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ECAD6007

Who am I teaching?

INTRODUCTION

Who am I teaching? The aim of this assignment is to assess and show an understanding of the varied nature of learners who will be sitting before us in a classroom. This reflection should discuss in depth the use of critical incidents in the context of reflective practice in teaching. According to Tripp (1993, p. 8),

“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 judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident.”

A critical incident is not something of a negative nature necessarily, but an incident with greater meaning and significance than first thought. Being able to observe and reflect is massively important in the practice of teaching so that improvements can be made within that practice. Critical incidents help us to focus and reflect not only when things go wrong, but also when things go well. This helps inform our practice, expand upon the incidents and apply what we have learned in the process to other aspects of teaching. This, hopefully, should enhance the learners' education and our relationship with the learners and broaden our knowledge and theory of teaching.

In this assignment, I will be discussing the following areas:

- The role of critical reflection
- My observation of a critical incident and the school's context
- Donaldson's four purposes
- A literature review discussing Classical and Operant Conditioning and Feedback
- My reflection on the critical incident and literature review and the next steps
- Conclusion

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL REFLECTION

The role of critical reflection is a crucial part of professional development and helpful in combining both theory and practice. Reflection is as Zwozdiak-Myers says:

Teachers who ask searching questions about educational practice that arise from their own contexts and professional concerns demonstrate a commitment to continuous learning by seeking new ideas, evaluating and reflecting on their impact, and trying out new ways of working to improve their effectiveness.

(Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012, p. 3)

This demonstration of commitment to continuous learning boosts your ability to adapt and grow within your professional practice. It helps you question what you are doing well, and what you are doing not so well. It challenges your existing assumptions.

Teachers need to ask what happened, and what made it happen to be able to effectively reflect and progress. Dewey (1933) stated, “while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habits of reflecting” (Dewey, 1933, p. 35). When we get into the habit of reflecting upon these critical incidents, no matter how big or small, we are able to almost automatically link these incidents with theory, evaluate our own teaching, question our personal beliefs, consider perspectives, try new strategies, maximise learning and continue to improve.

There are many ways of reflective practice. Kolb (1984) developed the model of experiential learning where he states learning is defined through experience. (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012). The four stages of experiential learning, Kolb defines, are: concrete evidence, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012). After you have had the experience, you review and reflect upon it. You then conclude what happened and what went wrong and make a plan of what to do next. Finally, you put those plans into action and try out a new approach. Once this has been completed, you start the cycle again.

Schon (1987) used an approach called 'reflection in action and reflection on action'. This method of reflective practice has two parts. Part one: reflecting as something happens. This means taking the situation into consideration, deciding how to act upon it and doing so immediately. Part two: reflecting after something happens. Think about what happened, reconsider the situation and plan for how to change it next time it happens (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012).

These approaches are only two of many ways of reflection but both help in the practice of critically reflecting. The basis of all approaches is simple: think about what happened and analyse why and how it went well or not in order to successfully improve upon your practice.

Professor Graham Donaldson (2015) stated in his Successful Futures Review that there was a need for change. A change that will help develop and enable world-class teaching and learning. This involves a curriculum reform that addresses aims, purposes, assessment, pedagogy and structure. This change of curriculum was implemented by primary schools across Wales in 2021. Secondary schools are yet to make the curriculum change in a lot of schools in Wales but must do so by September 2023. This change has meant that a lot of teachers are being forced to reflect upon their practice and adapt to follow the structure of the curriculum. Teachers need continuous professional development that is ongoing throughout their careers. They need to be able to implement their professional development in the classroom and act upon it in order to make improvements. Those improvements must always be centred around pedagogy, assessment for learning and feedback.

OBSERVATION

The observation took place in a mixed-gender English medium school based in Llanelli in the county of Carmarthenshire. It is a Catholic school with 483 learners on roll, all of whom are between the ages of 11 and 16. The school has identified that

24.2% of learners have additional learning needs, 3.3% have English as an additional language and 3.7% speak Welsh at home. The percentage of learners eligible for free school meals is 18.3%. (Estyn, 2022) This is just under the national average of 18.7%. 'The school's caring and inclusive ethos and firm commitment to keeping everyone safe are underpinned by the Gospel values which permeate all aspects of the school's work' (Estyn, 2022). The observation witnessed was during a year 7 English lesson, that took place just after lunch. It was some of the learner's first lesson of the year with their new teacher due to some rearrangements regarding setting and ability. Some of the learners knew the teacher already, but some didn't, nor did some of them know of their peers. For the purpose of this assignment, I will make sure that the school, staff and the learners observed will remain anonymous throughout and I will follow the BERA Guidelines "the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research" (BERA, 2018, p. 21).

DONALDSON'S FOUR PURPOSES

The critical incident observed was during a lesson created as an icebreaking exercise to help learners get to know each other and their new teacher. The teacher set a three-minute, timed task to ask the person next to them to describe something exciting about themselves and when the time is up, the learners had to tell the whole class what they had learned about their partner. The teacher played a short tune on a xylophone one minute into the timed task. The whole class went quiet immediately. The teacher proceeded to give out positive feedback to a few groups. They explained what they were doing well, how their conversations were strong and how they must keep going at this high standard. To one group, the teacher mentioned that they could see that they were a little shy and that they needed to be confident when talking to others. The teacher went on to give some encouragement saying, "you can do this, be strong!". After the activity was over, the teacher proceeded to give out 'golden tickets' to the learners who performed the best and gave the most interesting answers.

During the research for the curriculum reform, there was analysis and evidence gained from schools in Wales in which Professor Graham Donaldson (2015) found there are four main purposes that learners should leave school with.

These are:

- “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”

(Donaldson, 2015, p. 29)

I feel that all four purposes have sections that apply to the task observed. The teacher's use of instant feedback will help the learners “set themselves high standards and seek and enjoy challenge” (Donaldson, 2015). The teacher made sure to give this feedback as soon as the good behaviour was observed. Feedback given by the teacher motivates and boosts both confidence and resilience within the learner. Although negative feedback can be hard to take, knowing what went wrong and why is an important lesson to learn, not only to progress in school, but outside of school too. The use of classical conditioning by playing a short tune on the xylophone to settle the class will help learners “understand and consider the impact of their actions when making choices and acting” (Donaldson, 2015). By giving the learners opportunities to make choices in the way they learn and act, it is giving the learners key skills for life beyond school. The objective of the task observed was to talk to their peers about themselves, this can be hard for even adults at times, but the learners were pushed out of their comfort zone to do so, and with this, they are “building their mental and emotional well-being by developing confidence, resilience and empathy” (Donaldson, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Zhou and Brown (2015) state, Classical Conditioning was first determined by Ivan Pavlov in 1980 while studying digestion in dogs. Pavlov noticed an interesting occurrence. The dogs he was experimenting on began to salivate whenever an assistant entered the room. Salivation occurs when the dog can see and smell food, it is not under conscious control. What Pavlov noticed was that salivation was occurring in the absence of food and smell, but when the assistant walked in, meaning the dog had learned that food was coming. Pavlov then discovered that a bell could be rung at the time of feeding, and eventually, the sound of just the bell alone would cause the dogs to salivate (Zhou and Brown, 2015). Pavlov also discovered that this reaction could be suppressed if the bell rang and no food arrived (Zhou and Brown, 2015). When Pavlov published his findings, he mentioned that he had called the food the Unconditioned Stimulus because the triggers and salivation were not learned, they were unconscious reactions that happened naturally and were completely out of the dog's control. Pavlov called this an Unconditioned Response (Sprouts, 2020). This, related to the Critical Incident mentioned above, can be seen to work by the triggered sound of the xylophone. The learners had not been told that the sound of the xylophone meant to be quiet, yet they did so anyway. It was an Unconditioned Response, not a learned behaviour.

J. B. Watson first introduced the term 'Behaviourism' in the early part of the twentieth century (Pritchard, 2014). Watson was fascinated by Pavlov's findings and thought that his theory could be extended to look at different types of personalities and characteristics. Watson thought that, through Pavlovian Conditioning, he could train infants into becoming whatever he desired them to be in adult life (Pritchard, 2014). Watson states this belief in his famous quote:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—a doctor, lawyer, artist,

merchant- chief and, yes, even into beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations and race of his ancestors.

(Watson, 1926, p. 10)

While Pavlov showed how conditioning can trigger unconscious reactions, Watson used Pavlov's theory of Classical Conditioning to show that new behaviours can be instilled that are not biological or inherited but learned (Sprouts, 2020). Watson believed that human behaviour is based upon the individual history of exposure to reinforcements and punishments. He believed that this behaviour was a reaction to the environment in which the child was raised (Sprouts, 2020).

This begs one to wonder whether these schemes of adults manipulating infants to become whatever they so desire actually work, or even if it is ethical. It seems that this theory is good in hindsight, but does it pay off for that child in later life? For example, it sounds great in practice to have a completely still and silent classroom environment for learners to be able to concentrate and direct their thoughts to the work asked of them, but what effect does this have on the confidence of the learner? The learner might be scared to speak out or ask a question regarding their work, and instead keep their problems inside and fail to progress. Watson published "The Psychological Care of Infant and Child" in 1928. In this book he advised parents not to play with their children or it will disrupt their routine, not to touch their children too often or it will spoil them, and to keep an emotional distance from their children so as not to interrupt their new way of learning (Sprouts, 2020). This book was handed out by governments and healthcare specialists as a way of helping new parents and soon became a best seller.

Watson had four children, John, James, William and Mary, with whom he applied his theoretical methods while raising them. All four of his children had unfortunate lives. Mary developed a drinking problem and attempted suicide, like her brother James. John developed headaches from a young age and complained of them throughout his life before dying in his early 50s due to the symptoms. William took his own life at the age of 40 (Sprouts, 2020). This suggests that Watson's theory had some flaws.

Perhaps these children were missing some nurturing and love. It is not a coincidence that all four of his children led a dark path in life due to their father's experiments. It is said that Watson later regretted writing about his theory and using it to raise his children. (Sprouts, 2020)

Bigelow and Morris (2001) write about both sides of the argument: they say, according to Blatz and Bott (1929), affectionate behaviour and allowance of emotion can promote affectionate bonds, but this might lead to the infants becoming overly dependent on their parents and may trigger fear and anxiety. Yet, on the other hand, affection between parents and infants is highly appropriate and is recommended that parents should freely give and show affection to their infants (Bigelow and Morris, 2001). In relation to the critical incident, while it is very clearly unethical to show affection to learners in a physical manner, showing you care, listening and being supportive are great ways to connect with the learner. Being emotional with the learners can be done in a few ways but the most successful is through positive feedback. Care, consideration and understanding in the form of positive feedback is a great way to connect with the learners in hopes they will self-motivate and take pride and joy in their work and practice. (Van der Kleij and Lipnevich, 2020)

Following Watson's conditioning technique, B. F. Skinner developed a more in depth theory of conditioning called Operant Conditioning. This theory is about rewarding the desired behaviour as and when it happens. As Zhou and Brown (2015) suggest that when we are made to feel positive about something we are most likely to repeat that behaviour, "the things we call pleasant have an energizing or strengthening effect on our behavior" (Skinner, 1972). Skinner developed this theory after studying animals and concluding that both animals and humans would repeat the outcomes that are most likely to benefit them, while on the other hand, both animals and humans are most likely to suppress those behaviours that resulted in an outcome less beneficial (Shaffer, 2000). Skinner's Operant Conditioning theory was based on an experiment he conducted involving rats. He noticed that if a rat pressed a button and in return received food, the rat was more likely to press that button again. Yet, if the rat was shocked when the button was pressed, the behaviour would stop and the

rat would cease to press the button (Shaffer, 2000) Operant Conditioning is seen to be far more flexible than Classical Conditioning. The methodology can be split into 4 different areas, positive reinforcement, positive punishment, negative reinforcement and negative punishment (Pritchard, 2014). Operant conditioning was used in the critical incident previously mentioned, by using positive reinforcement to enhance behaviour. The teacher handed out 'golden tickets' to those who gave good answers. While those learners were not misbehaving in any way, it affects their peers too. The ones who did not get involved as much as the ones who had prizes will hopefully get more involved next time – thus changing their behaviour in a positive way.

Finally, in relation to the critical incident, the teacher gave feedback to the learners only one minute into the task. In a nutshell, feedback is given to learners as a way for them to “assess what they know, what they do not know, and what they need to know” (Hattie and Yates, 2013). Learners tend to focus on the future, where they are going next and what is happening next, instead of reflecting on where they have come from and what they have already done. Hattie and Yates (2013) discuss in their book 'Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn', how, after asking learners in a questionnaire, they do not welcome critique. As a teacher, critique is necessary to help the learner's development in both life inside a school context, and outside. Unfortunately for the learners, this feedback must be negative so that they can react to the feedback to correct their mistakes. As a result, this is where learners start to think that it is not their work that is the problem, but that the task was not achievable or that the teaching method is poor (Hattie and Yates, 2013). Feedback is a way of filling the void between where they currently are and where they need to be. Receiving appropriate feedback is really encouraging for the learner. It enables them to progress, motivates them, and allows them to adjust their plan and rethink their path to their goal (Hattie and Yates, 2013). The teacher mentioned in the critical incident used feedback in both a positive and negative way. They said “you must be confident, you can do this, be strong!”. While this feedback was definitely not very detailed in its approach, it is very motivating. It pointed out their weakness – confidence, and gave them a route to change that. While negative feedback is necessary for progression, creating a safe space for learners to know it is ok to get

things wrong sometimes is incredibly important. Creating a friendly environment with mutual respect and trust helps keep the balance between positive and negative. Over-praising can sometimes call for the learner to wonder if they are doing something wrong due to excessive positivity, as well as questioning if their feedback is honest (Hattie and Yates, 2013).

REFLECTION / EVALUATION & NEXT STEPS

Reflecting upon the critical incident and literature review, I can see how classical conditioning, operant conditioning and feedback are all vital in the classroom in their own ways. The use of classical conditioning by using the xylophone was extremely effective. It was not something that was taught by the teacher but made enough of an impact to stop the learners in their tracks. The sound was not harsh or shocking in any way and continued to leave the classroom as a safe space for learners. I think this is a fun way of gaining control of the classroom in a sensitive and calming way, instead of shouting over the noise and raising the level even higher. I would like to try this method in my own practice.

Feedback was given not long after the task was set. To some, this might seem counter-intuitive because it had not given the learners a chance to properly start. But, by giving this feedback so early on, it enabled the learners to know if they were on track, gave the teacher another opportunity to reiterate the success criteria and boost confidence in those who were struggling. This also made the learners aware that they were being listened to while they were having group discussions. Knowing they are being listened to means that there will be more of an initiative to have the appropriate discussions. I really felt a sense of pride in the teacher when they said such motivating things to the learners. I noticed while observing, but reassured during my research, that negative feedback is just as important as positive feedback. The teacher gave the negative feedback in a really understanding manner and twisted it to boost confidence and motivation. I hope that I can implement this

environment in my practice – it felt like a really safe place to be able to get things wrong sometimes, which we must do, to be able to progress.

The use of positive reinforcement in the form of the ‘golden ticket’ was also extremely effective, not only in the classroom but in the school as a whole, especially with the younger children. There was a sense of excitement when anyone got one. The learner’s faces would light up when they had one and it certainly encouraged their peers to strive to do more so that they could have one too. Positive reinforcement is something that I will definitely implement in my practice.

Tripp (1993) states: “carefully observed and analysed critical incidents can communicate their aims and achievements better than many other kinds of evaluation”. Being able to witness the critical incident, then evaluate it and reflect upon it has helped me see the somewhat seemingly minor incident could have so many knock-on effects for the learners. Something as simple as telling a learner “you can do it!” could impact them in a hugely positive way.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the biggest things I have taken away from the assignment are the importance of reflection, being critical and the importance of professional development. Under ‘Professional Learning’ in the Professional Standards created for the Welsh Government, it states:

“The teacher consistently extends knowledge, skills and understanding and can show how reflection and openness to challenge and support informs professional learning to progressively develop pedagogy.”

(Welsh Government, 2019)

Professional development and building upon knowledge are at the heart of the new curriculum. Refining teaching, influencing learners and advancing learning are the

biggest ways in which we can consistently secure the best outcomes for our learners. Without reflecting upon ourselves as teachers, being critical of ourselves and developing our skills and knowledge, how can we expect our learners to do the same? Showing passion, commitment and love for our jobs creates a perfect platform in which learners can progress and succeed not only in school, but continue to lead fulfilling lives as valued citizens of Wales and the world. These are definitely engrained in all I will do while practising my profession and will undoubtedly take along with me throughout life as a teacher.

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