

# A BRIEF ON DEBRIEFING: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT ISN'T

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## ABSTRACT

*Debriefing has been an important topic for ABSEL scholars over the past several years. Most educators would agree that debriefing is an important component of the learning process. Debriefing usually occurs at the end of an experiential exercise or computerized simulation and is a way to help students bring closure to the experience. Nevertheless, debriefing remains ill-defined, unsystematically used and not fully tested or proven experimentally. In particular, the authors found that promoters of debriefing seldom explain the rationale of the process or how to actually use it with a particular exercise or simulation. This paper reviews some of the ABSEL scholarship related to debriefing in an attempt to summarize, categorize and clarify the debriefing process. The paper discusses various definitions and descriptions of debriefing, presents several debriefing strategies and techniques, develops a taxonomy of debriefing categories, offers some research issues on debriefing and concludes with some recommendations about the theory and methodology of debriefing.*

## INTRODUCTION

Debriefing has been an important topic for ABSEL research over the past several years. Most educators would agree that debriefing is part and parcel of the learning process and an important component of both computerized simulations as well as experiential exercises. Nonetheless, debriefing remains ill-defined, unsystematically used and not fully tested or proven experimentally. This paper intends to review some of the ABSEL scholarship related to debriefing in an attempt to summarize, categorize and clarify the debriefing process. The paper is divided into the following sections:

- ◆ the purposes, assumptions and definitions of debriefing;
- ◆ debriefing strategies and techniques;

- ◆ debriefing taxonomies and categories;
- ◆ research on debriefing;
- ◆ conclusions and recommendations.

## DEBRIEFING: SOME DEFINITIONS

It is difficult to say whether there exists an actual 'theory' of debriefing. With that said, there are several definitions, descriptions, and assumptions about the importance, purpose and educational value of debriefing. Usually, debriefing is described or rationalized as part of the learning larger process, for example as part of a simulation or experiential exercise and not as a stand alone activity. Perhaps the most succinct definition of debriefing has been provided by Lederman. Debriefing is an oral discussion in which students and teachers engage in a question and answer session designed to guide students through a reflective process about their learning (Lederman, 1984). Lederman, a prominent writer in the area of debriefing goes on to discuss the roots of debriefing:

- Military use;
- Psychological studies—what it was really about;
- help with learning for those who have been through the experience (1992).

This paper concerns itself primarily with the third area of debriefing, which relates to the use of debriefing as an integral learning component of a simulation or experiential exercise.

The literature on debriefing finds several definitions and descriptions:

Debriefing is variously defined as learning through reflection on a simulation experience (Thatcher, 1990; Pearson and Smith, 1983; Rath, 1987; Lederman, 1983; Lederman & Stewart, 1985; Lee, 1984); emotional recovery from critical incidents (Bergmann & Queen, 1987; Donovan, 1983); work-related tasks, such as appraisal and synthesis of input from focus groups (DeNicola, 1990) or job performance analysis (Bobebe, 1987), or to team

build and identify managerial strengths (Bailey, 1990; Lederman, 1992, p. 147).

In her 1992 article on debriefing, Lederman herself discusses what she believes is the primary purpose and rationale for debriefing, “in the educational context, the goal 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 (students) 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” (1992, p. 148). In an earlier article, Lederman defines or describes debriefing as “an oral discussion session in which students and teachers engage in a question and answer session designed to guide students through a reflective process about their learning (1984). Harry (1971, p. 130) states that debriefing is a *sine qua non* for learning in a simulation or exercise, “a post-game discussion is necessary for maximum effectiveness of any simulation game.” Gillespie observes that games are not self-teaching and need a good debriefing session to assist students in reflecting on their behavior and the purpose of the simulation (1973). And Thatcher (1990) says that debriefing helps students reflect upon their learning and that when they do this, they are in a better position to recognize what they have learned. A practitioner and training consultant, Barbara Steinwachs simply states that debriefing is a time to reflect on and discover together what happened during the game-play and what it all means. She goes on to describe the three phases of debriefing: (1) description, (2) analogy/analysis and (3) application and says that the process, whether facilitated or not, usually moves through these three phases (1992).

Most designers and promoters of simulation and experiential exercises include debriefing as a necessary component of learning and effective game use. It seems that some authors see debriefing as a kind of cap or conclusion to the learning that is assumed to be part of the simulation or experiential exercise (Dutton, 1979). Dutton goes on to suggest that debriefing may be the *Achilles Heel* of an experimental exercise because it was done carelessly or incompletely or did not relate to the unique personalities of each specific group of participants (1979, p. 313).

In summary, debriefing seems to have certain components or elements, but their specific implementation seems to be the prerogative of the practitioner. Lederman lists seven elements:

1. debriefer is guide or facilitator;
2. participants;
3. experience;
4. impact;
5. recollection;
6. reporting;
7. time frame (1992).

The elements do not necessarily have an order of sequence; although one can see that there is an innate type of sequencing to the elements, some occurring simultaneously and others serving as partial feedback loops to the debriefer. Perhaps, Lederman’s greatest contribution is her listing and explanation of the phases of debriefing. The phases seem to address the fundamental philosophy and rationale of debriefing more than most other definitions or descriptions examined in this study. They are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

PHASE	PURPOSE	DESCRIPTION
Phase 1	Systematic reflection & analysis	Phase 1 is the introduction of the participants to a systematic self-reflective process about the experience through which they have just come.
Phase 2	Intensification & personalization	Phase 2 is the refocusing of the participants’ reflections onto their own individual experiences and the meanings they have for them.
Phase 3	Generalization & application	Phase 3 is the exploration that takes the participants from their own individual experience to the broader applications and implication of that experience.

Adapted from Lederman, 1992.

### DEBRIEFING STRATEGIES & TECHNIQUES

The authors reviewed the ABSEL works where the term ‘debriefing’ was mentioned. There were approximately 194 articles where the term debriefing occurred. The authors reviewed these articles and found that approximately 26 used the word in some other capacity than just to state that a simulation or exercise needs to be “debriefed.”

In the last 25 years, 5 articles have had debriefing as part of the title of the article, while 21 articles discussed debriefing in some way. Several articles, at least 17, are mainly concerned with the purpose of debriefing or providing an overview of debriefing. Some ABSEL papers describe or discuss debriefing in terms of video taping, groups, homework, ways in which to grade debriefing, use of professional boards to debrief, structured, Q & A, free form, etc and so forth—all sorts of methods are presented. Debriefing is also described as in terms of what it is not.

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Although, it should be noted that most papers say little about the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of debriefing. Some writers state that it is related to, but is not feedback and it is questionable as to whether it is evaluatory in nature or purpose. Finally, some papers use the terms of assessment and debriefing interchangeably to describe the method or purpose. However, most scholars would agree that assessment and debriefing are two very different methods, with two very different purposes.

TABLE 2 lists each ABSEL article reviewed and briefly describes its approach to debriefing. The article also lists whether the article fits into the simulation category, experiential exercise category or is an article of a general nature. Some articles hit two categories. The numbers on the left column correspond to a specific ABSEL proceedings article. The number corresponding to the article can be found in APPENDIX A.

**TABLE 2**

CATEGORY*	APPROACH TO DEBRIEFING	
1	E-G	Stresses importance of debriefing, describes steps in terms of an exercise.
2	G	Sees it as structured. It should match instructor's goals for learning-argues for structured debriefing form.
3	G	Article directed to debriefing. States importance, lists two different types and describes them and their underlying rationales
4	G	Article dedicated to debriefing. Describes both value and steps in general process
5	G	Article focused on debriefing. Stresses importance, lists various processes and steps and suggests various refinements on process.
6	G	No rationale per se-use debriefing as an assessment tool. Debriefing down as part of homework-designed to help them reflect.
7	S/G	Mentions debriefing only in terms of a evaluation questionnaire
8	G	Emphasizes importance of debriefing-suggests using video taping to help participants see others' experiences and help one to reflect upon exercise goals.
9	G	Debriefing not described-simply states that informal debriefing should take place.
10	S	Goals not defined but process praised as providing insight to goal of simulation
11	E	Sees debriefing as structured-instructors uses chalkboard to list and record comments.
12	S	Process is most effective way for students to learn reasons for their simulation actions and behaviors
13	G	Help students learn/understand their own inadequacies or improper decision rules when participated in exercises.
14	E	Debriefing used as data collection device for experiment studying effectiveness of a particular exercise
15	G	Mechanism for applying debriefing presented in an appendix.
16	E	Sees debriefing as a sort of "wild card" by which he means debriefing has several goals as well as approaches.
17	S	Mechanisms for debriefing described in connection with a simulation
18	G	Criticizes instructors for not using debriefing properly—but doe not describe ‘proper’ process
19	S/G	Use board of professionals to assist in debriefing. Rationale is to challenge students. Process somewhat described.
20	G	International exercise-semi-structured using either Hoops or Kolb, as well as semi-structured questions.
21	G	Debriefing not really described-says it is important to see what students learned.
22	G	Rarely structured process.
23	S	Simply stresses importance of debriefing in illuminating ethical issues in a simulation
24	E	Structured process-contingent upon specific experimental exercise. Provides some structured questions.
25	S/G	Presents general model for effective simulation use—claims it enhances debriefing
26	E	Provides specific debriefing regimen for an expediential exercise

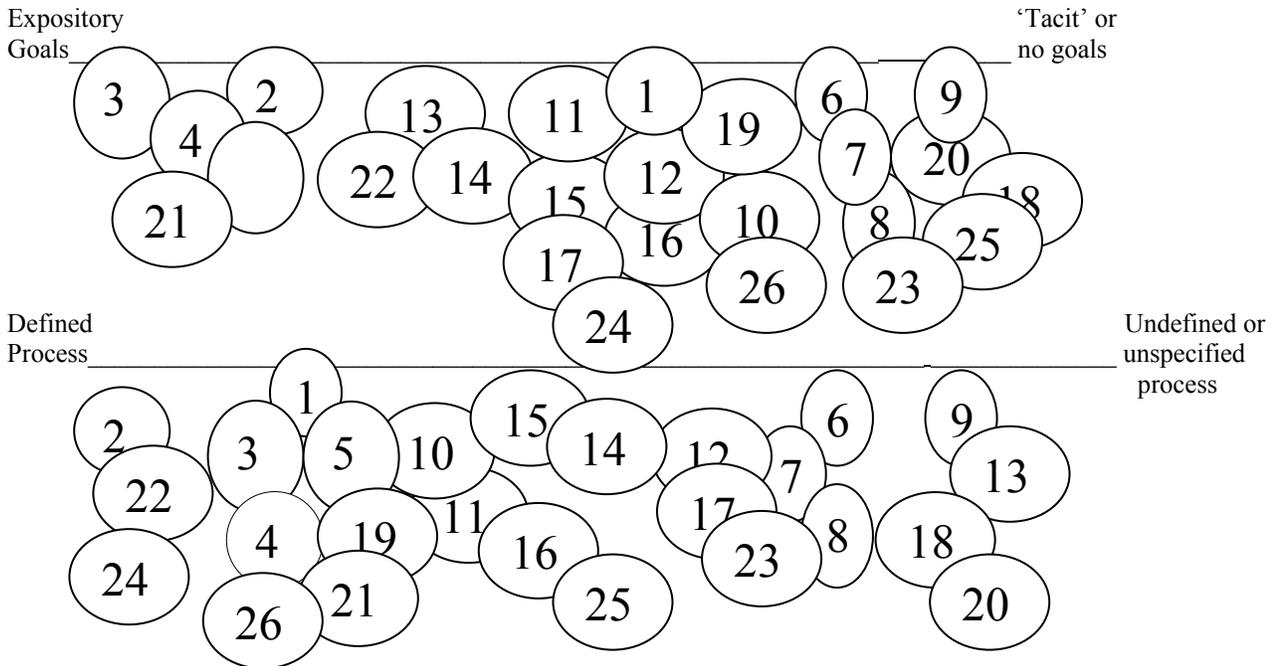
\* Legend:

- E = Experiential exercise
- G = General nature
- S = Simulation

As can be seen from TABLE 2, most writers while emphasizing the importance of debriefing for a game or exercise, do not fully describe the debriefing process, or explain why it is important—it is simply assumed to be important. Most of the debriefing comments were geared toward experiential exercises, while 7 were discussed in terms of computerized simulation. Some authors discussed debriefing as the main theme of their article, without reference to a specific game, exercise or simulation (viz., 13).

The authors then reviewed the articles along a criterion, which were believed to be meaningful to ABSEL scholars interested in the topic of debriefing. First, the articles were analyzed in terms of whether they explained the process of debriefing and second, the extent to which they addressed or explained the goals of debriefing (either general goals or specific to an exercise or simulation). Table 3 illustrates these categorizations.

TABLE 3



The center portion for both horizontal grid lines represents the area of partial explanations or descriptions for both process and goals. As can be seen from TABLE 3, most articles do not address the goals (either specifically or in general) of debriefing. A few, articles 2, 3, 4, 5, and 21, spend some time discussing the goals, and it is noteworthy that these articles represent early ABSEL contributions, which perhaps suggests that the goals have become accepted or understood by others. In terms of process, most only partially explain the process of debriefing with few giving it a full explanation. Of course, ‘full’ explanation is a relative term here. Using the benchmarks of articles 2, 24 and 22 as examples of full explanation, other articles fall considerably short, with several providing little explanation of the process at all.

**RESEARCH**

It seems that while debriefing is a popular topic, there is scant research to support many of the claims made in behalf of its efficacy. Schreier, states that debriefing has “always been a key component of successful exercises. The link

between objectives, course materials and the exercise seems rarely, if ever, crystal clear to the participants...adequate attention must be given to debriefing. Managers must process the information from the exercise and make real-life, on-the-job applications” (1990, p. 199). But do we really have evidence that students do not make the link? Are we simply being paternalistic about their notions, knowledge and experiences? Perhaps, debriefing has another goal—to provide the debriefer with a sense of control or the sense that one is doing something useful?

Schreier states that Certo and Lamb (1985) conducted one of the few research studies attempting to validate the debriefing process (1990, p. 199). However, a close reading of the Certo and Lamb article indicates that it was not a study of debriefing *ipso facto*, but an investigation of an experimental exercise called “Chairman of the Dance Committee.” Certo and Lamb state:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the validity of a recommendation made for [the] administration of Chairman of the Dance Committee. This recommendation is that, when debriefing, instructors should stress the point to

students that all four management functions must be integrated and practiced as one if a manager is to be successful. In effect, this study explores how the relative independence of planning, organizing, influencing and controlling is perceived in carrying out the role of [a] manager (1985, p. 163).

Petranek and colleagues note, “While oral debriefing is vital to the learning process, several assumptions are made about the extent of learning.” (1992, p. 178). He goes on to list four major assumptions, all of which do not carry the weight of solid research. Little else in the form of research was discovered in terms of debriefing as a method to influence learning. Thus, one is left to ask: What specifically does debriefing presume to accomplish? What are the objectives and goals of debriefing and how can they be reliability and validly tested?

It seems clear that any experimental approach to debriefing must posit what the assumptions of debriefing are. For example, if one accepts that debriefing is a process in which people who have had an experience are led through a purposive discussion of that experience. This definition is based on two assumptions:

- Experience has affected participants in some meaningful way.
- That a processing or discussion of that experience is necessary to provide insight into that experience and its impact (Lederman, 1992).

One proposal is for a long-term and/or several short-term studies on debriefing. A long-term research project

where debriefing is measured at the end of the exercise and then measured again later might be instructive. Another approach might be to assess the debriefing process by introducing a series of assessment criteria for both instructors and learners as part of a standard debriefing process. To say that there is a ‘theory’ of debriefing is perhaps an overstatement, but there are certainly hypotheses, purposes and assumptions as to why debriefing is important, and what it does. These need to be clearly spelled out and tested.

### CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that debriefing lacks a clear, concise theory. In part, this can be attributed to the fact that it is usually part of a larger learning process, such as a simulation or experiential exercise. Nonetheless, it would seem that more needs to be done to understand both the conceptual basis of debriefing, as well as how this process fits into the larger framework of teaching methodologies. While most articles assume debriefing is important, they do not state why. It would seem that those who discuss debriefing as part of a larger teaching protocol should explain in more detail the process and state how or why it relates to predetermined educational goals. For a start, the authors suggest adopting Bloom’s Taxonomy of educational objectives. They are listed in Table 4.

**TABLE 4**

KNOWLEDGE	Simple remembering, by recall or recognition, of specific facts, terminology, criteria, methods, principles, generalizations or theories. Learner needs simply to select the correct material from memory.
COMPREHENSION	Simple understanding demonstrated y means of paraphrasing, summarizing, interpreting, or inferring simple conclusions. Learner must put simple in a different form.
APPLICATION	Using general knowledge in new, specific and concrete situations (not previously learned).
ANALYSIS	Breaking down information into its separate parts, explicating the relationship between parts and/or the overall organizational structure. Learner divides complex whole into parts in order to better understand.
SYNTHESIS	Combining of two or more elements or parts into a new (for the learner) form or whole. Learner creates a “new” communication, plan, abstract relationship, etc.
EVALUATION	Judging information or knowledge against some appropriate criteria either internal to the material or an external standard.

Adapted from: Bloom, B.S. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook/Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay.

The objectives would serve to set learning outcomes for each phase of the debriefing process, or at least relate the purpose of debriefing to one phase of the Bloom taxonomy.

It is clear that debriefing is and will continue to be an important element for simulations, games as well as experimental exercises. ABSEL scholars frequently refer to

debriefing as an integral part of the learning process. It may well serve the learning community better for ABSEL researchers to take the lead in designing meaningful experiments on debriefing and clarifying the specific goals and objectives of debriefing as it relates to the learning process.

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APPENDIX A

#	Source
1	Altman, Steve "A Kiss Before Debriefing" <i>Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978.</i> pp 5-6.
2	Cook, Curtis W. "Debriefing With Serialized Theory development For Task-Team Learning" <i>Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978.</i> pp7-8.
3	Hunsaker, Phillip L. "Debriefing: The Key to Effective Experiential Learning" <i>Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978.</i> pp 3-4
4	Warrick, D. D. (Don) "Insights Into Debriefing Experiential Learning Exercises" <i>Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978.</i> pp 9-10.
5	Dutton, Richard E. "Customized Debriefing: The Achilles Heel of Experiential Learning?" <i>Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979.</i> pp 313-314.
6	Watkins, Thomas L. "Understanding Dispute Resolution Through Experiential Learning" <i>Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979.</i> pp 29-31.
7	Smith, Jerald R. "Gaming and Attitudinal Change" <i>Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979.</i> pp 231-234.
8	Brenenstuhel, Daniel C. "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Problems in Utilizing Experiential Techniques" <i>Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980.</i> p 105.
9	Burden, Charles A. "Encouraging Student Participation During International Academic Programs" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981.</i> p 219.
10	Chiesl, Newell E. "Tomed: A Computer Game Emphasizing Social Responsibility /or/ Why The Pop-Top Can?" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981.</i> pp 17-21.
11	Carroll, Lawrence B. "A Look at the Spoken and Written Work in Organizations: A Pattern of Group Communication." <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982.</i> pp 252-255.
12	Frazer, J. Ronald "Bankrupt: A Deceptively Simple Business Strategy Game" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 10, 1983.</i> pp 98-100.
13	Burns, Alvin C. and James W. Gentry "Do We Learn From Experience?" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 10, 1983.</i> pp 139-142.
14	Certo, Samuel C. and Steven W. Lamb "An Investigation of the Validity of a Recommendation for Experiential Exercise Debriefing" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 12, 1985.</i> pp 163-165.
15	Cooke, Ernest F. "The Dilemma in Evaluating Classroom Innovations" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 13, 1986.</i> pp 110-114.
16	Smith, Jerald R. "Strategic Planning With Experiential Case" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 13, 1986.</i> pp 94-95.
17	Hall, Daniel R. "Developing Various Student Learning Abilities Via Writing, The Stock Market Game, and Modified Marketplace Game in Beginning Macroeconomics" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 14, 1987,</i> pp 84-86.
18	Dutton, Richard E. "Identification of Unintended Effects in Experiential Laboratory Exercises" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 17, 1990.</i> p 186.
19	Rosenthal, Walter and Wm. John Werner "The Use of a 'Board of Directors' to Evaluate and Validate Decisions in a Competitive Graduate Management Simulation Course" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 19, 1992.</i> p 221.
20	Dennehy, Robert F. and Ronald R. Sims "Debriefing International Experimental Learning Exercises: Road Signs for Effectiveness" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises, Volume 20, 1993.</i> pp 47-49.

21	Gentry, James W., Gerrard Macintosh, and Jeffery Stoltman "A Systematic Approach to the Development and Evaluation of Experiential Exercises" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises</i> , Volume 20, 1993. pp 79-81.
22	Anderson, Claire and R. Bruce McAfee "The Older Worker Questionnaire: An Exercise On Older Worker Stereotypes and Behaviors" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises</i> , Volume 20, 1993. pp 160-161.
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24	Boscia, Marian W. and Bruce R. McAfee "Exercise: Preparing Financial Reports Using the Group Categorizing Technique" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises</i> , Volume 27, 2000. pp140-146.
25	Fujita, Katsuyasu and Sadao Murahara "Management Game Review System Development" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises</i> , Volume 27, 2000. pp 239-241.
26	Boscia, Marian W. and Bruce R. McAfee "Exercise: Conducting Role Plays Using Student Generated Cases" <i>Developments in Business Simulation &amp; Experiential Exercises</i> , Volume 29, 2002. pp 179-182.

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