In Conversation:
Transforming Experience Into Learning

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To transform experience into learning, reflection that often occurs through the medium of conversation is necessary. Specifically, we focus on conversation in debriefing and processing sessions following simulations and games as opportunities for transforming experience into learning. We suggest approaching debriefing sessions with a redefined role of the facilitator as one who has profound respect for the wisdom and voice of each participant and an openness to surprise and personal learning. Careful attention needs to be given to creating a hospitable and receptive space to hold and nurture the debriefing conversations. Specific contextual considerations in creating that space include making a conscious effort, attending to concerns of perceived safety, moderating the energy level, confronting conflict in ways that are growth promoting, valuing and encouraging the integration of the head and the heart of each participant, and valuing reflective listening as highly as active speaking.

KEYWORDS: conversation; debriefing; facilitation; receptive space.

The use of varied simulations and games provides a unique way of creating a context for experiential learning in classrooms, corporate training centers, and community-based organizations. The importance of the debriefing as a part of the overall educational process is pivotal in transforming experience into learning and thus is the focus of this article. The ways that space and time are created for participants’ reflection and sharing of experience through conversations in debriefing sessions can make a critical difference between having experience and learning from it. As Linda Lederman (1994) wrote in Part 1 of the silver anniversary issue of S&G, the debriefing phase is complex and demanding and has not received as much attention in the literature as the actual design and implementation of simulations and games themselves. We have focused on more deeply understanding conversation as a medium through
which learning can take place (Baker, 1995; Baker & Kolb, 1993; Jensen, 1995; Sullivan & Kolb, 1995). Thus conversation is the medium of the debriefing process through which learning emerges. Yet the nature of conversation and the space holding the conversation greatly influence whether experience is transformed into learning.

Simulations and games are designed to provide participants with an experiential context that can become a focus for inductive reflection and learning. As educators and designers of simulations and games, our goal is to directly involve participants in experience and to assist them in conceptualizing their experience by trying out the applicability of relevant concepts and theories as they interpret their experience and construct knowledge, a more deductive approach. A conversational approach to debriefing sessions, as distinct from discussion or debate, is one way to more deeply involve participants in exploring the meaning of their experience from multiple perspectives. The essence of conversation is the exchange among people in a conversation, which is distinct from the definition and essence of a discussion that is grounded in debate among participants. Thus the exchange in conversation more aptly describes the approach we are suggesting.

The following is offered not as a technique or method for designing debriefing sessions, but rather as broad considerations for creating hospitable, receptive spaces to hold and nurture conversations. They are less behavioral norms than normative ideals. These considerations can be invaluable to fostering good conversation that holds the potential to be transformative. The distinction, however, between making and nurturing, between following a method and attending to contextual considerations needs to be clear from the outset. As soon as the intention is to follow a method in order to make good conversation happen, the very essence of good conversation that is transformative is violated. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989),

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus, a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. . . . No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation . . . . Conversation has a spirit of its own. . . . The language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it. (p. 383)

Although our premise is that good conversation cannot be forced or made by following a method or prescription, passively waiting for it to happen is also not preferred or appropriate.

Conversation is one of the most fundamental forms of connection. As people weave their patterns of relatedness and interdependency, their similar and differing ways of perceiving and responding emerge. The collective possibilities for learning can expand far beyond what might have been learned
by any one of the participants alone. Thus following simulations and games with debriefing sessions opens those collective possibilities for learning. Through conversations, people share their points of connection and grapple with the inevitable differences. Although their similar perspectives are relatively easy to share, bridging the differences often presents more of a challenge. Creating a context that fosters good conversation in debriefing sessions where the similar and the differing perspectives become a catalyst rather than a barrier to learning is a monumental challenge and is the essence of this article.

Conversations are held or contained within a space. This multidimensional space includes physical, psychological, cognitive, and spiritual elements. It holds both the active voice of speaking and the reflective voice of listening and of silence. Increasingly, we realize that this space or context can influence the exchange in conversation. Thus, with attention, the space or context can become more receptive to both similarities and differences. Yet to be receptive to expression and exploration, both fears, which are perceived from inside, and judgments, which get projected outside, need to be suspended at least briefly. Thus a receptive space can ease those fears and judgments and increase understanding.

Our research on learning conversations has focused specifically on learning about the nature of the conversational contexts that enable good conversations, in which similarities and differences among people become a catalyst for learning and further connections. Fundamental learning growing out of our experience and research involves the role of the facilitator in debriefing sessions following simulations, games, and other forms of experiential learning. This work suggests an alternative perspective on the role of the facilitator.

Traditionally, the facilitator has been viewed as one who intervenes to try to make things happen. The person can often slip into behavior that can be perceived as manipulative and lacking in respect for the participants. Often, the facilitator comes into the conversation with a personal agenda for how the conversation should go and proceeds to try to make that happen, lacking respect for the very process of experiential learning that offers surprises and unanticipated learning to every participant, including the “facilitators.” Thus, with an intention to create a hospitable, receptive space for learning, a host or facilitator enters the conversation as a more wide-awake participant.

As a host or facilitator, much of the work is done as a precursor to the conversation in clarifying expectations and preparing the design of the experiential learning, the participants, oneself, the physical space, and the relevant reading material. Although these kinds of responsibilities on the surface may not sound new, when they are shaped by the intention to create a hospitable,
receptive space to hold the conversation rather than by the intention to make
certain things happen, both the spirit and the behavior are quite different.
Although this approach is not a method to make anything happen, it also is
not value free. Thus being explicit about these prevailing values will offer
some insight into that difference in spirit and behavior. The values that
undergird this approach include the following:

- a profound respect for each participant in the conversation, including the assump-
tion of the wisdom each has to offer;
- the inclusiveness of voices, meaning that even those who have traditionally been
excluded must not only be present but be heard;
- an assumption that reflective listening is at least as important in the conversation
as active speaking;
- the fundamental importance of allowing silence to provide space for reflection
and deep listening;
- a readiness that is essential for learning; and
- an openness to surprise and the unanticipated must be welcomed.

The nature of the spaces or contexts that hold personal interactions gives
shape and texture to the connections and relationships that do or do not form. To give more insight into the distinctiveness of the host or facilitator
role in debriefing sessions and into the creation of hospitable, receptive
spaces that can hold good conversation, we are suggesting specific contextual
considerations.

**Contextual Considerations for Creating Receptive Space**

Our research on conversation deserves some elaboration here (Baker,
1995; Jensen, 1995) because the approaches used and the insights gained
inform this work and these reflections. Although the exact words and lan-
guage used in conversation are important and often have been the focus of
valuable research and writing, the emphasis that primarily captures our
attention and seems most relevant here is from the "listening" perspective.
Increasingly, our approach is not that of the psychologist, philosopher, or
linguist who would be primarily focused on finding the truth and expecting
to find it from the "speaker" or the source of the active, assertive voice.
Instead, our intent is to draw meaning and legitimacy primarily from the
multiple perceptions of the "listeners," who also have the voice to speak. Thus
our focus is on deep listening among the participants, hosts or facilitators,
and researchers and on attention to the meaning made and taken away from
conversations.
Although the words spoken are important, the selective screening that every person brings into a conversation limits his or her range of perception. Thus participants involved in our research were asked to recall conversations that stood out for them and to tell about those conversations and the meaning they made of them. The focus of the research was on learning what they listened to and took away from the conversation as sources of potential learning in the future. There is much to learn from this research that can be directly applicable to fostering transformative learning in debriefing sessions.

The intention of our research was to learn from both the conversations that worked well for the participants and those that did not and to learn what contextual considerations contributed to or hindered their learning. Recurring and overlapping themes unmistakably stood out in both the conversations that worked and those that did not. Again, we suggest that these themes be thought of as contextual considerations rather than as a formula to follow. When these six interdependent themes were present, the space holding the conversation was receptive enough for people to not only share their similarities but also bridge their differences in ways that contributed to their learning and developing connections.

The contextual considerations for creating a hospitable, receptive space are the following:

1. **Making an effort.** When participants in a conversation are making an effort to understand, be understood, and speak to be heard, as well as swallowing some things along the way, they make a fundamental contribution to creating a receptive space. Making an effort does not mean avoiding the differences (as seen in #4 below, where confronting growth-promoting conflict is encouraged). It does mean considering how and what to say, being led by anticipating what can be more readily and fully heard by the listener(s). Especially where there are intensely emotional and historically laden differences, the receptive space does not get created without effort.

2. **Creating a safe space.** The sense of safety that comes with acceptance, respect, recognition, flexibility, openness, and patience is of primal importance. A safe space is one where individuals try to minimize or avoid judgment, blame, fear, ill intent, power plays, exclusion, rudeness, and coercion.

3. **Moderating the energy.** Being aware of modulating the energy and providing space for listening and reflecting while not suppressing participation deserves serious attention. If the pace is too fast or slow, it interferes with people simultaneously staying fully engaged and taking in (i.e., hearing) what is being said.

4. **Confronting conflict in ways that are growth promoting.** Explicitly supporting the exploration and confrontation of differences while being proactive and creative about building common ground and making a safe and receptive space for the confrontation is vital to learning.

5. **Engaging with the head and the heart.** A more receptive space is created for conversation across differences when people are using their heads (the cogni-
tive) integrated with using their hearts (the affective), as well as when both aspects are valued and encouraged.

6. **Valuing the reflective listening as highly as the active speaking.** Conversations require being both active and reflective, proactive and receptive, even though typically, at least in Western cultures, action is generally more highly valued than reflection and receptivity. Nachmanovitch (1990) refers to these two necessary phenomena as the “Creative and the Receptive, making and sensing . . . a resonant pair, matching and answering each other” (p. 34).

Our own personal experiences in debriefing sessions and hearing the voices in this research dispel any illusions that a receptive space holding both similarities and intense differences is easy to create. Yet the potential of providing this receptive holding environment for debriefing and processing simulations, games, and other forms of experiential learning is worth the effort. With care, the conversational space can allow for the surfacing of differing perspectives and the inevitable conflicts that move participants “toward the light, toward new, more complex understandings” (Wheatley, 1994, p. 108). The potential of providing a holding environment that can make “possible the emergence of . . . innate potential” (Josselson, 1992, p. 29) offers too much hope not to make the effort. This emergence of innate potential is the transformative learning possible in debriefing sessions where the host or facilitator creates a receptive space for good conversation.

Transforming the role of facilitation and creating a hospitable, receptive space to explore similarities and differences in the conversational medium of debriefing sessions is a tall challenge. Yet not to attend to creating that space leaves our work with too many missed opportunities for participants to learn from each other and for transforming experience into learning.

**References**


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