

# DEBRIEFING OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Many educational activities, such as training sessions, take place in which valuable exercises are run, but they lack debriefing (because of a lack of time, preparation, knowledge and experience of preparatory team members).

In a non-formal education context, an experiential volunteer-based learning context, the debriefing is indispensable!

Without it participants might not learn anything (or profit a lot less from the exercise than they actually could). Debriefing is an essential element of training and it is necessary for facilitators to know its structure and principles.

After every educational exercise a facilitator needs to organise participants to discuss the experience that they have just undergone at each stage of the exercise.

One could structure the debriefing process in the following parts: stepping out of the experience, reflection and analysis, understanding, sharing, concluding and linking to reality.

*This process of debriefing of an educational exercise (in training) follows the different steps of the experiential learning cycle (cfr. The learning cycle of Kolb).*

If you do not do a debriefing, do not expect the participants to extract much learning from what they have just experienced.

## Objectives for debriefing

- ⇒ to share the experience in order to decrease the frustration; to express verbally some of the emotions and feelings that participants have had; to identify feelings
- ⇒ to reflect upon the activity; to allow time for personal/group reflections; to share opinions; to enable participants to discover themselves; to air different points of view
- ⇒ to conceptualise what happened; to bring the ideas down from the “air” to the “ground”; to introduce new elements; to see the interrelation; to answer the questions and to create new ones with a new dimension; to gain new knowledge; to find ways to transfer the knowledge to real life situations; to share different perceptions and approaches
- ⇒ to see how to apply the learning; to develop empathy and flexibility; to describe the objectives of the activity; to help participants become aware of the aim of the exercise; to check if the aim has been met;
- ⇒ to evaluate the process; to analyse how the learning process is going; to try to show the objective of the activity

The following set of questions gives a short overview of the points which any debriefing should cover (following the experiential learning cycle of Kolb):

- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- How did you feel?
- Why did you feel like this?
- What does it remind you of with regard to “real life”?
- Can you give examples of similar situations?
- How can you use this experience in life or in your work with young people?

These questions can be seen as a rough guideline, referring to the various steps of a debriefing. Nevertheless, you always adapt the questions to each exercise and prepare a set of questions for each step (feelings, process, patterns, links to reality, learning). A practice example from the TC for Facilitators will show you in detail a possible debriefing plan. One does not need to ask all the questions listed above with every exercise; some of them are more suitable in one situation, while others are more useful in a different situation.

# Debriefing questions to enlarge the learning at the end of an educational activity

## Feelings/emotions

- What was the most sensitive moment?
- How do you feel about your personal contribution?
- How did it feel when you were forced to choose?
- How do/did you feel?
- Did you feel comfortable? Offended?
- What was the strongest emotional experience?
- Is there anything you would like to share with us right away?
- How did you feel about making these decisions?

## Process, conflict management

- How did you reach the conclusion that you came to?
- Was it easy? Why? Why not?
- How did you negotiate?
- How was your group dynamic (conflict, leader, etc.)?
- How did the group reach agreement?
- How did the group deal with differences?
- How do you relate your choice with your previous experience?

## Rational/logical patterns

- What influenced your choice?
- How much did your gender, race, language, nationality or sexuality influence your choice?
- How much did you choose on the basis of similarity/difference to you?
- What choices have you made? Why?
- What difficulties did you experience during the exercise?

## Learning outcomes/links to reality/InterCulturalLearning (ICL)

- Could you identify with the situation?
- What connection to daily life were you able to make?
- Have you ever encountered this in your everyday life?
- What did you discover about yourself?
- How has this experience changed your perception of yourself and your way of thinking?
- How did this confront your values?
- Did you find any limits to your tolerance/respect/acceptance?
- What did you learn from this exercise?
- How can you deal with such a situation?
- How do you think person XY is judged in different parts of the world?
- What would have been your initial reaction if you had not had this background information?
- How are these minorities represented in the media?

## Theory of stereotypes

- Do you know what a “stereotype” is?
- Did you as a group have the same stereotypes?
- If you had had more details, do you think your choices would have been different?
- How do you deal with such situations in real life?
- How much did personal experience inform your choices?
- What has changed in your perception of stereotypes?
- What is the root of stereotypes?

### **Reflection point**

*Is there anything missing for you? Can you follow the logic of the various question blocks?*

*Would you pose completely different questions?*

*(Of course debriefing questions need to go hand in hand with your exercise.)*

## **Questions to ask yourself when preparing a debriefing**

- ⇒ What can go wrong during a debriefing?
- ⇒ How can you ensure that you achieve the aims through running the exercise and doing a debriefing?
- ⇒ What happens during unexpected crisis situations?
- ⇒ What should you do when the participants go off in an unexpected or undesirable direction?
- ⇒ How much can a facilitator interfere with the process, and suggest or deliver solutions?

## **Recommendations**

- ⇒ Try to predict all possible answers to questions and how these answers can lead you to conclusions. During the discussion choose the most relevant ones.
- ⇒ Choose the exercise in such a way that you can achieve the aims. If you hear from participants feelings and answers that do not lead to expected conclusions, it means that you have chosen the wrong exercise.
- ⇒ If the process goes wrong, sometimes it might be useful to step out from the debriefing. The participants might need more time for coming out of their roles, etc.
- ⇒ If anything drastic happens (conflict, bad emotions, etc.), this should take priority. You may then also debrief this situation, even if it is outside the scope of the topic or the aims.
- ⇒ During the experience itself, you should observe carefully; it will be easier to know which feelings and answers to address in the debriefing. However, the facilitator should not interfere DURING the experience).
- ⇒ If the group does not reach the points you need to hear, you can also eventually suggest a solution or give an example from your own experience.
- ⇒ BUT: do not do anything that the group can do itself; therefore carefully assess the moment when your input, suggestions or answers are needed.
- ⇒ Do not be afraid of silence; give people time to think.
- ⇒ Ask open questions instead of suggesting potential answers in the questions. The participants should ideally be invited to think for themselves about the process and results.

The important conclusion reached during the discussion was that proper, conscious debriefing is a very difficult process that needs a lot of knowledge, experience and intuition to be run well. You need to think and prepare the debriefing well in order to run it, so that it can turn into a memorable learning experience for participants. Do not be afraid; just practise! Make sure you always have plenty of questions prepared, even though you might not use all of them. You will have to remain flexible with your questions, depending on the responses of the participants.

Nevertheless, you should have a clear goal in mind to which you would like to lead the group. Once you have prepared your set of questions, it is often good to ask the opinion of the educational adviser.

## **Source**

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