



PO21

WP3 - O6 Learning Resources

Critical Incidents Technique
Application Guide



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Credits

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Introduction

This document was produced in the scope of PO21_Prison Officers for the 21st Century (PO21). The Project is funded by the Erasmus + programme and implemented by a partnership of seven institutions from four countries, coordinated by the BSAFE Lab Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety of the University of Beira Interior (Portugal)¹, also including sectoral representatives (prison administrations, trade unions, VET and research organisations, and representatives of correctional private and public sector members).

The PO21 Project intends to develop a transnational Vocational Education and Training (VET) curriculum – a prison officer’s initial training course and learning resources. It aims to promote sectoral qualifications and ease professional mobility by adapting and developing new VET provisions according to current and foreseen skills needs. It seeks to provide innovative solutions and different skills for prison officers to be better equipped to face their everyday challenges. The results will also benefit public VET providers and decision-makers and the project partners, who represent a partnership for sustainable cooperation between prison administrations and correctional academies, trade unions, and other sectoral representatives.

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To achieve the objectives above, the PO21 Project researched to produce a needs analysis that could provide the framework to support the development of the proposed outputs. Data collection was carried out at various levels, including desk research at national and European levels, field research, recurring to the DACUM approach and an online survey and inputs from an Advisory Board composed of international experts.

The production of Learning Resources began in the second series of PO21 Project workshops, where the participants developed cases based on their daily practice under the Critical Incidents approach. As a result, ten cases were produced, which can be used in Prison officers' initial or continuous training sessions.

The present document intends to serve as a guide to accompany the application of the developed Cases, but it can also be used independently. It intends to contextualise and frame the critical incidents technique, provide options for its dynamisation in training sessions, and aid the trainer in its implementation. As aforementioned, and due to the characteristics of this tool, it can serve as a guide in any training context, although focused on Prison officers' training and the development of more reflective practice.

It departs from the definition of Critical incidents, how they should be developed and analysed, the application to prison officers' training whilst fostering reflective practice and suggestions of application in training sessions. It closes with final remarks, presenting some practical suggestions for trainers.

Critical Incidents

The Origin of the Concept

The Critical Incidents technique has been growing in usage in several research fields, including education and training, but its origin was within the psychological field. This method was first applied during the II World War to train American pilots. After the war, it was extended to working contexts, as it provided answers regarding the increase in productivity and the improvement of working conditions within the scope of Occupational Psychology (Estrela & Estrela, 1994).

According to its author, Flanagan (1954: 327), the critical incident technique “*consists of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles*”.

An incident means any human activity complete enough to allow for inferences and predictions on the person displaying the activity. To be critical, incidents have to be developed in a situation where the intention that motivated the action is clear for the observer and the consequences are evident, leaving scarce doubts regarding its effects (Flanagan, 1954).

Recent definitions consider critical incidents as unpredictable, unplanned and uncontrolled events that can be defined as compelling moments with enormous consequences for personal development and change (Tripp, 1993, cit. by Domingos, 2015) and allow individuals to acknowledge personal features previously not apparent.

A critical incident can be considered a moment of crisis which can reinforce an attitude, behaviour, or change. Still, it needs to be recognised as such by the individual or the group (Bolívar, 2002, Monereo, 2010, cit. by Domingos, 2015).

Monereo (2010, cit. by Domingos, 2015) considers it an event limited in space and time. When surpassing a given emotional limit, the professional does not act as usual, and to recover control of the situation, the professional needs deep psychological mechanisms to create a new identity to be able to deal with the situation since it goes beyond the professional's usual coping mechanisms (Mitchell, 1983).

A critical incident refers to some event or situation that marked a significant turning point or change in the subject's life (Miles and Huberman, 1984, cited by Tripp, 2011). These incidents are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. They are often presented as dilemmas in which participants can choose different courses of action –these incidents aid in maintaining a balance between academic understanding and practice (Tripp, 2011).

According to Tripp (2011), incidents happen, but critical incidents are created since they are produced by the way the observer looks at the situation. It is an interpretation of the significance of the event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement made and the basis of that judgement is the meaning attached to the incident.

The critical incident analysis explores deeper to identify the underlying issue that has caused strong feelings about a given situation, leading the trainee to reflect upon it in a structured way and consider alternatives for action. The incident is not necessarily a dramatic event but leads to internal reflection and interrogations. It may be common in daily practice, and since it is impossible to reflect upon every event, it is necessary to apply a selective analysis focus (Mohammed, 2016).

The extent of its application to several fields, including training, is in Weise and Monereo (2018) perspective, the acknowledgement of the validity and efficacy of this technique being recognised as a method that allows reflection upon meaningful events, feelings and emotions experienced by the subjects who took part in the action.

Critical Incidents as a Training Resource

All the above characteristics of this technique were considered as a potential tool for training, given its powerful context significant features. As Estrela and Estrela (1994) sustained, this technique can generate several training resources and be applied in several training contexts. From these authors' perspective, it is paramount to define the aim of the activity where the incidents will be used, and the specific field of action since the observed behaviour is only meaningful within a specific context.

Within the training context, a critical incident is a given situation where a behaviour is described in such a way that another observer would describe it the same way, and the observable consequences of the behaviour are clear and explicit (Estrela & Estrela, 1994).

In training, a Critical incident can be a commonplace event in everyday life that presents the subject with a dilemma between at least two different courses of action to solve a problem situation (Tripp, 1993, cited by Badia & Becerril, 2016). As such, it can be applied to any case involving dilemmas and problems.

As it is based on elements that simulate reality or are extracted from reality, it can provide a concrete base for teaching and articulating theory and practice. It can be used with role-playing, discovering and resolving problems, and as a support to a debate of ideas, problem analysis and solving collectively in group work, becoming a tool to develop trainees' critical thinking.

However, it is necessary to remember that critical incidents are not a faithful copy of reality but constitute important indicators of the analysed reality, with added value when it is impossible to observe the incidents by other means (Estrela & Estrela).

According to Domingos (2015), most authors agree that the analysis of a critical incident should contemplate three stages:

- a) The moment before the critical incident, its antecedents – situates the incident in the context, defines its meaning, describes the relevant predecessors, and describes the participants.
- b) The moment of the critical incident and its development – analysis of the development of the event, the reason why it is destabilising, the participants' behaviour, the timeline, the decisions taken, the resulting emotions and feelings and the consequences.
- c) The interpretation and redescription of the event – analysis of the problem, the triggering factors, the behaviours, the decisions and resulting emotions and consequences and the way the event is analysed in a regressive perspective.

Table 1 provides an example of the creation and development of a critical incident case:

Questions	Description
<p>Summary: identify a complicated/difficult/challenging situation</p>	<p><u>Main Situation:</u> Why is it Complicated/Difficult/Challenging</p>
<p>Who were the main characters? (include as many characters as necessary)</p>	<p><u>Character 1:</u> Name Professional Description Personal/Psychological Description Main Function/Hierarchy</p> <p><u>Character2:</u> Name: PO2 Professional Description Personal/Psychological Description Main Function/Hierarchy</p>
<p>Were there any secondary characters/witnesses?</p>	<p><u>Character 3:</u> Name Professional Description Personal/Psychological Description Main Function/Hierarchy</p> <p><u>Character4:</u> Name: Professional Description Personal/Psychological Description Main Function/Hierarchy</p>
<p>Describe the situation: Where did this situation occur?</p>	<p>At what time? How long did it take? <u>How did each character react?</u> What was the result of each action?</p>

Analysing the Cases – Reflection on Practice

Analysing a critical incident implies a reflective attitude, individually or in a group. The reflective practice using the analysis of critical incidents can stimulate the trainees' learning if this reflection goes beyond the description of the incident (Calandra et al., 2009; Griffin, 2003; Naidu and Oliver, 1999, cited by Badia & Becerril, 2016).

In this sense, Burrell (2022) mentions the work of Schön, who formulated the notions of the reflective practitioner and reflection in action as essential to professionals working in the areas of social work, education, and criminal justice, since these contexts are fruitful in diverse and challenging situations that characterise daily practice. Therefore, Schön considered that each professional encounter might pose different problems and challenges.

The skills required to work in such uncertainty and instability generate new knowledge for professionals. They must reframe the problem situation, develop strategies to address the problem as assessed, and deal with unexpected outcomes and consequences. Reflection is a specific moment for a mental problem situation, of critical questioning of a given situation or procedure, which can generate the reconstruction of current understandings and develop new perspectives for action (Malinowsky, 2021).

Schön (1994, cited by Malinowsky, 2021) defends that any activity involving working with people demands specific action models. This activity is developed in contexts of conflicts of values and interests peculiar to every human interaction, which involves a broad set of reactions and beliefs that are unique, complex, and variable.

As Nymo (2019, cited by Eide & Westrheim, 2020) argues, a professional prison officer must always reflect on the situations she is facing and extract the knowledge necessary to understand the specifics of the individual situation for only in this way can the prison officer increase the professional capacity for action.

Malinowski (2021) considers reflective practice useful for developing problem-solving competencies, especially in new and unpredictable situations. Referring to the penitentiary systems, this author characterises them as contexts with many ambiguities, inconsistencies and oppositions but also filled with observable facts and emotions. Thus, training prison service officers is an active process of developing and acquiring this reflective attitude, which leads to the development of practical knowledge to support a skilful performance.

Training Prison Officers through reflective practice

In their daily practice, it is common for prison officers to respond to unexpected and challenging situations with the obligation to comply with a legal framework. However, as Schaap et al. (2022) refer, the prison staff's responses cannot always be provided by following protocols. Hence, beyond the protocols, it is necessary to reflect upon challenging situations to develop a level of "freedom of action and reasoning" (Karssing, 2000, cited by Schaap et al., 2022), and ethical awareness in any situation is essential to guide decision-making.

To develop ethical and moral standards, these authors state the need for prison staff to engage in joint dialogues and reflections, in teams and with the prison system as an organisation. Schapp et al. (2022) defend a dialogical ethics approach, enhancing the need for deliberation and dialogue to arrive at a joint interpretation of situations and their improvement, where professionals can develop skills for future events.

Therefore, training should provide and facilitate reflection to deal with dilemmas. Since cases are highly context-dependent, their discussion and reflection upon specific moral dilemmas may be more fruitful than general guidance in training sessions or codes of conduct for prison staff (Schaap et al., 2022).

Critical Incidents Applied to a Training Session

The dynamisation of Critical incidents in a training session can be developed by employing a wide range of techniques such as brainstorming, role-play, simulations, debates, problem-solving exercises, etc. (Estrela & Estrela, 1994). From these, the choice was to highlight the techniques of brainstorming and role-play. Both techniques provide opportunities for group discussion and reflection, and were chosen due to their potential to foster reflective and critical thinking among trainees, as explained below.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a known technique used to generate ideas in several contexts (Oxley et al., 1996). The author of the concept was Osborn (1957, cited by Oxley et al., 1996 and Paulus et al., 2006), who first proposed the brainstorming procedure.

The members of a given group are asked to provide as many ideas as possible, with a non-judgmental attitude, to gather and expand upon the ideas of others. Osborn hypothesised that groups using this procedure would be more productive, and it is believed that collaborative brainstorming could improve idea productivity (Tuyet, 2017).

Brainstorming can be a very effective method since the group can benefit from its members' different perspectives and abilities, and people can stimulate each other to generate more ideas (Tuyet, 2017). In this sense, the use of brainstorming sessions and/or work teams is significantly higher among innovative enterprises than among non-innovative enterprises (Børing, 2017).

Oxley et al. (1996) highlighted using a facilitator in brainstorming sessions, who is not usually part of the group, to act as a guide. Osborn (1957, cited by Oxley et al., 1996) suggest that facilitators should be used to guide the brainstorming process. A facilitator is not usually part of the group, but an outsider who tries to help groups interact more efficiently (Putman & Brown, 2006, cited by Paulus et al., 2006), and the effectiveness of a facilitator will depend mainly on what the facilitator is trained to do (Oxley et al., 1996).

Table 2 provides an example of how to dynamise a brainstorming session based on a critical incident:

Brainstorming Session	
Elements	Situation
Description of the episode/event	
The primary and secondary characters	
The place and time	
Result and consequences	
Alternative Resolution 1	
Alternative Resolution 2	
Alternative Resolution 3	

Role-play

Regarding role-play, Songuro (2006) considers that this technique has proven effective in many training settings against traditional training methods. The latter tend to take time to update and, in most cases, do not foster trainees' understanding since the concepts learned are quickly forgotten because they are often taught without a direct connection and isolated from the practice. According to this author, *“role-playing accelerates the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and offers educators, trainers, and learners the opportunity to observe growth and progress in both teaching and learning transactions in a more practical way”* (2006: 355). Hence, a direct relationship between role-playing and practical learning seems evident.

Songuro (2006) states that direct experience in a learning activity is crucial to foster genuine understanding in trainees. Role-playing can be a tool for this development since the focus is not on memorising nor on the trainer but on the active participation of the trainees, thus facilitating the retention of information and enhancing new and more permanent learning, encouraging practice and direct experience in specific activities similar to real-life situations.

Ments (1989, cited by Songuro, 2006) argues that when people perform another role and behave like someone else in a given situation, there is solid learning about the person and the case; therefore, role-play may enhance change in behaviours and attitudes and develop emotional experiences. Thiagarajan (1996, cited by Songuro, 2006) adds that role-plays foster practice and the development of interpersonal skills, such as conflict management, negotiation, influencing, team building, active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and communication.

Table 3 displays an example of how to dynamise a role-play session based on a critical incident:

Brainstorming Session	
Elements	Situation
Main characters	
Secondary characters	
Scenario	
Situation and result	
Alternative Resolution 1	
Alternative Resolution 2	

Final Remarks

The present document is part of the set of Learning Resources developed in the scope of the PO21 Project. It was developed in the context of Prison officers' training, although the adopted methodology can be applied to any training context.

Given the characteristics and the unpredictability of prison officers' work, the partnership believes this is a solid methodology to develop critical and reflective thinking in trainees.

This guide provides guidelines on developing a case based on the critical incidents technique, how to analyse fostering the trainees' reflexive and critical thinking, and suggestions for its application in training sessions using brainstorming or role-play techniques. Both role-play and brainstorming also foster a reflective attitude in the trainees.

When applying this technique, whatever the method of dynamisation chosen, the trainer must follow the following procedures:

- a) Choose a realistic case, based or not on real facts, but the realism is essential to contribute to developing the trainees' reflective thinking;
- b) Describe the case thoroughly:
 - i. The context and place – frame the situation within a given place, building, department, cell...
 - ii. The characters (primary and secondary or witnesses) – it is essential to provide details regarding the age, personal and psychological description since the behaviours can be framed according to a given personality, the professional description and place within the hierarchy, and any other observations deemed relevant for the case (e.g. a recent traumatic event, a recent promotion..)
 - iii. The time (day, hour)
 - iv. The duration of the event (hours, minutes)
 - v. The behaviour of each character involved in the situation
 - vi. The implications of these behaviours (as they may collide with legal procedures)
 - vii. The reactions of each character
 - viii. The direct consequences and,
 - ix. The possible implications, not only in the short term but also medium and long term.
- c) If role-play is chosen to dynamise the case, the characters and the scenario must be as realistic as possible.
- d) Trainees can be allowed to present alternative behaviours and resolutions and reflect on the implications of their choices.

Finally, trainers should remember that this technique focuses on the trainees' active participation, and the trainer should act as a guide or facilitator.

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