Engaging as Critical Friends

At KSTF, Teaching Fellows engage in practitioner inquiry work throughout all five years of the Fellowship. This work is grounded in critical friendships that challenge them to closely examine their teaching practice, to reject easy answers rooted in unchecked assumptions, and to expand perspectives and understandings of what it means to learn. We believe that **engaging as critical friends** (one of the seven inquiry practices introduced in our first blog, "**Introduction to Inquiry Practices and Habits of Mind**") requires teachers to recognize their responsibility and investment in others' inquiry, and we view that investment as an opportunity both to help colleagues and for teachers to come to new understanding about their practice. Acting as a good critical friend involves identifying and focusing on one another's needs, asking probing questions that provoke thought, raising new perspectives, and resisting the temptation to offer easy solutions when challenges arise. Fellows build their capacity to engage as a critical friend in various ways across the five years of the Fellowship. In this blog, we want to share with you our goals and strategies for how we envision Fellows developing the skills and disposition to be a critical friend.

One goal that we work on from the start of the Fellowship is supporting Fellows to understand what it means to be a critical friend, by reading and discussing articles and teachers' stories about what a critical friend is and does, engaging in multiple opportunities to practice being critical friends, and reflecting on those experiences. In the first year of the Fellowship, Fellows read an **article** about critical friends, and discuss together what it means to serve as a critical friend as well as learn from critical friends. Then, at their first Summer Meeting, Fellows act as critical friends to second-year Fellows around a classroom activity they have planned for the first week of school. First-year Fellows then reflect with each other on the ways in which they acted as a critical friends, what was challenging about being a critical friend, and the ways they want to grow as a critical friend. For example, in their reflections, they shared,

> "[I was able to provide] authentic observations, not just reaffirm the presenter's assumptions."
> "Sometimes it was difficult to refrain from bringing my own experiences to bear on the work we were looking at, especially when talking about implications and broader classroom culture."

"[I want to] listen more actively."

These comments indicate that Fellows recognize room for growth in serving in the role of critical friend. Therefore, explicit discussions about the importance of critical friends in educational improvement, and the opportunity to practice in both providing and receiving feedback, is an important component of developing in this role.

Later on in the Fellowship, in addition to continued work with other Fellows, they have structured opportunities to engage as critical friends with colleagues in their schools—for example, including a colleague as part of their inquiry work. For instance, the Fellow might invite a colleague to observe their teaching and discuss what they see to help the Fellow reflect on their teaching practice. By continuing to get practice acting as critical friends, or inviting colleagues to join them as critical friends, Fellows strengthen their skills and dispositions to serve in this role.

A second goal throughout the Fellowship is to support Fellows to establish and maintain boundaries/norms that facilitate critical friend relationships, in which they challenge one another to improve their teaching practice in ways that are not threatening or judgmental, but aim at provoking thought and learning within an acknowledged zone of risk. To support this work and protect the integrity of their relationships, Fellows intentionally develop and regularly renegotiate norms within their cohort communities. In the process, they consider their community's values and create the conditions in which critical friendships can develop and thrive.

Each year, we schedule time for reflection on the effectiveness of established norms for promoting deep conversations and authentic connections among members of working groups, and for supporting intra-cohort relationship building. For example, at the start of Year 2, Fellows post the norms that they had agreed to during the previous year on large sheets of paper around the room. They then record instances when they observe norms being practiced and respected throughout the meeting. At the end of the meeting, Fellows discuss which norms worked for them, which ones should be edited, and whether to add new norms to address the needs and challenges they anticipate for the new year.

Early in the program, cohorts may develop lengthy and specific lists of norms, but

as their relationships evolve and ways of interacting and collaborating with each other become more routine and natural, their lists become consolidated. For instance, at the start of Year 2, one cohort negotiated 21 specific norms for how they would interact. By Year 5, they named only three norms they considered essential for guiding their relationships: 1) strive for equitable participation and sharing; 2) hold ourselves (individually and others) accountable to tasks and people; and 3) seek meaningfulness in our work. These few written norms were inclusive of many particular ways they acted responsibly for the sake of their cohort community since their first days together, and continues to support the group in acting as critical friends to each other.

Another important aspect of critical friendship entails providing others with new perspectives that focus on the teacher's concerns and questions and asking challenging questions to help expand the teacher's thinking, while refraining from offering advice and "easy fixes." To support Fellows in engaging in these kinds of critical discussions, we provide multiple opportunities for them to practice sharing and talking about their teaching using a variety of discussion protocols. These protocols—and understanding the reasons for protocol use—serve as a guide to critical friends discussions, and a foundation for future work as critical friends. [To read more about how we support Fellows' interactions with protocols, refer to **Building Community Through The Use of Protocols**.]

Early in the Fellowship, we provide Fellows with structured protocols that match particular reasons that they are sharing work with their critical friends. For example, the first time Fellows share data from their classrooms we provide a modified version of the **ATLAS protocol** to support their discussion. One purpose of a protocol like this one is to allow each member of the group to name what they "see" in the data (like a piece of student work). As a group of Fellows work together to analyze a shared piece of data, they begin to realize that since we all "see" different things in the data based on each individual's unique perspective, and it is important to first name what we see before we begin to offer our own interpretations of what we think the data means. As Fellows get practice in using this protocol, they debrief the challenges in and the importance of making descriptive, non-judgmental observations about data first before offering interpretations. Other protocols are designed to support Fellows in unpacking a dilemma in their teaching by asking each other **probing questions**. These are the kinds of questions that prompt a teacher to step back and think in new ways

about his/her work, without feeling judged or imposed upon. Asking probing questions can be challenging, since it requires critical friends to refrain from jumping to unwarranted conclusions or making unsolicited suggestions. As Fellows continue to practice using these protocols, they reflect on the challenges in asking probing questions that expand each other's thinking, and develop new tools that hone their abilities to ask these kinds of questions.

In later years of the Fellowship, Fellows continue to use protocols to support their work with critical friends, choosing among a variety of protocols, or modifying/creating their own to match their own particular purposes for sharing their work. We also provide structured opportunities for Fellows to use protocols to deepen their work with school colleagues—for example, by sharing student work with a colleague to talk about how instructional decisions impact student learning. These protocols are utilized to help reduce the risk inherently involved in opening up one's practice, and to provide a structure for those not familiar with the inquiry process to engage in meaningful ways.

We believe that critical friendships are the foundation upon which teachers can build the capacity to continually improve their practice. These relationships are not developed in isolation but are carefully constructed within a community that sees the value in taking risks, opening up their practice and inviting others to push on their thinking, perspectives, and assumptions. In a future blog, we'll explore how working together as critical friends supports Fellows as an inquiry community.