

Debriefing: Converting Experience into Learning

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The learning experience is not complete without a time of reflection and discussion.

- What did we experience?
- What did it mean?
- What will we do about it?

These questions must be raised to a level of awareness and purposeful concern. Otherwise much of the value of the practical experience washes out with the next tide.

Well-written books and good lectures explain themselves. In contrast, the more lively instructional experiences such as simulations, role plays, field trips, or internship experiences tend not to explain themselves; their learning value depends largely on the participants' insights. Such insights depend on deliberate reflection and guided exploration of meanings and implications. Without guidance in this insight-building process, much of the value of the experience will never become available in the conscious reasoning processes of the participant.

The effective facilitator of interactive and lively learning experiences learns the importance of good debriefing.¹ The importance of the debriefing is reflected in the allocation of sufficient time and in the thoughtfulness of planning. Good teaching always requires planning; leading a debriefing is no exception. The review and interrogation process requires a strategy.

Observing just four operating principles can make the difference between effective and ineffective debriefing. As is true of any valid instructional principles, these four are general guidelines which require adaptation and creative application to the specific situation. Attention to the guidelines should result in more consequential learning, but guidelines are no substitute for the creative inventiveness and the responsiveness of the facilitator. What counts most is the sensitive adjustment and attunement of the debriefing experience to the particular characteristics of the learners, their level of dialogue, and quality of interaction as a group, and the specific experience which is being debriefed.

1. *The debriefing should be flexible but directed toward the emergence and recognition of specific meaning and applications.*

The paradox of the debriefing process is that it needs to move toward conclusions but cannot predetermine those conclusions. The skillful facilitator will anticipate the range and variety of valid conclusions and listen for them. But the debriefing should be conducted with the sort of openness that allows on-target and off-target observations and propositions to emerge and be discussed. The facilitator is neither the “planter of ideas” nor the “judge of truth.” The facilitator should carefully avoid an argumentative or stubborn style which will put participants into a defensive posture, defensive reactions rarely move a debriefing forward. Accepting and encouraging critical reflection on all sorts of ideas about what the experience meant is the facilitator's responsibility. But through it all, the sense of direction and focus must be gently nurtured and ultimately emphasized.

2. *The debriefing should move from the affective to the cognitive.*

¹ This awkward term is now a matter of standard usage. Originally, a military term referring to the reporting of details of a completed mission, debriefing now denotes any planned and structured discussion in which learners reflect on what they have recently experienced.

If matters of feeling and emotion are not dealt with early in a debriefing, they tend to get overlooked altogether. Especially for learners who are habituated into school-type approaches to learning, the only things that seem worthy of reflection and analysis are the “facts.” It is important to work against this tendency. After an experience in any real human encounter, there are feelings and emotional reactions. These are important. The skillful facilitator will encourage sharing of the feeling-level effects of an experience early in the debriefing, following smoothly by increasing emphasis on the specific informational and factual aspects.

3. *The debriefing should move from the general to the specific, and then back to the general.*

The pattern should be that of allowing almost any level of generalization at first, then probing toward specific factors underlying the initial generalizations, and finally developing these carefully-defined specifics into more carefully-evaluated whole concepts which can be applied in situations others than the one experienced in the training situation. The facilitator’s task is to probe the contributions to the discussion always in terms of moving the discussion one way or the other on a continuum. At first, the movement should be toward more precision, care for accurate representation, and attention to illustrative detail or, conversely, toward the other direction—toward more valid generalization from the specific information and ideas.

4. *The structure and flow of the debriefing should provide a model of reflective reasoning.*

Nothing is more important than encouraging people to think. The most common complaint about educational experiences in our time is that people are not encouraged to reason and interpret. The connections between “schooling” tasks and the practicalities of life are so rarely well established. Debriefing should not fall into the trap of being just one more empty “head trip.” Showing off one’s intellectual prowess and exotic vocabulary is not the purpose of the debriefing—either for the facilitator or for the learner. When the debriefing fits this model, the first half (more or less) asks for general reactions and responses and probes underneath them for the observed details that led to the generalizations. The second half reviews the specific observations which have held up best during this analytic process and discusses their implications in such a way as to identify useful implications for the understanding of such situations in the future.

Suggested Applications

At the most practical level, apply the four guidelines through these specific actions:

1. Ask open-ended questions at first.
2. Ask about feelings and emotional aspects of reactions to the situation.
3. Listen well and encourage others to do so.
4. Ask follow-up questions and encourage others to do so, but try to avoid “putting people on the spot.”
5. Probe for connections between feelings and facts, between observations and interpretations, and between the specific instance observed and other situations, which might be similar.
6. At first, keep your judgmental remarks to a minimum, but as the debriefing unfolds, get involved with underlining and emphasizing the important concepts and the more valid conclusions as they emerge.
7. Raise questions that will help people see that there was even more that might have been observed and interpreted—one important value of the debriefing is the raising of

consciousness of the limitations and biases with which any of us engage in any experience.

8. Increase your emphasis on meaning and application as you go along; ask more intensely, “What does that mean to us?” and “Can we use that idea?”
9. Move toward making meanings and applications more concrete. Toward the end of the debriefing, focus on “So what have we learned from this experience and how can we use it?” With the help of the participants in the group, get these matters written down in plain view of everyone—and make sure that they are well interpreted and applied through discussion.