



Debriefing Experiential Learning

...for AFS
& Friends

Experiential learning can occur during a structured activity or in day-to-day life. During a structured experiential learning activity (e.g. orientation, re-entry workshop, training), a facilitator plays an integral role in helping participants articulate their experiences and relate them to participants' preexisting knowledge or experience through a series of open-ended questions. The questions are designed to generate a discussion to "debrief" the experience with the ultimate goal of linking observations from the activity to theory and then, helping learners make connections and generalizations that are applicable in their own lives. After an experiential activity (e.g. simulation, video clip), the facilitator can guide participants through each stage in the experiential learning cycle with the aid of debriefing questions.

Many of the trainings conducted within the AFS network include an experiential activity or element, such as role-plays, team building exercises, and simulations. Debriefing is an essential step in a training session to ensure that the knowledge is being acquired and processed. A simulation without a proper debrief can seem like a game or a fun way to pass the time. Without the opportunity to discuss and debrief activities, participants, especially adult learners, can become frustrated if they do not see relevancy of the training material in their own lives.



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE AS THE FOUNDATION

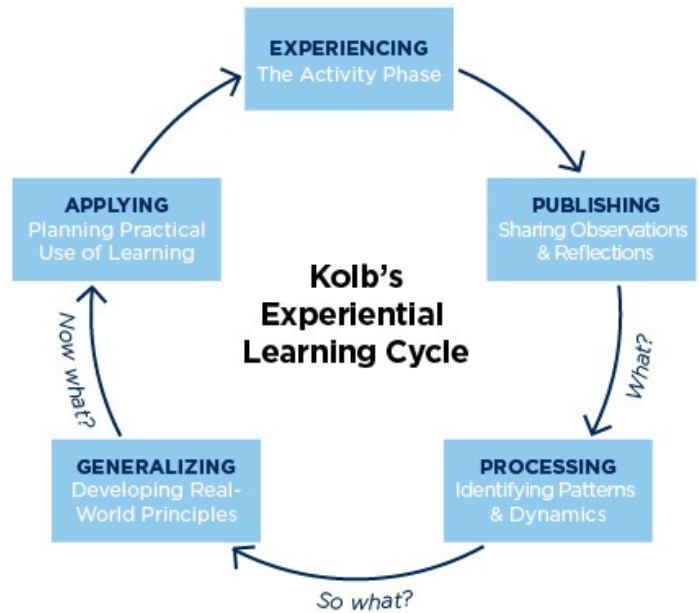
In order to understand the sequence and design of the debrief questions; it is necessary to review the experiential learning cycle because the steps for debriefing are based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The learning cycle is an on-going process that has four stages and four complementary learning styles: **Concrete Experience**, **Reflective Observation**, **Abstract Conceptualization**, and **Active Experimentation**. The debriefing process has five steps, which serve to transition participants through the four phases of the learning process. It starts with the experiencing stage and ultimately, transforms the learning from the experiential activity into knowledge that can be applied in the real world. For more information on the experiential learning cycle also see Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle ...for AFS & Friends.

DEBRIEFING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN FIVE STEPS

Experiencing is the beginning stage in the cycle where an individual engages in an activity such as a role-play, simulation, assessment or any other structured activity. After experiencing a shared activity, in the next stage known as **publishing**, participants should be ready to share or "publish" their observations and emotional reactions the experience generated. The next step, **processing**, involves a systematic examination of the shared experience to uncover what happened by reconstructing interactions and identifying patterns within the activity.

At the **generalizing** stage, participants are challenged to use the principles from the processing phase to make generalizations that could also be applied in the real world. In the final stage of the learning cycle, **applying**, the facilitator helps participants plan how the generalizations can be applied to make adjustments or improvements to their current situations.

It is important to note that although experiencing is the initial stage in the learning cycle, a training session, workshop, or any type of learning, including those of AFS sojourners, host families and even volunteers, can actually begin during any stage in the cycle. Even though it does not matter the stage in which the learning begins, it is still important that learners continue the learning cycle and debriefing cycle in its logical sequence, thereby completing a full cycle in order to maximize the learning opportunity.



DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS

As we know, learning is an on-going process, which is especially true in the AFS context. The following debriefing questions are meant to serve as examples of how questions can guide participants' learning through the experiential learning cycle to help them make sense of an experience. In preparation for a training or workshop, the facilitator will prepare debriefing questions based on the learning objectives and desired outcomes. The facilitator will also determine the quantity and sequencing of the questions. The graphic below shows how the debriefing process interfaces with the experiential learning cycle and establishes a framework to design workshops.

Experiencing

In the preliminary stage, participants are usually engaged in an activity (role-play, discussion, simulations, case study, etc.) designed to create a shared experience of the group. The reactions and observations are not typically discussed while the activity is going on; however, the following questions can be used during any of the five stages of the cycle to aid in the learning process:

- What is going on?
- How do you feel about it?
- Can you be more specific?
- Can you say that in another way?
- What do you need to know...?
- What would you prefer?

Publishing

When the participants have concluded the activity, the following questions are designed to generate observations and reactions based on the group's shared experience:

- Who would like to volunteer to share their reactions?
- What happened?
- How did you feel about that?
- Who else had the same experience?
- Who had a different experience?
- Were there any surprises?
- How many of you felt the same way?
- How many felt differently?
- What did you observe?
- What were you aware of?

Processing

In the third stage, the debriefing questions are intended to help the individuals and group make sense of their previous observations and reactions by discussing questions related to: "What actually happened during that experience?"

- How do you account for that?

- What does that mean to you?
- How does this all fit together?
- How was that significant?
- Do you see something operating there?
- What struck you the most about that?
- What does this suggest to you about yourself/group?
- What did you notice about yourself/group?

Generalizing

In the generalizing phase, learners work toward answering the question, “So what?”. Questions are constructed to aid participants in the identification of principles based on the knowledge they gained in the previous steps regarding themselves and their group.

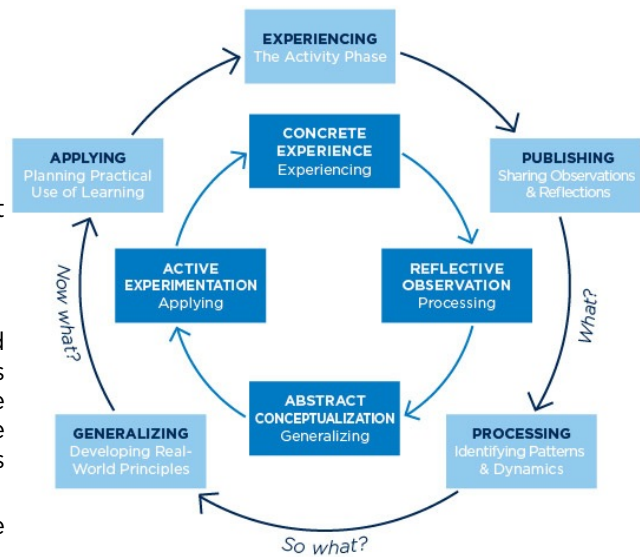
- What might we be able to infer/conclude from that?
- What did you learn/relearn?
- What does that suggest about _____ in general?
- What does that help explain?
- What principle(s) do you see operating here?
- How does this relate to other experiences?

Applying

In the final stage, participants are challenged to apply their learning to their own personal context. The questions seek to apply the general knowledge to their personal and/or professional lives.

- How can you apply/transfer that?
- How would you do this again differently?
- How could you improve the experience?
- What would be the consequences of doing or not doing that?
- What would you like to do with what you have learned?

Debriefing is an important facilitation skill, but also one that takes practice and time to develop. Every time you train or facilitate using an experiential activity or technique, it is an opportunity to practice your skills, which helps learners have a more in-depth learning experience.



Debriefing...

- ✓ Is a necessary part of experiential learning in order to make sense an experience.
- ✓ Is based on the experiential learning cycle and has five steps: **experiencing, publishing, processing, generalizing, and applying.**
- ✓ Serves as a tool to take participants through the experiential learning cycle to be able to apply their newfound knowledge.
- ✓ Requires preparation before a training session to develop the most appropriate questions based on the learning objectives.
- ✓ Is an essential facilitation skill.

For more theoretical information:

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

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