial criticism of teaching at universities, what are the reasons? Let me offer a few.

Teaching doesn't really matter. Do we perceive teaching as such a secondary concern for the university and for ourselves as educators that we don't consider collegial and critical scrutiny worth the effort? Hardly. In more than two decades of work in faculty development, I have found that many university educators care deeply about their teaching. They deem it important and put a lot of work into it.

University lecturers are already outstanding professional educators. Consequently it would be superfluous for their teaching to be submitted to anything but self-criticism (and perhaps occasional feedback from students). I do not think that this is a common belief among university faculty. In any case it lacks validity when we consider how systematically research is subjected to peer review.

Getting university educators to change their teaching methods is a hopeless task. The argument here is that faculty feel so constrained by the academic environment that they simply teach as they think best, and there is little motivation for change. Criticism from peers is therefore unwelcome. Many university teachers probably subscribe in part to this view, but empirically it proves unsatisfactory. There are too many examples of educators and institutions that do change their curricula and teaching methods because of internal criticism of existing practice.

University educators are not professional teachers. They are therefore not equipped to offer informed criticism and to respond to such criticism. Let me stress that this is not to discredit the erudition and expertise of university teachers. They are certainly professionals in their disciplinary fields. However, the *teaching* of a subject is a different type of activity, which in principle demands its own type of professionalism. Is it unfair to expect university educators to be doubly professional?

What It Means to Be a Professional Educator

Belonging to a profession entails (1) a lengthy higher education in your field, (2) a comprehensive shared and scientifically based knowledge base for carrying out your work, and (3) a shared professional code of ethics.

University educators in their roles as researchers or scientists and scholars meet these demands, but not in their roles as *teachers* of their subjects. Though teaching is a major part of an academic's job, many faculty members lack awareness of their professional responsibilities as teachers.

In keeping with our conception of ourselves as professionals and researchers in our chosen fields, we subordinate ourselves to an array of scientific quality demands and norms. These demands relate to our methods

of inquiry, the way we write scientific articles, and our research ethics. We subordinate ourselves to these demands because it seems reasonable and because it is a prerequisite to achieving recognition, acceptance, and even protection from the professional group. Indeed, the norms of the profession were created by its members to ensure the quality of their own work and to protect their own interests. This is one of the instruments for achieving society's acceptance of the profession's autonomy. The norms can be altered by initiatives within the profession, but they require conformity as long as they last and are enforced through active sanctions.

When it comes to teaching, most of us accept having little influence on the time and place where our assigned duties are carried out. We might grumble, but we accept these. I believe it is harder for us to accept demands to teach in a particular way to meet common norms for good teaching. Such norms have not been created within the bounds of our profession, partly because they are regarded as involving a sphere of activity that is private.

Let me cite an example. In Norway we have rules of research ethics that are shared by large groups of researchers (NESH, 1994), but we have no common ethical code for teaching. The only example of such a code I have found is in Canada, where guidelines were developed by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (Murray and others, 1996). We recently developed ethical guidelines for research supervision (UiO, 1997) at my own university, and this provoked some strong reactions among the faculty.

I do not necessarily consider existing written guidelines on the ethics of teaching or supervision to be ideal, but the negative reaction among the university teachers illustrates our uncertainty about our professionalism as teachers (Handal, 1997). It may be unrealistic to expect all academics to develop complete dual professionalism in our disciplinary fields as well as in our teaching. But I do think that universities should aim at encouraging enhanced pedagogical professionalism. In this connection, it is vital that the individual university professor is conscious of the categorical divide between *individual freedom* (to do what I want) and *professional autonomy* (acting within the norms of the professional group).

Enhanced professionalism can be achieved through becoming acquainted with concepts, theories, and research on teaching methods and student learning processes. This is a necessary basic investment if faculty members are to cooperate on the development of their teaching and communicate meaningfully with each other. We need a common language that includes concepts with some basis in systematized knowledge and theory about teaching.

There are other prerequisites. The institution should make time and space for informed discourse about teaching, respond to the needs of faculty to learn more about teaching issues, and provide mechanisms to recognize faculty members' competence for the educational part of their job.

This recognition must be minted in the system's own currency: due emphasis in relation to appointment, tenure, and promotion.

Colleagues as Critical Friends

My objective here is to look more specifically into mutual criticism among colleagues and its potential as a strategy for consultation. This ties in with my wish for increased professionalism in university teaching. If the quality of teaching and learning is to improve, it is vital that those who instigate educational development have ownership of the process, that they understand and approve of it. Such changes will demand joint, not just individual, efforts and require communication and collaboration between the involved parties in reaching common understanding and practice.

In the literature about development of educational institutions we come across the concept of the *critical friend* (Simons, 1987; Tiller, 1990). This implies an interesting combination of concepts that we usually do not associate: friendship and criticism. Friends are people who are close to us, who support us, and who provide confirmation. They often disregard our weak points or excuse them rather than confront us with them. Criticism is generally conveyed by others who are not as close to us, perhaps our superiors or representatives of viewpoints different from our own. But in fact a real friend is someone to rely on, someone who will hold a critical mirror before us if necessary.

Let me draw another parallel with research. Consider the following situation. A younger colleague, Stephen, approaches you with his nearly completed thesis. His supervisor has made it clear that the work should soon be ready to submit. But both Stephen and his supervisor want a second opinion from you. Stephen is a congenial fellow, and you have developed a solid and friendly relationship with him after working together for several years. The funding period for his research grant is now drawing to an end, so it is important that he wind up his thesis work. You read the thesis and have your doubts about its quality. But you see that with some revising, the clarification of a few concepts, and a sharper summary of the results, it would be excellent. In its present form, however, submitting the thesis for evaluation would be risky. Another semester of work is needed to ensure its quality. The two of you have an appointment to discuss the thesis, and with his buoyant spirits and his aura of expectation, Stephen arrives.

Most of us would feel that the responsible thing to do, as his good friend, would be to say, "Stephen, I'm sorry but I think that you still have more work to do on this thesis. Look here . . ." You would be letting him down as a genuine friend if you stifled your criticism and chose a more comfortable approach, "Great, Stephen, you've done a wonderful job. Maybe there are a few things that could be polished up, but I'm sure you will see them yourself when you reread the entire text. Good luck!"

A good critical friendship involves an obligation to analyze and criticize. Your friend has come to you confident both that you will give an honest and well-founded response and that you have the competence and ability to provide it; this is the response he seeks, rather than a nonchalant pat on the shoulder. In other words, a critical friendship includes

• A personal relationship of confidence
• Belief in the professional competence of the critical friend
• Expectation of personal integrity
• Basic trust in the good intentions of the critical friend

Critical Friends and University Teaching

At the institutional level, I think that a department that is concerned about the quality of its teaching could invite an individual or a small group of critical friends to evaluate the program. They would have to be people known and respected for their competence. The mission would be to look at the curriculum and teaching methods used in the department, observe selected key courses, talk with instructors and students, and give a critical response to what they have seen, heard, and thought about. The department or institution might specify particular aspects of the curriculum for attention, but it must be inherent in the "contract" between them that the critical friends can broach other aspects that they deem important.

In this situation we would expect criticism to take place in a context of collegiality. It would be a type of criticism that primarily takes the institution's own intentions as its point of departure and proceeds to offer commentary in that spirit. At the same time the critical friends might be encouraged to reflect critically on these very intentions, to see whether they are appropriate and worthwhile. Perhaps they might also reveal some unintended outcomes of the program, for instance that students might be becoming less independent than intended, due to a heavy workload or highly prescribed curriculum, a side effect that the institution had neither sought nor considered.

I have had the opportunity to function as a critical friend for a teacher education program at a Swedish college (Handal, 1996). It turned out to be a valuable experience for the institution and also most instructive for me. Serving as a critical friend at the institutional level is something that is hard to take on at one's own institution, where the consultant is an integral part of the system and the culture. But visiting another university in this role provides an opportunity for inspiration and generating new ideas precisely because of the different environment that is seen with fresh eyes. As an additional benefit, acting as a critical friend makes the consultant aware of aspects of his or her own practice that have not necessarily been considered before. This is a benefit of critical friendship that should not be underestimated. It can be as gainful for the critical friend as for the institution or people who are receiving the observations and comments.

Perhaps we can recognize something here from comparable experiences in research. When doing peer reviews of articles and conference papers or when reading a thesis and serving as an external examiner, we usually learn a lot ourselves. We get new ideas, become acquainted with fresh research, and are made aware of different perspectives and methods. Moreover, we might discover that our own criticism mirrors criticism that others have directed toward our own work.

A variation of such institutional use of critical friends is the system of *benchmarking.* The department or program engages people from an institution that it wishes to be compared to and requests them to analyze a program or practice. This is a way for an organization to gauge itself against a standard and ferret out possible weak points.

I am convinced from my own experience that the same process of peer review and collegial consultation can be used on the *individual* level. There are advantages to doing so. One is the obvious need for a fresh look at methods the teacher may not know need updating. Here a colleague can offer advice on what can be improved and how to make the changes.

Another advantage, and perhaps a more important one, is that much of our teaching is so dependent upon material and social frameworks (among them the contributions of our colleagues) that the prospects for making any substantial change of practice through individual efforts are limited. John Elliot, a veteran in the work to change the English education system, said a few years ago that "individual teachers cannot significantly improve their practices in isolation without opportunities for discussion with professional peers and others operating in a significant role-relationship to them" (Elliot, 1992, p. 25).

There are several pertinent points in this quotation. First, it is difficult for teachers working on their own to bring about meaningful change. Several colleagues have to be involved. Second, changes require the opportunity for discussions with colleagues. Third, these partners in discourse must be not just colleagues, but professionals. In other words they must have the required competence to analyze, discuss, and critique the teaching concerned. Fourth, people outside the teacher's immediate range of colleagues can be especially useful in such discourse by offering perspectives that are not bound by the limited local context. However, as a prerequisite, the external consultant must have a special relationship to the other educators. He or she must be considered, in the term of Berger and Luckmann (1971), as a *significant other*—a person whose viewpoints are respected, who is listened to, and who can serve as a role model. This is what I mean by the critical friend.

Critical Friendship in Collegial Consultation

We can also learn to function as critical friends for each other in the local context. And if you are invited by a colleague to serve in this way, it is a declaration of confidence in you and your competence and of trust that you will take the task seriously.

Before taking on this role you might want to talk a little more with your colleague about his or her teaching goals so as to get a background for making an interpretation. This requires listening, and although you must be sure that you understand these goals, this is not the time to begin taking a critical look at them.

So now you are ready to observe some teaching. Above all you must bear in mind your colleague's intentions and judge the teaching in this context. If the colleague has expressed a straightforward wish to disseminate information, you have to witness what happens and relate it to the criteria for such teaching. Is the structure of the presentation clear? Is it understandable for the students? Is the presentation adapted to their abilities, previous knowledge, and so on? As Kierkegaard (1859) said, you must "first and foremost find the place where the other is, and start from there. If you cannot do that, then you cannot help him" (my translation).

But you must also look for other aspects of the instruction that your colleague has not talked about. How do the students react to the lecture? Do the lecturer's examples illustrate the issue and function as well for both male and female students? Or would it have been better if the students had been given an opportunity to ask questions, even if this is contrary to the lecturer's intentions?

Afterward you can talk together. What do you answer to your colleague's question, "How do you think it went?" Even if you think so, your immediate response should not be, "You should have allowed for much more student participation." First you have to concentrate on your colleague's proclaimed intentions for the lecture so that he or she receives an answer that relates to these goals. Only when this has been done should you discuss the goals themselves. "What, really, are your teaching goals?" "How do you conceive of student learning?" "Is this the best way to use teaching time?" "How do you want the students to prepare for the next lecture? Are they in fact doing that?"

As a critical friend I do not always have an answer to all the questions or perspectives I raise. But I must have the imagination (and wisdom) to ask them so that we can consider them together (Handal and Lauvås, 1987). Above all, you must take your assignment seriously. You have been invited in to provide serious criticism, in the same way as you would as a critic of a scholarly paper. It would be insufficient to say, "Yes, this was great. Just tell me if you want me to come back another time."

From Occasional to Systematic Consultation

The above example is individual and one-way (one person has invited a colleague to come and observe an occasional lecture). An extension of this idea is the establishment of a collaborative *reflective team* of teachers (Lycke, 1998) who examine one another's teaching as critical friends and discuss

the themes, dilemmas, and critical points they observe, with the aim of becoming wiser and better educators together. Obviously these discussions can also include students' perceptions and evaluations, but in this context only as an aid in colleagues' mutual scrutiny of their own teaching.

In these reflective teams, where members act as each other's critical friends, an external critical friend can also be most helpful. The advantage of the outsider is that he or she has a different perspective, is not part and parcel of the same culture, does not always take the same things for granted, and can often rejuvenate the discussion with these outside perspectives and experiences.

To make this clearer, we can borrow some ideas from *hermeneutics,* the science of interpretation; especially applicable to the interpretation of texts, it can also apply to situations. The cardinal idea here is to grasp what the text was supposed to convey, what the author really intended. In addition, a more critical form of hermeneutics is practiced when we try to fathom why the author in fact wrote a text and how it made sense to do so in this way and in the context of the day. Such critical hermeneutics can include aspects, norms, and interpretations that were not known, not relevant, or simply not considered when the text was written; the text can be interpreted from these perspectives.

The reason for touching on hermeneutics is to illustrate that self-interpretation of one's own practice is limited to the perspectives that one already has, whereas the sort of hermeneutics we engage in with colleagues provides much greater potential for helpful criticism. However, benefiting fully from such critical hermeneutics often entails opening our practice up to a critical friend who represents other perspectives, concepts, knowledge, and models than are readily accessible within the culture.

Critical Friendship and Faculty Development

In our faculty development courses at the University of Oslo we include work in what we have called *collegial tutor groups.* Groups of three or four course participants visit each other's teaching sessions. They engage in pre- and postteaching conferences and tutor each other. The roles of mutual critical friends are practiced within the groups. We have found it interesting to observe that when these collegial clusters are heterogeneously assembled with teachers from various fields, the participants usually act more as external critical friends for one another. This is because they represent disparate experiences, view different things as self-evident, and are more likely to ask each other authentic and essential questions, such as, "Why do you do things this way?" As course instructors, we have joined these groups and found that with our special expertise we can also have positions as external critical friends. Again, an essential requirement for success is a relationship of mutual confidence and respect between the critic and colleague. Or, as

the Danish writer Piet Hein puts it, there are two requirements: "first to win each other's trust and second, to deserve it."

Mutual Demands on Critical Friends

From my perspective, it is important that those who function in such roles try to develop their knowledge about the issues they are critiquing and that they link experiential insights to concepts and theories that are empirically grounded in relevant educational research. I am not asserting that all university teachers should become professional pedagogues, but in their aspirations toward more professional teaching they should try to acquire some basic knowledge from the educational literature. After all, an art critic lacking a working knowledge of the basic concepts and tenets of aesthetics would have a slim chance of being taken seriously as a critical friend. Teaching is no different.

From this perspective, we make certain demands of critical friends in order to benefit from their advice. Likewise there are demands on those who choose to seek help from a critical friend. Be they institutions or individuals, I believe that they will first need *courage*. A healthy dose of self-confidence is required to invite someone to observe something as personal as teaching. Inviting a critical friend to watch an activity you have not completely mastered is difficult; showing off something you do brilliantly is easier.

The other need is a *willingness to change*. If we are quite certain that our teaching is being carried out just the way we want it, we should not invite a critical friend to observe it. The invitation must originate from the notion that we have something to learn and a wish to change our work to make it better. If this willingness is lacking, every attempt at constructive criticism is likely to devolve into a why-don't-we-yes-but game in which all suggestions are repelled or excused with arguments such as, "We have already done that. It doesn't work here. Our situation is so special that . . ."

The Bottom Line: Freedom and Control

This touches on a central conflict that I mentioned earlier between the views of university teaching as an individual and as a collective phenomenon. I stated that many university teachers perceive their teaching as essentially private property. This can be partially explained by again drawing a parallel with research. Freedom of research is a strong academic ideal. The academic culture is deeply ingrained with the principle of liberty to pursue the hypotheses that the researcher considers important. The ideal of free scholarly inquiry is cherished and protected, despite a world where so much research is steered by the market or fashion and constrained by funding opportunities.

I find that this ideal is rather indiscriminately transferred to academic teaching and transformed into an academic right to assemble any listeners who wish to gather in front of the lectern and to convey whatever knowledge, opinions, and criticisms are thought to be important. Certainly it is important that teachers be free to express their views on issues on which they are experts. But there are other requirements of an effective university teacher. Much teaching involves fulfillment of a social contract to educate new generations of students and serve the broader needs of society. Coherent curricula and quality student learning depend on cooperation and a measure of control. *Control* has a negative connotation, especially in contrast with the idea of academic freedom. But if teaching is to become more professional, it may be that we will have to respect some common norms for good teaching and to collaborate among ourselves as critical friends in a joint attempt to achieve these norms. We have long done so for research, so why not also for teaching?

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