Student-Generated Critical Incidents prior to Studying Abroad

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of having pre-departure study abroad students generate, as a preparotory measure, critical incidents based on experiences from their own lives. These critical incidents present instances of confusion or misunderstanding stemming from cultural or linguistic differences. The paper begins with an abbreviated overview of the history of critical incident usage, tracking a few relevant points in its fifty plus years of existence. This is followed by the procedure of gathering critical incidents from university students and applying them in activities designed to foster intercultural sensitivity. The paper concludes with a list of the basic categories that emerged from the class collection of critical incidents as well as an example of each and a brief commentary.

Introduction

For two consecutive years, I employed a three-phase class project designed to help university students develop intercultural sensitivity prior to studying abroad. The three phases are student creation of critical incidents that reflect some form of intercultural confusion; group discussion of those critical incidents; and individual analysis of a single critical incident. The purpose of the present paper is to describe the implementation of this critical incident project along with the rationale for doing so. To set the stage, I first touch on some points in the history of critical incident applications that are relevant to this paper. In addition, I discuss the meaning of intercultural sensitivity and contrast that with intercultural competence.

Critical incidents

Put simply, a critical incident is an account of an important moment, a vignette that is complete unto itself. Through reflection, discussion, and analysis, critical incidents can catalyze a deeper, clearer understanding of a situation, a job, or another culture, among many other aspects of the human experience. Flanagan first put forward the term *critical incident* in 1954 in his paper, "The Critical Incident Technique." The critical incident technique (CIT) is "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (327). Critical incidents have been used in a wide range of disciplines, including nursing, education and social work (Butterfield et al. 475.) to name a few. What he termed critical incidents were real-world accounts focusing on an important aspect of a given profession. The word *critical* referred to the significance of the behaviors reflected by these incidents, which were essential to success in the aspect of the work being described. Critical incidents could, according to Flanagan, describe an extremely positive occurrence or an extremely negative one.

He designed this technique to be used as a means of improving job performance. For instance, in 1944, Flanagan employed the CIT to identify helpful and harmful behaviors observed during combat. He asked combat veterans to report on both examples of effective and ineffective combat leadership. "Several thousand incidents were collected in this way and analyzed to provide a relatively objective and factual definition of effective combat leadership" (328). It is easy to see that such a "factual definition" of effective behavior, a composite of thousands of real-world experiences, would be useful for virtually any profession or task.

The focus of this paper is on using critical incidents to help university students prepare to study abroad, so from Flanagan's initial work on the CIT, we look to Triandis, who first applied the CIT to cross-cultural training with his development of cultural assimilators in the 1960s (Apedaile and Schill 7). A cultural assimilator is a training tool based around a group of carefully collected critical incidents. Each entry in the training tool comprises a critical incident; a set of four or five explanations for the confusion or puzzlement described in the incident, only one of which is accurate; and feedback for each explanation to be read if trainees select this particular one. It is important to point out that these are not simply interesting stories; rather the descriptions have accurate explanations of the cultural factors that prevented clear,

effective communication. Trainees using a cultural assimilator read the critical incidents and choose from among the explanations the one that most accurately describes the cause of the misunderstanding. If the trainee selects an incorrect answer, he or she will find questions and information that point toward the correct response (Fielder, Mitchell and Triandis 3-4).

The critical incidents themselves are authentic stories and experiences from cross-cultural encounters. Each incident is "refined" (Fielder, Mitchell and Triandis 5), to its essential form, stripped of names and unnecessary details. For each incident, four or five explanations are needed. One of these must be an accurate encapsulation of the cultural dynamic underlying the critical incident. For the creation of a culture assimilator, members of the target culture verify the sets of explanations. For example, if one were creating an assimilator for Americans preparing to work in China, it would be necessary to have members of the Chinese culture read the incidents and select the most accurate choice from among the explanations. This is the only method by which precision can be assured.

This process is labor intensive, as was Flanagan's CIT. As Fielder, Mitchell and Triandis note, "The time for preparing a 75- to 100-item program is estimated as approximately 800 manhours spread over nine months. This includes collection of items, writing the episodes and alternatives, and checking and revising alternatives and feedback information" (9). It is important to point out that for each pair of cultures, such as Canadian and Malaysian, two assimilators are required–one to train Canadians to interact with Malaysians and vice versa.

The type of assimilator described above is culture specific, meaning that a specific tool must be prepared for any possible combination of cultures. In 1986, Brislin, Cherrie and Yong introduced the culture general assimilator, which is based around one hundred critical incidents that address eighteen themes culled from cross-cultural training literature. According to Brislin and Pedersen, culture-general training "allow [s] one to learn about himself or herself as preparation for interaction in any culture" (qtd. in Bhawuk and Brislin 172). It is important here to underscore the words "in any culture." This means that a single instrument could be employed to help English speakers develop intercultural awareness and sensitivity prior to embarking on a trip anywhere in the world. This was of particular interest to me as the students in my class were preparing to go to a variety of countries, including Spain, China, Australia, Korea, and France. Having a method of helping students become more conscious about culture in general as well as the role their own feelings

and reactions can play when encountering cultural differences was essential for my purpose.

One major development in the history of critical incident usage, is found in the method by which the critical incidents are developed or gathered. For Flanagan, the collection of critical incidents was a scientific process. This held true for Triandis and his application of critical incidents in cultural assimilators as evidenced by the aforementioned labor-intensive process. More recently, the term "critical incident" seems to have come free of the need for a specific production or collection process. In the field of education, for instance, Tripp, in his 1993 book *Critical Incidents in Teaching: Developing Professional Judgement*, suggests that educators keep a file of critical incidents, a written record of classroom vignettes of significance for the teacher and his or her students. In the area of study abroad research, sojourners may be called upon to track their own critical incidents as they occur, and often they are asked to provide some reflection on the cause of the incidents.

Jackson, required her Chinese students studying in England to record their experiences using these instructions: "You will be required to keep a reflective diary in which you record your reactions to experiences in England that you found interesting, puzzling or otherwise significant. Entries about fears or expectations, rewarding or frustrating experiences or events, cultural observations, the 'English only' policy, your own cultural adjustment, your coping strategies, and/or any other thoughts and feelings you have during the sojourn will be useful" (184). She does not use the term "critical incident" in her instructions, but many of the examples from her students align with a basic definition of critical incidents, such as the following from Apedaile and Schill: "Critical incidents in intercultural communication training are brief descriptions of situations in which a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arises as a result of the cultural differences of the interacting parties, or a problem of cross-cultural adaptation and communication" (7). Jackson shares a report from one of her students who was unable to successfully communicate her concern about eating fish and chips too often. Another reported her sense that she had encountered discrimination at a travel agency. In both cases, students encountered challenges stemming from cultural differences.

What, then, is the common thread that runs through all of the iterations of the term "critical incident" in the last fifty plus years? It seems that critical incidents can be refined through a rigorous, systematic process of observation, interviews and verification, or, on the other hand, simply noticed in one's life and recorded. These

may be seen as the extremes of refinement, with Flanagan's process being highly refined and those recorded in a journal being much less so. These poles could also be described as objective and subjective. What these differing types have in common is the way in which they encapsulate a significant moment, with "significant" indicating that some learning takes place because of the incident described. Critical incidents are stories–simple stories even–that point to practical lessons. From the field of nursing, Keatinge suggested the term "revelatory incident" (qtd. in Butterfield 490) as an alternative. Perhaps this word change would provide more clarity than the original term, for these incidents have the potential to reveal important information about the performance of any task or professional role.

Background

In this paper, I present an application of critical incidents designed to help university students in Japan prepare to study abroad. Specifically, I hoped that by analyzing, discussing and writing about a variety of real-world intercultural misunderstandings, my students would become more interculturally sensitive, a term that I will discuss in more detail below. Furthermore, I hoped to demonstrate that even before going to study abroad, our class would be able to produce a wealth of thought-provoking cross-cultural stories. This was a bit of a risk, because, in fact, I was not absolutely certain it would be possible. The project, though, was a success, and I enjoyed distributing the full class collection of critical incidents to my students, who seemed proud of what they had produced as a group.

Participants were second-year university students in a first-semester class at a private univirsity in Tokyo, Japan. Each student would embark on a study-abroad trip during the following semester. These students prepared for their time abroad in a number of school-sanctioned activities, courses and events. For instance, all students took a course in which they read about and discussed aspects of Japanese culture in English. The intention here, of course, was that they would be ready to talk about their own country and culture while abroad. In addition, students took language courses; those going to Germany, took German courses. Those going to Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada or the United States took an additional English class aimed at helping students develop the skills they would need in their study-abroad host countries. Students also took a third type of course meant to foster cultural awareness. It was in this course that I implemented the project described in

this paper.

While engaged in this project–when talking with students or colleagues–I used the terms *intercultural sensitivity* and *intercultural competence* imprecisely. It is clear now that I had conflated these terms and tended to use them interchangeably. The distinction between sensitivity and competence is particularly significant for pre-departure study abroad students, who are poised between preparing to study abroad and stepping into a different culture. For Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), intercultural sensitivity refers to "sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures" (qtd. in Medina-Lopez). Looking back, I can say that this was the goal I had intended for my students.

Medina-Lopez-Portillo contrasts *intercultural sensitivity* with *intercultural competence*:

> It is important to distinguish between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. While they are not interchangeable terms, they can be understood as two sides of the same coin. Intercultural competence refers to the external behaviors that individuals manifest when operating in a foreign cultural context, where intercultural sensitivity refers to the developmental process that dictates the degree of an individual's psychological ability to deal with cultural differences. (180)

Analogies can be useful in understanding concepts. Humorously, perhaps, an apt analogy for these two terms is that of a safecracker in an old crime movie. These characters would often sandpaper their fingertips prior to the big job. This, of course, is meant to develop sensitivity so that when the tumblers of the safe lock clicked into place, the fingers would pick up the minute vibrations. This parallels the cultivation of intercultural sensitivity, preparing the human instrument to perceive cultural differences–even very subtle ones–and to know how to work with them to a positive effect. Now it is time to crack the safe; this is where the practitioner puts sensitivity to use. The safecracker opens the safe, and the sojourner navigates all manner of intercultural situations successfully.

Though my usage of these terms was imprecise, I believe my intentions were clear, and with the benefit of subsequent reading, I can state that I had hoped that the critical incident activity would help students cultivate intercultural sensitivity, which in turn would pave a way to the development of intercultural competence, the skillful application of awareness and knowledge.

Method

Prior to our critical incident activity, I established two focal points for our course, one that would ask students to look at their own home cultures and one that might nudge them toward higher intercultural sensitivity. On the first day of the class, I shared with students a quotation often attributed to Marshall Mcluhan: "I don't know who discovered water, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't a fish." This was meant as a suggestion that their home culture was often invisible to them because they live in it and may not have had a chance to see it from the outside. Later in the semester, I provided a short quotation from Hofestede and Pedersen: "The core of intercultural awareness is learning to separate observation from interpretation" (17). This set the stage for our work with critical incidents, for which we would create time to observe and interpret brief moments of confusion, to think about why they may have occurred and how we might extract and carry forward lessons from these conversations.

I gave students these instructions, indicating also that their stories would be shared with the entire class: *Please write a one-paragraph description of a situation in which there was some confusion caused by cultural factors. This should be something that actually happened rather than a made-up story. If you cannot think of something you experienced yourself, you may use an experience from a friend or sibling.*

Students sent their stories to me via email. I edited their writing to ensure clarity. In some cases, I removed names or other information that might identify the people involved. I then compiled the incidents in random order, labeling them "Case 1," Case 2," and so on. I did not indicate who had written the incidents. I devoted an entire ninety-minute class period to the discussion of critical incidents. On this day, I distributed a complete set of critical incidents to each student. Working in small groups, students discussed the critical incidents, using these guiding questions: *What caused this situation? Which cultural values are involved in this situation? What lessons can be learned from this? How could a similar situation be avoided in the future?* I asked students to take turns choosing from among the twenty critical incidents. For instance, one students might select case five. The group would discuss this incident for as long as they wished. Then the next student would choose another story. This process would continue until the end of the class. It was possible that a student's own story would be selected for discussion. I told them that if this happened, they could choose to tell their classmates they had written the incident or they could choose not

to reveal their authorship.

In addition to the group discussion, each student, as part of a final assignment, chose a single critical incident to analyze using concepts covered in our class or other classes, through personal intuition or additional research. My purpose in giving this assignment was threefold: First, I wanted students to revisit the collection of critical incidents. In order to choose one to analyze in their final papers, students would need to reread several, if not all, of the incidents. Second, I felt it was important to provide students the chance to develop their opinions individually after the group discussions. Third, these written reports would allow me to see how the students were thinking about the critical incidents and to look for indications of intercultural sensitivity.

What follows is a list of the types of critical incidents that emerged, each with example of the type and a brief comment meant to suggest some of the interesting features that may have come up in students' discussions and papers.

A personal homestay experience

When I was a high school student, I went to New Zealand; I stayed with a host family for two weeks. There, I often helped with household chores. When I first helped washing dishes, I was very surprised! At first, I washed the dishes. Usually, in Japan, we remove bubbles with water. However, my host mother did not do it. After washing the dishes, she put them in a basket and the bubbles disappeared naturally. I was shocked by this. I wondered whether it was safe and clean to eat something using these dishes? But, she said, "it is natural for us and we can use less water." It is a reasonable and eco-friendly activity. I agree with this custom. After all I became accustomed to using those dishes and did not think of them as dirty at all after a few days. However, when I came back to Japan, I told this story to my family and, they were also surprised and they said to me, "it is possible to take in harmful material. It is dangerous." I was confused and I could not decide which is right.

It is interesting to see the sojourner's comfort level with the New Zealanders' method of washing dishes change. First it appears strange to her. Next she begins to understand, accept and even appreciate the behavior. Then, upon returning to Japan and observing her family's reaction, she began to doubt its correctness.

A childhood experience abroad

When I was five years old, I went to Hawaii with my family on vacation. One day,

we went to a pool at the hotel and enjoyed swimming. Then, my sister suddenly floundered about in the water because she went out of her depth without knowing it. Because this situation was not so dangerous for her, my father was just looking and laughing. However, I realized that local people gave my father a look of contempt then. For them, to make this situation fun was looked at askance. Because for me this was just a pleasant time with my family, I still remember that I was little confused then.

This appears to have been a powerful experience. More than ten years later, this student recalls feeling confused. Moreover, she demonstrates insightfulness about the cause of the reaction in the "local people."

A personal experience in Japan

When I was a junior high school student, some foreign person asks me how to go to the station. Then I could not speak English well but I tried to give him directions. I think I had many mistake of my grammar. So at last I said 'maybe' after that. Then the foreign person was very perplexed. By saying "maybe," I meant, "I hope you can understand of my explanation." The foreign person thought he had a 50 percent chance of arriving at the station but also a 50 percent chance that he cannot arrive. Japanese people use 'maybe' very often, and that does not have a deep meaning. I felt it was part of Japanese culture at that time.

The writer of this incident nicely presents two interpretations of the word "maybe," that of the foreign visitor and his own intention. He goes on to point out that in Japanese the word "maybe" is used in a certain sense, which does not necessarily translate culturally.

My grandmother is Japanese; however, she grew up in China. She was living with her uncle who worked for the South Manchuria Railway Company during World War 2. She loves the Chinese culture, and she has many friends from China. Ms. Koh is one of them. She often visits my grandmother's home together with her husband. She is a very nice person. One day, she offered me boots. Her daughter had bought them, but they were too small for her, so she never wore them. So these shoes were as good as new. I was very happy because I wanted new boots for the upcoming winter. When she gave me the boots, she said: "Give me 10 yen" and smiled. I had no idea why she said that, so I was a little confused. She explained: "In my culture, it is considered not a good thing to give others something for free. That's why I asked you to give me some money, just ten yen". This incident helped me to understand that there are indeed cultural differences between Japan and China I wish to know more about the cultural values that influence

human behavior.

Though there was some confusion in this vignette, there was no hardship or discomfort; it was simply a step toward learning an interesting tradition from another culture.

A relative's experience

I will write about my father's story. It happened in France. Most Japanese don't expect a tip, and they don't pay a tip. However, in some countries, there is "tip culture". When my father went to France, he went to a restaurant to have lunch. Then he talked to waiter in English, but he answered in French. My father didn't understand it. However, after he paid a tip to the waiter, he started to speak English! It is not a kind of conflict, but he said he was confused. From this experience, we can know some waiters may change their attitude toward customers depending on whether the customer paid a tip or not. Another thing I have to notice is most Japanese tend to speak English when we meet foreigners, even if they are not English speakers.

Traveling from a country in which tipping is the norm to a country where it is not expected is certainly simpler than the reverse. In this, story we see an interesting interplay of language, money and culture, elements that all sojourners will encounter.

A friend's experience

This is my friend's experience. When he was a high school student, he was in the USA for a year as an exchange student. From his experience, he felt American culture is very different from Japanese culture. One day he went to a drug store. He found what he wanted immediately, and then he went up to the register and waited his turn. However, his turn didn't come easily, and he noticed the cashier was talking with a customer. After 5 minutes, his turn finally came, but the cashier began to talk with another cashier. So he was annoyed; however, the clerk didn't apologize to him for keeping him waiting. It seemed natural for American cashiers to enjoy talking with their customers. Therefore he thought clerks were equal to their customers in America because both of them are human. On the other hand, customers are very important like god in Japan, so clerk must apologize politely if they keep their customers waiting. So he was very surprised, but he understood the difference of culture.

The young man featured in this story demonstrates an ability to see a particular behavior from two perspectives, that of his own culture and that of what might be

called a neutral or more objective position, which allows him to appreciate what he observes.

Discussion

The goal of the critical incident project described here, and the goal of the course of which it was a part, was to help students develop intercultural sensitivity before studying abroad. Did students leave this experience with heightened intercultural sensitivity? Students' written analyses of selected critical incidents suggested a familiarity with a basic tenet of effective intercultural communication: being different is not bad or wrong. Here is an example from a student's final paper, in which she analyzed one of the critical incidents from our class collection:

I still could not know the background why that man [from a different culture] was not punctual but this does not mean he is lazy. This incident is important because it suggests that we should not determine other's personality [based] on cultural difference. When [encountering] such a situation, we should think and try to detect its background first.

Again, Medina-Lopez-Portillo states that "intercultural sensitivity refers to the developmental process that dictates the degree of an individual's psychological ability to deal with cultural differences" (180). Notice in the student's comment that she does not know the reason the man was not punctual; however, using the terms of Medina-Lopez-Portillo's definition, the student seems psychologically able to deal with cultural differences. This type of awareness was precisely what I had hoped students would be able to develop through the critical incident project. It is important to keep in mind the fact that all of the students in my class had chosen a university department devoted to the study of intercultural communication, meaning that many students had already begun to cultivate intercultural sensitivity. On the other hand, though, I learned through student feedback that many of them had never spoken with someone of their age from another country. Finally, the definition above refers to the degree of someone's ability, which is a reminder that everyone exists somewhere on a spectrum of intercultural sensitivity. As such, there is always the possibility to move forward from one's current position.

Conclusion

My goals for the usage of critical incidents in my class were modest. I felt strongly that students' simply going through the process in earnest would yield positive results. The process, again, comprised identifying and writing about an instance of confusion or misunderstanding caused by cultural or linguistic differences; discussing these incidents in small groups with the intention of extracting useful lessons; and writing an in-depth analysis of a single incident. By "positive results," I mean specifically that students would cultivate some measure of intercultural sensitivity: "sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures."

The critical incident project was not difficult to implement, and I was pleased with the results of each of the three phases. First, the critical incidents themselves were rich, interesting descriptions of intercultural exchanges. Second, students appeared enthusiastic and engaged as they discussed these critical incidents. Finally, students' written analyses of the critical incidents demonstrated an openness and flexibility toward cultural differences. I would recommend a project similar to the one described here to educators working with students who plan to study abroad or who simply want to explore the topic of intercultural communication.

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