

What am I teaching?

Words and learning steps focusing on a case study of an individual learner or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.

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Introduction

People Encounter critical incidents (CI) everyday, CI's are common in education and seen daily. A CI can be defined as '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 judgement is a significance we attach to the meaning of the incident' (Tripp, 2012) meaning CI's tend to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' but are referred to as critical through analysis. However, not all incidents are negative. CI's hold a great importance in teaching because through Tripps critical incident methodology, teachers can reflect and develop their teaching methods because it 'helps teachers know more about how they teach, they question their own teaching practice which enables them to develop professionally' (Tripp, 2012) therefore it's important as it helps teachers to constantly refine and develop their teaching through ethical thinking and analysis. Within this essay I will be exploring a particular CI I encountered. I will explore the incident and the topics related to it, mainly focusing on the positives and negatives of independent learning diving further into topics such as dot marking, reflective learning and assessment for learning (AFL).

The Role of Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is a powerful process of 'making meaning out of a purposeful combination of experiences and academic content' (Jacoby, 2010), Therefore critical reflection adds depth to simple conclusions by identifying, questioning, and assessing our knowledge. Teachers critically reflect on a daily basis, they reflect on classes, what went well, what needs improvement, how a child reacts and why, teachers are constantly critically analysing themselves and their pedagogy. Critical reflection is crucial when it comes to teaching in practice for many reasons mainly because It helps teachers become aware of their subconscious beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching. It also helps teachers 'promote a positive learning environment.' (Larrivee, 2021). Overall it's a process used to helps teachers collect, record, and analyse classroom experiences. It's an impactful strategy because it means that teachers can 'consciously develop a repertoire of relevant and context specific strategies and techniques.' (Larrivee, 2021) such as differentiation, independent learning, group work etc. It is important that teachers are constantly refining their teaching methods because

"The biggest effects on student learning occurs when teachers become learners of their own practice" – Hattie 2009:22

Therefor teachers need to critically reflect so they can acknowledge their downfalls and learn from them, constantly refining their teaching methods through reflection and research. A great method for critical reflection is Gibb's reflective cycle (appendix 1), it includes six stages that focus on reflection and gaining knowledge from experiences. The stages consist of;

Description - what happened.

Feelings – during an after.

Evaluate - what was good or bad.

Analyse - why it happened?.

Conclude - what could you have done?.

Action - next time what will you do?.

(Williams et al., 2012)

Furthermore Gibbs reflective cycle is a great strategy for teachers due to it providing a framework for reflection by including feelings, thoughts and the next steps of the reflective process. In previous studies Gibbs reflective cycle was found to be 'useful for

identifying the connection between personal experiences and professional values when maintaining reflective practices' (Adeani et al., 2020) which is perfect for teachers as they are reflecting on more than one thing, however, can differentiate between the two understanding and learning from it by putting ideas into place so the same thing will not happen again, meaning their pedagogy gains development and depth.

When it comes to the Welsh curriculum critical reflection is key, Graham Donaldson (Donaldson) created the four purposes (Appendix 2) in addition to the curriculum that contributes to the overall outcome of a student. The four purposes are as follows;

- Ambitious, capable learners - ready to learn throughout their lives.
- Enterprising, creative contributors - ready to play a full part in life and work.
- Ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.
- Healthy, confident individuals - ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society'

(Government, n.d.)

Donaldson also created the twelve pedagogical principles in review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements commissioned by the Welsh Government. The twelve pedagogical principles are as follows;

- 1 Focuses on the 4 purposes of the curriculum.
- 2 Challenges pupils to sustain their efforts to reach high but achievable targets.
- 3 Employs a broad repertoire of teaching approaches.
- 4 Promotes problem solving, creative and critical thinking.
- 5 Builds on previous knowledge and experience and engages pupils' interest.
- 6 Creates authentic contexts for learning.
- 7 Employs assessment for learning principles.
- 8 Makes connections within and across Areas of Learning and Experience.
- 9 Reinforces Cross-curriculum responsibilities including literacy, numeracy and digital competence.
- 10 Encourages pupils to take ownership of their own learning.
- 11 Supports social and emotional development and positive relationships.
- 12 Encourages collaboration.

(Tennant et al., 2022)

Furthermore, Donaldson defines pedagogy as classroom methods taking into consideration the purpose of the curriculum and the students needs. Donaldson's states that the recommendations of his Review 'do not imply an emphasis on any particular teaching approaches: decisions about teaching and learning are very context and purpose specific and are best taken by the teacher themselves.' (EWR, n.d.).

It is vital that teachers apply the four purposes and include the twelve pedagogical principles as often as possible to created the goal of well rounded citizens. It's important teachers follow the curriculum as it provides 'teachers, students, school leaders and community stakeholders with a measurable plan and structure for delivering a quality education.'(stricken, 2021) this is due to the curriculum identifying the learning outcomes and standards the student must hit before going onto the next stage of their education. Overall teachers must critically reflect on their pedagogy so they are sure they are effectively using the twelve pedological principles and implying the four purposes because if they are not critically reflecting they can not improve their skills nor refine their teaching methods.

Observation

The school I did my observation in has a world class school status with a success rate of 93% for GCSE A-C. It is a religious based school who have 1,268 pupils on roll including 295 in sixth form meaning the ages of the pupils in the school range from 12- 18 years of age. (Bishop, n.d.)

I observed a Year nine Spanish lesson (Appendix 3) within this lesson one incident caught my eye in particular. The teacher set independent work and assigned two 'star pupils', one female and one male. She explained that 'star pupils' were students that other students could go to for help if they were stuck, but only after they had used all the help resources provided to them. Essentially the teacher was promoting independent learning with added praise for the higher achieving students aka the 'star pupils'. The teacher then went on to reiterate 'three before me (TB4M).', Which is an independent learning tool used world wide it is a 'simple classroom strategy—when students experience a challenge, they must first ask three different people or resources for help before reaching out to the teacher.' (Brick, 2021) therefore, students were encouraged to use three different resources before coming to the teacher for help, reinforcing independent learning strategies in a positive light by setting challenges for students. I found this incident eye opening as many students used their peers as a helpful resource to complete the work they found difficult, having students as a form of support I personally saw this had positive impact, the students were talking about the work and engaging with each other and the work, staying on task. This was evidently a great independent leaning tool that worked really well for this class. The teacher had given the students time to complete the exercise then went around and 'DOT' marked. Dot marking is a independent learning strategy where the teacher will ' go round to students exercise book/worksheet/task and place a dot next to a mistake'(Parkinson, 2017), meaning the students have to independently figure out what the mistake is and amend the dot by reflecting on their work and finding the error, enhancing independent learning, making them think and learn from their mistakes in the moment.

Overall it was an interesting independent learning driven lesson. Personally I feel the CI had a positive impact on the class and reinforced great structure and resilience in the students, all tasks were completed with great success and student participation. The resources of pupils and work sheets were used really well and minimal students went on to ask the teacher for further help proving the method had great success.

Donaldson's four purposes

The CI relates to Donaldson's four purposes in many ways. The four purposes were created because Donaldson thought there should be a 'straightforward, enduring statement of curriculum purposes for Wales Without such clear and agreed purposes' (Dauncey, 2021). Donaldson's argument states if we don't know why, how can we know what to do and how?. The four purposes are 'four areas that should guide all future decisions about national and local educational priorities and underpin all teaching and learning in Wales'. (Dauncey, 2021), meaning they are the goals the student should be hitting by the time they leave school.

Within the CI I saw two of the four purposes being used in positives lights. The teacher reinforced the purpose of ambitious, capable learners as it was clear students were set high standards and to seek and enjoy challenge, this was shown via the challenging independent task all students completed to a high level. Building a body of knowledge and having the skills to connect and apply that knowledge in different contexts, this was evident when all students used multiple resources to help themselves to complete the task showing they could use different resources in different ways to complete the task, connecting knowledge to different contexts. All students were questioning and enjoying solving problems I saw this through the peer interaction students had by asking each other questions and solving problems by working together and alone. The second purpose that was reinforced throughout the lesson was enterprising, creative contributors this was clearly shown as students were able to think creatively to reframe and solve problems, lead and play different roles in teams effectively and responsibly, give of their energy and skills so that

other people will benefit (Government, n.d.), all three points were evident through the 'star pupils' that were allocated because these students helped peers solve their problems and played their role effectively to help everyone best they could, giving their energy and skills so that the rest of the class could benefit from their work by helping and giving advice.

Literature review

From observing that specific CI the first topic I will be focusing on is independent learning. Independent learning is 'a way or process of learning in which learners have control and ownership of their learning' (Lau, 2015), therefore it's a teaching tool that makes the students teach themselves and create their own learning. Independent learning has been advocated and promoted as a major contemporary educational goal, it is used for learners to take more responsibility and 'have more control over their own learning opportunities and trajectories, and to help them understand more about their roles in the learning process' (Lau, 2015). Therefore the centre of independent learning is autonomy "learners who are motivated to learn, take control of, manage, and actively reflect on their learning" (Luke & Hogarth, 2011). Research has been undertaken and many people believe the benefits of independent learning have been identified as 'increasing an individual's capacity to learn' (Luke & Hogarth, 2011), meaning it provides students with a framework to analyse problems, critically think and deepen their understanding of concepts and independent learning has been viewed as a foundation for students to become life-long learners, therefore this links to Donaldson's four purposes because independent learning reinforces the four purposes by giving students the challenge and opportunities to create their own learning creating ambitious students who are ready to learn throughout their lives, they are constantly being creative, confident and healthy by being creative and imagination and finally working in groups or solo independent work creates students of the world who are ready to play a full part in life by leading fulfilling lives as valises members of society, overall independent learning gives students life skills they can apply to life and their studies as the independent learning process includes students motivating each other and generating the feeling of performing as a group rather than as an individual who is left on his/her own (Scheel et al., 2022), this was so clear when observing the CI, the 'star pupils' were used as resources' and it generated group/partner work really well enhancing the students social and team working skills to complete the task.

However independent learning also has some negative effects as well, researchers found that during independent learning 'students still rely on teachers for guidance in the learning process, such as fast feedback and more instructions' (Scheel et al., 2022), showing students feel like they need the guidance from the teacher to succeed, therefore they have a lack of belief in themselves, students themselves stated 'independent learning tasks give them heightened anxiety around uncertainty and subjectivity' (Hockings et al., 2017) for this reason they classed independent tasks as more like homework (Scheel et al., 2022), insinuating due to the anxiety levels heightening the students decided to do the task as homework due to supposed embarrassment. However I did not observe this behaviour during the CI, all students were keen to work independently and utilised the 'star pupils', which eases the students anxiety slightly because if they did not understand they could ask their friend/peer gaining reassurance. Overall the independent task I encountered worked well and I only observed students enjoying it and working together to complete the tasks.

Independent learning was used really well during the CI through dot marking, which I observed during my time in the year nine class. Dot marking is a learning tool, the strategy 'enables immediate feedback and instant dialogue to take place between students and teachers.' (Parkinson, 2017) meaning the students receive vocalised feedback in the moment which they can take on and then amend the mistake independently. It gets students thinking as they have to amend the mistake alone with none/minimal feedback from the teacher, However, it is only effective if 'pupils have a dedicated period of time planned into a lesson to respond, DIRT (Dedicated Improvement & Reflection Time)' (Enser, 2022). Dot marking is a great tool and includes strategies from Schon reflective in action theory, Schon

Reflection in action, 'is the process of on-the-spot reflection and experimentation through which theories-in-use can be instantiated, developed, and on occasion modified and adequately verbalised (Schon, 1992)' (Erlandson & Beach, 2008), meaning it gives the person the opportunity to consider the situation, decide how to act and then act immediately. Therefore it offers both the student and teacher a moment to encounter uncertainty and overcome it, it lets them cope with the circumstances and attack the next steps calmly but quickly without being restricted by stress, defensiveness or bias. Furthermore reflection in action is shown greatly though dot marking because its taken place in the classroom meaning it's a reflective practice that 'is no longer just a retrospective process but can be performed whilst on-the-job' (Schön, 1983), this holds great advantages as the reflective practice if given in more depth by the teacher and students in the case of dot marking can learn to question themselves gaining critical thinking skills. Overall it's not time consuming and great for a classroom environment for both student and teacher. However it also holds many disadvantages such as the overuse of the theory as this can lead to 'immobilise us or take our focus away from the task in hand' (Schön, 1983), meaning it can sometimes lose effect because it can stop people from moving forward if they don't understand or disagree or even if they want to solve the issue but don't know how it can consume their time, therefore they don't move forward only stay in the same position/state of mind. However, the Schon reflective theory, reflection in action is evident in dot making and holds great value in the classroom as teachers can reflect on their pedagogy and student progression and students can reflect on their work and progress as the reflection 'allows students to make sense of material/experiences in relation to oneself' (Arts, n.d.) which brings me into the next topic of reflective learning.

Reflective learning is a process of learning using 'conscious, intentional reflection and can involve observing and auditing the level of information comprehension while learning' (Gray, 2022), overall it includes recollection and critical analysis of past experiences which links to David Kolb (Kolb) learning cycle which is a 'theory that can be used to design student centred learning experiences that promote sustainability learning through experimental learning' (Tomkins, 2016), Kolb created a theory that models for adult development which incorporates experiences playing a key role in the learning process. Furthermore incorporating a learning activity to explore a life learning occurrence allows students to learn from a significant life learning experience to application of lessons learned in the practice setting, 'Kolb's experiential learning model provides a framework for this process' (Chiu, 2019), The model includes a four section cycle of learning, consisting of 'concrete experience – learner encounters a concrete experience, reflective observation – learner reflects on the new experiences in the light of their existing knowledge, abstract conceptualisation – reflective gives rise to a new idea or a modification of an existing abstract concept, and active experimentation – the newly created concept gives rise to experimentations' (McLeod, 1970). Therefore Kolb's theory is centred around the transformation of information into knowledge so students can apply the new knowledge to the world around them. However Kolb stated that complete learning occurs when students engage in all phases of the learning cycle. (Appendix 4) (Tomkins, 2016)

Kolb was heavily influenced by John Dewey (Dewey) who said that a reflective individual will hold three crucial attributes, open-mindedness, responsibility and whole-heartedness. Dewey decided reflection was 'a conscious activity in which we engage to explore our experiences and develop new understandings and conceptualisations.' (Slesser, 2018) Therefore both theorist explain that reflection helps our knowledge forever expand and change gaining more depth and analysis each time, however, Learning from experience is one of the most fundamental forms of learning. Kolb argued that more emphasis should be based on the learner's ability to actively construct knowledge but Dewey said greater emphasis should be based on reflective thought (Slesser, 2018) even though they disagreed on what should be the main focus of the cycle they both agree that students learn from experiences and reflective thinking which they can then go on to apply to another experience they encounter as both theories enable us to learn from experience. Overall Kolb's learning cycle is a breeding ground for incorporating the four purposes into teaching as it allows

student to become a well rounded person as they reflect and are forever expanding their knowledge.

Reflective learning as a whole has positive impacts on students and teachers as it enhances 'performance, engagement, motivation and develops critical thinking skills' (Admin, 2022). However, researchers argue that reflective thinking can have negative effects due to 'not all educators having the understanding to follow the reflective process, it consumes a lot of time and it may cause an uncomfortable feeling to analyse and evaluate ones performance' (Summary, 2022).

Reflective thinking is used greatly in AFL. AFL is a 'bridge between where a student currently is in their learning and achievement and where they want to get to' (Hawthorne, 2022) meaning when AFL is effectively used it can make a positive impact by helping teachers and students fulfil their potential due to AFL indicating where a student is in their learning and critically analyses what a student has to do to reach their full potential. AFL can be assessed in two ways formal summative assessment and informal formative assessment, summative assessments are 'creatively based methods and formative assessment is more diagnostic and evaluative' (Dontbeshy, 2021), meaning there are multiple ways of assessing a student. There are multiple benefits of AFL including 'improvement of productivity and sense of motivation, attainment and achievement and improved resilience, self Ass term and confidence in most learners.'(Hawthorne, 2022) overall, AFL helps teachers analyse the quality off their pedagogy and how they will help students reach full potential along with what target they need to set their students to succeed.

However AFL has its disadvantages as it sometimes has a negative effect on 'student motivation, particularly for students performing below grade level.' (Sammons, n.d.), Careless implementation of assessments may have negative consequences for example using purely written assessments will not provide an accurate grade for the students achievement as students may perform better via a visual, creative or oral exam, therefore students can be at a disadvantage and endure unfair circumstances (Sammons, n.d.).

Reflection

When looking back at the CI I encountered I still believe it's a positive strategy however I now understand the negative impacts independent learning can have on students, it could cause students to feel anxious for being in unfamiliar territory therefore moving forward I would still incorporate independent learning within practice but acknowledge the uncertainty that could come with it, to prevent added anxiety I would reassure them, we learn from our mistakes so never be afraid to make them by incorporating Kolbs learning cycle so students can self-asses and reflect on their work adding AFL so they can move forward and learn from each experience they encounter. The 'star pupils' evident through observation had a positive impact on the class as a whole and I would incorporate this into teaching more often as it's a catalyst for independent learning and links to Donaldson's four purposes and reinforces them nicely. I would advice that 'star pupils' don't stay the same so students don't lose lack of motivation and all get praised for the challenging work they are completing, to show equality.

Dot marking is an interesting strategy and from what I saw it was effective for the class however I personally would not use this in my practice one because in the work is mostly physically but secondly because as stated above if its overused deliberate reflection in action may immobilise, take focus away from the task in hand, which I could imagine in the long term having a negative impact on the class, therefore I do believe overtime the method would lose its effectiveness and purpose. Saying that I would use a similar method verbally by giving verbal feedback to a student and asking them to use Schon reflect in action and react to the feedback instantly performing the piece again.

Reflective thinking is an important strategy and should be used in the classroom more often so students and teachers can monitor progression. I would personally use Kolbs reflection theory because I find it the most effective due to it touching upon feelings, experience and future steps, Kolbs theory should be used to critically reflect on lessons and activities for both students and teachers, this can be done through the basic questions of 'what went well' and 'even better if'.

Overall I feel independent learning is a great teaching strategy because it incorporates many different learning methods that reinforce Donaldson's four purposes and twelve pedagogical principles by challenging students, giving them time to reflect, work on it and then apply it to different sections of their life. It's a helpful strategy because it teaches students to fend for themselves by problem solving and creatively thinking to overcome challenges.

Conclusion

To conclude independent learning is a great strategy for the classroom, it reinforces Donaldson's four purposes and twelve pedagogical principles, meaning we are teaching students to have the skills and knowledge to be a well rounded citizen. It also includes reflective learning and AFL which are resources for the teacher and the student to see how much students are developing and how fast. Through research I found dot marking to be useful however only in the right circumstances so its not over used and loses its powerful effect. Overall independent learning is effective when used correctly through theory.

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