

Critical incident analysis: reflections of a teacher educator

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ABSTRACT

As a teacher educator I consider myself an advocate for research-informed education, and strongly believe that it starts with one's own critical self-reflection and analysis of one's own teaching practice. Critical incident analysis is a pedagogical theory developed by Tripp (1993), whose analytical approaches allow reflection on teaching situations – 'the critical incident' – so that teachers can develop their professional judgments and practices. This article examines the concept of critical incident analysis through a teaching situation, with the aim of improving the teaching practice of students on teacher education programmes. I conclude that although critical incident analysis is a useful tool in navigating teaching practices, often challenges need to be addressed at much broader levels than the teaching context itself.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of teacher education, a useful technique for self-reflection is known as 'critical incident analysis' (Tripp 1993). Some take the term to mean no more than constructive self-criticism of one's actions with a view to improvement (Calderhead 1989). However, critical incident analysis explores deeper, by aiming to identify the underlying issue that has provoked strong feelings about a particular teaching situation, and lead the teacher to reflect upon it in a structured way and consider possibilities for future actions. An 'incident' need not be a dramatic event in the teaching context, just one that makes you stop and think, or one that raises questions for you. Incidents such as these are common

in day-to-day teaching and it is neither reasonable nor even possible to reflect on everything that happens, therefore a selective focus needs to be applied. This article focuses on a particular incident from the pedagogical context, which includes the teacher educator's personal ways of thinking and acting, and Tripp's analysis approaches will be applied. Using Tripp's critical incident analysis, the same incident will be reflected on several times, with a view to understanding its position and meaning in a wider perspective and thus promoting professional development for educators on teacher education programmes, and its quality for students.

KEYWORDS

CRITICAL INCIDENT
CRITICAL THINKING
REFLECTION
ANALYSIS
TEACHING PRACTICE
TEACHER EDUCATION
TEACHER EDUCATOR

DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITICAL INCIDENT

To begin with, critical incident analysis aims to describe the nature of the incident:

Week five of the second semester of teacher training. In the previous week, students participated in play activities provided by the lecturer, which were then linked to the theory on play. At the end of the session students were asked to bring in a play resource of their choice for the following week to analyse and link to children's learning. Students, who had previously sat in their presentation groups (allocated by the teacher educator), were released from doing so this session. They were asked to work in groups of three to

introduce the resource they had brought in and to answer the questions displayed on the screen. Students were asked to explain why they had selected it and to further analyse how those resources might support children's learning and development.

A group of three students had not brought in resources, stating that they 'forgot'. I advised them to use anything they had on them at the time. Twenty minutes later when I returned to this particular group, they were sitting chatting and had not taken up any of my suggestions to engage in the group work. I asked them what they were doing and they just shrugged their shoulders. Then one of the students asked me 'why are we doing this?' 'What is the point of this?' I asked her to clarify what she meant and she said that she saw no point in the activity and did not understand its relevance to teaching. Then she was on the wrong programme, I told her, as we had spent two sessions on the concept of play and how it underpins early learning and also she had to have done some groundwork in her first degree and should be aware of the concept of play. I told her that she could not possibly proceed on teacher training if she did not understand the key principles of the discipline. The other two students immediately took out pencils from their bags and started to see if they could answer the questions on the screen. I walked away and immediately wondered if the other students knew what they were doing. They did because I was walking around and supporting them before I came back to this group. In order to make sure, I walked around again and found they were following what was required. All the groups fed back with the exception of one.

In the immediate context I was annoyed at the students for wasting time and not following instructions. I also felt that my teaching style was being directly targeted, where I was trying to promote discussion and group work, with this particular group taking advantage whilst I was engaged with other students. I also felt a little

'power play' in the sense that when the student asked the question, her peers sat back arms folded for a response. My reaction to their body language at the time indicated a confrontational approach. Critical analysis of the student's questions at first instance does not appear to be 'dramatic' or 'significant' (Tripp 1993) as at first read it appears the student is reluctant, time-wasting and does not want to engage. However, the significance lay in her asking '**why are we doing this?**'

THINKING APPROACHES IN RELATION TO THE INCIDENT

Analysis and reflection on teaching situations is not just confined to Tripp's model as there are various other perspectives that can also aid in the reflection process (Dewey 1933; Van Manen 1977; Schon 1983; Kolb 1984; Boud et al. 1985; Mezirow et al. 1990; Hatton & Smith 1995; Gibbs 1998; Kennedy 1999). Tripp's (1993) paradigm is useful in teacher education, as it provides categorisations of the incident, and different analysis in terms of thinking strategies (Ahluwalia 2009). In any research, whether the collection of data or literature, critical reflection and critical thinking is necessary, and this is what Tripp's strategies allow, almost an interrogation of one's thoughts.

Plus, minus and interesting: refers to clarifying what tends to be good (plus) or bad (minus) about the incident; and those thoughts that do not fit in either category but lie somewhere (interesting) in between. The first strong feeling associated with an incident often concentrates on the negative; however, critical reflection through this approach allows us to broaden our thinking and focus beyond.

Plus: The student was able to be honest and state that she did not know why she should do what was asked. Her questions prompted me to check at once whether the rest of the lecture group understood what they were doing. This incident

provided me with an opportunity to review my lecture design by considering why this method of teaching was involved, what intended learning outcomes (why are they doing this?) were to be achieved and why it did not work for this particular student.

Minus: The student asked the question as a result of direct confrontation by me when asked why she was not participating in the task. My response to the student's questions may cause her in future to refrain from asking, in the learning context, if she genuinely does not understand. The student was also embarrassed in front of her peers.

Interesting: The other two students had not been engaged, yet my response was only directed at the student who asked the question. I assumed that the students knew the reasoning behind teacher education pedagogy, and the reasons teacher educators ask them to engage in the activities of the learning environment; that all students should know why they do what they do and should be able to see and know the end goal. The incident suggests otherwise.

Alternatives, possibilities and choices: refers to thinking about what could have happened instead of what did happen. Alternatively, I could have checked on the group sooner as I was aware they had not brought in the resources required for the task. Hillier (2005) advises that students may not be intrinsically motivated in such a large class, and learning in groups can end up being slow and limited. When engaging with the other groups, I knew that they were on task, this then leaving me to be able to concentrate on this particular group. When the student asked the question, alternatively I could have sat with her and 'scaffolded' her understanding of what was required. By remaining with the student and the group, I could have talked through the questions and prompted them to make the link. There is a possibility here that the questions were not clear regarding the task set, but then all remaining groups

worked with it and fed back. A further possibility could be that the student found the questions difficult to read, a need that I may not be aware of. However, the main possibility is that the group work required students to feed back, and it could be that there was a form of anxiety by the students in doing so. Finally, the choice I made to relax the previous requirement that students sit in their presentation groups for this activity may have also been a contributing factor. It was only natural that students should choose to sit with those known to them. However, I felt at that time there would be some ownership and responsibility displayed by students in working to the learning task. The class was also after the weekend; this could have contributed to the 'forgetting' of the resource, but also prompted friends to sit with each other to catch up – could I have allowed a ten-minute catch-up moment at the start? I could also have chosen to regroup the students so that they were placed with those that had resources; however, I did not think of this at the time.

The 'Why?' challenge. Following on from the thinking strategies above, the 'Why?' challenge illustrates another form of analysis of the critical incident. Why? forces one to question one's response to the incident and allows understanding of what underlies the action or professional judgment regarding it. The challenge occurs twice, (1) where I want to be able to identify why this student was disengaged, but (2) to answer the student's query on why they were doing the group task and what was its relevance.

'Why?' challenge one:

Why did the student not engage in the learning task?

Because she did not bring in the resource to undertake the task.

Why?

Because she did not understand or see the relevance of it.

Why?

Because she did not engage in the previous teaching in order to link it to the present learning.

Why does this matter?

Because it demonstrates that she was disengaged, disconnected almost, from the learning context and did not fully understand what learning in teacher education requires.

Why?

Because she did not understand 'why are we doing this?'

Why does this matter?

Because if students do not understand the relevance of what they are doing (Why are we doing this? What is the point of this?) this limits pedagogy in moving students forward.

'Why?' challenge two:

Why should students engage in group work?

Because, through quality group working, students can make relevant links between prior knowledge and experiences with new learning in a collaborative learning context. Which will enable them to form links between theory and practice and how this, in turn, develops children's learning in the context of the teaching environment.

Why?

Because analysis, critical enquiry, reflection and discussion are all skills that are valued in teacher education and are essential employability skills. Students need the combined knowledge, understanding and these skills in order to work with children.

Why is this important?

So students are eased into understanding the demands and culture of teacher education.

Why?

Because these students will work in teaching contexts.

Why does this matter?

So that children are offered high-quality learning experiences through what students will bring with them as skills and knowledge to the education context.

Why?

Because children deserve the best from skilled and trained teachers.

Why?

Because this is how it is and how it ought to be!

It is apparent that my beliefs about what is required in teacher education programmes prompted the response I gave to the student. I thought of the child first as almost a gatekeeper of the workforce, and not the needs of the student as a learner.

Dilemma identification. Within an educational context, Tripp's (1993) dilemma identification can be used as a powerful critical incident analysis strategy to deal with a situation more clearly. When vesting significance in an incident, the incident itself poses dilemmas within it, of which we try to make sense. Dilemma identification can help deal with an uncomfortable situation more clearly (Louden 1991). The student's non-engagement and questions posed a number of dilemmas both during and after the incident, as to how to move this student forward in becoming an independent learner and thinker. At the time, the student was approached as a group of learners rather than a whole independent person. The students in the room were seen as identical, it was assumed that they should all be able to conform to the task in hand, and no allowance was made for individual differences in how the learning task is to be approached. As an educator, I could only do one or the other, informed by the dynamics of the learning environment,

size of the student group and the diverse body of needs. Tripp (1993: 71) reminds us that a teacher's professional practice is not determined only by her/his own values, beliefs and personal experiences, but also by the social and material conditions of the teacher's professional existence. After analysis and the 'Why?' challenge, if I view the student as an independent learner, and away from a group, further dilemmas are posed in the form of individual versus social group learning, individual versus common teacher education culture, individual learning versus teacher strategy, individual versus motivation to learn, but also the individual versus self. Here I experience dilemmas as an educator between the priority of communicating subject knowledge, my interest/concern for the student, and some of the priorities of the teacher education programme. How many students sit in an overcrowded learning environment and have the thought why am I doing this? What does this mean? This then creates the dilemma of individual as a person versus individual as a student, where they are required to engage with the demands of learning in teacher education but also be autonomous learners.

Personal theory analysis: refers to 'an articulated set of beliefs that inform our professional judgement' (Tripp 1993: 51). It is an 'evolution of dilemma identification' because the reason why one particular action is chosen over another enables 'identification of intrinsic values that underlie one's professional judgement' (Ahluwalia 2009: 5). Dilemma identification could imply that I was concentrating on my own aims as a teacher educator and may have disregarded aspects of the learner's aims. But when I reconsider, I can see that it is not so simple because at the time it reveals a number of personal values. Firstly, I seem to think that it was my role as the 'teacher educator' to judge the quality and appropriateness of group participation in the learning situation, rather than to respond to substance. Secondly, it implied

that I wanted every student to be thinking about the same concept at the same time in group discussion. Finally, it appeared that I valued immediate 'correct' responses to the task and nothing else. The values seem to have evolved from the response itself, and were not necessarily my beliefs at all. It was a reaction to the group's non-engagement at the time and not a response which I generated from the values that I hold. At the time, it would seem that I was more concerned about the technical matter of extending students' thinking related to the curriculum and ensuring content was delivered and met. Yet I might have more productively been considering that the students engage in discussion on differing aspects of the lecture, and not precisely following the particular task that I was at that moment asking for. Or even discussing with each other 'Why are we doing this?'

I now realise that my response was indeed confrontational, and that I could have discussed with the student what she thought the learning task was about, and allowed assessment of learning by checking that she understood. One value that I did recognise, however, was that I was sufficiently concerned about the student understanding and reflecting on the task as it not only prepared them for assessment, but also offered a valuable insight into teacher education with an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Another value which arises is from my personal experience of teacher education employment, and my beliefs about what is required to work with schoolchildren, and I wanted the student to understand that only the best quality matters. This 'complex web of ideas' (Tripp 1993:52) that makes up a personal theory actually consist of two features that lead to professional judgment: firstly my own values, beliefs and personal experiences, and secondly my role as defined by the university along with views, expectations and the teacher education programme.

REFLECTION

Through critical incident analysis, I have been able to understand the wide-ranging complex diverse perspectives, expectations and needs of students who undertake teacher education programmes without any basic knowledge, and how this hinders their learning in grasping the culture of teacher education. This in turn provides an unpredictable and diverse learning and teaching environment for both student and teacher educator. Aspects of reflection have included understanding manageable student numbers, where group work can suffice and as an educator having the time to sit with students who ask 'Why are we doing this?' This may maintain the quality of the student learning experience, where personal interactions between students and educators can bring upon dialogue and an 'autonomy-supportive' approach. Further, clear links to assessment and employability are essential so that students understand why teacher education programmes do what they do – 'Why are we doing this?'

I have also opted to think about the use of creative thinking around materials to support group working (ESCalate, 2009), originating from the student interaction. Although students were asked to bring in their own resources, I as a teacher educator could provide resources that I then help facilitate to link to the learning: in other words, role-model creative thinking to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Finally, skills need to be included in the assessment criteria of teaching plans to ensure 'practices' of learning are valued rather than 'products' (Black et al. 2004). A revised ongoing 'dialogic' formative assessment (Yorke 2001) increases opportunities for skills which support the development of learner autonomy through clarifying expectations of assessment in teacher education and what good performance is, offering balance in the tension between assessment of learning ('study products') and assessment for learning ('study practices') (Black et al. 2004).

CONCLUSION

Critical incident analysis has been an empowering and supportive process. It has been useful in navigating through the challenges that educators encounter in the teaching context. Having reflected critically on my incident within the context of teacher education, I have been able to rethink my professional judgment and practice. Through critical analysis I was able to view the experience, crisis, conflicts and dilemmas I and my students are faced with. This also provided a mismatch of my expectations, student expectations, research, and the reality encountered in the teaching environment. It also seems to be a 'juggle' between the pedagogic value I have of social constructivism, the learner, the children with whom the learner will come into contact and the complex demands of

the teaching profession. This all filters into the role of the teacher educator.

Coping with, and learning from, the variety of challenges can change views held by teacher educators, similar to the findings of Carter's (2000) study in New South Wales, which highlights that educators' values concerning teaching change over the course of their first year as teachers to accommodate a broader social agenda. It was also evident that the values that teacher educators hold can actually change, be extended and elaborated in day-to-day practice. These values come into tension and conflict with the values circulating in teacher education (Czerniawski 2010: 84). The role that is being constructed for teacher educators through various research mechanisms, which suggest various strategies to enable students to progress, is being

powerfully deconstructed by the realities the students face within the discipline.

However, although I envisage developing my practice as a teacher educator from this reflection, there will be students who do not engage, as demonstrated by the student in the critical incident. Analysis of this has uncovered a number of challenges for practice, and one cannot deny that the remaining lecture group all participated, therefore not necessarily highlighting issues in the learning and teaching strategy. What it does highlight is the student's suitability to undertake teacher education programmes, and how this fits in with the wider context. Therefore there are challenges that have to be addressed at a much broader level than the teaching context itself. ■

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