

Games & Debriefing

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In the last months I have spent time exploring the concept of games and their use in training. Games can be a useful way of enhancing learning, enabling the exploration of different concepts more fully and a great way of opening some subjects. Games can be standalone activities or they can support theory. Games also introduce an element of fun into a programme of training – another factor that supports learning.

In some cases the game that is played is as stated above a standalone activity, meaning it does not need anything else to go with it. The game is played and the programme moves forward to the next item on the agenda. For example, this is the case in most instances with energisers. The purpose of the energiser is to change the dynamic in the group in order to move on to the next part of the programme. There is no other agenda here, there is no need for any other agenda. For some games however this is not so, simulation games, team building games, trust games, role playing and so on... Each of these types of game produces learning and development for the group and individual in the group. But much of that learning remains dormant or hidden without support from the trainer to draw it out.

This article is an exploration of that ‘drawing out of the learning’, this is the concept of the debrief!

It has been a misunderstanding by many trainers that through doing or playing a game the learning is achieved. Yes undoubtedly learning is happening during the playing of a game. In the team building world it is quite common that all the focus is on the activity itself with no analysis provided. Some companies and trainers who do team building, focus on creating impressive and amazing activities, they ensure their clients have a great time and are challenged and pushed – mentally, emotionally and physically. Through their expertise they do get results where individuals from a company become a stronger and more dynamic team. Games of any description are dynamic and fun, interesting and engaging, they bring energy and insights. They are a legitimate tool for the trainer and do indeed achieve a great many things in their own right.

Yet I would argue that this is only half the job. How much learning is being lost by working like this? The problem with this approach is that as human beings most of us are not particularly perceptive in realising what it is we have learned. If we are left without the opportunity for exploring we focus our minds on the fun aspects; nothing wrong with that, it’s pretty healthy, but we are missing a lot of other good stuff. Even if we get together after one of these games and re-tell the stories of what happened and have a good laugh, we still miss a lot because there is no structured reflection and analysis of what happened. It is through this reflection and analysis that we have the opportunity to recognise the full extent of the learning that took place. Through acknowledging the learning it becomes learning rather than a subconscious or unconscious level of learning that may never be realised. This process of reflection and analysis by a trainer is called a debrief, a process of exploring, recognising and acknowledging learning.

There are many approaches and forms of debrief and different trainers put different emphasis on the whole concept. Some will perform a brief debrief while others will conduct in-depth analysis! The basic form of debriefing is pretty much the same whatever model you use. Below is a simple skeleton of a debrief, that I base my work on:

- ~ **The First Reaction**
- ~ **The Facts**
- ~ **The Emotions**
- ~ **The Learning**
- ~ **The Real World**

The following are some examples from different trainers and writers who have influenced me in developing my style and approach.

The Reflective Cycle; Gibbs, G. Learning by Doing. 1988¹

- ~ Description – what happened?
- ~ Feelings – What were you thinking and feeling?
- ~ Evaluation – What was good and bad about the experience?
- ~ Analysis – What sense can you make of the situation?
- ~ Conclusion – hat else could you have done?
- ~ Action Plan – If it arose again what would you do?

Peer Net BC:²

- ~ Do activity
- ~ Sharing to generate data
- ~ Processing – use of questions to make sense out of the data
- ~ Generalising – so what? What can we get from this
- ~ Applying – so how can this be useful in the real world

Dr Roger Greenaway. The Active Reviewing Cycle:³

- ~ What happened? What did you do?
- ~ What did you experience? What did you feel?
- ~ Why did that happen? What are you learning?
- ~ How will it affect you? What are your hopes?

Source Unknown:

- ~ The Emotions
- ~ The Game – what happened?
- ~ Too Remember
- ~ Relation Between the Game and Reality
- ~ What If (+Link Reality)
- ~ What's Next – what would you change in reality?

¹ http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade/a-z/reflective_gibbs.html

² www.peernetbc.com

³ <http://reviewing.co.uk/learning-cycle/index.htm>

Source Unknown:

- ~ What? So What? Now What? – How did the group solve the problem in front of them? Who contributed to that solution and how?
- ~ Interpretive discussion – Was there a better way to communicate the solution? Was everybody's opinion considered? Was everybody part of the plan? Was everybody part of the solution?
- ~ Lessons that this game taught that could be applied to real life – What did we learn from this activity that would be useful in your work? How could it help?

Source Unknown:

Reflection

- ~ How do you feel right now?
- ~ Did you realise something new?
- ~ How much were you already aware about?

Generalisation

- ~ Did you discover anything new?
- ~ What can we learn from this?

Application

- ~ What does this mean for you?
- ~ How can you apply what you have learned in this activity in your daily life?
- ~ In what way is this relevant to your life?

Every model has similarities and differences. Every trainer will approach their debrief sessions in their own way based on the models, things or experiences that have shaped them. Each trainer needs to work out what he or she is comfortable with in terms of a model and then adapt it to their own needs and style of training. There is no single right answer here, there is no single correct model for debriefing. There are too many factors to take into account that makes each debrief a unique activity in its own right. Factors include, the actual game, the subject, the group, the trainers style, the trainers ability to ask appropriate primary and follow up questions, and so on...

In the next section I will go through the stages of a debrief from my format model. For the purposes of clarity I will explain each section in the context of either a team building game and or a simulation game.

The First Reaction

It is important to leave very little time between the end of the game and the debrief, time changes perspectives, feelings and attitudes very quickly. It is vitally important to keep the group focussed and get them while they are still mentally and emotionally 'in' the activity.

I start with asking each person in the group to express their feelings, their first reaction or their thoughts concerning the game they have just completed. I do this because even though I have been monitoring and observing the activity and intuitively have a pretty good idea about what is going on for each individual in the group, I still need that confirmation. It is also good because it gets each person in the group to let the rest of the group know what they are thinking or feeling immediately that the game has finished. I get the group to answer one by one in the circle in order. For me this questioning is about the emotions that the individuals are experiencing in that moment. The problem is that most of us are not good at identifying feelings. If I ask each member of the group to express their feelings, many will respond with attitudes or statements that express everything except a

feeling. People will often say things like 'it was a good experience' or 'confused' or 'I did not want it to end' etc. These are not feelings.

At one time I tried to get people to name their feelings when they gave one of these statement answers, but some people felt they were being picked on and were sensitive, especially if this was after a game with a lot of emotions running in it. Now I try to ask the question in a way that gets me their first reaction, sometimes it is a feeling and sometimes not, but ultimately this does not actually matter at this stage, what I need and want to know is the reaction of each individual in this moment.

Sometimes some games, team building games and simulation games particularly can raise a lot of intense emotions. People get angry at each other because something went wrong and one part of the group wants to blame the other. If I get a lot of responses expressing anger and related emotions and statements I know I will need to adjust my approach and maybe focus on that more. If there is a general feeling of elation and success and unity then I can take another direction.

This is not meant to be an in-depth part of the debrief, and unless it is for clarification I tend not to interrupt or question what people say, though I do often repeat what each one says in order to verbalise it a second time, this acts as a way of confirming to the individual that I have understood what they said, or they will correct me if I am wrong.

The Facts

The next stage is then to go over what happened. I try to get groups to do this chronologically but when so many people have so much to say it is easy for the discussion to butterfly – meaning it can jump from one subject to another or one time period of the game to another.

This is a delicate balance, on the one hand as the trainer we need to control the analysis, but on the other hand it is so important to let the group take the analysis to where they need it to go. I don't have an answer about how to do this, it is something that I believe comes with practice, that you can only get right in the end by getting it wrong many times first. I was taught several years ago to listen to my 'gut', this is different from the emotions and intelligence. In training our gut reaction to something is perhaps the most important of the three – the head, the heart and the gut!

At this stage I almost discourage people from exploring their feelings, my role as the trainer is to try and get the group to reveal all the information about game, what they did, when they did it, to whom did they do it, how did they do it, etc. It is important for the group to relive the experience and tell each other their different perspectives. In one of my first articles for Global HR I explored a concept of Truth; to summarise, we can see the same thing from different perspectives and each believe that we have the whole truth of the matter yet what we actually have are two different truths! This happens in games as much as it does in real life. Group members will try to explain what they did and how it was sabotaged by somebody else, or how they blame another part of the group for screwing up the activity. Yet that other person was only trying to help from their perspective and the other part of the group felt excluded so they had given up trying. Every action has a consequence and a reaction. The following is a root cause analysis of a typical situation in a group debrief:

5. person 1 blames person 2 for ruining the game
4. yet person 2 was actually trying to fix things because person 1 had made a mistake in the strategy
3. person 2 had taken on a leadership role because no one else would and had made a mistake because there was a lack of support from the group for their leadership
2. there was no support because there was no cooperation in the group
1. there was not cooperation in the group because the 'group' – the whole group – did not take the responsibility to communicate at the beginning of the game to find a strategy to resolve the problem!

What starts out as a simple statement of blame actually has a huge history behind it, and in reality each point in that list has further branches of reasons for its existence.

- ~ Why was person 2 trying to fix things – because persons 3 and 4 encouraged them, or a part of the group was in rebellion and a new leader was emerging, or because person 2 is a rescuer and wanted to help person 1!
- ~ Why did no one else take on the leadership – because no one had the courage to step forward, or because person 1 is just dominant and is always taking charge!
- ~ Why was there no cooperation and communication – because the group is used to person 1 taking control so many of them just sit back and wait for person 1 to screw up as usual, or because they already think they are a group because things always work out in the end, or because they do not actually understand what a group process is!

Through this process of asking people what happened or following up responses with key questions, of facilitating participants into dialogue to understand what happened, through asking more questions and so on... it becomes possible to understand more fully the 'First Reaction' and why this was significant.

If people expressed anger it is important that it is explored through this analysis. Each member of the group reveals what they did, how they did and why they did it, this in turn leads to discussion, where people can challenge one another, where they can question one another for clarification. Each piece of the puzzle, each action, counter reaction and each consequence is what they as a group created and through revealing it the whole picture emerges.

If members of the group expressed euphoria at such a great piece of team building they achieved, yet you know that it was not, then it is equally important to reveal this through questioning. The same approach works, challenge them and get them to analyse what they did or did not do. It was a great success because person 1 did all the work and half the group stood around doing nothing for an hour! This is not team building, it is the achievement of an activity by one person on behalf of a large number of other individuals.

The Emotions

Once a number of things have been revealed, resolved and concluded it is important to revisit the emotions. How do you feel now? What are your feelings to the group? What are your feelings about the exercise? And so on... I think that at this stage it is important to get people to identify their emotions. This stage should receive much more time than the first stage with the round of instant responses, this stage needs time for exploration and expression. If members of the group come up with reactions that are not emotions there should also be space here to challenge that and encourage the individual through questioning to recognise and name their emotion. This is not just done for the sake of doing it, it is important as part of the learning process to be able to name and identify these feelings and emotions as feelings and emotions, because if we are able to recognise them then we can work with them. If we avoid naming them we are naming the actions or state of mind which are a result of the emotion, which is also good, but in order to do something about the action or state of mind we need to recognise and understand the emotion that this is coming from. This is the basis of the journey of change. I am not a psychologist and I am not trained in this field but it makes sense to me like this. Don't treat the symptom treat the cause, the action is the symptom the cause is the emotion and in turn there can be a chance to explore what caused the emotion. Any psychologists reading this, please correct me if I am wrong about this.

If you have the skill you can get people to explore the journey of their emotions, 'at first I was angry, then when I heard there was another point of view and person 2 did not try to mess things up on

purpose, I reflected more on my own actions, now I am feeling calm and a little confused'. It is fine for people not to have a conclusion and to end with confusion for example, this is not a therapy, it is an analysis of a game.

It is also vitally important to know how far to push a line of questioning or a specific issue with the group. If we push too much people just get confused and switch off, over analysis creates blocks, when what we should be doing is facilitating the group to understand and recognise its learning.

The Learning

Once you the trainer are satisfied that the facts or story of the game have been revealed and the emotions have been worked out and there are no open conflicts still in the group, the group has cleared the baggage and is ready to start identifying their learning. Much of the learning will already have been voiced in the previous stages but it may not yet be recognised as such. As with everything in debriefing it is all about questions. Identifying learning is actually really hard for most people. We can see the obvious big things but like 'The Emotions' section people will give answers that are not directly answers. For example: "I learned a lot", this is not an answer, what does it mean? It means nothing and everything! It is the trainers responsibility to use questions to get the individual to identify specific actual learning! Hopefully the process of the previous three stages will make this task easier. If someone gives one of these answers it should be possible for the trainer to refer the individual back to an earlier discussion, "earlier you were talking about the development in the game of your awareness of others, what did you learn from that scenario?"

Different games will have different types of learning though all will have many similarities. The similarities will be – these are generalisations – I learned about myself, I learnt that I have more patience or don't have patience, I learnt that I have to be clearer in communication etc. Specific things will depend on the game, in team building games the focus of learning will centre on working as a group, communicating as a group, leadership, inclusiveness, and about sub groups and so on... In a simulation exercise the learning will normally be more person centred and individual, difficult to say more than that because it would depend on the nature of the game subject! The hardest part as said above is getting people to verbalise and realise specific learning they have achieved.

This learning is all about what they as a group or individuals have learnt within the context of the game. The final stage is to start exploring how that learning can be transferred into the real world.

The Real World

Learning something in a game is great, let's face it learning in any circumstances is great. But what does this actually mean, what significance does this learning have for you as the individual, for the group you are a part of, or the company that you work for?

This is the final and most crucial part of the debrief. How does this learning get transferred into the real world! A friend of mine, Jo Claeys in Portugal, created and runs a simulation game called Plan B⁴. The learning in the game is all about decision making, cooperation, honesty and communication, among many other things. My friend always begins the game session by asking the group what they think about politicians, as you can imagine, there are not many positive or constructive comments. The game itself puts all the participants into the role of the decision makes – the 'politicians' – of three different communities, the game focuses on the varied resources these communities have and how they use them. At the end of the game the resources per population are calculated and more often than not thousands of citizens have died from lack of shelter, food and water – of which there is more than enough to actually save everybody if all the communities cooperated.

⁴ http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/documents/Publications/Coyote/10/simulated_reality.pdf

In the exploration of learning many things come out about communication and cooperation. In the stage of the debrief about 'The Real World', the learning becomes grounded in reality. That lack of honesty, cooperation and communication in each team and amongst the three communities had consequences. Participants find themselves comparing themselves to the comments they made about politicians before the game started! Decision making is not just about a person somewhere far away it is the communities responsibility. The learning in this game is designed to mobilise communities to work for themselves and not just rely on the decision makes. In this particular game the learning is quite intense. In other games it is not always so.

In a team building scenario, the false assumption in 'The Learning' stage of the debrief is that the group has learned how to be a team or a cohesive group. The actual learning should be that the team building game is just a first step on the road to the team or group becoming more cohesive. Generally the learning expressed from a team building game will focus on communication and cooperation, listening, and awareness. All good things, and learning from a game is great, but what do these specific things mean in the real world for a company or business? This debrief stage is getting people to work out what 'listening more' means in a daily context in their office, how will the group of colleagues ensure this will happen, what action do they need to take to ensure it happens.

Conclusion:

In conclusion then, debrief is vitally important for the completion of games and activities where the learning is the priority. Whichever of the models we base our style on, it is important to take the participants on the journey in order to reach the end result.

I have not mentioned anything about the intensity and length of the debrief. On average a debrief should last at least as long as the game. However there are exceptions. What is the need of the group, if it is a fun light hearted team building day that has been requested it will not need a heavy long debrief. If, for example, it is the Plan B simulation game that explores the role of the community, then the debrief can be significantly longer than the game, and the game lasts for at least 1.5hrs.

I have talked about debrief having these clear steps or stages, I did it this way because it is easier to explain it and visualise it like this, in reality many of the steps overlap or even merge sometimes. The important thing is that you need the steps, from whichever model suits you, in your head and can use them to facilitate the groups understanding of their learning.

And finally a couple of anonymous quotes:

Learning for the sake of learning is great, but transferring learning into our realities is the strength that games can provide for us.

Games + Debriefing = a practical level of learning that can be transferred directly into daily practice and life.