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Debriefing: Toward a Systematic Assessment of Theory and Practice

Linda Costigan Lederman
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Experiential learning in the educational context incorporates real-life-based processes into the educational setting in order for them to be used and scrutinized. The heart of these sorts of learning experiences is the postexperience analytic process, generally referred to as the debriefing session. This essay focuses on the debriefing process as it accompanies one form of experiential learning, simulations and games. It provides a review of the existent literature on debriefing, an analysis of the debriefing process, and effective strategies for its use. It provides an analysis of the process, identifies its components and essential phases, and presents a systematic approach to the assessment of the conduct of debriefing sessions.

KEYWORDS: behavioral data; communication; debriefing; experience; experiential learning; experience-based learning; games; processing; question-asking; simulations; teaching strategies.

An educational experience is a complex event. It involves one or more of three kinds of learning objectives: cognitive, affective and/or behavioral. It requires more than training students in the acquisition of desired skills or behaviors, such as reading aloud or spelling correctly or pronouncing words properly. An educational experience needs to provide learners with the basis for understanding why and how the new knowledge they acquire is related to what they already know. It must convey to the learners that they have the capability of using this new knowledge not only in the classroom in which they learn it, but in other contexts to which they take that which has been learned. As John Dewey (1929) put it in the first part of this century, for the experience of education to be educative, it needs to provide a continuity of experiences. The continuity of experience requires learners to be led to understand the relationships between what they learn in the present and their past and future experiences. This is the hallmark of an educative experience.

The way in which to provide such an educative learning experience depends on the materials to be learned, the objectives of the learning
experience and the nature of the students and teacher who come together in the learning environment. When the methodology selected is experiential, it incorporates the processing of that experience from which the learners are to draw the lessons to be learned. This processing is referred to as debriefing (Lederman, 1984; Greenblat & Duke, 1975; Thatcher, 1991).

Most simply stated, debriefing is a process in which people who have had an experience are led through a purposive discussion of that experience. The debriefing process is based on two assumptions. First that the experience of participation has effected the participants in some meaningful way. Second, that a processing (usually in the form of a discussion) of that experience is necessary to provide insight into that experience and its impact. Yet little is written to explain the process or to explore its conceptual underpinnings. In addition, the paucity of studies describing debriefing and assessing its effectiveness is surprising (Holmes, 1976). This is particularly true in the literature on simulation games, where it is often assumed that debriefing facilitates learning. Generally, the methods, procedures and evaluation criteria for debriefing are simply not examined. The purpose of this essay is to review the literature that does exist on debriefing to provide a framework within which to define debriefing; to identify and describe its essential elements and phases; and to provide a systematic means for the assessment of the effectiveness of a debriefing session.

**Background: A Review of Literature on Debriefing**

The historical roots of the debriefing process lie in military campaigns and war games (Pearson & Smith, 1986). Debriefing was the time after a mission or exercise when participants were brought together to describe what had occurred, to account for the actions that had taken place and to develop new strategies as a result of the experience. In more contemporary times, the literature on the debriefing of ex-prisoners has come to include debriefings of hostages and other crisis victims (Walker, 1990). The purpose of debriefing prisoners of war or former hostages is to provide information about the experience and insight into it for those who had not been there.

A second use of debriefing found in the literature is in psychological studies involving deception of subjects. In these studies the subjects have been deceived into doing something in an experimental context (Tennan & Gillen, 1979). After the experiment, the debriefing takes place to “disinform” the subjects; to tell what the experience was “really about.” The purpose here is to provide information for those who have gone through the experience
rather than to gather information from them. The experimenters tell the subjects the purpose for what they have been through. The literature on debriefing in this context concerns itself with the subjects who have participated in psychological experiments. To debrief them is to inform them (American Psychological Association, 1979); to reverse laboratory induced experiences (Tennen & Gillen, 1979); or to undo negative consequences, inform and educate, and to check on the method used (Mills, 1976). In the context of deception studies, debriefing is often defined as synonymous with dehoaxing (Walter, 1990).

The third use of debriefing reported in the literature is in the educational setting, where the process written about is referred to as the debriefing or the postexperience analysis (Lederman, 1983). Here debriefing is used after an experiential activity such as a simulation or game. The purpose is to use the information generated during the experiential activity to facilitate learning for those who have been through the experience. Sometimes in this context the whole process of debriefing is simply referred to as “processing” (Thatcher, 1986). The debriefing is recorded as the time after learners have engaged in a learning activity and as the time during which the instructors use that activity and the learners’ experiences to attempt to provide them with insight into the activity. It is an attempt, as it were, to help them learn from their experiences by processing them effectively.

Definitions and Purposes of Debriefing

While a number of authors write about the debriefing process in each of the three contexts described above, not all use the term “debriefing” to mean the same thing. Debriefing is variously defined as learning through reflection on a simulation experience (Thatcher, 1990; Pearson & Smith, 1983; Raths, 1987; Lederman, 1983; Lederman & Stewart, 1985; Lee, 1984); emotional recovery from critical incidents (Bergmann & Queen, 1987; Donovan, 1983; Walker, 1990); work-related tasks, such as appraisal and synthesis of input from focus groups (DeNicola, 1990) or job performance analysis (Bobele, 1987), or to team build and identify managerial strengths (Bailey, 1990).

Besides definitional differences, there are methodological differences in the use of the debriefing process across these three contexts. In the war/hostage trauma usage, the debriefing is designed to help those who have gone through the experience to deal with it (Bergmann & Queen, 1987; Donovan, 1983; Walker, 1990). The process involves getting them to tell the story and describe their feelings. The debriefers provide those who have gone through
the experience with information about what they can expect afterwards. When there are multiple participants they are encouraged to support and monitor each other in the future (Walker, 1990). In working in this context, it is expected that debriefers enact their roles nonjudgmentally and with patience (Donovan, 1983). They are there to permit former prisoners or hostages to tell the story naturally (Bergmann & Queen, 1987). They encourage them to ventilate, to debrief privately if necessary and to talk in their own words (Donovan, 1983). The purposes of these debriefings are factual descriptions of the event, emotional ventilation and identification of stress response symptoms (Walker, 1990).

In debriefing sessions used in deception studies, the subjects are usually told the nature of the deception, the true purpose of the experiment, and the reasons why deception was necessary (Ullman & Jackson, 1982). In this context the debriefer usually uses a scenario (Mills, 1976). There are three purposes to the scenario: first, to explain general reasons why deception is used in studies; second, to explain the particular study and why deception was necessary; and third, to relieve any anxiety about subject’s performance and why it is important not to discuss the experiment with others. The implicit working assumption here is that even well-designed and pretested procedures may yield some unexpected outcomes. Debriefing allows the elimination of these unwanted and deviant responses, so that the hypotheses may be tested with uncontaminated data (Tesch, 1977). In psychological-study debriefing, there is a role shift: the investigator in experiment now becomes the debriefer, and participants may not make the corresponding role shifts and may instead continue to behave as if the whole thing is an experiment (Tesch, 1977). Experimenters as debriefers are in a powerful, advantaged, and didactic role (Kelman, 1972) and may use debriefing to manage their participants’ impressions of the experiment and its value. By explaining the deceptions, procedures, and nature of the study even minimally, experimenters promote their own explanations and labels for the participants. Debriefers redefine the situation for the subject, overcome his or her resistance by appealing to their authority as the creators of the experiment, and then conclude for the participant that he or she has received an educational benefit (Tesch, 1977).

The methodological differences in the educational setting reflect a different goal than in the hostage/prisoner or deception study uses of debriefing. The goal here is to facilitate an understanding of what has happened, to find out what the participant learned, and to test that against the instructor’s learning objective. It is not to tell them that they learned what the debriefer wanted them to learn, but to find out what they did learn, and why, and the implications both for them as learners and for the debriefers as teachers.1 In
the context of experiential learning, ambiguity is expected, especially in
discovery learning experiences (Lederman, 1983; Ruben & Lederman, 1984).
This is in direct contrast to the deception studies in which ambiguity is seen
as error. This difference in goals leads to differences in the methods used in
debriefing in the context of education. In the educational setting, debriefing
is conducted as a guided discussion. Participants are taught to reflect on their
experiences and learn from them. They are asked questions about those
experiences. Learning is accomplished by responding to questions posed by
the debriefer and using their experiences and analyses of those experiences
as the basis for their answers.

The contexts differ in terms of the roles in which the people engage and
the purposes and uses of the process. In the context of war or crisis, the
debriefer does not know what happened so he or she has to ask questions, to
facilitate discussion, much like an interviewer. In the deception studies, the
debriefer knows what happened. He or she has been the designer of the
experiment and so not only knows what occurred, but also knows that the
participants did not know something that they needed to know about it, that
is, that they have been purposely misled for experimental purposes. In this
case the role of debriefer is enacted in a more didactic way. The debriefer
tells what it was "really" about and what "really" happened. In the educa-
tional setting, the debriefer knows what the experience was designed to be
like, but wants to find out how it was for the participants and to help them
sort their interpretations. In a psychological study, ambiguity is error (Tesch,
1977) and debriefing is a correction mechanism; in experience-based learn-
ing, debriefing is an acknowledgment that ambiguity is expected.

The Seven Elements of the Debriefing Process

Examination of what is written about the use of the debriefing process
across these contexts indicates that regardless of definitional and method-
ological differences, all debriefing sessions involve a defined set of common
elements. Lederman (1991) identified seven elements of the debriefing
process: the guide/debriefer, the participants, the experience, the impact of
that experience, the recollection of it, the mechanisms for the reporting out
on the experience and the time to process it. Figure 1 depicts the elements of
the debriefing session in relation to one another.

First, all debriefing articles in the literature report that the process involves
someone who enacts the role of the debriefer. In the hostage situation, the
debriefer does not know what has occurred. In all other contexts, the debriefer
is the one who structures and presents the experience, observes and interprets behavior during it, and then uses the debriefing to provide a processing of that experience for the participants. In experiential learning contexts, the debriefer acts as facilitator, teacher, or instructor in the debriefing process. It is the person enacting the role of guide who selects the experience on which the debriefing will focus, and provides the mechanisms for reporting out and analyzing and assessing the experience.

The debriefer works with the second element described in the literature, the participants. The people who engage in the experience become the participants in the debriefing session. It is they who are debriefed. The debriefer is there to facilitate the goal of the debriefing. In hostage/prisoner context, it is to find out from them what happened. In the deception study context, it is to correct misinformation; in the educational context it is to help them learn from the experience in which they have engaged. The third element is the experience through which those who will be debriefed have come. In experiential learning circumstances, the experience is generally preplanned, designed, and implemented to meet some specific learning objectives (Thatcher, 1986). Lederman (1984) refers to it as the behavior-
generating phase that precedes the debriefing. The experience that the participants have been through is what the debriefing session is designed to process (Greenblat & Duke, 1975).

The experience through which the participants have come has had some impact on them. Impact of the experience is the fourth element common to all debriefing. The purpose of the debriefing session is to shed light on that impact and its implications. The experience on which the debriefing focuses has already occurred. Because it is prior to the debriefing, the debriefing session involves some recollection of that experience. Part of the process of debriefing is to provide a reconstruction of the experience by leading the participants through a recollection of it. The experience is reflected on and discussed. The fifth and sixth elements are the recollection and the report. A debriefing session includes some sort of mechanism(s) through which participants get to report on their experiences and their recollections of those experiences and their impacts on the participants. This reporting element is most often spoken and oral. It is also possible to have the reports be written or presented in some other graphic way and/or combinations of all of these various media for reporting. The seventh and final element of the debriefing process is time. It takes time to process any experience.

**Debriefing Methodology: A Stepwise Process**

A review of the literature indicates that the debriefing process is undertaken in a stepwise fashion. Its goal is to review and describe the experiences through which participants have come and to assess the implications of these experiences and the meanings attributed to them. Lederman (1991) classified these processes into three phases that she labeled as the introduction to systematic reflection and analysis; the intensification and personalization of the analysis of the experience; and the generalization and application of the experience. Figure 2 presents and summarizes the purposes of each of these phases.

The first phase of the debriefing process is the introduction of the participants to a systematic self-reflective process about the experience through which they have just come. In the literature it is accomplished in one to three steps, discussed by various authors as an invitation to the participants to talk (Nissen & Ransom, 1983), a time in which to set the group rules (Bergmann & Queen, 1987), or to begin an assessment of the needs and abilities of the group (Hammel, 1986), the identification of what happened during the experience (Pearson & Smith, 1986), the identification of the nature of the simulation
<table>
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<td>Phase 1 is the introduction of the participants to a systematic self-reflective process about the experience through which they have just come.</td>
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<td>Phase 2</td>
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<td>Phase 2 is the refocusing of participants' reflections onto their own individual experiences and the meanings they have for them.</td>
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<td>Phase 3 is the exploration that takes the participants from their own individual experience to the broader applications and implications of that experience.</td>
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Figure 2: The Three Phases of the Debriefing Process

(Lee, 1984), a review and description of the events (Hammel, 1986), a gathering of information about the event (Walker, 1990), or a recollection of what happened and description of what participants did in their own words (Lederman, 1984).

The second phase of the debriefing process is the intensification and personalization of the debriefing process. To some extent the degree of personalization is determined by the way in which the first step was used. Some use it as a time for participants to describe the experience (Bergmann & Queen, 1987); others place the emphasis at this juncture on the description of participants’ feelings (Lederman, 1984; Pearson & Smith, 1986; Thatcher, 1986); still others see this step as the time to identify the effect of experience (Lee, 1984) or to assess participants’ stress response (Walker, 1990).

The third phase in the debriefing process is the time to begin to generalize (Pearson & Smith, 1986), to go from the individual’s experience to the broader applications and implications of that experience. Some focus this step on the discussion of the implications and applications, or the “what did you learn from this experience” approach (Lederman, 1984); others guide the participants through a discussion of the issues and nonissues, encouraging the individual expression of feelings (Nissen & Ransom, 1983), clarify facts, concepts, and principles used in the simulation (Thatcher, 1986), identify patterns (Hammel, 1986), assess how the individual performed (Bailey, 1990), make comparisons (Hammel, 1986), and identify processes developed in the simulation (Thatcher, 1986). This final phase of the debriefing process also includes some sort of wrap up and recap. This is done by some in one step, by others in several. It entails providing closure—a conclusion where
Phase 1: Systematic self-reflection

Uses
invitation to talk                  Nissen & Ransom, 1983
set the group rules                Borgmann & Queen, 1987
identification of what happened   Hammel, 1986; Lederman, 1984;
                                   Pearson & Smith, 1986; Walker, 1990
identification of the nature of the simulation Lee, 1984

Phase 2: Intensification and personalization

Uses
participants describe the experience Bergmann & Queen, 1987
participants describe their feelings   Lederman, 1984; Pearson & Smith, 1986;
                                       Thatcher, 1986
identification of the effect          Lee, 1984

Phase 3: The generalization and application

Uses
generalize                          Pearson & Smith, 1986; Hammel, 1986
identify patterns                  Hammel, 1986
discuss implications and application Lederman, 1984; Bailey, 1990; Hammel, 1986
express feelings                   Nissen & Ransom, 1983
clarify facts, concepts, or principles Thatcher, 1986
assess individual performance      Thatcher, 1986
provide closure and evaluation      Bergmann & Queen, 1987
recap achievement                  Pearson & Smith, 1986; Lederman, 1984

Figure 3: Steps in the Debriefing Process

there is participant evaluation of activities or recap of achievement (Pearson & Smith, 1986; Lederman, 1984). It is described, too, as a time to identify views formed (Thatcher, 1986), to relate experience to daily life (Hammel, 1986), to devise an action plan (Walker, 1990), to provide a closing and evaluation (Bergmann & Queen, 1987), or a follow up (Bergmann & Queen, 1987). See Figure 3, which summarizes the various steps reported in the literature and how they are used by various writers.

Description of the Debriefing Process

From all that is reviewed above, the picture of debriefing that emerges is a process involving a number of elements, activities, and phases. It is a stepwise process following an experience in which the debriever guides those who have been through the experience in a reflective discussion and analysis
of that experience and its meanings. It is a purposeful and planned activity (Pearson & Smith, 1986). It is a structured, post hoc method comprised of guided recall, reflection, and analysis (Lederman, 1984). It can take place either immediately after an experience or sometime later.

When used with experiential learning techniques, debriefing is not ancillary. It is a required part of the process of experience-based learning. In experience-based learning, it is assumed that experiences are the raw data out of which learning is created. Much of what people learn, particularly experientially, is a subjective, personalized, individual, and thus idiosyncratic way of knowing, which Boulding (1956) refers to as subjective knowledge. The kind of knowledge that is the product of experience is highly subjective; it is the product of the interaction between the individual and the experience (Lederman, 1984). To the extent that no two individuals are even completely alike, the knowledge one individual gains can never be identical with that subjectively experienced by another. In the postexperience analysis, the purpose is to examine and analyze the subjective knowledge that has been created during the experience (Lederman, 1984).

The ways in which these postexperience analyses are enacted reflect a difference in the understanding of the communication process underlying the impact of experience. In deception studies, the debriefing is conducted didactically. It implies that people can be told the meaning of what they experienced. It rests on the assumption that information is communication. When subjects are “dehoaxed” and told what “really” happened, it is assumed that this new information provides them with a different interpretation of what happened and its meanings.

In conjunction with simulations and games, debriefing is not a didactic activity. The purpose of providing learners with experience-based learning situations is to overcome the limitations of the traditional didactic, lecture format approach. The debriefing session, like the experiential activity, is learner based: it is discovery learning in which participants are provided with incentives to examine and analyze their inner thoughts and reflections. Like experiential activities themselves, debriefing sessions are process-centered. They are based on educational philosophy growing out of the work of John Dewey (1929) and other pragmatists who believed that experience and what is drawn from it are the raw data out of which real learning grows.

Given the traditions from which debriefing emanates, it is little wonder that there is isomorphism with the ways in which it is used by the various writers describing it in the educational setting. It is the traditions out of which it grows that provide the best basis for developing a set of assessment criteria for debriefing.
A Model for the Systematic Assessment of Debriefing

It is possible to assess and evaluate simulations (Lederman & Ruben, 1984). So, too, it is necessary to assess and evaluate the postexperience process through which participants are led. Figure 4 presents a model for the assessment of the debriefing process.

The model of the assessment of the debriefing process, presented in Figure 4, consists of five sets of questions that need to be examined. The first set of questions in the assessment of the debriefing process focuses on the examination of the learning objectives. The learning objectives are the specific cognitive, behavioral, and/or affective learning outcomes for the experience provided in the simulation activity. In assessing the effectiveness of the debriefing process, the first set of questions require the identification of the learning objectives for which the experiential activity was designed and the analysis of how, if at all, these were accomplished or enhanced through the debriefing.

The second set of questions to be addressed in the assessment of the effectiveness of a debriefing session focuses on the parameters within which that debriefing took place. In the model, this set of questions is labeled consideration of the situational constraints. The purpose of these questions is to identify the contextual factors that may have shaped the debriefing experience. The situational constraints are the time, energy, and resources available for the processing of the experience. Assessment of debriefing effectiveness takes into account these special contextual parameters, as for example, the relationships among the participants, their level of sophistication, and/or the time that can be devoted to debriefing at the moment. Debriefing is not an abstract nor theoretical construct. It takes place in actual time and space. The parameters within which it is possible to debrief participants need to be taken into account in assessing the degree to which the debriefing was effective in achieving its goals educationally. For example, constraints such as the relationships between participants outside the experiential learning context sometimes exist that impede an open, honest, verbal sharing of the thoughts and feelings of participants. In assessing the debriefing, these constraints need to be identified and examined and the debriefing session needs to have taken them into account. An intact work group that is going to be led through a debriefing is different from strangers who come together for a one-time learning experience. These differences make a difference in the ways in which a debriefing can and should be conducted.
The third set of questions to address in assessing a debriefing session is a review of the *debriefing strategy* selected. The debriefing may have been oral...
or written, conducted with the entire group or in small groups of two or three participants, immediately after the experience or delayed until a later time. The selection of the strategy is examined and assessed in relation to the specified learning objectives, and the constraints within which the debriefing operated. If, for example, time did not permit the immediate face-to-face processing and written debriefing was selected, this is different from the selection of the written mode when face-to-face was possible and perhaps preferable. Assessment here requires a review of the choices made and evaluation of their soundness.

The fourth set of questions to be addressed in a thorough assessment of the debriefing process is review of the implementation of the strategy selected. Questions to be examined here are how the debriefer prepares and presents all necessary materials, defines and enacts the role relationship between him- or herself and the students, and uses these for the participants. If, for example, the debriefing was conducted in groups of two and three and the groups needed to write out their experiences, materials to do so were needed. Assessment of this step focuses on the thoroughness and effectiveness of the preparation and presentation of materials where needed. Set up of the space within which the debriefing occurred, materials for participants and all other matters that would have facilitated the conduct of the debriefing are reviewed as part of this question.

The final set of questions to examine in the assessment process is evaluation of the processing experience. This is the examination and measurement of the learning process through which the learners have been guided. As discussed earlier in the essay, there are specific phases through which the debriefing process takes the learner. Questions here revolve around a review of the process itself through which the participants have been guided and the effectiveness of the exploration of each of the phases (what happened, what it was like, and what it meant). These questions serve the purpose of identifying the necessary steps in the debriefing process and whether they have existed and, if they have, how they have been handled.

In essence, the process of assessment and evaluation reviews all of the actions taken by the debriefer in preparing, implementing, and using the debriefing process. It is a review process to identify what has been done and how it has worked. It is a systematic way of approaching the assessment of a debriefing. Debriefing requires that the facilitator engage in a process with the participants, the outcomes of which may not be predictable. But the process itself is predictable and can be reviewed and assessed.
Conclusion

The process of debriefing is not ancillary to the educational experience to which it is tied. Debriefing is an integral part of any learning experience that is designed to be experience based. This essay has focused on a review and analysis of what is known and written about the debriefing process as the basis for offering a systematic way to assess a debriefing. For although a good debriefing may look as if it is natural and spontaneous, it is a predictable process with necessary parts and elements. The model laid out herein is an attempt to articulate those elements and phases as the basis for systematic analysis and assessment of debriefing.

Note

1. This essay focuses on debriefing in the educational context. The other two contexts are used to provide depth to our understanding of the construct, and to provide insight into debriefing in the educational context both directly and by inference. These contexts have been described above. They will be used hereafter only as they provide more insight into the primary focus for this essay: the learning experience.

References


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