



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

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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.

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 interpersonal change does not necessarily occur 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 are often described as *critical incidents*, can potentially change how SA participants handle unfamiliar experiences. This paper examines some ways critical incidents have been envisioned and suggests why they may be essential for SA programs to be 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. 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". 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).

In 1954 Flanagan developed a technique to identify critical incidents, using a retrospective interview procedure to pinpoint factors that influence the success/failure of desired outcomes. This procedure works best with tasks with well-defined target outcomes and 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 Flanagan's 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 consciously remembered (Hassan, 2009, par 3). This technique also depends on the willingness of informants to provide detailed, accurate narratives. In some case, there may be no incentives to offer detailed and accurate information – bogus information might offer better rewards. A final criticism of this technique is that raters 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. Another issue is practical: do most SA programs have the resources to conduct detailed ethnographic measurements of many participants? At least in Japan, many staff responsible for evaluating SA programs lack the time and expertise needed to conduct such evaluations.

Critical Incidents: A Crisis Models

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). School shootings are one example of a critical incident. Many large schools have specific response procedures for "critical incidents" because mishandled responses can not only 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 an incident involving multiple rape incidents by a male student (Cantalupo, 2010, p. 70-71). The university's lack of a timely, emphatic response to this crisis ended up costing them millions of dollars.

With large amounts of money and school 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, schools need to inform students how safety protocols vary in different cultures prior to departure. Without engendering obsessive paranoia, students should understand how activities that would seem "safe" in Tokyo might not be in 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.

Critical Incidents: Tripp's Descriptions

Drawing on the writings of Giroux (1983) and other pioneers of critical pedagogy, in 1993 David Tripp published *Critical incidents in teaching*. Basically, this text underscores the importance of constant self-monitoring and checking how well action and intentions are aligned. Tripp 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 routine to another. No doubt influenced by constructionist thought, Tripp maintains that events by themselves are neither "critical" nor "non-critical" – it is the *meaning* that participants attach to those events that determine that. To encourage teachers/learners to reflectively examine events, 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 critical incidents.

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 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. In my view, one of the roles of SA chaperons is to assist SA participants in reframing culture bumps as learning experiences.

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 a state of persistent maladjustment. Culture shocks have the potential to lead to insular withdrawal from the target culture and defensive stereotyping. On the other hand, as Avruch (1998) points out, if they are framed well, they also have the potential to lead to significant new breakthroughs in cross-cultural understanding.

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 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. Two such claims that are made about study abroad will one mentioned. One absolutist claim is that study abroad results in



improved language proficiency. However, Kinginger (2009) documents a number of counter-examples in which linguistic gains from SA were modest at best. Another absolutist claim that should be questioned is Oberg's (1954) assertion that culture shock invariably progresses through the same 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 in mainstream academic rhetoric. In particular, the Umberto Eco's 1977, 1984, 1990 works on critical semiotics should not be underemphasized. Eco underscores the difficulty in attempting to decipher meaning across cultures and across historical time spans. 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.

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.

I will conclude by asking readers to imagine what a SA experience without any critical events might be like. In other words, can you envision going to another country yet somehow avoiding all unpleasant shocks, unexpected surprises, or significant miscommunications? For many, perhaps this would be a splendid tour to Disneylike destination in which all "foreignness" is carefully packaged and sanitized. Such tours might afford relaxation and amusement, but they 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, I believe that 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.

Acknowledgements

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

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Ryūgaku: Explorations in Study Abroad, 4 (1) 11-18. (April 2011)

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[Revised April, 6 2016]

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