A CRITICAL FRIEND IN THE FUNCTION OF
SUSTAINABLE PEDAGOGY AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of the concept of Critical Friend in the context of sustainable pedagogy and emphasises its importance for reflective practise and continuous improvement of pedagogical methods. It discusses how Critical Friend as a method based on classroom observation facilitates constructive dialogue and the exchange of feedback among colleagues, leading to individual and collective professional growth and promoting the integration of sustainability goals into pedagogical practise. It is emphasised that Critical Friend contributes to sustainable action in several ways: it promotes teachers' self-reflection, the exchange and implementation of effective practises for sustainable education and fosters a community of practise focused on sustainable development. The method supports the development of critical thinking, innovation and resilience, which are key to tackling the challenges of sustainable development. This approach to peer observation not only improves the quality of teaching, but also serves as a strategy for achieving the broader goals of sustainable development in education. The findings of the paper show how mutual trust, reflective learning and collaboration serve as a foundation for the successful implementation of Critical Friend, thereby promoting pedagogical excellence and sustainability in the higher education context.

Keywords: Critical Friend Tool, sustainable pedagogy, higher education, classroom observation, lifelong learning.

1. Introduction

Thinking about sustainable education is driven by many aspects of work and life in society as well as issues aimed at responding to future impacts on society and the environment. It is linked to the idea of sustainable development, which extends to all areas of human life and focuses on meeting the needs of the present in a way that does not compromise the opportunities of future generations. Sustainable development refers (Gehlen 2010) to a global endeavour to reconcile economic growth, environmental protection and social well-being, and is intended to be a response to the damage caused by the traditional assumption that natural resources exist solely for the benefit of humans (Paata Koguashvili and Ana Chipashvili 2022). At its core, it is about meeting current needs without jeopardising the ability of future generations to do the same (United Nations 1987). (United Nations 1987).

The issue of sustainable development is closely linked to the transmission of knowledge, especially in the context of higher education. This emphasises the role of universities (Chalkley 2006) in preparing graduates with the

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knowledge, skills and values needed to live and work sustainably. Sustainability in education, especially in the face of global challenges such as climate change and population growth (Yayla EskiCi 2023), is emphasised as one of the main tasks of higher education. However, the role of education in sustainable development is a complex and multi-layered issue, as demonstrated by a number of studies that emphasise the potential of quality education to promote economic growth and social cohesion (Camilleri and Camilleri 2020). Concerns have been raised about the utilitarian approach of the SDGs, including SDG 4 (Brissett and Mitter 2017). In a narrower sense, sustainable education in the SDGs is 'only' one of the 17 goals, namely SDG 4, which refers to quality and inclusive education. In a broader sense, the topic of sustainable education is linked to all SDGs, and education for sustainable development is much broader than the transfer of knowledge and principles related to sustainable development. It is therefore not just about education per se, but about a way of life and a constant reflection on it and its impact on society and the wider environment. Education for sustainable development is a key component of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015), with SDG 4 emphasising the need for inclusive, equitable and quality education (Arsakhanova 2023). To achieve this, a shift in the prevailing education discourse is required to prioritise social and environmental justice (Brissett and Mitter 2017). Improving the quality and quantity of education is therefore critical to sustainable development, as there are few other areas that offer as high a return on investment as improving the quality and quantity of education (James and Ofei-Manu 2015). Therefore, mainstreaming quality education should not only be considered as one of the SDGs, but also as an essential starting point for the other SDGs.

Education as a process of change, appropriation and cognitive interaction between learners and teachers requires a rethinking of the way we teach. The educational process is not limited to the transmission and exchange of knowledge, but to the creation of a space for the emergence and construction of knowledge. This emphasises the need to develop teachers' skills and, consequently, to introduce new didactic methods and techniques, technological tools and approaches. The focus is on the challenges posed by changing teaching methods in higher education and the importance of developing teachers through structured collaboration (Painter and M Clark 2015). To do this, HE teachers must first be aware of themselves (self-awareness), understand others (students' abilities) and collaborate with others (the reality of their own actions and the impact that their actions (teaching) have on students). The self-awareness of university teachers is crucial for their interactions with students (Žydžiūnaitė and Daugėla 2020). This self-awareness can be developed through methods of self-education and self-development (Rafaila and Duta 2015) and processes of self-assessment (Arbizu, Olalde, and Del Castillo 1998). The 'Critical Friend' tool can be helpful in this regard, as it enables critical reflection and promotes a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to education for sustainable development.

The 'Critical Friend' tool is a valuable instrument for promoting critical reflection (Ash and Clayton 2009) and a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to education for sustainable development. This is particularly important in applied learning contexts where the tool can help to generate, deepen and document student learning. The concept of Critical Friend emphasises the role of a supportive yet challenging colleague in professional learning (Schuck and Russell 2005; Baskerville and Goldblatt 2009). These insights can be applied to the use of the Critical Friends tool in higher education to improve the quality of teaching and promote a culture of continuous improvement.

This paper discusses the theoretical basis for the development of the Critical Friends tool and a concrete example of pedagogical observation based on this idea, as well as the use of the Critical Friend tool at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Public Administration (FPA). The characteristics of the practical instrument, the results of analysing the findings and the opinions of teachers who have used the Critical Friend Tool in the past are presented. Suggestions are also made for improvements to the teaching process itself and for the further application of the Critical Friend tool.

2. The Critical Friend concept in higher education

The Critical Friend concept in higher education is a valuable tool for improving pedagogical practise and the quality of education. While there are different approaches (e.g. teacher-teacher relationship, student involvement, teacher-student relationship) and debates on the use of the Critical Friend technique to improve teaching (Andreu et al. 2003), regardless of the design, the role of the Critical Friend in developing trust in the classroom and improving dialogue is emphasised (Storey and Wang 2017). The importance of the Critical Friend in improving teaching quality consequently also supports school improvement (Qvarnström 2013), Gurr and Huerta (2013), further emphasising the potential of the Critical Friend tool in higher education.

The concept of Critical Friend in higher education refers to a way of fostering a trusting relationship for honest, constructive and improvement-orientated feedback. It can also be seen as a tool for quality improvement in universities and as a mechanism for the personal and professional development of teachers (Andreu et al. 2003). The concept of the Critical Friend is a valuable tool for promoting reflection on teaching practise and identifying opportunities for development. The role of reflective practise in the development of teacher identity (Walkington 2005) and of critical thinking and reflective practise in mentoring relationships (Harrison, Lawson, and Wortley 2005). has been emphasised. The value of Critical Friend in professional learning has also been emphasised, particularly its role in transforming activities (Schuck and Russell 2005) or moving from 'professional indifference' to 'safe' conversations (Baskerville and Goldblatt 2009). The studies cited above support the idea that Critical Friend is an effective means of promoting self-reflection and growth in classroom practise.

The role of the Critical Friend in higher education as a support for teachers has been analysed in various studies. The role of the Critical Friend in challenging and supporting teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practise has been emphasised (Holden 1997; Kember et al. 1997). The Critical Friend has been found to have a positive impact on promoting self-reflection, improving teaching and reducing feelings of isolation (Hultman Özek, Edgren, and Jandér 2012), suggesting that the Critical Friend plays an important role in enhancing professional development and teaching practise in higher education. The concept of the Critical Friend promotes a culture of open dialogue and collaboration among faculty with the goal of improving student learning outcomes and experiences. A culture of open dialogue and collaboration between faculty is key to improving student learning outcomes and experiences (Hardman 2016; Nguyen and Ng 2020; Jensen and Bennett 2016). This can be achieved through high quality conversations that promote active, collaborative and cognitively engaging learning experiences (Hardman 2016).

3. Self-awareness and openness to feedback

Teacher self-awareness is a key factor in the application of the Critical Friend tool. Self-knowledge is important not only in terms of subject knowledge and pedagogical competence, but also in terms of one's own personality, motives, strengths and understanding of how these factors influence teaching and collaboration with students and other teachers (Anosova 2021; Iandanova 2003; Samuseviča and Striguna 2020). Self-knowledge is a key factor in teachers' self-development (Anosova 2021).

Teachers' self-knowledge also plays an important role in students' personal and professional development. It helps them discover their potential, set goals and apply methods of self-education and self-learning (Rafaila and Duta 2015). Furthermore, self-awareness, which involves systematic, self-organised cognitive activity, is an essential part of a teacher's professional identity and development (Samuseviča and Striguna 2020). Individuals who have developed self-awareness skills are better able to receive feedback about themselves and their work. It is about recognising their strengths and weaknesses, values, biases, attitudes and perceptions of themselves and others. Self-awareness is also improved by understanding the reactions of those around them (e.g. reactions in the classroom). Self-awareness and openness to feedback on one's own work are important because concern for one's own development and the application of pedagogical working methods ultimately leads to the development of one's own pedagogical practise. It is a kind of personal 'norm' for the work of the university teacher, a way of working that is unique to the individual. The individual may become a "prisoner" of their own patterns of practise, which may include those that are not the best or that are not sufficiently adapted to changes in the profession, in higher education pedagogy, to the expectations of newer generations, and so on. The perceived "deviations" can be overcome with the help of the Critical Friend tool.

The Critical Friend Tool is based on relationship and mutual trust. It is a powerful tool for professional development, particularly in higher education, and can be used to support pedagogical innovation (Fletcher, Ní Chróinín, and O'Sullivan 2016). The use of the Critical Friend model in the higher education context has been shown to increase trust and promote fruitful Socratic dialogue (Andreu et al. 2003). However, it is important to establish ground rules and define roles before a Critical Friend begins (Farrell 2001). The structure focuses on the learning process rather than the content, and students can be involved in the process. Although there are different ideas about what good teaching is and how students learn, the results of such a pedagogical observation and especially the discussion with another Critical Friend provide enough information for self-reflection and a possible change in pedagogical practise. In this we can recognise the aspect of sustainable action, because the focus is on collaboration and sharing views, practises and ideas, not competition.

4. Basic principles

Collegial observation in an academic setting can become an extremely useful process for the professional development of teachers if the approach is properly designed and implemented. This method allows teachers to observe their colleagues in order to collect data, analyse the teaching process and reflect on the teaching practises of both the observed colleague and their own. This type of observation fosters a culture of continuous learning

and improvement, where understanding that everyone in a learning process takes on the role of observer or observed is crucial.

The Critical Friend Tool focuses on the dual role and shared responsibility of the observer and the observed. Both participants in the process are active 'learners', each contributing in their own way and learning from the experience. The Critical Friend in the faculty is a collegial observer who provides constructive feedback to improve teaching practise (Farrell 2001; Handal 1999) and encourages the development of reflective practise (Yiend, Weller, and Kinchin 2014). The observer who observes not only collects data and analyses the teaching process, but also learns from the observation. This role of the observer as 'learner' emphasises the importance of reflecting on one's own teaching practise in the light of observation... It enables the observer to compare and reflect on their own teaching methods, student engagement strategies and the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches. The observer has the opportunity to receive valuable feedback on their own teaching methods and approaches. This process can strengthen self-awareness and self-confidence and jointly develop pedagogical knowledge (Östlund 2012). Based on the perceived feedback, the observer can reflect on ways to improve their pedagogical practise. Observation-based feedback can reveal new perspectives or unexpected insights into teaching that might not have been visible without an outside view (observation).

Studies have emphasised the importance of collegial observation in academic settings, focusing on three key principles: mutual trust and respect, reflection as a basis for learning, and collaboration and shared learning. The value of 'collegial' observation (Kanuka, Sadowski, and University of Alberta, Canada 2020) for both the observed and the observer is emphasised, particularly in fostering collegial relationships and providing expert feedback. Such collegial observation enhances professional development practise (O'Riordan, Buckley, and Lincoln 2021). Reflection and collaboration play a key role in improving teaching practise (Semmoud 2015). In particular, the positive impact of structured conversations on teachers' attitudes and practises is noteworthy (Daniels, Pirayoff, and Bessant 2013). The principles outlined above serve as a basis for the successful implementation and improvement of teaching practise and can be broadly defined on this basis:

– Mutual trust and respect: successful collegial observation requires mutual trust and respect. This means that all participants in the process must value and respect each other's opinions and perspectives, regardless of whether they are in the role of the observer or the observed. Such an environment encourages open dialogue and the exchange of feedback in a constructive and supportive manner. Establishing this principle is done by introducing clear guidelines and protocols that define the ethics and expectations of peer observation. This can help to ensure that interactions are respectful and productive. It is also useful to organise training to help teachers develop the ability to give and receive constructive feedback.

– Reflection as a basis for learning: Reflection plays a key role in the process of peer observation. This principle emphasises that both observation and reflection are central to teachers' professional development. Participants should be encouraged to reflect on their own practise and the practise they are observing in order to understand and improve their teaching strategies. Practical implementation is achieved through the development of structured tools and processes for reflection, such as questionnaires, diaries or post-observation reflection dialogues. These can help teachers to analyse and reflect on their

own teaching and the teaching they have observed. These tools can serve as a basis for discussion and exchange between the observer and the observed.

– Collaboration and shared learning: Collegial observation is not only about individual development, but also about collaboration and shared learning. This principle emphasises the importance of a community of practise in which knowledge and experience are shared among colleagues in order to improve together. The implementation of this principle is facilitated through the moderation of group sessions and post-observation discussions where participants can share insights and learning points from the observations. This aspect is crucial to the successful implementation of the Critical Friend tool. It may also be useful to establish platforms or forums for the exchange of ideas and strategies that enable teachers to broaden their pedagogical horizons and learn from each other.

By adhering to the above principles, we can create an environment that fosters continuous professional development, teaching excellence and a culture of improvement and innovation. In this way, universities or faculties would be in a better position to create an environment that supports the continuous professional development of faculty, promotes teaching excellence and fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in teaching.

5. Structure and possible content of the Critical Friend Tool

The Critical Friend Tool is recognised as an approach to pedagogical observation and reflection in which colleagues (peers, teachers) help each other to improve their teaching. The instrument is based on the idea that constructive feedback and criticism can help teachers to develop their pedagogical skills. The Critical Friend Tool is a valuable tool for improving teaching in higher education (Andreu et al. 2003)and ensuring teaching effectiveness (Goldberg et al. 2010). It provides a method for improving educational outcomes (Kumrow and Dahlen 2002) and contributes to the development of teaching at various levels, including organisational, programmatic and individual levels (Johnston, Baik, and Chester 2022). The Critical Friend Tool includes joint consultation, observation, preparation of feedback, discussion and reflection, and change and follow-up. The most important steps and elements of the Critical Friend method are:

– Joint agreement: two teachers agree to observe and evaluate each other's teaching. It is important that both agree to this approach and understand that the aim is to improve teaching practise and not to criticise the person being observed.

– Observation: One teacher observes the lecture of the other teacher live or via video. During the observation, he/she tries to be as objective as possible and notes down his/her observations on various aspects of the lesson, such as methods, content, communication, etc.

– Preparing the feedback: After the observation, the observer concentrates on preparing the feedback. This feedback should be constructive and focus on the positive aspects of the lesson and possible improvements that could be made.

– Discussion and reflection: Teachers then meet to share their thoughts and feedback. They discuss what went well, what could be improved and discuss possible strategies to improve teaching practise.

– Change and follow-up: Based on the feedback, the observed teacher can make decisions about changes to their teaching practise. Further observation and evaluation can then take place to check whether the improvements have been effective.

The Critical Friend is a useful method for teachers as it provides constructive feedback that can contribute to their professional development. It provides a balance between challenge and support, encourages self-reflection and facilitates communication and collaboration among colleagues. It also helps to foster collaboration between teachers and encourages reflection on one's own teaching practise (Holden 1997; Hultman Özek, Edgren, and Jandér 2012; Samaras and Sell 2013; Fletcher, Ní Chróinín, and O'Sullivan 2016). When applying the Critical Friend tool, it is important that the observer pays attention to a variety of elements of pedagogical practise in order to provide holistic and useful feedback. Based on the above and experience from a particular higher education practise (Faculty of Public Administration 2013), possible contents of the Critical Friend Tool that can be emphasised during the observation are mentioned. It is suggested that an observation focuses on or evaluates a maximum of five contents. The potentially observed aspects of the teacher's work are:

1. Interaction between teacher and students: observing how teachers and students interact with each other can provide information about the dynamics in the classroom and the effectiveness of the pedagogical approach.
2. The nature of the interaction between teacher and students: It is important to observe whether the communication is two-way and encourages students to participate and express their opinions.
3. The way questions are asked and the type of questions (yes/no, open): The type of questions asked by the teacher can have an impact on student understanding and engagement.
4. Purpose of the questions (to check understanding of the material, to stimulate activity): This indicates whether the teacher is asking questions to check knowledge or to stimulate critical thinking and discussion.
5. Student responses and activities: By observing how students respond to the learning material and activities, you can determine how well they understand the material and how interested they are.
6. The quality of students' verbal responses (length, meaningfulness, language): Analysing students' responses will help you assess their knowledge and ability to articulate their thoughts.
7. Encouraging students to think critically/actively: It is important that the teacher challenges students with activities that promote critical thinking and independent learning.
8. Reviewing what has been learnt: The methods the teacher uses to verify that students have mastered the material are critical to assessing the effectiveness of instruction.
9. How the teacher responds to students' incorrect answers: The teacher's response to incorrect answers can affect the learning environment and the student's willingness to continue participating.
10. Introduction and conclusion: Effective introductions and conclusions are key to directing students' attention and summarising the main points of the lesson.
11. Work format (pair work, group work, etc.): A variety of work formats can encourage student collaboration and support different learning styles.
12. The teacher's attitude towards the students: A positive and encouraging attitude can have a significant impact on students' motivation and their learning experience.

13. Pedagogical strategies: Different pedagogical strategies, such as flipped classroom or project work, can provide diverse learning opportunities.

14. Use of learning resources: Effective use of learning resources such as multimedia resources or interactive whiteboards can enrich the learning experience.

15. Read a reading, listen to a reading, watch a video...: The way the material is presented and integrated into the learning process is important for students understanding and interest.

16. Language: language use, speaking: The language and the way the teacher speaks are critical to the clarity of the presentation and the accessibility of the information to all students.

17. Learning Objectives / learning Learning Outcomes: It is important that students know the learning objectives and that instruction is focused on achieving those objectives.

18. Cognitive complexity of student activities: Activities should be matched to students' cognitive abilities to promote progress and understanding.

19. Learning environment: External and internal factors: The physical and psychological environment should be conducive to learning and free from distractions.

20. Types of teaching and learning activities: Varied teaching and learning methods encourage engagement and enable learning in a variety of ways.

21. Introduction of new material (use of PPT or something else): The way new material is introduced is critical to student understanding and interest.

22. Discipline: What students do, how they take notes... Classroom management and student engagement are important to maintain order and focus.

23. Integration with other subjects: Interdisciplinarity and the integration of material from different subjects can enrich students' learning experience and understanding.

24. Learning environment: re-evaluating the learning environment is about how the spatial design, technology and atmosphere affect learning.

25. Other aspects: Education on generic skills, human values, environmental aspects, social aspects, etc.: Integrating these aspects into the teaching process can contribute to the holistic development of students and prepare them for the challenges of modern society.

The concept of the observer as a "Critical Friend" requires the ability to observe objectively and dispassionately (Midgley 2001) in order to form an appropriate judgement about the elements under consideration. This means that for each of these elements, as much relevant information as possible must be gathered that can help the teacher (the observed) to understand the effectiveness of their pedagogical practises and to recognise opportunities for further improvement. It is important that feedback is given in a supportive and constructive manner that enables the colleague to recognise opportunities for growth and improvement in their pedagogical work. With this approach, classroom observation becomes a valuable tool for professional development and improving the quality of teaching.

6. Teaching observation at the Faculty of Public Administration of the University of Ljubljana

Teaching (classroom) observation has a long tradition at the FPA. The faculty wanted to utilise all the benefits of observation and encourage teachers to use this opportunity. Despite initial scepticism, the number of classroom observations has increased over the years and is now relatively stable at around 8 observers and up to 10 observed teachers per year, which corresponds to just under a third of the faculty. In the last five years, e-learning observations have also been carried out, but these have been negligible. The faculty themselves labelled the observation a 'Critical Friend', but in practise it is a collegial observation of staff who otherwise tend to be collegial with each other. This approach is consistent with the positive orientation of this element, which helps to improve the quality of teaching.

Teaching observation at the FPA follows a well-defined procedure:
– The observed teacher and the observer set the date of the observation and complete the observation form prior to the observation. This form contains information about the course, the number of students and the various categories of observation. In this form, the observed teacher indicates the elements of the lecture that the observer should pay particular attention to (e.g. appropriate knowledge transfer, involvement of students in the discussion, motivation of students to actively participate, etc.),
– Observation is carried out during regular lectures; some students who observe certain elements are also given simplified observation forms. These forms are collected by the observers at the end and included in their report.
– After the observation, the observer writes a report with the results of the observation, focussing in particular on the elements that the observed teacher wanted to check. The observer also makes general recommendations for improving teaching and points out things that are particularly praiseworthy and worthy of emulation. The report is discussed between the observed teacher and the observer.
– The reports are not freely accessible to other teachers or to the management of the faculty. The purpose of the observation is the desire for self-improvement and is not intended to evaluate the work of staff or judge their performance.

This process not only ensures a systematic and comprehensive approach to teaching observation, but also fosters a culture of continuous learning and self-reflection among teachers at FPA. This underlines the Faculty's commitment to improving the quality of education and the professional development of its teaching staff.

6.1. Methodology

When analysing the Faculty's teaching observation reports, we considered reports from three consecutive academic years, namely from the academic year 2019/20 to 2021/22. Due to the shorter period of the academic year 2019/20 (Covid-19), the fewest reports are from this academic year. In total, we received 23 observation reports of lectures and tutorials and 3 observation reports of e-classrooms for analysis. The main purpose of the analysis was to check which observation elements were most frequently selected by the observed teachers and which observations and recommendations were made in the reports. For the analysis, the Centre for the

Development of Teaching Excellence (CRPO), which collects and reports on classroom observations at the FPA, provided us on request with only the parts of the reports relating to the preferred observation elements, as well as the general recommendations in the reports and the aggregated general data on the observations: Areas, number of observers and teachers observed, and frequency of reciprocal observations. The reports were therefore anonymised.

6.2. Results of the analysis

As mentioned above, 23 classroom observation reports from three consecutive academic years were included in the analysis, including 3 e-classrooms. 15 lectures, 7 tutorials and 1 workshop were observed. Most observations were made in the Department of Administrative Law (48%), followed by the Department of Economics and Public Sector Management (39%) and the Department of Organisation and Informatics (13%). A total of 12 observed teachers and 12 observers were involved in the pedagogical observations during the reporting period. For 1 observed teacher there were 4 different observers, 3 times the observer and the observed teacher swapped roles, 2 cases where the observed teacher had no observer role and 1 observer was not an observed teacher, during the analysed period. Based on the number of participants and the information on the exchange, it can be assumed that a good third of the teachers were involved in lesson observation during the observation period. The following table shows which elements of the evaluation were mentioned most frequently by the observers. As can be seen from the table, the teachers most frequently want to check whether the lectures are presented in an understandable way and how actively they can involve the students in the discussion.

Table 1: Desired observation elements

Observation element	Number of expressed preferences for the observation element
Understanding of the lecture	8
Student participation during the lecture	5
Timing of the lecture	1
Appropriateness of transition from general to specific	1
Method of communication	6
Language of expression	3
Discipline of the students	5
Attention and co-operation of the students	2
Encouragement of critical thinking	1
Integration with other areas	2
Use of teaching aids	1
Responding to students' incorrect answers	1
Method and type of questions asked of students	1
Introduction and conclusion	1
Attitude towards students	1

Source: own analysis

In the exercise observation reports, it is also possible to select additional points such as the cognitive complexity of the exercises and the achievement of generic competences through the exercises, which were only selected once.

Other elements observed in the e-classroom observation reports were the relevance of the interactive content and the tasks for the students, whether collaborative learning is sufficiently encouraged and whether the recordings are adequate. Most reports are positive about the elements reviewed, with some recommending more testing of the content taught rather than just quizzes. One report also suggests that collaborative learning could be better promoted with other possible tools.

In the lesson observation reports, we categorised the recommendations and findings into two groups. The first group of observations mainly refers to findings that can be labelled as 'good practise' or 'worthy of emulation'. The second group of observations can mainly be categorised as 'recommendations for improvement'.

In the reports, observers report the following findings, which can be categorised as good practise for different parts of the courses:

– Linking the material to real-life examples: Observers report that explanations using real-life examples significantly increase student listening, attention and participation.
– Asking students questions: This method of communicating with students was most often cited as a very good motivator for increased student participation, more dynamic communication, and increased attention in subsequent lectures/activities.
– Encourage student responses: In particular, some reports mentioned that students are more willing to answer questions if the teacher does not immediately give an answer to the question asked, but needs to be encouraged with sub-questions, additional associations and references to other aspects related to the question so that students eventually come up with an answer on their own.
– Group work: Especially in tutorials (in one case also in lectures) this way of working was recognised as a good motivation for students to work independently, to find their own solutions and answers and to search for information. It was also felt that better answers were given after group work.
– Students know students' names: In one observation, it was reported that students communicated a lot during lectures, participated in discussions and asked questions because the teacher knew their names and could address them by name, praise or encourage them.

In addition to these best practises, the reports include several recommendations for improving collaborative learning, engaging students in discussions, or encouraging students to respond to questions:

– Using additional learning tools such as mobile apps to provide answers, with the ability to animate the answers on the screen,
– Adding exercises during the lecture to activate the students,
– Summarising the main points of the lecture or, in the case of exercises, providing solutions to the solved task,
– Ask questions after each completed unit,

- In general, include more communication with the students in the lectures, especially their opinions, their experiences, their observations, etc.

In addition to all the above recommendations, mostly related to student involvement, in some cases the observers also mentioned ways to improve the lectures, such as speaking more slowly, less embellishment, more real situations as practical examples instead of just one or none, use of slides with as little text as possible, as students' attention is focused on reading rather than listening.

All this shows that the observed teachers really want external support to improve the quality of their work, and classroom observation is one possible element. The collegial visit brings a different perspective on teaching performance that is not provided by the students through their responses in the teacher evaluation surveys. Through this mechanism, the individual can therefore receive feedback, especially on the part of their work where they want to check whether their working methods are appropriate or where there is room for improvement.

7. Discussion

The Critical Friend Tool underlines the importance of constructive dialogue and self-reflection among colleagues for sustainable pedagogy (Blake and Gibson 2021). This is particularly evident in the context of teacher professional development, where the use of the Critical Friend Tool has been shown to deepen conversations and increase the effectiveness of pedagogical practise. In this way, the tool promotes a culture of lifelong learning and self-knowledge, which are central to the development of high quality pedagogical practise in higher education. The Critical Friend Tool serves as a mirror that identifies areas for improvement and opportunities for professional growth while building trust and mutual support among faculty. The transformative potential of such collaborative dialogue is also highlighted by (Farrell 2001), who speaks of the mutual development of colleagues through Critical Friend, albeit with the need for clear ground rules. In this way, the importance of the tool of Critical Friend in promoting sustainable pedagogy through constructive dialogue and self-reflection among colleagues is highlighted.

By analysing lesson observation reports, good practise and areas for improvement can be identified. Such observations help teachers to recognise which approaches are effective and where they can make further progress. In addition, the process enables the dissemination of effective teaching strategies and methods among colleagues, which helps to enrich the learning environment. The Critical Friend tool plays an important role in promoting sustainable pedagogical practises (Mat Noor and Shafee 2021; Gurr and Huerta 2013).

8. Conclusion

The tool of Critical Friend or collegial classroom observation brings a number of benefits, including increased reflection, sharing of best practises, fostering professional development and strengthening the community of teachers. However, the successful implementation of this method requires clear communication, mutual trust and the creation of a safe environment in which feedback is given and received constructively. For this process to be

truly effective, both the observer and the observed must be open to learning and willing to share their experiences. It is important that both are aware that the purpose of peer observation is to improve teaching practise, not to evaluate it. With the right approach and an open mind, collegial observation becomes an invaluable tool for personal and professional development that improves the quality of teaching in universities and colleges.

In the context of collegial observation, where the colleague acts as a Critical Friend, it is crucial that the observation is based on clearly defined elements. These elements serve as a framework for evaluation and discussion and provide a structured and holistic approach to evaluating teaching effectiveness. Challenges such as ensuring the quality of teaching, integrating sustainable goals into the curriculum and teacher development require a structured and comprehensive approach. The Critical Friend as a method offers the opportunity to address these challenges in a systematic way and to promote the development of pedagogical practises that meet the needs of today's society and future generations. This, and above all the constant desire to improve teaching practise, is at the centre of the implementation of the Critical Friend tool at the FPA. By establishing a system that encourages collaboration between colleagues and facilitates the exchange of feedback, the faculty promotes a culture of quality and innovation in the teaching process. This approach supports teachers' professional development through critical reflection and collegial support and emphasises the importance of inclusive, equitable and quality education in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. By analysing lesson observation reports at the FPA, the foundations are laid for further research and development of pedagogical practises that not only enhance the student learning experience but also contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development and social responsibility.

To summarise, the success of the Critical Friend tool depends on teachers' ability to open up to new perspectives, accept feedback and be open to change. In this context, the Critical Friend becomes not only a tool for pedagogical improvement, but also a symbol of trust, mutual support and shared commitment to the sustainable development of education.

Acknowledgment

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