Reviewing for Starters

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Reviewing usually happens after an event. This is normal timing. But is it always perfect timing? Are there other good times to have a review?

Well, you can review DURING activities. For example:

- reflection-in-action (Schon*)
- half time review (in games of two halves)
- taking time out (with a learning buddy or coach or video diary)

But 'Reviewing for Starters' is about bringing reviewing even further forwards and reviewing BEFORE the action starts. In some areas of practice, reviewing is the natural starting point, such as when you:

- carry out a training needs analysis
- involve participants in designing a programme that connects to their real world
- kick off an 'Appreciative Inquiry' with the question 'What works well?'
- or when you search for relevant expertise with a 'peer assist' (Collison and Parcell*)

In other situations a review at the start does not seem 'natural' at all. In Reviewing for Starters you will find some 'natural' and some 'less obvious' ways of starting a session with a review, in this order:

- 10 TIPS
- 10 BENEFITS
- 10 ACTIVITIES

John Dewey wrote that 'every experience lives on in further experiences' (Dewey*). By trying out the ideas in Reviewing for Starters you will be able to help people select and harness those experiences which they most want to 'live on' in the next activity. (References are listed at the end of this article.)

REVIEWING FOR STARTERS: 10 TIPS

1. Get participants busy discovering the diversity of talent and experiences in the room. For example: try out Brief Encounters or Sim Survey.
2. Review recent learning immediately after a break and before introducing the next exercise. This increases the chances that recent learning will be applied in the new exercise. The new pattern will look something like this: activity – break – review – activity – break – review -
3. Pay attention to each individual's current state by asking what feelings, fresh insights, questions, words or phrases are 'on top'. Not only does this help to meet people's need for attention, it also helps you pitch what comes next in a suitable way.
4. After briefing the next exercise, create a 'time-out' for people to consider what recent learning could be useful. Alternatively, refuse to start the clock on the next exercise until you are satisfied that sufficient connection has been made to recent learning.
5. Involve participants in researching safety, such as by including these questions in a Sim Survey: What do you already know about safety that will help us stay safe in this next exercise? What do you already know about the activity, the environment and how your group behaves that you need to consider in order to stay safe? (Adapt for other objectives.)
6. Review whose turn it is to ... lead, go first, keep time, observe, make the tea, or to carry out whatever responsibilities might otherwise fall to the same few people.
7. Review what progress individuals are making on personal targets, with a view to creating extra support or opportunity for those who might need extra encouragement. Spokes (a kind of human bullseye) is a quick method for viewing such progress.

8. Highlight one individuals' story. As an alternative to always trying to include everyone in every review, you can save pre-activity reviews for highlighting one individual's learning story – so that by the end of the programme each individual has had the chance of being in the spotlight at least once.
9. Use a round (or pair and share) to get everyone making connections between past present and future. Try these sentence beginnings: 'This situation / place / activity reminds me of ...'; 'What we are about to do reminds me of ...'; 'I was ... I am ... I will ...'
10. Find even more 'starter' reviews by searching http://reviewing.co.uk for 'Activity Map' and 'Observation Walk'. Also try creative tweaks of any other reviewing methods that can be used for bringing past experience into the immediate future.

REVIEWING FOR STARTERS:

10 BENEFITS

Many of these benefits arise from changes you can make in programmes where the normal structure for a session is 'brief-plan-do-review' (or similar). Some of the benefits described below can be achieved simply by changing the timing of the break so that the break occurs after the activity and before the review. Please note that a review before an activity can draw on *any* prior experience and does not need to focus exclusively on people's most recent experiences within the programme.

1. IMPORTANCE

Reviewing at the start demonstrates your commitment to reviewing and that you recognise its *importance*. If you leave reviewing until after the activity, and you do not have time to do it well, your participants will soon get the impression that reviewing is the unimportant bit tagged on at the end.

2. CONTINUITY

Reviewing first is a way of demonstrating that reviewing is part of a *continuous cycle* that has no beginning or end. You can start and stop wherever you like! You are not breaking any rules (or inventing any new theories) by reviewing first. You are simply applying experiential learning theory.

3. SURPRISE

Reviewing at the start *surprises participants* who are accustomed to reviewing at the end. Do it well and it will be a pleasant surprise that awakens their reflective processes from the very beginning.

4. ALWAYS THINKING

Reviewing at the start helps to keep review, reflection, thinking and learning *ticking over* – so review at every opportunity, including before the activity. (If the gaps between reviews are too long, people can get so absorbed in the action that they may do little reflecting until it's all over.)

5. ENERGY

People are *refreshed after a break*, so why struggle with a review when people are tired, when you can simply take a break and start the next session when people are awake and alert? For example, on a multi-day programme you can start the day with a review of the last activity of the previous day.

6. FLOW

Reviewing at the start *reduces the gap* between the learning from the previous activity and its application (if relevant) in the next activity. This helps to create more flow in a programme.

7. PERFECT TIMING

Start with a review and you can give the review *whatever time it needs* – assuming that you can be flexible with the time needed for any activity

that follows within the same session.

8. PERFECT PRIMING

Review after a break and you are better able to provide the *perfect lead in* to the next activity. Participants are refreshed and the break will also help clear your head and prepare for priming the next activity – complete with relevant connections with what has gone before.

9. PURPOSE

A review at the start makes it easier for participants to *see the purpose* of a review because it is usually bringing to the fore the very things that will be assets in the exercise that follows. (In contrast after activity reviews can sometimes feel like a 'dead end' going nowhere, especially if the review is referred to as a 'close', or 'closure', or 'wrap up' or 'winding down' or 'post mortem'.)

10. INTEGRATION

Reviewing at the start has its advantages but it does not rule out reviewing at other times. So you have nothing to lose by getting in a review early - and then reviewing as often as you like! This integrates reviewing into your practice while also getting participants into *a regular habit of reflecting on experience.*

REVIEWING FOR STARTERS:

10 ACTIVITIES

ENERGISERS

1. Good News Graffiti
2. Brief Encounters
3. Sim Survey

ACTIVE AUDITS

4. Talent Show
5. Auditions and Interviews
6. Back to the Future – individual
7. Back to the Future - group version

CREATIVE CUSTOMISING

8. Missing Person
9. Solo Challenge
10. Snakes and Ladders

ENERGISERS

These three energisers are

- reflective because they draw on people's experiences
- energising because they draw on positive experiences
- suitable for starting an event because you can readily include late arrivals

1. GOOD NEWS GRAFFITI

Good News Graffiti is particularly well suited to groups that meet regularly. As people arrive they are invited to write up their good news headlines on flip chart easels that are on display around the room. Experiment with different page titles to generate a suitable variety of good news. You decide whether to keep the good news focused on the work of the group and whether it is helpful to invite the sharing of other good news such as achievements outside work. This sharing of good news as people arrive helps to set a positive tone, while also acknowledging how people are contributing to the work of the group. Good News Graffiti could be seen as another way of asking the appreciative question: 'What is working well around here?'

2. BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Everyone receives a card with the instructions on one side and two unique questions on the other side. Following their instructions people quickly pair up and choose one of their questions to ask to their partner. The questions are designed to bring out short stories of success related to the overall theme of the event. After answering each other's question, partners swap cards and find a new partner. And so it continues for as long as you want. It is also suitable for any size of group (from 10 to 100 or more). One ready-to-use example of Brief Encounters is at:

http://reviewing.co.uk/success/icebreaker.htm

3. SIM SURVEY (Simultaneous Survey)

This looks much the same as Brief Encounters (from a distance) but it tends to be a little more serious and needs more time. In Sim Survey, people do not swap cards: they keep their unique question and report back to the whole group with an anonymised summary of what they have learned from their interviews. Best suited to groups of 10-30 people. To reduce the time needed for interviews and for reporting back, keep to a maximum of ten unique questions. This means that some people may have identical questions – in which case people with the same questions can meet up to collate their answers into a joint verbal report.

ACTIVE AUDITS

These three success-focused auditing exercises allow participants to reflect on the talents they have, and on how these talents can be appplied towards achieving an individual goal or a group task.

4. TALENT SHOW

Find an object or picture postcard representing a talent you have that you would like to bring to the next activity (or to the rest of the programme). Each person gives an example of where they have used this talent and of how they now hope to use it, or develop it. Alternatively (where people are overly modest) participants first share their 'talents' in twos or threes before introducing each other's talents in the larger group. After each talent is presented, it is put on show on a low table in the centre of the group – or wherever the growing collection can readily be seen by everyone. This may not be everyone's idea of a 'talent show' but it is a useful reviewing technique for focusing energy and talent towards a common goal.

5. AUDITIONS AND INTERVIEWS

Where a group task requires specific roles or responsibilities, show these in a list of vacancies and invite applications from the group (two or three people per vacancy). Those choosing not to apply for any vacancy automatically acquire the responsibility of serving on the interview panel. Now provide time for applicants to prepare for their audition. At the same time the interview panel meet to elect a chair and prepare for how they will manage the auditions. (Or you can appoint yourself as the chair!) Because this is an 'audition' rather than an interview, each applicant should be prepared to do a brief cameo performance demonstrating their suitability for the role. Applicants can also expect questions from the interview panel. Expect fund and hunour, but ensure that humour is not of the humiliating kind.

6. BACK TO THE FUTURE (paired version)

The original individual version of this exercise ('Objective Line') was described in some detail in the previous issue of Active Reviewing Tips. If you would like a pdf copy of the new improved version (complete with a series of questions to ask the traveller) please write to roger@reviewing.co.uk with 'back to the future' in the subject line.

7. BACK TO THE FUTURE (group version)

You ask much the same questions (as in the paired version) to the group as a whole. For example:
"What experiences / knowledge / skills / values / confidence / achievements etc. do you already have as a group that will help you tackle this next challenge successfully?"
Lay a rope of at least 5 metres on the floor, and place a chair at the far end of the rope. Explain that for every convincing point they make, you will move the chair towards the near end of the rope. Once they get the chair to the near end of the rope, the group switch from audit mode to planning mode. The far end of the rope now becomes their target, and as they talk about how they will use what they already have (making their plan) you gradually move the chair closer towards their target. This exercise provides a

graphic and memorable way of getting a group into the habit of carrying out an audit before making a plan. When I am the chair mover, I am happy for the group to overrule any moves I make, but I would try to insist on evidence (for the audit) and clarity (for the plan).

CREATIVE CUSTOMISING

Up to this point, all of the 'Reviewing for Starters' exercises have had a strong positive focus. These next three exercises allow for a more balanced approach.

- Missing Person is a creative way of looking at the strengths and weaknesses in a group.
- Solo Challenge starts by encouraging each individual to commit themselves to a task or activity that they would find particularly challenging and personally relevant.
- Snakes and Ladders is a more artistic version of Force Field Analysis or SWOT analysis. It is about how existing strengths and weaknesses might come into play in the next challenge.

8. MISSING PERSON

As with most reviewing methods, Missing Person is suitable for all ages with a little tweaking here and there. It is best used after a group have already carried out a number of different activities together, so that they have a range of group experiences to draw upon. The method is future focused, the key question being 'What kind of person would you welcome into your group to help you achieve your goals?'. But to answer this question the group looks back over their experiences together thinking about what has been missing from their performance so far and how a new person could help to bring about improvements. A more detailed description is in this month's extract from 'Dynamic Debriefing' in Active Reviewing Tips 11.2
http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11_2.htm

9. SOLO CHALLENGE

For Solo Challenge, group members all need to know each other fairly well. Solo Challenge starts as an appraisal exercise, in which the group (of up to around 10 people) generate ideas for suitably challenging 30 minute tasks for each individual. Each challenge is tailored to the perceived needs of each individual. Anyone in the group (including the facilitator and the individual being offered a challenge) has the power of veto over any proposal. For example, proposals have been vetoed because they are unsafe, too easy, too hard, not interesting enough, not related to the person's needs, unlikely to be fulfilling, etc. Vetoes help to raise the quality of the whole process. If it is proving too difficult to find acceptable challenges within about 30 minutes, take a break or postpone Solo Challenge until later in the programme. I have included Solo Challenge in Reviewing for Starters because the facilitator can use their veto to ensure value and relevance for each individual right from the start of this exercise. A full description of the whole process is at:
http://reviewing.co.uk/toolkit/solo.challenge.htm

10. SNAKES AND LADDERS

Before an activity ask:
'What snakes do you each bring to this activity that could cause you or others to slide back down?'
'What ladders do you each bring to this activity that could assist the process or raise your game?'

And (like Missing Person) you can ask about the group as whole:
'What snakes lurk in this group's way of doing things that could cause you to slide back down?'
'What ladders does the group have that could assist the process or raise your game?'

With some groups you may want to go the whole way with this method and have them make a snakes and ladders board, and play the game.

Snakes and Ladders is just one example of a Metaphor Map (described in Active Reviewing

Tips 11.2). A Metaphor Map is a graphic way of representing past experiences. It can then be used to help people anticipate and prepare for navigating future challenges, or it can be repeatedly used as a reviewing tool to reflect on the journey taken.

IS IT A BIRD? IS IT A MAN?

In which section of the facilitator's toolbox does Snakes and Ladders really belong?
Is it a reviewing technique?
Is it a game?
Is it a planning technique?
Is it a structure for an appraisal session?
Is it a skills development exercise?
Is it a team building exercise?

My answer: it could be all of these. If the naming of the snakes and the ladders arises from past experience (rather than being plucked from thin air) then it qualifies as a reviewing exercise. The fact that it leads so well into anticipating the future, does not disqualify it from being a 'reviewing' exercise. In fact, like all of the methods described in 'Reviewing for Starters', it encourages people to connect with past experiences before rushing into the next activity.

By choosing (or creating) a suitable review before the next activity, you are adding value to past experience in a way that is also likely to add value to what is just about to happen. This is what I mean by 'Reviewing for Starters'. If you would like to add any of your own 'Reviewing for Starters' to the list above, please write to roger@reviewing.co.uk with 'starters' in the subject line.

AND FINALLY ... ANOTHER WAY TO BEGIN

Ask a group to review the activity they are about to do - 'as if'* they had just completed it. Stepping into the world of imagination can be a welcome change to the normal routine – and it can readily provide breakthroughs in learning. If your review of an imagined forthcoming event goes well you might find that there is no need to review the event after it has happened for real. And if your review of an imagined event goes really, really well you might not even need to do the activity!

* REFERENCES and NOTES

Try not to be confused by the 'Starters' page at http://reviewing.co.uk/stories/starters.htm which describes storytelling methods for starting a review. This is a different concept to 'Reviewing for Starters' which is about priming an activity (or programme) by preceding it with a review.

Schon, D. The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action (1991) http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1857423194/reviewingskillst

'Peer Assist' is described in Collison and Parcell's Learning to Fly (2001) which is reviewed at http://reviewing.co.uk/reviews/learning-to-fly.htm

Dewey, J. Experience and Education (1938)

'As If' (reviewing an imaginary event) is described in my article on Big Picture Reviewing

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