Advanced Teaching Portfolio: Critical Incidents

1. Introduction: What is a “Critical Incident”

According to the Institute for Learning, a critical incident is an incident which, whilst not necessarily “dramatic,” is significant. David Tripp notes, “People often ask what a critical incident is and how to recognise one. The answer of course, is that critical incidents are not ‘things’ which exist independently of an observer….but, like all data, critical incidents are created. 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.”

As the IfL notes, for a teacher or lecturer, a critical incident can include:

- an aspect of work going particularly well, or proving to be difficult or demanding;
- a piece of work or a group which increased awareness or challenged understanding of social justice issues e.g. equality and diversity;
- an incident involving conflict, hostility, aggression or criticism: either with a colleague or a learner.

Although critical incidents may relate to issues of communication, knowledge, treatment of and by others, culture, professional or personal relationships, emotions or beliefs, they become significant for two main reasons:

1. they take the form of an event which makes one stop and think, or one which raises questions about beliefs, values, attitude or behaviour.
2. the incident has an impact on one’s personal and professional learning and/or teaching.

As Tripp noted in another article, critical incidents 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 sense that they are indicative of underlying motive and structures…in teaching, importantly, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen all the time, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident therefore is an interpretation of the significance of an event…”

That significance can only come about through a process of reflection, which necessarily takes place in retrospect. This also helps us to understand the context in which events take place. CIA helps to get beneath the surface of what happened in order to illuminate these aspects of practice, and, ideally, help us get better at teaching. CIA can help us think more clearly and less emotionally about the best way to address a situation. And it might even show us how, on occasion, our actions can betray our aspirations.

In the best of all possible worlds, it might even be possible to turn a Critical Incident into a Teachable Moment, “an unplanned opportunity that arises in the classroom where a teacher has an ideal chance to offer insight to his or her students.” A Teachable Moment, a fleeting opportunity that must be
sensed and seized by the teacher, may require a brief digression that temporarily sidetracks the original lesson plan so that the teacher can explain a concept that has inadvertantly captured the students' collective interest. Taking this tangent is worthwhile because it is organically timed to maximize impact on the students. As Tracey Muir\(^5\) notes, "direct reference to teachable moments in the literature is rare" but cites Clarke et al\(^6\) who stated that "effective teachers used teachable moments as they occurred and made connections to mathematical ideas from previous lessons or experiences." Muir also references a paper by Arafah, Smerdon, and Snow\(^7\) which provides an example of how teaching lessons can be analysed to explore teachable moments. However, this is outside the scope of the present paper.

2. Analysing a Critical Incident

Critical Incident Analysis (CIA) is an approach to dealing with challenges in everyday practice, and is aimed at making us reflective practitioners who have a better understanding of how we operate, making us more aware of our own practice. It’s a way to explore, explain, consider, justify and learn from incidents which occur in day-to-day work in order to develop a better understanding, which should help to find alternative ways of reacting and responding to such incidents.

CIA aims to:

- identify the issue that has provoked strong feelings
- reflect upon it in a structured way
- consider possibilities for future action.

One method used in CIA is to focus on key points to help identify what could be done better the next time e.g:

- Was it related to the learning environment?
- Was it behavioural?
- Was it subject related?
- Was it pedagogical?

The IfL suggests that, when analysing a critical incident, it is useful to frame incidents as questions.\(^8\) This helps to distance us from the incident, and enables the incident to be placed into a reflective context. The answers to the reflective questions can then be discussed with a trusted friend or mentor. An example would be the comment 'students always come late to my class,' which changes to 'why do students always come late to my class? Other questions might include:

- Why do I view the situation like that?
- What assumptions have I made about the student, colleague, problem or situation?
- How else could I interpret the situation?
- What other action could I have taken that might have been more helpful?
• What will I do if I am faced with a similar situation in the future?

3 A Toolkit for CIA

The University of Coventry has conducted research, and set out a method for analysing critical incidents. In the following Case Studies of my two Critical Incidents, I have incorporated the key elements from the following outline, which I have adapted from the Coventry research:

1. Choose a critical episode

2. 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

3. Interrogate your description: 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?

4. 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.

5. Where appropriate, you may want to compare your analysis with the views of other key people involved in the episode (students or colleagues).

6. Briefly write up your report.

4. Case Study: Reviews of Two Critical Incidents

This section reviews two critical incidents: one took the form of a single instance of unacceptable behaviour by a student; the other concerns an ongoing pattern of behaviour which culminated in two meetings with the student, each of which formed a related Critical Incident. I think that my handling of the first Critical Incident was sub-optimal, and I recognise that, the form it took was shocking, I played a part in creating it. Hence I would do things differently were a similar instance to arise again. I think that I handled the second Critical Incident in a much more reflective and productive manner, and would act in a similar way in future.

I have designated the two case studies as:

• The Nazi Salute
• The Invisible Student
4.1 The Nazi Salute

4.1.1 Background

All students taking UG degrees in Brighton Business School are required to take an Introduction to Economics module during their first year. During 2010/11 I was one of a cohort of lecturers who ran seminars for these students, in my case teaching economics to five seminar groups. I had no particular problems with four groups (apart from the usual first year challenges of attendance, engagement, suitability etc), but Group A was different from the start. Group A was a big group (21 students), who normally all turned up for seminars. Prior to the Critical Incident described below, I had been concerned that the behaviour of Group A had been more like 4th formers at a secondary school than Year 1 UGs: on an earlier occasion, one student had walked out of the seminar when I’d invited him to choose whether to behave properly and stay, or go. That particular student subsequently returned (as I invited him to) and his behaviour and engagement improved. Generally, the whole group's behaviour had been gradually improving. So I was unprepared for the Critical Incident described below.

4.1.2 The Critical Incident

Students were required to undertake two pieces of work:

- an individual marked assignment, and
- a class exercise, which had been set in a previous seminar.

The class exercise required students, in groups, to look up some basic macroeconomic statistics for a country of their choosing, bring the data to class and present, using whichever aids they liked except Powerpoint. Although students have now developed an instrumental attitude to set tasks, along the lines of “if it isn’t assessed, then it isn’t worth much effort,” most of the groups in this class had managed to produce a presentation that demonstrated some effort and application.

One group, comprising 3 women students, chose Poland. I invited them to the front of the deliver their presentation. Their "presentation" was of a very poor quality, and met very few of the task requirements – it included no statistics, and appeared to have been put together in around 5 minutes. My verbal appraisal, and I chose my words carefully, was, “I have seen 7 or 8 presentations from previous seminar groups today and I’m trying hard to find a way to describe your work other than “pitiful.” The students were not happy with this description of their efforts. One of the group, Ms. A, (whose assignment I’d just handed back with a good grade - 60+% if I recall correctly) then surreptitiously flicked a ‘v’ in my direction. Somewhat stunned, I pretended not to notice. Then, as I critiqued their efforts further, Ms. A did a Nazi salute. Just in case I hadn’t spotted the first salute, she followed up with another Nazi salute.
Shocked, I told her that this gesture was unacceptable and insulting. Ms. A replied that she was "doing it to the class." Not true: it was aimed at me. Ms. A then returned to her seat at the back of the room (although she had not been invited to do so), followed by the other two group members, all of whom proceeded to mutter in stage whispers for the rest of the seminar: comments such as "I am that close to walking out of here." Which I affected not to hear.

My expectation is that students would be prepared for their work to be subject to robust criticism. They would recognize that my critique was essentially justified (if, perhaps, expressed with more vehemence that necessary). However, I was completely unprepared for the response of this female student. I had not anticipated that I would ever encounter a student in a classroom making a gesture that is a cultural, historic and religious taboo. What transpired was completely outside my reference zone. I’m not really sure what happened after the incident described above – I think that it took place towards the end of the class, which then dismissed.

4.1.3 My Immediate Response

Being unprepared for this kind of behaviour, I think I went into a minor form of shock. At home that evening, I discussed the incident with my partner, who was equally shocked. By the following morning I had decided that Ms. A had crossed a line in terms of behaviour, and that further action was necessary. I emailed my concerns to the course leader, requesting that the student be subjected to a disciplinary procedure. I also noted that I was no longer prepared to teach Ms. A. The course leader confirmed that the situation would require the involvement of the Dean of the School, or his Assistant, who would call in Ms. A for a meeting. The meeting took place, and Ms. A did not come to my class again. On discussing the incident later with a colleague, it transpired that Ms. A had mysteriously turned up in his seminar group, and had been conspicuously quiet, saying nothing for the rest of the year.

4.1.4 My Reflections

When I go into a room I always say to myself “never assume.” That is, never assume that the people in the room share the same set of views as me. However, I do expect that there are certain norms that would be shared by adults in a developed European nation, such as some knowledge of the history of Germany during the Second World War, the role of the Nazi party, and the meaning of a Nazi salute.10 In the critical incident described above, it is clear that I was wrong about this.

I do not believe that all norms and understandings are negotiable: it is important that students are aware of history, and the symbols and meanings that arise from history. In Germany, Nazi salutes, and straight-extending the right arm as a saluting gesture are explicitly forbidden. It is a criminal offence punishable by up to three years in prison. Use of the salute has also been forbidden by law in Austria since the end of World War II. In a German classroom, this would have been a Criminal Incident, rather than a Critical Incident.
I hope that I never have to face a similar incident, but were I to do so, I would do things differently. For a start, I would immediately challenge the student. I would question whether she knew what this gesture meant? Was she aware of the significance of the gesture? Would she still have used the gesture if she had known that I, or other people in the class, might have been Jewish (Interestingly, if had known the significance, and still used the gesture, what would this tell us?) I like to think that I would try and turn this into a teachable moment, but it would be about history and behaviour, not economics!

Despite my reflections in the previous paragraphs, it is true that, as David Tripp says, Critical Incidents don’t just happen, they are created. In a sense, I “created” this one. I am always careful about the language I use, but this does not mean that students hear what I actually say. I now see that my comments were injudicious, and provocative: I had not appreciated how sensitive students could be and how they might respond to robust criticism.

Under similar circumstances on another occasion, I would not use such a baroque construction (“I'm trying hard to find a way to describe your work other than “pitiful.”) However, I reserve the right to be robust in my criticism of work that does not come up to the required standard. In my defence, I would say that the examples normally given of Critical Incidents – students arriving late, talking out of turn, etc – seem pretty mild compared with a student giving a Nazi salute in a seminar: to me, this is behaviour that is simply unacceptable.

4.1.5 Learning Points

I am now more circumspect about the language I use, and more careful to moderate my response to poor quality work, particularly if the feedback is given in front of peers (students now seem to be much more sensitive to criticism). Fortunately, since I now teach final year students and postgraduates, an incident of this type seems less likely to arise – by the time students have reached their final year, they have normally developed a better understanding of the purpose of academic critique. Also, I suppose that many of the weaker students have been weeded out by then.

I think I would be more detached in my response, and instead of responding with a negative critique, I would ask the student(s) a number of questions, eg How much time did you spend preparing this piece of work? Did you all contribute? Do you think your work meets the requirements set out in the task? How do you think that your work compares with the presentations that you have seen from other students?

There is a larger issue here, to do with the higher purpose of education, which includes transmission of some key components of a shared set of values and behaviours. I believe that, as tutors in HE, we have a responsibility to respect certain norms and that when these norms are transgressed, it is our job to uphold them. If a comparable incident were to occur again, I like to think that I would now be better placed to deal with it.
4.1.6 Colleague’s Reflections

MJI: After hearing this event first hand recently I was shocked that this could take place in a UK university in 2012. Firstly I think your level of composure must be commended I could not guarantee that I would be able to do the same. Going beyond this, the actions of the management structure is again positive. I do not believe there is anything that you could have done better in the current circumstances. We have to remember that these type of events are indeed isolated and the majority of the students are well rounded intelligent people. If this type of behaviour does become more commonplace the University could consider introducing the code of conduct for students, with an associated fitness to attend procedure. However I do feel it would be a great shame if things became too draconian.

5.2 The Invisible Student

5.2.1 Background

My second Critical Incident relates to a student enrolled on a final year research elective, which is assessed with a 5,000 word dissertation due for submission at the end of April (2012). The module takes place over 2 semesters:

- Semester 1 is taught, with 12 lectures and 11 seminars.
- Semester 2 is self-managed research and writing, with support from me as supervisor. I hold a kick-off meeting for all students, followed by individual support meetings to consider the student’s title, then their proposal, followed by individual meetings if required.

5.2.2 The Critical Incident

This student, whom I had not encountered previously during his university career, missed the S2 kick-off meeting which took place on 3rd February, and then came to a one-to-one support session with me on 16 February to discuss his proposed title. I didn’t recognise this student, and told him so. He then informed me that he had not attended any of the taught sessions during S1 - ie, he had missed all of the lectures and seminars. He told me that this was because he was at work on the relevant days, so that he could buy a car. None of his proposed titles were relevant to the requirement to write a paper focussed on behavioural economics. When I asked him why he had chosen the proposed titles, some of which contained allusions to illustrious but irrelevant historical figures such as Rousseau, his response was that he thought that “I would be impressed.” I wasn’t, and suggested that he re-consider and come back with a more viable title.

When the student came to the next support meeting with me on 24 February, his proposal was still unviable as a research elective: intellectually incoherent, and based on what appeared to me to be dubious evidence. When I questioned the student, he told me that his work would be based on piece of
(un-assessed) work he had carried out during his Year 1 economics course. It became clear to me that this student had almost no understanding of what was required, and seemed not to have assimilated any of the required theoretical tools underlying behavioural economics which would be needed if he was to deliver an assignment that met the required academic objectives. When I asked the student which of the required course reading he had carried out, he told me that he "did not do reading." It transpired that he has done none of the required reading from S1. When I asked the student why he was at university, ie, what had changed from S1 to S2, he told me that he aimed to "scrape a degree."

Following the meetings described above, the student did not send me a title or a proposal for his research elective. Given this student’s lack of familiarity with the prescribed books, and his ensuing lack of knowledge of the key concepts from behavioural economics, I was not confident that he would be able to deliver an assignment to the required standard within the time available.

5.2.3 My Immediate Response

Frankly, I found the attitude of this student deeply insulting. A colleague who was sitting behind me whilst the discussion took place subsequently noted that she had found the exchange quite unbelievable, and commended me for the calm way in which I had treated the student.

Given that other students on this module had displayed impressive levels of commitment, engagement and application, this student’s attitude was even more difficult to deal with. As I was concerned that Mr. X was likely to fail the module, and possibly, his degree, I decided that I should alert his personal tutor. I did so, by email, to which she replied that it was “very useful to have this kind of feedback.” Significantly, she also commented that she did not know Mr. X personally, and went on to recommend that I inform his Course Leader, since “it sounds like he needs some input from his CL to get to the bottom of what is going on with him.”

5.2.4 My Reflections

I was quite proud of the way in which I conducted myself in the two meetings with this student, given that he was exasperating, insolent, and essentially insulting. The comments of the colleague who overheard the meeting indicate that I am not deluding myself about this. I also think that I did the right thing by alerting his personal tutor and course leader about the incident.

I was surprised that, following our meetings, I heard nothing more from the student. I was not sure whether he had decided to read the writing on the wall and quit, or whether he was re-doubling his efforts and had gone into heads-down mode in order to increase his chances. This situation was not reflected with other students taking the research elective, many of whom had several meetings with me to discuss their progress.
When the submission date arrived, and I collected the student papers from the Undergraduate Office, I was surprised to see that this student had produced a paper. Perhaps this Critical Incident would have more dramatic resonance (or poetic justice) if it transpired that Mr. X had failed, but, in fact, his prediction was correct: he produced an piece of work that was (just) adequate, and which I rated at 41%. Due to the circumstances, I took particular care with the grading, and this student’s paper was one of those that I chose to have double-marked by a colleague (who was unaware of the background). He agreed my grade.

5.2.5 Learning Points

In the same situation, I don’t think I would do things very differently. Maybe I would have tried to track down the student earlier, but I believe strongly that, by the time students reach their final year, they should be managing their own learning: whilst I am happy to provide support and guidance to those students who request it, I do not think “progress chaser” is part of the tutor’s role. I suppose I could say that, because of my response to Mr. X during our two meetings, when I indicated the complete inadequacy of his proposed research, he recognised the seriousness of his situation and was galvanized into applying himself to the required task.

It is noteworthy that Brighton Business School now has minimum attendance requirements for first and second year undergraduates, but these do not apply to final year students like Mr X. I suppose that I should have spotted earlier that Mr X had not been coming to lectures or seminars: after all, I do require students to sign the register during seminars. However, with 70 students enrolled on the elective it is quite a task to manage those who do come along. In addition, because there are a number of different seminar groups running, and students constantly swap between different seminar groups, it becomes difficult to keep track – especially if some students sign up and then absent themselves, sometimes without notifying the undergraduate office. In fact, without going back and checking the manual course lists, I am not even sure that Mr. X had formally enrolled on the module. If Mr X had seemingly decided to go to work and earn money rather than attend the elective, and possibly the rest of his university work, it may not be possible for the university to do much about this.

A final reflection: because Mr X had not turned up to any of the lectures or seminars during S1, I have a lingering doubt about his assignment – did he actually produce it? It is possible for a student to pull an academic rabbit from a hat. But behavioural economics is quite complex and abstract, and it normally takes some teaching time for the main elements to become rooted in a student’s understanding: this is why I use S1 to follow a taught route. However, in the case of Mr. X, I could not find any specific grounds for plagiarism, and it is almost impossible to ascertain when a student might actually have met the requirements of an assignment by purchasing a bespoke paper from another author.

3.2.6 Colleague’s Reflections
MJI: Compared to the first critical incident I believe this type of situation is more common place, certain students playing the system for the lowest common denominator, however as before the majority of our students are well rounded intelligent people. However this candidate has set themselves very low standards and only just achieved them. Although you suggest a ghost writer could be at play here the 41% mark does make it questionable, but in similar incidences I am sure this is the case. Again as previously with your behaviour it should be commended I don’t see how you could have been more professional.

But you do mention what can the University do about this? I guess that is the big questions, smaller groups, greater resources, 50% pass mark, not making everything available on student central?? The list goes on.

My own take on the situation is that the sector needs to step back and think how we manage candidates like this. If this was a situation within secondary education due to the external scrutiny this would have been picked up earlier. However I believe HE isn’t and shouldn’t be geared up for this? I would like more vivas but again its resources and would Mr X just about get 40% in a viva.

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4 [http://k6educators.about.com/od/educationglossary/g/gteachmoment.htm](http://k6educators.about.com/od/educationglossary/g/gteachmoment.htm)
8 [http://legacywww.coventry.ac.uk/legacy/ched/research/critical.htm](http://legacywww.coventry.ac.uk/legacy/ched/research/critical.htm)
9 As Prince Harry similarly found to his cost, when spotted in a uniform adorned with a swastika.