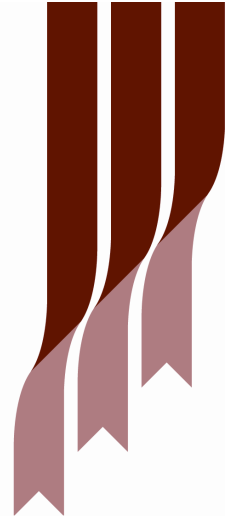# SCOTTISH INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

INTEGRATED ASSESSMENT

New Assessment Methods

Evaluation of an Innovative Method of Assessment:
Critical Incident Analysis
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Introduction

For many people, the term "assessment" is associated with tasks, which are less than inspiring, which are undertaken only because they are hurdles, which must be crossed in order to achieve some form of accreditation or to enable entry into work or a further course of study. In this worldview, what is important for the student is the final determination or grade assigned to their work. While *summative* assessment, in which students submit work that is marked by experts and which contributes partially or fully to a final grade, plays an important role in the lives of students and educators, contemporary thinking about "assessment" is much more expansive.

Notwithstanding the need to make summative judgements, contemporary educational theory stresses the need to provide constructive feedback to students, which facilitates student development and better equips them for undertaking the same or a similar task in the future. Formative feedback can also assist students to evaluate their progress and plan for future learning (Cree, 2000). While *formative* feedback can be provided alongside a summative determination on a piece of assessed work, more commonly formative assessment is considered to be that feedback provided to students prior to undertaking a summative assessment task (Boud, 2000). For social work students, while this may be in written form, is often provided verbally through conversations with tutors, practice teachers and from other students in classroom discussions.

There is also increasing recognition that the development of professional practice requires students to be able to critically appraise or assess their own work (Boud, 2000). Hence peer assessment and self assessment have been proposed as strategies for enhancing learning which fits with the development of reflective learning and critical thinking (eg Baldwin, 2000; Burgess, Baldwin, Dalrymple and Thomas, 1999; Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000). Further benefits include encouraging the process of life-long learning, and facilitating students to take specific responsibility for monitoring and making judgements about their own learning (Boud, 2000; Burgess *et al.*, 1999). However as students typically need considerable guidance to enable them to assess their own work or that completed by their peers, there may be a need for structured instruments to facilitate this (eg Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000).

A further development in thinking about assessment concerns the alignment of learning and assessment tasks (Biggs, 2003). Among educational theorists over the past couple of decades there has been considerable interest in, and development of, the idea that reflection on experiences can lead to crucial learning. Learning tasks, and therefore assessment tasks, which are most likely to achieve this result are those in which:

- Learners are actively engaged with a task which they accept is for learning (they are not simply following a prescription or set of rules, but are contributing their own thinking to the task).

- The task is constructed to allow significant elements of choice by the learners so that they can begin to own it and make it meaningful and worthwhile for them—it becomes a task which is not undertaken simply to satisfy the needs of the teacher.

- The event is not totally predictable to the participants and learners are prompted to notice what they did not expect.

- Learners' experience is challenged or confronted in some way which allows them to reassess their experience and the assumptions on which they are operating.

- Learners are obliged to intervene in some way in their own learning process; they have to make choices and follow the consequences of their choices.

- Learners are required to link what is new to them to their existing frameworks of understanding or confront the need to modify these frameworks.

(Boud and Knights, 1996: 28)

Within social work education, recent decades have also seen the development of a canon of literature on methods of assessing students that go beyond the more traditional essays and exams (Crisp and Green Lister, 2002). However, sometimes, these newer assessment methods which have been linked to the aim of enhancing reflective learning, seem to make quite burdensome demands on both students and their assessors (Crisp and Green Lister, 2002). One task which potentially encourages reflective learning and thinking across a range of domains, but need not be too onerous, is critical incident analysis.

What are critical incidents?

Critical incident analysis was first developed in order to understand pilot errors in flying aircraft (Flanagan, 1954) and subsequently used in researching safety in anaesthesia (Cooper, Newbower, Long and McPeek, 1978; Craig and Wilson, 1981). However, critical incidents need not involve a high risk or potentially dangerous situation, although some writers have suggested otherwise (eg Mills and Vine, 1990). Researchers have content analysed transcripts of interviews with social workers to gain insight into the cross-cultural misunderstandings they experience in their work (Legault, 1996). Similarly, analyses of written narratives of critical or problematic incidents have been used to understand how social work students develop their knowledge of practice (Nygren and Blom, 2001).

Despite a lack of consensus in the literature as to what critical incident analysis is (Minghella and Benson, 1995), perhaps the most influential writer on this topic in the past decade is David Tripp (1993) who notes that:

> The vast majority of critical incidents, however, are not at all dramatic or obvious: they are straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis.

(Tripp, 1993: 24-25)

There is generally also some element of surprise (Chesney, 1996). However, it is not always essential that those for whom an incident is critical are active participants in the process. Nor need the interaction be lengthy. Descriptions of the actual event

are often a few sentences, totalling under one hundred words (Legault, 1996). In some contexts, the process of critical incident analysis may be somewhat akin to deconstructing a 30 second television advertisement and finding much deeper meaning beneath the surface images (Jayasankar and Monteiro, 2000).

Interestingly, when given a choice between reporting on an incident where things went surprisingly well or surprisingly badly, participants in one study all chose to report on the latter (Kuit, Reay and Freeman., 2001). It would therefore seem important, to take the approach of Davies and Kinloch (2000) who provided students on a practice learning placement with a range of scenarios and asked them to select one that was significant to them in the previous week to discuss in supervision:

1. When you felt you had done something well…
2. When you made the wrong decision…
3. When something went better than expected…
4. When you lacked confidence…
5. When you made a mistake…
6. When you really enjoyed working with someone/ a group…
7. When you had a feeling of pressure…
8. When you found it difficult to accept or value a service user(s)…
9. When you realised you did not know enough…
10. When you felt unsupported…
11. When you were worried about a service user(s)…
12. When you took a risk and it paid/ didn't pay off…

(Davies and Kinloch, 2000: 140)

Critical incident analysis to enhance student learning

Whereas researchers are concerned with analyzing the meaning that their respondents ascribe to events, educators have used critical incidents as a method for developing learning in a range of professional disciplines including nursing (Burgum and Bridge, 1997; Parker, Webb and D'Souza, 1995), education (Kuit et al., 2001) and social work (Mills and Vine, 1990), in both undergraduate (Parker et al., 1995) and postgraduate (Tripp, 1993) courses, and in continuing professional education (Kuit et al., 2001; Mills and Vine, 1990). Typically this involves students both describing and going on to reflect and analyse the incident and identify the learning that has arisen from them as a result of this (Tripp, 1993). Nevertheless, the skills of the researchers could be applied by students to develop their understanding. For example, Nygren and Blom (2001) describe three types of codes which they applied to each incident which students in their sample had written about. These related to what happened, who or what was involved, and what reflection was occurring. One could readily imagine a situation where students are asked to present a written narrative, and then asked to underline various bits of text with different coloured pencils to show what was description and what was the student's analysis of the

situation, with presumably some indication as to what balance of these elements was expected.

Many educators require a more structured approach from their students in reporting on critical incidents (Ghaye and Lillyman, 1997). While any incident in education or professional practice may potentially be a critical learning experience for a student, students may be directed to submit critical incidents for assessment which pertain to particular aspects of practice. For example, undergraduate nursing students at the University of Greenwich are asked to identify critical incidents about communication which occur during their clinical experience:

> The aim is to pick out examples of interaction between student and client or between some any members of the interdisciplinary team. These incidents should in some way seem important to the students, either provoking admiration, anxiety or disapproval – in other words examples of good or poor communication, or where the student encountered difficulty or 'got out of their depth'.

> (Rich and Parker, 1995)

These critical incidents were written up under the following headings:

- An account of the incident;

- My feelings having witnessed/ experienced the incident;

- Process of communication and appropriateness of interactions;

- 'Actors' (other persons involved) views of the situation;

- What I have learnt from this critical incident. (Parker et al., 1995)

Critical incident analysis also has potential application for classroom based aspects of the curriculum. For example, understanding the critical events in people's lives can lead to greater understanding of the life experiences of others, especially those from people from other racial groups. Therefore, in one American course in cross-cultural social work, students interview someone from a different racial group about the critical incidents in their lives which influenced ethnoracial identity and write a report of their findings. This method of assessment has received positive feedback from participating students (Montalvo, 1999).

Critical incident analyses can be a stand alone piece of assessment in the form of a lengthy structured essay (James, undated-a; undated-b). Alternately, if the format is very short and structured, students may be required to submit several critical incidents to demonstrate their learning in a practicum. For example, students on a 14 week practicum as part of a midwifery programme were required to report on at least 12 critical incidents that occurred during this time (Burgum and Bridge, 1997) but the written documentation of critical incidents may be around 300 words of less (Ghaye and Lillyman, 1997). Critical incidents may also form one element of a multi-faceted portfolio which demonstrates student learning.

The experience of writing critical incident analyses is not necessarily one that students, even postgraduates, find easy. One student describes the experience as follows:

> Initially I found working through an incident critically both difficult and time consuming. It was difficult because I had to consider and rationalize, in addition to

my own, the actions and outcomes of the other participants involved in the incident. This was something I had not previously commonly practiced. I also found searching for a 'critical incident' within my professional practice difficult. It was after several weeks of examining one's own practice, in addition to conversing with my lecturer, I became confident in addressing incidents. The focus of my assessment of an incident as changed from "I" to one of "us". I now question what is actually going on within an incident; what processes are at work within the incidents … It has also enabled me to examine my role within the incident and develop strategies to prepare and equip myself to deal with further incidents.

<div align="right">(Burgum and Bridge, 1997)</div>

When a group of mental health nursing students met to discuss critical incidents nine times over an 18 month period, several recurrent themes emerged from the group. This included role conflict, sexuality, suicide/ deliberate self-harm, feelings of incompetence and inadequacy, lack of assertiveness, power, student status, communication with staff and clients, and questioning the approach to mental health care (Minghella and Benson, 1995). Yet, even if the types of incidents do not change, student's abilities to reflect and analyse critical incidents improve over time if they do several critical incident analyses (Minghella and Benson, 1995). Furthermore, it might be expected that this repeated process would lead to students becoming more able to apply theory to practice situations and to becoming an evidence-based practitioner (Ghaye and Lillyman, 1997).

Another role for critical incident analysis is as a formative assessment tool, especially for students involved in some form of supervised practice learning (Burgum and Bridge, 1997; Butler and Elliott, 1985). Students may have only limited access to their professional and academic supervisors and without defined structures may result in interactions with supervisors which do little to stimulate student learning (Crisp and Cooper, 1998). Requiring students to present a critical incident analysis, which they have begun to reflect on, may be encourage more effective use of supervision to stimulate student learning and encourage feedback from supervisors on this. To this end, Davies and Kinloch (2000) have encouraged students to make brief notes in relation to a critical on the following ten points, prior to discussing it supervision.

1. Describe the event; what happened, where and when; who was involved.

2. Put this event in its context, e.g. what had happened previously; what you had achieved/ tried to achieve and your relationships with those involved.

3. What was your role in the event, e.g. as participant, observer, co-worker.

4. What was the purpose and focus of your intervention at this point?

5. What did you think and feel about what you were doing at the time?

6. Did it remind you of any previous experience or learning?

7. As you look back, what do you think and feel about the outcome?

8. What have you learned, e.g. about yourself, relationships with others, the social work task, organizational policies, and procedures?

9. Are there things that you might do differently in future? What might help you achieve this?

10. What issues arose out of this reflection will you take to supervision?

<div align="right">(Davies and Kinloch, 2000: 141)</div>

Feedback may also come from peers. For example, part of a staff development programme at the University of Sunderland involved lecturers discussing a critical incident in their teaching with a colleague, comparing their initial assumptions with what actually happened. After reflecting on this dysjunction with a peer, participants were then encouraged to develop a new set of assumptions, which might result in needing to work differently with students in the future (Kuit et al., 2001).

Notwithstanding the potential of critical incident analysis as a method of assessment which facilitates reflective learning, it is not entirely unproblematic. Rich and Parker (1995) have raised questions as to what responsibility students and their lecturers have in reporting unethical behaviour revealed in critical incidents to the relevant professional authorities. Students may not even be aware that what they are reporting is poor practice (Minghella and Benson, 1995). A duty of care needs also to be extended to students for whom some critical incidents the observe in practice may result in them recalling painful and unresolved conflicts in their own lives (Rich and Parker, 1995) and fearing the implications of disclosing these (Farrington, 1993).

This report to the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE) provides information on two demonstration projects exploring the use of critical incident analysis in the assessment of students in qualifying social work programmes. The first of these is in a practice learning setting and the second in a classroom based subject.

Critical Incident Analysis in Practice Learning

We are aware of two distinct ways in which critical incident analysis has been used in the assessment of practice learning undertaken by social work students. The first of these involves practice teachers using students' critical incidents to structure supervision sessions and hence formative feedback to students in the midst of their practice learning (Kinloch and Davies, 2000). The second, which has been adopted by a number of Australian schools of social work, requires students to submit a written critical incident analysis to university tutors about an incident which occurred during their practice learning. These tend to be of essay length and form part of the requirements for summative assessment of a placement (Monash University, undated). As such, they are briefer and more contained pieces than the practice studies UK DipSW students were required to undertake (CCETSW, 1995). For example, the critical incident analysis paper which final year social work students at Monash University are required to submit is 1,500 words long and students are strongly encouraged to write about a particular incident rather than a case or general situation. By contrast, final year social work students in the West of Scotland Consortium DipSW have been required to write a 7,000 word Integrated Practice Study looking at numerous aspects of work on a single case.

The demonstration project which is described below sought to explore the potential of critical incident analysis in contributing to both formative and summative assessment of social work students undertaking practice learning in Scotland.

Critical incident analysis framework

A critical incident analysis framework was devised taking account of existing literature on both critical incident analyses and the new requirements for social work graduates in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003). This involved developing a) a structured pro-forma, and b) an introduction to the task, including definitions of critical incidents and the expectations of students in engaging in critical incident analyses.

As the students who were trialling the critical incident analysis framework were enrolled in the West of Scotland Consortium for Education and Training in Social Work DipSW programme, their specific learning objectives were also incorporated.

Development of a structured pro-forma

A structured pro-forma was developed as a framework for analyzing critical incidents which arise during a programme of social work education, including practice learning.

It was noted that even within supervised practice learning course modules there may be a range of situations from which critical incidents arise, and that not all of these may involve the student in some form of direct social work practice. To encourage regular use of the framework, a brief set of core items which students should use in the analysis of all critical incidents was identified, along with an extended set of optional questions, for further reflection, some of which may not be applicable to all critical incidents in a student's learning. The optional questions might relate to specific learning outcomes for different parts of a programme of social work education, with the optional questions below being based on learning outcomes for a particular module, in this case, Direct Practice II. This process yielded a total of 17 questions which could be asked about a critical incident.

Core questions for all critical incidents

1. Description of incident; what happened, where and when; who was involved?

2. What was your role/ involvement in the incident?

3. What were your thoughts and feelings at the time of this incident?

4. What were the responses to other key individuals to this incident? If not known, what do you think these might have been?

5. What have you learned, e.g. about yourself, relationships with others, the social work task, organizational policies, and procedures?

6. Are there ways in which this learning has led (or might lead to) changes in how you think, feel or act in particular situations?

7. What future learning needs have you identified as a result of this incident? How might this be achieved?

8. What are your thoughts and feelings now about this incident?

Additional questions for critical incidents involving participation in or observation of direct practice

9. What was the context of this incident, e.g. previous involvement of yourself or other from this agency with this client/ client group?

10. What was the purpose and focus of your contact/ intervention at this point?

11. What practice dilemmas were identified as a result of this incident?

12. *What were the outcomes of this incident for the various participants?

Optional additional questions [the following relate to the learning outcomes of DPII]

13. What are the values and ethical issues which are highlighted by this incident?

14. What theory (or theories) has (or might have) helped develop your understanding about some aspect of this incident?

15. What research has (or might have) helped develop your understanding about some aspect of this incident?

16. How might an understanding of the legislative, organizational and policy contexts explain some aspects associated with this incident?

17. Are there implications for inter-disciplinary and/ or inter-agency collaborations which you have identified as a result of this incident?

On subsequent reflection, we decided that a pro-forma with 17 questions was too cumbersome. Further work then saw these 17 points distilled into five key questions, each of which included a number of optional bullet points which students could consider according to circumstances. These were as follows:

1. Account of the incident
- What happened, where and when; who was involved?
- What was your role/ involvement in the incident?
- What was the context of this incident, e.g. previous involvement of yourself or other from this agency with this client/ client group?
- What was the purpose and focus of your contact/ intervention at this point?

2. Initial responses to the incident
- What were your thoughts and feelings at the time of this incident?
- What were the responses of other key individuals to this incident? If not known, what do you think these might have been?

3. Issues and dilemmas highlighted by this incident
- What practice dilemmas were identified as a result of this incident?
- What are the values and ethical issues which are highlighted by this incident?
- Are there implications for inter-disciplinary and/ or inter-agency collaborations which you have identified as a result of this incident?

4. Learning
- What have you learned, e.g. about yourself, relationships with others, the social work task, organizational policies, and procedures?
- What theory (or theories) has (or might have) helped develop your understanding about some aspect of this incident?
- What research has (or might have) helped develop your understanding about some aspect of this incident?
- How might an understanding of the legislative, organizational and policy contexts explain some aspects associated with this incident?
- What future learning needs have you identified as a result of this incident? How might this be achieved?

5. Outcomes
- What were the outcomes of this incident for the various participants?
- Are there ways in which this incident has led (or might lead to) changes in how you think, feel or act in particular situations?
- What are your thoughts and feelings now about this incident?

The pro-forma which includes these questions is reproduced in Appendix A.

Introduction to the task

Drawing on the literature presented in the first part of this report, 'critical incidents' were defined as follows:

> Critical incidents are those which cause us to think and reflect, which leads to learning about ourselves or others (individuals and organisations) or about processes (e.g. about learning to be a social worker, the social work task or organizational policies and procedures). Most critical incidents are not at all dramatic or obvious but commonplace events that occur routinely in social work education and/or professional practice. What makes them 'critical' is that they've caused us to think and reflect at this particular time. This could include any of the following situations:
>
> • When you felt you had done something well…
>
> • When you made the wrong decision…
>
> • When something went better than expected…
>
> • When you lacked confidence…
>
> • When you made a mistake…
>
> • When you really enjoyed working with someone/ a group…
>
> • When you had a feeling of pressure…
>
> • When you found it difficult to accept or value a service user(s)…
>
> • When you realised you did not know enough…
>
> • When you felt unsupported…
>
> • When you were worried about a service user(s)…
>
> • When you took a risk and it paid/ didn't pay off…
>
> However, you don't have to have been an active participant in a critical incident. It's okay if you were an observer to some action. Or it may not even be a piece of action but something you've seen written or picture or something else you've noticed.

In addition to defining what a critical incident is, some guidance as to how the framework might be used was thought to be necessary:

> Once you've identified a critical incident, you should try answering each of the questions on the critical incident analysis proforma, taking into account that some of the bullet points might not apply to all incidents. For some incidents, you might write just a couple of sentences or even just a few words. However, for some incidents, especially those which might contribute to your final report or IPS, you might want to undertake a much more detailed analysis. Some of your critical incident analyses might contribute to the portfolio of evidence which you will be developing over this placement.
>
> You are encouraged to use the critical incident framework on a regular basis, perhaps once a week prior to supervision. Over the course of the placement,

you should look to analyse a range of incidents which reflect different domains of learning, e.g. about methods of intervention, social work theories, anti-oppressive practice, organisations, legislation and policy frameworks, and the relationship between research and practice.

The full instructions provided to students are reproduced in Appendix B.

Demonstration Project

A demonstration project exploring the use of critical incident analyses was developed jointly by the authors from the Glasgow School of Social Work and staff from the newly developed South Lanarkshire Practice Learning Centre (PLC). The PLC plans include providing innovative placements to social work students in an effective learning environment. Staff at the PLC are interested in moving beyond the traditional paradigms of placement provision for social work students, and using an evidence based approach are trialling innovative models of placement provision including use of group supervision and peer supervision. The potential of critical incident analysis to contribute to both formative and summative assessment was identified.

Ten Fast Track postgraduate DipSW social work students from the University of Glasgow undertook their Direct Practice II (DPII) placement with the PLC between 1 June and 8 October 2004. As students who are enrolled in the West of Scotland Consortium for Education and Training in Social Work Diploma in Social Work programme, the summative assessments were fixed (placement report demonstrating required competences and an integrated assessment study (IPS)). However, although it was not possible to include critical incident analyses in the formal summative requirements for these students, it was considered that critical incident analyses may be used by students to inform the pieces of writing which they would submit as assessable work associated with this placement. We were also interested in exploring the use of critical incident analysis as a method of formative assessment and for structuring supervision sessions, whether on an individual or group basis.

All students and their practice teachers were invited to a workshop at the PLC one week after the 80 day placement commenced. This workshop was jointly convened by the co-ordinator of the PLC (who was also practice teacher for five of the students) and by the authors. The concept of critical incident analysis and the framework were introduced and discussed by those present for about 40 minutes. Participants were all provided with a number of copies of the critical incident proforma and with copies of the instruction sheet. Student participants were also given a copy of the pro-forma on a computer disk as a Microsoft Word file. The next phase of the workshop involved students and practice teachers working by themselves for about 20 minutes to begin completing a critical incident proforma. For the remaining hour, the authors met separately with groups of students and practice teachers both to a) trouble shoot any issues which had emerged with the proformas and instructions and b) to gauge their thoughts and feelings about the process.

Midway through and after the end of the placement, the students were interviewed individually in brief semi-structured interviews about their use of critical incident analysis during their placement (eg to prepare for supervision, to support writing of

placement reports) and their thoughts as to the acceptability of the process if adopted for formal summative assessment.

Follow up interviews were also conducted with the two practice teachers who had worked with more than one student involved in the study. These two practice teachers had between them been involved with six of the 10 students. Additional comments from practice teachers in respect of critical incident analysis were sourced from final reports which they had submitted as part of the assessment process for DPII.

Student perspectives at the commencement of placement

Nine students participated in the focus group which lasted for 1 hour. In the focus group students were asked to:

- Provide initial thoughts on the critical incident framework.

- Comment on the potential for use in supervision.

- Comment on the potential difficulties.

- Comment on its use as a potential assessment tool.

Student's initial thoughts on the critical incident framework

All students agreed that the critical incident analysis framework might be a helpful tool and, in general, students appeared positive about its introduction. For some students, the structured approach was appealing:

> I really like it – it's really structured…a small number of questions.

> It is really good to make you reflect – it is quite hard for me to reflect…there is each wee section to think about.

A number of students commented on what they saw as the potential for critical incident analysis to assist them in breaking down incidents for reflection:

> There is a focus on smaller issues instead of downplaying them. It may be better.

> A lot of learning comes out of incidents…after two or three incidents something just sort of clicks.

> Doing a few for the same case may demonstrate how attitudes have changed over time.

A number of students compared critical incident analysis to other reflective exercises they had used during their previous experience of practice learning:

It's similar to other reflective exercises I had on my last practice placement. They really helped, but were very time consuming…[this is] more about one piece of work…focusing on one incident may be better.

I couldn't do the reflective diary, write up what happened. I could do the why but not the how. I might be better with the framework…It may help with the learning objectives of DPII…this is incident by incident rather than a case.

There were mixed views on the ease of use of the framework, and students identified a number of possible issues that may surround its application:

I'm not sure how useful it would be for an IPS – this seems quite focused and critical…not as theory based. I'm wondering about its use.

In particular, a number of students were concerned that the narrow focus of critical incident analyses may lead to 'dangers of fragmentation:

If it is embedded in a big piece of work it may be difficult to pick out significant incidents.

It might be good for one incident, but not for a whole case…the linkages may be problematic…its not ok for a long incident.

It seems to take the focus off the whole process. It is more focussed on one incident.

First use of the critical incident analysis framework

As the students had just had an opportunity to write a brief critical incident analysis during the workshop, they were asked about this initial experience of using the framework. All students had written about something that had occurred on placement. While some had struggled to identify and incident which they considered to be significant enough to reflect on, others found identification of incidents relatively easy:

I found it quite easy to have to think of an incident where I've had strong feelings about an event.

You can make the incident fit with the framework…if you think it is significant…there is an element of flexibility.

There were mixed views on using the framework to write about more personal experiences, with students commenting that critical incident analysis "would be easier to use with placements" than other parts of their social work programme. Other students spoke of the perceived difficulties in using critical incident analysis for 'non-practice' incidents.

Another difficulty about which students commented was a tendency for negativity that may emerge during the reflective process:

I did it on the workshop, it brought out the negative aspects… I don't know if we are going to be the right people for this.

One problem with reflection is that you tend to show, sway towards the negative and play down the positive, whereas this encourages the use of the positive.

Difficulties/ potential difficulties with the critical incident analysis framework

It had been suggested to students that the critical incident framework may be a tool for reflection they use on a weekly basis. Hence within the group, issues regarding the time and workload emerged as a key concern relating to the use of the framework:

> Time…if we get time to do it.

> It seems to cover the same ground as the reflective diary… There is not always enough time to thing about it fully.

Conversely, some students suggested that the framework may make the process of reflection more efficient:

> Even if you didn't get time you need to retain the information and remember to make the time to do it…and it does help.

> You can answer it with the bullet points…it makes it quicker too.

However, there was no general agreement amongst the students about the structure of the framework and students had different views on the helpfulness or otherwise of narrative and bullet point structures. While one student would have preferred the framework to have had more questions:

> There could be more questions instead of less questions, enabling students to pick and choose. Headings is not enough…there might be better, different ways.

Others perceived problems in expanding the framework:

> More questions might be overwhelming …I think it may take ages.

> The problem with questions is that you feel obliged to give answers – maybe there should be no questions or even prompting – it may be easier to apply. It points in a structure that may be useful for some people but where asked questions you feel obliged to write a narrative rather than be more flexible.

Is critical incident analysis useful as preparation for supervision?

There was general agreement amongst the students that critical incident analysis would be a useful preparatory tool for supervision sessions, especially in the identification of issues which students wished to raise with their practice teachers:

> Sometimes I find it difficult to make time…to remember in supervision. This may make it easier to articulate.

Students views on the critical incident analysis as an assessment tool

The group expressed mixed views on the general application of critical incident analysis as an assessment tool. Some students were very positive about the potential of the framework. For example:

> It is very useful. It allows us to focus on pieces of work that have been very positive for us and continuously build up a good stack.

One student commented that it marked an improvement on previous diversity in placement assessments noting "There is value in uniformity in assessment". However, other students referred to previously expressed concerns regarding time and workload, and noted that this may impact on the potential of the framework as a structured assessment tool. Overall, there was an issue about overloading the students:

> The fourth part about learning – you can't do that totally offhand, you need to use research and literature and other stuff… It is good for supervision and IPS, but time is a key issue.

> We need some time allocated to look at the Internet and look at the research…we need time to look at the tool properly.

> It's size – depending on the incident and depending on what happened you could write forever – you could use it as a tool for yourself…you could give it then to your practice teacher before supervision if possible – how is it expected that it will be used?

> There is peer supervision and other innovations being introduced…its time again… At the moment every second is mapped out…Every week – maybe bi-weekly would be better. Weekly is maybe too many. Sometimes you can discuss some issues for a long time.

Despite the fact that the definition of critical incidents which had been provided to students was very broad, and could include observations and not necessarily be practice oriented, one student expressed concern that "some incidents may be missed out because they don't fit the framework".

Student perspectives at the midway point of placement

Eight students participated in the interviews which lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. These interviews were conducted five weeks after the initial interviews, close to the midway point of the placement. All of the students had completed at least one critical incident analysis and they were asked to discuss either their most recently completed critical incident analysis, or another recently completed on if they did not wish to discuss the most recent one they had completed. In respect of this piece of work, the students were asked to comment on:

• the process of using the framework;

- advantages and disadvantages;

- its use in supervision;

- feedback on critical incident analysis specifically with regard to formative assessment; and

- plans to use critical incident analyses in final summative assessment.

Student descriptions of most recently completed critical incident analysis

Students had applied the critical incident analysis framework to a range of incidents and were invited to speak about the most recently completed critical incident analysis. Whilst the individual incidents differed, the students interviewed had primarily applied the framework to practice situations. One student for example, had written a critical incident analysis focusing on her thoughts relating to a home visit, where she had visited the home of a client and the neighbours' house had a display of Union Jacks:

> I assumed it was a young person, but talking to the client I fount that the woman was the same age as the client…I used the framework to consider my assumptions…I wrote about questioning assumptions…my own values.

Some other situations to which students had applied the critical incident analysis framework included the following examples:

> I'd been to speak to a guidance teacher about a young boy…his mother had mental health problems…the main issues were about confidentiality…information sharing…. the problems were common knowledge amongst social work staff and other staff…. It got to the point where I realised I knew more than he did. I decided not to share the information and it made me realise…I'd never worked in childcare before.

> I've written about something that happened during practice…about an incident where I went out and the first thing the children said to me was 'Do you take little boys away…' then 'Do you take big boys away?' …it was coming from their dad. I felt it would raise anxiety...The outcome was to try and sustain the relationship… I was open with him… I wrote about attitudes…generationally transmitted perceptions of social workers… I wrote about principles of minimum intervention and about social workers being agents of the state.

> It was about someone doing a project…a health control group…how social work is different to health…we were all stunned at the use of the control group. It is so different to social work.

The process of using the framework

A number of students remarked on the fact that using the critical incident analysis framework was a somewhat different process to previous experiences of reflective writing either in journals or in writing extended case studies:

> This framework is different…in my previous experience just wrote an account for all areas…I spent a good bit of time on each one…It is interesting worthwhile…but different…I would want more time in writing if I used it on cases.

In particular, the framework imposes a structure which may encourage students to ask questions which they would not have considered unprompted:

> The prompts within it make you think about your initial response.

> You reflect…you ask questions you wouldn't ask yourself…It makes you think. It is good for me because I am not really any good at reflection.

> There were things I had missed and not analysed and things you don't think about – you take them as read…then you think about it while you are writing it.

> [The framework] is not structured in the way I would normally think about things…It deals with emotions in a sense and imposes a structure…it is a useful thing…it puts it in a different way.

While some students had used the questions in the framework to stimulate longer pieces of reflective writing, more commonly students tended to report working through each section of the proforma, answering those questions which they felt able to:

> I went through it from beginning to end. I looked at each subsection.

> I used the bullet points…it wasn't easy [to use]...it was complex…[but] at the end of the process it became useful.

> [Working through the framework] I answered some of the questions earlier…some of them I couldn't think about anything related to the incident…there was not really any theory…it was based on discussion with the practice teacher and my perceptions.

Relatedly, some students commented that they felt 'un-used' to using the framework and it may take some practice to get used to:

> Because I have only done two I am not used to it yet.

> If you don't get to write about it straight away you forget about it. You need to note it…you need to be able to have the time to use it…. The only thing is that it is quite time consuming. You find you need to get into the habit of using it.

Other students referred to the way in which critical incident analysis in some respects, seemed to influence the structure of their work, especially those who had a practice teacher who expected them to produce one critical incident analysis a week:

> In some ways it was contrived you know you get home and you have got a critical incident analysis to do about your thoughts and feelings…you know you need to identify a critical incident.

Yet others found this discipline to be beneficial:

> The routine of submitting one analysis per week helped me focus on being both reflective and critical.

Concerns relating to the time required to complete a critical incident analysis were expressed by a number of students:

> It's time consuming but it is about getting used to it…the advantages outweigh that.

> There is difficulty in the day trying to find the time to complete the critical incident analysis.

This was particularly an issue for students for whom the framework had stimulated some extended pieces of writing:

> It did start to get tedious. I wrote a lot in each section it was like a mini essay every week. It isn't sustainable throughout a placement. I felt it started to get contrived as I was finding something to write about.

> It depends on how deeply you engage in it. You could write pages…You could think about anything it is widely applicable. There are time constraints.

Not all students were convinced that the critical incident analysis framework was helpful for their learning. One student had used the framework in the first few weeks of placement but had recently stopped using it as work had built up both with regard to practice and practice related academic work. The time consuming nature and the limits of the framework were cited as reasons. Another student suggested that the framework might be a more useful tool in the first placement when students were being introduced to reflective writing. While this student had completed a number of critical incident analyses, they stated that they preferred using a reflective diary or to write case studies to aid reflection in the second placement.

Use of critical incident analysis in supervision

All students had used the framework as a focus for discussion and feedback, and those students who had received formal supervision had discussed at least on critical incident with their practice teacher. In general, the students felt that critical incident analyses were a useful tool for discussion, feedback and supervision. They described their experiences as follows:

> I took it to my supervision [my practice teacher] talked about how you can't take assumptions, your own values into practice.

> I talked about it in supervision. My practice teacher had read it in advance…It helped me get more out of the supervision session…He had a structured response…it was more formal…you take it more seriously.

One student whose previous experiences of structured supervision prior to this placement as had been "not great…I have got a great deal from informal supervision…placement and supervision" noted that using the critical incident framework had helped overcome this problem:

> In the last supervision [we] chatted about it. It was a productive experience. Something that has come up. Particular themes that relate to my personality and how I deal with things. It is something that comes up repeatedly. I need to look at it in more detail. The procedure…makes for a productive supervision…[and] feedback… My style…my way of thinking is something that has been flagged up…[as] areas to address.

Ongoing use of critical incident analysis seemed more likely among students whose practice teachers found it to be a helpful tool. However, enthusiasm by practice teachers should not necessarily be equated with a good understanding as to what the process involves. One student had had concerns that the practice teacher did not understand the purpose of them, recounting that, following discussion, the practice teacher wanted the student to change the narrative written in the framework, rather than "keep the original thoughts" there. As another student noted "I think practice teachers are finding their feet with it as well".

Student plans to use the framework/ critical incident analysis as part of a formal assessment/ report

Related to the use of the framework in supervision is the issue of summative assessment tasks. Student feedback above suggests that, at this stage in the placement, the framework was used as primarily a learning and teaching learning tool. Feedback given from peers and practice teachers in relation to critical incidents was a valuable source of formative assessment for a few students.

Two students felt that the time consuming nature of completing the assessment would be less worrying if the critical incident analyses they were producing were formally assessed:

> I wrote a lot for each section so it was like a mini essay every week If the portfolio was actually marked it would seem more worthwhile as the placement goes on

> Because it is not formally assessed it is difficult to think about…it is difficult to work it in.

Nevertheless, several students envisaged using some analyses to inform the summative assessable assignments of the practice study and interim report. They differed in how they would approach this. One student intended to attach two analyses as an appendix to a report. Some others were planning on including selections from their critical incident analyses in their final reports and practice studies:

> I would use my incident in the report, but I am not sure about how it will really fit in…if it is going into the portfolio thing it would be a good idea to get into it to take the pressure off kind of thing.

> It is relevant to the case study…I could expand on information that was there and base it on that…it's finding the competencies and values…It will be helpful for the case study…I imagine I may use it in reports later…in the interim report and long term.

> The policy/ procedural stuff wasn't that explicit. The critical incident analysis framework forces you to think about where the information is. It prepares you as you go along.

Others were less sure that the critical incident analyses which they had done would assist them in their summative assessment tasks:

> Specifically in terms of competencies ...acceptance evidences are fairly specific…it may not be helpful…It might be helpful in the IPS. We need to take it a bit further…case study material…I wont know until I have used it and integrated it….I feel unable to comment on its usefulness…I take the view it is the least of the concerns…it is not in the requirements of the consortium.

A couple of students suggested that critical incident analyses may be more useful to students on a first rather than second placement:

> Perhaps it would be better for DPI…it really made you think about how important it is to reflect. If I had something like this at the start it would have been very stressed.

> It [the critical analysis framework] will be easier to get into once work has started…now is mainly the introduction so there is not much to write about…It would have been helpful for reflection on my first placement…I think it will be good once I have got set cases.

Student perspectives at the conclusion of placement

Eight students participated in the interviews which lasted between 20 and 30 minutes.   These interviews were conducted after they had completed their assessable work for the placement.   The purpose of the final individual interviews with students was to provide an overall evaluation of the use of critical incident analyses. In the interviews, students were asked to discuss the following areas with reference to completed frameworks:

- The frequency of use of the framework

- An example of the use of the framework

- The advantages and disadvantages of the framework

- It's use in supervision

- It's use as an assessment tool

The frequency of use of the framework

On average students had completed six critical incident analyses.   However this varied considerably with one student having completed nine whereas another student had only completed one critical incident analysis.

An example of the use of the framework

Students offered a variety of uses for the framework. Most students referred to its use in examining an aspect of direct practice with service users. The following examples show the range of incidents analysed:

> It was about an incident of domestic violence and I had to challenge a probationer. I had built up a good rapport with him but my practice teacher said I had to challenge that day. I really felt I was being an instrument of the state. I would not have gone about it that way. I understand the best interests of the child are paramount but I would not have gone about it like that. So I used the framework to try to understand what was going on theoretically…care and control.

> I had tried on a number of times to find an incident which could address all aspects of the framework. I decided in the end to go 'backwards' in that I started with a theory in the situation and then answered other aspects of the framework around that. I started with Trotter's pro-social modelling and role clarification and reflected on my practice.

> My last analysis was about a home assessment visit I had to do where I was visiting a family where the father used methadone. I went to the house and the windows were painted over. I knocked on the door and the family asked me to go around the back and then they locked the door when I went in. I though about what we had discussed about safety in Social Work Practice 1. I was just about to ask him to

unlock the door when he saw I was uncomfortable and apologised asked me if I wanted it unlocked. I said yes and he did, saying it was just habit it. I used the framework to think through the dilemma.

I used the framework with regard to a value dilemma in working with a men's group. The group was voluntary and my relationship with the men had been one of facilitating. However, when I was assisting one of the men to get funding for his bills, it came to light that he had a recent history of drug and alcohol abuse and his children had been taken into care. I had to tell my practice teacher but felt very uncomfortable. I used the framework to help me consider the statutory role.

For a few students, using the critical incident framework had provided them with a methodology for working through a dilemma and deciding on what action they would take:

My latest critical incident analysis was with regard to work with a family where I completed a Social Background Report. The issue was non- attendance but there were lots of issues in the family, mum with mental health problems etc. Although the report had been about non-attendance I wanted to do a more in depth assessment and a care plan. My link worker had decided that our response should be a change of school placement. I felt that was inappropriate so I completed the critical incident analysis. It gave me the opportunity to reflect and to bring in theory, policy and process. I used it as a basis for supervision. My practice teacher agreed with my assessment, based on the critical incident analysis. He said it showed how I was using theory and not just personal opinion.

One student identified that the framework had been used to discuss value issues around aspects of criminal justice and departmental policy rather than issues directly related to case work. Another student showed how they used it to discuss work place issue rather than direct practice:

It was the second day of my placement and a co-worker made a racist remark. I knew I couldn't sit on it or that would be collusion so I used the framework to think it through and present to my practice teacher. I think I might not have focused so piece of reflective writing for my practice teachers who said it was too unfocused.

The advantages and disadvantages of the framework

The main advantage of the framework identified by the students at this post placement stage was in the way it facilitated a structured approach to reflection and critical analysis:

It is good to write down these dilemmas and be forced almost to think through issues and not take things for granted.

It clarified what is meant by reflection and analysis and helped me consolidate what I thought. It's logical and structured.

The focus on just one incident and going through the framework allows you to go into depth. You can then use that technique in other aspects of your practice.

I don't write a lot but I use it as a tool to get me thinking a more concentrated way. It's a springboard.

I have used the critical incident analysis framework as I went along and have built up a portfolio where I can see progress.

In particular, the framework was considered a useful way to examine value issues and dilemmas by six students, as the examples below show:

> I had been told in my last placement that my reflection on value issues was not strong. The framework has definitely helped me here

> It was useful to address value issues. You could use the framework to explore and challenge and then it didn't appear too personal. It assisted me to develop my style as I can come over too dogmatic. It helps you consider what you think rather than what people want to hear.

Six students identified that the framework had assisted them to integrate theory and practice, particularly towards the beginning of the placement, for example:

> It was quite useful at the beginning as it clarified the 'what' 'when' and 'how' and then the 'why'- why did this happen?

> It's the checking of what you are doing theoretically which is its main strength.

> The really useful aspect of the framework was when I started with the theory. It helped me get to grips with theory and practice.

The time- consuming nature of completing the framework was noted by all students. There are several aspect to this. Firstly, the framework was considered to be too comprehensive by some students;

> It is quite long to complete if you are doing it properly. It runs into hundreds of words.

> It would be useful if it was briefer so that you did not have to complete all the aspects in full.

> I found having to go through the whole of the framework each time very heavy on my time.

However, the frequency of submissions to the practice teachers and peer group supervision was also an issue for some students, particularly as their work load built up.

> It was great at the beginning but when placement reports and that kicked in it really got in the way.

> I stopped using critical incident analysis as I no longer found it useful. I did a number of them and it did take a lot of time. When I got more work it started to feel like an academic exercise and detracted from practice.

Three students identified that various other demands on students time such as peer supervision, meant that at times the balance of direct practice and reflection did not feel satisfactory. One student suggested that critical incident analysis could be used less frequently and that time for completion is structured into the placement as this would ease pressure on time commitments.

Finally students identified the nature of the tool as being limited, again particularly towards the end of the placement when reflective diaries (3 students) and case studies (2 students) became more useful:

> I am a naturally reflective person and find the diary is more suited to my learning needs.

> I started to find it a bit rigid and I now prefer to use case studies to reflect.

> It has been useful but it could easily be too constrictive. Incidents might not naturally fit into this narrative or format.

> I did nine analyses. It was useful at the beginning and then not so useful as I used a reflective diary. It could be a case of just doing too much. Also focussing on an

incident can be retrospective as you might want to talk about a wider scenario so case studies are better.

Use of critical incident analysis in supervision

All students identified that critical incident analysis had been a useful aid in supervision. As one student explained that it helped progress the supervisory relationship:

> It is a good starting point to get discussion going. It's a good way for students and practice teachers to get to know each other's value base, like my practice teacher would say 'I wouldn't have approached it that way.

Discussion of critical incidents with practice teachers was identified as valuable by most students:

> It provided a springboard for topics of discussion but it did mean that not a lot of time was spent looking at cases more on incidents. This could be a strength but also a weakness as it is less practice focussed. You might not want to spend your energy on this in supervision.

> I used it to take down notes and then used it as a topic for discussion in supervision. That's where you can really discuss in depth.

> It was very useful for me to bring to supervision as it helped explain and justify my assessment decision to my practice teacher.

Use of critical incident analysis as an assessment tool

Two themes emerged from students' opinions of critical incident analysis as an assessment tool. The first was in respect of their experience of the tool as a formative piece of assessment in individual and peer supervision. Several students identified that feedback from practice teachers and peers have been a useful experience both in developing practice and written work:

> Getting feedback on the critical incident analysis definitely helped me think through the next situation, more as it was happening rather after the event. Also I kept my examples so that I could use them in my reports….Handing your analyses to practice teacher and other students and getting feedback is putting you through the scrutiny of others and being assessed.

> I found it a useful tool to collate evidence for the placement reports. By completing them regularly I was building up evidence written at the time.

> I had found some competencies difficult to evidence in my first placement but found the critical incident analysis framework really useful this time.

Other students felt that critical incident analyses had helped them to complete reports and practice studies but they had not used them directly in these pieces of work:

> I don't know how useful they were in the end with regard to writing reports- in any direct way.

> Although I did a number of analyses, I couldn't incorporate much into my report.

The second theme related to the potential development of the framework as a summative assessment tool. Some students thought that the tool had potential if it

were more integrated into an assessment schedule both in terms of timing and in respect of other pieces of written work:

> If you had time carved out, as we do before other assignments, it would be a useful assessment tool. You couldn't do one every week or fortnight though.

> It could work as part of a portfolio. It wouldn't stand on its own but you could have examples of other pieces of writing in their too.

> Yes it would be useful alongside other assignments. It's not the answer, just one part of the whole assessment.

Other students however expressed some concerns around its usefulness as a summative piece of work, stating that:

> This may lead to writing what is expected rather than what is experienced.

> It could mean that you would be expected to write a long assignment again when this is useful because you can keep it short.

Practice teacher perspectives at the commencement of placement

Four practice teachers participated in a focus group interview which lasted approximately 30 minutes. This was conducted immediately after the training session to which all students and practice teachers had been invited. In the focus group practice teachers were asked to give their initial impressions of the critical incident analysis framework and to identify any issues which they thought might emerge in its use with students.

Some of the practice teachers had been introduced to critical incident analysis as part of a practice teaching programme and at least one had used a similar process before with students.

The overwhelming view of the practice teachers in terms of the framework which had been presented to them was positive, with no major problems anticipated in its use. Comments included:

> Brings in feelings and thought processes.

> Nice to have it on one piece of paper.

> Can be something quite little rather than a major incident which could be good when not having long term contact with clients.

Practice teacher perspectives at the conclusion of placement

Two practice teachers participated in the interviews which lasted approximately 40 minutes. They were asked about:

- The frequency of use of the framework by students;

- The advantages and disadvantages of the framework;

- It's use in supervision;

- It's use as an assessment tool; and

- Future use of critical incident analysis.

In addition to these two interviews, the final reports written by practice teachers of all ten students involved in the project were scrutinised for any mentions of critical incident analysis. A total of six practice teachers were involved in writing these final reports.

Use of critical incident analysis by students

It was noted that use of critical incident analysis by students varied considerably. For one or two students who were already structured and reflective thinkers, a decision was made to discontinue writing critical incidents and use a reflective diary. Conversely, there was at least one student who was not keen on the process at the commencement of placement but who subsequently found it useful and wrote a number of critical incidents over the placement. Overall, however, for most students, use of critical incident analysis slowed or ceased after the midpoint in the placement. As noted by one practice teacher:

> After a number of supervision sessions [student] gradually became less descriptive … and more analytical and reflective, using the Critical Incident Analysis tool to its full advantage. It is interesting that shortly after the interim stage of the placement [student] stopped presenting me with the CIA…

For several of the students, delays in obtaining disclosure checks restricted the amount of direct practice they were able to be involved in during the first weeks of the placement. As such these students had more time than might normally be expected for reflective writing and it was reported that some students wrote quite insightfully about situations which are often overlooked such as a brief meeting with another professional.

Although students were given copies of the critical incident analysis framework both in hard copies and on computer disk, practice teachers noted that almost always students used the disk version. It was felt that this both encouraged students to consider all the various headings but kept the process simple in that they did not have to actually write out the headings each time they used the framework. Hence making available either a disk or on-line copy of the framework should be integral in future use of critical incident analysis with students in practice learning.

Supervision

A couple of practice teacher reports commented on the use of critical incident analysis in supervision:

> …reflection was something [student] … struggled with, and the Critical Incident Analysis helped and in supervision we were able to discuss this and simplify the thought processes into What, How and Why.

> In terms of legal knowledge, [student] has definitely improved. [student] has a clear understanding now of how the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and how the Children's Hearing System works. This was an area we concentrated on during both Supervision and other elements, such as the Case Study and the Critical Incident Analysis …

As previously noted, regular use of critical incident analysis provided students with an opportunity to prepare for supervision. However, it also has the potential to encourage a more disciplined approach to supervision by practice teachers:

> … tightened it up for me as I'm quite a tangential thinker and it forced me to be more disciplined in the process. If you've got five students at a time, that's very useful.

In particular, this resulted in supervision which focused on learning rather than just case discussion. Sometimes this might also result in learning for practice teachers if the student's reflections "provoke" a practice teacher to consider a situation from a new perspective.

The extent to which use of critical incidents changes the supervision process may well depend on practice teacher expectations. One practice teacher noted in the final report:

> As part of the placement arrangements student in this "cohort" have been asked to undertake Critical Incident Analysis as a learning tool. This methodology will subsequently be evaluated for future use … In workload terms this meant [student] could not realistically continue with … reflective diary and this was agreed.

For a practice teacher who has always expected students to come prepared for supervision there may be less change than for those for whom introducing critical incident analysis has brought with it a greater expectation of student preparedness.

Assessment

Both practice teachers who were interviewed noted some potential for critical incident analysis in the assessment process.

> As a formative assessment tool it has real potential. And if it's seen by students as that, they'll understand.

In terms of assisting practice teachers writing their final reports on students, it was noted that for students who had produced a number of critical incidents, practice teachers were able to establish "hard evidence" of a student's development as a reflective practitioner.

Future use of critical incident analysis

Both practice teachers who were interviewed indicated that they would use critical incident analysis with future students with both seeing it as a "flexible tool" in a practice teacher's "toolkit". However, while one practice teacher had plans to use it with a forthcoming group of students, the other viewed it more as a tool which one

may or may not use with a student depending on circumstances, with students most likely to benefit being those on a first placement or those who are struggling. Both would agree however of the need to ensure more scope for individual learning styles by requiring students to produce critical incidents on a regular, often weekly basis.

While the framework as developed was reasonably comprehensive, future adaptations which practice teachers suggested included:

- Inter-professional practice – especially in relation to use of language and values of other professions;

- Service users and carers – i.e. how much of a partnership does the student have with service users and carers?

- An additional section 6 in which students could record thoughts not covered in the previous sections.

When framing additional or alternative questions for use in a critical incident framework, it was noted that one of the strengths of the current questions is that they used the language of "you". Hence it would seem important to frame questions directly to individuals as it is harder to detach if question are aimed at individuals directly.

In addition to changes to the framework itself, it was suggested that more guidance should be given to students in respect of the balance between description, reflection and analysis. Such instructions should highlight that it is the learning rather than the actual incident which is of most importance.

Another issue which emerged in respect of future use of critical incident analysis was the need to prepare agency staff, especially practice teachers as to what critical incident analysis is and the issues involved in its use.

In addition to using critical incident analysis with social work students on qualifying awards, the scope for use in post qualifying awards, including the practice teaching award, was highlighted. It was noted that candidates for the practice teaching award in the West of Scotland often had poor reflection skills, and that critical incident analysis has the potential to improve the reflective skills of this group of practitioners.

Discussion

This demonstration project set out to explore the use of critical incident analysis as an assessment tool for social work students undertaking practice learning. As the study involved only a small number of students and their practice teachers, the extent to which generalisible conclusions can be drawn is limited. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions in respect of the use of critical incident analysis in both formative and summative assessment.

The mechanism for students undertaking practice learning to receive formative feedback is supervision, which may involve practice teachers and/or peers. Student use of critical incident analysis prior supervision sessions can be helpful in preparing students to make effective use of supervision sessions, as they will have already highlighted issues for discussion. However, we would note that some students would

prefer to use reflective journals as a methodology for processing their ideas and preparing for supervision. Hence, regular preparation of critical incident analyses would seem to be a more attractive option for students who a) struggle with reflective writing, b) are disinclined to keep a reflective journal throughout their placement and/ or c) prefer more structured tasks than regular journal entries. Whether a student is disinclined to undertake critical incident analyses due to finding the task too difficult is nevertheless a possibility that practice teachers may need to consider.

Practice teachers who use critical incident analyses as a formative assessment tool need to consider its use alongside other tasks which students are expected to undertake. Regular completion of both critical incident analyses and keeping a reflective journal may well be an unrealistic expectation of students. This is particularly so if students and/ or practice teachers have expectations that all critical incident analyses are the length of mini essays. Regular completion of critical incident analyses may be more achievable, if, for some incidents, students write brief notes or dot points rather than always writing a lengthy piece of work. Access to an on-line or disk version of the critical incident analysis framework also seems to encourage regular use this tool.

As the students who participated in this demonstration project had existing summative assessment tasks as part of their DipSW requirements, we were not able to require them to undertake a critical incident analysis as part of their summative assessment for this piece of practice learning. However, we note that some students were in fact able to use elements of critical incident analyses which they had produced for their final reports and/or practice studies. Also, practice teachers who were able to review a series of critical incident analyses produced by a students over the period of their practice learning, found that they had hard evidence which they could refer to when writing their own reports about student learning and development of competence.

As a potential method of summative assessment, some students saw merit in using critical incident analysis, possibly as part of a portfolio of tasks. Others however felt that critical incident analysis was limited in that only enabled them to tackle an incident rather than consider their total involvement in a case as is required by their DipSW assessment tasks. Whether these students would have thought this had they not had a previous placement in which they had written lengthy case studies, is unknown.

In summary, this demonstration project has established a potential scope for critical incident analysis to be used in both formative and summative assessment of social work students undertaking practice learning in Scotland. The framework which was developed is not fixed and can be adapted in line with particular learning objectives set by different programmes of social work education. The challenge which remains for social work educators is to determine how best to use critical incident analyses in conjunction with other tools and mechanisms for formative and summative assessment.

Critical Incident Analysis in Classroom-Based Learning

Having developed a framework that had demonstrated potential as an assessment method in practice learning, the second phase of our work sought to explore the potential for critical incident analysis within a classroom-based subject in the new social work degree. In discussions with colleagues in the Glasgow School of Social Work, critical incident analysis was considered pertinent to the subject 'Learning to Learn'.

Learning to Learn

Learning to Learn is one of the first modules taken by undergraduate social work students in the new four year degree at the Glasgow School of Social Work and was first taught in 2004. When the new degree structure was developed, it was recognised that

> Students who engage in higher education, and especially those who do so in preparation for further learning and development beyond their degree studies, require to understand the processes of enquiry, learning and development, and to enhance their skills in using these processes purposefully, in order to maximise their capacity for life-long learning.

> (Glasgow School of Social Work, 2004)

A course outline was developed with the expectation that by the completion of the module students would be able to meet the following learning outcomes:

1. Explain the processes of adult learning, their own learning style, and the factors that influence these.

2. Research and manage information and ideas from a variety of sources.

3. Use such information and ideas critically to engage in reflection and analysis based on data, concepts and principles.

4. Synthesise and present (both orally and in writing) arguments based on data, concepts and principles.

5. Use their understanding of the processes of learning and analysis as a basis for their own personal/ professional development planning.

> (Glasgow School of Social Work, 2004)

The course was taught over a six week period and a range of approaches to learning and teaching were used. These included lectures, problem based learning, seminars, individual and group learning tasks and directed reading. Each week there

were set tasks, which over the course included exercises for students to identify what were learning situations for them, as well as seminar presentations, chairing or notetaking for a problem based learning group, including seminar presentations, undertaking library research and keeping a reflective journal.

Assessment in Learning to Learn

Alignment of intended learning outcomes, course content, and assessment (Biggs, 2003) was a key feature of Learning to Learn. Set tasks facilitated formative feedback to students from their peers and course staff, as well as encouraging students to identify their own needs for further learning. The summative assessment task required students to develop a portfolio comprised of class-based tasks, individual and group work, and a reflective commentary. The required components of the portfolio were as follows:

Section One

An explanation of how the student has organised him or herself throughout the course of this module, which aspects were effective and which were ineffective. An illustration or mind map with an associated explanation may serve this end, and should include (but not necessarily be limited to) how students organised material handed out to them, material they found, notes, assignments, deadlines, targets, session times/locations, other meetings, library information, other details/expectations they must keep track of, etc. (200 words).

Section Two

A copy of a learning styles inventory, a written analysis of the process and results and what factors the student believes to have influenced the results. The student should give an example of how the results of the inventory manifest themselves in their learning (500 words).

Section Three

A copy of the writing tasks assigned, which includes the student's written summary of a newspaper article and the student's written analysis (200 words for the summary— 800 words for the analysis—two separate but related tasks).

Section Four

An explanation of how the student approached group components of the module (i.e. PBL, seminars and oral presentation). The student should consider what they learned about working in groups and what they would do differently next time (500 words).

Section Five

A reflective commentary, based on a weekly log, on areas of learning and how the student went about his or her tasks, both individually and as part of a group. Students are encouraged to extract quotes from their weekly logs in order to clarify issues, reflect on experiences and glean insights. Content of handouts/worksheets/activities might also be useful to locate and discuss areas of learning (800 words).

Section Six

Completion of a proforma Individual Development Plan.

Critical Incident Analysis in Learning to Learn

Students were introduced to Critical Incident Analysis during the lecture in week 5 of the module. The critical incident framework used previously in a practice learning setting was revised by one of the teaching team to reflect the specific learning outcomes of Learning to Learn (see Appendix C). Students were also provided with some brief written guidance on the use of critical incident analysis (Appendix D).

Although inclusion of critical incident analysis was not compulsory, the nature of the assessment task provided scope for students to include this in Section 2 and discuss the use of critical incident analysis in Section 5. One of the researchers (BC) who had not been involved in the teaching of Learning to Learn reviewed 39 student portfolios submitted for summative assessment. As students are required to submit two copies of all assessable work, the reviewing of portfolios to identify mentions of critical incident analysis was done on separate copies and independent of the marking process.

Explicit mentions of critical incident analysis were found in only four of the portfolios. For one student it was the lecture on critical incident analysis itself that was critical:

> The lecture in week five was very helpful. I didn't realise that there was so much learning to be done in every day life. Of course we all learn from the experience we gain, but Laura's lecture on critical incident analysis has shown me that much more can be learned from what may appear as an "every day" experience. Using the critical incident framework really can help tease useful learning out of experiences where no learning had been apparent before.

One student who had come across the concept of critical incidents before, nevertheless also found the lecture helpful:

> The lecture was about critical incident thinking. I found this very challenging, because it is something I have done in work and not thought about. The lecture showed me the steps to go through and how to record the process. What really challenged me was being put on the spot and being forced to think of an incident during the module to analyse.

Yet what was for one student a challenge to identify a critical incident which had happened during the module, was noted by another student as one which "gave me

an opportunity to share my … predicament" with others in his/her group, noting "I have noticed a lot of change in attitudes from many people since then". Unfortunately, this student does not go on to reflect on the resultant learning for themselves.

Apart from having to identify an issue to analyse, only one student identified the challenges of honesty and being open when engaged in critical incident analysis:

> The module moved on to critical incident framework, which is an area I could identify with, as I have a tendency to over analyse situations to find out exactly how they developed and why they took a particular direction. I know from experience the best approach to use when applying a situation to the critical incident framework is honesty and to have an open mind. This ensures a learning experience is identified from analysing the incident.

Being honest about one's own involvement in a situation can be painful. As one student in the course wrote in their portfolio about another of the reflective exercises which formed part of the course "…this task asks for me to open up doors that were jammed shut because of emotional pain".

Without actually mentioning critical incident analysis, several students made mention of incidents which had occurred during the module which on reflection had led to learning either about themselves or others. For example, one such student acknowledged "several incidents during the course, which gave me an insight into my learning" and then proceeded to report one of these incidents. While the student's reporting was a single paragraph of text, it very closely followed the five parts of the critical analysis framework which students had been provided with. The following analysis breaks down the student's account according to the framework.

Critical Incident Framework	Student narrative
1. Account of the incident	During the third Problem Based Learning Group I found myself feeling very frustrated and began disengaging from the group.
2. Initial responses to the incident	I initially could not understand why this was.
3. Issues and dilemmas highlighted by this incident	After the session I reflected on what was making me feel this way and realised that it was because things were not moving fast enough for me. I felt the group were spending too much time on one issue and were not able to move on.
4. Outcomes	I decided I would not allow myself to leave the session feeling this way again but would share it with the group and suggest ways of moving the discussion forward.
5. Learning	This highlighted how confident I felt within the group and how committed

I was to moving things forward.

Discussion

While critical incident analysis was clearly felt to be worthwhile by a few students who took the compulsory Learning to Learn module as part of their beginning social work studies at the Glasgow School of Social Work in 2004, questions arise as to its utility given only ten percent of students mentioned it in their portfolios.

The input on critical incident analysis came towards the end of the module. As the course was aiming to encourage good study skills, such as working up a portfolio over the course of the module rather than leaving it to the end, the exercises which students wrote up for Section 2, tended to be those they completed in the first 2-3 weeks of the module. Similarly, there were several examples across the portfolios where students presented a series of extracts from their journals from weeks 1 to 3 or 4, as the basis for Section 5, with the number of weeks covered seemingly associated with how far they'd got through reflecting on the course when they reached the word limit of 800 words for the section. Hence it may well be that critical incident analysis was pertinent to some of these students, but it just came too late in the module for them to it in their portfolios.

For students who did comment on events in Week 5, this tended to be about the oral presentations which occurred in the same week as the lecture on critical incident analysis. In fact for many students, the oral presentation seemed to be a critical incident itself. The sentiments of several students were encapsulated by the following comment:

> The fifth week was for many people the most stressful. … For most people, the most stressful part of the module was that week's seminar, where everyone gave a four minute presentation of an article they had read. This was extremely daunting as it was the first presentation we had been asked to give. I found the task even more daunting because we were again asked to give feedback to other students. When I gave my presentation I was very much aware that I had given some constructive criticism to some students, and was really apprehensive not to be given the same criticism.

A further reason why students may have chosen not to include any mention of critical incident analysis in their portfolio is that the task was optional and perceived as more difficult than other reflective tasks which were included in several portfolios. Some of these other tasks asked students to identify situations in which learning had occurred, but unlike the critical incident framework, they did not ask them to compare their thoughts and feelings both at the time of the incident and now. Nor did they encourage students to identify future learning needs.

We have argued elsewhere that an assessment strategy which includes several short pieces of work may be more appropriate for new undergraduate students than a single longer piece of work which may be more appropriate for honours or postgraduate students (Crisp and Green Lister, 2005). The assessment for Learning to Learn fits with this argument, given that almost all students taking the module are new to university study. However, it means that the incidents which students write about are necessarily very brief allowing only limited analysis. Nevertheless, an assessment strategy covering the multiple years of a degree course could also

provide an opportunity for students to write a more extended critical incident analysis at a later point in their studies.

Despite its numerous limitations, this second study has demonstrated some potential for the use of critical incident analysis in classroom based modules undertaken by social work students. Furthermore, it has found some resonance with students who are both new to social work and to studying at degree level. Clearly much more work is warranted in exploring this further, especially as the only other example we had found of critical incident analysis being used in the assessment of classroom based modules in social work education had occurred among postgraduate students (Montalvo, 1999).

Conclusion

This report has explored use of critical incident analysis a) in both practice learning and classroom module settings, b) with undergraduate and postgraduate students, and c) as a tool for formative and summative assessment. As such we have found it a flexible assessment tool for which there is some potential in each of these scenarios.

In both studies, we found students for whom critical incident analysis proved a useful tool in making sense of incidents which had emerged in learning situations. However, there are also many students who would choose other options over critical incident analyses if given a choice. This is understandable, given that the critical incident analysis frameworks we have developed ask students to consider more dimensions of an incident than is the case in some of the other reflective learning tasks presented in Learning to Learn or in practice learning. For this reason, we suspect some students perceive the task as more difficult. Yet conversely for other students, the degree of structure may result in critical incident analysis being perceived as more straightforward and with a clearer idea as to what the expectations of students might be. Use of a critical incident analysis framework may be further facilitated by making it available in a computer readable format.

Student write-ups of critical incidents ranged from around 150 words by undergraduate students in Learning to Learn to essay length pieces by some of the postgraduate students in Practice Learning. As such, critical incident analyses could be used in summative assessment either as an element in a larger portfolio or as a discrete piece of assessment. At the Glasgow School of Social Work we have identified a number of points in the curriculum of the new four-year honours degree in social work in which critical incident analysis could be used for either formative and/ or summative assessment. These include:

Some Potential uses of Critical Incident Analysis in Glasgow School of Social Work's MA (Honours) degree in Social Work

Year	Module	Potential use
1	Learning to Learn	Students could use critical incident analysis to identify their own learning style and the factors that influence this.
2	Practice Learning 1	Students could use critical incident analyses to identify salient issues for discussing with their practice teachers and to take significant responsibility for their own continuing learning and development.
		A write-up of a critical incident could be included as part of a portfolio which demonstrates learning during the placement. Such learning could include practice issues, legal and ethical issues, and/ or issues of discrimination or inequality.
		Practice teachers review a series of critical incident analyses as evidence of student development during a placement.
3	Professional Roles in Organisational Contexts	Students could use critical incident analysis to demonstrate an understanding of the organisational context of social work or of the multiple, complex and contested accountabilities in social work organization including partnerships with service users and carers.
4	Development Planning	Students could use critical incident analyses to reflect on their learning across the programme and analyse the processes involved.

Although each social work programme in Scotland is configured differently, all programmes are required to conform to *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2003) in respect of the knowledge, skills and competences which graduates should acquire prior to graduation. Some requirements of the *Framework* could well be demonstrated by students using a critical incident analysis. For example, critical incident analyses could be used to demonstrate a range of skills including the following:

> Analyse the information they have gathered, weighing competent evidence and changing their viewpoint in light of new information, then relate this information to a particular, task, situation or problem.

Review outcomes in the light of actual outcomes.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 29)

Review intentions and actions in the light of expected and unintended consequences.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 35)

Recognise and work with the complex tensions and links between intra-personal and inter-personal processes and the wider social, legal, economic, political and cultural context of people's lives.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 37)

Analyse the impact of injustice, social inequality and oppression.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 38)

Reflect on and change their professional behaviour in the light of growing experience.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 39)

Make effective preparation for meetings and lead them in a productive way.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 41)

Analyse and work with the factors that inhibit integrated working across discipline, professional and agency boundaries.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 42)

Overcome personal prejudices to respond appropriately to a range of complex, personal and interpersonal situations.

(Scottish Executive, 2003: 43)

The appropriateness however of critical incident analysis as a form of assessment will however depend on the learning objectives for an assessable module and the extent to which these learning objectives can be aligned with the features of critical incident analysis.

While this study has explored the use of critical incident analysis by social work students and practice teachers, one question that this study has not explored, but which is ultimately critical, is how useful critical incident analysis is for both agencies and service users and carers. We would hope that the insights gained both into organisational processes, and of the lived experience of services users and carers, will facilitate more effective social work practice. However, a further study with a different research design would be required to examine the impacts of critical incident analysis on either agencies or service users and carers.

Another issue which was touched on only in passing in this report, concerns the assessment process which occurs after a student has undertaken a critical incident analysis. In particular there is the criteria by which academics and practice teachers mark reports of critical incident analyses. We recognise the potential for an incident which has been critical in facilitating student learning to seem trivial or insignificant to a marker who has much more social work and/ or life experience than the student

and hence caution against the incident itself being part of the assessment criteria. Similarly, if students feel they have to impress markers with clever or unique situations as incidents, they may avoid presenting the incidents which have been truly transformational to them. It is equally important that students are able to express the thoughts and feelings generated by an incident without fear of censure, particularly if there is the potential for them to be perceived as inconsistent with contemporary values and ideologies of social work. Rather, marking criteria need to be explicit to both students and markers and be based on factors such as the student's ability to reflect, analyse, integrate theory with practice, and/ or identify relevant research. Alternately, as in Learning to Learn, what was assessed was students' reflections on how the process of undertaking critical incident analysis had facilitated their learning.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A:
Critical Incident Analysis
Framework for Direct Practice II

1. **Account of the incident**
   - What happened, where and when; who was involved?
   - What was your role/ involvement in the incident?
   - What was the context of this incident, e.g. previous involvement of yourself or other from this agency with this client/ client group?
   - What was the purpose and focus of your contact/ intervention at this point?

2. **Initial responses to the incident**
   - What were your thoughts and feelings at the time of this incident?
   - What were the responses of other key individuals to this incident? If not known, what do you think these might have been?

3. **Issues and dilemmas highlighted by this incident**
   - What practice dilemmas were identified as a result of this incident?
   - What are the values and ethical issues which are highlighted by this incident?
   - Are there implications for inter-disciplinary and/ or inter-agency collaborations which you have identified as a result of this incident?

4. Learning
- What have you learned, e.g. about yourself, relationships with others, the social work task, organizational policies, and procedures?
- What theory (or theories) has (or might have) helped develop your understanding about some aspect of this incident?
- What research has (or might have) helped develop your understanding about some aspect of this incident?
- How might an understanding of the legislative, organizational and policy contexts explain some aspects associated with this incident?
- What future learning needs have you identified as a result of this incident? How might this be achieved?

5. Outcomes
- What were the outcomes of this incident for the various participants?
- Are there ways in which this incident has led (or might lead to) changes in how you think, feel or act in particular situations?
- What are your thoughts and feelings now about this incident?

Appendix B:
Critical Incident Analysis for Direct Practice II

Introduction

In social work education, it is generally considered that reflection on experiences can lead to crucial learning. Many of you will have been involved in some form of learning activity in your DPI placement which sought to encourage reflective learning, such as keeping a reflective diary. Another approach involves using a structured *critical incident framework* to think critically about various incidents in your placement. Although you will not be formally assessed on this task, it is envisaged that the critical incident framework could enable help you write your placement reports and IPS. The framework also has the potential to provide some structure to supervision sessions and to maximise the effectiveness of supervision as a space for learning.

What is a critical incident

Critical incidents are those which cause us to think and reflect, which leads to learning about ourselves or others (individuals and organisations) or about processes (e.g. about learning to be a social worker, the social work task or organizational policies and procedures). Most critical incidents are not at all dramatic or obvious but commonplace events that occur routinely in social work education and/or professional practice. What makes them 'critical' is that they've caused us to think and reflect at this particular time. This could include (but is not limited to) any of the following situations:

- When you felt you had done something well…

- When you made the wrong decision…

- When something went better than expected…

- When you lacked confidence…

- When you made a mistake…

- When you really enjoyed working with someone/ a group…

- When you had a feeling of pressure…

- When you found it difficult to accept or value a service user(s)…

- When you realised you did not know enough…

- When you felt unsupported…

- When you were worried about a service user(s)…

- When you took a risk and it paid/ didn't pay off…

However, you don't have to have been an active participant in a critical incident. It's okay if you were an observer to some action. Or it may not even be a piece of action but something you've seen written or picture or something else you've noticed.

Using the critical incident framework

Once you've identified a critical incident, you should try answering each of the questions on the critical incident analysis proforma, taking into account that some of the bullet points might not apply to all incidents. For some incidents, you might write just a couple of sentences or even just a few words. However, for some incidents, especially those which might contribute to your final report or IPS, you might want to undertake a much more detailed analysis. Some of your critical incident analyses might contribute to the portfolio of evidence which you will be developing over this placement.

You are encouraged to use the critical incident framework on a regular basis, perhaps once a week prior to supervision. Over the course of the placement, you should look to analyse a range of incidents which reflect different domains of learning, eg about methods of intervention, social work theories, anti-oppressive practice, organisations, legislation and policy frameworks, and the relationship between research and practice.

Appendix C:
Critical Incident Analysis Framework for Learning to Learn

1. Account of the incident
- What happened, where and when; who was involved?
- What was your role/ involvement in the incident?
- What was the context of this incident, e.g. what led to the incident?
- What was your intent and focus at this point?

2. Initial responses to the incident
- What were your thoughts and feelings at the time of this incident?
- What were the responses of other key individuals to this incident? If not known, what do you think these might have been?

3. Issues and dilemmas highlighted by this incident
- Note any dilemmas related to this incident that you experienced.
- Outline any values and/or ethical issues which are highlighted by this incident?

- What took you by surprise or happened in a way you didn't expect?

4. Outcomes
- What were the outcomes of this incident for the various participants?
- Are there ways in which this incident has led (or might lead to) changes in how you think, feel or act in particular situations?
- What are your thoughts and feelings now about this incident?

5. Learning
- What have you learned, e.g. about yourself, how you relate to others, how you learn?
- What future learning needs have you identified as a result of this incident? How might these be achieved?

Appendix D:
Critical Incident Analysis for Learning to Learn

Introduction

In social work education, it is generally considered that reflection on experiences can lead to crucial learning. Throughout this course, you will be offered activities designed to promote reflective learning, such as keeping a reflective diary. Another approach involves using a structured *critical incident framework* to think critically about various incidents that impact your learning. It is envisaged that the critical incident framework could help you to write future assignments, including assessment of practice, and becoming comfortable and adept at using the critical incident framework will likely enhance your learning and success on this course.

What is a critical incident

Critical incidents are those which cause us to think and reflect, which leads to learning about ourselves or others (individuals and organisations), how we learn (both cognitive and experientially) and how we relate to others. Most critical incidents are not at all dramatic or obvious but commonplace events that occur routinely in education and/or professional practice. What makes them 'critical' is that they've caused us to think and reflect at this particular time. This could include (but is not limited to) any of the following situations:

- When you felt you had done something well…

- When you made the wrong decision…

- When something went better than expected…

- When you lacked confidence…

- When you made a mistake…

- When you really enjoyed working with someone/ a group…

- When you had a feeling of pressure…

- When you have responded adversely, e.g. to someone you're expected to work with…

- When you realised you did not know enough…

- When you felt unsupported…
- When you took a risk and it paid/ didn't pay off…
- When an occurrence turned out differently than you expected…
- When something challenged the way you normally think about things…

However, you don't have to have been an active participant in a critical incident. It's okay if you were an observer to some action. It may not even be a piece of action but something you've seen written, a picture or something else you've noticed.

Using the critical incident framework

Once you've identified a critical incident, you should try answering each of the questions on the critical incident analysis proforma, taking into account that some of the bullet points might not apply to all incidents. It is important, however, to spend a bit of time thinking about each question before deciding whether it is applicable. For some incidents, you might write just a couple of sentences or even just a few words. Conversely, for some incidents, especially those which might contribute to content you might discuss in an assignment, you might want to undertake a much more detailed analysis.

Confidentiality

You may choose to share information on your critical incident proforma which may be personal to you, and this is not only acceptable, but encouraged if it helps you to critically reflect on your experiences. What you do choose to submit will stay between you and the markers. The only exception to this would be if you were to relate an incident of abuse. When relaying an incident of a personal or delicate nature, it is important that you anonymise any other participants in order to respect their confidentiality as well.