

Debriefing activities to enhance reflection and learning

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Abstract: Participants involved in adventure programs often find themselves in situations that require the overcoming of fears, and the inclusion of new thought patterns in order to move through many of the challenges they encounter. Some reflective individuals are by themselves, able to make connections with these experiences and use the resulting learning in other areas of their lives. However, a large proportion of our clients need some kind of assistance to guide this reflection process that will help cement home any key learning.

This paper presents a variety of debriefing activities that the outdoor education practitioner can use to help facilitate the learning process with groups they work with.

Letter Writing: One way to promote reflection is to have students pen a letter to themselves, writing about what they learnt during their adventure experience. (While students are on solo is a good time for this). The letter is collected by the teacher and then sent to them 6-12 months later, where they again get a chance to reflect on their initial thoughts and the relevance of the learning to the rest of their lives (Kolb, 1988, p. 50).

a selection of themes or questions for on can dramatically improve the especially for students with lower levels of



Providing a “scaffold”, or the students to focus quality of the letter writing, literacy. Examples may

include: An evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses in a variety of areas such as academic, social, or physical areas of their lives. They can then plan strategies to maintain their strengths, and outline ways of improving any weaker areas. Setting and writing down goals that the student hopes to achieve within the 12 months of them writing the letter is often powerful. Often students write back and tell how receiving their letter a year later really made them reassess where their life was going, as they had lost site of the goals they had set for themselves.

Nature Debrief: At the conclusion of an activity, send participants off into the surrounding bush or parkland and ask them to search for an object that mirrors the most important thing they learnt during the day. At the conclusion of a set time, have group member's pair up to share stories. After time has been given for partner sharing, bring the group back together. Each person in the group now gets an opportunity to share with the whole group their partner's story. The idea of speaking through an object and a partner is designed to take the focus off the spoken word and direct it to the object the person found, making it easier for those introverted individuals within the group to communicate.

An example might have a student share a closed dandelion bud with their partner, describing how prior to the trip they felt like the bud. "Closed up, wrapped in protection, never really opening up to what life had to offer." In the other hand they had a bud that had opened and flowered, and they tell of how they were going to become more like the flowering bud by, "opening up and feeling bright and happy everyday".



Object Debrief: If you are confined to indoors, an alternative to the above nature debrief is to have participants make a large pile of junk from anything they have in their possession, or can find nearby. Eg.) Watches, jewellery, water bottles, books, pens, food; anything will do but there has to be lots of options to stimulate thought. Have the group sit in a circle around the pile of junk and then pose a question for them to reflect upon. In answering the question, group members are encouraged to choose an object from the pile of junk that would metaphorically illustrate their thoughts and feelings. For example: A parent describing a bushwalk with their son stated: "When I arrived on Saturday morning I felt like this near empty bottle of coke. I was running on empty, and feeling flat, after a busy week. After the weekend I am now like this full water bottle, I am filled to the brim with pride and excitement at what I have seen this weekend with my son and his mates".

Finger Shoot: The finger shoot is a quick and easy way to get participants to reflect on, and quantifiably evaluate their performance, thoughts or feelings during any part of an adventure experience. It can be used in a variety of ways ranging from a simple check in with group members to see how they are coping, to a catalyst for more in depth introspection. It is a great way to get a group thinking and describing their experience without having to verbally communicate in front of the group. Thus it is suitable for all types of groups, but especially those who take a bit of time to open up and speak their thoughts. Like in the game “Paper, scissors, rock”, participants, on the count of three hold up any number of fingers ranging from one to five, or one to ten (if using both hands), to evaluate how they performed in some aspect of the experience that they had just been through. For example: As part of the debrief at the conclusion of a bushwalk, you might ask the question; “How would you rate the way you worked together as a team, helping each other through the clean up at dinner last night?” All participants hold up their score (fingers). As a facilitator you are now armed with information to further delve into this issue. There are two ways to facilitate this activity from here. You could focus on the negative aspects of their behaviour that had led to their score; ie) “So Joe, you gave yourself a three out of five, what did you do that resulted in giving yourself that score?” Or, you could address the positive “solutions” one would need to take to improve their score. “So Sue, you scored a three out of five. Next time you are in a similar situation what could you do to ensure your score improved?” [See Gass & Gillis, (1994) for further information on “Solution Focused Facilitation.”]



Assigning processing questions to be answered in a journal: At the conclusion of the days experience students are asked to go off into the bush and find a quiet spot to reflect on the day’s events; “A mini solo”. Here they would answer several questions in their journal that would help draw out the learning that had happened during the day for them. Often a quote, or motivational picture can be a stimulus for the reflection.

Nadler & Luckner, (1992), and Knapp (1992) have examples of questions that could be used in this type of session. Following is an example of a guided reflection session.

[Read the following and reflect on its meaning]. *Imagine there is a bank that credits your account each morning with \$86,400. It carries over no balance from day to day. Every evening it deletes whatever part of the balance you used during the day. What would you do? Draw out all of it, of course!!! Each of us has such a bank. It's name is TIME. Every morning, it credits you with 86,400 seconds. Every night you lose whatever of this you have failed to invest to a good purpose. You can never get back any that you did not use. It is lost forever. Each day it opens up a new account for you. Each night it burns the remains of the day. If you fail to use the day's deposits, the loss is yours. Do something useful with the next day of your life!*

This week's journal writing task asks you to think about the way you are using your time as you go through life. As young people we don't often think about what we are doing, where we are headed and the importance of making the most of our time. On your mini solo today I want you to think about how you are using your time while here during your six- month stay. Below are some questions to help your thinking. You do not have to answer these questions; they're only a guide. Feel free to respond to the above story, with a picture, a poem, a sketch, a song, or anything else that expresses your thoughts to this topic.

1. What was your initial reaction to this piece of writing about time?
2. Rate your life on a scale of 1 to 10 as far as setting goals and making the most of your life is concerned. What were the reasons for this score?
3. Are there places in your life where you think you are wasting opportunities? What kinds of things cause you to miss these chances?
4. List several ways that you think you could make each day of your life more productive and worthwhile.
5. Set one short term and one long term goal that will motivate you to get more out of each day of your life.

Computer Game: This activity is credited to Hunt & Hitchin, (1990), but one of the most powerful





activities that I have come across for
great way to open dialogue between
circle, one member reads from a

**Someone who is
always willing to help
others.**

facilitating discussion; it is a
members of a group. In a
prepared pile of cards. The

cards have written on it a general behavioural statement that would describe someone in the group; the facilitator can write their own to address issues within the group. (ie. Someone who should listen more; someone who is considerate; someone who offends me, etc). This person looks around the group for “the someone” who fits that description the closest, and goes and gives the card to them. (They may not search through the deck, they can only look at the top card, otherwise, they have to pass). The person who receives the card reads it out in front of the group. The sender can then comment as to why they gave the card to that person. The facilitator then directs a discussion around the issue brought up, allowing others to have a say, or offer solutions to the problem. It is a great way to bring conflict out into the open for discussion, or to get those with behavioural problems to see what others really think of their conduct within the group. It also allows for individuals to receive positive reinforcement from the group, which sometimes is forgotten about. The facilitator has an important role to play during this activity to ensure emotional safety of the group, through the setting of guidelines for safe positive disclosure.

Smartie or Jelly Bean debrief: At the end of the day the facilitator breaks out a big packet of

smarties or jelly beans and puts them in a big bowl in the centre of the group. The group is then asked to reflect  on some aspect of their experience during the day, and to pick  a colour that would explain the emotions or thoughts that were going on with them at the time. Each person is then allowed to choose one smartie. In an answer to a question about the interaction between climber and belayer teamwork, a  student chose a red smartie, going on to  describe

the following: "I chose red, because red describes the anger I felt when my belayers were not paying attention to me when I fell on the climb. I fell about a metre, they needed to keep the rope tighter. I really found it hard to trust them for the rest of the day after this happened." From a comment like this an astute facilitator would capture this moment to perhaps further explore issues of trust through the use of a "funnelling" style of questioning. [See Priest & Naismith, (1992) for more information on funnelling style of questioning.] The best part of this debrief activity is that the group gets to eat all the smarties at the end of the session.

Pipe cleaner man/women: The pipe cleaner man/women is a great way to help younger primary school age participants make connections between their experience and their learning. At the beginning of the day have students make a stick man or women out of pipe cleaners. The group then takes their new friend with them during the activities they do throughout the day. At the end of an activity, or at the conclusion of the day, you can ask questions of students, but asked through their pipe cleaner friend. Ie: What was your little friend's favourite thing she did today? Why was that so special? Did your friend think that everyone in the group was kind and friendly toward one another? What would your friend like to have seen from these people so others feelings would not have been hurt? It is a fun way to get younger participants talking about important issues that often arise with group activities.



The above activities are designed to enhance the learning outcomes from experiential programming and help participants transfer their learning back into everyday life. With this, participants show positive change and our industry grows stronger because programs are having a powerful impact on their lives.

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