

"We're Completely the Same Kind of Lunatic"

Friendship as Method in Self-Study Research

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Collaboration

Critical Friendship

Friendship

Friendship As Method

Self-study of Creative Practice

As collaborative theatre-makers, researchers, and teachers of theatre in higher education in South Africa, self-study allows us to explore the interactions between our work as theatre artists and our theoretical interests in education, along pathways “at the intersection between theory and practice, research and pedagogy” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 827). Traveling these pathways, we have found ourselves often in a space of “in-betweenness” (Meskin & van der Walt, 2010), exploring the lacunae between theatre, teaching, and research, within an educational context. Our critical friendship dates back to 2004, since when we have helped each other “provoke new ideas and interpretations, question [our] assumptions, and participate in open, honest, and constructive feedback” (Samaras, 2011, p. 75). On our journey, our collaborative relationship that has shaped our practice and our research for many years has remained constant. In this paper, we put that relationship at the centre of our research by connecting it to the notion of “critical friends” in self-study methodology and interrogate how the threads of our collaboration and friendship interweave with the multifaceted tapestry of self-study.

Objectives

A core element of self-study research is making use of ‘critical friends’, who act as “interested, invested partner[s] in the research endeavour” (Meskin et al., 2014, p. 9). The value of critical friends is noted in much self-study research (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2010; Samaras, 2011). In this paper, we seek to extend this thinking, as well as Tillman-Healy’s (2003) notion of “friendship as method”, and interrogate our own critical friend dyad to offer one ‘enactment’ of a critical friendship collaboration.

Our critical friendship, which began as a casual friendship at work and deepened over many years into a close personal friendship beyond the world of work, is a result of the continued thinking together that underpins everything that we do in our collaborative practice as co-creators, co-directors, and co-researchers. In our collaborative work, we have engaged in an ongoing process of what Samaras (2011) calls “dialogic validity” (p. 219) rooted in our longstanding friendship, through our continued conversations, sometimes amicable and sometimes contested (often informal and unrecorded), that have helped to shape our thinking. These intersubjective exchanges create a dialogic space in which our ideas are tested, debated, and built upon, through encouragement and critical engagement. We believe that it is our personal friendship that gives the critical aspect its particular power.

Our intention in this paper is to position the notion of *friendship* at the centre of self-study research, through exploring our enactment of critical friendship, as a creative expansion of the methodology. Thus, we ask:

1. How does our personal, creative, and collaborative friendship impact our critical friend relationship as self-study researchers?
2. How do we understand the concept and functioning of critical friendship from this perspective?

In so doing, we seek to “develop understanding of practice that then turns back on itself to be useful both to the self-engaged in the practice and others who are practitioners” (Pinnegar, et al., 2010, p. 205).

Methods

To explore our critical friendship, we examined our own collaborative practice through the use of Reciprocal Self Interviews (RSI) (Meskin et al., 2014), as well as a lengthy recorded conversation where we discussed our ways of working together¹. In both, we used questioning and dialogue to excavate nodal moments where our friendship enabled a deeper experience of critique and knowledge exchange. In so doing, we were enacting critical friendship, as described by Costa and Kallick (1993), where the critical friend

is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. (p. 50)

Critique “as a friend” is important; in our experience, our personal friendship allows a more probing critique, one that reflects our insights into who we are as people, and affects how such critique is received. We do not shy away from the difficult or contested; rather, our personal friendship serves as a safe space, protecting us as we grapple with the most challenging aspects of our work. Writing about the RSI as a method, we observed:

It was like looking into the mirror...we are not always comfortable with what we see, but the more we explore our inward gaze and receive feedback from the critical friend, the more our image can shift, evolve and acquire depth, complexity and texture... (Meskin et al., 2014, p. 15)

The RSI provided important markers of our critical friendship, in terms of both the content generated and the methodological practice, which we have continued to explore.

Our recent work using object inquiry to understand and research creative practice (see Meskin et al., 2017) has also impacted how we imagine our personal friendship as the key to the critical friend relationship we enjoy. After carrying out the RSI, and as we began writing this paper, we began to consider how many everyday objects are present when we are together and how their materiality operates as a liberating mechanism for our creative, critical work together (Pahl, 2010; Mitchell, 2011). We examined our critical friendship retrospectively, looking to identify significant objects which form a part of our working process. We then used these objects as anchor points; both their denotative and connotative meanings allowing us to explore different aspects of the understanding we seek to give and receive as critical friends. In this way, we construct a metacognitive discussion between friends about using friendship as a research technique, enabling a unique shared/sharing process that contributes to our educational research. Thus, we offer here an “exemplar” (Mishler, 1990, p. 448) of critical friendship in action; a critical friendship with the emphasis on the friendship, rather than the critique, foregrounding the value of collaborative practice as art, teaching and learning, and research.

A Critical Friends Toolbox

Our collaborative partnership is rooted in our personal friendship. Like most creative collaborations, ours evolved out of a casual work relationship, and as the professional collaboration grew, so did our sense of personal commitment to each other. As we learned to work together as co-creators of theatre work, as co-directors of scripted texts, as co-researchers of creative practice, and as scholarly co-authors, so we began to share other aspects of our lives with each other, with increasing intimacy and trust. Our collaboration thus began organically and evolved instinctively over the

progress of our many projects together. In our recorded conversation, we discussed this ‘casual’ beginning to our collaborative work:

Tamar: And then I remember talking about that TIE² project, and thinking this is interesting, she gets me, and we were talking about...

Tanya: We're completely the same kind of lunatic.

Tamar: Yes, we were talking about how to make 'Macbeth' accessible and what would we do with it, and how would we make it work with these kids But I mean we didn't sit down to discuss this is what we're going to do. It was very kind of informal... in terms of the actual collaboration, we never sat down and went okay, now we are going to have a collaboration. It just kind of happened.

This casual and organic beginning has continued to set the tone for our work together. We have never developed formal structures or procedures for our collaborative work; rather, we tend to work in an organic and visceral way, making what Tamar calls “a heart connection and a head connection” to our work.

To understand our practice more fully, and to advocate for self-study of creative practice, by exploring how our personal and critical friendship underpins our research and demonstrating the material and immaterial elements that make it work—what makes us “completely the same kind of lunatic”—we have constructed our Critical Friends Toolbox from the objects we identified as being significant in our working together. The objects stand for and embody our understandings of our own critical friend relationship. In the rest of this paper, we will unpack this metaphorical toolbox to demonstrate what we do, how we do it, and why.

A Bottle of Wine and Two Glasses

At the centre of our critical friendship is an ability to “think together” (van der Walt, 2018), and the basis of this shared thinking is dialogic, as Tamar noted in our recorded conversation:

The dialogic part for me is critical. It's not theoretical, it is dialogic. So we ask questions of each other, not in a kind of like academic way. But the questioning is also about discovering. So we're both discovering simultaneously. So it's an exchange of ideas that happens in a question and answer kind of way but it's not like one person has all the questions and the other person has all the answers. So it becomes a dialogic exchange.

We co-construct meaning in an iterative and evolving process that we have irreverently termed “*over-wine thinking*” (hence, the significance of the wine bottle). John-Steiner (2000) observes that “Generative ideas emerge from joint thinking, from significant conversations, and from sustained, shared struggles to achieve new insights by partners in thought” (p. 3).

Our ‘significant conversations’ demonstrate “shared sensibilities and ways of seeing” (Colin & Sachsemaier, 2016, p. 13), or, more simply, that ‘two heads are better than one’. Each participant brings to this process their own sets of ‘knowings’, and through shared thinking, places those knowings at the disposal of others in the collaborative relationship. When this happens, as in our critical friendship, a sense of mutuality and interdependence emerges, and it is a relationship both synergistic and symbiotic.

The wine points to the playfulness and fun in our relationship. Our critical friendship happens under conditions of spontaneity, in ways that are not always serious, accompanied by a playfulness that shifts the feelings associated with a project into a realm of liberated thinking. According to Gordon (2009), what establishes something as play is “a set of features that shift the frame of an activity from one domain to another through the meta-message that ‘this is play’. . . Playfulness is the attitude that makes this shift possible” (p. 4). The wine here operates as the metaphorical lever to open the experience to that meta-message; we can talk about big ideas and serious matters, without taking ourselves so seriously, within a space of playful possibilities. This is a generative space of “freedom and connection [that] makes transformation possible” (Gordon, 2009, p. 5).

A Digital Voice Recorder

The voice recorder captures dialogue as it happens. Listening to our recorded conversations, we hear a flow of dialogue, often overlapping, punctuated by questions and challenges to each other to think in different ways; underlying it all is the sense of excitement to be engaged in this exercise of discovery.

In these conversations, the dialogic thinking and co-construction of meaning operate as processes of mutual appropriation, or 'speaking back' by which we are able to help each other to articulate what we know instinctively and implicitly, or what we are in the process of coming to know, as we grasp and articulate the emergent meanings and knowledge that lie within our work. The recorder becomes the vehicle for reflecting on both critique and questioning, allowing them to become generative factors in our work.

Critique, of course, can be a destructive force if mishandled. To avoid this, we try first to ensure that our critique is constructive, and second, to see the critique as something separate from our friendship, and not personal. We have found ourselves able to do this well because we are such good personal friends which allows us to trust the positive intentions behind any critique. Being constructive is equally significant; as Tamar noted, "There's no use to criticism if it's not constructive, particularly in the theatre. Why would you tell somebody that something's terrible if you can't tell them how to fix it?" In theatre, critique is part of our DNA, and the constant message is to 'take the note'³.

The voice recordings of our dialogues also reveal the presence of lateral thinking, or "thinking outside of the box". Our thinking process shows no linear logic; rather, as Tanya observes, "it's inventive, and it's creative, and it's sort of a little bit off the wall, but it takes us somewhere in a discursive way". This does not mean that we agree about everything; the discursive and dialogic space of our shared thinking is also a highly contested space. Indeed, disagreement and contestation are key components of the critical friendship dynamic; we see such contestations as wrestling with each other's ideas, which allows us to find alternative meanings and perspectives in our practice.

A Teapot and Teacups

We have probably drunk a million cups of tea together, and for us, tea signifies the power of listening and empathy. Our collaboration works because it is based on a willingness and openness to listening. Our friendship embodies "dialogic empathy" (Cummings, 2016), a "constant and open-ended engagement, responding and reacting to the other as actors respond to fellow actors" (Cummings, 2016, p. 6). Empathy is a crucial component of theatre practice, and we believe that our friendship, measured in those infinite cups of tea, offers a similar engagement in relation to our self-study research. Our conversations reflect the same dynamic quality in a process of recursive 'responsive engagement' where meaning emerges from and through engagement with the other. It is the opportunity to uncover and seek out new perspectives that makes an empathetic, dialogic friendship so powerful a research tool.

We share a willingness to compromise, to find the 'in-between' of our ideas, in what John-Steiner (2000) calls "mutual appropriation", the "result of sustained engagement during which partners hear, struggle with, and reach for one another's thoughts and ideas" (p. 199). Over the years of our friendship, we have learned that as long as we can boil the kettle and make tea, we can share our ideas, our struggles, our decisions, our reasons for being and doing, in a space free of judgment.

A Notebook

Our work begins with verbal brainstorming; we throw out ideas, phrases, references we think might be useful, crazy thoughts and eccentric connections; we make lists, play with word associations, doodle, and scribble down as much as we can. The notebook is the crucial physical accompaniment to this process, embodying the creative meandering which Czikszentmihalyi (2014) calls a "flow experience", or

The holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. ... It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next.... (p. 136-137)

Later, he defines this as an autotelic activity, or “things people seem to do for the activity’s own sake” (p. 229). Extending this idea, Sawyer (2003) describes group flow as the state where “everything seems to come naturally; the performers are in interactional synchrony. . . [and] each of the group members can feel as if they are able to anticipate what their fellow performers will do before they do it” (2003, Kindle edition, loc 1113 of 5563). Sawyer (2003) calls this state “a magical kind of high” (Kindle edition, loc 1169 of 5563), where the group is completely immersed in the joy of their task, sparking ideas off each other in a close interplay between creative minds that generates a deep sense of pleasure. Our critical friendship is an embodied example of group flow in action, as we work almost instinctively and seamlessly off each other’s ideas. It allows us to work organically ‘at the speed of thinking’ in a manner that is intuitive and visceral, following the map in our notebooks.

Chocolate Brownies

We bond over chocolate; the brownies stand for the trust that underpins our friendship, and which is vitally important in researching our practice. Working with a critical friend to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of one’s study requires sharing our “most current, least finished work” (Farrell, 2001, p. 151). This is when we need the most help; sometimes we are looking for answers, sometimes for guidance, sometimes for reminders, and sometimes just a shoulder to cry on and a voice telling us to get on with it. Only with trust are these things possible.

This speaks to Farrell’s (2001) notion of “instrumental intimacy” (p. 151), which he says:

...occurs when each begins to use the mind of the other as if it were an extension of his own...The boundaries between the self and other diminish until the members are able to think out loud together as if they are one person...it is common for the participants to find their ideas emerging in a cascading flow, such that neither one knows or cares who thought of the idea first. (p. 157-158)

This can only happen when members of a group, over time, deepen their sense of commitment to each other and their shared work. Such sharing requires “trust and confidence” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 190), allowing the participants to trust each other enough to make themselves vulnerable and open their ideas to comment and criticism by others.

We trust each other implicitly, and we use this trust as a way of managing the risks of vulnerability and opening oneself to criticism. Because we know each other so well, and because we have worked together so long, we have a well-developed ‘shorthand’ that allows us to grapple with more and more challenging and complex ideas in our work, through a deep emotional and intellectual connection that results from our friendship . . . and a whole lot of chocolate brownies!

A Trusty Computer

Our conversations become emergent texts which we then share back and forth; each time the feedback operates as another level of critical engagement, echoing Samaras’ (2011) hermeneutic spiral. It is a recursive process that keeps working through the stages of the research, with the level of interrogation deepening with each new round. The computer is the vehicle for this process, and by the time a paper, for example, is complete, there are numerous versions in our shared Dropbox folder. In this process, we pare away the tangential aspects to reach the core focus of a study, with each of us taking a turn to play the editing game. By the time the final draft is complete, our joint-voices are inscribed in every paragraph and every word choice.

This co-construction of meaning is a product of John-Steiner’s (2000) notion of “connected knowing” (p. 101). If two (or more) minds are working together creatively, then the meanings of their ideas and their insights have to be constructed through dialogue and mutual meaning-making, which is the root of co-constructed meaning. John-Steiner (2000) explains that “Thought communities enable participants to engage in the co-construction of knowledge as interdependent intellectual and emotional processes” (p. 196). Our critical friendship, we believe, operates as such a “thought community” and it does so because we share freely, without fear, embracing vulnerability as the necessary precursor to generating knowledge, allowing us to build something that is more than either of us might produce alone. This is the essence of critical friendship and what gives it its value as a core component of self-study methodology.

A Map or Guidebook

We consider ourselves experts in academic tourism, which is of course fun. But it is not just for fun! For us, the map points to the necessity in the critical friendship of moving outside one's comfort zone, opening one's self up to new experiences and new possibilities, just as travel does. The critical friendship space is one of both comfort and discomfort; even the most constructive criticism can be painful. However, one must embrace the discomfort because it is those spaces that "moments of ideation" (van der Walt, 2018) can occur.

We see our travel experiences as formative in creating the wellspring of our ideas. Stepping outside of one's normal environment—either literally or metaphorically—makes one think differently; when one shares those different thoughts with someone else in dialogue, this leads to more thinking, in an infinite cycle of learning. Travel gives one time to 'wonder'; all those potentially dead spaces—airports, planes, trains, automobiles, queues— become living spaces in which to have fruitful discussions and generate ideas. As we noted in conversation:

Tamar: Sometimes it is important to get away from our normal environment to discuss our project. Definitely.

Tanya: Absolutely. Trains, planes, and... Tamar: And automobiles.

Tanya: And automobiles, and glasses of wine and...

Tamar: Absolutely. I can't recommend it enough. That's absolutely an essential part of it.

Tanya: It is, because you do need to be out of the space of everyday life, of the demands of the department, the demands of the children.

Tamar: And also, I think what happens when you go into a new space, whatever new space it is, you're taken out of a comfort zone in some way. So it makes you think and as soon as you think, things occur to you. And then because you have a dialogue, that thinking can then lead to more thinking; you are kind of thinking tangentially. And I think that happens when you move out of your habitual zones.

Tanya: Yes. And I think we've always been very good at kind of using those sort of strange spaces, like sitting on planes, we've always been quite good at using that sort of dead space, dead time, as a space in which to do a whole lot of creative thinking.

By moving out of our comfort zone, and opening ourselves up to a range of experiences, we use the time and the place of travel as generative spaces for problem finding and problem-solving (Sawyer, 2003, 2007).

Photographs

At heart, collaboration involves a relationship between two or more people, who enter into a relationship of mutual interdependence. Simon Murray (2016) refers to this as a "force field where two or more people, practices, groups or organizations 'meet' to create an outcome (known or unknown) It is the spatial and dialectical 'betweenness' of collaboration" (p. 36). The idea of 'betweenness' aptly describes our critical friendship and is captured in this collage of photographs of us in spaces that are not academic— traveling, drinking wine in Buenos Aires, at Machu Pichu, on Easter Island, outside Shakespeare's house, having adventures, having fun, and creating a space of mutuality. Our critical friendship, like the photograph, is intersubjective and takes place in the intersectional spaces between our individual subjectivities. For self-study, this speaks to the interactional nature of the research; it is living, breathing, active engagement of the self with someone else, in a community, in the world, which gives it the power to become a change agent, to make a difference, for what Hamilton and Pinnegar (2015) call the "absent others" (p. 147). This is the "so what of what we do as teachers" (Samaras, 2011, p. 72), and as artists or researchers.

Figure 1



Conclusion

This discussion of how our critical friendship and our collaborative working process function attempts to capture the tone of our friendship and its playful nature; and to demonstrate the theoretical concepts that explain the 'why' of our friendship. In doing so, we hope to help self-study researchers expand the potential of critical friendship, through highlighting the significance of the *friendship* part of the descriptor. We are aware that not all researcher relationships are like ours, and they do not need to be; what matters is the intent to imagine the critical friendship as a creative, collaborative space in which it is possible both to work and to play. We believe that the creative, collaborative friendship space constitutes a mutual zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; John-Steiner, 2000) where we teach and learn simultaneously, and enrich each other in the process.

¹The RSI and the recorded conversation were then transcribed and analyzed closely to reveal "manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships" (Mouton, 2001 p.108). All the quoted observations and insights from our data which are included in this paper are from the recorded conversation.

²Theatre in Education

³ Directors frame their critique as notes given to performers and technical crew members during rehearsals, which form the basis for improving the work and are fundamental to the art form. Any serious theatre practitioner understands the necessity of listening to these observations in order to make their work better; not to do so would be self-defeating. Hence, the aphorism.

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