

**Critical incidents in study abroad:
Some contrasting multidisciplinary perspectives**

海外研修での危機的出来事：対照をなす学問的見解

by Tim Newfields (Toyo University)

Abstract

This article compares four notions of what a "critical incident" implies in study abroad contexts. Rather than viewing critical incidents as a singular concept invariant across time, this article suggests how prevailing psychological and sociological theories as well as changing research contexts have constructed our understanding of "critical incidents". It concludes by pointing out how critical incidents are needed for transformative study abroad programs. In the next issue of this newsletter, some actual critical incident response strategies will be considered.

Keywords: critical incident theory, intercultural awareness, culture bumps, culture shock, criticality, study abroad

本稿は、海外研修中に起きた「クリティカル・インシデント」を4つの概念で比較する。「クリティカル・インシデント」を普遍的な概念として捉えるのではなく、むしろ研究状況の変化と同様、その時代に優位性を保つ心理学や社会学理論が「クリティカル・インシデント」に対する我々の認識をいかに構築するかについて、本稿は示唆している。最後に、有意義な海外研修プログラムにおいて、「クリティカル・インシデント」の重要性を指摘して結論とした。

キーワード：クリティカル・インシデントの理論、異文化間の認識、文化衝突、カルチャーショック、臨界、海外研修

Retrospective reports by many study abroad (SA) participants suggest that far from all interpersonal change occurs in unilinear ways – certain incidents seem to spark significant shifts in how SA participants view their host cultures, themselves, and even their native cultures (Laubscher, 1994, 77-134; Savicki, Adams, Wilde, & Binder, 2007, 111-120; Pederson, 2009, 73 - 86). These events, which may be understood as critical incidents, can potentially change how SA participants handle unfamiliar experiences. Often it also influences their willingness to undergo more such experiences. This paper examines some ways critical incidents have been envisioned and suggests why they may be essential for SA programs that are life-changing.

First, let us seek to clarify some of the meanings implied by the term "critical incident," and then distinguish it from some related notions.

Flanagan's Original Concept

Critical incident theory can be regarded as a child of World War II and to some extent, of behaviorism. During the early years of that conflict, John Flanagan was commissioned by the U.S. Air Force to study pilot performance. In his own words, Flanagan (1954) describes a critical incident as "extreme behavior, either outstandingly effective or ineffective with respect to attaining the general aims of the activity" (p. 338). In other words, a critical incident was first envisioned as any action substantially contributing to the success or failure of a specific outcome. Flanagan's initial focus was on identifying job-related behaviors that were considered "effective" or not. However, in subsequent years the scope of critical incident theory has expanded to explore topics as diverse as customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990, cited in Gremler, 2004, p. 65), student compositions (Naidu & Oliver, 1994), and online data access trends (Urquhart, et al., 2003).

Flanagan's vision of what constituted a "critical incident" was closely linked to a technique bearing that name. In 1954 he outlined a retrospective interview procedure to pinpoint factors thought to influence the success/failure of desired outcomes. This procedure seems optimally suited to tasks having well-defined target outcomes with clear performance criteria. However, it is not without critics. In particular, Chell (1998, pp. 51-72, cited in Gremler, 2004, p. 67) raises concerns about the reliability and validity of this technique. For example, since the critical incident technique requires informants to recall key elements of an experience, it is subject to a phenomenon known as *recall bias* in which memories are either distorted by later recollections or else neglected entirely since some events were not imprinted in conscious memory (Hassan, 2009, par 3). Flanagan's critical incident technique also depends on the willingness of informants to provide detailed, accurate narratives. However, unless there are clear incentives for informants to offer detailed information as well as a widespread belief that their confidentiality will be respected, the data will be meager and/or biased. A final criticism of this technique is that raters seem to vary in how they set analytic categories (Norman, Redfern, Tomalin, & Oliver, 1992, p. 595-597).

While acknowledging the merits of this procedure for some contexts, thoughtful readers should question how appropriate it is for most SA research. One quandary is that many SA programs lack single, precise outcomes because many factors influencing each SA outcome vary widely. Another issue is practical: do most SA programs have the resources to conduct detailed ethnographic measurements of participants? At least in Japan, many staff responsible for evaluating SA programs lack the time and expertise needed to conduct professional program evaluations.

Crisis Models of Critical Incidents

The word "critical" is derived from the Latin *criticus* and Greek *kritikos*, which means to judge, decide, or discriminate (Weblio, 2011). However, by 1600 this word also came to mean "at the point of a crisis" and this meaning prevails not only in the medical field, but also in many school settings. For example, some university SA programs have adopted emergency response procedures

drawn from "critical intervention" protocols, which I believe would be more appropriately termed *crisis intervention protocols*. Such protocols often define how emergency psychological and/or medical care should be given in calamities (Fishkind & Berlin, 2008, pp. 9-24). In this vein, Roberts (2005) defines a critical incident as, "an event that has the potential to overwhelm one's usual coping mechanisms, resulting in psychological distress and an impairment of normal adaptive functioning" (p. 779).

In a similar tone, The University of Sydney defines a critical incident as a ". . . tragic or traumatic event or situation . . . or the threat of such, which affects, or has the potential to affect students, their family members and other persons including staff and friends, in a traumatic way" (par. 2). As school shootings sporadically devastate campuses around the globe, institutional response protocols are being drawn up. Importantly, specific response procedures for so-called "critical incidents" are outlined because mishandled responses not only have the potential to aggravate misery, but also result in lawsuits. As a case in point, in 2004 an Ohio State University student sued her alma mater for failing to respond adequately to a incident involving multiple rape charges by a male student (Cantalupo, 2010, p. 70-71). The university's lack of a timely, emphatic response in this situation ended up costing them millions of dollars.

With large amounts of money and schools' reputations at stake, it is not surprising that many educational institutions envision "critical incidents" from crisis intervention paradigms. Unfortunately, all too often the focus is on short-term emergency responses. My belief is that more focus needs to occur on pre-crisis preventative interventions. In SA contexts involving Japanese students, students need to be informed of how safety protocols vary in different cultures prior to departure. Without engendering obsessive paranoia, students should understand how activities which would be "safe" in Tokyo might not be in other cities such as Tijuana, Toronto, or Tel Aviv. Local orientation modules, such as the one Gilmour (2010) has designed for Japanese university students preparing to the UK, may be helpful.

Tripp's Descriptions of Critical Incidents

Drawing on the writings of Giroux (1983) and others who have shaped our notions of critical pedagogy, in 1993 David Tripp published *Critical incidents in teaching*. Basically, this text underscores the importance of constant self-monitoring and checking the alignment between action and intentions. It also encourages teachers to consider how they impose societal values in their classrooms.

For Tripp, a "critical incident" is simply anything that is interpreted as a "problem" or "challenge" in a particular context. Farrell (2008) echoes his notion by claiming it is, "any unplanned event that occurs during class" (p. 3). Tripp points out that what may be considered a "critical incident" to one individual might be seen as a routine norm to another. No doubt influenced by constructionist thought, Tripp maintains that events by themselves are neither "critical" nor

"non-critical" – only after participants go through a process of attaching some sort of personal meaning to them, can they become "critical". To encourage teachers/learners to reflectively examine events and reflect on their meanings, Tripp recommends keeping a *critical incident file* resembling a research journal. The structure of each critical incident file depends on what one is researching, but the overall purpose is to bring to light unrecognized assumptions. A good example of some sample critical incident files by teachers can be found in the University of Birmingham's ProDAIT project (2006).

Related Concepts

Before contrasting the notions discussed so far, let us briefly explore some concepts related to "criticality" in general.

Culture Bumps

Carol Archer's description of a *culture bump* (1986) draws upon expectation theory and posits that when a culturally determined expectation is not fulfilled, a sort of "bump" occurs. In this sense, it might be useful to think of culture bumps as culturally driven cognitive dissonance. Archer's culture bump concept shares a number of similarities with Thorp's (1991) portrayal of a "confused encounter". Both cases involve foiled expectations. Whereas Thorp points out how unmet expectations tend to stir up negative emotions, Archer recognizes that culture bumps can have many emotional shades.

Culture Shock

Archer goes on to suggest that culture bumps are mild forms of culture shock which are ". . . over within a few minutes or even seconds" (p. 171) even though the cognitive shifts they trigger may persist for years. By contrast, culture shock is described by Archer as a state of persistent maladjustment. It seems the term "culture shock," at least as first popularized by Oberg (1954), denotes "the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (p. 1). The process has been described as a roller-coaster ride with several distinct stages. Interestingly, Oberg portrays culture shock as a condition of weakness to "get over" (p. 9).

Instead of regarding culture shock as inherently negative, I prefer to think of it as part of a lifelong accommodation. Particularly for those living abroad "culture shock" can be viewed as an ongoing process of adjusting to ever-changing environmental conditions. Indeed we might regard culture shock as an example of "creative destruction" (Cowen, 2004) in the sense that pre-existing expectations are shattered to accommodate new environmental shifts.

Criticality

A vast body of literature and sociological research has influenced how "critical incidents" are conceptualized. At the heart of this discourse is a vigilant questioning of the status quo. In many cases it also involves skepticism of absolutist or universal claims. In SA contexts, this means questioning the popular wisdom of Oberg's (1954) assertion that culture shock invariably progresses

through similar stages. In many cases, it also involves questioning the notions behind such concepts as "internationalization", "host family", or "studying abroad".

Critical theory represents a rich pool of 20th century thought that has contributed to such diverse discourses as feminism, liberation ideology, critical race theory, and some post-colonial writings. Even if one has never read Habermas, Hall, Lyotard, or Lacan directly, their influence is likely to be felt because many of their ideas are now part of mainstream academic rhetoric. In particular, the Umberto Eco's 1977, 1984, 1990 works on critical semiotics should not be underemphasized. Eco underscores how we are often limited in our ability to decipher meaning across culture and across time. He reminds us how cultural phenomena should be studied as forms of communication. In SA contexts, many extended pre-departure and post-return programs would be enriched by discussing the themes he raises. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed exposition of critical theory, however readers who have not already entered that ocean might enjoy Dino Franco Felluga's *Introductory guide to critical theory* (2011) as a starting point.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has shown how our understanding of "critical incidents" has evolved over time. Whereas Flanagan's notion of a "critical incident" is rooted in a behaviorist, technique-driven paradigm, many institutional notions of what constitutes a "critical incident" are informed by crisis intervention models. Those working in SA contexts will probably find Tripp's discussions of "critical incident" particularly useful because of pedagogical procedures he describes can readily applied to SA contexts. The next article in this series will consider practical issues of how teachers and SA chaperons respond to critical incidents.

One way to conclude this paper would be to imagine for a moment what a SA experience without any critical events might be like. In other words, can you envision going to another country yet somehow avoiding any unpleasant shocks, unexpected surprises, or significant miscommunications? For many, perhaps this would be a splendid tour to some a safe Club-Med or Disneylike destination in which all "foreignness" is carefully packaged and sanitized. Such a tour might afford relaxation and amusement, but it would be unlikely to foster any deep cross-cultural insights. Although some SA programs – particularly those for primary or secondary school students – attempt to create such scenarios, a perfectly safe, critical-incident-free SA program is not only unfeasible but also undesirable. The reason is that critical experiences, though often stressful at first, should be understood as necessary steps in the process of breaking down some of our limiting mindsets about host cultures and ourselves. Those organizing SA programs should not, in my opinion, seek to eliminate all unpleasant or stressful experiences – but simply to find an optimal "criticality threshold" for participants. To do this takes maturity, focus, and flexibility. While the possibility of being overwhelmed by too much stress in a foreign culture should to be acknowledged, the very real possibility of being underwhelmed in an overly protective or

excessively insulated SA program should be recognized as well.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Andrew Atkins, Joe Falout, Elaine Gilmour, Russ Hubert, and Jim Lassegard for their valuable feedback on this article.

References

- Archer, C. (1986). Culture bump and beyond. In J. M. Valdez, (Ed.) *Culture bound: Bridging the cultural gap in teaching*. (pp. 171- 178). London, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Mohr, L. A. (1994). Critical service encounters: The employee's view. *Journal of Marketing*, 58, 95-106.
- Blackwelder, N. L. (1995). *Critical Incident stress debriefing for school employees*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Dissertation Services. Retrieved January 29, 2011 from <http://www.safebus.org/NBDissertation.doc>
- Cantalupo, N. C. (2010). How should colleges and universities respond to peer sexual violence on campus? What the current legal environment tells us. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 3(1), 49-84. doi: 10.2202/1940-7882.1044
- Chell, E. (1998). Critical Incident Technique. In G. Symon & C. Cassell (Eds.). *Qualitative methods and analysis in organizational research: A practical guide*. (pp. 51-72). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cowen, T. (2004). *Creative destruction: How globalization is changing the world's cultures*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Critical. (2011). In *Weblio*. Retrieved February 11, 2011 from <http://ejje.weblio.jp/content/critical>
- Eco, U. (1977). *A theory of semiotics* (Critical social studies). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eco, U. (1984). *Semiotics and the philosophy of language* (Advances in Semiotics). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Eco, U. (1990). *A theory of semiotics* (Critical social studies). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Farrell, T. (2008) Critical incidents in ELT initial teacher training. *ELT Journal*, 62(1) 3-10. doi:10.1093/elt/ccm072
- Felluga, D. F. (2011). Introductory guide to critical theory. Retrieved February 2, 2011 from <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/>
- Fishkind, A. & Berlin, J. (2008). Structure and function of psychiatric emergency services. In R. Glick, J. Berlin, A. Fishkind, & S. Zeller, (Eds). *Emergency psychiatry: Principles and practice* (pp. 9-24). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51, 327-358.
- Gilmour, E. (2010). Welcome overseas. Retrieved February 18, 2011 from <http://web.me.com/elainecglmr/studyabroad/Intro.html>
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). *Theory and Resistance in Education*. Westport, CT.: Bergin and Garvey.

- Gremler, D. T. (2004). The critical incident technique in service research. *Journal of Service Research*, 7(1), 65-89.
doi: 10.1177/1094670504266138
- Hassan, E. (2009). Recall bias can be a threat to retrospective and prospective research designs. *The Internet Journal of Epidemiology*, 3 (2) n.p. Retrieved December 16, 2010 from http://www.ispub.com/journal/the_internet_journal_of_epidemiology/volume_3_number_2_12/article/recall_bias_can_be_a_threat_to_retrospective_and_prospective_research_designs.html
- Jiang, W. (2001) Handling 'culture bumps'. *ELT Journal*, 55(1), 55-61. doi: 10.1093/elt/55.4.382
- Laubscher, M. R. (1994). *Encounters with difference: Student perceptions of the role of out-of-class experiences in education abroad*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- London Deanery. (n.d.) Significant event or critical incident analysis. Retrieved April 7, 2010 from <http://www.faculty.londondeanery.ac.uk/e-learning/assessing-educational-needs/significant-event-or-critical-incident-analysis>
- Naidu, S., & Oliver, M. (1999). Critical incident-based computer supported collaborative learning. *Instructional Science*, 27, 329-354.
- Norman, I., Redfern, S., Tomalin, D., & Oliver, S. (1992). Developing Flanagan's critical incident technique to elicit indicators of high and low quality nursing care from patients and their nurses. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17 (5), 590-600. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.1992.tb02837.x
- Oberg, K. (1954, August 3). *Culture shock*. Presentation to the Women's Club of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, August 3, 1954. Retrieved December 12, 2010 from <http://www.smc.edu/academics/internationalel/pdf/cultureshockarticle.pdf>
- Pederson, P. J. (2009). Teaching toward an ethnorelative worldview through study abroad. *Intercultural Education*, 20, (1-2), 73-86. doi: 10.1080/14675980903370896
- Roberts, A. R. (2005). *Crisis intervention handbook: Assessment, treatment, and research*, 3rd edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press USA.
- Savicki, V., Adams, I., Wilde, A., & Binder, F. (2007). Intercultural development: Topics and sequences. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 15. 111-126.
- Thorp, D. (1991). Confused encounters: differing expectations in the EAP classroom. *ELT Journal*, 45(2), 108-118. doi: 10.1093/elt/45.2.108
- Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical incidents in teaching: Developing professional judgment*. London / New York: Routledge.
- University of Birmingham Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching Project (2006). Critical Incident Analysis. Retrieved February 3, 2011 from <http://www.prodait.org/resources/Critical%20Incident%20Analysis.doc>
- University of Sydney International Student Office. (2010, September 7). Protocol for Managing Critical Incidents Involving International Students at The University of Sydney. Retrieved November 15, 2010 from http://sydney.edu.au/internationaloffice/student/critical_incidents_protocol.shtml
- Urquhart, C., et al. (2003). Critical incident technique and explication interviewing in studies of information behavior. *Library and Information Science Research*, 25(1), 63 - 88.

Usability Professionals' Association, (2005). *Methods: Critical Incident Technique (CIT)*. Retrieved April 7, 2010 from <http://www.usabilitybok.org/methods/p2052?section=how-to>