

# Who is holding the mirror? Debriefing and reflection in work-integrated learning

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Debriefing is used across many disciplines and for different purposes in work-integrated learning (WIL), but there remains much ambiguity about what debriefing actually is, and what it entails. This study explored conceptualizations of debriefing for 35 WIL practitioners, located across a range of disciplines, professions, institutions and countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada). Findings point to a broad range of views and demonstrate that debriefing is associated with three different types of learning in WIL: academic, reflective and performance related. Our results show that the most consistently cited feature of debriefing was the presence of a facilitator, with the value of debriefing seen as enabling deeper insights than would be possible via solitary reflection. For supporting learning, most practitioners used both reflection and debriefing, suggesting that neither is seen as better than the other, but that both are useful and necessary strategies for student learning in WIL. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Debriefing, facilitator, feedback, work-integrated learning, reflection

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Debriefing has long been recognized as playing an important role in work-integrated learning (WIL), with experience alone considered insufficient to produce learning. Indeed, debriefing is viewed by some as the “most valuable component... in producing gains in knowledge” (Shinnick, Woo, Horwich & Steadman, 2011, p. 109). The importance of debriefing has also been highlighted by several studies including one of 3,000 Australian students which found “a facilitated debriefing session for students” was one of five curriculum dimensions that contributed to a quality WIL experience, in turn linked to enhancement of employability capabilities (Ferns, Russell, & Smith, 2015, p. 170).

Despite being frequently used as a teaching strategy (Cantrell, 2008) in a variety of disciplines, there is much conceptual and definitional ambiguity around the term debriefing (Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). Definitions found in the literature differ largely in emphasis. For example, some definitions highlight features such as feedback or reflection, or the method used for the debrief (individual, group etc.). Indeed, the term reflection appears in many definitions of debriefing and is often used synonymously with debriefing, for example, “purposeful reflection which can be undertaken by an individual or in a group” (Pearson & Smith, 1986, p. 156); a “mixture of reflecting and teaching” (Allan, 2011, n.p.). Interestingly, the terms debrief/debriefing do not typically appear in definitions of reflection.

Available literature on debriefing in WIL, especially in recent years, is heavily situated within medicine, nursing and other health related practice-based sciences, and less is known about how debriefing is understood and/or used in other areas of education and disciplines/professions more broadly. Much of the focus has been on debriefing in simulation exercises in medical and nursing training (e.g., Levett-Jones & Lapkin, 2014), which has tended to dominate thinking about what debriefing is and what it

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should and could be in WIL, and the kinds of strategies that could be used. Specifically, the strong focus on performance and feedback in health-related simulation studies emphasizes these aspects.

Evidence (mostly from research on health simulations) shows that debriefing promotes a range of skills, knowledge and personal development. Reviews of debriefing in medical education (Dufrene & Young, 2014; Levett-Jones & Lapkin, 2014) reveal that in most cases where debriefing has been used, significant improvement is reported in learners regardless of the actual debriefing process or method used (e.g., verbal, video assisted). Recent work has started to explore in more depth the effectiveness of various debriefing strategies/approaches, for example, self vs facilitator led debriefing (Oikawa et al., 2016), structured vs unstructured debriefing (Reierson, Haukedal, Hedeman, & Bjørk, 2017), single vs co-debriefing and in-person vs tele-debriefing (Brown, Wong, & Ahmed, 2018).

Debriefing can be used to improve performance and identify performance gaps (e.g., Rudolph, Simon, Raemer, & Eppich, 2008; Zebuhr et al., 2012), and has been found to contribute to longer lasting learning, better knowledge acquisition and retention (Chronister & Brown, 2012; Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Shinnick et al., 2011; Zebuhr et al., 2012). Debriefing is also associated with skill development, for example in areas such as leadership (Kaplan & Ura, 2010), interprofessional competencies (Nimmagadda & Murphy, 2014), assessment and psychomotor skills (Chronister & Brown, 2012). Heightened perceptions of self-competence (Dufrene & Young, 2014) and attitudinal changes have also been reported in learners following debriefing, including increases to self-reported confidence (Kaplan & Ura, 2010; Merryman, 2010), however confidence findings are mixed.

Debriefing may be particularly useful for WIL experiences in which learners may be exposed to potentially confronting experiences such as chronic illness, death and traumatized populations (Didham, Dromgole, Csiernik, Karley, & Hurley, 2011; Williams, 2013) as it can be used to help students process emotional experiences (McKenzie, 2002; Johnston, Coyer, & Nash, 2017; Regev, Gause, & Wegmann, 2009). WIL (including simulations) can be anxiety provoking for some students because of uncertainty or unfamiliarity with workplace environments/tasks and fears of being evaluated where performance is a key focus (e.g., Johnston et al., 2017). Finally, debriefing is thought to play a role converting tacit into explicit knowledge (Maynes, Hatt, & Wideman, 2013), the application of learning to future practice (Johnston et al., 2017), as well as enhanced reflection and feedback (Reierson et al., 2017).

## RESEARCH AIMS

Our research aims to extend existing scholarship by exploring and identifying the range of ways in which debriefing in WIL is thought about (by WIL practitioners across a range of disciplines and professions), and its perceived impact on learning and employability skills. Specific research questions to be addressed in this paper are: How do WIL practitioners conceptualize debriefing? What is the perceived relationship between debriefing and reflection? (i.e. are they the same/different? If different, in what ways are they different?). And, what are the implications of such conceptualizations on WIL practices? Preliminary findings of the same research project have been previously reported for learning flashpoints (Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2016) and emotions (Rowe & Winchester-Seeto, 2017).

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants ( $N=35$ ) were mostly university staff ( $n=30$ ) –academic and professional – with a smaller

number of host supervisors ( $n=5$ ). All were involved in the delivery of WIL programs across a diverse range of disciplines and professions including business, health sciences, community development, engineering and the humanities. The sample was an international one, with participants located across multiple institutions and countries – Australia ( $n=28$ ), New Zealand ( $n=5$ ) and Canada ( $n=2$ ).

Although it is possible to break the interviews into smaller segments based on countries, we deemed the number of participants in the each of the countries (except Australia) to be too small to yield valid results and comparisons. Similarly, given the number of disciplines involved the resultant number in any category would be too small to effectively show valid results. We have undertaken a preliminary analysis based on professional backgrounds of interviewees, but with 25 academics, five professional staff and five host supervisors any results should be treated with caution.

### *Research Design*

An exploratory, qualitative approach was used for the research, given that the area under investigation was relatively under researched, at least from a multi-disciplinary/professional perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the institution where the research was undertaken (HREC Reference No. 5201400821).

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited through an advertisement circulated via WIL communities within the institution where the research was undertaken as well as externally at conferences, in newsletters and through national associations. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken both face to face, over the phone and online (via Skype) by the research team, and a research assistant (in an earlier phase of the study). Specifically, participants were interviewed about their views and experiences of debriefing within WIL contexts.

The analysis for the present paper focused on responses to two of the interview questions: ‘What do you understand by the term debriefing?’ and ‘Do you think debriefing is the same as reflection? Why or why not?’ While conceptualizations of debriefing came up at other points during the interviews, only data pertaining to responses to these questions were included in the analysis. This was because we wanted to ensure their first thoughts were captured. Relevant interview segments were subject to thematic analysis - each researcher independently coded data, initially manually, and later using QSR NVivo 11, meeting to discuss and agree on final codes.

A thematic analysis of the interviews yielded a set of common elements for debriefing (Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2018) and, using these as a basis, a cluster analysis based on word similarity of the coded segments was undertaken. This analysis was done in NVIVO v11, using Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient. Results are shown on a dendrogram (Figure 1), where the nodes are clustered so that those with higher degree of similarity based on occurrence and frequency of words are clustered together; nodes that have a lower degree of similarity based on occurrence and frequency of words are displayed further apart.

## FINDINGS

### *Conceptualization of Debriefing*

Determining how debriefing is conceptualized by WIL practitioners is key to understanding how and why it is used in WIL. In our study a wide range of responses to the question “What do you understand

by the term debriefing?” quickly demonstrated that there is no single view about what debriefing actually is, nor an agreed definition. Indeed, in interviews several participants were hesitant, with some asking the interviewer if the definition they provided was correct, suggesting a lack of confidence about this point.

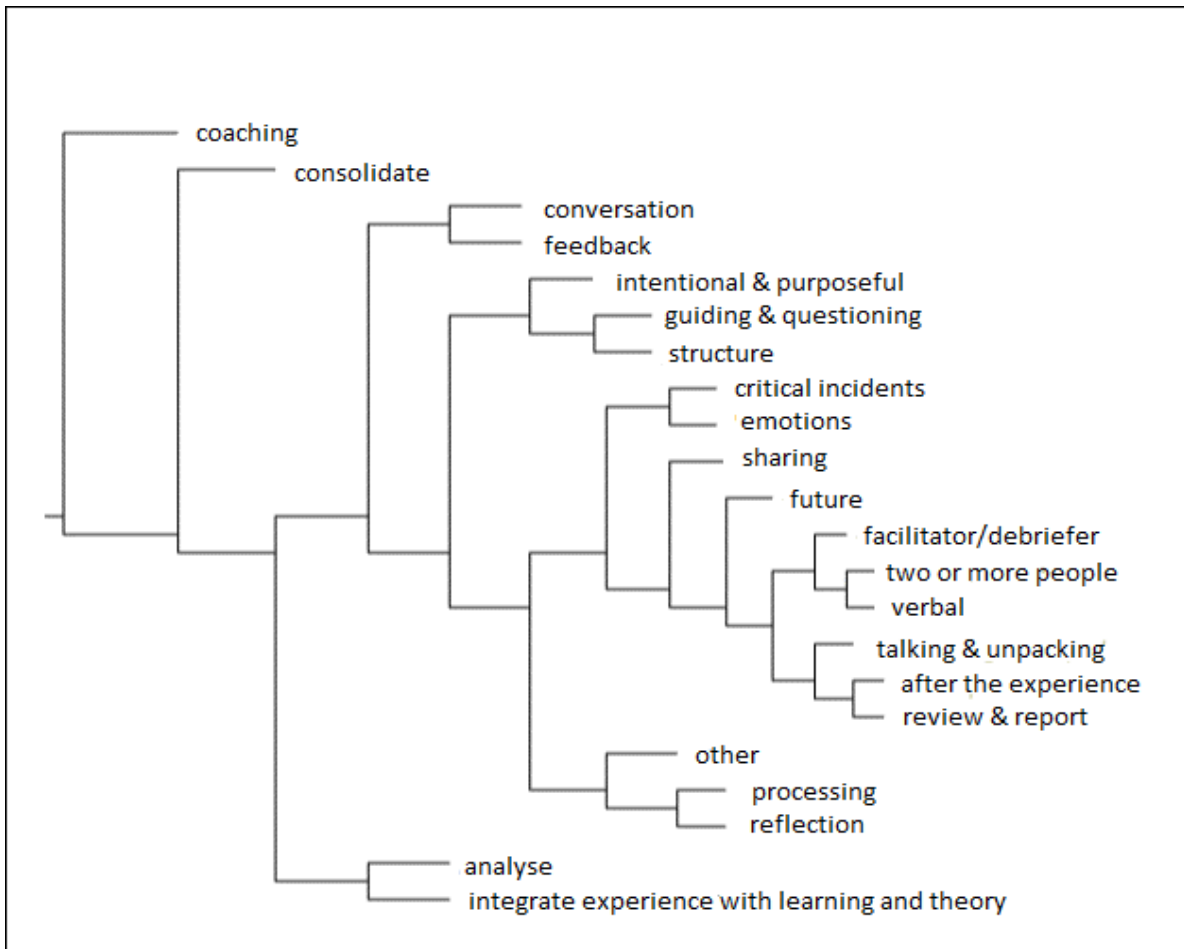


FIGURE 1: Cluster analysis and resulting dendrogram of common elements of debriefing based on word similarity of coded segments.

Nonetheless, thematic analysis of the interviews revealed several common elements used by more than two-thirds of participants when describing debriefing (Figure 1; Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2018), including:

- occurring after an experience;
- involving two or more people;
- being in person and verbal;
- one person acting as a debriefer or facilitator; and
- review and reporting of an experience.

Although all participants mention most of the common elements, there are certainly differences in the frequency of comments, suggesting different emphases by academics, professional staff and host supervisors. Feedback features most frequently in the interviews with host supervisors and, least in

interviews with academics. Host supervisors emphasise processing and the future the least of all categories interviewed. The complementary use of reflection and debriefing is talked about most by professional staff who often see the two intimately related. The numbers of hosts and professional is quite small, so this finding needs further investigation for confirmation.

Figure 1 shows a cluster analysis of the common elements based on word similarity. Reading the dendrogram (Figure 1) from left to right, the most dissimilar elements, and first two isolated clusters are the elements *coaching* and *consolidate*, and these are considered to be outliers.

There are several interesting patterns in this dendrogram:

- *analyze* and *integrate experience with learning and theory* are paired and spoken about by the participants using similar words with similar frequency; *conversation* and *feedback* are also closely paired, as is *processing* and *reflection*;
- *analyze* and *integrate* are then paired against all other elements, suggesting they are spoken about, and conceptualized differently to other elements – these are the most academic aspects of learning;
- *conversation* and *feedback* are the next pair to be clustered and separated, and represent two techniques that are used predominantly about practice and performance improvement;
- *processing* and *reflection* are also paired and separated from other elements but are clearly closely related to most of the elements – this represents another aspect, that of reflective learning and is often more of a personal nature.

When reading the descriptions of debriefing offered by participants, it is obvious that reflective learning (*reflection and processing*) is an integral concept for most but not all (between one third and two thirds of participants mention *reflection*). Some emphasized reflective learning alone, others concentrated on academic learning (*analysis and integration*) or practice/performance improvement (*conversation and feedback*). Several mentioned a combination of performance improvement and reflective learning, or academic and reflective learning. None referred to all three aspects of learning in their definition. This suggests that debriefing is intended by practitioners for very particular purposes and is rarely conceived in a holistic way that involves all three aspects of learning.

Other note-worthy patterns are: the pairing of the elements *critical incidents* and *emotions*, which suggests a close link between the two; and the close similarity and clustering of *intentional and purposeful, guiding* and *questioning and structure*, which refer to the instructor's intentions and actions.

The dendrogram shows that the way participants conceive debriefing involves one or more of the following: the kind of learning that is intended (academic, practice or performance related, reflective learning); how it is conducted (guiding, questioning, structured); the purpose/s (dealing with critical incidents and emotions, talking through and unpacking the experience, reviewing and reporting, sharing, future planning); and/or the involvement of a facilitator, with debriefing being in person and verbal.

#### *Role of Facilitator*

All participants conceived debriefing as involving two or more people, with one fulfilling the role of a facilitator or debriefer. This person guides and structures the discussion, uses questioning to probe and prompt deeper reflection, coaches students and/or provides feedback. Analysis of the interviews reveals the significance of the facilitator in the process and a 'spectrum of concepts and behaviors' of the facilitator. These largely fit into three main non-exclusive approaches (Figure 2; Winchester-Seeto

& Rowe, 2018, p. 120) and two or more approaches maybe used by the same facilitator in different situations and sessions, or even in the same session.

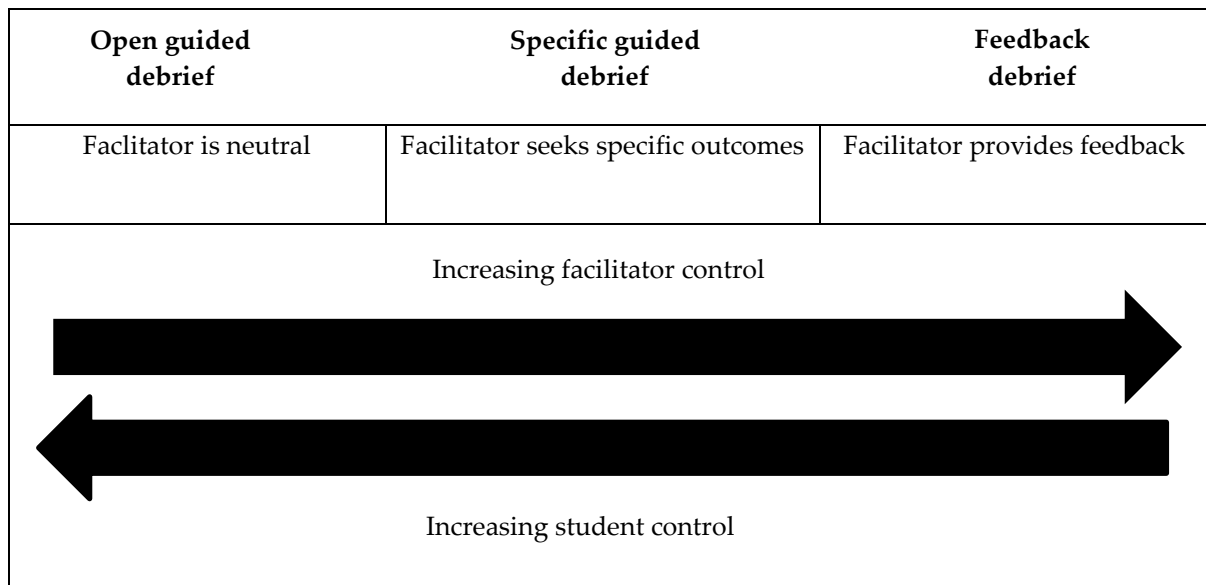


FIGURE 2: Spectrum of Approaches to Debriefing.

In the first approach the facilitator adopts a neutral stance and uses an open, guided method, i.e., the facilitator guides the discussion to probe and promote deeper reflection, but does not pursue a pre-defined outcome, the topics covered depend on student choice. In the second approach, the facilitator seeks to guide the discussion and promote deeper reflection, but on specific, pre-determined topics. These topics are often related to the specific learning outcomes of the subject. In the third approach, the facilitator sees the primary purpose of debriefing as providing feedback to the student. The strategies used are similar to the other two approaches, for example, guiding discussion, questioning, and often occur through a conversation and dialogue.

The outcomes are different for each of the three approaches, and the locus of control of the process changes. Students are much more in control in the open guided approach and least in the feedback approach. The facilitator has much more control where feedback is used than in the open guided approach.

*Similarities and Differences Between Debriefing and Reflection*

A close connection between debriefing and reflection is often assumed in studies on the subject. To probe how participants viewed the association between the two terms they were directly asked “Do you think debriefing is the same as reflection?”.

A few participants saw no difference between the two terms (3 out of the 17 who made direct observations), for example, “In my world they’re the same” (Participant 27) and a few viewed them as completely different (2 out of 17) e.g., “I don’t see them as synonymous at all” (Participant 19). The majority considered that the terms were: similar (5 out of 17) “there are so many crossovers with reflection, I’m not quite sure how you draw the line” (Participant 4); or related (5 out of 17) “I think [debriefing is] a species of reflection” (Participant 15); or closely linked (2 out of 17) e.g., “Are they all just intertwined?” (Participant 30). One participant made the observation: “debriefing, reflection,

feedback . . . there's a difference but it can be only slight sometimes, so it makes it [tricky]" (Participant 13). Thematic analysis of the responses revealed some specific traits perceived by participants (Table 1).

Features of debriefing include:

- being concrete and active
- guided, facilitated, scaffolded by someone, and involving more than one person
- that a facilitator can help dig deeper and develop a boarder overview
- it can be structured, or an unstructured/organic process
- the focus is: outward, on action, moving forward, problem solving, and the future
- it can involve processing emotions
- it involves looking back
- does not take much effort
- may involve feedback
- is intentional
- relies on open communication and sharing
- is verbal and has immediacy
- covers critical incidents and/or negative aspects of experiences

Features of reflection include:

- being abstract
- individual, personal, independent and thus done by yourself
- it can be a fluid, cyclical, ongoing process, or more structured and systematic
- it is an encompassing task
- it can lead to deeper insight and understanding
- the focus is on many things, but particularly the future
- it can promote engagement with emotions
- it involves looking back over an experience/s
- it takes time, effort and discipline
- it is largely quiet, gentle and introspective

Although there is clear overlap between the two terms, participants do allude to some crucial differences. While opinions vary, reflection is largely viewed as having an introspective and personal nature, and being a quiet, gentle process. It is also viewed as needing time, effort and discipline to accomplish, as it is ongoing and cyclical. This contrasts with debriefing that is viewed, at least by some, as taking less effort and being an immediate offload.

Debriefing, as it involves at least two people, must be based on honesty, sharing and open communication to be successful. The involvement of a facilitator who guides, probes and questions students is viewed as an integral part of debriefing. Several participants commented on a close relationship between debriefing and critical incidents and other issues of concern or negative events. Some participants viewed debriefing as being solely useful for critical incidents, others recounted that they used debriefing one-on-one for working through such incidents with individual students, and other strategies e.g., group debriefing for different situations. In some circumstances group debriefing is needed where critical incidents involve more than one student.

TABLE 1: Examples of participant perceptions of debriefing and reflection.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Debriefing – examples from interviews</b>	<b>Reflection – examples from interviews</b>
Concrete v Abstract	concrete / active verb (2)	abstract (1)
Guided v Individual	guided [by someone else] (4) facilitated probing questions scaffolded	individual (8) personal independent internal
Number of people involved	more than one person (9) two-way conversation	single person (4) done by yourself
Structure	less structured (5) more organic, everyday more naturally more of a conversation more structured (3) structured reflective approach	more fluid (2) cyclical ongoing process  more structured practice (4) more systematic thing
Breadth	gives a broader overview (4)	more encompassing task (4)
Depth	digs deeper / step further (3) allows you to drill deeper as a staff member	deeper insightfulness (3) deeper level of understanding limited because you only have yourself to draw on
Focus	outward (4) action moving forward future problem solving	future gazing (2) inform future action
Emotions	processing lots of emotions (2)	engage with emotions (1)
Looking back	after the fact (3) looking at a past experience	on what you just experienced (1)
Effort and time	more time bound (2) without putting so much effort into it	takes much more effort (3) more disciplined process process that takes time allows some time to pass
Feedback	feedback (4) how I saw you act, react, or this is what I observed	only slight differences (1) between debriefing, reflection, feedback
Intentional	intentionally reflect (2) guided, intentional structure	
Open communication/sharing	be honest (5) freely share joys, concerns	
Verbal	verbal reflection (2) discuss	
Critical incident/negative event	(4) critical incident that has had a deep impact often comes about with smaller or larger crisis points	
Immediacy	immediate off-load of an experience (2)	
Quiet/gentle		more the gentle thinking (2)



There were diverse opinions about whether both debriefing and reflection were structured or more organic processes. Similarly, participants were divided on which of the two led to deeper insight. Some argued that a facilitator could help students to dig deeper or see things from a different perspective, while others suggested that reflection leads to a deeper level of understanding, analysis and insight.

It is difficult to discern whether some or all of these are fundamental differences, or whether they actually reflect the particular strategies used by the participants for both reflection and debriefing. If the latter is true, it implies that different strategies in both reflection and debriefing can lead to different outcomes.

#### *Relationship Between Debriefing and Reflection in Practice*

In practice debriefing and reflection are often used together or seen as complementary. Quotes from participants reflected this view: "I think that the reflection is them reflecting on themselves, and then the debriefing is taking it a step further where they're talking to me" (Participant 28); and "One part reflection on the part of the student, and the other part facilitating that reflection a little bit by somebody who has some skills and questioning and listening abilities" (Participant 27). The two are commonly seen as tools, albeit for different outcomes: "I think [debriefing is] a tool that can help you reflect" (Participant 17) or "reflection is a very helpful tool in debriefing" (Participant 18).

Some practitioners use student reflections as a basis and fodder for debriefing: "The reflections then give us feedback on whether they need a debrief" (Participant 20), and "I think that self-reflection can be the [basis] of debrief" (Participant 24). Others used debriefing to stimulate student reflection "I think it encourages reflection" (Participant 35), "it is a good kick-start for the reflection" (Participant 2), and "I think debriefing is an activity that you need to do in order to reflect" (Participant 13).

The differing uses of reflection and debriefing underlines their close connection and their versatility, as well as their significance in the mind of the practitioners, for student learning. As observed above, the actual use of these two teaching and learning methods in practice may be more related to the particular design of the WIL course, the traditions of different disciplines, the intended purpose and learning outcomes of the subject, and the role the facilitator assumes in the learning process.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings point to a broad range of understandings about debriefing in WIL by practitioners. As pointed out by Tannenbaum and Cerasoli (2012) "given the heterogenous foundation and application of debriefs, some definitional ambiguity is not surprising" (p. 232). The interviewees come from a broad range of disciplines, each with a different history of using debriefing for teaching purposes. Instructors will also have had exposure to different debriefing strategies. These factors may impact on their understanding of the term.

The versatility of debriefing is evident by the association found in this study with the three different types of learning: academic learning (*analyze* and *integration*); performance improvement (*feedback* and *conversation*); and reflective learning (*reflection* and *processing*). These learning types and connected concepts align with some of the well documented purposes of WIL. For example, performance evaluation and appraisal are common goals of debriefing in WIL, particularly in clinical simulations intended to provide students with opportunities to identify performance gaps, develop knowledge and technical and generic skills (e.g., Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Shinnick et al., 2011). The link between feedback and conversation, noted in our analysis, may be related to dialogic approaches to feedback

used for performance improvement (Nicol, 2010). Similarly, integration of theory and practice in the workplace is a core focus of many WIL activities, particularly those with professional accreditation such as, medical/health sciences, teacher education, engineering (e.g., Allen & Wright, 2014) and is an important aspect of academic learning. Finally, reflective learning is concerned with the processes (e.g., cognitive, emotional, somatic) underpinning learning, development of understanding and improvement of future actions (Harvey, Coulson, & McMaugh, 2016).

It is clear that debriefing can be beneficial for all these three types of learning, but it is also clear from our data that none of our participants use debriefing for all three. This begs the question of why, if debriefing can be helpful across a broad range of learning, it is not used in this way. One possible explanation is that the way that debriefing is conceived by the instructor impacts its adaptability and range of application. Instructors who conceive debriefing as being primarily for performance improvement, for instance, may only seek or know of strategies for that purpose and miss many other strategies that could promote other types of learning. While not explored in this study, there are clues in the way participants discussed debriefing, that the actual strategies used by instructors may influence and constrain their conception of debriefing. The choice of strategies may be a result of disciplinary tradition and expectations, or because they are the only ones known to the instructor. Thus, expanding an instructor's conception and introducing a broader range of available strategies, may result in a richer and more versatile use of debriefing.

The aspects of debriefing identified by interviewees, e.g., notion of an external debriefer, facilitation, feedback, intentional, reviewing, reporting, verbal, emotion, active, critical incidents, align well with existing scholarship (Allen, 2011; Cantrell, 2008; Dreifuerst, 2009; Lederman, 1992; Fanning & Gaba 2007). Specifically, they cover theoretical lists of elements (such as those recognized by Lederman, [1992] including the role of a guide or debriefer, the need for unpacking an experience), ideas of a facilitated/ guided reflection (Fanning & Gaba, 2007), and purposes of a debrief (e.g., identify and close gaps in knowledge and skills, [Eppich & Cheng, 2015]). As with debriefing there is no clear agreement about the definition of reflection (Harvey et al., 2016). Most features of reflection reported by participants in our study were found to align with those found in the literature. Examples include, notions of self-direction, depth, time, emotion, metacognitive processes, cycles, future, multiple perspectives/lenses and effort (Cowan, 2014; Denton, 2011; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Moon, 2004). However, there were some differences in emphasis. For example, in our data feedback was associated more with debriefing than reflection - in contrast to some literature emphasizing the importance of feedback in reflection (e.g., Werderich, 2006). Secondly, debriefing was viewed as a more active process than reflection. This differs from views of reflection as an active process (e.g., Dewey, 1910/1997).

#### *Who is Holding the Mirror? – Differences Between Debriefing and Reflection*

Our participants emphasized that the single most important aspect of debriefing was the input of a facilitator, who could add considerable value to the process. This is summed up by one interviewee who observed "I might hold a mirror up to myself, but I mightn't see the reflection which is actually there. I might see the reflection I want to see. Whereas if someone holds a mirror up to me that can be a very different thing" (Participant 5). Similarly, another suggested that "Reflection by yourself is limited because you only have yourself to draw on" (Participant 16). From the viewpoint of instructors this can enable students to gain a more accurate and richer view of themselves and their actions, However, there are a number of other factors that illustrate the value of facilitators, including: that the facilitator may assist students to see another viewpoint: "I can give them another perspective in addition to their own perspective and the mentors perspective" (Participant 29), or that a facilitator can

help stretch student thinking or dig deeper: “in a debrief if you use the right questioning technique, you can go in further and dig a bit deeper if you think the student hasn't picked it up” (Participant 20), and “pushing them in their thinking and pulling out of them what we think is there” (Participant 27).

The value of debriefing thus seems to lie in assisting students to reach deeper insights than would be possible via solitary reflection. The results also show that most instructors in our sample used both reflection and debriefing in a variety of ways to gain maximum benefit for students. This suggests that neither is seen as better than the other, but that both strategies are useful and necessary for student learning in WIL. Using reflection as fodder for debriefing and using debriefing as a kick-start for reflection were both mentioned by participants. Adopting a cycle, or series of cycles of reflection and debriefing throughout the WIL course may prove to be a useful concept for curriculum design.

The active involvement of a facilitator is viewed by many authors as a necessary part of debriefing (Eppich & Cheng, 2015; Fanning & Gaba, 2012). There is less agreement on the most appropriate level of directedness and/or control of the process by the facilitator. In our study we found three different approaches used by facilitators, from a more student-directed form (open, guided) to an approach where the facilitator guided the discussion to meet pre-determined outcomes (specific, guided) to one where facilitator-feedback was the dominant strategy (Figure 2). This last is often viewed as directive feedback, but other strategies can be used such as open-ended questioning (Sawyer, Eppich, Brett-Fleegler, Grant, & Cheng, 2016). This categorization emphasizes who decides and directs the subject matter and progression of the debriefing, from student-directed and controlled to instructor-directed and controlled. Most of our participants relied on some degree of instructor-directedness, echoing Stuhr and Sutherland (2013) who found that teacher-centered debriefs were the most common practice.

Fanning and Gaba (2007) outline three levels of debriefing, based on practices in the aviation industry. These levels are based on the degree of facilitation – high where participants largely debrief themselves and the facilitator “gently guides the discussion only when necessary” and acts as a “catalyst” (p. 119); intermediate where the instructor is more involved and students need “help to analyze the experience at a deep level” (p. 119); and low where “intensive instructor involvement...strongly directs the nature of the discussion” (p. 120). While not exactly the same, there are parallels between this scheme and that described in our study.

Both schemes trigger questions around the role of students and instructors in the process. Fanning and Gaba (2007) suggest that there is a “tendency for instructors to . . . overinstruct”, and that there is a need to “match the level of instructor involvement to the nature of the material and the group” (p. 120). They go on to discuss the possibility that novice learners may benefit from a more instructor-led approach with intensive instructor involvement and directedness, and more experienced learners may benefit from a less intensive approach. The same might be applied to the open-guided, specific-guided and feedback approaches in our study, where open-guided could be more suitable for more experienced students. Some types of learning, e.g., reflective learning and aspects of service learning may be better served by a more student-directed approach, where the student determines where the discussion goes and the instructor acts as the catalyst for deeper thinking.

The goals of WIL are many and varied, covering skill and knowledge development and personal attributes such as creativity, resilience, and self-reliance. Intentionally choosing the most appropriate style of debriefing for desired outcomes and student needs will undoubtedly foster better student learning. This needs to take into account the amount of instructor involvement and control in the conduct of the session; the selection of topics to pursue; and the outcomes desired. However, it is not

enough to just meet the needs of students and their learning in the here and now, important though that may be. It is also vital that we assist students to become autonomous and self-directed learners. If the overwhelming experience of students is instructor-led and controlled debriefs, with intensive feedback, then the question becomes: how will this help students develop autonomy and prepare them for life outside the academy?

### *Implications for Practice*

Results of this study yield some potential practical implications for use of debriefing and reflection in WIL, including:

- debriefing can successfully be used for all aspects of learning in WIL: academic learning, performance improvement and reflective learning;
- increasing the range of debriefing strategies will allow debriefing to be used for different purposes;
- having a facilitator for debriefing can help students to gain a more accurate and richer view of themselves and their actions, and lead to deeper insights than solitary reflection;
- combining the use of reflection and debriefing is a powerful strategy and both are necessary for student learning;
- adopting a single cycle, or a series of cycles of reflection and debriefing throughout a WIL course may provide a useful basis for curriculum design;
- the choice of instructor-led versus student-led debriefing approaches depends on whether students are novices or more experienced, and on the desired learning outcomes;
- intentionally choosing the most appropriate style of debriefing (i.e. open-guided debrief, specific-guided debrief or feedback debrief) to match the desired learning outcomes, student experience and needs, will foster better student learning;
- using a wide range of debriefing styles with varying amounts of instructor and student control will assist students towards a goal of becoming autonomous, self-directed learners.

### *Limitations*

Given ours is a small sample, and the overall number of coded words is small, it could be that there is insufficient data to draw definitive conclusions. There are, however, a number of ideas that could be tested with a wider set of disciplines. The participants in our study are all instructors, predominantly academic and professional staff, with a small number of workplace or host supervisors. As there are no students included the views are entirely those of teachers and thus the results could be skewed. Nonetheless, the findings do align with other studies where students were included.

This study sheds light on the understanding of debriefing and reflection by WIL practitioners and the findings point to some potentially unique features of each concept and how they might interact. To the authors' knowledge there is no theoretical/conceptual literature which unpacks the relationship between debriefing and reflection in WIL, or experiential learning more broadly. Thus, this paper makes a unique contribution by attempting to better understand the interconnections between these two concepts and associated strategies.

## CONCLUSIONS

Debriefing is extensively used as a teaching and learning strategy across a range of disciplines for WIL. At present it is heavily used for practice and performance improvement, but there is considerable scope

for effective use of debriefing in different ways for a much broader range of purposes. Academic learning aspects of WIL, especially integration of theory and practice can be fostered by debriefing, for example asking students to outline options for actions and justify their choice. It can also be used to acknowledge and work through emotional responses to WIL and critical incidents. This may assist students develop resilience, a desirable result of WIL.

Arguably one of the most significant outcomes of education, and our best gift to students is to assist them wherever possible to become autonomous, independent learners. Debriefing can be used in ways that assist this process, but also it can be used in ways that hinder that process. Over-reliance on instructor-led approaches will not, do much to help students learn independence. A balance between instructor-led and student-led approaches may be necessary. This does not belie the necessity for students to learn to lead the process over time and suggests that curriculum design should allow for progressive change in debriefing approaches as students develop. Also, as pointed out by Fanning and Gaba (2007) in practice, a combination of approaches may prove to be the most beneficial depending on the purpose and objectives of the debrief.

To exploit the full potential and worth of debriefing we need to understand how and why it works, and the most effective ways to use it. This study has started to delve into and unpack instructor conceptions of debriefing and has highlighted the value they see in the process.

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## About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL, in 2018 the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum*". Defining elements of this educational approach requires that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related task, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace. Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the New Zealand Association of Cooperative Education (NZACE), [www.nzace.ac.nz](http://www.nzace.ac.nz).

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

*Research publications* should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data. And a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

*Topical discussion* articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

*Best practice and program description* papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

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