



Peer Debriefing: Teachers' Reflective Practices for Professional Growth

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"I never cry at school, but this particular day I was sitting at my desk on the verge of tears. I was teaching a high school writing class and was feeling a great sense of failure. A colleague who rarely comes by my room suddenly showed up at my door. When I saw her, the dam broke, and I burst into tears. When she asked what was wrong, I lamented about what a terrible job I felt I was doing teaching my students how to write and was counting my failures on both hands. She started asking me questions. I showed her pre and post writing scores and pre and post reading and writing interest inventories. She began to see some things I hadn't noticed. She showed me where there was more improvement than I had perceived. Because of her outside perspective, I was able to see that my perceptions differed from the facts."

Introduction

This story exemplifies the role of peer debriefing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define peer debriefing as a "process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). A disinterested peer is someone who is not an immediate stakeholder in the outcome of a project, but who is a knowledgeable source on the topic. For example, a ninth grade English teacher may not have a stake in the outcome of a class project by the science teacher across the hall, but since they both teach the same grade, the English teacher knows about the needs of ninth graders and can serve as a knowledgeable source for the science teacher. This fits Schwandt's (2007) definition of peer debriefing where a teacher "confides in trusted and knowledgeable colleagues and uses them as a sounding board" (p. 222), or as Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) refer to as an outside or external evaluation or perspective. Researchers, especially qualitative researchers, have discussed the impact peer debriefing has on clarifying experiences, thoughts, and theories, and how it helps illuminate situations (Cooper, Brandon, & Lindberg, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They recognize that the process of moving in and out of data collection, striving to identify the salient patterns, captures the attention of the key investigators. The intensity of being immersed in the site often causes the focus on the phenomenon to be so specific that researchers need to "talk through" their interpretations with interested peers to verify their conclusions. These planned conversations assist them in affirming, confirming, and challenging their findings (Guba & Lincoln; Lincoln & Guba).

Although the term *peer debriefing* is more often seen in qualitative research than in teacher education literature, as professors who prepare teachers, we wondered if teachers utilize the process in their teaching practices even if they do not know or use the term. This driving question sparked an interest in us to find an answer and change the trend to more integrated and purposeful use of peer debriefing and to bring the term a more common understanding among

teachers. From our experiences, we see that teachers often serve as disinterested peers for each other. They may help each other talk through instructional practices, solve problems, and explore new theories as they learn together. However, like in the story above, many times teachers are isolated in their own classrooms and do not immediately turn to each other for support because of time constraints or other issues. According to Heider (2005), attrition among teacher educators is an increasing problem in the United States. Studies continue to reveal that quality beginning teachers leave teaching within the first few years due to feelings of isolation (Heider).

In our desire to support the practices of peer debriefing with our preservice and inservice teachers, we wanted to know if our former graduate students engage in peer debriefing or similar activities. Our research question for this pilot study was: Do graduates of the university's elementary and reading master's programs utilize the practice of peer debriefing? We believe educators would benefit from taking advantage of this valuable hallmark in qualitative research. Furthermore, it would be helpful for preservice and inservice teachers to be taught the importance of the role of peer debriefing and how to utilize it to improve instruction and for professional growth.

An Overview of Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is a useful tool for educators as researchers if systematically utilized. Teachers, encouraged to share what is happening in their classroom with peers, may open the door to a deeper insight into their professional behaviors. Through meaningful discussions and evaluation, educators are able to take advantage of peer debriefing to make better sense of educational phenomenon. For example, teachers routinely review the success of a particular lesson after it has been taught. They reflect on what went right (or wrong) and the outcomes of their students. Their self-evaluation may not be as impartial as it would be for an outside observer. Consequently, using the practice of peer debriefing may assist them in a more objective critique. The process of debriefing with a peer may benefit them in two particular ways.

First, by describing in rich detail for the peer to fully understand the phenomenon, the teacher may recall additional facts that had not been considered prior to the sharing. This in-depth review often shifts the emotional slant to a more objective perspective as the "facts" are presented. Reflection by the teacher may continue in light of new information, even causing a change in the teacher's own evaluation. Second, as the disinterested peer listens and questions the teacher, different perspectives are often shared. Because the outside voice is a professional with an understanding of the context, meaningful dialog often occurs. This give-and-take may lead to different or clearer comprehension. It often challenges the teacher/researcher to rethink initial findings or explore varied conclusions. The net result is an even deeper analysis. This fits with Zeichner and Liston's (1996) view of reflection: "to convey the sense of a teacher who is comfortable gazing upon and evaluating her practice, a teacher who is open to seeing differently and anew, and a teacher who has agency over her own practice" (p. 6).

Additionally, if peer debriefing becomes a routine component of educators' self-evaluation, it may support the retention of good teachers. Too often teachers struggle with problems or concerns by themselves. They may feel isolated and as if they are the only educators facing particular issues (Heider, 2005). With peer debriefing, support for collaborative analysis diminishes teachers' fears that they are all alone. They discover others share similar experiences and alternative ways to respond to situations. When educators believe they have support for what they are doing, they will be more eager to continue. Peer debriefing becomes an alternative way

for teachers to scaffold their understanding of their instructional practices and learning communities. As they practice peer debriefing, they may become more accepting of themselves and others creating an environment where teachers want to grow. Such an atmosphere will help sustain teachers in this profession. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2002) stated, "The era of solo teaching in isolated classrooms is over. To support quality teaching our schools must support strong professional learning communities" (p. 13). Peer debriefing offers a way to help overcome isolation, sustain collaborative environments, increase retention and make dynamic improvements in classroom.

Reflecting on one's teaching practices allows the teacher to make adjustments in both instructional style and techniques. When peer debriefing is added, the level of reflection increases. Wagner (2006) stated, "Through the process of reflection, teachers identify the strengths as well as the weaknesses in their instructional practices" (p. 30). When this reflection is shared with another teacher, the insights are often deepened or clarified. As in the example at the beginning, using data to support reflection is important. Wagner believes "reflective practice is data-driven, making it a more valid way to evaluate our knowledge and skills" (pp. 31-32).

Theoretical Perspective

Peer debriefing is a strategy used to enhance credibility in qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) maintain peer debriefing increases "the credibility of a project" (p. 513). Hendricks (2006) points out that peer debriefing helps focus on correctness and accuracy of research interpretations and conclusions, guards against researcher-bias, provides evidence of collaboration of stakeholders, and enables distribution of findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four areas important to peer debriefing. First, it helps restrict bias in interpretation of information, which support Hendricks' perspective. Second, debriefing allows the teacher the opportunity to develop new ideas with a peer. Third, it allows teachers to create and modify instructional practices or lesson. Fourth, it encourages the teacher to reflect further through discussion.

Although Spillett (2003) states there is no right or wrong way to conduct peer debriefing, there are studies to support certain aspects of the technique. Selecting an impartial debriefer with whom the teacher identifies is a first step (Mobile Member Care Team, 2007; Spall, 1998). Trustworthiness is a major issue in this selection as noted in research by Cooper, Brandon, and Lindberg (1997), Spall (1998), and Spillett (2003). The debriefer must be willing to commit to the process and be available. The length of each peer debriefing session must be agreeable to all participants. However, it should be of such length as to provide the teacher with satisfactory emotional release. Regularly scheduled meetings work for some. For others, meeting on an as-needed basis works well. A neutral place for the debriefing to occur is another area to consider.

Another teacher or outside source enables teachers to see the data through different lenses and perspectives. Spillett (2003) labels these *insider* and *outsider* debriefers. Another teacher, an insider, knows the climate of the school and is often able to connect to the situation along with the teacher. An outsider, while not understanding the school climate, may be better able to offer a fresh way of looking at the situation. Spillett is not advocating for one over the other. In fact, both types of debriefers are effective and able to offer teachers insights into their instructional practices.

Example of Peer Debriefing in Action

In the opening story, the educator thought about her teaching based on her first reflections. She was disappointed because she did not feel her students were making progress in their writing. Although she was carefully documenting and evaluating her students' progress, she held a different opinion about their progress than did her colleague. This came to light during a peer debriefing session. The two colleagues discussed the data the teacher had collected. They took a closer look at the gain in scores based on the scoring guides. As the teacher talked and processed her conclusions, her friend asked questions often probing deeper into the analysis of the data. Additionally, she offered alternative ways to interpret the findings. For example, the means for the scoring guide ratings made a positive gain of 1.66 points from the baseline writing to the post writing. While this did not seem like a huge gain to the teacher, her peer-debriefing partner pointed out that it actually reflected a change in a level and one-half. If gains like this continued, they discussed, student growth would certainly exceed grade level expectations.

During this example scenario, the teachers discussed both qualitative and quantitative data. They talked about how students' attitudes changed and their writing habits evolved. Discussions like these helped clarify the initial meanings and expanded the classroom teacher's perspective.

Methodology and Findings

In our elementary and reading undergraduate and graduate education courses, we emphasize to teachers the role peer debriefing plays in their instructional practices. But as the old adage states, what is taught may not be caught. In order to determine whether or not our students go on to utilize peer debriefing to improve their reflective teaching practices, we conducted a pilot descriptive study. The overarching research question was: Do graduates of the university's elementary and reading master's programs utilize the practice of peer debriefing? If we could capture a general sense of whether or not teachers were utilizing peer debriefing, we believed it could transform our teaching and assist other professors in working with teachers to deepen their peer debriefing experiences.

We constructed a survey and mailed it to 629 graduates from our elementary and reading education master's programs. The survey contained items designed to ascertain teachers' use of peer debriefing such as if they discuss concerns and successes with others, if they use other educators as sounding boards, and if they believe reflecting with others is important to their professional growth. The voluntary return response rate was 33%. Table 1 shows the demographic data obtained for grade levels and teaching assignments.

Table 1. *Demographic Summary*

Survey category	<i>f</i>	%
Grade Level Taught		
Preschool	6	2.9
K-2	85	41.1
3-5	50	24.2
6-8	22	10.6
9-12	10	4.8
Other	34	16.4

Assignment Area

Classroom teacher	144	69.6
Title I	22	10.6
Librarian	3	1.4
Special Education	18	8.7
Other	20	9.7

Note: $N = 207$

The survey began with scale questions asking teachers to indicate with whom they seek opportunities to peer debrief. We also wanted to determine if there was a difference in selection of peers based on whether the debriefing was related to issues of concern or success. Table 2 shows the responses for teachers' choices of peers for debriefing partners related to issues of concern or success.

Table 2. *Percentage for Preferences for Teachers' Peer Debriefing Partner*

Peer Choice	Concerns	Successes
Other teachers	98.6	93.7
Principals	64.4	67.6
Mentors	56.3	50.6
Curriculum Directors	20.1	14.4
Literacy Coaches	35.1	33.3
Professors	11.4	9.8
Friends	59.0	77.5
Other (including specialists)	70.0	62.5

Note: Percentages represent responses provided by teachers regarding their preferences for with whom they peer debrief concerning either concerns or successes.

Educators responding to the survey indicated they were likely to very likely to discuss concerns with other teachers (98.6%) or often a specialist (70%). They listed principals (64.4%) as a source for discussing concerns. Conversely, respondents were asked with whom they discuss their successes. Teachers (93.7%) were still the first choice for debriefing partners, with friends (77.5%) and others (including specialists, 62.5%) following closely behind.

Additionally, respondents agreed they use other educators as sounding blocks (99%), and they viewed reflecting with colleagues as important to their professional growth (96.2%). They reported they often reflect on their own teaching first and then confer with colleagues (95.7%).

These results overwhelmingly indicate that teachers often use each other as sounding blocks, and most believe that sharing and reflecting with colleagues is an important aspect of their professional growth as educators. Overall, respondents were positive about discussing teaching issues with other professionals. They seem to be using all or parts of the peer debriefing process, such as discussing educational matters with others who are knowledgeable but not specifically interested in the issues.

While the survey questions did not address the depth of the peer debriefing teachers engaged in, subsequent interviews with teachers who completed the survey provided a more in depth interpretation. One new teacher, Wendy, talked to us about the weekly peer debriefing sessions she had with her mentor teacher. They met once a week during their mutual planning pe-

riod. Wendy made a list of the issues she wanted to discuss each week. She brought student samples to show specific examples of problems she was having with students. The mentor teacher was able to address each issue with Wendy and help her talk through the problems and look for solutions. Wendy told us that she would not have successfully completed her first year of teaching without these peer debriefing sessions. She felt that she was able to help her students much more because of this process.

Amanda shared with us how she and the other first grade teacher in her building confer regularly about their instructional practices and about individual student needs. Although they do not have a planned time set aside for these discussions, they do consider that they are using each other to peer debrief about what they are doing in their individual classrooms. For example, this year both teachers are using a writer's workshop approach for the first time. Every chance they get they talk about what they have tried and how it has worked. They compare student writing samples and talk about ways to improve the process.

David said that his school's involvement in Professional Learning Communities serve as peer debriefing sessions for him. The teachers in his building meet weekly to discuss ways to improve student learning. They talk about specific issues and needs of their students and share ideas for how to increase learning. He is able to bring specific problems to the table to bounce ideas off of the other teachers. For example, the most recent issue he discussed was how to improve his students' fluency. He talked about things he had tried and eagerly learned other methods the other teachers suggested such as repeated readings, timed readings, and Readers' Theatre. He would take the ideas, try them in his classroom, and then discuss the results at subsequent meetings. It was an ongoing process of peer debriefing that he believed greatly impacted his teaching.

Each of the teachers interviewed shared the same reaction: they find that conferring with other teachers about their instructional practices and student needs is an invaluable part of teaching. They believe it not only strengthens their teaching, but helps to keep them motivated as teachers as well.

Sources for Peer Debriefing

As the study revealed, teachers often utilize their colleagues for support in the classroom. Teachers find that support in many ways, but they must take the risk to reach out to their colleagues. Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) found that "learning from colleagues requires both a shift in perspective and the ability to listen hard to other adults" (p. 973). Some great sources for peer debriefing are from teacher study groups, graduate classes, professional organizations, learning communities, or from formal and informal sharing with colleagues.

Teacher Study Groups

Teacher study groups are almost by definition peer debriefing groups. Teacher study groups have been defined by Cramer, Hurst, and Wilson (1996) as "a collaborative group organized and sustained by teachers to help them strengthen their professional development in areas of common interest" (p. 7). In these groups, teachers work independently on their own professional goals, but depend on each other to help them work toward those goals. The group serves as an organized forum for a peer debriefing session where members of the group are knowledgeable about the issue, but do not have vested interest in the outcome. They serve as knowledge-

ble sources of information who also provide an outside perspective. LeFever-Davis, Wilson, Moore, Kent, and Hopkins (2003) found in working with teacher study groups that they offer “a safe place for teachers to articulate their understandings of teaching and learning and to challenge some of their long-held beliefs” (p. 783). That is the goal of peer debriefing as well.

Graduate classes

Many graduate classes for teachers have built in discussion times where teachers converse about classroom issues and share ideas with one another. Depending on the type of course, the class often becomes a type of weekly support group for teachers. Web-based learning coursework offers students another unique method of peer debriefing. Server-supported discussion boards and whole class or small group chat rooms allow learners to post their concerns and successes to others in the class and receive feedback through discussion board response postings or instantaneously through live chats. Often students are willing to take risks by discussing in this format because they are not face-to-face; and since the class consists of students from a geographically wide area, it is unlikely they even know each other except through the web-based course.

Professional Organizations

As members of professional organizations, teachers attend conferences on the local, state, and international levels. There is often time before sessions begin, between sessions, and during breaks or banquets when teachers meet others who are teaching the same grade level that conversations begin and each teacher shares successes and concerns. These peer debriefing sessions, while often short in length and occur only once, are often helpful because the conversation occurs with a disinterested person, yet one who is knowledgeable in the field. Professional organizations also help teachers make connections with others with similar professional interests, and this networking often leads to sources for further peer debriefing.

Learning Communities

Learning communities are developed in schools to help teachers support each other in their classroom endeavors. In Grossman et al. (2001) discussion of the impact of developing teacher professional committees, they state, “the wisdom of the collective exceeds the wisdom of any one individual” (p. 1000). They further contend, “As community develops, individuals begin to accept responsibility for their colleagues' continuing growth” (p. 1000). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2002) writes, “The era of solo teaching in isolated classrooms is over. To support quality teaching our schools must support strong professional learning communities” (p. 13). Peer coaching is a means by which America's schools can overcome isolation and build collegial environments that improve teacher retention rates and, ultimately, classroom instruction. This type of learning community offers teachers a source for peer debriefing. The teachers serve as peer debriefers for each other, thereby strengthening each of their instructional practices and professional growth.

Formal and Informal Sharing with Colleagues

Sharing with colleagues in the building happens both formally and informally. Some schools have times set aside for grade-level meetings where teachers work through instructional decisions and problems while also having a formal group with whom they share successes. Another type of formal sharing takes place in many schools through literacy coaches who are there to offer specific help to teachers in the area of literacy. According to Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz (2011), “the literacy coach facilitates a collaborative learning environment by working with various participants who contribute to the development of student learning” (p. 406). These literacy coaches help teachers peer-debrief about concerns in their classrooms. Spur-of-the-moment peer debriefing sessions also often take place among teachers in the hallway, teacher workrooms, or during lunch or before and after school. When teachers are aware of the support that comes from peer debriefing, they are more likely to ask for that help and to provide it for others.

Conclusion

Peer debriefing, defined as discussing reflections and perceptions with a disinterested peer in order to more clearly see a situation, is a valuable tool teachers utilize to strengthen their instructional practices and grow as professionals. The research question for this pilot study was: Do graduates of the university’s elementary and reading master’s programs utilize the practice of peer debriefing? A survey, returned by 207 inservice teachers, indicated that overall, respondents seem to use all or parts of the peer debriefing process, such as discussing educational matters with others who are knowledgeable but not specific stakeholders in the situations. An overwhelming finding of this study was that almost all teachers surveyed (99%) reported that they use other teachers as sounding blocks, and that reflecting with colleagues is important part of their professional growth (96%). Smith (1998) contends that this collaborative support from other teachers is vital for teacher growth and change.

Some teachers, such as the example of the new teacher who met regularly with her mentor teacher, plan for peer debriefing sessions, while others, such as the two first grade teachers discussed, peer debrief with others as the opportunity arises. Often peer debriefing sessions happen by chance in the hallways or teachers’ lounges. Wherever or however the peer debriefing sessions occurred, teachers reported they turned to others when they had challenges or successes and that they utilized the expertise of their colleagues to work through issues they encounter in their classrooms.

The time teachers spend discussing, reviewing, and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data not only impacts them and their teaching and research, but that of their students as they make changes in their instructional practices. It not only helps the teacher who asked for help, but it also has an influence on the teaching, understanding, and shared research of the colleague who helped talk through the situation. Educators must be trained and supported in using peer debriefing to increase the benefits of their already important dialogs. Preservice teacher education programs provide this training by teaching preservice teachers the process and role of peer debriefing to help them grow as professionals when they are in the classroom.

As schools move to more action research based inquiry, they need to become efficient in using the strongest tools and prevent barriers from emerging. For peer debriefing to be used to its fullest potential, it would be beneficial for teachers and administrators to have a more conscious understanding of the role it plays and to set aside time for more formal peer debriefing sessions. During mentoring sessions, experienced teachers maximize their time with a mentee by exposing

them to and routinely using peer debriefing. Principals may elect to conduct inservice training with their staff in peer debriefing, then provide the time for teachers to use the methodology to improve their own teaching and understanding.

Additionally, teacher education programs need to take up the challenge for preparing newly inducted teachers to assume control of their own professional development. Anders (2008) contends that it is the role of teacher educators to “provide spaces and opportunities for reflection—for teachers to take control of their own development, to make it a norm in the profession that teachers are self-aware, critical, and reflective” (p. 357). When university faculty teach pre-service teachers about the vital role peer debriefing plays in their professional lives, it helps them continue to learn and grow in the teaching profession. Peer debriefing assists teachers in taking a multifaceted look at critical issues and practices. It provides alternative perspectives and diverse approaches to issues educators face on a daily basis. However, if peer debriefing is not practiced and supported, it will not thrive within the school structure. A concerted effort to add peer debriefing to the professional development tools as well as the overall assessment plan for educators must be in place to make the difference.

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