Literature Review on Critical Academic Friendship

Although geographers have generally overlooked friendship as an analytical tool (Bowlby 2011), the friendship shapes social practices and creates distinct spaces within academia. Spaces and places are shaped by social interactions and thus are continuously evolving (Stefani, Gazin and Ticca 2012). Friendships in the workplace develop within physical settings, such as offices and classrooms, as well as within the socially constructed dynamics of departments and disciplines.

Since its description by Costa and Kallick (1993), Critical Academic Friendship (CAF) has emerged as a transformational andragogical concept, particularly for emerging academics and students (Jones and McNulty 2023) (Sotiropoulou and Cranston 2022). It is a relational practice aimed at enhancing professional skills and fostering personal and professional development within educational contexts. Rooted in principles of self-reflection, constructive critical dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving, CAF may manifest through one-on-one relationships and group dynamics (Jones and McNulty 2023). While these relationships may often begin with a formal agreement, the cornerstone of CAF lies in trust and authenticity (Baskerville and Goldblatt 2009).

Emerging academics and students frequently find themselves navigating the intricate terrain of academia, encountering challenges and demands, many of which are amplified by intersectionality (Khelifa and Mahdjoub 2022) (Sang 2018). In such contexts, CAF may offer a supportive and empowering framework that promotes growth, resilience, and solidarity (Brewer, Wideman-Johnston and McCabe 2021). For emerging academics, CAF may serve as a powerful tool for navigating the complexities of academia and dismantling the toxic expectations therein (Sotiropoulou and Cranston 2022).

Moreover, students stand to gain substantial benefits from engaging in CAF with university instructors and assistants. Through these relationships, students can nurture their academic thinking and voice, while simultaneously cultivating self-reflection and a sense of belonging within academic communities (Storey and Wang 2012). CAF provides a space for students to receive constructive feedback on their work, challenge their assumptions, and broaden their understanding of academic concepts (Carlse 2019). Additionally, CAF can contribute to the social and emotional well-being of students, fostering a sense of connectedness and validation (Jones and McNulty 2023).

This unique combination enables a delicate balance between challenging critique and supportive trust, rendering CAF a potent concept in educational environments (Storey and Wang 2012).

In the contemporary landscape of academia, marked by the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology, CAF emerges as a practice deeply intertwined with feminist care ethics. By prioritizing meaningful relationships, ethical care, and constructive critical engagement, CAF operates as a form of resistance against the dehumanizing pressures and incivility often at play in academic work (Sotiropoulou and Cranston 2022).

As mentioned above, CAF not only benefits emerging academics and students in terms of their professional growth but also enriches their interpersonal development (Smith, et al. 2016). It fosters a sense of belonging, community, and collaboration, countering feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome prevalent in a highly competitive and hierarchical academic environment (Jones and McNulty 2023).

Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) offer a comprehensive definition of CAF as a practice facilitated by reflective practitioners characterized by integrity and a passion for teaching and

learning. Within this framework, safe spaces are established to support and challenge colleagues in the shared process of derivatizing their professional practices.

These safe spaces are cultivated within CAF when participants feel assured that the relationship is marked by clear boundaries, active listening, integrity in responses, and an unwavering commitment to the success and development of one another (Costa and Kallick 1993).

Further refinement of the concept by Wideman-Johnston and Brewer (2014) emphasizes the cyclical nature of CAF phases and the influence of each member's status within the friendship dynamic. This cyclical process underscores the iterative nature of critical friendship growth and the dynamic interplay between its participants.

A gap in the literature exists in the overlapping worlds of instructors and their students. Much of the literature explores either how teachers can refine their skills with other teachers, or how a similar model can be adopted by students to refine professional and interpersonal skills, which is an increasingly common practice in education programs and graduate studies (Smith, et al. 2016).

One adjacent article explored the process of integrating two students' feedback as their teaching assistant (Meštrić, Đirić and Ivančić 2014). This example was a more formal agreement which lacked several of the more meaningful components of deep CAF, including a level of trust that allows for unguarded conversation and a true reciprocity that emerges in empathic response to that trust.

Citations

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