Teaching Brief

Reflecting on Reflections:
Debriefing in Public Relations Campaign Classes

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ABSTRACT

This brief argues for a different perspective when incorporating debriefing exercises in classes such as public relations campaign courses. Grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), this study views debriefing exercises as Kolb's "concrete experience" stage, rather than the traditional approach of debriefings as "reflective observations." Using examples from different campaign classes, the study shows how this change can lead to positive results for students. Additionally, recommendations are provided for implementing this approach.

KEYWORDS: Debriefing, experiential learning

In a successful experiential learning (EL) situation, students apply knowledge gained from traditional pedagogical methods to real-world situations, thereby expanding their skills through these experiences. Kolb's (1984) Theory of Experiential Learning identifies four stages of EL. The concrete experience stage incorporates hands-on events where students apply previously learned principles and concepts. Students then review the experience (reflective observation stage), partly to identify any gaps between the student's experience and their understanding of those previously learned concepts. In the conceptualization stage, students reconcile those gaps identified during the reflective observation stage by modifying existing concepts or identifying new ones. Finally, these new/modified principles are applied and tested as part of the active experimentation stage, which can lead to new concrete experiences.

This teaching brief argues for a new approach to one widely-used reflection tool—the debriefing exercise. Debriefing allows participants to "reflect on recent experiences to prepare for subsequent tasks" (Eddy et al., 2013, p. 975). Initially developed as a military exercise, debriefing is now used in a variety of professions (Nicholson, 2013). Despite its wide use, debriefing exercises are not always effective. Potential problems with debriefings include not allocating enough time for the debrief and an imbalance of power between facilitator(s) and participants (Dennehy et al.,1998). These problems generally can be best addressed by the facilitator of the debrief, but other problems require the efforts of both the facilitator(s) and participants. These include "too much focus on task work, telling—not discussing, inadequate focus, and no definitive look forward" (Reyes et al., 2018, p. 48-49).

Additional challenges arise when introducing debriefing exercises to students, who generally have little experience with such exercises. This inexperience impacts students' abilities to effectively contribute to a debrief.

When I first introduced debriefing exercises to a public relations capstone class over seven years ago, I had three objectives for this exercise—students would reflect on the project, gain debriefing experience, and provide feedback about the overall class. While all three objectives might be appropriate, it became clear that it was unrealistic to accomplish them all during a session that may last as little as 20 minutes. As such, it was important to focus on one objective and develop the debriefing with that single objective in mind. Given the students' inexperience with debriefing meetings, I decided that the primary objective of these sessions should be learning, rather than reflecting.

This teaching brief, therefore, proposes that debriefing exercises still be used within the context of an EL class such as a public relations campaigns class, but instead as part of the concrete experience stage, rather than as a reflective observation. With this approach, the emphasis is not to have students reflect on what they have learned (reflective observation), but rather for students to learn how to effectively debrief (concrete experience). This brief recommends steps to take before, during, and after the restructured debriefing exercise (see appendix for a summary of these steps). The paper then provides observations and experiences from the new approach to the debriefing sessions.

Restructuring the Debriefing Session

Before the debrief

Prior to any debriefing, students should receive an in-depth introduction to the concept of debriefing sessions and the "rules of the road." This introduction starts with a lecture highlighting the value of debriefing both in a classroom setting as well as in a professional environment. This introduction stresses two key concepts: First, the debriefing is a "conversation among equals;" everyone's "rank" and ego are left outside of the meeting. As such, it is important that students understand they may direct the conversation as much as the facilitator.

They are encouraged to contribute their thoughts, but also to raise questions and issues they feel are important to examining the team's progress. Second, the introduction encourages students to think in terms of analyzing the team's progression; this is not a meeting to focus on individual successes or limitations.

To augment this explanation, I assign short readings and videos (e.g., Bourke, 2014; Rae, 2017; Sundheim, 2015; Womack, 2015) further explaining the concept. These assignments include both academic and professional perspectives, so students can also see the professional-world applications. I then quiz the students on the assigned materials. The quiz is not for a grade, but the students must pass the quiz in order to attend the debriefing meeting, which is for a grade (typically five percent or less of the student's final grade). Students can take the online quiz an unlimited number of times until they receive a passing grade. In other words, the quiz is not the ultimate objective of this assignment, but it helps instill a sense of accountability among the students while helping them prepare for the debriefing exercise. In addition, if students do not fully understand the reading material, they can see this with their quiz score, and can go back to review the readings before taking the quiz again.

After passing the quiz, students are given questions that could arise during their particular debriefing session, so that they can begin the reflection process. I encourage students not to write out detailed answers to these questions. In previous classes, students prepared written responses to the questions prior to the debrief and used these answers as a script for the meeting. Doing so inhibits the interactive aspects of a successful debrief. Instead, the purpose of providing questions in advance should be to encourage students to formulate their ideas, but not prepare scripted answers for the meeting.

Questions used during a particular session are tailored to each group, reflecting the unique characteristics of each group's project and

experiences. The questions focus specifically on the project itself (e.g., what worked, what didn't), rather than reflecting on what students have learned, which would be more appropriate in the reflective observation stage. Sample questions can be found in the appendix and other literature (see Sundheim, 2015). Since the debriefings may only be 20 or 30 minutes long, the questions should be designed to engage students and encourage discussion as quickly as possible.

The Debriefing Meeting

I schedule each team's debrief during one class period, and each team meets separately with me. Therefore, the time spent with each team is only a fraction of the class period, typically 20 to 30 minutes. It is helpful to have a second facilitator in the meeting as this often provides a different perspective of the debriefing meeting

When possible, I schedule the meetings in a conference room rather than a classroom, leaving the classroom available for the other students to continue working in their teams during the other debriefings. This also helps create a more professional setting, leading to a more realistic EL environment.

Since this is a learning—not a reflection—assignment, the quality of a student's reflections is less important to their grade than is their participation during the discussion. One strict requirement which I impose—which students know in advance—is that they be on time for the meeting: Once the meeting begins, being late by even a few seconds results in a 10% deduction to the assignment grade. This reinforces the professional aspect of meeting and emphasizes the importance of being on time in such professional settings.

During the meeting, any prepared questions are just a guide; depending on the way students direct the conversation, unanticipated questions may be more meaningful once the debriefing is underway. The facilitator should be responsive to these dynamics and lead the direction

of the discussion accordingly; if the students shift toward a different, but relevant topic, encourage continued discussion. Conversely, if the students begin focusing on extraneous issues (e.g., the class, the curriculum), the facilitator should redirect the focus, most likely by introducing another previously prepared question.

Post-Meeting

During the first class after the debriefing, it is beneficial to spend time recapping the debriefing sessions. In essence, this recap incorporates the "reflective observation" stage of the EL cycle.

Reflections of the debrief should start off by reinforcing the benefits of debriefings within the context of a professional environment. At this point, engage the students to get their thoughts on the debriefing itself. Probing questions can include, "Do you feel that this meeting helped your team focus on the next set of milestones? If so, how? If not, what could you/your team/the facilitator have done during the debrief that would have led to better results?" The important distinction with this meeting (vs. the debriefing meeting) is that now, the students' reflections are not about the capstone project, but rather specifically on the debriefing session. Another benefit to this discussion is that it allows the student to reflect on what they could have done differently as a participant and what they might do in a similar situation as a facilitator.

Discussion

The new approach to the debriefing sessions has been in effect for two years, and most of the sessions have included one facilitator and one outside observer. After the debriefings, the facilitator and observer have met to share their observations. These observations—as discussed below—consistently reflect a greater level of student engagement and a shift in the students' attitudes towards debriefing. Overall, the facilitators/ observers have found the "new" debriefings to be beneficial to the quality of students' participation in the meetings. Unless otherwise stated, the

discussion below reflects those observations that were noted by all observers.

First, the students seem more engaged in terms of the time they spoke (vs. the facilitator), although all observers agreed there is still room for improvement in this area. Additionally, during the debriefing session, students discussed the underlying project as if it had been a professional work project rather than as a school assignment.

Some of the students have been more proactive in discussing their team dynamics and interaction. In one instance, a student acknowledged she had not been able to attend many of the team meetings due to work commitments and was concerned that her teammates felt she had not contributed sufficiently. The other team members unanimously disagreed, indicating that her contributions had been crucial to the success of the team's final campaign plan. Subsequently, the team's implementation of the plan during the second half of the semester was also successful, and the group's client commented on the enthusiasm and cohesiveness of the students throughout the project.

Students have also demonstrating a greater appreciation for the debriefing process. As an example, students in one particular class participated in the first debriefing during the semester's mid-term, which helped each team approach the final half of their project more cohesively and effectively. As the semester end neared, the students were given a choice: They could each reflect on the semester by submitting a written, one-page reflection paper with their thoughts, or each team could meet for a longer debriefing session (one hour) at the end of the semester. The choice, therefore, offered students an assignment that would require them to return to campus for an in-person group meeting, or to submit an individual assignment online, and avoid any on-campus meeting. Despite the effort required to come to campus and meet for an hour, an overwhelming majority of the class opted for the debriefing session

instead of the reflection paper.

During their end-of-semester meetings that the students opted for, I asked students why they preferred an assignment that required them to be on campus at a specific time during finals week, when they could have simply written a one-page reflection and submit it without having to appear in class. Most students responded by focusing on the value gained from the debriefing experience. Some acknowledged the team-building benefits to having this kind of meeting, and indicated they wanted yet another opportunity to get together with their semester-long teammates before ending the term. Reflecting on the debriefing earlier in the term, some students saw the positive impact that the initial meeting had on their team's cohesiveness and interpersonal relationships. Others valued the additional insight from their team members, as indicated by one student who said, "Any chance I can get feedback from my peers or teachers I want to get it."

These examples and observations point to a more successful debriefing experience when used as a learning exercise, rather than a reflection tool. Indeed, there is a reflection component to this EL exercise, but the reflection observation phase is not the debrief itself, so students view the debriefing experience as a learning experience. Students also seem to appreciate the value in debriefing in terms of the impact to the classroom experience (e.g., stronger team dynamics and more meaningful feedback). As such, the new approach to treating the debriefing session primarily as a learning tool seems successful: students are gaining a better understanding and appreciation of the debriefing process, which should position them to be effective debriefing participants when in a post-collegiate, professional environment.

Indeed, some students have already benefited from the debriefing project in their own post-collegiate, professional experiences. In one case, a recent graduate and former student in the capstone class took an initial

job upon graduation at a manufacturing company that held debriefing meetings weekly. Within a few weeks, her manager recognized her contributions and has asked her to participate in an initiative to evaluate the effectiveness of the debriefing meetings, and provide recommendations for improving the company's debriefing processes. It was a positive opportunity that enabled this graduate—a newly-hired employee—to establish solid credentials within her organization and specifically with management.

One challenge that all facilitators/observers noted in the debriefing meetings was the hesitancy for students to raise issues that may expose potential conflicts within the group. Some students have shown a willingness to address their own challenges during the project, but none have proactively raised problems involving other students' performances or problems. In at least two separate classes, teams dealt with significant intra-group challenges and conflicts, but none of the members of these teams raised these issues in any of the debriefing meetings. In fact, in one case, the issues weren't raised at all until students wrote confidential peer assessments of their team members. It is obviously important for students to learn and practice successful techniques regarding raising sensitive issues within the team, so this is an area of the debriefing exercise to further refine.

Conclusion

EL projects offer students the ability to reflect on their learning experiences while developing skills that can be crucial to success in their post-collegiate careers. Debriefing allows for both—to reflect within the context of a situation while challenging students to develop skills that even well-seasoned executives struggle to master. This brief has advocated for refocusing the debriefing from a reflection tool to a learning tool, and identified steps when creating a debriefing exercise that can accomplish this (See Appendix). By positioning the debrief first and foremost as a

concrete learning experience, students become better contributors in the debriefing exercise, and ultimately more effective participants in future professional situations.

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Appendix

Before the debriefing:
- Adequately prepare students
    - In-class, explain the debriefing process and benefits.
    - In-class, explain the role of participants and facilitators. Instill the idea that all are equals; there is no hierarchy in the debrief.
    - Outside of class, assign additional resources. (e.g., Bourke, 2004; Guterman, 2002; Sundheim, 2015).
    - Create a sense of accountability with a quiz on the additional resources. The quiz is not the focus of the debrief, so it should not be overly difficult or punitive in nature.
- Prepare questions
    - Questions should follow the nature of typical debriefing questions (e.g., Womack, 2015), but should be tailored to reflect specific dynamics of each team
    - What was your goal? Did you achieve it? What helped you achieve it? What stood in the way of success? What could the team have done to improve results? What should the team keep doing that worked?

During the debriefing:
- Follow prepared questions, BUT…
- Be flexible. If the discussion leads the team to a different topic or issue that is relevant, be able to facilitate and manage the discussion accordingly.

- Use questions to facilitate not to participate.
- As facilitator, guide the process, not the content.

After the debriefing:
- Use part of the first class after the debrief as a time for reflective observation.
- Reinforce the value of the debriefing by noting a few positive outcomes or key points from the debrief meeting.
- Engage students—Ask them their thoughts about the debriefing experience.
  - How does the debriefing meeting help your team going forward?
  - Do you feel differently about debriefing now that you have gone through it? If so, how?
  - How could your debriefing experience help you in the future (beyond the classroom)?
  - What will you do differently in the next debriefing meeting?