# The Critical Incident Questionnaire

The critical incident questionnaire (referred to from this point on by its initials, the CIQ) is the instrument that has been most helpful in allowing me to see the classroom through students' eyes. It is a quick and revealing way to discover the effects your actions are having on students and to find out the emotional highs and lows of their learning. Using the CIQ gives you a quick insight into what’s working and what’s misfiring, what you should keep and what you should discard, and how different students experience the same classroom activity in varying ways. It also provides you with running commentary on the emotional tenor of each class you deal with. You can download this free from my home page: http://www.stephenbrookfield.com.

The CIQ is a single page form that is handed out to students once a week at the end of the last class you have with them that week. It takes about three to five minutes to complete and students are told *not* to put their name on the form. If nothing comes to mind as a response to a particular question they are told to leave the space blank. They are also told that at the next class I will share the group's responses with them.

The five questions on the form are:-

* At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
* At what moment in class this week were you most distanced from what was happening?
* What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
* What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
* What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs).

Students are given the last five minutes of the last class of the week to complete this form. As they leave the room I ask them to leave the top sheet of the critical incident form on a table by the door, face downwards. After I have collected the CIQ responses I read through them looking for common themes. For a class size of 30-35 students this usually takes about twenty minutes.

I look for comments that indicate problems or confusions, particularly if they are caused by my actions. Anything contentious is highlighted, as is anything that needs further clarification. Major differences in students’ perceptions of the same activity are recorded as well as single comments that strike me as particularly profound or intriguing. These themes then become the basis for the questions and issues I address publicly the next time we're together.

At the start of the first class of the next week I report back to students a summary of the chief themes that emerged in their responses. I tell them I’ve conducted an elementary frequency analysis and that anything that gets mentioned on 10 per cent of the forms will be reported. I also let them know that I reserve the right to report a single comment if I find it to be particularly revealing or provocative.

Students know that the only comments I will *not* report publicly are those in which they identify other students in a personally disparaging way. I inform students that if such comments are included on the form I will re-frame them as general observations or problems the group needs to address, or communicate them in a private, confidential conversation with the student concerned. Such conversations are usually with students who are reported on the CIQ’s to be dominating the class or generally throwing their weight around in an obnoxious manner.

If I have the time I will type up a one or two page summary and leave copies of this on students' chairs for them to read as they come in. Most times the pressures of other work mean I give a verbal report. If students have made comments that have caused me to change how I teach, I acknowledge this and explain why the change seems worth making. I try also to clarify any actions, ideas, requirements or exercises that seem to be causing confusion. Criticisms of my actions are reported and discussed.

If contentious issues have emerged we talk about how these can be negotiated so that everyone feels heard and respected. Quite often students write down comments expressing their dislike of something I am insisting they do. When this happens I know that I must take some time to re-emphasize why I believe the activity is so important and to make the best case I can about how it contributes to students' long-term interests. Even if I have spoken this case before, and written it in the syllabus, the critical incident responses alert me to the need to make my rationale explicit once again.

I am such a strong advocate of CIQ's because of the clear benefits their use confers. Let me mention a couple of these very briefly.

**Detecting Problems Before They Get Out Of Hand**

Using CIQ's helps teachers detect early on in a course any serious problems that need addressing before they get out of hand. Since I began using this over 20 years ago I have never had a class explode in unexpected mutiny. There have been explosions and mutinies but none of them have caught me by surprise. I have always had a pretty good idea from the CIQ responses that the explosion was coming. That knowledge allowed me to prepare for dealing with it when it happened.

**Justifying Why You Use Different Teaching Approaches**

CIQ’s also help me justify to my students why I use a variety of activities and approaches in my classes. Invariably, when I report back to students the spread of responses to the previous week's CIQ’s a predictable diversity emerges. A particular activity – say a small group discussion or a visiting speaker – is chosen by one group of students as being incredibly helpful and engaging, and by another group as a waste of class time. As I read out these responses at the beginning of each new week, I emphasize that my recognition of this diversity lies behind my own efforts to use a range of teaching methods and materials. If different people learn differently then I need to use as many different approaches as possible to make sure that for some of the time in class each person feels they are learning in a style that feels comfortable, familiar and helpful.

**Helping Resisters Realize They Are In A Minority**

One or two troublesome students who throw their weight around, constantly complain, or always object to class exercises you’ve arranged, can effectively sabotage a class and exercise an influence hugely disproportionate to their number. The CIQ’s provide the troublesome students, the teacher, and the other students with a realistic assessment of the degree of resistance that really exists in a class. When a majority report how they are engaged with, or helped by, the same activities that one or two object to, this stops you from overestimating the extent of the resistance and making lots of adjustments that aren’t really necessary.

**Using C.I.Q.'s with Small and Large Classes**

Teachers often raise the problem of how to use this method with small and large classes. The largest group with which I've used this method had about 250 students. Most of my classes have between 20 and 35 people enrolled. If you're teaching classes considerably larger than that, I would still advocate that the method be tried but that you read only a portion of the responses each time. It’s not realistic to think that a teacher with a class of 100 or so students can do a weekly analysis of a considerable amount of qualitative data. But asking a fifth of the class (a group of twenty or so students) to complete the C.I.Q.'s at each meeting is much more manageable, and you still get some valuable insight into what's going on.

Another approach is to ask all students to complete the forms individually and then to ask for volunteers to collect some of the forms and to summarize the main themes that are reported. The students who volunteer to do this are excused that week’s assignment and also given maximum points for it, so there’s usually a flood of people offering to do this. In my group of 250 I had 10 volunteers who each summarized the responses of 25 of their peers. I then read those 10 summaries to prepare a report on that week’s CIQ’s.

I use a variant on this approach when I'm working with very small classes or with groups that I have taught for a long period of time. Because it becomes easier in these situations for me to recognize handwriting, or to see the order in which students hand in their forms, there is a risk of students clamming up because they think I will be able to identify individual contributions. To prevent this happening I ask a student to collect the forms and summarize the responses. Again, this student is excused part of that week’s homework. Although I know the identity of the student who hands in the summary of group members’ responses that person is simply the reporter or conduit for group members' responses. I have no idea who made which of the comments that appear.

**A Caution**

Although I have argued forcefully for the use of CIQ’s as a central component of skillful teaching, I want to acknowledge that my use of these has been bedeviled by one constant problem, the ‘Perfect-Ten’ syndrome. The syndrome describes the unreasonable desire to want to collect a batch of CIQ forms at the end of every class that contains no negative comments and a surfeit of compliments. I find myself repeatedly frustrated by not achieving an unblemished record of expressed student satisfaction for every week of the course. Unless the C.I.Q. sheets are returned with the sections on distancing moments and puzzling actions all left blank, or marked 'Not applicable', and unless no negative comments are written in response to the question about surprising aspects of the class, then I feel as if somehow I've failed. I want all he forms to contain only comments that praise me, and that week’s class sessions, to the skies.

Knowing that this is an irrational desire on my part doesn't seem to help me very much. Intellectually and viscerally I know all about the contextual, complex nature of learning, and I am well aware of the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in teaching. I know, too, that the phenomenology of classrooms means that the same event is perceived and interpreted by different students in a myriad of antithetical ways. But the voice of reason is not heard very loudly by whatever emotional demons are driving me to assume the mantle of consistent perfection.

Even after many years of collecting, analyzing and reporting back students' critical incidents, I still die a hundred small deaths each semester as I read descriptions of distancing moments and unhelpful actions. So, if you're thinking of trying out something like the CIQ, try to learn from my mistakes. Remember that the point of doing this is not to score a perfect ten of student satisfaction week after week. The point is to situate your teaching in an understanding of the emotional, cognitive and political ebbs and flows of group learning that help you realize why achieving such a score is impossible.