

Part A: Critical Incident

Reflecting on a Year 3 maths critical incident using Tripp's methodology

Observe → Analyse → Plan & Develop →
Observe again



1. Introduction

Using Tripp's reflective methodology to examine a classroom moment

Purpose of this presentation

Introduce a critical incident from a Year 3 maths lesson.

Tripp (1993) explains that an event becomes a critical incident through how we interpret its significance. Describe the event carefully before making assumptions.

Consider possible explanations, then identify what to plan and evaluate in Part B.

Keep the pupil anonymous and protect their identity (BERA, 2024).



**Reflective cycle: observe → analyse → plan
and develop → observe again**

2. OBSERVE — The critical incident

Describe the snapshot before interpreting it

- A pupil gives an incorrect answer to a maths question.
- The teacher invites other pupils to explain their methods.
- One pupil explains a different answer.
- The first pupil listens, but it is unclear whether they understood.



Observation is not proof of understanding.

3. ANALYSE — Possible causes

This is a snapshot: consider more than one explanation

Social learning

A peer explanation may support learning through talk and shared thinking (Vygotsky, 1978).

Prior understanding

The pupil may need a different explanation or more practice; one wrong answer is not enough to judge ability (Piaget, 1952).

Cognitive load

The explanation or task may have included too much information at once (Sweller, 1988).

Other possibilities

The pupil may have understood, remained unsure, or needed more thinking time. The incident alone cannot tell us which.

Critical point: these are possible explanations, not conclusions about the pupil.

4. ANALYSE — Deep dive

Focus: listening to a peer does not necessarily show understanding



Peer talk can help—but understanding needs to be checked.

What the literature suggests

- Vygotsky (1978): support from others may help a learner do something they cannot yet do alone.
- Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976): guidance can support problem-solving.
- Sweller (1988): too much information may make learning harder.
- However, the incident does not prove that peer explanation caused understanding—or confusion.

A follow-up check is needed before deciding what support to use.

5. CONCLUSION — Reflect and plan

Use the observation to inform Part B and evaluate what happens next

- Peer learning can be useful, but it does not automatically mean every pupil has understood.
- Tripp's approach encourages careful reflection rather than quick assumptions (Tripp, 1993).
- For Part B, plan a short check: ask the pupil to explain the method in their own words and try a similar question independently.
- If needed, model the steps or use counters or a number line, then observe whether the support helps.



Reflect → plan → develop → observe again

Reading list

BERA (2024) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. 5th edn. British Educational Research Association. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2024> (Accessed: 12 October 2026).

Tripp, D. (1993) Critical Incidents in Teaching: Developing Professional Judgement. London: Routledge.

Piaget, J. (1952) The Origins of Intelligence in Children. New York: International Universities Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sweller, J. (1988) 'Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning', Cognitive Science, 12(2), pp. 257–285. doi: 10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4.

Wood, D., Bruner, J.S. and Ross, G. (1976) 'The role of tutoring in problem solving', Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17(2), pp. 89–100. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-7610.1976.tb00381.x.