

# *Artful Critical Friendship: Interpreting a co-teaching relationship*

**Andy Millington**

## **Keywords:**

friendship, critical friend, reflection, art, metaphor, co-facilitating, co-authoring,



## **A context**

I am an optometrist who has worked in community practice for over 30 years. For the last 17 years, I have combined this with a specialist clinical and teaching role in the Cardiff University School of Optometry and Visual Science, which is where I met Rod Woodhouse. I felt honoured when I was asked to be a critical friend for Rod, another contributor to this publication. When my friend Rod (see his article 'Being there' elsewhere in this journal) asked me to contribute to his creative process, this became a burden of joy. It brought responsibility, but it was a responsibility that I craved and relished. After all, that is the sort of thing you do for a friend. But it did set me off on the path of considering the nature of our friendship, using a technique (reflection) that we have been using for the past few months when he and I were co-facilitating a wellbeing webinar for university students

## **The Process of Reflection**

Reflection as a process is an important part of medical professionals' lives. It is used as an assessment tool during their education, an educational aid for their ongoing registration and a personal tool used by many to make sense of the ambiguities and challenges they face in their daily schedule.

Part of my working life, which I share with Rod, is teaching the reflective process. It can be truly rewarding when a student truly 'gets' the process, but also hugely frustrating when they don't. Some of the issues that we face is that it is seen as an assessment tool. This generally leads to one of two approaches. Either the reflection is written with two eyes on the person who will be marking it. This leads to very obvious types of discussion and conclusions specifically chosen with the interests of one or other of us – as imagined authority figures - in mind. The second approach is very structured, is written to the marking matrix in an attempt to gain the maximum number of marks. Both of these approaches lack the authenticity and openness to emotion that provide the power and strength of reflection.

### Art as antidote

In an attempt to encourage authenticity, we have turned to the world of art. Our very simplistic premise was that great art provokes great emotion, though since we started this process, we have come to realise that great art actually provokes great metaphor. But more of that later.

Using this technique, when I have identified a situation that I wish to reflect upon, I begin a process that leads to me selecting a piece art. Alternatively, I might see an image which prompts me to reflect. For instance, if I wished to reflect on an episode from my working day, I would consider the event, and then think about how I could visualise this as a single image. The next stage would be to select the image which most clearly represents my initial visualisation.

### Reflecting on the art of friendship

In this case I have been reflecting on the nature of friendship, and for me the image that most clearly represents this is this one.

For me the problem with this photograph is that it captures a single moment, and misses the nuances and interactions, the before, during and after of the relationship, and the essential essence of a friendship, its living, breathing, evolving nature. As a technique, I require the subtler nuances and increased complexity of a work of art. This also means for me that I need to use someone else's work.



Andy and Rod (right).

I have found that using existing works of art rather than creating a new piece of work is more insightful and provocative for actual reflection, giving greater depth and insight. A piece that I have created would tell the story that I want. It would suffer from the constraints that creating a narrative imposes. A narrative imposes

structure, we create a narrative to tell stories, to illustrate a point. We create a linear structure of beginning, middle and end to show a causality which we have created post hoc. The punchline would be the punchline, and no more. For me, the metaphor would be constructed and constrained by my creative process. By using an existing artwork, I am considering how my narrative compares to the artist's. But I am also able to learn from their experience, to follow or diverge from their narrative, to draw lessons or to interpret through the lens of my experience and insight. By using metaphor, we also free ourselves from narrative constraints. We have freedom to truly consider the now in all its glorious technicolour without the artifice of causality.

The process of choosing a picture is also interesting as an acceptable amount of ambiguity is necessarily introduced into the process. No image will be exactly what I want, and writing this, I have realised that this element is what provides some of the power in the reflection technique.

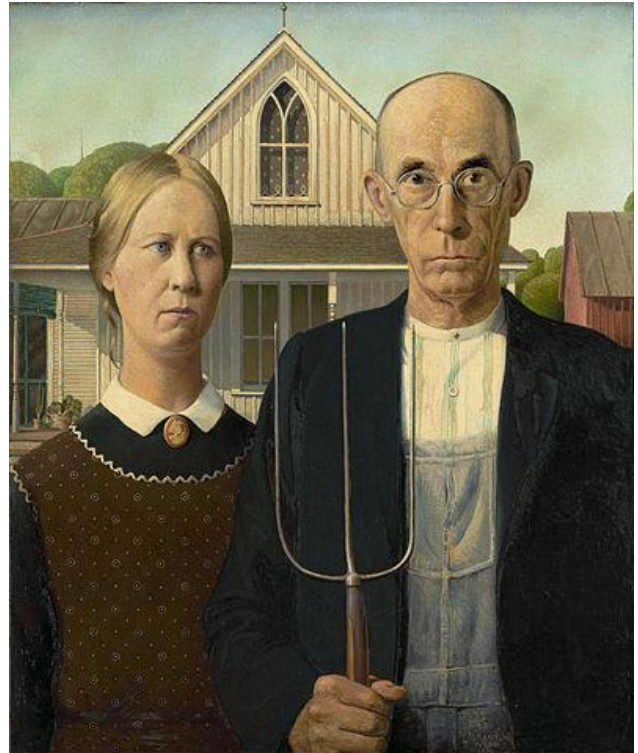
My initial thoughts were that Hans Holbein the Younger's [The Ambassadors](#) would be perfect: however, while it provided plenty of complexity, it also felt too posed and constructed, almost knowingly clever. At this point I turned to Google Image search. There is an element of authenticity to this element of the process. I find it very easy to reject images, my gut reaction. There are byways and backwaters where I might look at other works by the same artist or change my search string in response to some of the descriptors of a particular image. This mirrors any normal creative process. Am I using the power of Google to augment my intellect, or is it the modern equivalent to a piece of paper and a pencil?



[The Ambassadors](#), Hans Holbein the Younger (1533), [The National Gallery](#).

## Image as medium

After due consideration, I made my choice. American Gothic (Grant Wood 1930) (is often considered to be the most famous painting in the American canon. It depicts a rural couple posed in front of their farm building, dressed in the Sunday best, with the husband holding a pitchfork to signify his trade. It is a tightly framed shot, with little unnecessary background depicted, which draws the eye to the two protagonists who compete for room, with the wife turned slightly to fit in the shot. This results in them having differing eye lines. He is almost confrontational, proudly staring straight out at the viewer, while she is either reluctant to make eye contact, or distracted by something happening beyond the frame.



American Gothic: Grant Wood, [Google Art Project](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

## The Nature of our co-teaching

I have known Rod for most of his life. I first met him when he was a toddler, but lost touch when his parents split. I remained in contact with his dad who, as dads do, would tell me odd snippets of what he was up to, but would also lament his lack of contact with Rod, having by this time emigrated and had another child. I next met Rod 25 years later when we both took up part-time positions in The School of Optometry in Cardiff University. We had occasional contact, both making coffee at the same time or passing on the stairs, but our relationship was probably best described as being aware of each other.

This all changed a few years ago when I was 'stood up' by a colleague who I was teaching a workshop with. This particular workshop would not run single-headedly, and by chance Rod was passing in the corridor and was free for that session. Thus a Sliding Doors moment brought us together.

It is fair to say that I am easily distracted, whilst Rod takes refuge in structure and we both use humour to deflect, which meant that this first session set the tenor of our relationship.

Although both scientists, we also both have social science degrees, and approach the task of teaching and the subject matter with a knowing social science perspective. We have both commented that our solo teaching is less satisfying and less effective than when we collaborate. The second voice that teaching together brings works on several levels. It negates the didactic stance of much teaching by providing an everyman figure and taking us on a journey of discovery rather than being channelled along a path of slides.

## The Exploration:

### Resonances of Wood's painting with the relationship between Rod and me

Wood's image is a naive style painting which is also reminiscent of a Victorian studio photograph. The two individuals have a very posed stance. One is looking directly at the viewer, focused on the task of having the image made. The other has a different eyeline, looking beyond the frame of the picture, distracted by something outside of the bounds of the image.

This strikes a chord with me on two levels. In social situations I am the bold, up front gobby half of the relationship. Rod on the other hand doesn't make much eye contact, he has learnt how to behave in social encounters and plays that role. Role and performance are topics we continually return to in both our teaching and private discussions.

There are dimensions of this in our working partnership. Rod provides the focus and keeps us on track, whereas I am easily distracted, a starter rather than a finisher, always looking to the next idea, jumping like a mayfly from subject to subject, and totally non-sequitur. So in this respect we are interchangeable characters in the picture: socially, I would be the front man; professionally Rod would be in front to moderate and mediate, steer the ship.

Wood's characters are dressed for the occasion. Smart but not unnaturally dressed up. Initially there appears to be no dominance in the picture. However, the gentleman is slightly dominant, he is in front of the lady and taking slightly more of the frame. This could be interpreted as him being focused on the task in hand, or alternatively that as a couple they are squashed into the frame. That there isn't actually room for both of them but they have got in there in any way that they can.

The framework that friendship provides is exciting. Rod and I both struggle to fit in everything we bring. We compete for the space. There is a sibling-like rivalry. It is also exclusive, there is no room for anyone else within this relationship. But we are content, because we totally fill it and are free to step outside the frame at any point.

## The Hero

In 'American Gothic', I don't see a power imbalance between the couple, despite the traditional gender roles, the primacy of the man in the staging and the presence of the pitchfork; more that they are the two voices of one individual. The outward face presented to the world and the inner voice whispering in the ear.

How is this indicative of my relationship with Rod? Within the framework of my role as critical friend, Rod has the constraints of writing a paper; the brief, the time frame, the word count. This allows me a freedom to express ideas. I can explore concepts and generate ideas in my role as friend/reviewer, yet the very nature of that role brings with it boundaries. I am very conscious that 'Being there' is Rod's piece of work and, although I have been invited, it still feels a little like trespass. Perhaps this leads to a lightness of touch in the critiquing process, suggestions are liberated rather than given, they are released like doves. Some are spotted and used; others fly free. Are they all ignored? Does it matter, does the very act of someone voicing possibilities validate the created concept?

## The Child as Outsider

The naïve element is important to me as well. It is a true friendship, not sophisticated, not troubled by politics, just compatible friends with no artifice. There is an innocence to our relationship. We have an outsider position in the higher education organisation we work for. Rod for having a non-optometry qualification, and me for being part time and working in *commerce*. This is exacerbated by my difficulty in understanding organisations. Why does it take so long for decisions to be made and actions to occur? Why do you need to justify a decision with a paper trail? How can you take collective responsibility for something but not then take personal responsibility for seeing it through? Why are the rules valued above the outcome? Rod has a better understanding of how the organisation works, but is marginalised by academic snobbery displayed by others. It is an institutional racism based, not on creed or colour, but on a mindset of town or gown, academic or trade. Resistance to this them and us distinction is one of the factors which binds us. We revel in the outsider role, the agent provocateur. We wear our alternative status as a badge of honour, but this also allows us to confront the difficult questions in our teaching.

The background in Wood's painting is also important. Neither character has a backward glance. Their clothing and the presence of the pitchfork acknowledges where they have come from, their rural roots. Yet they are both fiercely forward looking, and we, too, acknowledge the experiences and influences that have formed us. We celebrate them, carrying the pitchfork of our experience, yet looking to the future. The pitchfork can be interpreted in a number of ways, as a weapon, as a trophy or even as a token of the past. A sanitised reminder of a more brutal existence that it is proudly displayed.

I also liked that the image has a life of its own. It has developed an iconography. A simple Google image search for 'American Gothic' versions reveals a myriad of interpretations. It has been taken, changed, used and interpreted. It has been politicised, used for humour and contextualised for other cultures and generations. This is something that I think Rod and I do within our relationship. We exist from different generations, but this has never been a source of conflict or seniority between us. We exist as two halves of a whole. I am conscious that we have a two-voice approach. For me this frees me to be creative, knowing that Rod will apply the brakes, redraw the boundaries and set my horizons when necessary. This freedom to create is incredibly liberating. I can think and be wild, debate without censure, ask the silly questions and play with ideas in a way I have never been able to before. I almost surrender my role as an adult and become the annoying Why? child. Free to express the inner why?, why?, why?, or more often why not?, why not?, why not?

## REFLECTING ON LEARNING AND CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP

Typically, studies of friendship have concentrated on the value of friendship and the responsibilities and rewards that it brings, I hope that this exploration of our friendship will enlighten or entertain, and perhaps inspire.

Drawing upon the process I've been sketching above, I'd like to conclude this piece by addressing the following questions from the edition editors about webinar co-teaching, writing and critical friendship, which Rod and I discussed.

### How did you feel about the whole process?

**Rod:** I was overjoyed to be asked. It felt like validation, the fact that I had made an impact somewhere and that I have a network. I felt that I had made a mark and that was a big driving force, and actually that was a feature of the wellbeing webinars. I felt like I was making a mark, touching lives and having a positive impact on the students which is all I really want.

### How did you view the role of critical friend?

**Rod:** I think it worked for me because of our existing friendship. I trusted you enough, Andy, to tell me if I was completely on the wrong track. I found it really supportive and that was something I needed. That support was fantastic. Was it the critical friendship role that drove you to want to write your own article as well?

**Andy:** Writing is my outlet; it is a tool to let go of my emotion. I was honoured to be asked, that you would trust me with your opinions and to guide you. The article just came out, it had to go on paper. I share very little of what I write but with this it was almost that now it's on paper I felt I had to share it as a celebration of us, about what I had discovered about having a friend. I loved the critical friend workshops, but I feel I had very little input to your work. That the role was to be there as a sounding board rather than an input to content.

**Rod:** My understanding of the critical friendship role is that it is what you need it to be. It could be a glorified editor, if necessary, but it was the partnership approach that was needed here. Critical friendship is something that is overlooked in a lot of the mainstream journals; they are very parochial. The critical friendship role works best if you are approached to write something since you haven't got an article that you then go and hawk somewhere. The way AMED works is really refreshing. Here's an idea, now come and write something for us. Critical friendship is its own form of peer review, it's not faceless reviewers, but it's gone through a really rigorous review process. It comes up with some really interesting ideas that got me thinking. It's not just about the article either.

**Andy:** I was concerned it was going to be a joint article, and I didn't want it to become that. I was conscious that you were asked first, and I was quite loath to contribute my article. It goes back to the vying for the spotlight, we are individually vying for the spotlight, but we are holding hands and trying to pull the other one with us at the same time. The performance is more than the individual.

It comes back to that yin and yang. You would prefer content; I would prefer structure so you are happy to pass structure to me and I am happy to pass content to you but if I come up with content you provide structure. People are beginning to acknowledge that we tend to come as a package (as John and Bob have discovered).

## References

Hans Holbein the Younger (1533). 'The Ambassadors'.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans\\_Holbein\\_the\\_Younger\\_-\\_The\\_Ambassadors\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Holbein_the_Younger_-_The_Ambassadors_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

Grant Wood (1930). 'American Gothic'. Art Institute, Chicago.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grant\\_Wood\\_-\\_American\\_Gothic\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grant_Wood_-_American_Gothic_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

Rod Woodhouse (2020). 'Being there: Using webinars to support university students through the COVID crisis.' This journal

### About the author

**Andy** is an optometrist who has worked in community practice for over 30 years. For the last 17 years, he has combined this with a specialist clinical and teaching role in the Cardiff University School of Optometry and Visual Science. Andy is also a close friend of Rod Woodhouse and acted as critical friend to Rod while Rod was composing his article for this edition.

E: [andy\\_millington@sky.com](mailto:andy_millington@sky.com)



# A note about AMED



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk). We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

Through AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover at a significant discount, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations to generate synergy and critical mass for change. [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk), or contact **Linda Williams**, our Membership Administrator, E: [amedoffice@amed.org.uk](mailto:amedoffice@amed.org.uk), T: 0300 365 1247