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SHARING THE QUEST OF DOCTORAL SUCCESS: CREATING A CIRCLE OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

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INTRODUCTION

Loneliness and isolation are constant companions on the doctoral journey. One strategy to overcome doctoral isolation is to create a circle of critical friends. A critical friend is defined as someone who, as a friend, is supportive and available to listen and, as a critic, offers thoughtful responses and raises points that the researcher has not considered (Whitehead & McNiff 2006). Rallis and Rossman (2000) suggest that this critical friend is external to the project. This friend serves as a sounding board and an evaluator, but the interaction takes place in conversations that produce learning. Critical friends can help you fill a void in your skill set (Kember *et al* 1997) and help to validate whether your data (and conclusions) are accurate (Gerardi, as cited in Foulger 2010). The benefits of critical friends are well documented in the literature on teacher education and action research, but not to the same extent in the context of postgraduate study.

In the South African context, an apprenticeship model (one-on-one supervision) rather than a cohort (group) approach is most commonly used in doctoral supervision (ASSAf 2010). This apprenticeship model may leave students feeling isolated. This model becomes especially problematic when the shortage of experienced doctoral supervisors and underprepared students is taken into consideration. The use of a circle of critical friends is one way to combat these potential challenges in the postgraduate experience.

This chapter describes our experiences as four doctoral students in participating in a circle of critical friends. Through our experiences we describe the roles participants need to take on, and what benefits and challenges such a group may offer. This

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chapter also outlines a strategy to set up and manage a circle of critical friends. Finally, we argue that our participation in such a group ensured that we did not only survive, but thrived on our respective doctoral journeys.

SETTING UP A CIRCLE OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

Our circle was a group of four female doctoral students who worked full-time at the same university. Benefits of an all-female group are described by Grant and Knowles (2000). All of us started our doctoral studies after reaching the age of 40 years and our circle was created based on a need to create a support structure. We had elements of a planned and emergent group (Cartwright & Zander 1960). The group was planned in the sense that two of us started talking about the possibility of establishing a support group. We knew the two other members independently and then invited them to become part of the study partnership, and so our circle became emergent and self-organising in the sense that the final formation of the group happened spontaneously (Cartwright & Zander 1968; Arrow, McGrath & Berdahl 2000). You can also think of a circle as a goal-focussed task group as you will all be united in pursuing an individualised, but common goal of graduation (Lickel *et al* 2000).

Although we had a shared need for support and a shared goal to graduate, we are quite diverse in terms of the disciplines, professional profiles and our doctoral topics, and we were at different phases of the research process. When setting up such a circle, it is important to ensure that members have some things in common. The commonalities we shared included a positive world and life view, limited time and energy available for studies, and using qualitative data in our respective studies. We also had the advantage of similarities in values, beliefs, social class and interests. When setting up a group, think of the similarity principle described by Newcomb (1961) – that people initially get to know those closest to them and later get attracted to those who are similar to them. In retrospect, the small size of our circle was beneficial in terms of being able to focus on the goal and tasks at hand, allowing us to complete tasks, use information effectively, and ensure that each of us had our fair share of attention. The size of a group influences its nature in many ways (Forsyth 2006) and is an important factor when creating a group as numbers of relationships increase as the membership grows.

Working and studying at the same institution made it easier to meet – a key element in maintaining momentum. Three of us work on the same campus, while the fourth member works a few kilometres away. Being located in the same building meant that we would regularly see one another in the corridors resulting in spontaneous,

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informal conversations. The regular face-to-face meetings varied in frequency from once a week to once every three to four months. The schedule of the meetings was dictated by our needs and the specific stage of our research. Grant (2006) emphasises the value of repeated experiences while also becoming aware of your own progress. Any group member had the authority to call a meeting. We never set out to create a set of norms, but when we look back we recognised that we established our norms informally during the start-up phase of the group. Adherence to the group norms is usually a requirement of any group for continued membership, and the norms we created (without saying them out loud) was an unbiased approach towards each other's work, professional context, personal situation, organisational climate, and organisational politics.

The values that underpinned our relationships relate to both critical readership (the cognitive domain), as well as critical friendship (the affective domain). The lessons learned from our rational way of knowing (critical readership) was complemented by our intuitive and affective ways of knowing (critical friendship). We identified professional integrity, accountability and taking ownership of our own studies as the key values that underpinned our critical readership. Not only did everyone take ownership of her own doctoral journey and successful outcome, but we also took ownership of each other's survival and success. Joint identification with the values that underpin a critical friendship is essential to group sustainability. Trust, personal integrity, empathy, flexibility, mindfulness, courage, purpose, focus, being receptive, compassion, patience, respect, resilience, avoiding harm, interdependence and balance were all important values to us. The result of this values-based approach to critical readership and critical friendship is that you can all claim improved self-knowledge and improved reflective practice. A critical stance and the giving and receiving of criticism were facilitated by this values-based approach. When setting up a circle, it is useful to include some discussion on what is important to all members (values) and how co-operation will take place (norms) in creating a safe space to develop relationships that are close but not competitive.

We did not set out to assign roles and indeed there was never any discussion of roles. Upon reflection, we could easily identify taking on the roles of coffee maker, mirror, resource provider, writing consultant, and deadline enforcer as described by Kember *et al* (1997), though these roles were not assigned formally. As we formed the circle based on existing collegial relationships there was never any need for someone to take on the role of building rapport. The awareness of how to function in the role of critical friend became clear to us during the process as we had the benefit of being both recipients within and contributors to the process. We assumed different

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roles at any given time. Our academic roles were idea generators, organisers and critical readers. Our personal roles included being motivators, showing or keeping the big picture in mind, managing expectations and keeping aspirations around the project realistic. Our academic and personal roles combined in our efforts to bring structure to some of the bewildering doctoral processes and to the expected format of our respective theses. These roles were not fixed or formal in our circle of friends, but we found ourselves taking on these roles naturally as the situation unfolded and often changed – and exchanged – in a single session. You need time and energy to fully understand the research that other critical friends are doing so that feedback is possible, but this is a worthwhile investment. By using a values-based approach, we quickly learned that it is possible to successfully merge the tension that exists between providing support while at the same time critiquing the work of friends (Grant 2006; Gibbs & Angelides 2008).

As critical friends we brought alternative perspectives to our common and individual experiences and, in so doing, we are convinced that we provided ourselves substantive protection against isolation and despondence. Sagor captures our experience well with the description of the critical friend as “one who does not have a stake in the problem, but is committed because of a complementary personal agenda” (as cited in Foulger 2010:148). Our complementary personal agendas were going through the same journey, willingness to share experiences to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety of the person in the group who (at that moment) was overwhelmed in their project. And – most importantly – had a stake not in the problem, but in the person.

WHAT TO ADDRESS DURING MEETINGS

One of the key characteristics of our collaboration was that the meetings provided a safe space for sharing successes, challenges and failures. We did not use a pre-set protocol to guide our meetings. Instead, one of us presented our individual project’s progress at each meeting. We followed this brief update with key questions and provided feedback on any issue that the presenter might have had. We asked the presenter questions such as, “where are you now?”, “what is your next step?”, “what are the barriers you see or experience?”, and “what can be done to overcome these barriers?”. By using these questions as a framework, we ensured that the meetings were energy-giving and life-affirming events (Whitehead 2012). The update ended with identification of barriers and next steps. This process took approximately 30 minutes and each of the other members had approximately 10 to 15 minutes to update the circle on their projects using the same technique of identifying barriers

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and next steps. In this way the focus rotated between members, but ensured that overall momentum was maintained.

Resources that were tried and tested – or with which one of us had a personal experience – were discussed and shared. We shared literature sources, as well as learning opportunities, such as software training opportunities and research support sessions. Any questions regarding the use of software or reliable professional services (such as transcribers, statisticians, printers and language editors) were answered from within the group. Experiences of doubts and anxiety in different phases of the study are common and will peak when the reports needed to be finalised. We learned to view the doubts and anxieties as normal and transient. Anxiety was lessened by ending group meetings in a positive spirit.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATING IN A CIRCLE OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

In hindsight, the extent of the academic and personal benefits of belonging to the circle astounded all of us. Some of us believe that we would not have successfully completed our studies without the circle, while for others it provided an essential life-line on the doctoral journey. All of us experienced one or more critical points (so-called crossroads) in our doctoral studies and the support of the group meant the difference between dropping out and pushing on. Family members and work colleagues seldom appreciate the burden of doctoral studies, but as fellow travellers the circle can provide a safe space to be honest about your doubts, fears, academic (cognitive) challenges and emotional (affective) challenges. We found two kinds of academic benefits of being a member of a circle of critical friends. The first benefit was on the cognitive level where we created new knowledge and developed professionally, and the second benefit was on an affective level where we gained knowledge of ourselves.

As we have diverse academic backgrounds and were engaged in diverse doctoral studies, the new knowledge that was created was the development of scholarship and professional growth. Foulger (2010:149) summarises this as “professional insights, stronger proof in the powers of our work, and an understanding of how co-mingling of thoughts and ideas can create a synergy not obtainable independently.” The process of collaboration, asking questions and identification of the next steps during our meetings helped us to make our progress more explicit. Explaining to the group what we had done since the previous meeting helped us appreciate how much we had accomplished. Often many small administrative tasks needed to be done for the research to continue ethically and successfully. By listing what was completed,

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we realised that progress was made and this helped each of us to stay motivated and energised. Even when not much progress was made since the last meeting, the reasons for the lack of progress was explored (by using the key questions) so that each of us left the meeting with a strategy of what needed to be done to regain momentum.

This reporting on the progress since the previous meeting required of us to be self-critical in a reflective thinking process. We were interdependent on one another to provide feedback on a piece of writing, the structure of chapters, coherence, and overall clarity and sense making. This critical feedback was invaluable to us as either a first round, before sending drafts to the supervisor, or sometimes in the final round of writing. As critical friends we offered views on each study that were neutral, objective and provided valuable critique and reflective questions that needed a response. This unpolluted view improved the clarity of the written report. Formulating our thoughts aloud in the circle helped each member to understand their individual studies better. Speaking aloud in the group helped us to identify and address obstacles early in the research and kept the focus of the study clear. It should, however, be noted that the notion of talking as thinking is quite a western concept, and students from other cultures may find it strange (Lyubomirsky *et al* 2006)¹.

Our specific combination of members at different stages of the doctoral journey allowed us an opportunity to deepen our knowledge of ourselves, which offered possibilities for personal growth. For example, an absent-minded unstructured member got tips in time management and managing her study by observing the more organised members. Others found the circle a useful place for advice on how to build and maintain a healthy supervisory relationship, and deal with feedback from supervisors and examiners. Being involved in the circle undeniably stimulated our self-reflection and self-understanding (Gibbs & Angelides 2008; Wachob 2011), and confidence in our strengths and abilities.

Doing a doctoral study is a form of adversity with the potential of disturbing one's well-being. Indeed, you can expect to experience some form of burnout and anxiety at some point due to the fatigue of working long hours. In our case we all kept going as we knew that the others had survived the same phase and were able to safely progress to the next phase. A credo of "courage, patience and resilience" prevailed. When we were doubtful of our ability to continue, we would remind ourselves that we knew some

¹ In this regard, see the chapters by Zondi Mkhabela and Liezel Frick (Chapter 2) on negotiating differences in epistemic positions, Langutani Masehela (Chapter 12) on agency and Ubuntu as complementary notions, and Catherine Robertson (Chapter 13) on identity in academic writing.

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people who had completed and obtained doctoral degrees against all expectations. So clearly you not only need the cognitive ability to complete your doctorate, but also survival strategies and resilience². An important part of surviving your doctoral studies is that you experience well-being, as conceptualised by Charney (2004). Well-being is the dynamic state that refers to persons' ability to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong positive relationships, and contribute to their communities. We found that participating in our circle of critical friends had the inherent attributes that lead to our individual and joint well-being. In pursuing our studies as part of this circle, we often found ourselves in a state of flow, of being really engaged with something challenging, but doable. Because we selected worthwhile topics, our journeys were meaningful and mastery was developed in the progressive achievements of milestones.

Despite the overwhelming positive benefits of participating in a circle of critical friends, we experienced several challenges. Primary amongst these challenges were the emotional responses to the experience of pursuing doctoral studies, especially at the onset of the process. Common emotions were feelings of vulnerability, apprehension, and lack of self-confidence. Later in the process feelings of obligation and responsibility weighed on individuals when requests for assistance were in conflict with their own activities. In addition, one member became aware of a sense of dependency and felt unable to continue with changes without the circle's critical feedback. We therefore needed to also develop survival strategies.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Resilience refers to "positive adaptation or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity" (Herrman 2011:258). The strategies that helped us to prosper and arrive safely at the graduation line focussed on the self, our relationships and our actions. Despite our interdependence in the circle, each of us primarily relied on herself. Our self-sufficiency was developed through the sharing of authentic experiences. Group members in different stages of their studies experienced different obstacles and the sharing of these authentic experiences helped others when we reached that point in the journey. We realised from the start that because many hours of hard work would be required, we would need balance for the sake of our health and family relationships. Enjoying a meal together – in our case with a glass of wine – to celebrate the achievement of milestones contributed to our sense of balance. We reminded each other to take a break for a day or two when necessary

2 See Bella Vilakazi's chapter (Chapter 5) that focusses on becoming resilient through compassion and imagination.

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in order to strive for some kind of work-life balance. The fundamentals for a happy successful life outside of the doctorate are vital. Good nutrition, exercise, enough sleep and spending time with friends and family will always be under pressure. When alone, we built in little rewards for ourselves, such as a special cup of tea or a quick walk in the garden. By keeping your focus sharp on your own or in the group, you may achieve better productivity and creativity.

The nurturing relationships within our supportive group were a protective factor that helped us to thrive beyond survival (as explained by Herrman 2011). The primary factor in resilience is “having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create trust, provide role models and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster a person’s resilience” (American Psychological Association 2015, “Resilience factors and strategies”, para. 1). Our circle was central in reducing feelings of isolation. Even when working alone, we had a sense of support in absentia because we knew that the others both understood and cared. Grant and Knowles (2000) describe this benefit as imagining yourself in the company of others. The emotional support of belonging to a circle is a key survival tactic when you experience personal challenges. This nurturing relationship within the group was invaluable to us and as an all-female group, as we were comfortable to share our vulnerability and even tears with each other. One member spent one session just crying. Another member shared how she cried all the way from a supervisor’s meeting until she reached home. After a follow-up meeting, she stopped crying at the first traffic light (a sign of progress for us). The work of Grant (2010) is of interest regarding this fragility and her work is useful to reframe the student-supervisor relationship. With support, negative emotions dissolved fairly quickly and we all left the meeting ready to continue. A key group strategy was to never allow our group members to indulge in self-pity or become fixated on the negative, but rather focus on taking action.

Taking decisive actions to achieve our goals was the final survival strategy. By ending each session with everyone identifying their next step, the overall goal – of obtaining the degree – remained alive. Our chances of reaching our goals improved when the intention was shared with others (as also explained by Fishbein 2008). In our circle the capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out was strengthened through joint problem solving. This problem solving was extended beyond academic dilemmas to include any problems that posed an obstacle to progress. For example, one member moved home and felt overwhelmed by her unorganised home environment. The whole group gathered on a Saturday afternoon

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and helped to arrange the furniture, paintings and other items to create a better study environment.

CONCLUSION

This chapter described our authentic experiences of acting as soundboards in a circle of critical friends in our doctoral studies. We shared the organic nature of how we set this circle up, how we supplemented our skills set, what we did at the meetings, what roles we fulfilled, and the academic and emotional benefits we gained in the process. This chapter also described the practical survival strategies of self-reliance, nurturing relationships and decisive actions that built resilience. Participation in the circle ensured that we did not only survive, but also thrived in our doctoral journeys.

Ours was a shared journey as we did not only take full ownership of our individual studies, but we also shared accountability and ownership for the successful completion of the other members' studies. Each individual journey had its obstacles and challenges, but by having critical friends who were not involved in the study itself, and who were able to think objectively and assisted in generating ideas in how to overcome obstacles, we were able to prevent the stalling of progress in our studies.

Our success in this circle was therefore not only graduation, but the life-affirming and energy-giving interactions (Whitehead 2012) that characterised our relationships. This chapter has contributed the notion of thriving as an outcome to participating in a circle of critical friends. By participating in a circle, we achieved the primary overarching goal of success of graduation by using the strategy of interdependent (rather than independent) ways. But graduation was not the only benefit. We experienced the uncommon benefit of PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning/purpose, and Achievement/mastery), which is critical for true well-being (Seligman 2010:231). After all, not only is there life after a doctorate, but there is also life during the doctorate.

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