In the last two Tool Fairs, those who were invited to present a Tool for Learning were assigned a “Critical Friend”. The idea was to have someone who would help the presenter to think critically about the Tool and the workshop and get more from the process as a result.

The Tools For Learning Strategy includes the concept of the “Journey of a Tool”. The idea here is that Tools for Learning go through different stages of development and adaptation. The strategy envisages the publication of Tools in the online Toolbox, with the opportunity for peers to comment on and use them; it envisages that Tool users will comment on how it went and what changes might be made to develop the Tool. The strategy envisages events such as the Tool Fairs, where peers gather to share Tools, critically evaluate them and collaborate on their development and adaptation. Those who present Tools for Learning, either face-to-face or online, are called “originators” (when they actually are); “curators” (people who take care of the Tool on this part of its journey) or “developers” (people who see the potential of the Tool and work on changing, growing or adapting it for different audiences). They can be a combination of all three. A Critical Friend in this context is someone who helps the originator/curator/developer during the process of presenting, developing, reflecting
Friends

I’m assuming we are quite at home with the term “Friend”. In this context I would emphasise the role of friend as someone who travels with you, who cares about how things are going for you, has your best interests at heart and who is prepared to “tell it like it is”. In other words, a friend who respects what you do but isn’t afraid to challenge you, a friend as a support.

Critical

But what about the word “critical”? It could be taken to mean negatively judgmental, but that of course is not what we have in mind here. Other definitions include the idea of careful evaluation and judgment, which is constructive rather than destructive. Often the adjective is associated with turning points: scientifically, it is used to describe “a point at which an abrupt change in quality, property or state occurs” (for example, a critical point for water is 100 degrees at normal atmospheric pressure). It can, of course, also be used about a turning point in thinking or opinion.

When marking Masters level assignments, a common problem is that there is too much description and not enough critical reflection. The student has described what happened, what they saw and maybe even how they felt, but there is a lack of attention to processing that experience; not enough effort is made to “unpack” what happened; to ask – and answer - critical questions about it. It’s exactly the same in experiential learning. Without the reviewing – the critical reflection – of the experience, much of the potential learning is lost. That’s where the challenge often is: taking the time and finding a process to draw out learning. Critical Friends help us to be more disciplined and thorough through their impact on our reflection.

“What the hell are you bugging me about this for? I've still got to prepare my workshop!"

Often the benefits of critical reflection are not appreciated until the investment of time is made!

Critical Friends at the Tool Fair

Going back to our presenters at the Tool Fair: they have volunteered to present a tool that they have originated, developed or are currently looking after (curating). They have the option to simply present and start a discussion or they can get the assembled group of peers to engage with the Tool as any other group of learners would. When this happens, the presenter is offering to carry the Tool into the next stage of its journey. He or she is shining a light on the Tool, voluntarily putting it under scrutiny. Generally, the presenter has already invested considerable time, energy and thought in this Tool and now a group of peers is going to learn about it and hopefully take it away and use it. Those peers are probably also going to evaluate it and make a judgment about it. There will be a lot for the presenter to think about – not only the practicalities of running the workshop, but also the follow up thinking. What to make of the reactions to the Tool?

Questions

The Critical Friends at the Tool Fair have the role of supporting the presenters in their preparation and reviewing of the experience. In some ways they are like a personal facilitator, a coach or mentor. And what do these Critical Friends actually do? Well, they might bring a cup of coffee when
preparation time is running out or give a high-five when the peers respond well to the presentation, but most importantly they ask probing questions...

The briefing for the Critical Friends includes suggested questions for before and after the workshop. For example...

- What are your success criteria for your workshop?
- What do you see as the potential areas for development of your tool?
- Which areas of the tool or your presentation would you particularly like some feedback on?
- Which areas of the workshop or the tool itself are you least confident about?

And for after the workshop...

- How did it go from your perspective? - What did you do well?
- What did you learn about your tool and its application?
- What changes would you now make to your tool?
- What particular competencies do users of the tool need to develop?
- How could you develop your written presentation of the tool (including the upload to Tool Box)?

Being a Critical Friend requires some specific **skills**: the ability to **listen** and ask effective **questions** and the ability to develop rapport quickly. The Critical Friend might also offer some specific, constructive **feedback**. They might provide some evidence to support or challenge the conclusions. In order to do that, Critical Friends need to be **present** in the workshop, they may need to take notes and they need to balance engaging in the experience with observing what is happening for the presenter.

"OK, now I can see things in a different light, you’ve given me some things to think about"

The questions are designed to help people think and see different perspectives. The feedback needs to be specific, accurate and relevant.

**Potential**

The provision of Critical Friends at Tool Fairs is a simple process to support and develop individuals and the Tools they present. Perhaps it has other potential? For example, the idea is already being used by one **trainer pool** for peer support. Could it be used outside the Tool Fair for Tools for Learning? If you have put a Tool into the online Toolbox, you could also ask to have a **conversation** (by email or Skype) with a volunteer peer who could ask you some challenging questions about it.

Perhaps you could **video** record your Tool being used, upload it and invite selected peers to comment on both the Tool and on your use of it? Perhaps there is some scope for encouraging our **participants** to be more like critical friends when they ‘do’ the evaluation at the end of events or training courses? Perhaps I need a critical friend to help me come up with more ideas about Critical Friends!

"Phew, its difficult to find the time to really talk about these TFL criteria - but it’s worth it"
The benefits are for the presenter, their critical friend and for anyone using the Tool for Learning in the future.

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