

The irony at a school like ours – traditional, communal, and prescriptive – is that we *assume* peer-to-peer professional development. Yet, we are likely more isolated *from* one another precisely because we live, work, and play *with* one another. Our professional modes of communication can be circumvented by the time and lifestyle constraints inherent in boarding school cultures. Inviting NSRF and Critical Friends to the school represented an acknowledgement of a cultural paradox in all boarding schools that alienates its faculty members from professional intimacy. Boarding school faculty can easily fall into this trap. At The Hill School, we had acknowledged this dilemma four years ago, but we floundered with an approach to breaking down barriers and building up professional alliances. Critical Friends training has likely given us the template we were only able to previously intuit. By day three of the training, seven

us knew that the responsibility of creating a culture of peer-assisted professional development would be ours. Michele would be leaving in two days. We braced ourselves for some culminating protocols on day four – we knew we'd have to make a plan for our future on day five.

Moving and looking forward are two very different realities. With the help of Critical Friends training, our team looked at the start of the school year in September as the jumping off point for a pilot program of volunteers. Critical Friends teams at The Hill School will be comprised of volunteers. Next, we looked closely at how to spend the “coin of the realm” – time. Again, it's probable that time issues are similar in nature at all boarding schools. This is where moving forward takes on new meaning. We are planning to ask for “imbedded,” scheduled academic and co-curricular time to meet in teams of 8-12 for a

total of twenty-five hours over the course of the year. We plan to host a luncheon during the first week of faculty meetings that will help us gauge interest. From there, we'll follow an action plan we created on day five, replete with a list of concerns and agreements. We expect, now, that with an actionable plan, time and willing “friends”, that professional development is no longer an assumption.

Armed with a menu of protocols and the empiricism of their efficacy, our small team is prepared to spread the collegiality and communication NSRF and Critical Friends coaches so deftly instill during training. There will be danger zones. We're getting better at navigating them.

Questions/Comments?  
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**ARTICLE EXCERPT:  
“CRITICAL  
FRIENDSHIP  
CIRCLES: THE  
CULTURAL  
CHALLENGE OF**

**COOL FEEDBACK.” BY  
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Critical Friendship Groups (CFGs) or circles (CFCs) are groups of critical friends who meet for feedback on practice. Typically a protocol is used to minimize confusion and conflict and maximize time use and useful focused feedback. Although the concept of Critical Friendship has a history of over 30 years in the field of education, the idea of critical Friends (CFs) is not as widespread in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). A longitudinal grounded theory study that uses reflective essays, focus groups, and transcripts of CFC meetings as data was carried out at an

American university in Egypt using 95 participants in an MATESOL program. Four important theoretical categories were revealed: cultural intolerance to open negativity, fear and/or rejection of giving or receiving cool feedback, uncertainty about and neglect of the use of protocols and appropriate language as well as usefulness in terms of personal and professional growth.

The first important issue for the success of CFCs in this non-Western cultural context was metacognitive understanding of the differences in cultural orientation towards cool and challenging feedback. Teachers needed to understand their own cultural orientations, those of their

fellow teachers and how this affected their fears, usages of protocols and ultimate goals. The second important issue was training in language use. Second language users needed guidance with protocols and what pragmatic use of language was needed for successful CFC meetings. While almost all participants in the research project agreed on the usefulness of CFCs, many found immense challenges due to culture, especially in the phase of cool feedback.

Wachob, P. (2011). Critical Friendship Circles: the cultural challenge of cool feedback. *Professional Development in Education*, 37:3, 353-372.

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**A FRIEND OF THE NSRF: “COLLABORATIVE ART, EMPOWERING EDUCATION” By Laura Bryant about Collaborative Artist Joe LaMantia, Bloomington IN**

Visual artists work in all kinds of media. Community artist Joe LaMantia uses many media in his

work, too, but his primary medium by far is people.

“My artistic vision is about the process,” says LaMantia, who has been leading collaborative, community-based public art projects since 1993. Over the last two decades, he has worked on more than 100 school-based projects, primarily in Indiana.

LaMantia’s method is holistic and all-inclusive. Unlike artists who may come to a project with preconceived designs to be executed, LaMantia starts by meeting with students, parents, and school personnel to gather ideas and inspiration. When he’s collected a range of ideas, he designs the project with the aid of a core group representing the school community. “The end result is a creative process that empowers each individual with a sense of being part of the work of art,” he says.

Through pitch-in lunches, community suppers, class meetings, and other conversations, LaMantia’s projects proceed from design to creation to installation. The end results are unusual public art works uniquely related to a school’s history, students, or curriculum. For example:

**The Villagers’ Bell Tower at Glens Valley Elementary School, Indianapolis IN.**