

Debriefing:

The Real Learning Begins When The Game Stops

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Abstract There is a tendency among both designers and facilitators to become fixed, perhaps even fixated, on our simulations and games. Making and using systems that, at least to us as experts, clearly demonstrate some concept or skill in action is exciting. But, what about for the students? What do they, as non-experts, get out of their experience? How do we as teachers know what they got from the experience? What if what they got is not what we were wanting them to learn? What do we do then? (Leigh & Tipton, 2014) Students need to compare the simplified model of the simulation/game back to reality in order to transfer the competencies gained to the real situation. (Kriz, 2003) For real learning to happen, we must debrief and we need to do it well. To quote Prof.Dr. Stephan Rometsch: “A game is like a tasty meal in your mouth. The debriefing is digesting and absorbing nutrition” (Crookall, 2014). This workshop will help its participants to gain insight, confidence, and skill in both developing and conducting debriefing sessions that help the simulation/game participants process their experiences into real learning. It lasts five hours.

Keywords: Debriefing, Assurance of Learning, Experiential Learning, Simulation/gaming

1 Why Debrief?

There is a tendency among both designers and facilitators to become fixed, perhaps even fixated, on our simulations and games. Making and using systems that, at least to us as experts, clearly demonstrate some concept or skill in action is exciting. But, what about for the students? What do they, as non-experts, get out

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of their experience? How do we as teachers know what they got from the experience? What if what they got is not what we were wanting them to learn? What do we do then? (Leigh & Tipton, 2014)

Simulations and games are experiences that need to be processed to draw out the learning. While a simulation or game provides for active experimentation and concrete experience, reflective observation and abstract conceptualization are also needed for experiential learning to occur (Kolb, 1984). For learners to leave a simulation/gaming session being able to say “I see the point” or “I now understand” or “I can do”, in-game or post-game debriefing is absolutely necessary.

A simulation/game starts with a physical and socially constructed reality. This reality is then reduced to a simplified model. The simulation/game is then run. But if the process stops here, the knowledge and skills developed during play remains relevant only to the reduced model. It is necessary to compare the simplified model back with reality in order to transfer the competencies gained to the real situation. (Kriz, 2003) This places a requirement on designers to create games and simulations with debriefing built into the system.

Undebriefed learners can leave the simulation or game experience thinking “that was fun, but I am not sure why we did it and how it relates.” Undebriefed learners can leave the simulation or game experience harmed by feelings of confusion, frustration, anger and stress. Undebriefed learners can leave the simulation or game experience thinking “that stuff we learned in class does not apply here, so it must not apply in the real world either.” All of this is bad for both the students and for us as professionals. The importance of the debriefing for helping participants process strong emotions (Thiagarahan, 1992) and for making the lessons of the simulation/game explicit (Gordon, 1970) places an ethical obligation on facilitators and instructors to debrief and do it well.

Most debriefing, when it occurs at all, tends to be carried out rather hurried and superficially. Debriefing, so it seems, is treated as an afterthought at best to the simulation or game (Crookall, 1992). Lack of time is often given as an unjustified excuse for skipping the debriefing. Lack of planning, on the part of the designer and on the part of the facilitator, is the more likely culprit. Developing and implementing a debriefing session that is tailored to both the learning process and the learning objectives needs to be done thoughtfully and thoroughly (Lederman, 1992). “Without the opportunity for reflection on what participants have learned, and the chance to discuss it with others, much of the learning value (and in particular the ability to transfer knowledge and skills to other domains) from games may be lost.” (Harviainen, Lainema, and Saarinen, 2012) We as simulation and gaming professionals must provide this opportunity.

Yet, debriefing is an oft-neglected skill among simulation and gaming professionals. The common assumption that when participants are engaged and having fun learning happens actually hinders the higher-order cognition skills we are trying to develop. Due to the stochastic nature of simulation and game outcomes, designers often leave the planning of the debriefing to the facilitators (Tipton & Murff, 2014). The facilitators often struggle to develop debriefings that go be-

yond the superficial. This experiential workshop is intended to help rectify this situation. In particular, this workshop will help its participants to gain insight, confidence, and skill in both developing and conducting debriefing sessions that help the simulation/game participants process their experiences into real learning.

To quote Prof.Dr. Stephan Rometsch at the debriefing workshop at the ISAGA 2014 conference: “A game is like a tasty meal in your mouth. The debriefing is digesting and absorbing nutrition” (Crookall, 2014). For real learning to happen, we must debrief and we need to do it well.

This experiential workshop, where we will be “playing with” debriefing to build skills and insights, lasts five hours.

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