Debriefing

Debriefing is a term used in experiential education to describe a question and answer session with participants. These talking sessions are generally thought to be a 'sit down' circle where the facilitator asks questions and the participants answer. Although this can be an effective debriefing technique, if it is the only technique used, participants can become bored with it and can become easily distracted.

Debriefing an experience helps participants connect lessons and activities they learned in your program to the outside world. It is a very important piece of programming and learning as a whole. If participants are not allowed to reflect on their experiences and relate them to the outside world, then a lot of the learning may be lost. So including debriefing is really valuable after powerful experiences in your program. And mixing up your debriefing activities will keep participants engaged in what they are learning and allow you to create more teachable moments.

The Value of Reflection:

An important concept to consider when implementing experiential education activities is providing opportunities to process, or reflect on their educational experiences. The educational philosopher John Dewey (1933) who is known as one of the forefathers of experiential education believed that in order to truly learn from experience there must be time for reflection.

Processing helps learners make connections between their educational experiences and real life situations. It helps them recognize their skills and strengths by naming them. By recognizing and naming, the skills and strengths used in an experience, they become more cognizant of their inner resources that can be used in future life situations. The practice of reflection itself is one of the most useful human skills in that it develops insight one of the hardest important tools to teach and learn. Experiential activities followed by processing help people develop insight skills.
Debriefing is designed to help facilitators ask debriefing questions in a sequence that makes sense to participants. It can also shift some of the responsibility for successful processing from the facilitator to the participants. The sequence of 1) What happened, so what, then what, 2) Why is this important, 3) How can I use this information, 4) Knowing this information, what could we have done differently not only takes participants through a progression for processing a specific event, but also presents a fun and unique way for participants to debrief themselves. After a good debrief or at a later point in time, try the activity again. With participants new knowledge, they will go about it differently and get different results.

There is no one set way to debrief or one perfect time to debrief. Using a variety of techniques and using activities that give participants the power to take the lead in the debriefing is the most engaging and effective way of viewing debriefing. This handout will focus on different techniques to help liven up your debriefing circles.

Technique #1: Pair and Share

With this technique, the facilitator first asks participants to find a partner. Once everyone has a partner the facilitator instructs the group to discuss a debriefing question together.

The debriefing technique of Pair and Share works well because the participants get a chance to practice their answer before sharing with the large group. Many participants do not like being put on the spot when asked question in front of their peers. Pair and Share also allows for each participant to answer the question, not just one person talking while the rest of the group listens. Everyone gets a chance to answer each question that is asked.

Many icebreaker games you might already know could also be used as great pair and share debriefing activities. Think about some icebreaker games you already play. If they involve participants pairing up for a discussion question, you could use the same activity as a debriefing activity.
**Debriefing exchange:** Place cards with debriefing questions in 3 piles according to color and question type. Instruct participants to choose one card from the **Orange Pile** first. Ask them to find a partner and share their response to the question on their card with their partner. After the two have each shared their response, have them exchange cards and find a new partner. Encourage 3-4 partner exchanges. After 3-4 exchanges with Orange cards, have them trade out their card for a **Green card**. Encourage 3-4 partner exchanges with the green cards, then trade out this card for a **Blue card**. After 3-4 partner exchanges with the blue card the participants can return the card to the pile and form a circle. This process lets the group walk themselves through the debriefing sequence.

**Fortune Cookie Debrief**
Add spontaneity to your question and answer session with intriguing reflective treats. These paper versions of cookies are easily filled with reflection questions or closing quotes. Have each participant pick a fortune cookie from the box, then pair and share the question with a partner.

**Notes:** (What are some other icebreakers you know that would work as a debriefing ‘Pair and Share’?)

**Technique #2: Metaphoric Methods**

**Metaphoric Methods** are amazing techniques that really let the props do the talking for you. They also give more ownership of the debriefing process to the participants themselves. Debriefing activities can be just as dynamic and engaging as challenge course initiatives or group initiatives- especially with a new frame of mind from facilitators towards recognizing that reflection is not that ‘boring thing’ that comes at the end of the activity. It is that thing that creates the value and wonder in learning; it is the way ideas come together as a lasting lesson.
Using objects, as symbolic representations of an experience, or personal attribute can be a very effective approach to processing. These activities engage participants in creating or choosing symbols representing a group success or individual strength or accomplishment. The strength of these types of activities is that they are not threatening to participants and facilitators, and leave the opportunities for creative and meaningful interpretation of an experience wide open. Participants can attach their thoughts to a tangible object that they can touch and show to a group during group discussion or take away with them to represent their experience. This helps thoughts and ideas reach depth and character in a way that doesn’t happen with dialogue alone. Because the participants can talk about the object or image rather than about themselves directly they sometimes express thoughts that otherwise would be left unsaid (Cain, Cummings and Stanchfield 2004). Objects and images can be used to liven up the traditional sharing circle by providing interactive, kinesthetic ways to engage participants in group dialogue.
A favorite Metaphoric Tool:

Metaphor Cards/Chiji Cards

Metaphor Cards are reflective tools that use metaphors or symbols to represent participant's reactions to an experience. These cards are useful as introductory activities, for processing a specific experience, for closure, or even as tools to help participants resolve conflict.

This engaging tool uses pictorial images, metaphors or symbols to represent a participant's or group's reactions to an experience. Providing a tangible image upon which participants can attach their thoughts helps give these ideas substance and shape in quite profound depth. Metaphor Cards are useful as introductory activities, for processing a specific experience, for closure, or even as a tool to help participants resolve conflict. Metaphor Card Activities are appealing to participants, can be used in many different ways, and are appropriate for all age groups. Groups seem to go more in depth about their ideas and feelings when they attach their thoughts to a symbol or picture. Because participants share about a card rather than directly about themselves they are often more willing to share. Often more reserved members are drawn to expressing themselves through the use of these symbols.

Directions for Metaphor Cards/Chiji Cards:

- As an introductory activity participants can choose the card that best represents a strength they bring to the group, or a goal they have for the day, course or program.

- As a pre brief in the early parts of a program spread the cards out before the group and have them pick a card that best represents where they are at that moment. At the very beginning of the day/program, spread the cards out before the group and have them pick a card that best represents where they are at that moment. Ask them how they are feeling and to pick a card that matches where they are mentally coming into the day. Go around the group and ask each participant to share why they picked the card they did and why that card represents them or where they are. If you start the day with this activity, it is good to end the day with this same activity.

- Spread the cards out before the group and have them pick a card that best represents an experience or a feeling that they had during the activity or at the end of the day. You can do this at the end of the day or after an activity. Go around the group and ask each participant to share why they picked the card they did and why that card represents them or an experience they have had. Participants can each pick their own card, then draw it or write about in their journal.
Technique #3 Intervention Tools

Sometimes with our groups we have to stop the fun and games and have hard conversations with participants. This could result from a negative behavior from an individual or a group behavior that needs to be addressed. This next tool is one of my favorite tools to use when you have to have a hard conversation.

Traffic Debrief

A traffic light is used to help direct motorists while driving to keep them from crashing. The lights signify things a driver should do to keep things flowing smoothly. The three colors on the stoplight can be used as metaphors for behaviors: What are you doing well? (green light) What do you need to be careful of? (yellow light) What do you need to stop doing? (red light)

Present a stoplight to the group to set the stage for targeted metaphorical processing. When a group has started to show negative behavior patterns, or if a conflict arises, use the metaphor of the stoplight to debrief the situation. **Frontload** your discussion with examples for each color. You could also have the group give suggestions for each color. Following are examples of processing questions and information that relate to the Stoplight.

- **RED**: What are things happening in the group that need to STOP in order for us to be more successful? The usual answers are to stop teasing, horseplay, put-downs, blaming, etc.
- **YELLOW**: What are things we need to be CAREFUL of as we continue? Suggestions have included keeping everyone safe, listening to all ideas, being aware of personal choices and boundaries, etc.
- **GREEN**: What are things we want to GO for? This could be group goals, as well as behavior suggestions. Ideas have included being respectful, encouraging more, setting time limits, etc.

If it wouldn't be a distraction, the stoplight can be handed out to a specific individual who will monitor those ideas for the group. This person can be asked to report on what they observed at the end of the activity or session. For example; the person designated to carry the stoplight is asked to let the group know any time he sees an infraction of behavior norms. He could call a group discussion, point to the yellow light and say, —We had stated we wanted to be careful of listening to everyone’s ideas before we started. Are we listening to everyone?
Conflict Resolution Thumball™

Here is a truly unique tool to help organizations and individuals resolve a conflict. There are 32 different conflict resolution or peer mediation questions pre-printed on the panels of the ball. The ball is made of soft material.

- Invite your group to sit or stand in a circle.
- Ask participants to toss the Thumball™ to a teammate. This teammate should catch it, look under their thumb, and respond to the question found there.

Sample questions found on the Conflict Resolution Thumball™:

1. What is one thing you could have done differently?
2. How would you like to see the conflict resolved?
3. How did you approach the other party?
4. Describe your initial reaction to the conflict.
5. Is there old stuff you are using to fuel this fire?
6. In the grand scheme of things, how important is this conflict?
7. Are you trying to cast blame?
8. What are you doing that is blocking the resolution of this problem?

Variation: Read the group a conflict scenario and then ask them to toss the ball around and respond to the questions based on how they would try and resolve the conflict.

Variation: This is a wonderful processing tool for one person. If you are going through a conflict of some kind, toss the ball in the air and look under your thumb to reflect on the question silently. The 32 questions are well thought out and may give you insight on how to solve your own inner conflict.

Technique #4 Frontloading

In its simplest form, Frontloading refers to giving an example before the experience rather than afterwards. By giving the participants and example of the type of answer you are expecting, it makes the debriefing process much easier. Kids learn by example, so if they hear a good example they will most likely follow your lead. Frontloading gives participants a sense of the task purpose, expectations for behavior and motivation for coming up with their answer.
Body Part Debrief™

The Body Part Debrief™ activity is a great activity for both new and seasoned facilitators. It is simple enough in nature that groups of any age will use it with ease. The body parts have a ‘coolness’ factor to them that fosters a safe environment for people to talk. If you are having a hard time getting your participants to share or reflect, this activity will help solve that problem.

The basic concept for this activity is that you have different balls or objects that are shaped like body parts. Each part can represent a metaphor related to that part. For example:

"Eye"
- Could represent something new that you saw in yourself or someone else.
- What vision do you have for yourself/the group?

"Stomach"
- Could represent something that took guts for you to do.
- What pushed you outside your comfort zone?

"Brain"
- Could represent something new that you learned about yourself, a teammate, or the group.
- What did you learn through your experience?

"Heart"
- Could represent a feeling that you experienced.
- What things come from the heart?

"Hand"
- In what way did the group support you?
- Could represent someone you would like to give a hand to for a job well done.

"Ear"
- Could represent something you listened to or a good idea you heard.
- Could represent something that was hard to hear—did you receive constructive feedback or not-so-constructive feedback.
Technique #5  Self Reflection

The Pocket Processor

The Pocket Processor is a processing tool based on the theory of the yin and the yang. This theory describes two ends of a continuum, with each end having the seed of the other. The Pocket Processor helps participants examine the flow along the continuum.

Human Continuum variation:
Put a piece of rope in the center of the room. Ask everyone to stand on the line. Then read the two sides of the card and allow every participant to physically place himself or herself anywhere on that continuum. For example, a facilitator can say, "This side of the room is always taking charge." The other side of the room is always, "allowing others to lead." I want each of you to find the place on the continuum where you most fit today.

Technique #6  Action and Reflection

Traditionally processing has involved sitting a group of participants down in a circle after an activity and having the facilitator ask participants questions regarding their reactions to experience. Though this activity can be effective, it can be tiresome for everyone involved if it is the only processing method used. Also in this method, the facilitator is directing the participants rather than students interpreting the experience for them. Some variations of this activity that will liven it up and give more control to the participants are listed below:

Shuffle Left, Shuffle Right
Debriefing in Motion

Some folks have remarked that it takes more energy for an 11 year old boy to stand still, than it does for them to move! For participants that need to move during a debriefing session, here is a perfect solution.

Concepts: Providing some kinesthetic movement during a reviewing session can maintain the energy of the group, and keep those high energy folks engaged by being active.

Directions:

- Begin by asking the group to form one large circle. Groups may decide to place their arms around their neighbors, hold hands, or simple stand unconnected next to each other.
- The facilitator offers the group the chance to "have their say." This may be related to a
particular question, or the previous activity, or be open to any viewpoint that a person in the group wishes to share. It is often helpful for the facilitator to go first, and demonstrate the style (and length) of response.

- The activity begins with the group shuffling to the left.
- At some point, the facilitator says —stop!— and then gives their comment to the group.
- Next, they say —shuffle right, and the entire group shuffles right, until someone else says —stop!— and has their say.

Technique #7 Sit and Get

As mentioned above, debriefing is a term used in experiential education to describe a question and answer session with participants. These talking sessions are generally thought to be a ‘sit down’ circle where the facilitator asks questions and the participants answer. This is often referred to as a Sit and Get circle. This technique can be very effective as long as it is not the only technique used. If not other technique is used, participants can become bored with the process and can become easily distracted. Also in this method, the facilitator is directing the participants rather than students interpreting the experience for themselves.

Technique #8 Anchor Pieces

Anchor pieces are small trinkets or mementos of your program that participants take home with them. These objects will anchor the learning and experiences they had back to your program.

Some examples of this Anchor Pieces are listed below:

Community Puzzle

Puzzles can be incorporated into reflective learning in a variety of ways. Puzzles create a unique atmosphere in which each participant can contribute an equal piece. Puzzle pieces can work as a metaphor for the role participants take in activities. They can act as a space to create artistic representations of a participant’s strengths, or contributions to the group. They can create a “picture” of the group and its experiences and goals piece by piece.
There are many ways to use The Community Puzzle. The only limit is your imagination. We recommend having each person decorate a puzzle piece in his/her own style, usually, but not always using a common theme. You can have them color on their puzzle piece to represent a ‘piece’ of learning that they are going to take away from the program, or how they are an essential ‘piece’ of the team.

Later Letters
Later Letters allow participants to receive a letter from themselves at a later date to remind them of their experience during the program.

- Give each participant a piece of paper, pen/pencil and envelope.
- Ask each person to write a letter to themselves describing their experience from this program.
- After they have finished writing have them seal the letter inside the envelope, and write their mailing address on the front of the envelope.
- Seal letters and mail them back to their authors at some other strategic time. If you have the ability to keep up with a calendar, ask the participants to place a date on the back of the envelope as to when they would like to receive the letter. Then you can mail the letter to them a few days before the wished to receive it. A file cabinet system and good organization are key to making this work.
- As an alternative, before sealing each envelope, other members of the group can include greetings, mailing addresses, birthday wishes, email addresses, sketches or photographs. And don’t forget a greeting from the group’s facilitator.

Technique #9 Artistic Methods
Artistic Methods allow participants to have creative freedom to express their learning through different mediums. This could be through art projects, musical methods or videography.