

OBSERVATIONS WITH REFLECTIVE DEBRIEFING

This model uses a reflective debriefing after a classroom observation. The approach operates under the assumption that you, the teacher specialist, are working with a teacher who wants to have effective instruction. As a specialist charged with improving teaching strategies in your district classrooms, you know you are going to have to ask the kind of questions that get teachers to change as necessary. It is evident to all of us that they will not fully implement standards based instruction simply because we want them to. Use of this reflective debriefing model can promote the introspection needed to help change occur.

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BASIC MODEL

A. A pre-observation conference is useful, but not essential. This conference can be used to get the teacher to suggest things that they want you to look for during the lesson. This emphasizes your role as a personal coach. It also allows you to stress that the observation is for professional growth only, and that no report will be given to any administrator. **THIS IS BETWEEN YOU AND THE MENTEE ONLY!**

B. Collect data during the observation. Some observers like to script the lesson. Others like to write anecdotal comments about what they saw during the observation. It is critical that your notes not have any “editorial or opinion” comments. The teacher may wish to see your notes. There is no reason not to share them, especially as it may refresh their memory of what occurred in the lesson.

C. The format for the debriefing session is composed of three simple parts:

1. Start with positives.
2. Explore areas of refinement with open-ended questions.
3. End with positive.

Parts 1 and 3 are self-evident in their make-up. The following are principles related to the open-ended question portion of the model.

DEBRIEFING PRINCIPLES

- ❖ If debriefing two or more people at the same time, make your questions directed to a specific participant.
- ❖ Try not to use questions that have “yes” or “no” answers.
- ❖ Do not use value judgments. Instead, use factual, concrete examples from the lesson.
- ❖ Make sure you ask only one question at a time.
- ❖ Ask questions that try to pull out omissions or mistakes.
- ❖ Keep the session at no more than thirty minutes.

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A SAMPLE DEBRIEFING

This sample includes other principles of the debriefing process. These principles are presented in the context of the debriefing sample to help understand their application.

Hi, Mr. Tisdel

(Be sure you are smiling and conveying a congenial spirit. If you are on more familiar terms, use of the person's first name would be appropriate)

I would like to begin with some of the strong points of your lesson today.

1. You had an excellent variety of communication aides-charts, graphs, overhead display calculator.
2. The individual groups were all personally involved in working mathematics.
3. It is evident that you were well prepared for today's lesson.

I know you have been thinking about the lesson already and I want to explore it with you.

- * What do you believe were the strengths of the lesson?
- * What did you do to address the different learning styles of the students?
- * If you were to do the lesson over, what would you do differently?
- * *(For a lesson you have seen for the second time)* What changes did you make since the last time you presented this lesson?

Keep track of their responses so that you know if they have covered any of the points you want them to bring up. People who are truly reflective practitioners with knowledge of standards based instruction will most likely mention several of the points you wish cover in your direct questions.

At this point, if they have no suggestions, or if they have not covered all the points you want to mention, then you should begin your questions. (Do not forget the time limit. Be sure you keep the debriefing session on task. NO BIRD-WALKING!)

Mr. Tisdel, do have any questions you would like to ask related to the lesson or other need that you might have?

(Respond to questions but remember that you are not to make negative judgmental statements. If you promise to provide assistance related to their questions, be sure to follow-up in a timely manner.)

I want to let you know that the application you provided to the students really caught their attention and mine. I hope you will continue providing such excellent examples.

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MORE SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- ❖ What are the key concepts that this lesson is supposed to bring into focus?
- ❖ What connections are there in this lesson to your previous units?
- ❖ Why did you choose to have the ___ activity to be teacher-directed rather than allowing the students to do it individually or in groups?
- ❖ What component of the lesson focused on the students having to communicate what they were learning?
- ❖ For the general quadratic formula you wrote: $y = (x-h)^2 + k$. Would you examine this formula for any errors you might see?
- ❖ What questioning techniques could you use to be sure that all students are being given the opportunity to communicate understanding?
- ❖ Near the end of the lesson segment you said, “You need to learn this.” How would you have responded if a student said, “Why?”
- ❖ How could you incorporate technology into this lesson?

ADDITIONAL PRINCIPLES

- ❖ If they answer your question with a question, say “Let me rephrase (clarify) my question.” Then give your question again in a different form. Try to address their question in your rephrase.
- ❖ With your questioning, have follow-up questions prepared which are designed to draw out the response you seek. If after two or three such follow-ups they are still stuck, ask them to continue to reflect on it at their leisure and get back to you later. Do not just let them sit there and be hung out to dry!
- ❖ If there was a major math error, and you believe that their understanding might not come easily or might destroy the friendly tone of the session, have the problem, example, etc. written out for them on a separate sheet of paper. Before giving it to them, say something like this: “I appreciate your efforts to bring understanding to your students. I am confused about something you (said, wrote, put on overhead, etc.) I have written it down for you. Perhaps you could reflect on it later and tell me how you would change this explanation.” Give them the notes folded so that they will grasp that they are not supposed to look at it yet. You might also save this one until last and preface it with a comment like, “Before I give you some additional positives in your lesson...”
- ❖ Your final effort should be to offer them an opportunity to get your direct input. Say, “Is there any feed back you would like from me with respect to the lesson that we have not touched on? If they say, “yes,” hear their requests and respond. Remember, BE FACTUAL, and do not use value judgments. (“That was a pretty stupid example!” could be better said as “My observation was that the students did not get the point of the example you gave.”) After hearing their concerns, close with at least one positive comment. If they say “no,” close with at least one positive comment.

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SUMMARY

With these principles in place, here is a complete model of a debriefing:

1. Greet the participant and set the person at ease. .
2. Open with positive comments. Three is a good number to help set them at ease.
3. Ask them what they felt were the strong points of the lesson.
4. Get them to make suggestions on what they feel needs to be changed.
5. Ask your lesson content directed reflective questions.
6. Give them the opportunity to ask for input respecting their concerns not covered in your questions.
7. Close with at least one positive comment.