

## Critical incidents

McAteer *et al* (2010, p.107) suggest that a 'critical incident is one that challenges your own assumptions or makes you think differently'. They provide the following helpful prompts to guide reflection on critical incidents:

- What happened, where and when? Give a brief history of the incident.
- What is it that made the incident 'critical'?
- What were your immediate thoughts and responses?
- What are your thoughts now? What has changed/developed your thinking?
- What have you learned about (your) practice from this?
- How might your practice change and develop as a result of this analysis and learning?

Here is a simple example of critical incident reflection:

*During the very beginning of my NQT year, I spent a great amount of time observing several senior members of staff in their approach to pupils. Whether it was in a lesson, or in the hallways, I consciously tried to note how the teacher would communicate with the pupils in a variety of situations and circumstances. Consequently, I then applied certain behaviour management strategies that I had observed. One of the things that really stood out for me was the variation in the tone of voice used by the teacher, with the firm and strict tone seemingly the more effective. I attempted to adopt a firmer tone than I had previously used, and that comes naturally to me, and became stricter with my expectations as well as sanctions.*

*Unfortunately, it did not work for me and my particular teaching groups, and the reaction of the pupils was the opposite to what I had hoped. I was beginning to lose their respect because they could see I was trying to be someone else, and would shout at them every time they did something wrong. In one particular incident with a very challenging pupil, where I raised my voice and insisted on stamping my authority, things ended up getting rather heated, and it ended up outside of the classroom with the pupil in tears.*

*The incident acted as a wake-up call for me, and things only got better after I reverted back to being my 'old self'. I reverted back to talking to the challenging pupils on a one-to-one basis, and having a quiet word with them, where I would explain to them where they had gone wrong, and what they should have done instead.*

Which of McAteer *et al*'s prompts (above) does this account attend to?



Some hallmarks of deeper, self-critical reflection have been suggested by Moon (2004, pp.202-203), adapted as follows:

There is...

- evidence of standing back from the event;
- an internal dialogue - a conversation with oneself that considers alternative explanations;
- evidence of looking at the views of others, considering the alternatives and learning from them;
- seeing the significance of the passage of time on reflection;
- noticing of other, possibly unrelated events that affect actual behaviour and/or subsequent reflection;
- awareness of reconstructing the event in retrospect – creating a story that may not be 'true'.
- recognition that there may be no conclusion and still things to be learnt from a situation;
- reflection on one's own process of reflecting (metacognition).

How could the account above be further developed using these hallmarks?



Here is a further example of critical incident reflection, using McAteer *et al*'s questions as prompts:

**What happened, where and when? Give a brief history of the incident.**

*The critical incident related to the feedback given after an observed lesson in order to move the trainee forward. I observed feedback being given to a trainee after a lesson which was detailed, coherent and insightful...*

**What is it that made the incident 'critical'?**

*...but it was entirely a one way process.*

**What were your immediate thoughts and responses?**

*At the time of the incident I was impressed that the observed feedback addressed the key issues with the lesson; it dwelt on the positive aspects and gave points for development. Equally impressive was, I thought, the fact that the feedback addressed all of the teaching standards thoroughly. I congratulated the observer and felt that this was an excellent model which should be lauded and replicated.*

**What are your thoughts now? What has changed/developed your thinking?**

*At a similar time, perhaps a few weeks later, I attended a coaching course. I had little more than a rudimentary understanding of coaching at this time, and had not ever been the recipient or provider of a coaching experience. One of the key intentions of the programme was to coach teachers, whether that be in a leadership and management role or in order to improve the quality of their teaching. In essence the key message of this programme, indeed the key benefit of coaching, was to ensure sustainable change for the better.*

**What have you learned about (your) practice from this?**

*Reflecting on my newfound coaching knowledge I considered more deeply what the most effective ways were of feedback to trainees post lesson. I reflected on the feedback that I had witnessed (which initially I had felt to be an example of good practice) from the point of view of the observer and the observed and came to an entirely different conclusion. From the observer's point of view I could see the benefit of conducting feedback in this way. Firstly, this approach is quick and thorough. It leaves little out and it identifies quickly the key ways in which the trainee needs to move forward by giving suggestions on how aspects of the lesson could be taught differently and how pupil progress can be secured. From the trainee's point of view I could already now see that such an approach can be overwhelming and bewildering. For certain types of trainee this approach would have negative outcomes: a trainee lacking in confidence could potentially become entirely demotivated; a trainee in their comfort zone would become stagnated as they are not encouraged to consider or reflect; a competent trainee with good feedback of this nature could become complacent. In summary this approach would not produce the 'reflective practitioners' who would be armed with the necessary critical and reflective tools to navigate their own way through their NQT year with less hands on support and guidance.*

*Armed with these new insights I observed a range of learning 'coaches' giving feedback in different schools. What I found was that those giving feedback paid lip service to the favoured coaching approach by asking trainees at the start of the feedback session what they thought had gone well in the lesson and what could be improved, before invariably launching into a monologue describing their own viewpoints of the lesson. Indeed, I recognised this model of feedback as being the one that I would frequently employ myself.*

**How might your practice change and develop as a result of this analysis and learning?**

*This 'critical incident' changed my thinking about the best ways in which to move trainees forward after an observation and led to me researching and developing materials with the aim of promoting this approach amongst our learning coaches. A triad model whereby a pair of trainees are matched with a learning coach is becoming a more frequently employed model within our training programme. The triad is utilised during the initial placement and the pair of trainees, in conjunction with their learning coach, plan jointly, deliver, reflect and refine lessons in a continuous cycle.*

Which of the hallmarks of deeper, self-critical reflection are evident in this account?



**References:**

- McAteer, M., Hallett and F. Murtagh, L. (2010) *Achieving your Masters in Teaching and Learning*. Exeter: Learning Matters. Available from: <http://lib.myilibrary.com?ID=272528>.
- Moon, J. A. (2004) *Learning journals: A handbook for academics, students and professional development*. Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer.