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Published in:
Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

2012

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Hultman Özek, Y., Edgren, G., & Jandér, K. (2012). Implementing the Critical Friend Method for Peer Feedback among Teaching Librarians in an Academic Setting. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, *7*(4). http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/16600

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Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Article

Implementing the Critical Friend Method for Peer Feedback among Teaching Librarians in an Academic Setting

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Received: 9 Mar. 2012 **Accepted**: 4 Nov. 2012

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Abstract

Objective – The role of the academic librarian has become increasingly educative in nature. In this study, the critical friend method was introduced among teaching librarians in an academic setting of medicine and health sciences to ascertain whether this approach could be implemented for feedback on teaching of these librarians as part of their professional development.

Methods – We used a single intrinsic case study. Seven teaching librarians and one educator from the faculty of medicine participated, and they all provided and received feedback. These eight teachers worked in pairs, and each of them gave at least one lecture or seminar during the study period. The performance of one teacher and the associated classroom activities were observed by the critical friend and then evaluated and discussed. The outcome and effects of critical friendship were assessed by use of a questionnaire.

Results – The present results suggest that use of the critical friend method among teaching academic librarians can have a positive impact by achieving the following: strengthening shared values concerning teaching issues; promoting self-reflection, which can improve teaching; facilitating communication with colleagues; and reducing the sense of "loneliness" in teaching. This conclusion is also supported by the findings of previous studies.

Conclusion – The critical friend method described in this study can easily be implemented and developed among teaching librarians, provided that there is support from the organization. This will benefit the individual teaching librarian, as well as the organization at large.

Introduction

The role of the academic librarian has changed rapidly over the past decade. An important issue in this context is that these professionals are now being required to play an increasingly educative role in institutions of higher education. This can be described as a transition from being in charge of bibliographic instruction and sessions aimed at teaching skills in locating resources (expert-oriented tasks) to being educators in information retrieval and reference management with a context-based, learner-centred focus. Information literacy as a subject has gradually become embedded in the curricula of undergraduate, masters, and postgraduate programmes, as well as in the continuing work of researchers. Consequently, teaching in the area of information literacy today is associated with a context-based situation in the higher education environment (Biggs &Tang, 2007).

Handal (1999) has pointed out that university lecturers have extensive expertise in their own fields, but they are not always trained as professional teachers. He suggests that applying the critical friend method during peer observation is one of many approaches that can improve teaching skills among faculty. A similar situation exists for professional librarians, who do not undergo teacher training, because their education is focused on library and information science. Thus the evolving complex role of the academic librarian also requires new competencies and should include continued professional development in teaching and learning on the same level as that provided to the teaching faculty at the institution. The recent shift towards learning-centred teaching in higher education has prompted universities in Sweden to introduce incentives to encourage teaching staff to improve and raise their awareness of their teaching skills. These incentives include: formal teaching awards nominated by students or colleagues, nomination to academies of educators, and teaching portfolios for documentation and reflection on one's own teaching skills. It is equally important for the academic librarian to understand and use learning theories, and to become engaged in the teaching role (Giustini, 2008, 2009; Handal, 1999; Peacock 2001). In sum, fundamental requirements for academic librarians as teachers include having knowledge of theories and different learning styles, as well as the ability to communicate with academics (Peacock, 2001). With the emergence of this new role, redefinitions of the academic librarian have been offered, which emphasize that it is essential both to take

issues further in teaching and learning, and to encourage a culture of reflective practice as a teacher (Lupton, 2002). For example, by attending faculty development courses related to teaching in higher education, an academic librarian will receive an orientation in learning theories in a wider context and will also have the opportunity to create equal partnerships with faculty members (Peacock, 2001). Peer feedback for improving teaching skills for professional development is equally essential in the academic librarian's teaching role (Castle, 2009; Norbury 2001; Samson & McCrea, 2008; Snavely & Dewald, 2011).

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 (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Dahlgren et al., 2006; Handal, 1999). This method involves observing and giving friendly criticism on a colleague's teaching, and it is based on integrity and mutual trust between colleagues (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Dahlgren et al., 2006; Handal, 1999; O'Keefe, Lecouteur, Miller, & McGowan, 2009). This makes it possible to gain immediate access to a colleague's expertise and feedback, which can facilitate continued professional development. For the academic librarian as a teacher, the critical friend method can aid self-reflection and help improve teaching skills.

The aim of this study was to implement the critical friend method and explore the perceptions of the participants in an academic library setting. Other methods of peer review are not explored, as the intention of the research was not to compare the various methods, but instead to implement the critical friend method.

Literature Review

In the literature search, information was retrieved from these databases: Web of Science (SCI, SSCI), ERIC, Scopus, PubMed, Cinahl, LISTA, and SocIndex. The search engine Google Scholar was also used. The years 1980 to 2010 were included in the search strategies, and the following keywords were employed: critical friend, critical friendship, peer observation, academic librarians, professional development, teaching librarians, constructive criticism, structured feedback, and self-assessment. When searching on terms related to "critical friend," we also excluded terms related to "academic librarian" in order to limit the results to information focused on professional development in teaching. Use of the keywords "critical friend" and "peer observation" frequently identified articles in the school improvement literature, higher education, and more recently in the LIS literature. The search term "critical friend" was extended to also encompass "peer observation," because it seems that these two terms are used interchangeably in the literature. Citation tracking in Web of Science and Scopus was performed for some key articles on the topic "critical friend." Searching with the Google Scholar engine also identified papers presented at conferences. A final literature search for 2011 was performed.

The literature thus far has indicated that implementation of the critical friend method in various projects involving teachers has mainly yielded positive results that have contributed to effective faculty development. Most studies used qualitative methodology; some were quantitative. We found examples of beneficial outcomes for the individual teacher, including increased confidence, confirmation of good practice, a sense of belonging to a collegial community, and breaking the sense of isolation in teaching assignments (Dahlgren et al., 2006; O'Keefe et al., 2009). It has also been observed that more extensive improvement of teaching methods in the educational organization has led to increased networking and team building that creates a trusting working environment (Rosario, Lourdes, & De Juana, 2003). In the research report of a school reform project, Towndrow (2008) states that colleagues alone could help each other by using their reflective voices as a critical lens, concluding that "this strategic move has the power to put teachers, not policy makers, in the driving seat of educational transformation" (p. 919). An early study (Achinstein & Meyer, 1997), on the other hand, demonstrated the difficulty of combining criticism with

friendship, as tension arose between participants of the study. The study ran for three years and participation was voluntary. The authors state in their conclusion that the ability to critically challenge teacher colleagues comes with time and practice.

Thus, considering the different uses of the critical friend method, it is clear that this approach has mainly provided positive outcomes, despite the use of variables reflecting disparate roles and purposes of the critical friend at the various levels of educational organizations. However, the positive outcomes in the literature may be due to publication bias, as negative results are rarely published. Despite these positive results, it has also been pointed out that formalizing and regulating a critical friendship can have a negative impact if "critical friend" is used as a concept in official documents, thereby distorting the original meaning (Swaffield, 2007). However, it is not within the scope of this study to analyse the suitability of using the critical friendship method. Nevertheless, some clarification is needed, and hence these variables are discussed briefly below in the sections concerning the definition of critical friendship.

The "Friend" in Critical Friendship

As mentioned in the introduction, there are various contexts and formats in which the critical friendship approach has been implemented in the educational settings of schools and universities. But what is a critical friend, and how can we explain critical friendship to create a universal definition for this method? The literature on critical friendship often quotes this statement made by Costa and Kallick (1993): "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend" (p. 50). The term "critical friend" has been discussed further by researchers, which has resulted in a variety of definitions or statements. According to Swaffield (2007), critical friend refers to a supportive yet challenging relationship between professionals. Furthermore, the relationship between critical friends is one that encourages and cultivates constructive critique. The main conditions must exist; besides trust and commitment, it is necessary to have knowledge of the context of the teaching environment. For example, considering school improvement, Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) disapprove of large-scale use of critical friendship in the self-evaluation and policy-making of schools, and they have raised the question of whether "it may be difficult for the [consultant or leader] to stray too far from policy agendas and political objectives. The freedom to be intellectually subversive and challenging of received wisdom lies close to the heart of the critical friend's value and purpose" (p. 251). Thus Swaffield (2007) warns that the lack of knowledge of the local settings by outside experts can have negative consequences, because the critical friend model will become distorted and lose its original powerful form of support. In a research action study by Baskerville and Goldblatt, a critical friend has been defined "as a capable reflective practitioner … who establishes safe ways of working and negotiates shared understandings to support and challenge a colleague in the de-privatising of their practice" (2009, p. 218). These studies indicate that implementing a more formalized version of the critical friend concept can constitute one of many assessment methods when performed as part of career steps or tenure track (summative purposes). Therefore, using the critical friend method for formal peer observation (summative purposes) rather than for individual professional development (formative purposes) in a non-hierarchical setting can distort the original meaning of having a critical friend for feedback. Thus, the critical friend concept should not be confused with peer review of teaching for a formal reward system (summative purposes). Biggs and Tang (2007) also stress that peer review of teaching – having a critical friend – should be for formative purposes for reflection and improvement, and should be separated from summative assessment.

In this regard, we can ask what is the meaning and definition of "friend" in critical friendship, if it is used in connection with broader goals

rather than the individual's professional and personal development towards becoming a reflective teacher. Thus, it has been pointed out that we need to extend our understanding of the role of the critical friend, because little research has been done in this area (Swaffield, 2004). Gibbs and Angelides (2008), shed some light on the term "friendship" within the role and context of the critical friend and take Swaffield's criticism further for clarification. In their extensive conceptual analysis, Gibbs and Angelides conclude that "critical friends do not report their judgements to others" (p. 223) and then leave. They state that "critical friends visiting schools, giving feedback and then leaving can hardly be considered friendship, although it might well be critical!" (p. 223), indicating that using "friendship" to describe an evaluating process made by external experts (summative purposes) is not justified here. In short, these authors aim to give a more precise definition of "friendship." They base their discussion on historical writings such as those of Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Francis Bacon, and others in an attempt to depict the central characteristics of relationships between friends, including mutuality, awareness of care, engagement, and trust. Thus, Gibbs and Angelides argue that the notion of trust is an essential aspect of critical friendship that introduces "the competence of trust [which] functions as a means to an end [and] is the adequate fulfilment of commitments and functions at the centre of social structures. This is the trust in critical friends" (p. 219).

The "Critical" in Critical Friendship

Having established a definition of the friend in a critical friendship, we turn our attention to the built-in force in the critical friendship – the constructive criticism – that aids the development and improvement needed to become a reflective teacher. Handal (1999) has pointed out that, in academia and research, advancement of knowledge requires the critical tradition of quality assurance, including aspects such as the peer-review process for publication, the thesis defence, and journal clubs. Here, the tradition of constructive criticism is an accepted and essential activity to ensure the progression of research. In contrast, a similar tradition of collegial feedback and constructive criticism in teaching is not as prevalent in the higher education environment. The literature on assessment and evaluation has shown that teaching can be a lonely endeavour, and at the same time there are thresholds that must be crossed before allowing a peer to enter the sphere of teaching to make observations (Dahlgren et al., 2006; Handal, 1999). Feedback on teaching is gained primarily through evaluations provided by course participants (Handal, 1999), but relying solely on such assessments can have a built-in bias and may not deliver responses regarding feedback from all aspects of the teaching and learning situation (O'Keefe et al., 2009; Wellein, Ragucci, & Lapointe, 2009). Furthermore, self-assessment as a complementary tool for reflection and improvement may not be effective enough, if it is performed in isolation and without communication. Investigations of feedback and self-assessment have suggested that a more successful approach is to recognize that there is a need for an external source in goal-setting and continuous structured feedback on the learner's specific goals for improvement (Archer, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kevin & Regehr, 2005).

So the question is: how can learning aimed at improving teaching skills be accomplished? To fill the void of managing reflection in isolation, the teaching community in higher education has used the critical friendship method for some time as a complementary tool in the regular evaluations and assessments that are conducted to improve teaching methods and skills (Wellein et al., 2009). It has been shown that the built-in structured feedback in the context of critical friendship is essential for reflective thinking in the professional development of the individual. Moreover, as Gibbs and Angelides (2008) argue, it is the trust in the relationship that renders the giving and taking of criticism effective. In critical friendship, once mutual trust and engagement have been established, the next step is to provide and receive structured feedback, and then use the benefits attained to develop teaching.

However, structured feedback in constructive criticism can have different approaches in this communication process and may or may not be as helpful as expected. In an extensive literature review on assessment for learning, Wiliam (2011) asserted that "information does not become feedback unless it is provided with a system that can use that information to affect future performance" (p. 4). This statement is derived from a conceptual analysis study in which Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe the benefits of feedback as a tool and present a model based on three questions: What are the goals? What progress is being made towards the goals? What activities are needed to progress? After those questions are answered, this model also discriminates between four different levels of feedback: the task, the processing, the regulatory level, and the self level. Hattie and Timperley suggest that feedback seems to be most effective when it provides cues to directions on the processing level, and this in turn appears to help the receiver to pursue more challenging goals. They also conclude that giving feedback as "praise" or by offering comments like "that was good" is ineffective for professional improvement and development since comments made by participants in various studies remained on a general level that gave no specific cues about how to handle the task (i.e., the self level of giving feedback). General statements about "self" may even lead to negative effects such as insecurity. Furthermore, Wiliam (2011) has stated that feedback must do more than simply provide information: it must be domain-specific, which means that the information given must be generated within a particular system and for a particular purpose. In this context, information should alter the gap between the feedback and the goals set by the learner. When the gap is closed, a learning process directed towards improvement and reflection is begun, as has also been outlined in a review article by Norcini (2010) and in a critique of the literature by Archer (2010).

To summarize, in contrast to self-assessment and evaluation by course participants, the essence of critical friendship consists of structured feedback and constructive criticism that can encourage improvement and self-reflection. This means that having a critical friend involves doing the following in order to become a reflective teacher: setting goals, embracing the challenge of receiving feedback from a trusted colleague, and reflecting on the goals that have been set and the work that is intended to achieve improvement (Handal, 1999; Towndrow, 2008).

Our study focused on a critical friend who is an equal in a non-hierarchal setting for formative purposes only, and who shares the context and values with the one to be "criticized" and does not report observations to authorities or any official records, nor to other people (formative purposes).

The next section explains the process and outcomes of critical friendship applied in the context of the teaching environment of academic librarians. The critical friendship method used in this study emanated from the fundamental principles of mutual trust, engagement, and commitment in a non-hierarchal setting (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Dahlgren et al., 2006; Handal, 1999).

Methods

Context

Our chosen method was a single, intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995). A case study is suitable when contemporary events are the focus and behavioural events are not controlled (Yin, 2009). The project was carried out within the Library Unit of the Faculty of Medicine at Lund University in Sweden, which is a medium-sized integrated support and service resource centre for students, researchers, and faculty members. The Library Unit has facilities in two cities, Lund and Malmö, and it serves 2,500 full-time students enrolled in nine undergraduate degree programmes in medicine and health sciences, as well as 1,000 post-graduate students and 1,200 employees. Some of the education provided by the Faculty of Medicine Library Unit is conducted at the regional Skåne University Hospital. At the time this study was carried out, the Library Unit had 11 librarians who were in charge of

operating the educational and research resource centres of the Faculty of Medicine in both cities, and 4 of the 11 also served as contact librarians for all the educational programmes, including PhD studies. In Swedish universities, librarians do not belong to the academic staff, but rather to administrative staff, and their positions are not tenured but permanent. Thus formative assessment is most appropriate for the teaching librarians. Teaching performed by the librarians at that time consisted primarily of seminars and workshops, all related to information literacy and scientific communication.

In 2002, the management of the Library Unit implemented a professional development policy for the staff with the aim of requiring teaching librarians to at least take the basic course, "Introduction to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education," which is offered by the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the Faculty of Medicine. Giving and taking feedback are topics included in the course. The course program on teaching methods and learning is also part of the required continued education for faculty development. The idea of also making this course mandatory for teaching librarians was a first step in introducing these professionals to the teaching and learning methods and values applied in the parent institution. Participation in such courses is one of many strategies that are intended to maintain continued professional development in teaching and learning issues and to improve the teaching methods.

The Case Study

In 2009, a project using the critical friend method was initiated at the Library Unit. The Centre for Teaching and Learning was contacted for support, and the project was started at the beginning of the academic year and continued for 10 months. Participation was voluntary, and eight librarians signed up, none of whom had any previous experience in using the critical friendship method. The peer observation was to be used for formative purposes only. The participants had been asked to sign up in pairs if possible, but they did not. Accordingly, they were assigned to pairs by the teacher from the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Participants with similar prior experience and who had previously worked together and knew each other were assigned to the same pair.

The first group meeting took place in a neutral location, and the teacher from the Centre for Teaching and Learning had prepared readings and activities to be done. It was considered important to create a climate of trust. The intention was to establish a common understanding of the concept of critical friend and to discuss the participants' expectations and perceptions of potential difficulties that could emerge. After the first meeting, it was up to the members of the individual critical friend pairs to decide how to observe each other's teaching and how to give feedback. This opportunity to decide feedback criteria within the pairs was chosen since teaching forms could vary between giving lectures, facilitating group work, and leading seminars. To guide the process, the participants could use articles published by Handal (1999) and Dahlgren et al. (2006) and a critical friend protocol including an extensive collection of different questions for the peer observation. One participant dropped out at an early stage due to limited teaching during the project time and difficulty finding the time to participate. The teacher from the Centre for Teaching and Learning thus entered the project as a participant, instead of being just an observer as had been planned. Two additional meetings were held during the project period: one of these, the second meeting, was conducted after five months to present a report from the critical friend pairs and to discuss difficulties that had been experienced; the other (third) meeting took place at the end of the project and concerned the final reports from each pair. After the last meeting, a questionnaire (see Appendix) with seven open-ended questions was distributed to the participants. Two of the authors (GE and KJ) worked independently to evaluate the questionnaire responses by content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). An overview of the steps in the project is illustrated in Figure 1.

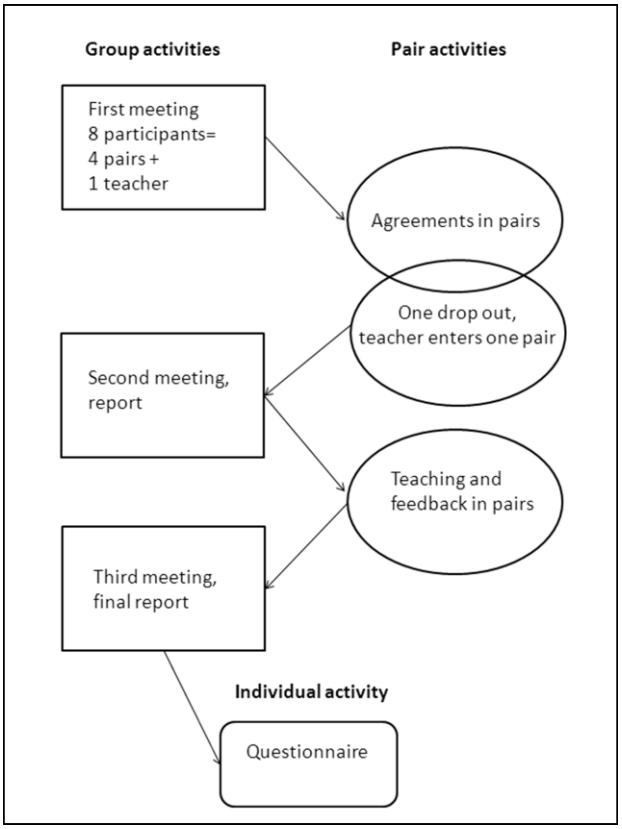

Figure 1
Overview of the project steps

Results

The project was completed by all eight participants (after replacement of one initial drop-out). After two preparatory meetings, at the third and final meeting, all pairs were to report what they had done and how they perceived the critical friend process and the results. The statements made at this meeting clearly showed that the participants had taken the opportunity to tailor the process to suit their individual needs. Overall, it seemed that their impressions of critical friendship were positive, but there were negative impressions as well. Some participants found it difficult to find the time for discussions and agreements, and in particular to be present at scheduled teaching. Some also would have preferred to select their own partner.

After the final meeting, all eight participants were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of open-ended items, and seven responded. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality, but in such a small group they were not anonymous to the authors. Four categories emerged from the descriptions of their critical friend experiences, and we chose to call these "peer learning," "change and innovation," "professional development," and "prerequisites"(Table 1).

Peer Learning

The participants discovered new ways of learning from the following: receiving feedback, observing someone else teaching, and giving feedback. Several pointed out that discussions with a colleague in an informal setting were important for learning.

> *"We had some very fruitful discussions when meeting afterwards for penetrating the structured evaluation outcome."*

Learning included increased awareness of positive aspects of their teaching, as well as things that could be improved. In particular, the participants stressed the realization of both their own strengths and those of the colleagues they were paired with.

> *"It was also very nice and uplifting getting constructive feedback on my work from a peer, particularly when the feedback highlighted things that I previously was unaware of."*

An important issue here was that learning with a partner reduced the feeling of being alone in the teaching situation.

> *"Having a critical friend gave me a sense of not being entirely on my own."*

Change and Innovation

Several participants mentioned that observing and being observed by a colleague had given them the opportunity to see things from a new perspective.

> *"It was very interesting to observe the participants from behind and see what they were doing at different stages of the lesson."*

Table 1
Categories and Codes in the Answers to the Open-ended Items in the Questionnaire

Peer learning	**Change/Innovation**	**Professional development**	**Prerequisites**
Informal communication about teaching	New perspectives	Teaching partnership	Mutual trust
Exchange of ideas and experiences	Creative discussions	Confidence building	Open-mindedness
Learning from observing and from being observed	Improvement of teaching	Librarian as a teacher	Willingness to change
New interaction with colleagues on an informal, "friendlier" basis		Utilize and apply colleagues' experiences and knowledge	Time and supportive management
Reduced feeling of loneliness		Reflection	

In the discussions that took place both before and after teaching sessions, the participants had opportunities to exchange knowledge and ideas about teaching.

> *"Very fruitful as a forum for exchange of ideas and 'tips and tricks.'"*

Several participants were convinced that the critical friend project had had immediate outcomes in improved teaching.

> *"An immediate impact of my teaching has been an improved 'student focus.'"*

> *"The students have benefited from the project, though in an indirect way."*

Professional Development

The project gave the participants opportunities to develop as professionals, not only through the activities in the critical friend pairs, but also as a result of the two project report meetings, once an open climate had been established at the first meeting.

> *"The meetings on two occasions with the whole group involved in the project gave us a sense of coming closer together and may be a suitable forum for educational matters in the future."*

A confirmation of the value of the new role of academic librarians as teachers was also seen as an outcome of the project.

> *"It has brought us together to reinforce our identity as teachers."*

The realization that it is possible to learn from colleagues can reinforce the development of the professional community.

> *"CF can open up new perspectives and identify 'hidden jewels' in the other person's teaching."*

Some of the participants pointed out that an increased awareness of personal strengths can augment professional development.

> *"I became more confident in what I was doing."*

An important aspect of professional development is reflection, and this was mentioned by some of the participants.

> *"Gives you opportunity to reflect on your own teaching."*

Prerequisites

The advice or recommendations that emerged from the informants' responses indicated that

the prerequisites for a successful critical friend process include aspects such as the importance of mutual trust and respect between the members of the friend pair.

> *"You must have an open mind, be yourself, humble and open."*

An attitude of openness and willingness to change is also a prerequisite for the success of a critical friend project.

The external conditions mentioned most often concerned having the following: the time and the opportunity to engage in the project; management that was explicitly supportive and willing to understand the purpose in a broader perspective and context; the ability to recognize the positive contribution of professional improvement to the organization at large.

> *"Calculate the time carefully – it takes more time than you might think."*

We also found that the working process differed among the pairs. Some worked in a more structured manner, using a common pre-formed evaluation protocol and pre-meetings before each teaching session, whereas others worked in an unstructured fashion without prior discussion about what to evaluate or to select any common evaluation criteria.

The most important thing that people learned about their own teaching was an improved awareness of their own actions (such as moving around, turning away, or not speaking loudly enough), and of what their students did during teaching and how easily they became distracted. They also learned to make more use of peer learning for the students by facilitating the exchange of prior knowledge and experiences between them.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the critical friend method. We found two articles, a qualitative method analysis by Dahlgren et al. (2006) and a conceptual study by Handal (1999), which evoked interest in the concept. Using our professional experience we decided to implement a project. We also wanted to find out what the results in the literature showed. As the project was running, we searched the literature further for deeper knowledge of the critical friend method to enhance the professional development of academic librarians as teachers, which suited our context. The findings in our literature search and our case study showed some positive outcomes.

The participants who responded to the questionnaire were favourable to giving and receiving structured feedback in peer observations performed with a colleague. One participant stressed that getting structured feedback was more useful than hearing the general statement "that was good." This agrees with results reported in a meta-analysis by Hattie and Timperley (2007), indicating that professional development may be promoted by feedback given on the task level, that is, during setting up of goals, identifying needs, and reflecting on the challenge. Some participants experienced giving feedback as more of a challenge than they had expected. Another positive perception was that the project decreased the feeling of being alone in the teaching situation, and this beneficial outcome has also been highlighted in previous peer observation projects (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Dahlgren et al., 2006; Handal, 1999). Using a critical friend can fill the void when results of course assessment are seldom or never delivered to the teaching librarian, a situation that often arises when teaching in undergraduate programmes because they are not always compulsory. Furthermore, in independent workshops and courses given for faculty members, whether or not course assessments are performed depends on how the teacher perceives the value of such evaluation. In cases like that, it appears that the critical friend method can be a useful way to fill the gap.

One of the outcomes of the present critical friend project suggests that this method has strengthened a number of values shared by the teaching librarians, such as self-reflection and

learning, as well as better communication with colleagues. The respondents pointed out that such an undertaking takes time (like any professional development) and that management should understand the value of the activity and allow it to take the time that is needed. Nonetheless, even though the participants had allocated time for the activity, they still had to consider schedules and other tasks concurrently and this was often perceived as a distraction. Thus it is clear that shared values that include a clear vision aligned with the organizational values and beliefs are needed to support and allow manifestation of an activity that is intended to promote learning and professional development through teamwork (Senge, 2006).

The strengths of our study include the fact that we searched the literature for possibilities of professional development of academic librarians as teachers, and then we applied our findings in a realistic setting with no special resources allocated, except for the teacher from the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Another advantage was the high degree of completion of the project, with only one drop-out at an early stage. Hattie (2009) has identified themes that are important for professional development of teachers that can have an effect on the outcomes of students. We applied most of those themes in our intervention: involvement of an external expert; engagement; teachers talking to teachers; and opportunities to challenge pre-existing beliefs about learning.

The weaknesses of our investigation were the low number of participants, the lack of anonymity, and the fact that participation was voluntary. Some participants might thus have been unwilling to report negative perceptions. It is plausible that individuals who take part voluntarily in a project will be inclined to perceive outcomes as positive. Another limitation was that the authors were also participants, and so other participants may have been less inclined to state negative feelings and outcomes. However, Hattie (2009) has reported that voluntary involvement did not affect the outcomes of various studies described in the literature. Another limitation of the current work was that the only outcomes considered were the perceptions of the participants; we were not able to study actual results as improved teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The critical friend method described in this study can easily be implemented and developed among teaching librarians, which may benefit the individual librarian as well as the organization at large. The shared values of working in a feedback context to achieve reflection, improvement, and development have the potential to create continuity on the level of the individual professional and to contribute to the entire organization. In this approach, it also seems to be an advantage to have a coach who is a teacher that is familiar with the organization. Since this is just a single case study, further studies are needed, preferably using and comparing other methods.

However, as one of the participants in the present study stated:

> *"Be yourself, humble and open. This is not a competition. It is a great opportunity for your professional development to utilize and apply the experiences and knowledge of your colleagues. There is no course fee, and there are no travel expenses!"*

Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to all our colleagues who participated in and contributed to the project. This project was first presented at the EAHIL Conference, UCL, Brussels, Belgium, 4-6 July, 2012.

All three authors participated in the project as librarians (YHO, KJ) and as a teacher (GE). All authors took part in drafting the manuscript and performing the critical reviews, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Appendix

Critical Friend: The Project Questionnaire

Briefly describe how you worked together with your critical friend, in particular considering how you reached consensus on the criteria for evaluation!

What aspects of your participation in the critical friend project were positive?

What was the most important thing you learned by taking part in the critical friend project?

Do you think you will change anything in your teaching as a result of the critical friend project?

Besides professional development of teaching, do you feel that work in the critical friend project has had any other effects?

Will you continue to use the critical friend method even if the organized activities with a group leader are no longer conducted? Why or why not?

Do you have any advice or recommendations you would like to give to others who want to test the critical friend method?