

Critical friendship revisited: The complexities of graduate student advising across cultural contexts

Vachel Miller, Appalachian State University

Author's Contact Information

*Vachel Miller, Associate Professor
Leadership & Educational Studies Department
Reich College of Education,
Appalachian State University
Phone: 828-262-2280
Email: millervw@appstate.edu*

Abstract:

In this paper, I reflect on challenges of graduate student advising across a cultural/institutional divide between a comprehensive regional university in the US and an expanding research university in Ethiopia. This is a field-based report rooted in my recent experience as a Fulbright Scholar in Ethiopia in 2015-16 and contextualized by the rapid expansion of graduate education in Ethiopia. Methodologically, I take a hybrid approach, blending autoethnographic and narrative moments with analysis based on higher education policy literature. My purpose here is to tell a small story as a window into a larger story about the expansion of higher education in Ethiopia and the epistemological tensions involved in the work of critical friendship in graduate advising across cultures.

Key Words:

critical friendship, Ethiopia, higher education, graduate advising.

Introduction

As American universities continue to internationalize, faculty members are encouraged to engage in cross-border research and teaching partnerships. Faculty who undertake such partnerships often do so from a stance of mutual learning and appreciation, wary of neo-colonial tendencies that can privilege western models and modes as superior to those of their local counterparts. Despite our best intentions, what happens when friction arises from the encounter of divergent cultural norms in the context of an academic partnership? This is the question I found myself struggling with, in regard to graduate research advising, as a Fulbright scholar in Ethiopia in 2015-16.

The friction between different approaches to supporting graduate students began during my time teaching in Ethiopia and continues now, since I've continued to serve as a dissertation advisor for one of my former Ethiopian doctoral students. In the spring of 2018, I received news that my doctoral advisee in Ethiopia had passed his dissertation

proposal defense. Although he was relieved, he expressed frustration that the Ethiopian faculty examiners had focused on criticizing details of his document, rather than opening dialogue about his theoretical framework, methodology, or the significance of the study.

Actually, it's what we both expected. We both anticipated that the examiners would take a fault-finding approach, dwelling far more on small problems in the document than the conceptual value and methodological possibilities of the project. Such is the dominant academic culture in Ethiopia, where examiners are examiners--external authorities charged with objective critique of a research document--rather than partners who engage with students reciprocally as critical friends.

In this essay, I foreground the notion of critical friendship as a platform for thinking about relations of academic collegiality across epistemological/cultural divides. I employ this concept on two levels; first, as a mode of doing advising work; second, as a stance toward the institutional norms and practices that surround graduate advising in another cultural setting. I suggest that the notion of critical friendship, in a cross-cultural context, allows space for appreciative engagement as well as a productive emphasis on the critical side of critical friendship, with the confidence that engaging in dialogue about different modes of teaching/learning—even when challenging our colleagues' cultural norms—can be a valuable dimension of our cross-border work.

Methodologically, I take an intentionally hybrid approach, blending autoethnographic (Ellis, 2009; Kara, 2015) and narrative moments with analysis based on higher education policy literature. My purpose here is to tell a small story, as a window into a larger story about the expansion of higher education in Ethiopia and the epistemological tensions involved in teaching/advising across academic cultures. This approach finds resonance with a recent edited book on higher education capacity building in Africa (Adriansen, Madsen, & Jensen, 2016) in which the editors call for critical interrogation of the interests and effects of engagements of western universities with African universities and employ first-person accounts of individual authors' experiences with capacity-building projects.

I center my discussion on divergent approaches to research advising and the thesis defense, as a specific site that crystallizes differences in academic cultures. I suggest that, in an increasingly cosmopolitan academic context in Ethiopia, control over knowledge production involves ongoing cultural negotiation that challenges simple dichotomies of "foreign" and "local". The expansion of higher education in Ethiopia also raises questions about the expected role of international collaborators, and the nature of the norms that will guide the growth of graduate student education in Ethiopia.

In my engagement with Ethiopian colleagues, I carried an implicit assumption that my work as a research advisor was rooted in a position of critical friendship. As Storey (2013) explains, critical friendship is a well-established concept that holds the tension of positive personal regard and critical distance in the context of a trusting academic relationship. The metaphor of critical friendship involves a more horizontal, peer-oriented relationship than notions of traditional mentoring which suggest hierarchical distance. As a horizontally-oriented relational construct, the notion of critical friendship emphasizes mutual vulnerability and support among colleagues who care about the

growth of each other's work (McKeown & Diboll, 2011). In my own practice as a research advisor for graduate students, I've often employed the metaphor of critical friendship to describe the dual nature of my work: to raise hard-edged questions within a space of collegial warmth and supportive personal care. In Ethiopia, though, I found myself working from a culturally-rooted metaphor that didn't align with the dominant local understanding of the advising relationship.

Expanding higher education from the ground up

Accounts of cross-cultural academic partnership do not always situate themselves within a complex institutional landscape. To provide context for my engagement with Ethiopian colleagues, I sketch the rapidly expanding higher education sector in Ethiopia (Semela 2011; Tessema, 2009). This setting is more than a cultural backdrop; it's a critical dimension of the story, anchoring the personal narrative in a broader context of institutional development.

Globally, many developing nations have "massified" their higher education systems in recent decades (Altbach, 2017), a phenomenon that has been particularly strong in Africa (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2011). In line with its goal of rapid economic transformation, Ethiopia has undertaken the massification of its higher educational system (Akalu, 2014). Through successive 5-year plans, Ethiopia has quickly expanded the number of higher education institutions, with broad geographic spread and increased enrollment. In 1991, Ethiopia had only two public universities. By 2007, the number of universities had reached 22 (Semela, 2011), and by 2015, there were 33 universities. Another wave of construction is planned, to increase the number of universities to 44 in the coming years. The government has made an enormous investment in university expansion in order to produce the human capital needed for continued economic growth.

During this expansionary phase, universities often hire fresh bachelor's-level graduates to teach. This practice has resulted in a largely under-qualified staff (Tessema, 2009). As Akalu explains, the teaching staff is often "young and inexperienced" (2014, p. 403). In response, the government of Ethiopia is undertaking an intentional drive to expand the pool of graduate-trained faculty. As Ashcroft and Rayner (2011) note, "The government is trying to overcome the problem of the chronic shortage of qualified academic staff by establishing a massive program of in-country provision of master's and PhD programs, supported by the more-established universities in the country and foreign universities" (p. 30).

Ethiopian universities are now opening new doctoral programs across disciplines at a rapid pace. The university in northern Ethiopia where I worked had opened its first PhD program in 2010. By 2015, it boasted 15 PhD programs, with many more expected to open by 2020. Nationally, from 2010-2015, universities in Ethiopia more than doubled enrollment in graduate-level programs, from 14,000 students in 2010 to nearly 34,000 in 2015 (GTP II, p. 43).

In order to expand the number of Ethiopian PhD-holders, Ethiopian universities have quickly opened new PhD programs in what might seem an audacious, even reckless manner by the norms of western universities that would require significant library, lab, and faculty resources before opening a new doctoral program. In Ethiopia, the ethos of

expansion was best articulated to me by a dean who said, “Open the door and then furnish the room!” In short, expansion first; operational details later. For this dean, it was imperative to open new programs and then, after they started, the university would sort out staffing and resource issues on the move. This approach seemed the only viable way to bootstrap the university’s own capacity and escape cycles of dependency on foreign expertise. As a stop-gap measure, while Ethiopian universities were in the process of “growing their own” PhD-holders, the newly-opened doctoral programs attempted to borrow faculty wherever they could find them, including visiting American scholars.

That was the context for my engagement in Ethiopia. To provide a brief timeline: in September 2013, I answered a call for proposals from the US Embassy in Ethiopia for linkage projects between American and Ethiopian universities. During 2013-14, I travelled twice to the university for dialogue with administrators and faculty about their aspirations for a new doctoral program in educational leadership. I was invited to teach in the program, and my subsequent Fulbright Scholar award enabled me to spend a year in Ethiopia as a faculty member in 2015-16. Although I didn’t fully realize it at the time, my presence was helping fulfill the university’s need for visiting scholars to staff its nascent doctoral programs.

Situating myself in Ethiopia

As a Fulbright Scholar teaching in Ethiopia, I shared an office in the university’s old administration building which had been re-purposed to house the university’s burgeoning PhD programs. It was a simple room, furnished only with wooden desks and chairs. Next door, there was a classroom for the new PhD program with a U-shaped table and a rickety whiteboard. This was the first year of the program with an opening cohort of three students, all of whom were staff members of Ethiopian universities.

In my teaching, I found that Ethiopian graduate students were not inclined to adopt western concepts uncritically. They challenged me to re-situate the texts I used in North Carolina to accommodate a radically different cultural/economic reality in Ethiopia. Our discussions often focused on assumptions underneath western theories; for instance, we explored notions of “servant leadership” and “adaptive leadership” and how they translated into the Ethiopian context. The students were excited by these concepts and how they could make their own use of them; in fact, these frameworks became central to the dissertation proposals they later developed.

My host university aspired to become a premiere African research university. To undergird that ambition, the university encouraged faculty to conduct research and publish in international journals. To support professional development, I was invited to conduct a series of research workshops for faculty on topics such as research ethics, qualitative research, feminist research, and participatory research. I intentionally emphasized less traditional research strategies to open the possibility of alternative approaches in an Ethiopian academic culture in which positivism and quantitative methods reigned supreme. As I slowly learned, the research culture of Ethiopia tended to be conservative, particularly around the norms and rituals of knowledge production.

In addition to teaching in the PhD program, the department of Educational Planning and Management invited me to serve as an advisor for two students in a master's program. One of the students conducted research on barriers to women's advancement in educational leadership. At her thesis defense, I was surprised to find that I had no role in the proceedings. Other department faculty, serving as examiners, questioned the student, while I sat at the margin of the room. I noticed that the examiners tended to dwell on lower-level questions, systematically working through the student's thesis to identify organizational or methodological problems, page by page. The examiners made no attempt to appreciate why the student and advisor made their methodological choices. Even more irritating, from my standpoint, was that the examiners asked no questions about the implications and professional significance of the work. The thesis defense provided little space to affirm the student's achievement or the value of her scholarship for advancing gender equity in the profession. To me, the defense ritual lacked a spirit of critical friendship.

From a postcolonial perspective, I could respect the ways in which my role, as a western academic, was marginalized in the thesis defense. My task was assisting the student in meeting the expectations of Ethiopian faculty examiners. As such, the thesis defense was a site that affirmed Ethiopian sovereignty over knowledge production and positioned me as an external academic in a supporting role.

Nevertheless, I also found the defense frustrated my pedagogical desire to applaud students' accomplishments. As an advisor, I work from a stance of affirmation, in which a thesis/dissertation defense becomes a celebration of students' research work and its emergent meanings. For my Ethiopian colleagues, however, the defense had a more traditional gatekeeping and quality control function, based on the objectivist epistemological assumption that quality can only be judged by an expert standing outside the project.

The Ethiopian examiners adopted the stance of skeptical critic, not critical friend. The examiners had no formative role in the preparation of the thesis. In this respect, the Ethiopian cultural norms surrounding the thesis defense replicated a colonial structure of power, in which lower-status knowledge (produced by the student) could never quite measure up to the standards of the distant power-holders (the examiners) who stood apart from the subject of their professional gaze.

Following the thesis defense, I asked a number of my Ethiopian colleagues about their views on graduate advising and the thesis defense process. I wanted to better understand why the examiners adopted a problem-finding role, which contrasted so sharply with my assumptions that a graduate advisor should serve as critical friend. We discussed the hidden assumptions and cultural frames surrounding the defense. As we did, I better understood both my assumptions and theirs. I understood that their insistence on detailed evaluation of methodological rigor and the logical presentation of findings was intended to ensure the quality and legitimacy of the research. The Ethiopian approach to thesis examination removed relational entanglements from the process, separating concern for the student's self-worth and growth from judgements about the worth of the research product. At the same time, I could see more clearly my own culturally-shaped interest in the student's identity development and my

epistemological belief that knowing is a relationally-grounded endeavor. In sum, we stood on very different ground in our stance toward graduate research advising.

In these conversations, I also realized that several younger Ethiopian colleagues were also frustrated with the lack of support for graduate students in the advising and defense process. Specifically, my Ethiopian colleagues who had studied in Europe for their own graduate degrees were aware of alternative approaches to student advising that were more supportive and growth-oriented than the Ethiopian tradition. We decided to write about it, and we co-authored a brief article for the university's newsletter about moving from a fault-finding to empowering approach to cultivating emerging scholars (Miller, Hindeya, & Yibrie, 2016). In that article, my Ethiopian colleagues and I challenged the negative tone that often dominates public conversations about research in Ethiopian universities (Miller, Hindeya, and Yibrie, 2016). Whether in conferences or defense presentations, professional audiences in Ethiopia often fixate on the perceived defects of a research project. As a result, we noted, students often made safe choices that follow long-established research pathways and used well-worn frameworks, rather than risking censure with the use of innovative methods. In this respect, the fault-finding culture of research has the counter-productive, conservative effect of incentivizing mainstream approaches while discouraging new methods and frameworks that might depart from established practice (Miller, Hindeya, & Yibrie, 2016).

Already globalized local academic debates

Of course, there is no monolithic academic culture in Ethiopia. Diverse Ethiopian scholars have their own complex differences in their approaches to teaching and learning—especially as a result of global flows of intellectual capital, with Ethiopian faculty pursuing advanced graduate degrees in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and, increasingly, in China. The globalized, and diverse experiences they bring back, can be a well-spring of negotiation and change that is simultaneously “inside” and “outside” the culture. I would like to suggest that American scholars working with Ethiopian partners should not be shy about critically engaging their colleagues, offering their reflections and recommendations in the ongoing dialogue about cultural change.

Once I realized that Ethiopian scholars were engaged in their own internal dialogue about epistemology and knowledge production in graduate research, I felt more comfortable that I could stand as a critical friend with my colleagues, i.e., joining that dialogue as a critical voice from the outside, within the context of an established, multi-year academic partnership.

In that respect, my experience in Ethiopia reminds me that the humanist discourse of “appreciating difference” in international partnerships can limit the ways in which partners from different cultures can serve as critical friends for each other. I want to argue that critical scholars need not leave their critical sensibilities at home, when they engage in partnership with international colleagues. Once we appreciate that our partners are already engaged in intensive, internal dialogue about the same questions we face about enriching cultures of teaching/learning and research, we realize we can best serve our partners by sharing our own questions and suggestions for doing the work differently. The necessary humility that cross-cultural partnership requires—the

acknowledgement that our way is never the only and right way—should not constrain us from challenging what may be counter-productive or constraining elements of other people's traditions. Such is the work of critical friends.

One of the other insights I've gained from my collaboration with Ethiopia, is that collaboration occurs within a specific policy/institutional context—a context which the American partner may not fully understand from the outside. That was certainly the case with me. During my initial visits to Ethiopia, when I began conversations with Ethiopian colleagues about developing a new PhD program, I did not understand that their local project was motivated by a much broader national agenda of quickly opening large numbers of PhD programs to build indigenous capacity for staffing the universities mushrooming across the Ethiopian landscape. What I didn't understand at the time, was that Ethiopian universities had specific interests in engaging international faculty members, as a kind of academic guest workers whose purpose was to fill in a resource gap until Ethiopia educates sufficient numbers of its own PhD-graduates.

In saying this, I simply acknowledge that an international partner may seek foreign engagement for reasons that may not be immediately visible from the outside. In the case of my colleagues in Ethiopia, they were looking for someone to teach and advise their doctoral students when they "opened the door" but could not yet "furnish the room" on their own. This acknowledgement, for me, recognizes that institutions on both sides of a partnership are complex actors. We may desire reciprocal relationships of mutuality that are free of other entanglements, but we need to be aware of what we need from each other and be self-critical in our assumptions about how we operate as critical friends.

References

- Adriansen, H. K., Madsen, L. M., & Jensen, S. (Eds.). (2016). Higher education and capacity building in Africa: The geography and power of knowledge under changing conditions. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Akalu, G. B. (2014). Higher education in Ethiopia: Expansion, quality assurance, and institutional autonomy. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 68(4), 394-415.
- Altbach, P. G. (2016). *Global perspectives on higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ashcroft, K. & Raynor, P. (2011). *Higher education in development: Lessons from sub-saharan Africa*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (2016). *Growth and transformation plan II*.
- Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (2015). *Education sector development programme V*.
- Kara, H. (2015). *Creative research methods in the social sciences: A practical guide*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- McKeown, J., & Diboll, M. (2011). Critical friendship in international education reform: A journey to educational cultural convergence. *Mevlana International Journal of Education*, 1(2), 15-26.

- Miller, V., Hindeya, H., & Yibrie, A. (2016, October). From fault-finding to empowering: How can we build a more learning-centered culture of student research at Bahir Dar University? *The Nile: Newsletter of Bahir Dar University*.
- Semela, T. (2011). Breakneck expansion and quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education: Ideological rationales and economic impediments. *Higher Education Policy*, 24, 399-425.
- Storey, V. A., & Richard, B. M. (2013). Critical friends groups: Moving beyond mentoring. In V. Storey (Ed.). *Redesigning professional education doctorates: Applications of critical friendship theory to the EdD* (pp. 9-24). New York, NY: Palgrave McMillan.
- Tessema, K. A. (2009). The unfolding trends and consequences of expanding higher education in Ethiopia: Massive universities, massive challenges. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63(1), 29-45.