

Interpretation

Creating critical incidents

Introduction

Most of this book exemplifies the use of critical incidents. In general, I find they have two major uses: they are an excellent way to develop an increasing understanding of and control over professional judgement, and thereby over practice; and they are also a means of finding a focus for classroom action research. Unfortunately it is not possible to deal with this second use here, though critical incidents are constructed in the same way for both uses.

In this chapter I want to concentrate upon the nature of teacher's professional critical incidents, dealing particularly with the importance of diagnosis and how it can become an approach to teaching in its own right. Interpretation is important because we act according to what we think things mean. It is also the process by which we render incidents into critical incidents. In Chapters 3 and 4 I shall then outline some techniques which teachers and researchers have found useful for analysing incidents. And in the fifth and sixth chapters I shall deal with how to handle a collection of critical incidents by constructing a critical incident file.

What is critical about a critical incident?

The term 'critical incident' comes from history where it refers to some event or situation which marked a significant turning-point or change in the life of a person or an institution (such as a political party) or in some social phenomenon (industrialisation, a war or some legal negotiations). Being major events, this kind of critical incident occurs so rarely in a teacher's lifetime that it alone could not constitute an adequate basis for a professional research file, particularly one that is being used to inform on-going educational action research. But highly significant events (see, for instance, Incident 53: *Spitting* or Incident 49: *Homework*) do occur and have very important consequences, and so that is one kind of incident which ought to be included for professional reflection in a critical incident file (see Woods 1992 and 1993 for an account of this kind of critical incident).

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. An example of this kind of critical incident has already been presented (Incident 2: *Settling down 2*). It was an incident which passed entirely unnoticed when it occurred, but which was made into a critical incident by what was subsequently seen in and written about it.

There are thus two stages to the creation of a critical incident: first, some phenomenon is observed and noted, which produces a description of what happened. This could be called the production of an incident, which can then be explained (so we have ‘what’ and ‘why’). The critical incident is created by seeing the incident as an example of a category in a wider, usually social, context.

For example, this observation is an incident:

Incident 8: Permission

Mary raised her right hand. After about a minute her teacher noticed, and asked her what she wanted. Mary asked if she could sharpen her pencil.

It is a description of what was observed. It is not an explanation because it does not say why this exchange took place at all. ‘It is the way children are supposed to ask the teacher if they can do things’ explains it, and ‘Mary is conforming to the rule’ tells us what is signified by it. But all this is still at the concrete level of the particular incident. To create a critical incident one would have to say what the incident meant, which means moving out of the immediate context in which the incident occurred. For instance, one might see that raising her hand to ask if she could sharpen her pencil meant that she was not allowed to decide such matters for herself in that class, and that in turn was indicative of the power structure of the classroom: it was one that made her in some respects dependent upon the teacher’s rather than her own judgement and authority. And of course, Mary’s classroom is contextualised by the school system which is contextualised within the local district which is contextualised within the wider national society. At each of those levels, the significance of the original incident (Mary raised her hand) will become more general: schools teach children to accept and depend on the authority of the state rather than on themselves and their own initiative.

I have tried to schematise one way of creating a critical incident in Figure 1. Perhaps the most obvious thing to note about this is that there is a sequence to the analysis: it is only possible to suggest what an event means if we know what the event was (i.e. if we have described it). Similarly, it is only possible to find a more general meaning if we know what it means in its specific context.

It is also an important aspect of professional practice to act from a considered and justifiable values position. In this case, both the explanatory and the critical questions should enable us to arrive at a position such as, ‘I think students should be more responsible for their behaviour in school’ which may well then

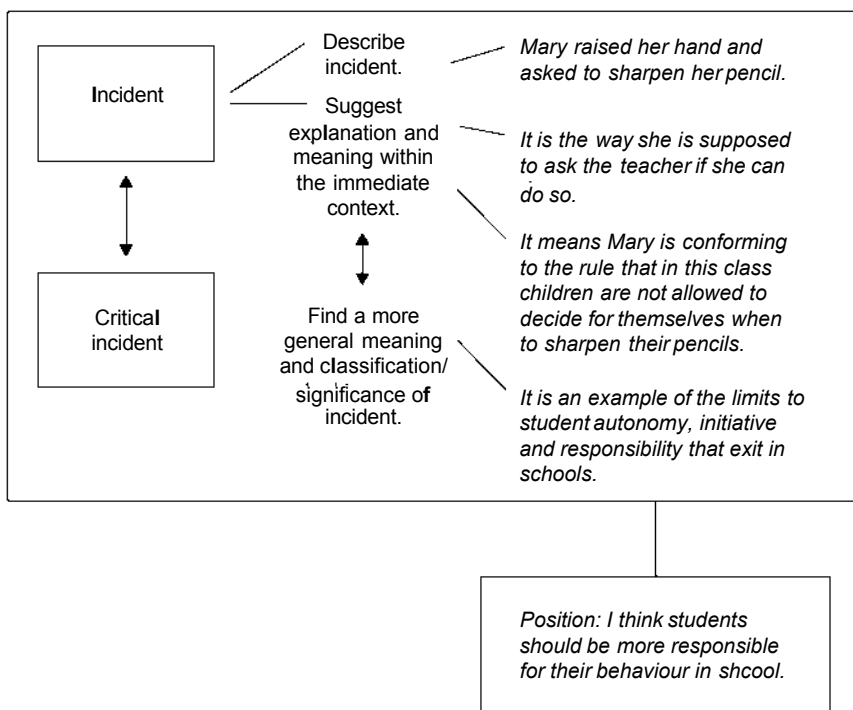


Figure 1 Creating a critical incident.

make a teacher decide to let children decide for themselves when to sharpen their pencil.

Another feature shown by the figure is that 'the analysis' actually consists of several different kinds of analysis. All analysis involves breaking a complex structure into its simpler constituent parts in order to better understand its nature and composition, and what kind of analysis one uses depends upon what aspects one is interested in understanding, which in turn depends upon the purposes of the analysis. In Figure 2 I have named the kinds of analysis that I have used here according to the kinds of information that I want, and hence the kinds of questions that I would ask about the incident. I have then grouped these kinds of analysis into four sections because they are associated with different kinds of professional judgement which I have called practical, diagnostic, reflective and critical. These terms are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 9. In each kind I have emphasised the importance of considering the people involved.

I recovered these kinds of analysis from an examination of my critical incident analyses. I use the terms for the four kinds of judgement also as superordinates for the kinds of analysis involved in producing them, talking about 'diagnostic analysis'

<i>Kind of judgement</i>	<i>Kinds of analysis</i>		
	<i>Information required</i>	<i>Questions asked</i>	<i>People involved</i>
<i>Practical</i>	Procedural	What should I do? How? When? Where?	For and/or with whom?
<i>Diagnostic</i>	Descriptive	What happened?	Who was involved?
	Causal	What made it happen?	Who acted?
	Effectual	What does it do?	For whom?
	Affectual	What does it feel like?	For whom?
	Semantic	What does it mean?	To whom?
	Explanatory	Why did (does) it occur?	With whom?
<i>Reflective</i>	Personal Evaluative Justificatory	Do I like it? Is it a good thing? Why?	Do others like it? For whom?
<i>Critical</i>	Classificatory	What is it an example of?	Whose classification?
	Social	Is it just?	For whom?

Figure 2 Kinds of judgement and analysis.

for instance to refer to the co-ordinated use of descriptive, causal, effectual, semantic and explanatory analysis. Of course, it is not possible or necessary to get all that information about every incident: some will be more appropriate than others depending upon the incident and the purpose of the analysis. As this book demonstrates, I do not take these questions as a formula, though to use it as a list of suggestions may help when learning to create critical incidents.

Returning now to our original point, Figure 1 shows that the incident itself (Mary raising her hand) was not 'critical' in any way in the context in which it occurred; on the contrary, it was wholly routine. To be critical, it had to be shown to have a more general meaning and to indicate something else of importance in a wider context. Thus one can see that critical incidents are not simply observed, they are literally created.

Just to expand on that idea, the point is that incidents only become critical because someone sees them as such. This is really just another aspect of

awareness that was dealt with as ‘problematic’ in Chapter 1. We always operate with a habitual view of what is critical and what is not. Most of us would see an incident in which the roof collapsed or a student swore at us and overturned a table as critical because they are so entirely contrary to our ideas of safety and how students should behave in class. But if we expected roofs to collapse and thought such student behaviour was OK and it happened every day, we would not see either incident as ‘critical’. Thus it was that the teacher who always had one music prize for the girls and another for the boys did not see her giving my daughter the girls’ prize as critical in any way. On the contrary, it was a normal part of her routine. It was only when the child’s response was analysed in detail that it became clear that the event was significant and should be questioned.

The point is that everything that happens is a potential critical incident: we just have to analyse it critically to make it one. The counsellor officer who tends to sit in the same place (in front of or behind his desk) when interviewing parents, can consider the effects on any routine interview. The adult literacy teacher who always asks students to write about themselves first, can consider that with reference to an individual or/and a whole class. The Deputy Principal who keeps staff informed through general notices and personal written notes, can analyse that. The teacher who likes to ‘have a laugh’ with the students, can critique that.

Those kinds of routines are not single incidents, but are nevertheless composed of a succession of them. A teacher who habitually brings her students out to sit on the mat at the front of the class when she wants them all to listen to her, and sits them at their tables when she wants them to write, has a routine. But that routine is just a repetition of what is, to all intents and purposes, the same incident, and the routine can therefore be critiqued in exactly the same way as can a single incident of things happening according to that routine. Because critical incidents should question the way things normally operate, those which deal with the minutiae of routine practices are therefore by far the most common, and the majority of the writing is subsequent analysis rather than dramatic narrative accounts of exceptional events.

Diagnostic teaching

One of the problems of presenting a method is that people may be left with the impression that they have to do all or none of it. This is not the case here, for there are many different ways in which critical incidents can be used on their own in everyday teaching. The skill of diagnosis is one of them. I want to show here how the analysis of critical incidents tends to produce an approach to classroom teaching that one might broadly term ‘interpretative’. This term is to emphasise that professional judgement is based upon a scholarly analysis of our ideas of the meaning of the incidents rather than on our experience of the incidents themselves. The main reason for using ‘interpretation’ to make this distinction is that it indicates the construction and choice of meaning, and it therefore appropriately carries the idea that a transformation of experience occurs when one renders teaching practices into discourse.

‘Interpretation’ also seems appropriate for the creation and analysis of critical incidents in teaching because of its associations with what is often called the interpretive approach in the sociology of education.¹ Interpretive sociology aims to produce micro-analytic accounts of the everyday in terms of how participants receive, perceive, create and negotiate their ‘reality’, which is precisely what one does in the analysis of critical incidents. The point is that how one acts in an incident, what one learns from it and the judgements one makes about it, all depend upon interpretation. To explain this it is necessary to look rather more closely at what is meant by interpretation in the context of an approach to teaching. There are many different kinds of interpretation, but I want to illustrate just one interpretation, ‘diagnosis’.²

It is unfortunate that diagnosis has associations with disease, because in its wider sense ‘to diagnose’ means, ‘to identify by careful observation’, a diagnosis being a ‘distinctive characterisation in precise terms’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). But diagnosis also involves explanation by inference: one looks at the physical manifestations (or ‘symptoms’) and infers their causes. To term a high temperature ‘a fever’ is not a diagnosis; to see that a fever is being caused by flu or malaria is; identification of the disease through inference from the symptoms explains the occurrence of the fever. Accurate diagnosis is so important in medicine because it is a serious mistake to treat the symptoms of the disease rather than the disease itself, or to treat the wrong disease.

Diagnosis works in much the same way in teaching and is just as important. One can call one’s interpretation ‘a diagnosis’ when there is reason to be relatively sure that one has identified the cause or causes of a phenomenon. Consider this incident:

Incident 9: Bad behaviour

Matthew kept messing around in our silent reading period, fidgeting, getting up, talking to himself and others. I’m fed up with his bad behaviour. Telling him off doesn’t work for long. I’m really going to try to do something about it next time.

To term ‘talking during silent reading’ ‘bad behaviour’ is not a diagnosis; and to treat the ‘bad behaviour’ without trying to discover its causes can be both ineffective and harmful. Yet, contrary to medicine, lack of a diagnosis or an incorrect one seldom shows in teaching because it is possible to treat the symptoms with apparent success. The difficulty is that punishing a student for bad behaviour does usually make the bad behaviour disappear. But if the bad behaviour is in fact an understandable response to an underlying problem, it is a symptom of a problem, not the problem itself. If the student is then punished for the bad behaviour, the symptom will often disappear but the original problem may be compounded, perhaps with the addition of carefully hidden resentment. Thus traditional approaches to discipline often mean that suppression or transformation

of the symptoms of underlying problems that may be preventing learning is actually seen as successful classroom management. That view may account for diagnostic expertise not having become a professional ability generally expected of teachers.

Another reason that teachers are not taught to diagnose their practice is that the difficulty of diagnosis is immeasurably greater in teaching than in medicine because students can choose which symptoms to display, when and where and to what degree, and even whether to display any symptoms at all. This means that symptoms of a problem may or may not be made manifest to the teacher, and that if they are, they may be made to appear in quite different ways by different students, and in different ways by the same student on different occasions.³ This is very important because it means that accurate observation of phenomena alone is not a sufficient basis on which to judge the best action to take. As in medicine, what teachers do should depend more on their understanding of the cause of a phenomenon than on the manifestation of the phenomenon itself. Which is the reason for dealing with incidents critically.

Tempting as it is to see diagnosis as an objective matter of facts, it is important to remember that all diagnosis is interpretation, which means that one has to construct and choose a meaning from among several possible meanings.⁴ These aspects are well-displayed in the 'translation' of languages: interpretation is necessary because the equivalent words of different languages do not have precisely the same meanings.⁵ So in teaching, interpretation is necessary because there is never a single way to categorise an incident, action or situation. It is a characteristic of the professions that interpretation is something each member does for him- or herself, even if the judgements of colleagues are sought and taken into account. Interpretation is also a matter of one's taking a 'position' on something. 'We interpret this as a threat', is an interpretation because we acknowledge that it may not have been intended as such and that others could see it differently. What interpretations we make are therefore very much determined by who we are. It is for that reason that it is so important to reflect upon and critique our judgements.

In fact, interpretation is essential to professional practice because it always comes between observation and action. One student is copying from another: what the teacher does depends entirely on what he or she decides the act of copying means for those children in that situation. If it were during a test, the teacher would probably interpret the copying as 'cheating'. If the student who was copying had missed the previous lesson, it would probably be interpreted as 'catching up'. If the students were working together on a project, it would probably be interpreted as 'collaboration'. And so on. Because in each case interpretation has involved seeing the behaviour as an instance of a particular category, it is a diagnosis, though which category is chosen does not depend upon what is happening (copying), but upon an understanding of what the student is trying to achieve, the history of the incident, its current context, and so on. Those things are a fairly straightforward factual matter involving description. And, given sufficient

information, one could easily match the description to a general category to make a diagnosis.

Again, diagnosis in teaching is in this respect more complicated than in the practice of Western medicine because some diagnoses themselves require interpretation.⁶ Suppose, for instance, that an incident in which one student copying from another was diagnosed as cheating, the reason for the phenomenon (copying) is explained, but by a phenomenon which itself requires explanation: what caused the student to cheat? That is a much more difficult matter which may well stretch the professional resources of a child psychiatrist to understand and explain. So the teacher has to make their own judgement, which will depend very much upon how well they know the child, how they regard cheating, and their understanding of the situation in which it occurred. Their diagnosis is a matter of their understanding of the meaning and significance of what they observed: they may decide the copying was an aberration for a usually honest student; that it was simply too easy to copy; that the student did not regard it as important; that it was the result of too much parental pressure; that the student was over-anxious to succeed; and so on. The only way to decide why the cheating occurred is to analyse the incident as much as possible, making a judgement based upon an interpretation of the meaning of cheating in the incident. For such reasons, diagnosis, though an essential tool, should be seen as a specific kind of a more generally interpretive approach to critical incidents. Diagnosing a critical incident is one way to ensure that our reflection and evaluation is grounded in actuality.

The diagnostic teaching cycle

Being aware of what something means to us is of little practical value unless we do something with it. Creating a critical incident before acting in or analysing an incident is a matter of postponing action and reflection, not of avoiding them. One way to use critical incidents in our practice is to follow some kind of an action research cycle such as in Figure 3. In this strategy one alternates between action in the field of practice on the one hand, and interpretation in the field of discourse on the other. Reflection is centred on a series of incidents, each of which is explained prior to action, the explanation then being used to inform the response to what happened. In this approach, the teacher keeps a critical incident file in which incidents are first of all described and then analysed. These incidents then act as both an agenda for further action and a way of evaluating and interpreting it.

This cycle can be used instantly during teaching in an informal way. But when it is used in the more formal way described here, there may be a delay of anything from a day to several weeks between making an observation and responding to it. This is not just because interpretation based upon scholarly analysis takes time; it is also because it has to be worthwhile investing the effort necessary to create critical incidents, which means that the matters that arise in the incidents tend to be large and important ones.

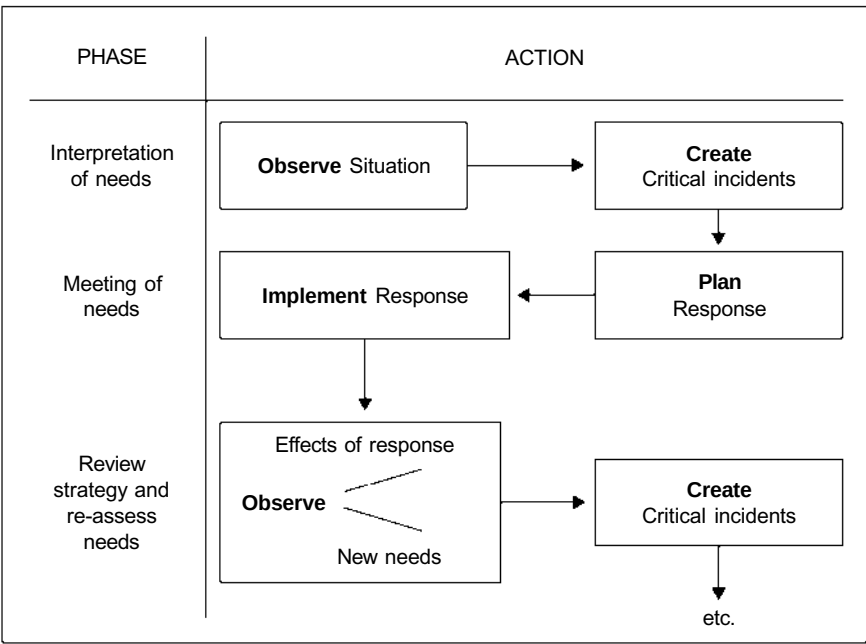


Figure 3 The diagnostic teaching cycle.

Describing incidents: the importance of detail

Moving on to the recording of incidents, I will also continue to indicate further aspects of the nature of critical incidents as we look at how to create them. As usual, I will exemplify points with actual incidents, mainly those described by teachers with whom I have worked over the past few years.

Most critical incidents begin with a concrete description of an event, or idea. Detail is a primary characteristic of incident descriptions because, when one is dealing with meaning in the wider contexts of a critical incident, one is inevitably dealing with generalities. In any case, critical incidents belong to the research journal tradition, and a fundamental characteristic of journals is that they should be more elaborate than a diary. I take that to mean both that critical incidents should be more detailed than diary entries, and a critical incident file should be more systematic. These are two basic criteria of quality, and as will become apparent, they are cardinal in determining the usefulness of a professional critical incident file. It is important to conceive detail and system as emerging, developing and continually shifting attributes, for it is neither desirable nor possible to have such qualities in every part of a critical incident file right from the outset: files need to be made to become detailed and systematic. Very few critical incidents will be ‘fair copy’ or

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‘final draft’; as in journals, the main characteristic of critical incident writing is lack of closure and continual revision. In fact, many of the entries will be actual events rather than critical incidents, simply because critique is a much slower and harder process than description of an event. Detail is important precisely because it is important to have detailed and accurate incidents available for critique.

Leaving the matter of system aside for the chapter on the structure of critical incident files, detail in critical incidents tends to be developed in two different ways: through focus and enlargement. Focus is clarification of the whole picture by increasing the definition of the existing details to make it all clearer; and enlargement is changing the size of the things in the picture so we see more of the picture in less detail, or less of the picture in more. The former process is generally termed ‘progressive focusing’, the latter, to continue the photographic metaphor, ‘cut back’ and ‘zoom’. The more one can emphasise both of these aspects of detail, the more comprehensive the final account of a phenomenon. Note how in interpreting Mary’s hand-raising, ‘cutting back’ to include the broader context was essential in rendering the incident critical. But more detail is necessary to validate the interpretation that all the children in the class have to asked to sharpen their pencils: we need to ‘zoom in’ on that aspect of the incident to make sure that it is not just Mary who has to ask (because she makes a mess).

The value of developing detail is well-illustrated in the following incident description:

Incident 10: Teaching rooms

Delamont proposes that the classroom setting and personal front has a bearing on how students assess their teachers as individuals. She compares the two Latin staff and suggests because one of them is consistently moving around the school and is not in one particular room, then this teacher is supposedly unorganised and not really on ‘permanent’ staff. I have found, in most Western Australian schools especially in senior high schools, you tend to get moved around a fair bit and unless you are in a specialist area such as science which requires certain forms of equipment then you expect not to have a permanent room as your base. This is often unsettling to students and most importantly to first-year out teachers who find it very much a disorientation.

In terms of the language (including constructions) this is typical of an initial incident description. It is not a ‘bad’ entry, for it is not possible to make such overall judgements. Critical incidents are more or less useful with regard to particular purposes. The purpose here was to generate a personal response to a research paper (Delamont 1976), which the teacher, having read, was then applying to his own classroom. In terms of professional development, the aim was for this teacher to think about his practice through making case to case generalisations. Inasmuch as he draws upon his own experience to exemplify Delamont’s observation, it is a

useful entry. As it stands, however, the picture presented lacks sufficient detail for any other interrogation to occur: there is very little other than the bare statement that he has had a similar experience and so he is endorsing Delamont's point. But as the quality of a critical incident can only be judged according to the use to which it is put, the entry is quite effective.

However, if the teacher wanted to inform others about the matter, a more detailed and methodical kind of observation would be required. This could be done by 'zooming in' to enlarge upon some aspect of the picture, such as, for instance, on the teachers' responses to moving classrooms in terms of their use of resources; or the students' responses in terms of their sense of belonging to the school. We need some actual 'for instances'. The picture could also be made more 'focused' by clarification of what 'disorientation' actually means to him, or of just how much movement is involved in his teaching day. That should probably include examples of the effects of the teachers' being moved around, so the reader would know the kind of data upon which the judgement (that it is bad) was made.

The language of the original entry reveals where more precision in the recording of observations already made is required: words such as 'often' are used when it should not be difficult in this case to make an attempt at deciding how often, when and why. Observations (such as 'This is . . . unsettling to students' and 'Teachers . . . find it very . . . disorientating') remain merely personal judgements unless supported by actual incidents. To judge the validity of this teacher's opinion we need to know the ways in which and occasions when the phenomena ('unsettlement' and 'disorientation') do or could occur.

Having revised the entry through the addition of such information, the teacher might then use it with colleagues and students in order to discover their reactions and experiences. That information could then be used to further revise the entry, but it could also be used in other ways, such as in the design of a questionnaire on the matter to inform school policy.

We can now see why it is not possible to judge entries without regard to the purposes we wish them to fulfil. Simply to tell us nothing more than that his own experience makes him agree with Delamont's point, is a valid purpose for an entry, and it serves that purpose well. But if the teacher wishes to do anything other than register his opinion of the matter, then he will have to include a great deal more empirical detail to provide the reader (who may still be only himself) with a far clearer view of the whole picture.

With regard to methodology, this example shows how zoom and focus are progressive processes: one can always return to further develop an entry. One of the differences between the two, however, is that focusing normally occurs more or less constantly and evenly with each theme or issue as the teacher clarifies their observations and ideas and the way they express them. Cut-backs should also frequently occur as we should always be able to see an incident in its wider (social) context. Zooming, on the other hand, occurs spasmodically as enlargements are only necessary when a particularly useful or interesting facet needs to be verified. The point of the photographic metaphor is that one improves the actuality of an

incident by ‘focusing’ and ‘zooming’ in on its details; and one makes it critical by ‘cutting back’ to see how it is significant to wider social contexts.

Overall, then, the main point to remember is that it is only worthwhile providing very detailed descriptions for incidents that are important to us, and which we are going to analyse in some depth. So many incidents will and should remain ‘notes towards an entry’. This means that it is not possible to say how much detail is necessary in critical incidents: we can only ask, ‘Is this incident described in sufficient detail for me to analyse it in the way I wish?’ As we shall see later, it is surprising just how much even fairly simple methods of analysis can produce from a few details.

Noticing critical incidents

Attributes of events

Bearing in mind that many teachers, when they first embark on a diagnostic understanding of their teaching, have some difficulty in deciding what incidents to record for further analysis, it helps to use some techniques to assist observation. Most people find that the analysis of events is the best way to begin, and one of the easiest ways to generate critical incidents is to look for certain adjectives one could apply, such as interesting, funny, sad, silly, witty, violent, unfortunate, boring or good. If a teacher goes into a class having decided beforehand to make a note of anything funny or fortuitous which happens, they actually alert themselves to be more receptive to a whole range of incidents, because it is necessary to canvas everything in order to select the funny or fortuitous. The very act of deciding beforehand what is to be looked for, forces the question ‘Is this what I’m looking for or not?’, and to answer it one has to examine the whole range of incidents in order to discount most of them.

One particularly useful adjective is ‘trivial’. Incidents which we recall only to dismiss as trivial are often a good indicator of criticality because the very fact that we have recalled them means that there is probably something important about them, something which has made them salient for us in one way or another. But it is our very judgement of them as trivial which can be a way by which to deceive ourselves into thinking we can legitimately dismiss them, when we should actually consider them in great depth. A good instance of that kind was Incident 7, about the boy who did not finish his work. In that case, the teacher at first refused to share the incident with the group, because, ‘It’s too trivial.’ Another example that came in response to my asking a group of teachers to write about ‘something trivial’ was the following:

Incident 11: Getting started

I have this child in my class, Kate, who won’t start what I’ve asked the class to do until she’s called me over to explain some silly little thing. No sooner have I finished my instructions than up goes her hand. It really annoys me sometimes.

It did not take long for the group to suggest that here was a child who needed some kind of help which the teacher hadn't been giving. Various hypotheses were put forward, such as, attention-seeking behaviour, lack of confidence, anxiety (to please, to get it right, to win, etc.), learned helplessness, lack of prior concentration, and inability. As we talked the matter over, the teacher clarified for herself that she probably over-emphasised the need to do things exactly as she asked, and she began to work on reducing dependency and increasing initiative and variety in her students' work. What had become salient as an emotional reaction (annoyance) but was ignored because it seemed so petty, became a matter of professional judgement and deliberate action. The matter was always there, it just needed to be exposed, which it was by looking for something that was thought to be too trivial for consideration.

Typical/atypical events

Another very straightforward way to generate critical incidents, is by looking for examples of two classes of event: those which we can term typical, and those that appear to us to be atypical or even unique. The second category includes events which appear to be counter-instances and exceptions to rules. Typical events are when something happens which the teacher expected to happen because it seems to them to be always happening. Incident 38, about the fact that students never seem to follow instructions in examinations, is a typical event.

Such events are worthwhile recording and then analysing in order to see what it is that tends to produce the event. Four possibilities are (a) that a particular sequence of events always precedes the typical event (trend or pattern); or (b) that a particular person is always involved in a particular (perhaps catalytic) way; or (c) that the incident always occurs in a particular relationship, when certain roles are played; or (d) that there are always certain constraints such as time, place, expectations, aims or demands.

Atypical, unique events, exceptions and counter-instances, enable one to work the other way round, by asking why an event is uncommon or why it did not happen as expected. It is often said that the exception proves the rule (because something can only be an exception if there is an already existing rule), so in a real way exceptions may be used to formulate and verify rules.

Examples of rules and exceptions could be the very routine aspects of running a classroom, such as asking for quiet in a particular way and getting or not getting it; speaking to a particular child in a particular way and getting a particular response; noting one's movements in the classroom, and looking for a factor which would explain why, at a particular point, the teacher was standing behind the desk rather than, for instance, at the back of the room.

Then there are the class rules themselves. The way in which these are implemented can be a rich source of exceptions.

Incident 12: Manners

We had been working on manners. I had suggested a few very basic ones, the first of which was knocking before entering the room. To encourage the students I had a daily 'Good Manners Award'.

After lunch on the day we started it, the first visitor was the Head. He just walked into our room without knocking, interrupting me to check on something (irrelevant) and Chris yelled out, 'He can't get our award. He didn't knock on the door, or wait till you had finished speaking.' How true. The kids thought they were wonderful picking someone up, but the Principal didn't seem to appreciate it all that much as I did.

He shuffled out of the room and left me to explain that perhaps we might add to our list of good manners that we wait until the visitor leaves the room before we comment on their manners.

An amusing incident, though one which caused both teacher and Principal some embarrassment. It is interesting how often, as soon as an apparently simple rule is set up to follow in school, the rule merely proves the world to be more complicated than anticipated. In fact, 'good manners' does not mean that everyone behaves in the same way. Manners are primarily codes by which we express relationships, particularly status, and are thus contingent upon power. There is nothing absolute about manners: doing or not doing something does not mean it is good or bad manners, but depends upon the people and the context. It is a good illustration of the point that only certain people are bound in certain ways and certain occasions by classroom rules, so all teachers have to constantly make exceptions.

Manners are a constantly repeated concern of teachers, but because there is no substantial and commonly available research on how children learn manners in different settings, or on how they may be taught, this entry on its own is difficult to analyse much further. But we can cut back from the particulars of such an incident to the underlying and more general social processes that are operating, by considering whether there is another (contradictory) rule of which this incident is an example, not an exception. Here, we know, for instance, that there is a nexus between privacy and intimacy, and status and power. In the school context, the degree of intimacy and amount of privacy depends upon status, bestowed by institutional role, which is hence a feature of power. This is clear when one considers that in this school, the Principal may go anywhere without knocking or waiting to speak, the teachers may go into most rooms in the school without knocking (though not into the Principal's study) and generally wait to speak, but the students may go almost nowhere without knocking and must always wait to be asked to speak.

We do not know much about what markers of power there are in our schools, how they support or contradict each other, to whom and in what ways they are beneficial or harmful, or whether there are procedures and rituals which teachers

could and should operate upon. But once we have understood the general social significance of one such incident, it is possible to return to the specifics of our practice by seeking other examples of the same general rules. These are often found in conventions such as modes of address, control of discussions, or allocation of tasks. The point is that incidents become critical incidents when one tries to explain an incident by locating it in a wider context, in this case, by forming a general rule from a single incident. One should always modify and verify the rule through searching for other examples of and exceptions to the rule.

Vicarious experience and research reports

Another way of generating critical incidents is to compare others' experience to our own, which is something we actually do quite naturally all the time. Staffroom discussion of a class or student generally consists of comments about their behaviour (appearance, personality, etc.) as they are with us, and we usually find that the behaviour varies considerably from class to class. This pooling of such experience may lead us to observe our own situation more carefully, to revise our opinions and judgements, even to behave differently ourselves. Such casual and specific comparisons are often too limited and unsystematic for the researching teacher, who needs to consider the broader implications and to collect more and better information. So one way to broaden and verify our experience is to compare it with the results of published research findings.

This is basically a way of linking theory to practice: we can read articles and then go back to observe our teaching looking for evidence as to whether the (necessarily generalised) conclusion of the article is true in our case. Whether it is true of our practice or not, we need to create data about the ways in which it is or is not true in order to explain why it is so. A teacher can read an article, on, for instance, competition and co-operation (Johnson and Johnson 1975), and then look at their class to see how these strategies are (or could be) used by him- or herself and the students, collecting some incidents to record in their critical incident file and using them for further analysis. Here is an example of my own thinking deriving from published research in this way:

Incident 13: Air pressure

Barnes (1969) shows how students don't so much just work together as work 'off' each other in the sense of learning occurring as an (inter)active social encounter between people who remain individuals.

When his students were looking at air pressure, he found that it was 'the social processes' which contributed most importantly to the level of understanding reached: without Steve's help, Glyn would not have represented to himself so clearly 'what made drinking possible'. This is obviously a very different dimension to group work from Britton's (1969: 98) 'group effort at understanding'.

In my STAR tutorial, I think I am managing that aspect OK, because they seem to pool their ideas well; but I think now I have also to enable them to use the group to clarify and develop their own individual understandings and insights more. I think that occurred in Barnes' case because of the task: air pressure is not ultimately a matter of opinion and consensus like my group discussion topics. I need something more specific, and I think I'll try to look at defining some of the concepts like 'ideology' and 'culture' that we're using.

That entry is the result of reading some of the published literature and generalising it to my own practice. Note how it is possible to transfer the main idea (of socially mediated individual learning) from a science topic with school students to a history of ideas course in university. As I suggested earlier, there are difficulties with this approach, but when it does work it can be a very simple and efficient way of initiating observation and change.

From reflection to incident

In all the incidents we have considered so far, an incident has been recorded and then analysed. But very often we find that we have reached some kind of a conclusion in our thinking without having recorded or noted any actual instances: they have occurred, but the separate incidents have disappeared into a general sense of knowing. As I suggested in the example of Mary raising her hand, we often find we are acting from a value position which is not actually based upon the facts. We then need to examine our practice for data that will confirm, modify or challenge our existing values position. This means moving from a conclusion to data rather than the other way around. It was partly for this reason, and partly because we should consistently check our conclusions against the data, and re-analyse the data, that the relation between an actual event and a critical incident is shown as a two-way interaction in Figure 1.

The following entry is typical of someone thinking through an evaluation in the absence of any actual incidents.

Incident 14: Labelling

What is of some concern is having the labels of ESL and Remedial attached to the one teacher. I know the administration made the decision for the one person to do everything for economic and financial reasons, but I wonder what impact this has on the perceptions of students, parents and staff. Is a message being given that students from non-English speaking backgrounds are somehow less able than their monolingual counterparts?

When asked whether there were any incidents that might answer the question, the teacher could not think of any, but subsequently she observed one student ask another if they were 'spastics' because they were in a remedial group. This did not

so much answer the question asked as pose another: did the very practice of withdrawing children for special attention categorise them as different and inferior regardless of the label attached? Both the research and further observation suggested that this was so, with the result that the idea of changing the labels was dropped in favour of pushing the administration to allow all children at some time to be withdrawn for 'extension'.

So one can usefully work from analysis and questioning back to an incident, and in so doing, may change the conclusion previously reached. This process is a form of exemplification which is important in all theory building.

Re-reading incidents

Finally, a very important way of generating new critical incident file items is through reading earlier entries and writing about them.

Incident 15: Wilful blindness

I've just finished re-reading what I've written so far this term and what surprised me was how often Malcolm was mentioned. I didn't know I'd written about him much at all, and in one way I haven't: not one entry is devoted to him. But I've highlighted his name wherever it occurs in all the other entries, and it does in over a third of them! When I look at why his name occurs, it is always in the context of something bad: he can't keep control; he 'borrows' without asking and then doesn't return things; he doesn't do his programmes . . . and so on. I've been studiously ignoring the fact that Malcolm is involved in almost every incident I've written about. I'm now going to have to do some really deep thinking about him and our work.

The importance of re-reading is that it enables us to see such patterns and trends as they begin to emerge. If you look at Incident 26: *Reading 26 July*, you can see how the matter of reading was the real problem, though it was initially seen only as a symptom of difficulties in the children's attitudes and discipline. Looking back and realising that it was problems with the teaching of reading that caused the other difficulties, the teacher was able to regard herself and her teaching ability quite differently: she was not an incompetent disciplinarian, but lacked experience in teaching reading with an age group she had not taught before. Further discussion of this process of re-analysis occurs in Chapter 7 with regard to personal professional histories.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how it is the unremarkable and everyday events that make up our routine professional lives that are often the best indicators of the patterns and values that underpin our practice. It is through rendering

critical the incidents of normal everyday events that much personal–professional development can occur.

Although I have drawn attention to two different kinds of incident in this chapter, the division between the two is, of course, not often clearcut. Seldom does one produce an entirely ‘uncritical’ incident, though I have taken some trouble to show that these are important in their own right. Equally seldom does one analyse a critical incident as far as one can, drawing from it all possible social significances. Most critical incidents are somewhere between these two extremes. As I showed, one begins to move from description when one asks questions about an incident and one often sees a single aspect of a deeper meaning indicated by it, without following all its ramifications through, or looking for other meanings.

In conclusion I would like to return to the idea that one of the occupational hazards of being a successful teacher in a system during a period of little growth or change is to become captured by one’s own routines. Although routines are essential to all professional practice, when they dominate they can often make us lose sight of what we are trying to achieve. Punctuality, for instance, is a necessary routine, but Peter (of ‘Peter’s Principle’) once found a manager who so insisted that his buses would always run on time that drivers were not allowed to stop to pick up passengers if they were running late. Less obviously contradictory, an important routine in creative writing is for children to draft their work; but always to insist on multiple drafts eventually reduces the number and type of pieces attempted. Recently, I made the following entry about a routine in my file:

Incident 16: Explaining readings

Still having real trouble getting the first years to do the reading. Before the lecture I gave them a quick seven-question test on the chapter on morphology I’d set them to read. 84 per cent didn’t know what morphology meant; 19 per cent couldn’t spell it. We talked it over and they said they weren’t doing the readings because they were so difficult that they couldn’t understand them and they got the main ideas from my lectures anyway. ‘How do you know’, I asked, ‘if you’re not doing the readings?’ In fact I don’t cover all the main points in the lectures, so how can I help them to do them?

I decided that as the reading–lecture–workshop sequence I had always used was not working, I would try a lecture–reading–workshop sequence, using the lecture to reduce the difficulty of the reading and find workshop activities for which they would have to have done the reading. In terms of the number of students doing the reading, it worked much better.⁷

So teaching routines are essential, but to keep them successful, we must constantly challenge and monitor them. One of the aims of incident analysis is to scientifically and systematically initiate, assist and record the process of developing personally and professionally as a teacher. The point is that committing any incident to paper enables the writer to reflect upon the experience, and thus gain

much more from it than if it were simply to pass unremarked and unconsidered in the routine of teaching which we constantly need to vary, develop and adapt to suit changing circumstances. To create critical incidents enables us to become aware of things we otherwise take for granted. And, having written them down we can then show and discuss that record with others, such as a teaching or research partner.

Of course, the methods described here of generating critical incidents are only some of the ways into the 'genre', and should not be taken as a closed formula for creating them. As outlined in Chapter 5, critical incidents should grow and develop a life of their own as themes emerge and our perception becomes more focused and controlled. But when one is well into the diagnosis and evaluation of professional practices through critical incidents, such methods are still useful as ways of opening up our minds again, so that the critical incident file does not become too narrowly focused on known issues. And one way of doing that is to take a new look at our routine practice.