

How to Design a Debriefing Session

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Chances are you and I already agree that experiential education is a valuable form of education. I wouldn't be writing for an AEE journal and you probably wouldn't be reading one if we didn't both agree that there is tremendous potential for human development and growth in carefully designed, safely executed and thoughtfully processed experience. Since you are reading this particular article, chances are also good that you have some ideas and some questions about how you, as a leader or teacher can maximize that growth through thoughtful processing or debriefing. The primary purpose of debriefing is to allow participants to integrate their learning, thus gaining a sense of closure or completeness to their experience. In order for participants to take what they have learned in an outdoor experience and use it effectively in their every day lives, they must think about it and interpret its meaning for themselves.

As a leader, you can facilitate this process by:

1. Setting aside enough time to reflect on the experiences.
2. Asking the right questions.
3. Planning appropriate activities that will help participants reflect on their experiences.
4. Listening to the participants carefully.
5. Supporting each participant's unique learning.

This debriefing guide provides some ideas for doing these things, but a word of caution is necessary: this is only a guide, not a set of rules to be followed exactly. The joy of designing a quality debriefing is that each one will be different, because each group you lead will be different.

Stages of Learning

In designing a debriefing, you are guiding people through a potentially complex learning process. In order to do this effectively, it can be helpful to understand how people learn. How do we piece together information gained from experience, instruction or reflection? How do we get to the point where we can say, "I learned that...?"

One way to describe how people learn is Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which delineates six levels of learning: (For more information about applying this concept to experiential education, read "How to Process Experience," Quinsland and Van Ginkel, JEE, Fall, 1984.)

- **KNOWLEDGE (memory level)**- remembering information by recognition or recall
- **COMPREHENSION (understanding level)** - interpreting or explaining knowledge or learning in a descriptive or literal way
- **APPLICATION (simple usage level)** - correct use of knowledge; e.g., to solve rote problems or answer questions
- **ANALYSIS (relationship level)** - breaking knowledge down into component parts and detecting relationships between them; e.g., identifying causes and motives
- **SYNTHESIS (creative level)** - putting together to form a whole; e.g., to formulate a solution
- **EVALUATION (opinion level)** - making judgments about the value of ideas, solutions, events

What does this mean? It is simpler than it looks. At first, we are very concrete in our thinking about our experiences. We remember the events and their associated feeling ("Today we sweated it out on that hike. I remember feeling like it would never end!") Once we have refreshed our concrete memories then we can look for patterns or relationships between recent and past events and feelings. ("I felt today like I've felt before when there is an enormous unknown in front of me - tired, grouchy, excited all at once, I felt all those things because I didn't know what to expect.") Only then can we move to more abstract thinking and consider what we have learned from an experience, how we might apply that learning in other situations and whether or not we like what we have learned.

(“Maybe tomorrow I can look at the map in the morning, compare tomorrow’s proposed distance with today’s and then gauge my strength. I don’t like feeling overwhelmed by not knowing what to expect, so I can inform myself and get a handle on what’s coming up.”)

Applying Stages of Learning

The following is a chart to show how these stages of learning relate to the stages of debriefing.

Learning Stage	Debrief Stage	Sample Questions & Activities
Concrete Knowledge Comprehension Application	Review/describe events feelings thoughts problems	Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you do when...? • What happened when...? • How did you feel when...? • What did your group do when...? Activities: Guided blind review ”I’m proud that I...” whip (can substitute happy, scared, excited, disappointed, pleased)
Abstract Analysis Synthesis Evaluation * Values Clarification ** Playfair *** NCOBS: Field Manual	Identify patterns Make comparisons Relate to daily life Propose solutions Examine values	Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the highlight for you? • The most challenging? • Do you see any patterns? • Does this remind you of anything? • Have you ever faced a similar challenge feeling? How? • What did you do then? • Have you learned anything here that you could use when that happens again? • Have you learned anything about yourself through this experience? Activities: ** Human tableaux *** Pantomime highlight/challenge *** Place in the circle *** Self shield * Rogerian listening on a group issue * ”I learned that I...” whip <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose & share two objects which represent self of before and now • Multi-media sharing - imagine the highlight/ challenge; draw it; share drawing; write about the drawing; share the writing

By recognizing the stages of learning as your groups go through them, you can design or modify your session to make it more effective. Different groups spend more or less time in each stage, so you must pay close attention. If you stay in the describing stage too long, you may notice people yawning or appearing bored or restless. It is obviously time to move on to questions or activities that get people to make comparisons or identify patterns. On the other hand, a group that has not had enough time to review their experiences will often not be able to move on to the next stage. They will return to descriptions even though you have asked them to start comparing or looking for patterns. This means you’ll need to give them more time and/or ways to finish that stage. A group that is still discovering patterns and making comparisons will not want to move on to thinking about how to apply their knowledge to their every day lives, nor will they want to describe how they felt about what they have learned. Your job is to sense when they are ready to move forward or when you are moving too quickly and need to slow down.

Fine Tuning a Debriefing

Once you understand that your debriefing session needs to follow the stages of learning from concrete to analytic to abstract, you may be tempted to pull together a list of all the questions and activities you know and start designing. Wait! There is more to consider. How do you know which activities will work? How do you know which questions to ask or how many or to whom? It is time to start fine-tuning.

Assessment of Participants

The first step is to assess the needs and abilities of your group, as individuals and as a group. Ask yourself: How involved is each person? How involved is the group? What kind of personal impact is this experience having on these people and the group? How self-aware are they? How well are they able to verbalize their feelings and thoughts? How comfortable are they sharing those feelings and thoughts with each other?

For instance, how would you rate your group and the individuals in it on the scales of possible responses on the bottom of this page? Asking yourself these questions will help you select appropriate questions and activities for your group's debriefing. If your group has just spent an entertaining but uneventful day rock climbing, you would place a matter-of-fact, brief session including questions and activities to review the day and a few questions or activities to allow them to reflect on the meaning of the day for themselves. Since their level of involvement and the impact of the experiences was low, they will not need or want a lengthy soul-searching session.

On the other hand, after a fear-filled day on the rocks, be prepared to allow time and support for people as they look back on that harrowing experience, relive some of the events and feeling from the safety of the solid ground, sort out their feelings and try to learn from them.

Level of participant response				
Bored	Actively resistant or passively noncommittal	There, but just tentative, hesitant	Totally focused	
Personal impact of the experience				
Ho hum		A few pleasant experiences	Oh WOW!	
Level of self-awareness				
I'm not feeling anything	I don't know what I'm feeling	I'm not sure, but I think I'm...	I'm feeling proud, sad, pleased, mad, frustrated, etc.	
Ability to verbalize feeling and thoughts				
Silence		vague, mumbled words or unclear sentences, hard to understand	specific, clear, descriptions or explanations	
Level of comfort with sharing				
Resistant Refusal to share	Uncomfortable silence	Chosen silence I'm not ready to share that much	Tentative sharing	Spontaneous outpouring

How do you know whether to use planned activities or just ask questions? The amount and type of structure you use will depend on your participants' needs as you have assessed them. The more unaware, inarticulate and uncomfortable your group is, the more structure you will need to provide. To ask a person who is just beginning to recognize her feelings to describe the difference in her feelings from the first to the last day may be asking the impossible. If she is just becoming aware of those feelings, she may not yet have words to describe them. She may well have forgotten the feelings from the first day, since she doesn't have words to pin them down. You may know she has felt many emotions from observing her face or listening to the tone of her voice. How can you help her recover those feelings? A structured activity or question may help her remember or label her feelings. After reviewing the events of the day you could start a whip going quickly around the circle using a specific feeling ("I was scared when...") or ask "When did you feel proud of yourself on this trip?" or "You looked disappointed up there. Were you?" (Always check out your interpretation of an emotion that you think you have observed.) In this way you have given her a hint, a piece to work with, so she can find a way into herself. If you use too broad a question ("How did you feel today?"), she may muddle around and perhaps feel embarrassed or angry because she cannot answer your question. With that you have blocked instead of aided her transfer of knowledge from the field to daily life.

With a group that is uncomfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings, try working in pairs to defuse the risk of sharing in a large group. Give a writing assignment, clearly stating that it can be shared or not. As a rule, the participants should always know that they may pass their turn. Do a short round robin or a positive, non-threatening

“whip” in which each person completes a short statement like “I’m glad that I...” A quick, clear whip can often loosen people up and focus their attention. Because everyone is on the spot very briefly, they may be willing to risk sharing a small piece of themselves.

If a group is shy or tense, pushing them to disclose their feelings will probably have the opposite effect. You can model self-disclosure for them by talking about your own feelings a little. “The first time I did that, I felt...”. Ask for concrete feelings about specific events, not global feelings. “How did you feel when you got to that hard part?” not “How did you feel about rock climbing?” Provide gentle and small opportunities to disclose, and then reward them by thanking them for talking or by restating what they said in a supportive way. Each small disclosure, if it falls on supportive ears, can build trust within the group.

You may find, on the other hand, that you have a group that talks easily and articulately. For them to have a high quality debriefing you may only have to plant a few questions and then facilitate the spontaneously unfolding discussion. It may be enough to ask key questions at the right time. “How was that for you today?” “Do you see any patterns in those feelings?” “Have you noticed any parallels between your feelings here and those in your daily lives?” “Do you think you can use what you have learned today at home?” In fact, the participants in such a group will probably pose these questions to each other or answer them before they are asked. Responding with a supportive nod may be all you have to do to keep the ball rolling.

The most important contribution you can make is to be sensitive to your group’s needs and abilities both in planning the debriefing and in the midst of it.

Balancing Variety, Flexibility, Timing and Location

The final four things to consider in planning your session are variety, flexibility, timing and location. Used with sensitivity, these can contribute to a smoothly flowing, enlightening debriefing. There are an infinite number of questions and activities to include. Vary them, play with them according to your group’s needs and abilities. Do activities alone, in pairs, in trios or with the entire group. Talk, touch, smell, act out, write, draw, pantomime, sing. Address matter-of-factly both the positive and the negative aspects of the experience, the comfortable and the uncomfortable, the pleasing and the repulsive. Be loud and quiet, big and small, active and still, slow and fast, silly and serious. A wisely chosen variety of activities and questions keeps the participants’ attention engaged, which leads to more productive processing of the experience.

In planning and leading a session be flexible. Try to assess your group accurately, but be prepared to change if you discover that you have misjudged. Remember, the participants are right. If your debriefing flounders, you simply have chosen a mismatched set of activities or questions for that group of participants. Try to sense where that matching point is and change your questions or style. If your group is not comfortable with the level of self-disclosure or self-examination YOU want, and you have not managed to make it safe enough for them or to pique their interest, trim your goals to fit their abilities. Meet them where they are.

Timing and location, too, are crucial. Schedule a time and pick a place that will maximize your participants’ ability to focus. Discomfort, fatigue, hunger, cold or bugs practically preclude awareness of feelings or abstract thinking. If you talk before lunch, will the people be able to pay attention? How hungry are they? If you wait until after lunch, will they be asleep? Is it too dark, too buggy, too cold, too late? When WILL be a good time; when could you MAKE a good time?

Remember that experience itself does not guarantee growth. Growth occurs when people recognize, articulate and reflect on the feelings that are a result of experience. A good debriefing can pull together all the wildly flowing feelings so that they make sense. It can crystallize those feelings into kernels of knowledge.

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