

IDENTIFICATION OF ACADEMIC TEACHER COMPETENCIES USING CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

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Purpose: the aim of this study is to show the possibility of using the critical incident technique (CIT) to identify the competence needs of academic teachers.

Methodology: Interviews with academic teachers using the CIT allowed us to confirm the importance of substantive and methodological competencies.

Findings: It has been shown that CIT provides the opportunity to identify the competencies of an academic teacher while also indicating the importance of personal and psychological competencies.

Research limitations: the CIT only allows for qualitative research to be conducted. Pointing to the limitations of the conducted research, it is worth mentioning the number of respondents, the lack of the differentiation of the respondents due to seniority or the positions that they held. To confirm the obtained results, it would be worthwhile to conduct research in a quantitative model on a much larger sample of subjects. The results of such an analysis could be verified by a list of competencies of academic teachers that is established using the CIT. Quantitative analysis is a future direction of research.

Practical implications: the analysis of the obtained empirical material emphasized the importance of the psychological competencies of academic teachers. The results of the research indicated possible competence gaps of academic staffs related to their abilities to cope with difficult situations that resulted from work at a university. In the light of the obtained results, it is necessary to consider the possibilities of developing a group of psychological competencies so that activities that support teachers in this area can be implemented at the organizational and university levels. Such support would strengthen the future teachers' abilities to react positively in difficult situations and would also act as an intervention in the event of a situation that exceeds the employees' abilities to cope independently. The importance of a clear system of procedures is also important here; this would support academic teachers – especially in crisis situations.

Originality/value: the results of the research indicated the usefulness of the CIT in diagnosing the competencies of academic teachers. The article shows the importance of psychological competencies for the role of an academic teacher. The article is addressed to both academic staffs and university authorities.

Keywords: critical incident technique, academic teacher, competencies, psychological competencies.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

An academic teacher must usually reconcile two roles in his/her work. On the one hand, he/she is required to be a good teacher, and on the other hand, a good scientist. In addition, recent years have brought dynamic and difficult changes in the environment, which also affect the work at universities. The pandemic period forced everyone to isolate, which resulted in the sudden need to conduct classes remotely; also, the outbreak of war in Ukraine caused an influx of immigrants (including students with significant emotional baggage). It is obvious that this instability of the modern world (fear for the future) has not been without impact on the mental conditions of students. All of this (including the generational and legislative changes in the requirements for academic teachers) has also had an impact on the work of an academic teacher. Undoubtedly, substantive and methodological competencies are the basis of a teacher's work, but the question of whether these significant changes in the environment have affected the competence needs of teachers has also become important.

The aim of this study is to show the possibility of using the critical incident technique (CIT) to identify the competence needs of academic teachers. In pursuit of this goal, the following research questions were posed:

- Does CIT provide the possibility of identifying the competencies of an academic teacher?
- To what deficiencies in their own competencies do academic teachers' pay attention?

2. Competencies of academic teachers – theoretical introduction

In the scientific literature, a whole range of definitions of competence can be found; however, most authors point to three main components (knowledge, practical skills, and specific personality traits) that are expected in the profession of a teacher (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1997; Olczak, 2009; Żeber-Dzikowska, Wysocka-Kunisz, Muchacki, Bernatova, 2014; Szydłowska, 2016; Śliwa, 2017). The most problematic component of teaching competence seems to be the one that refers to a teacher's attitude or psychological predispositions to perform professional work.

In the literature, competencies are divided into different types or areas. The most common division includes substantive competencies (which concern the issues of the subject that is taught) and didactic and methodological competencies (which concern the teacher's and students' skills, i.e. methods and techniques of teaching and learning). The third type is educational competencies (which concern the various ways of influencing pupils); these include communication skills, networking, the problem-solving skills of a given developmental age, etc. (Taraszekiewicz, 2001).

A slightly different division of teacher competencies was presented by Denek (2008); it distinguished praxeological, communicative, collaborative, and creative competencies. On the other hand, Kwaśnica (2003) divided the teacher's competencies into two groups: methodological competencies (i.e. the ability to act according to the rules that define the optimal order of pedagogical activities), and implementation competencies (i.e. the ability to choose means and create conditions that are conducive to achieving goals). Oleksyn (2014) distinguished the key competencies of an academic teacher as well as those competencies that are called second-order competencies (which are equally important in the work of a teacher). The key competencies include up-to-date knowledge in the fields to which employees devote themselves: creativity and innovation, the effectiveness of activities and the ability to achieve goals, and pedagogical competencies (i.e. the ability to methodically and interestingly transfer knowledge and interest in the subject, encourage students and learners to independent research, the use of sources, learning, and self-development, knowledge of the methodology of scientific research, and constantly improved research skills). On the other hand, second-class competencies include analytical skills, insight and inquisitiveness, diligence and perseverance, efficiency in acquiring and processing information, communicativeness, the ability to cooperate (more and more often in interdisciplinary teams), good knowledge of foreign languages, ethical conduct, care for one's health and psychophysical form, and resistance to stress. Maciejowska (2018) divided the teacher's competencies into those that are related to general didactics and subject methodology, social (interpersonal) competencies, personal competencies, and digital (systemic) competencies. The result of the analysis of teachers' competencies perceived as "dimensions of professional teaching competencies" (Stahr, 2009) was the five-element structure of competencies by Sajdak (2015). According to this, the dimensions of the competencies of an academic teacher were didactic competencies (related to general didactics), methodological competencies (related to subject didactics), social competencies (related to the development of interpersonal skills), systemic competencies (related to procedures at a given university), and personal competencies (related to self-awareness in the role of an academic teacher).

Muchacki and Bernatova (2014) emphasize that, in addition to substantive competencies such as knowledge and experience, specific psychological predispositions (personal culture, responsibility for the upbringing of children and young people, respect for the student, recognition, and even the possibility of creating a proper positive image of both oneself and the educational institution) are also extremely important.

The works of authors who have dealt with the subject of academic teachers' competencies have primarily indicated the essence of didactic and methodological competencies. On the basis of the above considerations, it can be concluded that it is the subject knowledge (i.e. the substantive aspect) that is the key element of the characteristics of an academic teacher. Methodological preparation also plays an important role. These competencies include the motivate students to work, pass on their passions, set diverse tasks for students, encourage

independent thinking and decision-making (Maciejowska, 2020). However, a competent teacher is not only one who constantly improves his/her general and specialist knowledge and is able to apply various teaching methods in an effective way; the teacher should also be a role model for students. The teacher should be able to build close contact with them, while maintaining a professional distance. However, it is interesting to ask whether the application of CIT will confirm the set of competencies of academic teachers that have been indicated by researchers or whether it will allow attention to be drawn to a different group of competencies – the need for which being reported by the interested parties themselves.

3. Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

Currently used in management practice for work analysis, CIT was first described in 1954 by the American psychologist Flanagan (1954) in the article “Critical incident technique”. In his article, Flanagan pointed out that CIT was actually a set of procedures for directly collecting data on observations of human behaviour (incidents). The author’s assumption was that it was to be implemented in such a way as to facilitate the potential usefulness of the collected observations in solving practical problems and developing general psychological principles. An incident was understood to mean any observable human action that was, in itself, complete enough to allow for inference about the consequences of that behaviour as well as the person who performed the action.

It is important in the analysis of critical incidents that they relate to real events that occurred in the past. Critical incidents should relate to situations in which a given employee has taken some action or made a decision. In this context, stimuli are also important, i.e. events or the behaviours of other people that caused a specific reaction. The decisions that were made should reflect the job-specific requirements: knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics and should be of a conscious nature; also, the subject of the incident should know for what purpose and why he/she made the decision. It is necessary for the critical incident to clearly indicate what the end result of a certain decision in a given situation was, whether it was a positive or negative outcome. In the process of generating critical incidents, experts (i.e. people from whom incidents are obtained) can only be people who have current or past experience related to a given position (Prokopowicz, Żmuda, Król, 2014).

CIT seems to be particularly important for the processes of identifying employee competencies, as it focuses directly on capturing and describing behaviours that are a direct observable expression of the employee’s competencies. As Flanagan himself wrote, CIT was a set of important (although, as the author emphasized, flexible and modifiable in order to adapt to a specific situation) rules and procedures related to the analysis and synthesis of observations. The procedure that was proposed by Flanagan (1954) assumed the use of five steps:

1. Setting the goals of the studied/analysed activity.
2. Preparation of the research plan: determining the types of situations to be observed, determining the importance of the situation for the general objective, and deciding who will make the observations. Flanagan emphasized that, in the CIT survey, the sample size did not depend on the number of participants but more on the number of critical incidents that were observed or reported and whether these incidents constituted an appropriate scope of the audited activity.
3. Data collection (which can be carried out through individual or group interviews as well as with the use of questionnaires and behaviour registration forms).
4. Data analysis – categorize the taken observations.
5. Interpreting the collected data and reporting.

In order to maintain the methodological correctness of the technique that is used, it is important to carefully follow the established and robust method of qualitative research (see Glinka, Czakon, 2021). Currently, it is increasingly visible that researchers focus not only on the retrospective description of the behaviour itself but also on the thoughts, feelings, and reasons why the participants behaved the way they did, i.e. on focusing on what the person did, why they did it, and the result of their actions (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, Maglio, 2005). This is particularly important for identifying and understanding the key competencies that are needed by an employee in a given position; hence, the analysis of critical incidents is successfully used in work analysis (Chell, 1998; Stitt-Gohdes, Lambrecht, Redmann, 2000). CIT seems to be a useful technique for identifying the competencies of academic teachers. Its value stems from the ability to recognize, categorize, and analyse the employee's behaviour in specific everyday professional situations while performing authentic tasks. A technique based on the actual experience of employees allows one to capture the competencies of an "action" and in the context of their usefulness in a specific organization. The fact that the research takes place in the natural environment of the respondents makes it easier to formulate conclusions and recommendations – for example, in the area of development activities for employees (Cisek, 2017). What is more, by attempting to reconstruct episodes from the employee's professional life that were undertaken in the faces of various professional challenges, CIT makes it possible to reach the so-called hidden knowledge (Polanyi, 1958) or practical "how-to" knowledge (Wagner, 1987) that seemed to be involved in the case of making decisions on how to act in difficult situations (Prokopowicz, Żmuda, Król, 2014); this can undoubtedly be discussed in the context of the work of academic teachers.

4. Research method

The methodological guidelines that were proposed by Flanagan and other researchers were applied to the research (Flanagan, 1954; Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, Maglio, 2005; Krzyżanowska, 2000; Prokopowicz, Żmuda, Król, 2014):

1. The aim of the research: identifying the competencies of academic teachers by reaching everyday events and situations that are related to the performance of their professional roles by the respondents.
2. Research plan: the respondents were 20 academic teachers who actively implemented didactics with a minimum of 10 years of work experience. The respondents represented two universities in Krakow and were employed at different faculties. The respondents possessed doctoral or professorial degrees. The study involved ten women and ten men. The conversation with each teacher lasted about one hour. The recorded incidents concerned situations when the teacher carried out tasks that were defined for the area of didactics. The study collected 56 incidents; after the first verification of their quality (completeness of the incident), 50 were used for the final analysis.
3. Data-collection procedure: data collection was carried out through face-to-face interviews that were partially standardized. The instructions for the interview included the following:
 - a. informing the respondents about the purpose of the research and presenting the main assumptions of the critical incident technique – participants learned that the purpose of the interview is to collect information in order to understand the specifics of the work of an academic teacher (with a particular emphasis on situations with which the respondent has difficulties at work).
 - b. instruction on CIT – the participants were informed that the interview would be entirely focused on questions about specific situations that happened to them at work; they were asked to give specific examples. The respondents were warned that, for this purpose, the researchers could ask a number of detailed questions about the description of the situation, such as the description of the event, the time and place, the people, the sequence of events, and the reaction of the people who were involved in these situations.
 - c. Main questions - the aim was to obtain the most complete description of critical incidents; the interlocutors were encouraged to develop topics that they themselves considered important. The respondents were asked:

“Please describe the situation related to the work in a given position:

 - that was a difficult situation but you felt that you had handled it well,
 - in which you realized that something could have been done in a different and better way”.

4. Analysing data – results.

- a. The pre-selection of incidents: the incidents were assigned to categories that reflected the types/aspects of those tasks that were related to the work of an academic teacher. The categories were created by the authors of the article on the basis of a qualitative analysis of incidents. Analysing the respondents' statements, the authors assigned incidents to areas that were related to the didactic work of an academic teacher. The following categories were distinguished: preparing classes, conducting classes, evaluating students' work, being evaluated by students, working with diploma students, organizing one's own work, organizing events for students outside the designated frameworks of the classes, cooperating with the administrative units at the university, and coping with crisis situations that were psychologically difficult.
- b. The next step was to re-analyse, organize, and group the incidents into categories and then assign competencies to them. At this stage, the authors worked independently in order to increase the reliability of the conclusions; then, the results of the work were compared.

5. Results of own research

The results indicated the important role of psychological competencies in the work of academic teachers. The surveyed teachers described their experiences in didactic work, which mostly concerned descriptions of difficult incidents as well as those in which they did not assess their behaviour as being optimal but, on the contrary, there was a reflection on some competence deficit or whether it was not accompanied by competent behaviour despite the awareness of the desired action.

The most represented group in the research were those incidents that described the difficult attitudes of students for teachers; in the perception of the teachers, these were related to the lack of respect, the lack of respect for university rules, and the entitlement of the students. Optimal responses in such situations implied the need to have not only substantive and methodological competencies but also psychosocial competencies such as coping with stress, self-confidence, assertiveness, and accepting or providing difficult feedback.

Another group of incidents consisted of crisis situations (difficult ones) that had occurred both during and outside the classroom. These events were most often related to the personal situations of the students, including their private problems, mental conditions, and lack of support from their relatives. In the face of these difficult crisis situations, optimal interventions and behaviours of educators require highly developed personal/psychological and social competencies.

Among the incidents that were widely represented in the respondents' statements were situations that were related to the provision of feedback and the evaluations of students' work as well as those that the students made of their teachers. Here, the respondents pointed out the high sensitivity of students to negative feedback, hostile reactions, questioning the legitimacy of grades, and behaviours that devalued the lecturers' work (expressed directly or through anonymous evaluations or in the forum of academic communities).

The results of the studies that were described above are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Categories of critical incidents along with assigned competencies of academic staffs

Competence	Categories of critical incidents
1. Coping with stress	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
2. Assertiveness	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
3. Giving and receiving feedback	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
4. Communicativeness	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
5. Confidence	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
6. Empathy, social sensitivity, support, tolerance	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9
7. Continuous learning	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9
8. Work-life balance	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9
9. Motivating students	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8,
10. Self-motivation	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
11. Conflict resolution	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
12. Knowledge of procedures	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
13. Substantive competencies	1, 2, 3, 5
14. Methodological competencies	1, 2, 3, 5
15. Dealing with crisis, difficult situations	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9
16. Working with students with special needs	1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9

Incident categories included in the table:

1. preparation of classes;
2. conducting classes;
3. evaluations of students' work;
4. assessment by students;
5. work with diploma students;
6. organization of own work;
7. organization of events for students outside designated course framework;
8. cooperation with administrative units at university;
9. crisis situations – psychologically difficult.

Source: based on own research.

The next group of incidents consisted of work with diploma students, which generated similar issues. Academic teachers pointed to the high expectations of students; these concerned the absolute availability of supervisors, excessive involvement in writing theses, shifting responsibility, untimeliness and sensitivity to feedback, or too little independence of the diploma students. The teachers spoke about the great need for the individualization of teaching, which they have noticed in recent years among students; this translated into the expectation of the constant availability of the teacher on weekends and days off from classes. Analyses of the contents of these dilemmas indicated that such competencies as communicativeness, coping with stress, assertiveness, and self-confidence were very useful in solving them (all while maintaining empathy and sensitivity to the students' needs).

What is important and worth emphasizing is the invariably recurring difficulty in the descriptions of educators; these were often defined by their lack of skills, competence in coping with the excess of duties, and reconciling didactic work with scientific work as well as the pressure and sense of overload and difficulties with maintaining work-life balances. This almost constant element – stress, tension, overload, and often burnout – illustrated not only the competence gap but perhaps the working conditions of many academic teachers.

6. Conclusions from own research

The aim of the research was to identify the competencies of academic teachers using the critical incident technique for this purpose. The conducted in-depth interviews with academic teachers made it possible to confirm the importance of substantive and methodological competencies; also, it made it possible to indicate the importance of personal and psychological competencies.

Answering the first research question that was posed in the introduction, it has been shown that CIT makes it possible to identify the competencies of an academic teacher. CIT is a technique in which the respondent is given the floor and is followed in his/her everyday professional life. Its application allowed us to get closer to the answer to the question, which caused an increase in the importance of the personal and psychological competencies of an academic teacher.

Answering the second research question, the analysis of the obtained empirical material emphasized the importance of the psychological competencies of academic teachers. Changes at universities are generated not only by growing requirements for university employees but also by changes in education, technological progress, or the rapid pace of economic development. The COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflicts (especially the war in Ukraine), and energy and environmental crises are factors of direct and indirect impact on the academic community. These cause stress, a sense of threat, anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation, and they significantly affect the deterioration of one's mental condition.

What most incidents have in common are the interpretations that are made by educators who pay attention to several issues. The first one concerns the impact of the current situation in the world as well as the events of previous years that have contributed to the decline in the mental well-being of students and changes in their behaviours, motivation, levels of sensitivity, and resistance to difficult situations; these directly affect their behaviours at universities. These changes, which are reflected in the professional dilemmas of academic teachers, are also a reflection of two models that have been presented in the literature: VUCA (Benatta, Lemione, 2014), who described the functioning of an organization under uncertain and unpredictable conditions where the excesses of information result in its ambiguity and

complexity, and BANI (Grabmier, 2020), who described the sense of uncertainty that is associated with the functioning within a reality that is fragile and full of anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility. It is worth emphasizing that this description of the reality in which an academic teacher and a student meet with mutual expectations is a potential for difficult situations to appear.

The second issue that was raised by the educators concerns the generational change – the challenges that are related to the education of the young generation. Among the many advantages of Generation Z (which currently forms the largest groups of students at universities), it is also pointed out that they find it difficult to establish interpersonal relationships (especially in direct contact outside the Internet); they experience a lack of need for authority figures (they find the knowledge that they need on their own), the inability to focus their attention, their high expectations, and their self-confidence (all while being very sensitive). This state of affairs is illustrated by the term “snowflake generation”, which describes people who do not tolerate criticism about themselves very well; this makes them easily offended (Stillman, Stillman, 2017; Nieżurawska, Karaszewska, Dziadkiewicz, 2016; Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomałowska, 2014; Anisiewicz, 2023). All of these characteristics that are visible in the empirical material translate into a new model of the teacher/student relationship and become a challenge for the daily work of an academic teacher.

The third aspect that appeared in the research was the overload and excess of duties of an academic teacher (pressure on didactics on the one hand and on scientific work, organizational matters, and the internationalization of teaching on the other). This results in difficulties in maintaining work-life balances, constant tension, stress, the need for continuous learning, and difficulties in organizing one’s own work.

The answer to these challenges is the ability of academic teachers to engage; regardless of the conditions in which they work, they should perform not only a didactic function in relation to students but also an educational, developmental, and compensatory function (Jaskot, 2002).

7. Summary

The analysis indicated possible competence gaps of academic staff that were related to the ability to cope with difficult situations that were related to work at the university. The research showed that academic teachers currently point to the need to improve their psychological competencies, which determine the effectiveness of their decisions in the area of teaching. The higher their mental resilience, self-confidence, ability to cope with difficult emotions, and assertiveness in relationships with others, the greater the chances for not only efficient self-management but also shaping appropriate relationships with students.

The work of an academic teacher implies the need to cope with demographic transformations and with the conditions of permanent change while being accompanied by constant pressure to learn and acquire new knowledge. In this context, it is therefore worth considering the possibilities of developing a group of psychological competencies so that, at the organizational and university levels, activities that support teachers in this area are implemented. It is justified for universities to not only introduce training opportunities in this area (which would teach the principles of competent behaviour in difficult situations) but also offer professional and psychological support (which would strengthen the ability to respond positively to stressful situations in the workplace as well as act as an intervener in the event of a difficult situation that exceeds the employee's ability to cope). It is also important to have a clear system of procedures that would support the academic teacher – especially in crisis situations.

The qualitative research that was conducted by the authors should be treated as an introduction to the discussion on the competence needs of an academic teacher.

When drawing conclusions from the qualitative research, it is also necessary to remember its limitations, which include the number of respondents, the lack of the differentiation of the respondents due to the length of service or the position that was held, and the lack of reference to objective assessments of the competencies of the surveyed employee in relation to the performance of teaching duties (evaluations of students and assessments of supervisors). The study also did not take contextual variables such as organizational culture or university strategy into account, which may affect the required competencies of an academic teacher. The CIT that was selected for the research allowed for only qualitative research to be conducted. To confirm the obtained results, it would be worthwhile to conduct research in a quantitative model on a much larger sample of subjects. The results of such an analysis could be verified by the list of competencies of academic teachers being established on the basis of the CIT. Quantitative analysis is a future direction of this research.

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