

Effective Debriefing Helps Achieve Learning Objectives in the Classroom

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Abstract

Learning involves making sense of whatever has been taught or experienced in the classroom (Watkins, 2009). Individual students may, in fact, interpret such experiences of learning differently and may apply this knowledge distinctly throughout their lives. Classroom activities in this regard may work as useful tools to enhance students' learning experiences through active involvement and reflective practices (Watkins, 2009). However, if whatever done in the class makes no sense to a student and is not integrated effectively with the content and students' demographics both purpose and process of teaching and learning become ambiguous (Berman, 2004). One of the many reasons where students learning is said to be hampered is inadequate opportunity left for the teacher to debrief or review activities once they are done (Dennison, & Kirk, 1990). Thus, I believe, one of the ways to ensure student learning is adequate integration of pedagogy with learning objectives through reviewing and debriefing exercises.

Keywords: debriefing, reflective writing, teaching and learning

Post-activity discussion or reviewing any task performed during the class may be referred to as 'Debriefing' (A'Echevarria, 2010). In other words, after any task is given to the students or any activity performed during the class, the discussion (formal or informal) that leads to the main purpose of the exercise may be referred to as debriefing (Dennison, &

Kirk, 1990). Debriefing may sometimes be used interchangeably with the terms reviewing or reflecting. Thus, as the name suggests, debriefing like any other review or reflective exercise, involves in-depth discussion or interchange of ideas to deduce the purpose or objective of the pedagogy used in the class. For learning to take place, effective debriefs are said to be vital whereby people acknowledge occurrences around them and give sense to such experiences (Dennison & Kirk, 1990). This is because students' experiences and knowledge gained during the class play a vital role in the overall learning process of the child (Dennison & Kirk, 1990).

Learning is a very complex process of giving meaning to a particular experience or making sense of the knowledge acquired (Watkins, 2009). Lessons learnt from such experiences play a significant role in the development of a person's knowledge, skill and expertise (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002). When students are involved in the class and are able to comprehend classroom exercises and activities, learning occurs. It may thus be said that classroom activities provide opportunities to students to get involved in the process and debriefing time provides opportunities for students to enhance their knowledge and experience as reflective practitioners (Watkins, 2009). When students are involved in classroom exercises, they participate well in the overall process of learning, which helps them to make sense of their experiences with precision (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002). On the other hand, if whatever is done in the class makes no sense to a student and is not integrated effectively with the content and the students' demographics or their cognitive level, both purpose and process of teaching and learning become ambiguous (Berman, 2004). Students' learning in the class, in such cases, may be said to be hampered because of inadequate opportunity for the teacher to debrief or review (Dennison, & Kirk, 1990). Through effective debriefs, the teacher can make sure that students are able to deduce key messages from the lesson being taught or are able to learn something from the pedagogy used in the class. This discussion will highlight the importance of effective debriefing exercises in the class as one of the ways to ensure students' learning and adequate integration of the pedagogy with the learning objectives. This essay would first give a brief context of the classroom experience as an instance and then would highlight the importance of review or debriefing in the class. In addition, this essay would also provide the implications of

having post-activity review / debrief sessions in the class for learning to take place.

In a secondary education classroom, where students range from 10-13 years of age, my task as the new term teacher was to begin the new chapter and give an introduction. Our planning for initial classes was all done and tasks were delegated way before to elaborate assigned key concepts for the lesson; therefore, I was confident about my class planning and execution. Despite initial planning based on students' level of understanding, there arise some concerns while we talk about teaching and learning in secondary classes. I reflected that it was often easy to apply various teaching pedagogies, but difficult to sustain students' interest and achieve the content objective at the same time.

For the introductory session, we asked students to draw objects they thought would resemble their own personality and then asked them to present their drawings with to the whole class. After individual presentations, students had to relate the individual pictures in the form of a story. I had planned the lesson in a way that I thought would keep my students engaged in the learning process, using their ideas to explore the concept of development and evolution. The aim was to let the students identify their own features and traits so as to relate these with their acquaintances to generate a story. In this way each concept begot new concepts, which was the evolution or development of ideas.

Students participated well in the classroom activities. However, as soon as the lesson was over, it was found that all the efforts that were put for students to learn the very concept of development and process involved in the evolution of ideas went in vain. The activity did take place and students participated actively within the classroom, but by the end of the lesson, all they remembered were the images that were drawn and that they had great fun and laugh during the lesson. My reflections of the lesson made me realise that by the end of the lesson, teachers and students were not on the same page. Objectives for the session seemed to be lost behind the colourful drawings, fun and laugh students had during the lesson. Hence, the purpose of the activity and the reason for that particular strategy to be included in the lesson plan may not have been inferred effectively.

Similar to the instance stated above, teachers face many such challenges in their classrooms. Although teachers do anticipate minor issues within the classroom which they try to manage using various teaching pedagogies, understanding student's level of interest and so on, but careful considerations for planned debrief exercises and reviews are seldom considered. All the key messages needed to be communicated to the students are assumed to be learnt automatically after each activity is concluded. That is, teachers assume that students would be able to deduce the purpose of the activity effectively, but this practice is easier said than done. Even though planning and deliberate efforts are done by teachers to reach appropriate conclusions, directed questions and specific linkages are not consciously made while deducing key messages from the lesson. As evident from classroom experience, fun during the activity, no doubt, created a comfortable environment for the students to share their views; however, the students were still unable to comprehend what was actually aimed for a particular activity.

This instance in my teaching experience, aroused my interest towards 'debrief time' specifically allotted during classroom exercises in order to make meaning and connections of the activity with the actual content. With effective debriefing discussions, it was evident students were engaged in the class, learnt from each other's responses and opportunities were available for them to clarify any missing links. It helped me in setting up a healthy environment in which students' learning could be facilitated, achieve lesson objectives and assess students' learning (Dennison & Kirk, 1990). Hence, it may be said that the simple notion of debriefing and reviewing of activities can bring about a change in a big way for the overall achievement of objectives.

There are many prospects regarding debriefing within the classroom. First, it is suggested that it is vital to include debrief time consciously within the lesson plan (Dennison & Kirk, 1990). Assigning appropriate time for debriefs consciously, during the lesson is effective to integrate teaching methodologies with the content being taught. Designing debriefing questions and possible connections prior to the lesson helps the teacher to remain focused and direct the lesson towards the overall objective which would otherwise remain ambiguous.

With planned deliberate attempts to engage students in the post activity discussion, teachers can allocate protected time to debrief their students about the purpose of the class and how cooperative learning is linked with the learning content and with their lives at large. Wrapping up the classroom tasks in a structured manner would help students make meaningful connections about what they are learning and make them understanding the importance of reflection or reviewing exercises in their everyday lives.

Second, debriefing or review discussions may be incorporated at the end of the class or even several times during the session, according to the need and context of the study (Pearson & Smith, 1985). As starting any activity is important for a greater impact and attaining the motivation and interest of the students, so does the conclusion. The ending should be impactful, reflective, and long lasting for the students. Therefore, it is advisable to follow a sandwich approach in the class. The sandwich design of teaching and learning suggest that before and after the main task or the learning experience planned for the students, there should be an meaningful conclusion together with the detailed beginning. This structure for the lesson suggests that before the actual learning, tasks, objectives, instructions, and resources for the activity need to be clarified. Then after the students' performance or completing the task/activity, the finishing phase must include the opportunity to discuss the achievement of outcome, collective learning from the task performed, and to reflect on the learning with the students that we have discussed above as debriefing activities. Nonetheless, rather than emphasising on the stages where these discussions are placed, these can be made effective when it is structured in the lesson plan beforehand (Pearson & Smith, 1985).

Third, both formal and informal techniques may be used to debrief any lesson for students. While debriefs may be initiated informally, several planned activities and questions including reflective writings and guided discussions may be used formally. In formal planning for debriefs, it is said to be essential to practice and plan debrief questions beforehand in order to remain focused and connect the activity with the learning objectives, than to assume that it is an automatic process. Although the questions were laid out before the actual performance of the activity and that might

not reflect what students' real experience in the class are, there is always room to modify the questions and link them to activities as per the needs, rather than going in the class without foreseeing the outcomes. Whether a formal or informal approach is used for effective debriefing discussions, debriefing questions determined prior to teaching can be useful to guide the teacher about the time and effort needed to make the students understand the activity and its relevance with the actual content (A'Echevarria, 2010).

Where in the above discussion, planning and implementing debriefing was highlighted, we will now discuss the implications and positive outcomes debriefing might lead to in the classroom. In the process of teaching and learning, debriefing discussions or activities might help students in the following ways; First, discussion or interaction within the classroom in the form of debriefing may actually help both students and teachers to become conscious of their learning in the classroom (Watkins, 2009; Dennison & Kirk, 1990). This requires mutual effort from the teachers as well as the students to build an understanding and to move forward with this understanding (Harrison, 2002). In this way, students learn how to learn and teachers learn how students have learnt (Watkins, 2009). In other words, discussions or reviewing activities provide a tool for students to share their learning with their fellow students as well as with the teacher (Dennison, 1990; Nicholson, 2012). Second, due to this developed habit of learning from experiences, students and teachers may both begin to reflect upon its implications in their daily lives (Berman, 2004). I will discuss these implications as follows:

Debriefing activities are said to be crucial in providing reflection time as well as an opportunity for learners to interact. Discussions during debriefs provide room for interaction amongst students and between students and the teacher (Dennison & Kirk, 1990). This helps create enabling learning environments where students engage actively in the process of meaning making apart from their engagement in the teaching methodology used (Watkins, 2009). Involving students in the post-activity discussion helps the whole class to share their individual understanding with each other and then to build upon their learning from each other's experiences (Jaworski, 1996). Students' learning from the class might be

different from their peers and therefore, debriefing discussions can be used to collect diverse ideas together and multiply individual learning experiences through synergy (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002). Hence, students can become active participants in the learning process and education may not be limited to mere transfer of knowledge from a teacher to a student, but becomes a collaborative process (Barclay & Weir, 1994).

Here, debriefing activity may have to be given a completely new dimension. This is because review or debrief exercises have not been limited to students learning but also a tool to assess students (Baker, Jensen & Kolb 2002). Moreover, it may function to facilitate a teacher's own learning that how well teacher was able to actualize a plan and achieve the students' learning objectives in the classroom using a particular activity in the class and how that can be modified in the later classes to make it more explicit and impactful for the students (Barclay & Weir, 1994). This may also serve as an opportunity for the teacher to provide evaluative feedback to the students about their performance and contribution in the class (Pearson & Smith, 1985).

In addition, the process of reflecting on the experiences and how they have affected one's life may also be studied through constructivists' approach (Jaworski, 1996). The theory suggests that learning takes place when people reflect on their experiences. In other words, post-experience reflections in the classroom help students to learn the skill and knowledge to integrate various learning experiences with their own lives (A'Echevarria, 2010). While this approach assists students to observe overall learning experiences not as discrete order of activities but a continuous spiral of concepts that they are learning, it also helps a teacher to structure learning in an effective way so that all the exercises in the class are relevant to the students' context (Berman, 2004).

Furthermore, engaging in any activity or experiencing any phenomenon helps students develop a certain thinking pattern that will not only help students to acquire knowledge but totally internalize it (Baker, Jensen & Kolb 2002). Therefore, reflection on the critical experiences during and after the class is essential (Dennison & Kirk, 1990). Kolb's experiential learning cycle also gives significance to the reflective process

after any concrete experience within the classroom. According to him, learning may take place through active experimentation and conceptualizing it through the process of reflection. This shows that reflection is an integral part of the learning process, which will be initiated through debrief-time within the classroom. Kolb further notes that learning is a continuous process, whereby students learn from their experience, reflect upon it and then testify it; and this may lead to experiencing something else and hence the process continues. This is important because it allows the learner to review his actions and thus avoid repeating the same fallacies again.

Classroom experiences may be acclaimed as a critical learning base for our experiences. Lessons learnt henceforth, may be applied to enrich our learning environment and make constructive changes in our teaching philosophy to overcome challenges. In this regard, it may be said experience from an instance opens opportunities for researchers to dig deeper into the concept and highlight strategies for improvement. In this case, the discussion paper, invites teachers to inculcate the habit of using debriefing and review activities and to make conscious efforts in their classrooms for the same. Such efforts not only provide classroom experience a proper direction, but also opportunities for learners to assess and evaluate their experiences.

When I implemented structured, yet flexible, debriefing discussion questions with my class, I observed changes in my students' attitude. By the end of any activity, students had begun to deduce its main purpose and they even tried to look at the same activity with various perspectives that even I had not thought of while planning. They also asked me to define certain terms that were confusing which also gave me a new dimension towards which I should work on during subsequent classes, that is, to clarify certain genres being used in the class so as to make sure all the students are on the same level of understanding. Since debriefs have become a regular practice in my classroom, I found my students asking high order questions as they learn from each others' responses, and are ready to add value to their own limited knowledge.

I feel encouraged to observe that by using careful 'debrief-time' in my classes I am able to conclude my class with more satisfaction. I am

now more confident that students are taking at least something from the many objectives intended for the lesson through debriefing exercises, which earlier were left quite vague. When students are engaged in discussions, they gain confidence and then the class becomes open learning ground for them to discuss their issues, raise concerns and internalize the meaning or purpose of the lesson (Dennison & Kirk, 1990).

In the end, I believe it would not be wrong to claim that activities are meaningless unless given meaning through debriefing or review discussions/ activities. Overall, debriefing discussions may be used to summarize the content, evaluate the interpersonal skills and to identify the thinking processes of the students. When teachers try to implement effective review time within their classes, it is helpful for them to remain focused in their lesson and to comprehend students' understanding. Review or debriefing exercises are thus meaning making exercises which when done during the class would help widen the students' perspective and would help them think about the world with a completely new paradigm. They would begin to learn and deduce learning outcomes from every experience in their lives and would then be able to apply it in their daily lives.

Teachers' little effort to try to make sense of the pedagogy used and the content being taught, the debriefing activities or discussions may prove helpful to assess students' progress and their understanding. The teacher would hence, be able to reflect on their practices too by observing the applicability of the pedagogy used and then to modify the plan for the next session based on feedback from the students. Though debriefing might not bring drastic changes in the students' attitude towards learning, I believe that with gradual input and consistent effort, this review methodology would be helpful for me as a teacher-learner and to the students who are trying to make sense of the world.

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