

ECAD6007 Assignment

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Introduction

...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 judgment is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident. (Tripp, 2011, p.8).

Tripp uses the term 'critical incident' to describe any 'typical' event that has been identified to require more in-depth reflection. Once a situation has been analysed, responses or strategies can be planned and implemented. Tripp recognises the importance of professional judgement within the teaching profession, highlighting that in-depth, critical reflection is key to the professional development of teachers' practice. This notion will form the basis of my critical evaluation.

This assignment will focus on an observed critical incident which will lead to the identification and critical evaluation of the next teaching and learning steps in my developing practice. Firstly, the role of teachers and critical reflection will be addressed, followed by an in-depth report of the observed critical incident within a school context. The literature review will identify and synthesise two areas of research linked to the critical incident: scaffolding and differentiation. This will lead to a section of reflection and evaluation followed by a conclusion.

Throughout this writing, I refer to the learner as anyone from the developmental process and the teacher as someone supporting the learner. Following BERA Guidelines "the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research", and therefore the school, staff and the pupils observed will remain anonymous throughout this assignment. When referring to the critical incident I will note the teacher as teacher X to adhere to BERA guidelines and preserve anonymity.

The Role of Critical Reflection

The Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership in Wales states that teachers must emphasise reflection and evaluation of their own practice to continue personal and professional development (Education Wales, 2017). This means it is a requirement of the profession to be a reflective practitioner. Teachers who question educational practice and their own professional practice demonstrate a commitment to continuous learning to improve their effectiveness. This may include researching new ideas, reflecting and evaluating on their impact, and testing new ways of working. Teachers have a responsibility to their learners to ensure they are continually seeking to improve the quality of their teaching by becoming 'life-long' learners themselves.

When thinking of the purpose of 'reflective practice', Schön shares that "reflections should form a bank of ideas which the practitioner may draw upon in future practice" (Aubrey and Riley, 2019, p.186). This reinforces the idea that reflection helps inform 'next steps' and further action. It is not enough to just reflect on an event or experience, emphasis must be placed on the action that follows, to improve the teaching.

Arguably, the teacher is a key role model and influence for a child and young person. Bashir et al. observe, "teachers have long-lasting impacts on the lives of their students, and the greatest teachers inspire the pupils to greatness" (2014, p.4). Reflection is a key aspect of learning which is highlighted as a requirement for both teachers and their learners in the Professional Standards (2017). If teachers are to expect their learners to reflect as part of learning progression, they must also model reflection in their own practice.

Observation

For the two-day observation sessions, I visited a mixed-gender secondary school in Carmarthenshire with the total number of learners (ages 11-19) in 2021 noted at approximately 450 according to mylocalschool.gov.wales (n.d.). The language provision is defined as English with significant Welsh, which according to the Welsh

Government's document; "Defining schools according to Welsh medium provision" (2007) both languages are used in teaching with 20 - 49% of subjects taught through the medium of Welsh. During my short time at the school, I witnessed a strong emphasis on the Welsh language within the classroom and communication between staff and learners were in both languages. In 2021 the percentage of learners receiving free school meals was on average 20.8% over 3 years (My Local School, n.d.).

This assignment will focus on a mixed-gender, year 9 History lesson I observed on a Monday morning (Record 3). It was the first lesson of the day, and two classes were merged for this particular one-hour session. The mixed attainment class was at maximum capacity with 31 learners. Teacher X prepared a seating plan for the class which was displayed digitally on the board to instruct learners where to sit on arrival. The seating plan had been designed to position lower attainment learners (Group B) at the front of the class and higher attainment learners (Group A) at the back. After 20 minutes of literacy improvement work on their marked homework, the lesson progressed to their current class topic of World War I. Firstly, teacher X displayed an image of a recruitment poster on the large screen, then introduced the notion of 'to infer' and asked the learners what they could infer from the image. Learners were encouraged to raise their hands to share ideas and teacher X carried out questioning techniques to encourage the expansion of responses and ideas. Subsequently, learners were given a written task to complete independently. The exam-style question asked them to look at the source (image of a poster) and write down what they could infer. Teacher X prepared two different printed resources; one for Group A and one for Group B (Figure 1 and 2). Group A's resource had the question only, whereas Group B's resource broke the question down, and explained some of the terms by providing sentence starters. The task was open-ended with the intention to challenge and encourage learners to push themselves, linking well with one of the Four Purposes; "All our children and young people will be ambitious, capable learners" set out in Donaldson's new Curriculum for Wales (2015). Learners are developing skills to question, analyse, problem solve and communicate as well as striving to become "ethical, informed citizens" (ibid, 2015) by building knowledge of a historical event with global significance. The task also provides the teacher with an

indication of learners' literacy skills, which is one of the three mandatory cross-curricular skills within the Curriculum for Wales (ibid, 2015).

Literature Review

The observed critical incident of providing different instructional resources to different learners for the same task inspired further research into scaffolding and differentiation in education. It has sparked the desire to explore the meaning of these terms and their significance and impact within the classroom.

'Scaffolding' was coined by Wood et al. in 1976 as a metaphor to explain the support provided by an adult for a child to complete a task that they cannot do alone. They proceed to define scaffolding as a process "that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (1976, p.90).

Scaffolds are introduced to break down the task (which is initially beyond the learner's capability) into manageable chunks within their range of competence. The idea is that when the learner is ready, the scaffold can be removed, and the learner can carry out the task unassisted therefore successfully working towards independence in learning.

When referring to the critical incident, the objective of the lesson was to complete an exam-style question, however, teacher X believed that the pupils would be unable to complete the task without scaffolding the learning. The teacher broke the lesson down into small steps: firstly, by introducing and defining the term 'infer', followed by modelling the process with an example question carried out by both teacher and learners together, before finally asking the learners to attempt the exam question independently. By this point, the learners received enough support and guidance from the teacher that they could apply their understanding and skills to tackle the question independently. Half of the printed resources provided further scaffolding to the lower attainment group by providing term definitions and sentence starters. Learners work towards the same objective and the scaffolding ensures they achieve the same goal as their peers.

It may be suggested that Bruner built his ideas of scaffolding upon some of the social constructivist, Lev Vygotsky's thinking around sociocultural theory and his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Gray and Macblain, 2015). The ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can learn on their own and what they can achieve with support and guidance from a more capable adult or peer (which Vygotsky referred to as 'Most Knowledgeable Others'). He suggests that when learners are in the ZPD, instruction is most beneficial as it provides the learner with a 'boost' to achieve the task that may have been beyond the previous level of comprehension. Vygotsky defined the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as:

Those functions which have yet to mature but are in the process of maturing... 'buds' or 'flowers' of development rather than 'fruits' of development. The actual development level characterises the cognitive development retrospectively while the ZPD characterises it prospectively. (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

Vygotsky acknowledged that learners are individuals and have different levels of potential (Gray and Macblain, 2015, p.101). What may prove challenging for the teacher is obtaining an understanding of each learner's prior knowledge and their ZPD. This will require time, effort and skill on the part of the teacher to get to know their learners, hence the danger may be that they underestimate or overestimate a learner's potential. Attempting to scaffold learning for individuals' needs in a whole-class environment may prove more difficult than a one-to-one teaching scenario.

Barak Rosenshine also highlights scaffolding within his 'Principle of Instruction', sharing the notion that it is important for learners to undergo a form of 'cognitive apprenticeship' "whereby they learn cognitive strategies from a master teacher who models, coaches and supports them as they develop a level of independence" (Sherrington, 2019, p.22). Sherrington goes on to emphasise that scaffolds are temporary and if overused learners may become dependent on them which goes against the intention to develop independence of learning.

Classrooms can be diverse even when learners have been grouped into sets, streams, or year groups. Learners' motivation, readiness skills, background knowledge, learning styles and interests vary greatly. Just because learners share a similar birth date, does not mean that they learn the same way, at the same time.

Vygotsky believed that the role of the teacher is to tailor the programme to suit the learner rather than expect every learner to rise to meet unrealistic goals (ibid, 2015, p.101). Similarly, Carole Ann Tomlinson believes that teachers should differentiate instruction to accommodate the diversity of learners within the classroom. She argues that:

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs. (Tomlinson, 2017, p.10).

Different types of differentiated instruction may include varying content, for example, if the assigned learning outcome is the learner must develop essay writing skills, then teachers may allow learners to choose their topic. This is likely to increase engagement as it relates to their interests. Other strategies may include varying the learning process (for example, watching a video, reading, physical activity), varying the assessment (for example, writing an essay, creating a presentation or designing a website) and varying the classroom environment (which may include group discussions, peer collaboration, independent quiet study time, outdoor activities or working with ICT).

Differentiation is a learner-centred approach and arguably, the focus to maximise the capacity of each learner to reach their learning potential, lends itself well to the new curriculum for Wales (2015) with the introduction of the principles of progression. The aim of the progression steps is to recognise the progression of the whole child throughout their education, acknowledging simultaneously that learners will progress at different paces. The curriculum aims to be less prescriptive and the focus on the next steps of learning will be agreed upon between teacher and learner. One of the benefits of differentiation is it strives for equity, recognising that it is not entirely fair to treat everyone the same.

Tomlinson believes that learners respond best when they are pushed slightly beyond the level where they can work unassisted (Bates, 2019, p.18). This notion is similar to that found with Vygotsky's ZPD, emphasising the important role of the teacher or 'Most Knowledgeable Other' (Vygotsky, 1978) in supporting the learner. Both scaffolding and differentiation share their aims to work towards independence in

learning, however, there are differences between both strategies and thinking. When a task is scaffolded, learners work towards the same objective as their peers with extra support. This was observed in the critical incident where learners shared the same objective to complete the exam-style question. Teacher X provided scaffolding to all learners to temporarily aid the learning, and once the concept was understood, the scaffolding was taken away. In comparison, when a task is differentiated learners work towards a different objective within the same lesson. It may be possible to link differentiation to the two different resources that were handed out by teacher X to the lower attainment and higher attainment group, as a distinction was made between two sets of learners and therefore support was adjusted accordingly, however, there may be an argument to this as learners were not given a choice. The least-proficient and most-proficient had been pre-determined by teacher X (or the school system) and therefore learners had no choice as to which resource to use. It is almost certain that just because a learner requires differentiation in one task does not mean they automatically will in another. A potential alternative strategy would be to offer differentiation only when the individual learner is not able to reach the same objective as their peers, even with scaffolding in place.

Effective use of differentiation can help to increase learners' motivation, academic achievement and build on learners' previous knowledge (Munro, 2012 and Konstantinou-Katzi, 2013). However, the technique of differentiation is often misunderstood, especially by teachers that are new to the concept and may result in 'dumbing-down' content to scaffold their least-proficient learners or utilise it as a group working strategy (Hertberg-Davis, 2009). Hertberg-Davis expresses concern that differentiation, if not implemented correctly does not effectively challenge gifted learners with their attention targeted on supporting weaker learners (ibid, 2009). Differentiation can also be criticised for giving too much choice to learners, for example, if a learner repeatedly requests to watch a video over reading, this may cause regression in literacy or reading skills. It is therefore the role of the teacher to ensure this does not happen as this is a misuse of differentiated instruction.

Reflection/ Evaluation

This assignment has offered an insightful and privileged opportunity to observe a teacher and their learners. It is therefore important to acknowledge that I only observed a one-hour lesson: a small snapshot of the learning that morning. I do not know the learners, the teacher, or the school therefore am unaware of the full context of the incident. I am unaware of the learners' backgrounds, upbringings, health, heritability, opportunities, and social interactions, which all play a complex role in affecting the learning process (Gray and Macblain, 2015, p. 24). Hopefully, teacher X has had the opportunity to observe and document the student's learning over time; a technique introduced by Piaget (1952, cited in Gray and Macblain, 2015) which provides an indication of academic attainment. As Vygotsky states, the teacher needs to know the learner's prior knowledge and Zone of Proximal Development in order to implement effective scaffolding (Crowley, 2017, p.87).

One model which may prove helpful when reflecting on the experience of the critical incident is Schön's proposal of 'Reflection-on-action' and 'Reflection-in-action' (1983 cited in Aubrey and Riley, 2019, p.186). Reflection-on-action takes place after the event, whereas reflection-in-action takes place during the event. This is when a practitioner embodies the idea of 'thinking on one's feet', evaluates the situation and makes adjustments accordingly. Reflection-on-action lends itself well to this observational task as I can review, describe, analyse and evaluate after the event has taken place, providing time to research deeper into learning theories such as scaffolding and differentiation. Reflection-in-action may prove more difficult in this scenario as I was not teaching the history lesson, however, it did provide a unique opportunity to perhaps anticipate or speculate what decisions teacher X was making on the spot during the event. Schön explains:

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds unusual or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and a change in the situation. (1983 cited in Aubrey and Riley, 2019, p.186).

I look forward to applying Schön's notion of reflection-in-action in my teaching practice and future lessons, as I will be required to evaluate the learning of individuals and groups, and make necessary decisions to implement scaffolding and differentiation techniques on the spot during the lesson. This will then be followed by reflection-on-action, which will enable me to consider what happened and evaluate the effectiveness of my chosen strategy or technique, and adjust where necessary in the future. As well as reflecting through experience and memory, I also plan to discuss events with mentors and colleagues and look to video-record my lessons in order to obtain a different perspective.

When reflecting on the observed critical incident, I question whether there are potential areas to improve differentiation and scaffolding strategies. The teacher has predetermined who receives the different resources. What if the learner had a choice? Could the learners decide for themselves if they require additional scaffolding to complete the task? This may fit better with the intentions of the new curriculum and one of its four purposes (ambitious, capable learners). The curriculum wants young people to take autonomy and ownership of their own learning and progression. The Professional Standards of Teaching and Leadership also outline that "learners take an active role in managing their own learning agenda with self-initiated and self-determined activity helping them to set their own high expectations" (Education Wales, 2017, p. 38). I argue that this may be a way to incorporate. Learners may need additional help for a particular task and not another. Perhaps this is where differentiation is introduced to the individual learner, rather than scaffolding the whole class or half the class. If learners are grouped or categorised based on their attainment level they may be stuck in that category across a whole academic year or even their academic life, unable to access the most appropriate support and resources for their progress and potential.

One of the benefits of an academically diverse classroom is that learners can learn from each other. Piaget believed that learners should be encouraged to learn from their peers (Bates, 2019, p.50). More able students can support their peers as well as learn from verbalising the problem. Learners are expanding and cementing their knowledge and understanding by teaching others. He believed that peer interaction is effective when one dyad had achieved an understanding of the topic, and from his own research, he concluded that "non-conservers were more likely to attain

conservation through their experience of working with a more expert peer than when working alone.” (Gray and Macblain, 2015, p.104). By sharing the learning experience, both the learner and peer gain a greater insight into the problem.

By seating Group B (lower attainment) at the front of the classroom and the Group A (higher attainment) at the back of the class the teacher has made a conscious decision to separate the learners which may contribute to feelings of division between the groups. This seating plan may ease circulation for the teacher and allow for quick distinction between the groups, however it does make the difference visible to learners. This is something I will take into consideration in my own practice when designing seating plans.

“Judging the transition from students being guided enough to becoming independent is a subtle skill, a central element of teacher expertise that develops with knowing the material, knowing how to break it down into practicable elements and crucially, knowing the student” (Sherington, 2019, p.45).

Conclusion

In this assignment, I explored the role of critical reflection and how it plays a key role in the professional development of the teaching practice, which is outlined as a requirement in The Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership in Wales (Education Wales, 2017). This has led to a critical evaluation of theories around scaffolding and differentiation linking to my observed critical incident. The critical evaluation has led to a recognition of the importance of continuous learning as a teacher as well as the importance of the teacher getting to know their learners in order to meet their learning needs. By finding out prior knowledge and backgrounds, teachers can identify effective scaffolding and differentiation strategies to ensure learners are reaching their potential within the progression steps and ultimately achieve the Four Purposes set out in the curriculum. I look forward to delving deeper into research on these theories and continue as a reflective practitioner.

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