

'Ethical Incidents': Experiential Learning in an Introductory Christian Ethics Course.

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Abstract

In this article I explain how I introduced experiential learning into my Introductory Christian Ethics course through the use of a critical incident approach. As a result of this initiative I influenced my students to develop a more nuanced and empathetic approach to making moral judgements and in engaging in critical reflection upon their basic moral values.

I offer an evidence-based explanation of my educational influence in encouraging and enabling my students to develop competence in moral judgment and action. My explanatory principles in my living-educational-theory include my educational influence in contributing to my students' reflection on complex real-life, critical incidents that have served as a catalyst to promote critical reflection on their fundamental values or moral presuppositions that promoted an 'ethics of care'.

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Overview

This article consists of five main sections: 1) I begin by setting the context of my teaching and the roots of my concern that the learning of my students is unrelated to their experience and situations. 2) I then review the 'Critical Incident' approach that I evolved to address this concern. 3) I follow this with a review of samples of students' Critical Incident assignments in which I evaluate my educational influence in their work as they reflect upon their values in relation to the critical incident vignettes that they present. 4) I further support my evaluation by presentation and discussion of the findings of a brief survey I conducted in support of my review of students' Critical Incident Assignments. 4) This leads into a discussion of the ways in which I might further my educational influence by addressing issues revealed by my review. 5) Lastly, I provide an account of my learning through the conduct of my research project and the EJOLTS' review process. As further evidence of my influence I present video interviews conducted with four of my students as an Appendix.

Context and Concern

The starting point of my discussion in this paper occurs a few years after taking up a teaching post in Ghana Christian University College, a small faith-based university college in Ghana, West Africa where I have been teaching the basic Christian ethics course since 1990. I had read Keith Eitel's book *Transforming Culture* (1986) and was outraged¹ by Eitel in which he gives a simplistic exegesis of what a 'Biblical Ethic' for marriage in African should be and then takes a straw poll of leaders to confirm his assertion! I then became alarmed that I was probably doing the same kind of thing! When I first began teaching the course I adopted the 'usual' (Biggs & Tang, 2007) didactic approach that presented a set of moral principles supported from authoritative texts that were discussed in class and applied to hypothetical cases. While I did have lively discussions in my classes, they were all at the theoretical level. There was little application to living situations and certainly little application to the lives of my students.

This alarm provided the motivation for my doctoral studies (1998-2007) in which I explored the question of the contextualisation of Christian ethics within African cultures. During the course of these studies I became more aware of situational issues in the formation and practice of moral traditions. When I reflected on my own teaching from this perspective I found that there was very little of situational engagement in my teaching of ethics. From 2000 and onwards I began to look for ways to resolve this growing

¹ My reviewers, especially Jackie DeLong and Stephen Bigger, were consistent in challenging me to define my Living Educational Theory. I had defined this in very broad theoretical terms which meant that my actual concern was rather obscured by layers of theory that I used to articulate and investigate my concern, but were not actually my concern itself. My concern actually crystallizes around the conviction that Ethics should be a dialogue within the context rather than a (foreign) monologue imposed on the context.

contradiction in my practice by finding ways to teach Christian Ethics in ways that engaged with the life-situations of my students.

Context and Community

My concern deepened with the new discoveries that I made in my doctoral studies in which I began to explore the ways in which ethical values from the Christian tradition took root in new contexts of faith, such as the one in which I worked in West Africa. I had already come to the conclusion as a result of my previous academic work (Jennings, 1989) that Christian Ethics were a radical (countercultural) 'minority' ethics (Hauerwas, 1984) that were particular to the Christian congregation understood as a voluntary community. This conclusion was reinforced through my engagement with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1988; 1990; 1999) who argues that moral discourse is only intelligible within the context of the moral tradition of particular communities and their 'extended arguments' about the right and the good through generations. In his work MacIntyre provides a model for analysing moral traditions in terms of their supreme good, the key virtues supporting this good, and the practices that sustain these virtues. Using MacIntyre's framework I was able to study the interaction of a Christian moral tradition (Methodism) with an indigenous moral tradition (Fanti traditional ethics) and trace their synthesis in Fanti Methodism over 150 years through documentary and qualitative research (Jennings, 2007; 2010).² In the course of my research I had to engage with actual moral practices in real-life situations with the context of committed communities.

After I had completed my Ph.D. in 2007 I began to study teaching and learning in higher education contexts. I then discovered the experiential dimensions of learning in the forms of reflective practice (Schon, 1987; 1991), action research (Susman, 1981; Susman & Evered, 1978) and action learning (McGill & Beaty, 2001). Through these studies I came to the realisation that students only learn when knowledge is actually rooted in their experience and action. Learning is something that students (rather than teachers) do (Biggs & Tang 2007; Kember & McNaught, 2007).

These influences led me to question the adequacy of my teaching practices and even the relevance of my students' learning, both of which were largely at the theoretical and abstract levels. I sensed that I was in a place of 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989) and I began to search for ways in which both my teaching and my students' learning could become rooted in their experience and in the practice of their Christian communities.

² In the autumn of 2014 I was delighted to discover that a Ghanaian scholar, Lord Elorm-Donker, had used my research (Jennings, 2007) as the starting point for his own doctoral studies and explored practical ways in which an Akan Christian Ethic might be developed within local Churches (Elorm-Donker, 2011). Because Elorm-Donker's work builds on my research yet goes far deeper I feel it is a strong example of my 'educational influence' (Whitehead, 1989).

My response to my concern: the adoption of the critical incident assignment

To respond to my 'concern' (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) I began to introduce a larger element of experiential learning into my Introduction to Christian Ethics module. This is a third year module and is one of the core courses taught to all students in the BA Theology programme in my Institution. The men and women in this programme are generally mature students, many of whom are already engaged in some form of Christian service, or wish to apply their Christian faith in their current professional role.

From the time I began teaching Christian Ethics in 1990 I have adopted a virtue-ethics approach – and I have strengthened this emphasis in the course of time in my choice of texts (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). However, I believe my most significant innovation is in the adoption of a Critical Incident Assignment to strengthen the experience or practice-based dimension of learning on the part of my students and to influence them to make more empathetic and contextual moral judgements based upon critical reflection.

The Critical Incident Assignment

The development of the Critical Incident Assignment in my Christian Ethics course forms the core of this paper. The nature of the assignment, as a learning exercise, has evolved over a number of years. It reflects the different stages of my growing consciousness as an educator in response to the educational influence I have encountered in my formal and informal learning. The assignment has 'emerged' as an influence out of my concern rather than been deliberately planned or developed.

Since 2003 I had been encouraging students to explore 'real life' moral issues or 'case studies' in their essays. This reflected my focus on contextualisation, arising from the influence of authors in the area of contextual theology (Bujo, 1992) and virtue-ethics (Bujo, 2001; Hauerwas, 1981; MacIntyre, 1988) in my doctoral studies. By slow degrees these influences led to the development of a full 'Critical Incident Assignment.' I tried to communicate these influences to my students in the following ways: An orientation session early in the course; individual tutorials to review topics and bibliography at the half-way point; presentations in the final sessions. I encouraged students to concentrate on incidents in their personal experience to ensure that scholarly resources were related to actual situations that the students had either faced or were currently experiencing. My concern was that students be able to relate scholarly resources directly to their context.

This process of slow emergence reached its climax in the 2014 academic session when I finally gained a clearer understanding of the use of critical incidents, largely under the influence of the work of David Tripp (2012). While I discovered this new knowledge subsequent to drafting my module descriptor I was able to use new insights to provide better clarity and focused influence to support my students in their assignments. These included a learning exercise in the third session of the module and the use of an article drawn from nursing education as resource for the tutorial stage. In this article qualified

nurses were asked to use a critical incident as the basis for a literature review in relevant medical practice (Elliot, 2004).

What are 'Critical Incidents'?

By this stage I was aware that I was using a well-established model for the Christian Ethics assignment that has a strong evidence-based theoretical pedigree. At this point it would be appropriate to pause in my narrative to consider the emergence and use of the Critical Incident Technique to establish some theoretical criteria to evaluate the use that I have made of this approach in consolidating and extending my educational influence.

Development of the Critical Incident Technique

John Flanagan seems to have been the first researcher to formally define a 'Critical Incident' in the context of his research to improve the performance of combat pilots in the Second World War (Flanagan, 1954). After the War, Flanagan refined his method and developed it into the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) as a means to develop workplace and professional competences (Joyce & Rankin, 2010).

Flanagan's overall approach was quantitative and rested on positivistic assumptions. It requires the comparisons of hundreds of critical incidents to establish effective behaviours (Flanagan, 1954; Joyce & Rankin, 2010). Even so, he stresses several times that the judgments of observers are subjective. Thus, his quantitative studies are also based on qualitative pilots that establish the necessary categories for quantitative research. It is this qualitative element that comes to the fore in later iterations of the CIT that take on an increasingly constructivist flavour. This is especially the case in David Tripp's version of the CIT, which he appears to have developed independently of Flanagan's work in the context of teacher education (Tripp, 2012).

For Tripp, a 'critical incident' is any incident that a practitioner 'makes critical' by reflecting upon it and analysing it. A critical incident can be any episode or sequence of events, positive, negative or 'ordinary', which the practitioner captures in a description and reflects upon at different levels - individual, institutional and socio-economic. Tripp's work has been highly influential in developing reflective practice, especially in education (Angelides, 2001; Finch, 2010; Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008; Griffin, 2003; Hughes, 2012; Hughes, Williamson & Lloyd, 2007; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011; Young, 2012), healthcare (Elliott, 2004; Mikkonen, 2005), social work (Crisp, Lister & Dutton, 2005; Sousa & Esebio, 2005) and management (Gray, 2006; MacFarlane, 2003).

Applications in Ethics Education

The work of Peter J. Dean (1992) is an early example of the use of the Critical Incident Technique in business ethics education (prior to Tripp's work). Dean advocates the use of the CIT as a training tool in which workers themselves define exemplary moral behaviours for specific work roles on the basis of their workplace knowledge. The approach suggested by Dean asks workers to apply moral principles to hypothetical situations in their workplace in group discussion exercises rather than beginning with actual incidents.

A more comprehensive approach is taken by Michael W. Small and Joy L. Cullen (1998) who incorporate Flanagan's CIT into reflective practice and small group discussion. The authors review the use of experiential and action learning approaches to teaching business ethics with CIT included as part of student learning activities. Graduate level students were asked to identify moral dilemmas they had faced in the course of their careers and to discuss how they had resolved them in small groups with their colleagues.

A particularly powerful example of the use of the Critical Incident Technique in medical education is that provided by William Branch (1998.) Branch describes the use of the Critical Incident technique as a basis for reflection by medical students on practice ethics during student internships in hospitals in the southern United States. Student critical incident narratives revealed sub-moral behaviour on the part of medical teams, which students found at odds with their own emerging virtues. Teams either exercised a cynical pragmatism or elevated abstract principles above compassion, empathy and fairness for individual cases. In many situations students found themselves in conflicted situations in which they felt that they were being asked to act immorally in order to be part of the team. Branch notes that his students, (whether male or female) generally adopted an 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1982), expressed in contextual virtues such as compassion and fairness, above an 'ethics of justice', expressed in (Kantian) universal principles. Branch also reflects on his pedagogical approach in which the critical incidents are discussed in small groups - leading to greater understanding of the context.

In a later article Branch (2005) gives further insight into the way in which critical incidents contribute to the moral and professional development of medical students. Firstly, writing about critical incidents in their practice enables students to critically reflect on their basic moral values or presuppositions and either reaffirm them or redefine them. Secondly, sharing their reflections with a supportive group can help students to nurture their moral judgement and counter the negative effects of a 'hidden curriculum' that medical students may encounter in the institution or in hospital practice contexts. Often patients are dehumanised in a manner contrary to the espoused values of the medical profession.

Branch establishes a link between reflection on critical incidents with Mezirow's idea of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990). Branch notes how profound personal change can be triggered by reflection on episodes from experience. Mezirow, in turn, argues that practical understanding and action in adults are controlled by received meaning structures (*schemes* and *perspectives*) through which they habitually engage the world. He distinguishes between reflection in which people reflect on how an action is performed and critical reflection when the presuppositions behind the action are evaluated and changed, when they are discovered to be wanting or out of tune with higher values. Critical reflection can be occasioned by 'distorting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1990, p. 14), critical experiences that create a 'hiatus' in our sense of meaning and act as 'catalysts' for change. Critical reflection on such dilemmas can lead to a change in meaning structures and perspectives that constitutes transformative learning. Critical reflection on presuppositions will lead to a refinement or change generating a *transformation* in the learner's meaning structures resulting in transformative learning. Viewed from this perspective what makes an incident 'critical' is that it provokes critical reflection on presuppositions and results in transformative learning.

Of particular interest for this study is Merizow's understanding of distorted *sociocultural* presuppositions that include moral values (Mezirow, 1990; 1997). Branch (1998; 2005) presents evidence of sociocultural transformative learning among his students as they reflected on their ethical presuppositions that generally resulted in an orientation to an 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1982). I shall present evidence below that similar learning has occurred among my students.

Conclusion: The use of CIT in ethics education

The use of the Critical Incident Technique as a tool of ethics education seems to involve two common processes. Firstly, the identification of critical incidents from experience from practice, either as dilemmas or examples of exemplary behaviour, that provoke critical reflection upon moral presuppositions or values. Secondly, the review of these critical incidents in small group settings both for learning purposes and to establish frameworks for future practices.

Evaluation of My Practice in the Light of Scholarship

Authors engaging in research into ethical practice using the CIT stress that formal Ethics courses are important but by themselves they are insufficient (Branch, 1998; 2005); there needs to be engagement with ethical incidents in real-life practical situations. As a teacher of ethics I became aware of this need through the influences I encountered in my doctoral research and have gradually adopted something like the critical incident technique in my ethics course since 2003. This movement arose out of a concern for the contextual relevance of my students' learning. Only in 2012 did I begin to use the term 'critical incident' in my Module Descriptor.

As I review my design of the Critical Incident assignment I find that my approach most closely resembles that of Branch (1998) and Small and Cullen (1998), who encouraged students to select and reflect upon critical incidents from their own practice: 'In one application of the critical incident technique, students were asked to reflect on and analyse an incident, i.e. a critical incident, which involved an ethical or moral dilemma which had occurred in their particular field of work experience' (Small & Cullen, 1998, p. 699). The main research method I set for the assignment is experiential observation – an approach used by both Flanagan (1954) and Tripp (2012). I asked students to analyse their incidents at different levels – related to the different levels of moral reflection identified by Stassen & Gushee (2003): basic convictions expressed in Biblical narratives; the relationships and responsibilities of the different parties involved in their different social groups such as family, Church, and community; moral insight and perception linked to more general moral ideas or principles. This 'layered' approach to analysis is similar to that adopted by Tripp and ideally leads to critical reflection upon presuppositions or basic convictions as recommended by Mezirow (1990). Lastly, it was my hope that students would interpret their critical incidents in the light of scholarly literature and debate. The presentation sessions were intended to support this process through discussion with peers and lecturers. In this context the presentations take on the role given to small groups by Branch (1998; 2005), Dean (1992) and Small and Cullen (1998) giving students the opportunity to explore their critical

incidents with others. This also parallels the approach taken by Tripp in his action research course (Tripp, 2012).

What I want to stress here is that the Critical Incident Assignment is not a 'stand-alone' learning activity, as may generally be the case with course assignments. The assignment did indeed begin this way but with the process of giving the assignment greater coherence and providing greater support for students in a challenging learning exercise, it has become more and more integrated into the heart of the teaching and learning activities of my Christian Ethics course. In this respect I find that my influence most closely resembles the influence that Branch achieved through his students' critical incident narratives and the discussion groups at which they presented their narratives (Branch, 1998; 2005).

Review of Sample Assignments

Having evaluated my practice and its possible influence on my students from the point of view of the literature, in this section I wish to review practice and influence from the perspective of student performance. I will do this through a review of selected student work.

Research Process

I circulated permission letters among existing students and graduates of the Institution who had completed the Christian Ethics course seeking permission to use their assignments in my research project. I gave an assurance of anonymity to any who wished to participate in the research. (For this reason it was not appropriate to post any images that might allow the participants to be identified.) I received nine positive and valid responses that span three years of delivery from 2011-2012 to 2013-2014 (from a population of 28). Of these papers, I have selected five assignments for particular comment. I chose these particular papers for three reasons: First, participants engaged with incidents of which they had direct experience; secondly, the papers provided evidence of analysis and some significant critique of the roles, responsibilities, and values of those involved with the incident; thirdly, the participants offer a recommendation that will address the issues in their incident.³ I believe these papers provide indicative examples of my developing educational influence at work in promoting experiential learning in the critical reflection upon moral values among my students.

This period also coincides with the cohorts who formed the population of a brief survey I conducted in support of the research process. I comment on results from this survey later in the article. The idea was to align these two elements of the research process so that the results from the survey would be aligned with the findings from the review of the samples and vice-versa.

³ In fact 17 of the 28 papers submitted in the period under consideration (61%) shared these characteristics. This suggests that while I have had some measure of success in extending my influence there remains much to do.

I need to add a comment at this point on the recurring emphasis on sexual morality that dominates four of the five samples.⁴ I felt that it was very important that students should have an unrestricted choice of topics to allow them to engage with topics that were of particular importance to them. Invariably, (and much to my disappointment) students selected critical incidents related to sexual morality. Of the nine eligible samples seven concern some aspect of sexual ethics. In the wider population 16 of the 28 papers submitted in the period under review (57%) were related to sexual ethics.

Two possible reasons for this emphasis suggest themselves. Primarily, within Ghanaian and other African societies, identity is socially defined by kinship and family-networks. Moreover, the family is conceptualised as a metaphysical reality comprising the ancestors, the living and the unborn (Jennings, 2010; Kunhiyop, 2008). This means that matters of sexual ethics impinge on questions of personal identity and social cohesion. For this reason, patterns of sexual behaviour were closely regulated in traditional society (Assimeng, 2000; Nukunya, 2003).

Kunhiyop puts this very well:

The stress on community ties in Africa means that any discussion of the sexual, reproductive and relational ethics of African marriage must take the whole community into account, including the immediate living community – parents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, grand parents, cousins, nieces, and nephews, the whole extended family and the entire village – and also the living dead (ancestors) and future members of the family yet to be born. (Kunhiyop, 2008, p. 191)

This leads to the second possibility. In contemporary urban Ghana, traditional patterns of kinship and marriage are under pressure (Nukunya, 2003), especially among the poor, with the result that sexual behaviour is no longer regulated. This, I suggest, has the potential to generate considerable existential anxiety concerning both personal identity and social stability. The sense of self is dependent upon the sense of belonging. For a person to attempt to define themselves apart from this network of social relationships will result in a marginalised identity at best.

The anxiety this creates does seem to be reflected in some of the examples below, especially those that discuss measures for the control of sexual behaviour. In these vignettes the action of Church leaders may also be understood in the light of African culture, as sexual behavior would have also been a matter for the 'Church family'. Church leaders may also

⁴ One of my reviewers, Stephen Bigger, was particularly concerned about this emphasis that he felt made intrusive judgements about the lives of those who featured in the critical incidents while distracting attention from more fundamental issues, especially concerning the use of power and patterns of oppression and inequality. While this analysis is valid I fear that it may represent an 'ethics of justice' approach (Gilligan, 1982), that could provoke a defensive monologue as participants sought to protect the perceived 'absolutes' (around order, authority, and 'purity') of their tradition against a perceived foreign imposition. In terms of Virtue-ethics this would be a confrontation between two distinct (rival) moral traditions (MacIntyre, 1990). I feel that the dialogical approach that I adopt is more constructive as it promotes a movement towards an 'ethics of care' *within* the moral traditions of the context. I believe that this is demonstrated by participants in their consideration of their critical incidents vignettes.

had felt that they needed to make a public stand as part of their accountability to the couple's extended families as this 'misconduct' occurred on their watch.

I feel that the Church does have a key role here, but not necessarily that assumed by the leaders in the Critical Incident Vignettes. I believe that the Church can support marginalized people to re-establish their social identity and status, or, where necessary explore alternative identities within the context of the Christian congregation.

Sample assignment from 2011

The Public Chastisement of a Youth Leader

My sample from 2011 concerns a critical incident involving the public chastisement of a youth leader who had impregnated one of the young women in the Church. The participant uses the incident to explore the application of Church discipline, both from the Bible and from scholarly literature. The leadership of the Church felt that public confession and repentance were necessary in order stress the seriousness of the immoral behaviour involved and to preserve the 'purity' of the Church. He disagrees with the action of the pastor and the elders of the Church:

I believe that it would be best to seek to restore a church leader who has impregnated a girl and the pregnant teenage girl than to call them in front of the whole church for all to know the evil they have done This is because I don't know how best that would help them to repent for God's name to be honoured.

The participant feels that a process of private admonition and repentance is more appropriate in restoring the 'offenders' to fellowship with God and to the community.

In reflecting on the incident the participant emphasises the values of *restoration*, *honouring God* (through repentance and forgiveness) and the (moral) *purity of the Church* before an immoral world in which the Church should preserve its uniqueness. For the participant the issue is the *means* – purity can be maintained through private admonition (following Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 18). This suggests a fundamental value of *compassion* that should have priority over 'purity'. Furthermore, the Church, following the example of Christ in the story of the woman accused of adultery (John, 8:1-11), should first of all be a *forgiving* and *restoring* community.

Alarmingly, while the participant does discuss the topic of teenage pregnancy, the power relationships and possible legal implications of the leader's actions are not considered. Unfortunately, the participant does not provide any further details concerning later developments between the two young people and whether there was a marriage or any continuing support of the youth leader for the young woman. I would have liked the participant to go deeper in considering the responsibility of the youth-leader in the situation.

Sample assignments from 2012

The Incident of the Tithe

The first sample assignment for 2012 gives a particularly interesting incident from the perspective of local cultures in Ghana in which the leaders of a local Church refuse to bury one their members because she was not up to date with the payment of her Church tithe.

This research is to find out whether a person's ability to pay tithe should be a prerequisite for not being buried. Pastors of [a local church] refused to bury a regular member of their church for not paying her tithe. As a result of this all the woman's children stopped attending the church and joined other churches, while others decided not to attend any church.

The participant reflects on both the place of the tithe and the importance of burial rites in some detail. He notes the status of the tithe in the New Testament is ambiguous. There follows a more interesting consideration of the role of mourning rituals in both local traditional practice and in wider social contexts that emphasises their importance to the bereaved. This discussion results in a stress on moral values such as *mercy*, *justice* and *faith* in contrast to the *cruelty* inflicted by *legalism* and the damage done to the image of the Christian community and its *witness* to the family of the bereaved and to its neighbourhood.

It seems the decision the Church took can be related to how Jesus responded to the Pharisees. Thus, one may conclude that the Church has not been merciful because they have ignored the 'weightier matters' that are mercy, justice and faith.

The participant makes the following evaluation of the case:

Again, according to the church the decision they took was right because it scares other members and makes them to pay their tithe consistently. However, it seems this will rather make them committed to the church instead of God. Members would like to do things to pay the pastor and elders of the church. Or in order to avoid embarrassment of family members, [church] members may decide to live their life anyhow and pay their tithe since that is what the church wants. Also, it put[s] the church [at] the level of a secular organisation where their slogan goes as, 'No contributions, no chop!' For example, in Acts 2:44-48 we are told that they were all together and shared everything in common to the extent that some sold their possessions and goods and brought the money to be shared by everyone. Therefore, where is this love today?

The incident is used here to critically reflect on values of *justice*, *mercy* and *giving* from the heart rather than from compulsion. The participant's concluding example and exhortation I find particularly powerful. I am very encouraged with the evidence of critical reflection here in which the participant concludes with a focus on the primacy of what might be described as 'distributive love.'

The 'Indiscretion' Incident

The second sample from the 2012-2013 academic year concerns church discipline. In this incident a young church member who entered an unplanned sexual relationship with a young woman in the course of his service for the Church was required to make a public confession of his offence. This was despite the fact that he acknowledged his indiscretion and assumed responsibility for the ensuing pregnancy by marrying the young women with whom he committed his 'indiscretion'. A typical Case is one of Kwame Oduro (not actual

name of person involved) who committed sexual immorality (fornication) in my local church...

Kwame Oduro was staying with a senior member of the Church and used to work for the church. A humble young man with the aim of evangelising a certain young lady ended up in fornication with her.

The disciplinary committee of the church was tasked to look into the matter when it was reported to the head pastor of the church. Kwame Oduro was summoned to appear before the committee but he refused. He stopped coming to the church and it was later reported that he had fled to his home town because of shame and fear [of] stigmatisation. He spent a year there before returning to Accra. He married the lady he committed the act with because she became pregnant. He currently has two children with her.

When he came back to the church he was rebuked by the leaders and was asked to publicly confess his sin to the congregation. The head pastor pleaded with the congregation to forgive him, pray for him and accept him again as a brother. Currently the church has been employing him to supervise some construction works of the church. Some congregation members were not happy about the disciplinary procedure and wondered whether the gentleman was the only sinner in the congregation. The Church justified its actions with the Biblical view of such matter[s] under the stipulated disciplinary policy of the church concerning such act of sin.

The participant writes a lengthy reflection, drawing on Biblical material, traditional values, and literature in Christian Ethics on the rise of promiscuity and the need to maintain both Christian and traditional standards of sexual morality. He concludes that this justifies the public rebuke given by the Church leaders. However, the participant also stresses the repentance and responsibility of the brother and his restoration to the community.

The participant stresses the following moral values and virtues: '*Public discipline*' – to maintain moral standards in the community, *restoration*, *chastity* and *responsibility*. In making his evaluation he makes the following comments:

The principles of loyalties of the Church would be towards Christ and focused on purity and holiness that make the Church unique from the world...He [the brother] also showed loyalty in his responsibility toward the lady and child by marrying the lady and taking responsibility for the pregnancy.

The perceptions exhibited in this case include the condemnation of sin, process of forgiveness, repentance and restoration, and chastity and holiness in the Church.

Sexual immorality (fornication) is a violation of the human sexual ethics adhered by Christians and as stipulated in the Bible. But modern cultural trend[s] in society sees nothing wrong with this act and argue that it is a human right, and should the church succumb to such societal view as a member commits such act. Who then do we obey God or man[?]

The participant used the incident to critically reflect on what he understands to be Biblical values of *holiness* and *responsibility* in an immoral world but these are balanced by themes of *restoration* and *forgiveness*. What is encouraging here is the focus on a positive example of responsibility on the part of the young man. In his reflection the participant

articulates and begins to critique his own values and to formulate virtues applicable to the incident he has chosen.

The participant's response in this third vignette stands in contrast to the first in which the participant felt that the practice of public confession and rebuke undermined the nature of the Church as a community of forgiveness and restoration. The third participant feels that the Church has to 'set an example' but what aspect of the example is predominant – the righteous rebuke or the loving acceptance?⁵

Sample Assignments From 2013

The Incident of the Wayward Niece

My first example from the 2013-2014 academic year concerns a young professional family who invited a young relative, their niece, to live with them to help with household chores in return for assistance with her education. (This is a very common practice in Ghana and is viewed as a form of family solidarity in which more prosperous members of the family give assistance to young people in less prosperous branches of their extended family (Nukunya, 2003).)

The participant reports that both the aunt and the uncle were working parents, the aunt as a teacher and the uncle as an ambitious businessman building his company. As a result the niece, 'Ama' is largely left to her own devices as both her uncle and aunt are frequently absent. Left largely unsupervised Ama forms an intimate attachment with a young man and becomes pregnant as a result. She is then sent back to her parents in the village in disgrace.

Subsequent reflection focus on the roles and responsibilities of the couple and their niece, the Church and participant himself (whose intervention as a Church youth worker would have been accepted in Ghanaian culture) are left out of the equation. Emphasis is placed on the young woman's responsibility to exercise self-discipline and the couple's responsibility, as surrogate parents, of *parental concern and guidance*. It is significant that the couple seemed to have lost sight of their responsibility in dismissing their ward. The participant concludes that they have a continuing responsibility – in terms of both traditional

⁵ Two years ago I was approached for advice on a similar matter by the pastor of the Church where I'm a member. One young man, a Church member, had been discovered to have been living with a young woman for some years having fathered two children with her. Some of the Church leaders felt that a period of suspension was necessary in order to signal the 'seriousness' of the offense. I suggested that it would be enough for the young man to acknowledge his fault, after which the Church should help the young couple, build their relationship. The young man did make his confession, which became an occasion for affirmation and celebration. He was commended for his courage in making his public statement and for his responsibility in seeking to place his relationship with his partner and children on a permanent and secure footing. The Church's Men's Fellowship later supported him in completing all the customary arrangements for the relationship to be recognized as a marriage by both families. The couple later had their marriage blessed in Church. They are a highly valued couple who play key roles in the life of the congregation. I believe that the crucial response to such cases is to establish practices of inclusion and empowerment for community, relationships and responsibility.

and Christian morality. The participant closes his reflection with this profound insight concerning the love and support that both the mother and his child will need.⁶

Though it was a right decision that Ama's guardians took by sending her to her mother in the village but the anger at which they expressed their action was rather too harsh. Everybody is liable to make mistakes like that of Ama, but there must always be an appropriate way of solving such an issue. Since this is Ama's first pregnancy, she may need much attention and much education, so being with the mother at the village is to her advantage. The guardians in the city still have the love that they had for her from the beginning and give her the second chance after her delivery. Ama must frequently be visited by her parents in the city and must be cared for as their real daughter. They shouldn't stop sending her gifts and must always communicate with her. They should let her know that her vision is not aborted; it's still active and living and that after delivery she will be brought back to the city to continue her education and her dream.

The Incident of 'Mabel's' Pregnancy

My final vignette is particularly challenging as it concerns a serving police officer who wrestles with a tension between public duty and Christian conscience. The participant has the responsibility of promoting a public policy of 'reproductive health' that includes emphasising access to abortion services. This conflicts with the participant's convictions as a Christian. The critical incident concerns the care offered to an educationally handicapped woman and the participant's dilemma is explored in relation to this incident. In 'Mabel's' case a creative alternative was found to abortion.

The participant describes her dilemma in the following words:

In spite of my adverse personal opinions, I'm supposed to be an 'ambassador' or 'advocate' for 'the advancement of the reproductive health of women' (an IPAS agenda supported by the Ghana Health Service <http://www.ipas.org/en/Where-We-Work/Africa/Ghana.aspx> (assessed 28/07/2014)). I had already received several sessions of training on this very issue of abortion. Actually, as part of our follow up and progress strategy, we were implored to, as a matter of duty, educate the ones who were not aware of this provision of the law, and to make referrals to selected and approved health facilities where necessary for abortion. Periodic assessments are made for suitable incentives.

The participant explores the issue of abortion extensively from Biblical sources and scholarly sources that engage with Christian, secular, and traditional perspectives and reaches the conclusion that it is wrong from the perspective of both her Christian faith and traditional culture. She considers the role and responsibilities of the different parties, especially that of the Christian police officer and the balance between duty and conscience. Her attention is also directed to the family, and also to the Church where it advocates pro-life stances. In the course of her discussion the participant reflects on the following values:

⁶ I am grateful to one of my reviewers, Stephen Bigger for helping me see the depth of the participant's insight in this reflection. Stephen comments: 'All this seems to miss the point. The girl will have a baby, who will be much loved and will need support. The new mother will also need support. The adults around her, by throwing their rattles out of the pram, are doing nothing to help.'

creativity in finding alternatives and operational care and justice. Reading her assignment, I find that the following virtues emerge from her account: *contentiousness, compassion, service and duty.*

The participant was able to find a creative solution to this particular incident:

Significantly, Mabel's family did not insist on abortion in spite of 'wielding' such an alternative. This meant a little economic or even emotional support could salvage [the situation].

... Mabel now has her baby girl, being catered for by the family thanks to the intervention of a support facility or package from [a sympathetic church].

In this last vignette the participant explores her ambiguous position as a police officer with a responsibility to advise and support women in their reproductive rights, which includes access to safe abortions, and as a Christian woman committed to a 'pro-life' position. Judging from the participant's statement above official policy and resources favoured a particular approach to reproductive rights. Using her discretion, and with the support of her wider faith community, the participant was able to provide alternatives that were more acceptable to 'Mabel' and her family, and possibly also to her colleagues. I felt that this was a creative response to her contradictory situation in which she found a middle path between simple compliance and withdrawal from her position to fulfil her public duty.⁷

Evidence of Educational Influence in Samples of Student work

Considering these five samples as a whole I suggest that my educational influence has been demonstrated in the following ways:

1. All participants have drawn on *real incidents from their experience* that have become critical for them through reflecting on their moral and ethical significance. All the incidents are 'close to home': pre-marital sex, adultery, burial, extended family relationships and abortion. These all reflect moral issues that are culturally significant and matters of direct concern to the participants.

2. All participants were able to *articulate key Christian values and virtues* through which they interpreted their incidents. Recurring values included *restoration, justice, holiness of life, repentance and relationships.* Among the virtues that were seen as key to Christian moral performance are *compassion, forgiveness, sacrificial love and integrity.* Thus the critical incident exercise was valuable in terms of enabling the participants to construct their moral reality within the framework of the Christian moral tradition and in the light of their Christian identity. The virtues identified by students all suggest an orientation to 'an ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1995; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).

⁷ Initially I felt that this participant had demonstrated transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1997) as she had wrestled with her basic convictions within the context of her professional practice. Pip Bruce Ferguson, one of my reviewers, considered that she was the epitome of a 'living contradiction.' In this case, however, 'transformation' does not occur as she does not change her basic convictions but rather finds creative ways to act in congruence with them.

3. All participants in the sample were also able to use these values as the basis for *evaluation* of the incidents and *recommendations* as to how the concerns raised by the incidents might be addressed. Thus there is evidence not only of interpretation but also of judgement, and at least in one case, creative action.

4. All participants were able (to varying extents) *to evaluate the role and responsibilities of the different players* in their incidents. In all but one case, participants also extended this evaluation to themselves. While I had hoped this might be part of my influence, it was not part of the brief for the assignment and it does require greater moral maturity. It is easier to begin to use a moral lexicon in evaluating the behaviour of others before a person is able to apply it to him or herself. It may be that this 'external' evaluation is a stage on the way to full moral awareness (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). Notable in the discussion of roles and responsibilities is the position of the Church that is identified variously as a 'pure community', a place of 'restoration' and a vehicle of witness. This emphasis probably reflects both the communal emphasis in local cultures but also an understanding of the role of the Church as a moral community (in terms of definition, formation, and action) that I have sought to communicate in my teaching.

5. All participants were able to draw on *sources from the Christian tradition*, principally the *Bible*,⁸ to enable them to formulate their values and virtues. Of course, this means not the just Bible alone but the hermeneutical framework through which the Bible texts are interpreted. My Christian Ethics course, as it stands, includes significant content on Biblical interpretation in which, following Stassen & Gushee (2003), priority is given to Jesus' words and actions as the defining criteria by which Christians define their ethics and critique their moral practice (according to the 'weightier matters of the Law'). This emphasis is reflected in the samples.

6. In three of the samples traditional values played an important role in setting the context for moral reflection and even informed the construction of Christian values and virtues that were applied to the incident. I find this a very encouraging development for it provides evidence of participants forming the kinds of synthesis for themselves that I feel are the basis for the contextualization of Christian ethics

⁸ The use of the Christian Scriptures or other religious texts as sources of moral values is often contested. The approach adopted here assumes that ethics is a 'tradition constituted' inquiry or argument within (and often between) specific communities (MacIntyre, 1999). Insofar as sacred texts are a part of a community's tradition, and in some cases, identity, they will be a key source of its moral ideas. However, the way that sacred texts function as sources of values is complex. First of all, there is often diversity within the canonical texts themselves with some texts apparently requiring the extermination of unbelieving nations, while others model and portray the welcome and acceptance of (foreign) strangers and even the love of enemies. Secondly, communities begin to establish traditions of interpretation in which the examples and values that are given the highest prominence by the community over time become the key to interpreting the sacred texts as a whole. I believe that it is critical that we understand *how* texts function as a source of values and what factors might influence their interpretation. I think we actually have some examples of how this happens among African Christians in the examples that I have presented. For a fuller discussion of the role of sacred texts as a source of ethics in Christian and other faiths readers are referred to Fowl and Jones (1997), Smart (1996), and Stassen and Gushee (2003).

7. Four of the five participants in the sample engaged constructively with scholarly literature that deepened their reflection and judgement of their critical incidents. In one case, however, the participant used scholarly literature to critique and extend crucial values. Engagement with scholarly literature is an *academic* influence that I wanted to promote among my participants. It is important for the grade awarded to the assignment, but more importantly it can promote critical thinking and critique by participants of their own values. This in turn builds a stronger moral identity.

8. The critical incidents selected by the participants acted as catalysts to promote critical reflection in Mezirow's (1990) sense. Participants articulated and evaluated their basic moral values or presuppositions. There is also some evidence in the sample of a movement toward transformative learning as moral values and engagement were deepened, changed or adjusted.

Insofar as participants were able to use relevant critical incidents as a starting point for identifying, articulating and critically reflecting on key values and virtues from their Christian identities that relate to relationships and issues within their experience and context, I consider that my educational influence has been both significant and effective. Even so, in future uses of this approach I will need to consider how I can encourage my students to give greater attention to their own role in critical incidents, achieve a greater engagement with traditional values to develop a contextual synthesis, and, lastly, encourage critical engagement with scholarly literature and perhaps create and share their own living-educational-theories of their educational influences in their own learning.

Further Reflections on the Evidence Provided by Student work

As I reflect on these samples afresh I am struck by the similarity of some of the responses of my students to Branch's medical students (Branch, 1998; 2005). Most of my participants were also alarmed by the complacent and unfeeling nature of the moral practices that they witnessed and as a result of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990) began to stress 'weightier' virtues related in the context (such as love and mercy) that are more person, rather than rule or result, centred. This, it seems to me, also follows Jesus example as presented in the Gospels.

Both Branch's students and mine seemed to move from an 'ethics of justice' toward an 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1995) as a result of critical reflection. There is also some indication that just as Branch's students sought change in their practice of medicine so also my students are committed to a more person focused moral practice in the Churches and other institutions in which they are involved. Both Branch's students and my students became transformative learners who have adopted 'superior perspectives'. As Mezirow (1990, p. 14) comments, '*More inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives are superior perspectives* that adults choose if they can because they are motivated to better understand the meaning of their experience' (italics in original). Based on the evidence provided by Branch's research and my own, these 'superior perspectives' appear to be embodied in an 'ethics of care'.

These parallels are also supported by the findings of a brief survey I conducted after the course with a limited number of students and graduates who had completed the Christian Ethics Course. (I received 10 replies from a possible population of 25 who were

available at the College. This population comprises students who have participated in the Christian Ethics Course over a period of three years from 2012-2014). I asked the following question: 'When considering the incident that you studied what values and virtues did you find were particularly important?' The following responses, ranked by occurrence, emerged: love (6), faithfulness (4), truthfulness (3), chastity (3), patience (3), forgiveness (3), submissiveness (2), holiness (2), loyalty (2), obedience (2), acceptance (2), commitment (1), purity (1), kindness (1), sympathy (1), diligence (1), honesty (1), transparency (1), responsibility (1), goodness (1), peace (1), trustworthiness (1), understanding (1), justice (1), integrity (1), kindness (1), nurturing (1), service (1).

I reviewed this list of values and virtues and noted that many were related to each other in that they have similar attributes, or appear to be dimensions of more comprehensive virtues. For example, truthfulness, honesty, commitment all presume each other, while they may not be exactly the same. On the other hand, kindness and nurturing both seem to be dimensions of love. In both cases the values are *cognate*. Where I found this to be the case I put the values into clusters and combined their incidence ratings. This established the consolidated pattern that is set out in Table 1.

Values and Virtues	Incidence
Love, Kindness, Nurturing	8
Faithfulness, Loyalty, Commitment, Trustworthiness	8
Truthfulness, Honesty, Transparency, Integrity	6
Patience, Sympathy, Understanding	5
Forgiveness, Acceptance	5
Submissiveness, Obedience	4
Holiness, Purity, Goodness	4
Chastity	3
Diligence, Responsibility, Service	3
Peace	1
Justice	1

Table 1: Clustered values and virtues.

Overall, students prize the virtues and values that enable them to actively love their neighbours. Those values that lead to the positive evaluation and orientation of the self to God and neighbour are ranked next. Interestingly, those values that could be construed as being oriented primarily towards God receive third ranking. I wonder if this might not be a reflection of John's sentiment that our love of God is judged by our love of our neighbour (1 John, 4:20). Interestingly these are also the virtues articulated by Branch's students in an

'ethics of care' expressed in their concern for the patients they encountered (Branch, 1998; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).⁹

Identifying My Educational Influence in The Critical Incident Assignment

When I articulated my concerns I stressed the importance of experiential learning in establishing moral values and virtues in moral conduct and practice within the relationships of actual communities. The examples of student work, the responses to the questionnaire, and the interviews show that the critical incident assignment has been a valuable tool for achieving such learning within the students' own context.

However, my influence has extended beyond facilitating merely instrumental learning (Merizow, 1990; 1997) by my students applying received values to new situations. Rather, it has generated transformative learning by encouraging my students to critically reflect upon and change these received values in a more *caring* orientation (Gilligan, 1995) based around the teaching and example of Christ as the principle criteria for Christian Ethics. The evidence above shows that I have had an educational influence in my students' learning through my teaching of Christian ethics. There is also some indication that the Critical Incident Assignment has provided a starting point for students to begin to form their own living educational theories around their values.

I had also hoped that the critical incident assignment would also help students to 'ground' scholarly insights from the literature of Christian Ethics and moral theology in lived experience and establish a dialogue in their consciousness between the values of students' Christian faith and those of their traditional cultural background. This would serve to deepen critical reflection. With one or two notable exceptions I have been less successful in these dimensions that I had hoped. However, I feel that this is due to limitations in my application rather than in the critical incident approach itself.

I have offered an evidence-based explanation of my educational influence (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) in encouraging and enabling my students to develop

⁹ In their research Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) found that an orientation to an 'ethics of care' was predominantly found among women while men were predominantly oriented to an 'ethics of justice'. My sample contained only one woman and yet the preferred virtues of my participants (rated 5 and above by occurrence) were predominantly those associated with an 'ethics of care'. Those normally associated with an 'ethics of justice' were generally rated 4 and below. My study is too small to allow for any generalisations but it does pose some very interesting questions concerning the roots of the distinction between an ethics of care and justice. Gilligan (1995) theorizes that the distinction arises from the history of patriarchy that is expressed in the idea of (male) autonomy. My findings here and those of Branch suggest other possibilities. It may be that the focus on living experience provided by reflection on critical incidents promotes an ethics of care through emphasising relationships and responsibilities for actual people, usually a feminine concern according to Gilligan. Cultural differences may also be a factor such as the difference between (African) communal cultures and (Western) individualistic cultures and 'caring' subcultures (feminine, professional, and religious) within a predominantly 'justice' oriented moral culture. A further issue worth investigating is whether the moral teachings of Jesus also have a basic orientation to an 'ethics of care'.

competence in moral judgment and action. My explanatory principles in this explanation include my educational values in contributing to my students' reflection on complex real-life, critical incidents that have served as a catalyst to promote critical reflection on their fundamental values or moral presuppositions.

I see that there is some room for improvement in encouraging students to greater comparative and critical engagement through making greater reference to both traditional values and to scholarly theory and debate in Christian ethics as well as in generating and sharing their own living-educational-theories with the values from Table 1 above.

Opportunities to Extend My Influence

While I feel that some of my students have begun to form their own living-theories as a result of my influence through the Critical Incident Assignment, I can also see – as is evident from my discussion on the research process – that there is considerable room for improvement in encouraging students to generate and share their own living-educational-theories with their values, from Table 1 above, as explanatory principles. How can I go about this?

First, I can make some basic improvements in my pedagogy recommended by my students in the brief survey. They suggest that I should provide further tutorial and supervisory support for their projects thereby deepening my empowering relationships with them and they recommend greater contextualisation of course content and resources. This is apt, as it will provide further opportunity to guide students in their reflection on their critical incidents and enable students to make clearer connections between scholarly resources and their contexts of moral experience and practice.

Secondly, and more importantly, following some of the key findings of this study, I need to conduct wider explorations with my students into the nature of the Church as a moral community. In particular, we will need to consider what kinds of relationships and uses of power can build practices of care and responsibility that will adequately express the the 'higher' virtues and values that students esteem. Can the community of 'forgiveness' and 'restoration' in which members can construct whole identities that participants desire be built through punitive judgement or by educative empowerment based upon an 'ethics of care'? I take the latter to be the true path of Christian discipleship.

My students have been indispensable partners in helping to develop and explore my living-theory and my educational influences. I wish to express my sincere thanks to them and to my colleagues. The 2013-2014 cohort played a critical role in the progress of my inquiry. They are pictured below with one of my colleagues and myself (I am the pale guy on the left of the picture).



Image 1. 2013-14 Ethics Cohort

Using the Critical Incident Approach to Evaluate My Own Learning

At this point I feel that it would be appropriate to use the critical incident approach to review my own learning. The incident that provoked my learning journey was my reading of Eitel and my conviction that there had to be a better way to contextualise ethics so that moral traditions are transformed from within by the Christian Gospel rather than coerced by impositions from without. This caused me to be highly critical of my teaching of Christian ethics as an abstract or imposed tradition. Tanner's observation that Christianity has no culture but is parasitic on all cultures (Tanner, 1997) became a key point of reference. This led me to the realisation that what was necessary was to study the ways in which local Christian communities were developing their own local moral traditions in interaction with their culture and so transforming their cultures from within (MacIntyre's 'synthesis model' (MacIntyre, 1990). This led to my doctoral research in which I studied the interaction between the Methodist and Fanti (Akan) moral traditions and discovered elements of transformation in the practice of leadership (Jennings 2007; 2010). (Elorm-Donkor in his research has taken this study further and actually developed models and processes by which local congregations can develop their own moral syntheses (Elorm-Donkor, 2011).)

As result of my doctoral studies I became concerned that my students should also begin to study Christian ethics from within their context rather than as an abstract body of theory. By degrees I began to develop the use of critical incidents with my students for them to make their own journeys of discovery that we review and discover together. I believe that this has changed my classroom from a site of 'teaching' to one of learning in which we consider how Christian virtue can be expressed in our differing contexts and situations. More recently I've begun teaching ethics of management in the B.A. Development management programme offered by my College and I've found the critical incident approach to be a valuable tool in this course also, primarily because it allows students to explore moral issues in situations familiar to them rather through 'worked' case studies drawn from foreign contexts (MacFarlane, 2003).

The lessons I've learnt by using the critical incident approach have brought a complete reorientation to my approach to higher education. Whereas in the past I would have been content merely to find more effective methods of transmission (livelier lectures) now I'm attempting to build an experiential dimension into all of my educational activities and I've become an advocate for experiential learning within my institution. Let me offer two examples here. Recently I was asked to teach Introduction to Philosophy after a break of several years. Initially I struggled to connect philosophy with experiential learning until I discovered the autobiographical and narrative approaches employed by Laura Duhan Kaplan (2006) and Kevin Harrelson (2012) and invited my students to be part of a dialogue in which we framed and discussed answers to philosophical questions from our life experiences and compared them to the answers offered by key figures in the history of philosophy. I'm also currently attempting to establish a Centre for Workplace Learning within the University College affiliated with the Global University for Lifelong Learning (see <http://www.gullonline.org/index.html>) in which we support reflective practice through coaching and action learning. One of the initiatives I'm currently working on is developing a framework to support and recognise reflective learning by our students in their Long Vacation Internships in which they consciously link the academic knowledge they have acquired to their internship experience.

So what have I learnt since my outraged reading of Eitel's book? I think in common with my students I've arrived at a more compassionate and generous view of Christian Ethics after having considered its practice in actual situations in interaction with other moral traditions rather than as abstract theory. This reflects more of an ethics of care (Gillian, 1995) than a concern with abstract righteousness that I feel is closer to Jesus' agenda. I have certainly engaged in critical reflection and I feel that I have made such a journey that I can reasonably suggest that my fundamental assumptions concern the practice of both education and ethics have been transformed (Merizow, 1990; 1997).

It might help if I explain this in terms of levels of learning. Nielsen (1996), drawing on the work of Schön and Argyris, identifies three levels of learning or change: single loop in which you just learn to do what you are doing better; double loop in which you question and change the assumptions of your practice; triple loop in which you attempt to develop a whole new framework of practice. With the introduction of the critical indecent and narrative approaches into my current educational practice I believe I have accomplished

double-loop learning. My attempts to develop a parallel approach to learning alongside my institution's existing academic programmes, I believe, represent triple loop learning.

Learning Along the Way

Over the last three years, in partnership with colleagues, I've been attempting to introduce the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL) Learning System into Ghana Christian University College. As part of this I've been on my own learning journey through the five levels of a GULL 'doctorate'. Levels four and five of the GULL programme require the evaluation of a workplace project – either in the present or the past (GULL, 2015). At about the same time as part of my engagement with action learning and action research, I had discovered, and become excited by, Living Theory Action Research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Early in 2014 I saw an appeal for papers for this journal. The prospect of writing living-theory was exciting but I didn't feel that I had any practice research to hand that might be adequate. However, a chance conversation with one of our graduates who was paying us a visit provided me with my material. I asked my visitor what had been the highpoints of his learning in his B.A. Theology course. 'Oh', he said. 'That case-study you had us do in ethics – I was able to use that to address some issues.' I suddenly realised that he had identified my educational influence.

My initial conception was very grandiose. I planned to review all of the educational influences that had formed my living-educational-theory including phenomenology of religion (Smart, 1971; 1996; Smart & Konstantine, 1991) and relational Trinitarianism (Moltmann, 1981, 1985) and show how all of them were expressed in the Critical Incident Assignment. (I was actually trying to write two different pieces. One was a piece about my identity as a teacher (rather like that of Pip Bruce Ferguson in the June edition 2015 of this journal (Bruce Ferguson, 2015) which I might still write), while the other was on the utility of a particular educational method as means of extending educational influence.) Needless to say my reviewers could find no real connection between my cosmic vision and the assignment that I set my students. I was left perplexed. I knew that the connection was there, I could *feel* it, but how could I track it down. I was stumped!

Early in September 2014, Jack Whitehead and I began a series of conversations. I have vivid memories of the first. I met with both Jack and Marie Huxtable. Jack treated us both to lunch while we discussed concepts of divine love outside of Bath Cathedral on a gorgeous late summer's day. Later conversations took place via email. In the course of these conversations Jack gave me the motivation to revive my project when it had hit the doldrums by having me look again at the research cycle and then the support to move my research forward once I discovered (through Jack's patient coaching) where the focus of the project needed to be. This was not in the richness of my theology but in the bridge that I was using to communicate my living-theory. The heart of my project was the 'Critical Incident Assignment' and I needed to look carefully at what, exactly, it communicated. Basically, it was that moral values could only really be explored in the student's own living experience – within the context of their workplaces, families, communities, churches and the relationships that these all entailed. I suddenly saw that experiential learning was key to my concept of ethics education and learning. Once I saw this connection more clearly I was able

to go backwards to identify the influences in virtue-ethics, my own empirical research, and experiential approaches to learning that had contributed to the formation of my Critical Incident Assignment. This same insight then enabled me to go forwards to study the impact of the Critical Incident Assignment itself and the manner in which it generated critical reflection and an 'ethics of care.'

It was only when, thanks to Jack's help, I stopped trying to prove my influence that I could see the influence that I was actually having. The final breakthrough came when Jack commented on the virtues that the participants prioritised in Table 1 and I saw that my students were actually adopting an 'ethics of care' as a result of their reflections. This is the kind of influence that I was hoping to effect! Sometimes things grow better by themselves than if you try to force them. Many thanks Jack for helping me to get in the 'flow'!

The review process itself has also been a critical learning process. Thus, I need to add some comments about my learning through the review process in my conversations with my reviewers Jackie DeLong, Stephen Bigger and Pip Bruce Ferguson.

Jackie provoked me to go deeper in understanding the meaning of a living-educational-theory, which includes the influence of the learning processes that I seek to establish for my students and on me as well as them. She also encouraged me to weigh my words more carefully in terms of their nuance and number.

Stephen adopts a very different approach to ethics to me, which meant that he was able to offer very contrasting views on student reflections and recommendations to mine. I was focusing the small steps that my students were taking within our shared Christian moral tradition while he sought to critique the abusive patterns of power and deceit that he believed were evidenced in the critical incident vignettes. While I still have some fundamental disagreements with Stephen, which are reflected in our robust discussions, he forced me to address the issues he raises from the resources of my own tradition and practice.¹⁰ This directed me to the 'ethics of care' that I believe are inherent in the Sermon-

¹⁰ The following is an example of one our 'robust discussions' in which we discuss the role of Critical Theory:

Stephen - Critical theory is a formal method of applying such scrutiny to those holding power. I can see how such a scrutiny can feed off an understanding of ethics, and how your work with students could develop your and their ethical awareness (using the term ethics precisely and not conflating it with doctrine). This all said, I don't think your journey is yet over.

Brian - Critical Theory does not form part of my methodology and it is different from critical reflection. My issue with this approach is that is just is what it is: *critical* and *theory*. Its great contribution is that it does analyze how concepts and social roles reflect patterns of oppressive power sadly, it does not seem to have creative power to develop concepts and roles that do empower people. Critical theory forms part of a long and distinguished skeptical tradition in European thought that is suspicious of any claim to truth. This is great for demolition but awful for construction! Once the ground is cleared everyone is afraid to put anything up (or even to stand!) for fear of being accused of some form of oppression! Critical theory remains at the theoretical level and does not support the development of new practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2001).

Moreover, Critical Theory generally critiques a context from the outside – often from a privileged position of 'neutrality'. If I used this approach I would be acting in contradiction with my concern to journey into the context and dialogue with those inside the cultural context. Use of critical theory in my context would only serve to alienate those I wish to dialogue with and create the impression that I was seeking to

on-the-Mount and the example of Jesus and that I take to be the criteria of ethics. Due to Stephen's influence I see that in future iterations of the Christian Ethics course I will need to explore the role of authority and relationships within the Christian congregation with my students. In particular, we will need to discover the ways in an 'ethics of care' can be nurtured.

Lastly, Pip entered the conversation with an encouraging spirit that has not prevented her from raising some critical issues about the nature of transformative learning that I've had to address in the text in terms of critical reflection and transformational learning. While I can make the claim that my students engage in critical reflection, in Mezirow's sense, evidence of transformational learning is more limited. Rather, it needs to become a goal in my future work with my students.

It has been a long, challenging, but very fruitful road. My friends, thanks to you all.

critique contextual practice by a methodology generated by the European tradition. In doing this I would then be open to the (justified) charge that I'm using critical theory as a means of power myself.

Far better approaches are Appreciative Inquiry that seek to build on 'what is best' in the context (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and Ghaye's model of reflective practice that incorporates a great deal of appreciative thought as well as promoting critical reflection (Ghaye, 2011). Interestingly when I adopt these, and similar, approaches participants object that I'm not giving sufficient weight to Divine Wrath!

I also have an interesting Critical Incident with Critical Theory. I once had a change of supervisors that took me out of the Selly Oak Colleges School of Mission where I had originally registered. One wanted me to abandon Virtue-ethics completely and rather use Critical Theory as my methodology. I could see no way to engage with my context using this approach – especially as post-modern approaches make little sense in contexts that have not passed through 'modernity' – something the late Kwame Bediako (1994) considered be a uniquely European phenomenon! I was ready to throw in the towel but friends encouraged me to make a petition directly to the Head of the Theology Department on the basis of work that had already been approved by supervisors from within the department. This proved to be excellent advice as I was assigned to two outstanding supervisors Sigvard von Sicard and Jabal Buaben who supported me in the successful completion of my Ph.D., which led to the publication of my book *Leading Virtue* (2010) under the sponsorship of Professor Werner Ustorf, who was one of my Examiners, and then to Elorm-Donkor's (2011) excellent research. Adopting critical theory would have in no way contributed to the construction of such an affirmative narrative. Nor, would the current paper exist. Critical theory did not, could not build this practice.

Stephen, may I humbly suggest that you consider constructive and practical alternatives to critical theory! Perhaps when I visit the UK next and we are no longer reviewer and reviewee we can discuss this over some jars in a nice pub somewhere – mine will be a pint of Old English Cider! ;-)



Image 2: Cider!

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Appendix

Video Evidence of the Emergence of Living Theories

To explore my influence further I conducted four video interviews with participants from the 2013-14 cohort of the Christian Ethics Module. At the beginning of each interview I asked each of the participants if they would be willing to be recorded on video for their responses to be viewed by readers of the Educational Journal of Living Theories. The four participants whose responses are presented all agreed. In the course of the interview I asked each participant what he or she had learnt in the course of the Critical Incident Assignment. Some did not distinguish between the module as whole and the assignment.



Video 1: [P. 'As a Theologian and a Christian'](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xMEz0D_pes&feature=youtu.be) (Jennings, 2015d)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xMEz0D_pes&feature=youtu.be

'P' relates how the Critical Incident Assignment has deepened his relational skills in counselling practice and enabled him to appreciate the impact of the Beatitudes and Fruits of the Spirit as a 'Theologian'. P's comments relate to class sessions in which we discussed the nature of Jesus' Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 3-12) and Paul's Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 22-23) as relational virtues that build reconciliation, service and community. It appears that P is putting these to work already in his pastoral ministry.



Video 2: [G 'Marriage Issues'](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFzoEd9oE3M) (Jennings, 2015b)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFzoEd9oE3M>

'G's critical incident concerned divorce and he relates his growing awareness that the roots of divorce are to be found in 'small issues' that affect the quality of relationships. His developing *theory* is that married couples in the Church should take nothing for granted in their relationships and continually build their understanding.



Video 3: [F Love and Anger](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qskVFAWLpz8) (Jennings 2015c)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qskVFAWLpz8>

'F' takes this insight further. He explains how using Jesus' teaching on forgiveness he was able to resolve a misunderstanding between a couple in the Church in which he is a minister that was reaching the point of angry violence.



Video 4: [E 'People I met'](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tL-Xi_Jy6Zw) (Jennings 2015a)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tL-Xi_Jy6Zw

'E', demonstrates the greatest progress in developing her own living theory in that her response demonstrates an active understanding of Christian ethics in which she actively seeks to build relationships of care and empowerment to extend her own influence

I feel that the participants' responses indicate that they are beginning to form their own living-theories in response to both the Critical Incident Assignment and the interaction they have experienced in class sessions. Of these I consider that E has made the furthest progress in forming her own living-theory as a result of my influence.