

# Debriefing: Pupils' Learning and Teacher Planning

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## Aim

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To investigate what and how pupils learn from debriefed lessons and how teachers plan and support such lessons.

## Dimensions of this Case Study

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Lesson observations and pupil interviews were conducted by 4 teachers at 4 secondary schools.

## Summary of Findings from this Case Study

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- Whole class debriefing of specific lessons was successful in a variety of ways in helping pupils to learn. For example:
  - pupils said, and were able to show that their ability to handle and process information had improved and their writing skills had become more analytic;
  - pupils gave longer responses to questions;
  - pupils were able to pose probing open questions;
  - pupils were able to give evaluative feedback;
  - pupils were able to identify the need for and benefits of co-operative investigation and discussion;
  - pupils' geographical knowledge and skills were enhanced.
- Specific aspects of lessons highlighted by the debriefing process seemed to be significant, including:
  - the use of challenging and stimulating thinking activities;
  - the collation of ideas and strategies in a plenary session;
  - making connections with other curriculum content and everyday life which seemed to be helpful in improving understanding;
  - the provision of detailed and specific feedback;
  - clarity about the purpose of activities.
- The teachers found that the opportunity to watch themselves on video, observe each other and hear pupil feedback on videoclips helped them to become more articulate about their planning and teaching.
- Pupils took time to develop a cumulative awareness and language that supported debriefing – younger and less able groups took longer to develop this capacity.

## Context of the Study

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The four geography teachers who took part in this study all use Teaching Thinking strategies within their teaching. They frequently debrief after these activities to get pupils to talk about both their solutions and how they have done the tasks (metacognition). The debriefing session is also used to encourage pupils to transfer their learning to other contexts.

They made reciprocal visits in which nine debriefed lessons were videotaped. The classes ranged from Y7 to Y10 and included mixed ability groups and setted classes of high, middle and low attainment. The visitor also interviewed pupils after the lesson.

## What is Distinctive about the Debriefing Process?

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In some lessons debriefing took place in one episode at the end of the lesson, while in others it was spread over three shorter episodes:

- in all the debriefing episodes there were high numbers of open questions asked by the teacher;
- the teachers made frequent reference to learning skills and overarching concepts such as cause, effect and planning;
- many pupils gave lengthy responses to teacher questions, sometimes after being asked to 'go on';
- in all of the lessons the teacher made connections between the learning outcomes and other (transfer) contexts;
- the pupils received evaluative feedback on their reasoning both from the teacher and other pupils;
- the teacher summarised the discussion and learning for pupils;
- in most lessons the discussion became animated, while in two it was very limited.

The debriefed lessons were different from other lessons because of the extent to which reasoning, thinking, learning, transfer and purpose were discussed. Whilst pupils contributed openly and fully the teacher remained in control of the direction of discussion.

## What did Pupils Learn from Debriefed Lessons?

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### Geography

All interview groups said that that they had learned either geographical content or skills in the lessons. Debriefing had helped them learn.

**Female pupil:** That there's more damage to people (caused by hurricanes) on the coast (compared to inland).

**Interviewer:** How did Mr K help you?

**Male pupil:** He made everyone make a comparison.

### Learning skills

Pupils made reference to improving their ability to take in, handle and process information in the pursuit of problem-solving.

**Female pupil:** We learnt how to group things together and see what might affect other things.

**Second female pupil:** Like one thing starts another.

### Social skills

In some lessons pupils reported improved social and cooperative learning skills.

**Male pupil:** I think you learnt that you've got to co-operate to find things out, you cannot just do things on your own....cos you'll probably be wrong about it.

(Another lesson) **Female pupil:**.... some of the things that she teaches, we like need to talk...civilly to one another without having to shout.

### Literacy

In several instances in their interviews pupils pinpointed that the debriefing episodes had informed either their writing in that lesson or their approach to writing.

**Female pupil:** ...somebody can describe something on a page long but not describe it properly and then we can just do a couple of sentences and know what to include.

(Another lesson) **Female pupil:** For writing essays and stuff, you have all the reasons, the background and the trigger reasons, it can help you... arrange an essay and write it.

## Wider learning

Some pupils identify a wider transferable significance in what they have learned. This has developed over time.

**Female pupil:** It's like we're relearning things that we've done in the past, that we've been learning over two years.

**Second female pupil:** And if you're going to college you can use it....

Four classes found it much easier to talk about what they had learned especially beyond subject content. These four classes were two KS3 classes containing more able pupils and two mixed ability Y10 classes, who had some previous exposure to debriefing. Talking about learning requires a language that is not immediately available to all pupils.

## What the teacher did that helped pupils learn?

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### Stimulating teaching

The use of challenging and stimulating Teaching Thinking activities underpinned the debriefing process. These were a prerequisite because they gave pupils a focus for discussion.

### Collating ideas

In the debriefing process the teacher draws together a range of ideas pupils have developed or strategies that they have used in tackling tasks so that they are available for all to consider. Good thinking is shared.

### Managing discussion

Pupils explicitly emphasised the value of discussion, both in small groups and in the whole class debriefing episodes.

**Female pupil:** What's good is like when other people put up like arguments (so) you can see everyone's different point of view.

## Facilitating feedback

A particular feature of discussion is the extent to which it provides feedback to individuals, on their thoughts and explanations. They value this for helping to improve their work.

**Interviewer:** You don't mind your friends correcting you?

**Female pupil:** No..I'm not bothered...If you don't (listen) you just do it wrong next time.

## Caring for groups and individuals

The debriefing process is an integral part of the lesson and its success depends on the attention the teacher gives to groups and individuals throughout the lesson. This care helps to persuade pupils that the purpose of the lesson is to encourage them to think and to share that thinking. It provides them with confidence.

**Female pupil:** She makes you feel more confident about answering questions.

## Explaining oneself

Many pupils mentioned that they were asked to expand on their first few words, to explain fully or "say a bit more". This process helped them to clarify and articulate their thinking.

**Female pupil:** You get a better idea of what you are talking about in your mind.

## Making connections

This is potentially one of the most powerful tools of debriefing. The teachers are offering analogies or parallels in the context of pupils' everyday lives which help them understand the geography and its wider significance.

**Male pupil:**...he tried to take it away from geography so that if people didn't understand it they could still give their own opinion.

## Communicating the purpose of learning

The debriefing helps pupils see the point of the lesson. This may be in very direct terms such as examinations, or in terms of life skills, or most generally in terms of understanding the world.

**Female pupil:**...We discuss everything.

**Interviewer:** And you think that helps?

**Female pupil:** Yeah because then we understand what we're doing and why we're doing it.

## Providing learning strategies

Strategies such as 5W (using Who, What, Where, Why, and When as stems for generating questions), Fact or Opinion Lines and Venn Diagrams are offered during lessons and pupils recognised them as generic strategies that can be used in many other contexts.

## Making pupils ask questions

In a few lessons, pupils were encouraged to ask questions, either of the teacher or of other pupils and this was seen as helping them to develop a greater sensitivity as to what makes a good question.

## Implications for Developing Practice

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Advisers and inspectors (and many teachers) have watched some of the videos and confirmed that this format of discussion is both extremely rare and contains many features of good practice.

- Pupils' learning can clearly be extended by debriefing lessons. Three particularly important features of debriefing are:
  - getting pupils to explain their reasoning;
  - providing them with critical feedback on their solutions and thinking;
  - making connections between the lesson outcomes and other contexts.
- Planning for debriefing cannot be reduced to a set of simple instructions. Trial and error and perseverance are necessary. It is important to think about the questions that you ask, encouraging pupils to give longer answers. Teachers need to plan the analogies, stories and contexts to be used to encourage transfer.
- Being videotaped, peer observation and having time to analyse and discuss are very powerful vehicles for developing practice.



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