

Critical Incident Analysis

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What is Critical Incident Analysis?

A critical incident is something we interpret as a problem or a challenge in a particular context, rather than a routine occurrence. For example, students may constantly arrive late for a class, or talk when other students are presenting their ideas.

Critical incident analysis is an approach to dealing with challenges in everyday practice. As reflective practitioners (see 'Reflection on learning and teaching' at www.prodait.org/reflection.phpwe), we need to pose problems about our practice, refusing to accept 'what is'. We need to explore incidents that occur in day-to-day work in order to understand them better and find alternative ways of reacting and responding to them.

Often, a critical incident is personal to an individual. Incidents only become critical, that is, problematic, if the individual sees them in this way. It is after the event that it is defined as critical.

Why do CIA?

Critical incident analysis can help teachers to know more about how they operate, to question their own practice and enable them to develop understanding and increase their control of professional judgement. It can enable an individual to reflect on their practice and to explain and justify it.

Background

As with a number of approaches, critical incident analysis has largely been explored in school teaching, but it has applications to all types of teaching and learning. David Tripp (1993), in his book on critical incident analysis, puts it simply – when something goes wrong, we need to ask what happened and what caused it to happen. The guiding principle is to frame incidents as questions. Thus 'students always come late to my class' changes to 'why do students always come late to my class? In this way, critical incidents can become turning points and lead to changes to our understanding. In asking 'why did I do that?' or 'why did I let them do that?' we are working on the values in our practice.

Analysis of Critical Incidents

Analytical method

The following method for analysing critical incidents is adapted from material produced by Glynis Cousin for Coventry University (<http://corporate.coventry.ac.uk/cms/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=2929&a=18305>). See also Martin (1996).

- Choose a critical episode: for example, students continually arriving late, students talking during class discussions.
- Describe the incident:
 - when and where it happened (time of day, location and social context)
 - what actually happened (who said or did what)
 - what you were thinking and feeling at the time and just after the incident.
- Interrogate your description as follows.
 - Why did this incident stand out?
 - What was going on?
 - Were there different levels of behaviour or activity?
 - Did I bring personal bias or a particular mindset to the event?
 - Could I have interpreted this event differently from another point of view?
 - What can I learn from this episode?
 - What can I do to progress a resolution of the problem(s) it suggests?
- Find a friend or colleague to:
 - share your account of the episode
 - discuss your interpretation
 - modify your analysis, where necessary, in the light of peer suggestion, advice, perspective.
- Where appropriate, you may want to compare your analysis with the views of other key people involved in the episode (students or colleagues for example).

- Briefly write up your report. Remember that if you name colleagues or students, you need to clarify issues of confidentiality if you wish to make your report public.

Maze method

Another perspective undertakes the analysis by using 'mazes'. These can help us to take a systematic approach to the many decisions involved in everyday teaching. Judith Kennedy (1999) has written about mazes and describes them as 'a way of presenting structured alternative actions'. Incidents are identified and alternative possibilities for action are chosen. Each possibility leads to further reflection and options for action. You may like to read Kennedy's paper.

Tripp (1993) may also be helpful, although most of the examples are from school teaching and are perhaps rather laboriously analysed. It will be a useful read, however, for anyone who wishes to research critical incident analysis as it provides categorisations of critical incidents and of different levels of analysis.

Case Studies in CIA

The following case studies represent detailed reflections on significant incidents in teaching. When reading them, remember that in every teaching session, there will also be smaller incidents which can be dealt with in different ways to make a difference to the learning and teaching that takes place.

Contributors of case studies include Sarah Jane Veevers and Hugh Munro, colleagues in the University of Birmingham.

Case study 1: Clarity of communication

Background

In a seminar session on 3 March, a student was present who had failed to hand in an essay due on 17 February. The student had come to this class and had asked for an extension for the essay because she had been ill (she looked and sounded ill). I had agreed she could hand it in by the following Thursday. However, she had failed to attend the class that week (24 February) and no contact had been made. When asked why she had not handed in the essay, she said that it would be ready for the next day (4 March). She said she had still been unwell and a friend had proofread her work and told her it had a lot of mistakes.

This left me unsure how to handle the situation as the student, who normally attends and contributes well in class, had not submitted work on time and had failed to offer reasons in advance. She had come to me only at lessons to offer explanations.

In response, I explained why this had been annoying to me as a teacher with no reasons to explain her non-submission. She was apologetic, but seemed unaware that university policy was to deduct marks from an essay for every day it was late with no support from a doctor's note.

Tutor's reflections

This incident stood out because it may reflect difficulties that my teaching style creates. I may have been too relaxed and informal in order to put students at their ease and promote discussion in classes. Perhaps this had led to some students taking advantage of my relaxed and non-confrontational manner.

The dynamics of the room may have compounded the situation. I was distracted by other class members who were doing a presentation that week. They needed assistance and were talking to each other and trying to engage me. Also, other people in the lesson were asking me (and each other) unrelated questions (as a result of my informal style, these were 'how are you?' type questions). In the relatively small class, what I was saying to the student concerned could easily be overheard.

I think bias affected the way I handled the situation as I had effectively let the student off the hook. This was in part due to my assessment of the individual's character, which I had based on how she had been in previous sessions. Although annoyed, I wanted to avoid any heavy-handed or drastic actions.

The student may have been unaware of the effect of not submitting work. She had attempted to complete the essay and gain feedback from her friend, suggesting she wanted to submit the best work possible.

Learning points

As the module convenor I should have reminded students at the beginning of the consequences of the late submission of work. I should also have been firmer with the student and asked for proof of illness.

From this I learn that clarity and consistency of communication between students and myself is crucial. It seems extreme to go to the student and discuss the event again but the lessons learnt will influence my future practice both this term and for next year's students.

Case study 2: Meeting individual needs

Background

In a discussion with another tutor, he commented that the work of a student, whom he considered to be very able, was slipping. He also said this student was friends with a couple of 'lazy lads' and that he was becoming like them. He didn't think there would be any point in saying anything to the student.

I thought about this and decided that if the department had no interest in encouraging students then I would do it. I decided to speak to the student, who is in a practical class that I teach.

The day before the practical I worried about how to approach this as I didn't want to say the wrong thing or make the situation awkward.

The incident

During the practical, I went over to answer a question from this student and while I was talking to him, his two friends went across the room to talk to another student. We talked about the write-up for this practical and because I knew that the three of them had been working closely together, I warned him about plagiarism and copying from one another. He agreed and then I took the opportunity to say I was aware that his recent academic achievements were not matching his capabilities. He said he had had an essay mark back recently that he was disappointed with. I said that if there was a problem he should talk to someone but if he was just being lazy then he should pull his finger out! He agreed that he had got lazy and we left it at that.

The following week I saw the student again. He told me he had been in the library over the weekend, reading a lot to finish an essay that was due. He said (in front of another student), 'After you kicked me up the arse, I've been working really hard'.

Tutor's reflections

I felt very pleased I had dealt with this and that what I said had an effect. The episode hadn't made things awkward between us. Since then, I have been approached by this student several times for help with various aspects of his work. I saw him recently working in the self-teaching room on a project. I am so pleased that he is back on track and that I have probably contributed to this change.

Learning points

This incident stands out for me because I did a small thing that had a very positive outcome. I was made aware of this student's situation and so I could do something about it. There may be others whose problems I wouldn't pick up.

It seems important that the department should act in situations like this. Perhaps something should be introduced to ensure that all students' progress is monitored and encouraged informally in this way.

Case study 3: A matter of confidence

Background

In a first-year seminar, there were 16 students. Two students had prepared a presentation for the rest of the group. I then attempted to initiate a whole-group discussion of the issues raised, using six questions I had prepared. The students responded to my first question with silence. I then re-worded the question in case they had not understood it and received only a brief reply. I then invited other members of the group to speak, but nobody responded. This pattern was repeated when I asked my second question and the third

was met with total silence. It seemed that few students had done the preparatory reading, and, when asked, it emerged that only four students (including the presenters) had prepared for the session. I reminded the students of the purpose of the seminars and their responsibilities relating to them. I then told the group it was pointless to continue the session if so few of them had prepared for it, so I apologised to the presenters and to those who had done the reading, then told the class to leave.

Tutor's reflections

As the situation unfolded, I felt increasingly uncomfortable and embarrassed. The students sat and stared at me as if waiting for me to do something and, due to my lack of training and experience, I felt vulnerable and out of my depth. I was also unsure how to react because I was ignorant of the range of possible responses open to me; I felt angry that my department had placed me in this situation without any prior training.

After the incident, I felt cross and disappointed with the students because I had done a lot of wasted preparation. I felt they were not taking me or the seminar seriously. I was also uncertain whether I handled the incident appropriately, although it was difficult to see what the alternatives were. The incident made me doubt my capabilities as a teacher and to blame myself for it. I started to ask myself whether I was really cut out for teaching and whether the behaviour of the students was somehow my fault, triggered by some deficiency or failing in my teaching style. In short, the incident seriously shook my already fragile confidence in my teaching skills.

Learning points

The problem may have resulted from my teaching style, which requires me to initiate and perpetuate group discussion. If students have not prepared adequately, then discussion will not get off the ground. The incident resulted from a combination of my teaching style and the behaviour of the students.

Whole-group discussion format will only work if students have prepared adequately and are willing to contribute. As a graduate teaching assistant, my role must be to facilitate discussion, not be the sole source of it. Therefore, I need to ensure that most, if not all, of the students participate in the class, perhaps by giving them more of the responsibility for its success.

A possible alternative would be the group discussion and presentation format, which encourages students to contribute more to seminars.

A colleague's perspective on the incident

I shared my account of the episode with a colleague. She thought I was being too harsh in my self-criticism and that I acted professionally in a difficult situation. By ending the session early, she said I showed the students that 'it is their efforts that are needed in order for the seminar format to work effectively'. I had made the students more aware of my expectations. She was

impressed that I apologised to the students who had prepared for the class. This, she said, demonstrated an ability to relate to the students.

Until I shared my analysis with my colleague, I saw the event as the encapsulation of all my failings as a teacher. However, her feedback suggests I am a better teacher than I thought.

Case study 3 – the sequel

The incident

In a later seminar, two students had prepared a presentation. I divided the students into small groups with a set of four questions and asked them to talk about them for eight minutes. They were then to deliver a brief presentation on each answer. Then each group gave their answer to the first question and the class spent a few minutes discussing these answers. The majority of students were willing to contribute to the discussions and offer new ideas – and we ran out of time before finishing our discussions.

Tutor's reflections

As the seminar progressed, I found myself really enjoying a teaching session for the first time. I was pleased that the students responded well to the group discussion and presentation format, and the seminar was a great deal more relaxed and less draining than the whole-group discussions of previous weeks.

The new format had worked well for both me and the students. The experience restored some of my confidence in my teaching abilities.

Learning points

The group discussion and presentation format can work well for me and for the students. However, there was not enough time to cover four questions in detail and asking each group in turn for their answer to each question proved very repetitive.

I intend to dispense with student presentations next semester and concentrate on group discussions and presentations. I will also give each group a single question to talk about, which should reduce repetition.

A colleague's perspective on the incident

My colleague's view this time was that I had showed a willingness to be flexible in teaching and that my ability to react to the dynamic of the class and alter my teaching style accordingly is very valuable. She added that this was definitely something to be proud of.

References

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