

## Contents

1. Introduction	Page 2
2. Description of the Critical Incident	Page 3
3. Reflection on the Critical Incident	Page 6
4. Analysis of the Critical Incident	Page 8
5. Alternative Actions	Page 11
6. Learning from the Reflection	Page 12
7. Bibliography	Page 13

## **Introduction**

“Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make and the basis of that judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident” (Tripp, 1993).

A critical incident does not have to be something that is necessarily a bad occurrence within ones teaching, it is however something that happens for which one feels a need to examine it, to find out if there are any underlying causes for it and consequently shape our responses to it and future incidences.

To this end in order to analyse a critical incident I have previously experienced I will look at a combination of Rich and Parker’s ‘Reflection and Critical Incident Analysis’ work along with David Tripp’s, ‘WHY? Challenge’ as, I believe this to be the most suitable of his four approaches to my specific critical incident. I will use these to analyse a critical incident that I have experienced in order to find out why the critical incident occurred and why I responded as I did. This will also help in ascertaining whether I could have or should have handled things differently.

## **Description of the Critical Incident**

I am currently teaching in an all male, open prison in [REDACTED]. I teach what we refer to as our ABE Communications class; this is a mixed ability Adult Basic Education Literacy class, with students ranging from an ESOL equivalent level up to Entry Level 3.

The critical incident to be reported on happened on a Friday morning during an 8:30 to 11:30 session, with one fifteen-minute break provided at 10:00. The lesson was in a room seating approximately twelve students with six students present at the time.

I had undertaken approximately thirty minutes of teacher talking on the subject of homophones and then provided each student with a gapped handout for them to read and fill out the missing words.

The specific critical incident involved myself as teacher and two students who I will refer to only as Student A and Student B. At the time of the critical incident Student A was an ESOL Student working towards Entry Level 1 and Student B was an Entry Level 1 Student working towards Entry Level 2. Student A was in his first week of Education within his prison sentence and the lesson in which the critical incident took place was his first lesson with myself as teacher. Both students are also of the same Asian ethnic background.

After the handouts were given to each student I had asked them to read and fill out the missing words based on the teaching I had earlier undertaken. I told the class I would then walk around and help them individually with any queries they had and any difficulties they were finding with the work.

At this point Student A said he could not read the handouts, so I approached him and asked him exactly what the difficulty was, he informed me he could not read English at all. I then asked him to try and read the words to me and that I would help him with any he had difficulty with. Student A then said again that he could not read any of them and that I should read the passage to him. Again I asked Student A to attempt to read the passage while I sat with him and would help him with any difficulties and once again Student A suggested that a 'good idea' would be for me to read the passage for him. For a final time I asked Student A to read the passage by saying "No I think a good idea would be for you to 'try' and read the passage for yourself, and I will help". At this point Student B who had been sitting next to Student A during our conversations spoke and commented, loud enough for Student A to hear, "Yes sir, I think that's a good Idea too". At this point Student A made an admirable attempt to read the passage given to him and with my assistance was able to make a very good effort at completing the gapped handout.

Significantly, I could have 'lost the class' had this incident continued or had I not been able to control the incidence's outcome. Had Student A been seen to 'get away' with not doing the requisite work or seen to have 'control' over the student / teacher relationship, it may well have sent a signal to the rest of the

class that they too needn't do any work and could see any sessions with myself as teacher as sessions where they were in control and could get away with not making any effort.

At the time of the critical incident I had several thoughts in my head as to why it was happening. Firstly I thought that genuinely Student A was unable to read any English at all, I thought maybe there had been a mistake in the system used at my place of work which ascertains the level of the students ability before they gain access to the education facilities available. Secondly I thought that Student A could be lazy, I thought that there was a possibility he simply couldn't be bothered to do the work and so was trying to get it done by someone else, namely me.

Since the critical incident, I have been able to expand my thinking to other possibilities surrounding the actions of Student A, maybe he wanted to show me he was in control of the Student / teacher relationship, after all, without wanting to generalise, only when you understand the prison environment and the culture of the prisoner do you see how clever at manipulation the average prisoner can be. He may also have wanted to show the rest of the class he was in control and he may even have wanted to 'show off' to the class. As I have got to know Student A better it is apparent that he is something of a comedian amongst his peers, which he appears to use to create popularity in what can be a hostile environment to live for the period of an inmates sentence.

## **Reflection on the Critical Incident**

The aim of the work I was undertaking with the students was multifaceted. It was to improve their reading and writing, to improve their spelling and punctuation also to improve their confidence when it comes to attempting to read and to attempt to get the student to feel comfortable with asking for help and advice. My specific aim during the time of the critical incident was to get Student A to do the work I was asking the entire class to do without exception.

I do not want the students to view me as a prison warder or a dominant and authoritarian part of the prison staff, as the education department is a separate autonomous entity. Although as the teacher I must still ensure that the student / teacher relationship is upheld and the students must be aware of the level of authority I possess. I didn't want Student A or any of his fellow students to feel that they could 'get away' with not working in class and general indiscipline during my teaching sessions.

At the same time the manner in which I handled the critical incident was still very relaxed so the students did not see me getting angry or frustrated or authoritarian. To this end I feel I was able to keep the trust and respect I feel I have managed to gain during my time at my place of work.

As a consequence of my actions Student A has from then on always been friendly and courteous towards me even jovial on numerous occasions. He has also probably more importantly always made the effort in class to at least

attempt any work I have asked him to do and even ask me for help and assistance when he has needed it. Student B began to help Student A with his classroom work and appeared to even relish what he seemed to see as his roll as a mentor figure in the classroom. This has also even been to a point where Student B began to leave the classroom at the same time as myself and ask my advice on the days work and how to improve his own understanding and he even took to helping me with carrying books, ILP folders and resources to the staff room after lessons. With regards to the rest of the class it appears that they also respect me as their teacher and so far no similar incidents have taken place.

Both at the time and on reflection in the days and weeks since I feel I handled the critical incident well. I was not expecting the incident so was not prepared for it or with how to handle it however this incident along with my reaction to it has prepared me for any such future incidents of a similar nature.

## Analysis of the Critical Incident

Using David Tripp's 'WHY? Challenge' model I can ask myself a series of 'why?' questions in order to attempt to explain and understand the behaviour of Student A before, during and after the critical incident.

I will begin by looking at what I see as the two key possibilities in the critical incident, was Student A **unable** or **unwilling** to do the work asked of him?

*Why could he not do the gapped handouts?* Perhaps he genuinely couldn't read them. Student A may indeed not have the requisite level of English to do the work I was asking of him. The education department at the prison in which I work is only a small department with a staff of only three full time teachers and a small number of 'visiting lecturers'. Resources and time are limited so when a student is initially brought into the prison's custody they are given a rudimentary diagnostic test to ascertain their level of competence. If they gain access the privilege of the education department they are then given a second diagnostic test to ascertain their specific 'national curriculum' levels in English and Mathematics. However as stated earlier there is always a possibility, no matter how slim, that a student may appear to have a greater ability than I realise and perhaps this was the case with Student A.

There is also a possibility that the work I was providing for a mixed ability class did not take into account enough the students at the lower end of the ability range. I may have been pitching the level too high for all and not



differentiating enough between the abilities and previous education of the students. Could there be another reason for him not to be able to read them? Student A may have had a learning disability that I was not aware of.

*Why did he not want to do the gapped handouts?* Perhaps Student A was being lazy and simply didn't want to do any work. Many students do indeed apply to come to the education department as they see it as a 'soft option' instead of doing manual work during the days. It must be understood at this point that in the open prison at which I work from 8:30 until 16:00 each inmate must be undertaking some form of activity, be that manual labour internally at the prison, working within the community or 'going to education'. The prison operates on a privileges system and the inmates have to earn the right to do different levels of activity throughout the day, but no one is allowed to simply do nothing and lie on their bed. So Student A may have been one of a few students who simply think that coming to education is an easy way of filling their day. He may simply have not been bothered to do the work and was trying to get someone else, namely myself, to do it for him.

*Why else might he have not wanted to do the gapped handouts?* Student A was in his first week of education yet I am not party to how long he had already been an inmate of the prison or indeed how long he was to be attending. It was also his first session with me as teacher. Something all students do and especially so in prison education is to attempt to 'suss-out' their teacher. There is a good possibility that Student A was indeed doing this. I feel he may well have been testing me out to see just how much he could

'get away' with and how lenient a teacher I was with regards the students actually having to do work. The way in which he could have been doing this was by 'pushing me' to see how agitated I would get by his comments and even to see if I would get scared, as he is after all in prison for a reason.

Another reason may well have been that he was 'playing up' to his peers, perhaps in a show of authority himself or simply to gain the respect or admiration of his peers as 'the student who showed the teacher'. As I have already stated Student A now appears to me to be somewhat of a showman when it comes to the other inmates after all.

*Why else might he have not wanted to do the gapped handouts?* Another reason on a more educational level may be that he considered the work 'beneath him'. A difficult problem with teaching basic education to adults is the issue of andragogy versus pedagogy. Indeed Knowles (1983) discusses, among others, one major difference between an adult and child's learning is this basic concept that an adult needs to know **why** they are learning something before they can begin. Although it is changing now there are still difficulties in teaching an adult what they may see as simplistic things in English Literacy classes. Many resources for the teaching of English Language education are aimed more at the pedagogical or child learner and although I felt that the passage in question I had given the students to read was not patronising or 'beneath' them Student A may have felt otherwise about it.

## **Alternative Actions**

There were some alternative actions I could have taken to the critical incident.

I could have simply ignored the situation and left Student A to get on with the work. However I feel that he would not have done so and would have become more of a disruptive influence on the class as a whole, more than likely beginning conversations with the other students as I tried to do 'one-to-one' work, helping them with their own work.

I could have been more forceful with Student A and resorted to threats as to what might have happened if he simply didn't do what I was telling him to do. However again I do not think this would have worked in my favour with the rest of the class and I would have probably lost the trust and respect I feel I have built up with the other students.

A final alternative action would have been for me to actually do as I was asked initially and read the passage to Student A and fill in the gapped handout with him, taking a more instructive role in the learning process. However once again, I don't feel that learning would have taken place as Student A could have quite easily just let me do the work for him without paying any attention to the reasoning behind the solutions to the problems. This would also have more than likely given a poor signal to the other students that I was prepared to let them not work and do it for them.

## **Learning from the Reflection**

I feel in hindsight I have learnt a lot from this incident and indeed from being able to look at it with the newfound knowledge of critical incident analysis in combination with reflective practice.

The experience has taught me to 'expect the unexpected' for one whilst I am teaching. I was not prepared for the incident to happen as I had assumed that the work I was giving them would be suitable for all of the students in my class. However with a new student who's background I do not know and who's prior learning I am not aware of, being a possibility in all classes, particularly within the prison education environment, this particular critical incident has taught me to be more prepared to differentiate at short notice and have 'back up' plans for any eventualities.

At the same time as this I have also come out of this experience and indeed the analysing of it with a feeling of confidence that with planning and preparation I am fully capable of dealing with critical incidences as they happen during my teaching career. As this will always be the case as Tripp (1993) says, The vast majority of critical incidents however are not at all dramatic or obvious: they are mostly straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis.

## **Bibliography**

Armitage, A et al (1999) Teaching and Training Post-Compulsory Education, Open University Press

Knowles M. (1984) The Adult Learner; A Neglected Species, Gulf Publishing.

Minton, D (1997) Teaching and Learning Skills in Further and Adult Education, Macmillan

Petty, G (1998) Teaching Today, Stanly Thornes Limited

Reece I & Walker S. (2003) Teaching, Training & Learning, A Practical Guide, Business Education Publishers Ltd.

Rich A. and Parker D. (1995) Reflection and Critical Incident Analysis: ethical and moral implications of their use within nursing and midwifery education. Journal of Advanced Nursing: 22(6)

Tripp, D (1993) Critical Incidents In Teaching, Routledge