

Thiagi's Guidelines for Debriefing
(This quoted material is Thiagi's, found in Thigaran, S. (2004).
Simulation Games by Thiagi, pp. 205-207)

“Debriefing is the activity undertaken after the play of a simulation game to help participants reflect on their experiences, relate them to the real world, discover useful insights, and share them with one another. Without debriefing, simulation-game players may have a good time—but learn nothing. In some cases, the participants may actually become confused, frustrated, or upset. Debriefing helps you, the facilitator, bring the simulation game to a close, reduce negative reactions, and increase learning insights.

A difficulty you will face is trying to find the right balance between structured and free-flowing discussion. . . . you should prepare and sequence several questions before the debriefing session. During the actual debriefing, you should welcome spontaneous comments and go with the flow of the discussion. However, if conversation degenerates to random meandering, fall back on the prepared list of questions.

My standard procedure is to begin the debriefing with a brief introduction about its purpose and the format. I divide the discussion into six phases, each associated with a few primary questions. The guidelines below suggest an introductory script and different types of questions in use for different phases.

Flexibility

The structure and the sequence for debriefing suggested below should be treated as adaptable guidelines rather than as rigid requirements. Remember the debriefing should provide an opportunity for the participants to discuss and discover rather than for you to enlighten and expound.

Introducing the Debriefing Session

Spend a minute or so to introduce the purpose and format of the debriefing session. Use an appropriate variation of this script:

As a result of playing the simulation game, you probably have several interesting and exciting things to talk about. I want to conduct a debriefing session to help you do that. To facilitate thoughtful reflection and useful sharing of insights, I would like to establish an informal structure for our discussions. From time to time, I may ask some questions to ensure that all different aspects of the simulation game are covered.

List the six different phases of debriefing on a flip chart:

1. How do you feel?
2. What happened?
3. What did you learn?
4. How does this relate to the real world?
5. What if. . . ?
6. What next?

Continue with the explanation:

This is an outline of the debriefing process. As you can see, it consists of six phases. At the beginning of each phase, I will briefly explain what happens in that phase.

Phase 1: How do you feel?

Explain the purpose of the phase. This phase gives players an opportunity to let off steam and express their feelings about the simulation game. This phase makes it easier for the participants to be more centered and objective in the later phases.

Begin with a broad question. Invite the participants to get in touch with their feelings about the play of the simulation and its outcomes. Encourage them (without forcing anyone) to share these feelings. Ask the others to listen actively in a nonjudgmental fashion.

While it is important for you to encourage and to facilitate the free expression of feelings and emotions, prevent this phase from becoming a therapy session. If some overwrought participants have emotional needs that cannot be handled during this session, suggest that you have an individual meeting with them later.

Explore specific classes of feelings. Suggest a list of feelings based on your earlier experiences with the simulation game. Ask participants whether they experienced similar feelings during the play of the game.

Discuss feelings related to specific events. Recall the major decision points and milestones in the simulation game. Encourage participants to discuss how they felt during specific events.

Discuss feelings toward different groups of people. Identify specific groups of people (or roles assigned) in the simulation game. Ask the members of each group how they feel about the members of other groups—and about themselves.

Phase 2: What Happened?

Explain the purpose of this phase. You are collecting data from different participants about what happened during the play of the simulation game. This phase makes it possible for the participants to compare and contrast their recollections and to draw some general conclusions during the next phase.

Begin with a broad question. Ask participants to recall important things that happened during the play of the simulation game. Create a chronological list of events on a flip chart.

Ask questions about specific events. Use a list of different events that occurred during the simulation game [for example, the list of chronological events]. Identify each event and ask participants to recall significant things that happened during each event.

Ask questions about specific types of events. Use a list of adjectives (such as *important* or *frustrating*), and ask the participants to recall events from the simulation game that they associate with each word.

Phase 3: What Did You Learn?

Explain the purpose of this phase. You want to encourage the generation and testing of different hypotheses. Ask the participants to come up with general principles based on their experiences from the simulation game and to offer evidence to support or to reject them.

Present your principles and invite others. Use a prepared list of principles related to the play of the simulation game. Offer the first principle and ask the participants for data to support it or to reject it. Encourage open discussion and inquiry. Invite participants to offer their own principles. Fall back on your list if there are long periods of silence.

Phase 4: How Does This Relate to the Real World?

Explain the purpose of this phase. You want to encourage a discussion of the relevance of the simulation game to the real-world workplace. Participants suggest analogues to the simulation-game elements from their everyday experiences.

Begin with a broad question. Ask the participants whether the simulation game reflects any events in their workplace. Or, as an alternative, suggest that the simulation game is a metaphor for real-world events, and ask the participants to speculate on what those events might be.

Discuss specific events from the simulation game. Identify game events and ask the participants to come up with similar experiences from their workplace.

Discuss game objects and artifacts. Identify specific materials used in the simulation game. Ask the participants to find workplace counterparts to those materials.

Discuss specific groups and roles. Use the list of people involved in the simulation game. Ask the participants to identify similar groups or roles in their workplace.

Discuss specific principles. Use the list of principles from the preceding phase. Ask the participants to discuss how each principle relates to real-world experiences.

Phase 5: What If?

Explain the purpose of this phase. You want to encourage the participants to apply their insights to new contexts. This phase uses several alternative scenarios to encourage the participants to speculate on how the play of the simulation game would have changed.

Present your scenarios and invite others. Use a prepared list of scenarios related to the play of the simulation game. Use an approach similar to the one used in the first phase with principles. Offer the

first scenario and ask the participants speculate on its effects. Invite participants to offer their own scenarios. Fall back on your list if there are long periods of silence.

Phase 6: What Next?

Explain the purpose of this phase. This is the action-planning phase in which the participants use their insights to come up with strategies for their behaviors in the simulation game—and in the workplace.

Ask for improved simulation-game strategies. Invite the participants to discuss how they would change their strategies if they were to play the simulation game again, knowing what they know now. Also ask the participants how they would handle a different role in the simulation game.

Encourage real-world action planning. Ask the participants how their workplace behaviors would change as a result of the insights gained from the play of the simulation game.

Discuss specific principles. Recall some of the principles from the third phase. Ask the participants how they would apply these principles to their workplace situations.”

Albatross Skit

(Mick Vande Berg adapted this short version of an old favorite from an earlier version that YFU was using in the late 1970s or early 1980s)

Learning Outcomes

This interactive skit is designed:

- To allow participants to better understand the nature of “framing,” and to become more aware of some of the ways that they characteristically frame ambiguous events.
- To experience the importance of carefully and objectively observing an event before drawing conclusions about what the event “means.”
- To experience the way that we tend to make an event “mean” what our initial way of framing it tells us that it means—even when our senses provide evidence that contradicts the initial meaning we’ve attached to the event.
- To understand how our previous cultural conditioning leads us to frame events in ways that are consistent with some of our cultural assumptions.

The skit’s characters

- One man (while he’ll preferably be in his 50s, if not older, it’s OK if he’s a bit younger)
- One woman (preferably younger than the man, and dressed in pants, with a high neck that won’t fall open when she bends over; or, if wearing a skirt or dress, one that’s rather long)

Material

- One straight-backed chair, placed against a side wall in the training room
- A soft blanket or small rug, folded and placed on the chair

Role Play Steps

1. The man stands in the front of the room, at the center. The woman sits in the first row, or at a table, among the participants, and just inside the exit. The woman remains silent throughout the role play.

The man explains to the participants, whom he is facing, that in this workshop, he and the other facilitators will often start an activity by saying “On-stage,” and that everything that happens after this *is* the activity. He then goes on to explain that when he or another facilitator says “Back-stage,” this means that the activity is over, and that the facilitator is now going to ask the participants to comment on the activity, or to go on to another activity, etc.

The man then repeats the first part of this, dramatically: “When I say “On-stage,” this means that everything that the activity has started—that everything that happens after it *is* the activity.”

He then pauses for effect, and then, looking directly at the participants, says, “On-stage.”

2. At this point, the woman gets up and quietly leaves the room. She waits outside the door for the man to arrive, remaining out of sight of the participants.
3. During the rest of the role play, neither the man nor the woman says a word.
4. The man now walks over and moves the chair to the center of the “stage.” He places it exactly in the center, then unfolds and places the folded blanket or rug just to the right of the chair, with the front of the blanket or rug aligned with the front of the chair. He spends some time making sure that the chair is placed exactly in the center of the stage, and that the blanket or rug is aligned exactly with the front of the chair. Then he leaves the room.
5. The man and woman remain outside the room for a minute or longer—long enough for the participants to wonder what’s going on.

The woman now takes off her shoes, which she will leave out in the hall. She will remain barefoot throughout the role play.

It’s important to understand that this activity is designed in a way that is sure to make a number of the participants uncomfortable. We will discuss this in the debrief.

6. The man and woman now enter the room. He precedes her, and she remains three paces behind him all the while that they walk to the center of the stage. They walk deliberately, without looking at each other or at the participants—and they will continue not to look directly at each other, or at the participants, throughout the role play.

Both make sure that they remain emotionally neutral throughout the role play—they show no signs of any positive or negative emotions.

The man slowly walks circles the chair, with the woman following him, three paces behind. Once he has circled the chair once, he calmly sits down in the chair; his back straight (though not rigidly so), he places his hands on the top of his thighs, palms down. The woman kneels on the folded blanket or rug, rocked back on her heels, in an erect (though not severe) posture, and places her hands on the top of her thighs, palms down.

7. The man and woman remain in this position without moving, looking straight ahead, focusing on the back of the room (it’s important that neither the man nor the woman look directly into the eyes of any participant who happens to be seated directly in their line of sight; instead, they should focus their gaze just to the side of anyone who is directly in front of them). They remain in this position for a minute or longer—long enough for the man to get a strong sense that a number of participants are getting increasingly uncomfortable.

8. The man slowly pivots his gaze and the top part of his body to his left; he then mimes the action of removing the top from a low barrel, picking up a bowl from a table, and twice scooping some of the food from the barrel into the bowl. He turns his head and pivots the top part of his body to the left. He holds the bowl in front of him, at the level of his lower chest, and holds the bowl there for ten or fifteen seconds. He then mimes the action of eating the food from the bowl; his left hand becomes the bowl, and his right hand dips into the bowl, takes the food, raises his hand with the food above his head, bends back his head, opens his mouth, and slowly takes in, and then slowly chews, the food. He does this eating action twice. After he eats twice, he holds the bowl at the level of his lower chests and chews the food thoroughly.

He then hums a single, neutral tone—it's important that it be loud enough so that everyone in the room can hear it—and he continues this humming for five or six seconds.

As soon as he starts to hum, the woman starts to hum as well; as soon as the man stops humming, the woman does too.

The man then pauses in this center position, holding the bowl at the level of his lower chest, without moving, for ten or fifteen seconds. He then slowly pivots his gaze and the top part of his body to his right, and slowly hands the bowl to the woman.

9. The woman takes the bowl and mimes the act of eating, twice, exactly as the man has just done.

When she has finished eating, and after a pause of ten to fifteen seconds, the man hums a neutral tone, exactly as before, and continues to hum for five or six seconds. And as before, the woman starts to hum as soon as the man starts to hum, and she stops humming, as soon as he does.

Now the woman does something that the man hasn't done: she pivots her gaze and her body to her right, and she places the bowl on the ground.

10. The man now mimes the second of the three actions that the pair will do during the role play: he mimes the pouring of liquid into a glass, which he holds in both hands, and drinks from two times, pausing between the drinking. After he has drunk twice, he goes through the humming routine. The woman joins into the humming, as before.

The man hands the woman the glass, holding it with both hands; she takes it and goes through exactly the same drinking steps that the man has done. After she finishes drinking twice, the man starts to hum. As before, the woman follows the man as soon as he starts humming, and ends as soon as he stops humming.

Now, for the second time, the woman does something that the man hasn't done: she pivots her gaze and her body to her right, and she places the glass on the ground.

11. The man now mimes the third of the three actions that the pair will do during the role play: he very deliberately pivots his gaze and the top of his torso to the right and exaggeratedly places his hand behind the woman's head. *He places his hand on her hair, and he does not touch her head.* When the woman feels that the man's hand is on her hair, and after waiting five or six seconds, she places her hands on the ground in front of the blanket, slowly bends her torso forward, and touches her forehead to the ground. She holds her forehead on the ground for three seconds; then she slowly straightens up. *The man keeps his hand on her hair throughout this sequence; he is following the motion of her head, not forcing her head down.* (If the woman who's playing this role can't bend all the way to the point of touching her head to the ground, that's OK: in this case, she should simply bend forward as far as she can, and hold that position for three seconds.) The pair repeats this action once (that is, they perform this action two times).
12. At the end of this sequence, the man and woman sit, facing the participants, without saying anything. They remain in this posture for five to seven seconds; then they do the humming sequence, with the man again initiating and ending the humming.
13. After they have finished humming, they wait ten or fifteen seconds. Then the man slowly rises out of the chair, he deliberately walks to the door, and then exits the room. As before, the woman follows him, three paces behind. When the woman exits the room, she closes the door behind her. The pair remains in the hall, outside the room, for ten or fifteen seconds.
14. The man and woman then quietly re-enter the room; the woman sits in the chair she had been sitting at, before the activity began. The man goes to the center of the room and begins to ask a series of debriefing questions.

Debriefing Questions:

The process and questions here find sources both in David Kolb's central concept of "learning around the learning cycle," and in five of six of the debriefing questions developed by Sibasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan—those that neatly mesh with the four principal learning styles that Kolb identifies. In following this process, you should choose at least one and possibly two or three questions from each of the five groups below.

1. **How did you feel?** (Reflect on and explore feelings during the simulation activity)
 - a. How did you feel about this simulation activity?

- b. How did you feel when the two of us left the room? When we didn't return to the room for awhile?
 - c. How did you feel about the man? About the woman?
 - d. Did you feel frustrated, ill at ease, or annoyed at any point in this activity?
2. **What happened?** (Recall what happened, and discover similarities, differences or other patterns in participants' own and others' recollections)
- a. What happened during this simulation activity? [Have participants create a chronology of events that you write on a flip chart.]
 - b. [Focus on two or three key activities from the chronological list.] What happened during the eating activity? During the drinking? During the next activity?
 - c. Share something interesting that you observed or experienced during this simulation.
 - d. What are some patterns (similarities/differences) that were uncovered during this activity?
3. **What did you learn?** (Uncover/identify principles or hypotheses)
- a. What have you learned from this activity? About culture? About perception?
 - b. Share something about what it means "to frame" an event. About what happens after we have framed the event, and the event continues.
 - c. What are some cultural insights that were uncovered during this "simple" activity? Any insights about age or gender affecting framing?
4. **How does this activity relate to the real world?** (Relation to day to day activity, personal/professional life)
- a. What insights from this activity could you apply to your day to day life?
 - b. How does the interaction between the man and woman relate to your personal and/or professional life?
 - c. How could this experience be helpful when you are interacting with others in your personal and/or professional life?
5. **What Next?** (Insights for application and next steps)
- a. Given what you have learned, what would you do differently, if you were to experience this simulation again?
 - b. Given what you have learned, what would you like to do differently in interacting with others at home or work?
 - c. How might this activity influence your future communication with others at home and/or work?