

Debriefing Questions



An open access professional development module for simulationists

How to use this module



Module progresses from foundational concepts to advanced practice. Self direct how deep you want to go!

Exercises are designed to work on your own or to discuss with a friend over coffee.



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Debriefing Questions

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Overview :

Constructing an effective debriefing question can be overwhelming. We often think there are certain 'right ways' to ask questions in a debrief, sometimes to the point that we can freeze and lose track of the conversation itself.

Within this module we will explore 3 conversational techniques used in debriefing: Plus-Delta, Advocacy and Inquiry, and Circular Questions.

Each of these techniques can be remarkably useful in your debriefing utility belt. However, we also remind the reader that there is 'no one way to debrief' and that these questions are just a suite of tools you can choose to use. They can strengthen your conversations once you feel comfortable having them in your repertoire, but if your learners know you care about them and their learning, they'll often reflect with you even if your questions aren't as perfectly crafted as you hoped.

This module moves from the most simple types of debriefing questions towards the more complex. We hope that by completing this module you'll feel more comfortable using these techniques!

Exercise 1 : Plus Delta

The plus/delta is a learner self-assessment technique that many simulation participants will be familiar with. In its simplest form it involves asking a learner to consider an aspect of their performance that was good (a plus) and an aspect that they could improve or change (a delta).

In the following article the authors expound some of the benefits of this method, critique some of its limitations and explore ways that it can be used with more nuance as a component of a blended approach to debriefing.

- [Embracing informed learner self-assessment during debriefing: the art of plus-delta¹](#)

And here is a podcast where Ben Symon discusses how the plus delta technique can be employed in with two exponents (including the first author of the above article):

- [Simulcast Episode 144 : Advances in Simulation Plus Delta Debriefing²](#)

Ask yourself :

- What is the role of a debriefing conversation? To improve care? Improve participant knowledge and skills? Encourage reflective practice?
- What in your mind are the some of the benefits of the plus/delta? Where do you think this technique best fits into your practice in the simulation lab?
- How about in your clinical environment?

Retrieval practice :

- Consider how you would phrase a plus-delta debriefing question using the following techniques: single vs double barrelled, big picture vs. specific performance.

Thorny question :

- Ben Symon confesses to having suffered with debriefing snobbery; overlooking the humble plus-delta in favour of more complex debrief questioning techniques. Have you in your practice and aspirations as a debriefer also been guilty of "conflating conversational artistry with educational impact"?

Spaced repetition:

- Schedule in your calendar for a month's time to watch the following [rapid tutorial video on Plus Delta](#). This will help the ideas stick better in your long term memory.

Exercise 2 : Advocacy and Inquiry

In this exercise we will consider a style of questioning known as advocacy, inquiry.

In this style of questioning the debriefer makes an objective statement about the actions of a learner (what I saw ...), advocates for their perspective on this action (I think that...) before inquiring about the perspective of the learner (I wonder what...).

This technique is explained in greater detail in the following paper by Jenny Rudolph et al. however as you will see the proposition by the authors is not that the technique of questioning should be adopted exclusively but rather that it should be a tool used to help debrief using an approach that they term “debriefing with good judgment”.

- [There's No Such Thing as “Nonjudgmental” Debriefing: A Theory and Method for Debriefing with Good Judgment](#)³

Ask yourself :

- What are the core principles that underly this approach to debriefing?

Now let's take the same set of principles and consider how they apply to giving feedback more widely. Watch this YouTube video from author and software industry expert Kim Scott:

- [Radical Candour in 6 minutes](#)⁴

Ask yourself :

- Consider a debrief that you have been involved with (either as participant or facilitator) where there was a significant performance gap.
 - Was the debrief conducted with a 'good judgment', 'non-judgmental' or 'judgmental' approach?
 - What do you think the impact of the debrief was on the learners? (Consider knowledge/skill, psychological safety, reflective practice)
- What's your perspective on Kim Scott's opinion that we have a moral obligation to give critical feedback?

Retrieval practice :

- What are the underlying principles of debriefing with good judgment?
- Consider the following hypothetical situation:
“During a simulation you are running the patient has an episode of conscious VT, maintaining cerebral perfusion and adequate blood pressure. The team electrically cardiovert the patient without providing any sedation or analgesia.”
- Construct an advocacy inquiry question that explores the frame of a participant in this scenario.

Thorny questions (for experienced debriefers):

- This seminal paper on debriefing was published in 2006 and had a remarkable impact on healthcare simulation. How has your debriefing practice changed in the intervening years? When you re-read this paper now, are there things you disagree with or have a different take on now?

Spaced practice:

- Schedule in your calendar a time to watch the [following short video recapping Advocacy and Inquiry](#) in about a month's time.
- This will help you keep that knowledge in your long term memory vaults.

Exercise 3 : Circular Questions

In this exercise we will explain and practice the construction of circular questions. Originally described in family therapy literature in the 1970s, circular questioning has more recently been employed in healthcare debriefing. The following video explains how to construct a circular question and describes their utility in the field of psychology.

- [Circular Questions](#)⁵

Ask yourself:

- In this video we heard that circular questions can be a powerful tool for information gathering and behaviour modification. What aspects of performance in medical simulation would lend themselves to being discussed this way?

Retrieval practice:

- How is the term circular question defined in the video?
- What are the two aspects of constructing a circular question as described?

Exercise 4 : More Circular Questions

In the following paper, Kolbe et al explore the use of circular questioning in simulation debriefing and provide a practical guide to constructing circular questions in this setting. As you read this paper, don't feel too worried if circular questions feel quite overwhelming. This is very advanced practice and many expert debriefers find it challenging as well.

Read the paper :

- [How to debrief teamwork interactions: using circular questions to explore and change team interaction patterns](#)⁶

Watch a tutorial video:

- Watch this video where Ben Symon [explains circular questions](#).

Ask yourself

- In relation to understanding learner's frames during a debrief; does circular questioning offer any advantage over (linear) advocacy-enquiry questioning?
- Regarding using influencing circular questions (such as hypothetical future); does this technique hide your thoughts or judgements from the learners? Does this technique integrate with debriefing with 'good judgement'?
- The authors propose that the behaviour of individuals in a team are interdependent and therefore teamwork is a circular process. How does this view correlate with your experiences of working in a team?

Retrieval practice

- What are the considerations and requirements that the authors recommend for using circular questions during debriefings?

With a peer/group of peers

- Using the paper as a reference, construct a circular question for each of the following settings:
 1. A participant in a simulated scenario did not speak up despite knowing that a drug dose being given was incorrect and potentially harmful, *you want to understand what prevented them from speaking up.*
 2. A participant in a simulated scenario did not speak up despite knowing that a drug dose being given was incorrect and potentially harmful, *you want to influence their behaviour to encourage them to speak up.*
 3. A participant in a simulated scenario comes across as rude and dismissive of the opinion of a member of a consulting specialty. *You want to encourage awareness of their behaviour.*

Exercise 5 : Practice, Practice, Practice!

For those new to debriefing, you might like to use the following scenario videos to mentally rehearse forming debriefing questions.

1. Choose a video that's relevant to you
2. Make some observations about the participants' performance
3. Write some debriefing questions based on the principles you've learned in this module

Video 1 : A trauma case for an emergency team

- [CRMx | The Crisis Scenario - A Simulation](#)⁷
- In this excellent quality video from Columbia University, a trauma team do not recognise anaphylaxis as the precipitating cause for a patient's traumatic injuries. There's a lot of great demonstrations of effective and less effective crisis resource management techniques as well as the opportunity to explore anchoring bias.

Video 2 : An operative complication for a surgical and anaesthetic team

- [OT Simulation 2 - Haemorrhage](#)⁸
- The Australian Institute for Clinical Education provides this scenario of a simulated cardiac arrest in the perioperative setting dealing with covert haemorrhage.

Video 3 : An arrest on the medical ward

- [Ward simulation](#)⁹
- The Australian Institute for Clinical Education provides this scenario of a simulated cardiac arrest on the ward which goes quite awry. You will not be short of performance gaps to explore!

Video 4 : Neonatal simulation for a midwifery, nursing or paediatric team

- [PPV Scenario](#)¹⁰
- HSS Webteam provide a scenario where a high performing team resuscitate a flat newborn baby.

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Alex is an Emergency Medicine and Retrieval Physician and a keen proponent of both educational and translational simulation. After spending the early part of his career in the UK he completed specialist training in Queensland, Australia, where he is currently continuing his education as a simulation fellow at the Gold Coast University Hospital.



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Ben is a Paediatric Emergency Physician and Simulationist with a passion for translating clinical and educational research to front line health care workers. He is co-producer of the podcast 'Simulcast' and a member of the Bond Translational Simulation Collaborative.

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