

Embracing Critical Friendship for Agroecology Transitions



This series explores praxis in agroecology transitions. Praxis is a critical concept in participatory research and action and can be understood as the dialectical interaction of theory/reflection and practice/action that opens the possibility for contributing to social transformation.

The idea of the ‘critical friend’ is used by participatory researchers, teachers and organizers who want to improve their practice and is a valuable concept for anyone seeking to become better agents of change in processes of agroecology transitions and other areas of social change.

In participatory research, we often talk a lot about ‘reflexivity’, which can be understood as a commitment by researchers (and other people) to regularly and deeply examine what they are doing, why they are doing it and to challenge the assumptions and implications of their work in the world. It also involves thinking about who they are (their identity or ‘positionality’, particularly in relation to intersecting privileges and oppressions) and how that is also important in shaping their practice. The idea is that this reflexivity will allow people to become better researchers and agents of positive change in the world. Reflexivity involves a process of self-examination that can be very hard to manage alone; a critical friend can greatly help someone see their work from a different perspective.

“The Critical Friend is a powerful idea, perhaps because it contains an inherent tension. Friends bring a high degree of unconditional positive regard. Critics are, at first sight at least, conditional, negative and intolerant of failure. Perhaps the critical friend comes closest to what might be regarded as ‘true friendship’ – a successful marrying of unconditional support and unconditional critique.”¹

¹ MacBeath J, Jardine S. I didn’t know he was ill – the role and value of the critical friend. *Improving Schools*. 1998;1(1):41-47. doi:10.1177/136548029803010118



A critical friend is typically a colleague who is committed to helping a researcher improve their practice. An ideal critical friend is encouraging and supportive, lifting up the strengths and competencies that they perceive in their colleague and identifying exciting opportunities. Crucially, these might be more visible to a friend than they are to the researcher themselves.

On the other hand, a critical friend must also offer a critique. While it isn't always easy, they should aim to provide honest, constructive, and often frank feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In so doing, they can help to push a researcher to probe the edges, tensions, problems, and contradictions in their work. This allows the researcher to make such dynamics visible *to themselves*, to better understand them, and then to act on them. The relationship between a researcher and their critical friend is thus one of mentorship and learning.

A critical friend is ideally a peer (e.g. if you're a researcher, this would be another researcher or a research partner) or someone who has a perspective that you would find helpful in your own self-examination. Even more ideal is a reciprocal critical friendship where two or more people act as critical friends for each other. Meetings of critical friends are ideally regular (at a pace that works for them – e.g. every quarter, every 6 months, monthly, etc.).

The critical friend process also works best when it is intentional and systematic. This 'systematic' approach could involve for example, the development of a document that charts out a person's values, vision and trajectory that is then shared with a critical friend to garner feedback and discussion. In this systematic process, the researcher/organizer can: a) more concretely articulate in writing or orally their

current research/organizing program, plans, praxis, dilemmas and b) set aside specific and regular times for their critical friend to touch base and discuss progress.

The critical friend takes time to digest this and give thoughtful feedback through dialogue. Long-term critical friendship relationships can be rewarding and help researchers to improve their praxis over time, but short-term (even one-off) encounters can also inject new perspective into a researchers practice.

Practical Guidance for Critical Friends

As a first step to setting up a critical friendship, it might be helpful to share and discuss this brief and then discuss a way to systematize this through an intentional and regular process. It can also be helpful to have multiple critical friends in order to rotate roles and introduce different dynamics.

Providing and receiving feedback can be uncomfortable—while the purpose of a critical friend is to be critical and provide honest and constructive feedback, approaches based in compassionate communication and horizontality can help critical friends to avoid judgement and condescension in their feedback. Here are some tips for getting the most out of your exchange:

- 1.) **Ask clarifying questions.** Before providing a critique, clarify the meaning of what was shared, the goals it seeks to accomplish, or how the person is thinking about it. Sometimes, the critique can simply be a matter of communication.
 - 2.) **Base critique in observation.** Starting critiques with “To me it sounds like you’re saying . . .” or “I think this could be interpreted as. . .” can give space for avoiding potential issues in miscommunication.
 - 3.) **Ask probing questions.** When something sounds like it’s not quite adding up, a critical friend can ask deeper questions to get to the *why* of a perspective, goals, or methodology. Asking these kinds of questions before passing critique can help to encourage self-reflection without defensiveness and help one’s critical friend think through potential challenges.
 - 4.) **Assume best intentions.** This is the underlying logic of the previous three. The assumption in this case might be that one’s critical friend is actively desiring to be a more just and engaged researcher who acts as an agent for positive change, but questions can be asked to clarify this. From here, a critical friend can provide feedback (starting with questions and observations) to support a move towards these goals.
 - 5.) **Ask what kind of feedback the researcher desires:** Open-ended discussion can be useful. At the same time, it may also be helpful to ask explicitly what kind of feedback the researcher would like.
 - 6.) **Be experimental:** if things don’t work out well the first time don’t be afraid to propose new ways of structuring the interaction. For example, new settings for meetings, or new formats for presenting your work to each other.
 - 7.) **Discuss how it went:** Consider ending by reflecting together on how the session went and what you might do differently next time, if anything. And, set another date for another meet up (even if it’s 1 year ahead)
 - 8.) **Keep notes:** It is helpful to take some notes from the meeting to record key points of discussion and advice.
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Further Resources:

- College and Career Readiness Standards-in-Action. (2009). *Overview of Critical Friends Model. 2*. https://www.valrc.org/learning/sbi/docs/5-Overview-CriticalFriends_a.pdf
- Golby, M., & Appleby, R. (1995). Reflective practice through critical friendship: Some possibilities. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 25(2), 149–160.
- Smith, J., Wood, P., Lewis, G., & Burgess, H. (2016). Critical Friendship as a Pedagogical Strategy. In V. A. Storey (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Designing Professional Practice Doctorates: Applying the Critical Friends Approach to the EdD and Beyond* (pp. 233–248). Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137527066_14
- Swaffield, S. (2008). Critical friendship, dialogue and learning, in the context of Leadership for Learning. *School Leadership & Management*, 28(4), 323–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430802292191>

Colophon

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About the Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative: The [Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative \(ALC\)](#) is a community of practice at the [University of Vermont](#), which utilizes an approach grounded in [agroecology](#), [participatory action research \(PAR\)](#) and [transdisciplinarity](#). The ALC approaches agroecology by integrating ecological science with other academic disciplines (e.g. agronomy, sociology, history, etc.) and knowledge systems (e.g. local, indigenous, etc.) to guide research and actions towards the sustainable transformation of our current agrifood system.

About the CCRP Program: The Collaborative Crop Research Program (CCRP) is a program of [the McKnight Foundation](#) that has funded agricultural research since the 1980s. Working in three regional [communities of practice \(CoPs\)](#) in Africa and South America, CCRP projects generate technical and social innovations to improve nutrition, livelihoods, productivity, environmental sustainability, rural vibrancy, and equity for farming communities. CCRP engages in local, regional, national and global processes to support agroecology transitions.