

# Reviewing in Twos

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How does the option of reflecting with a partner best fit into an overall strategy for facilitating learning from experience? When is reflection best carried out alone, with a partner or in a group? What are the best ways of combining these options?

*This article will help you to facilitate effective paired learning. The context is "reviewing" – you are asking pairs to reflect on their experiences and you are providing methods that will engage them fully in the learning process.*

Index of topics you will find in "Reviewing in Twos".

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## 1. Reviewing in twos is normal

If reviewing was ever "invented" it would surely have been in the form of a conversation between two people. Perhaps they have just pushed a rock up a hill together and are congratulating each other on making it to the top before Sisyphus? Or maybe one person just made fire for the first time, and the other says, *"That's impressive. How did you do that? What steps did you follow?"* Or maybe they were the two survivors from a battle, wondering if there could be more friendly ways of sorting out disputes.

Fortunately, groups don't always end up having battles, but difficult topics do become more difficult to explore as the group size grows. So does it follow that the smallest group size - listening pairs / learning buddies / partners / dyads / duos / peer coaches / twos - is *just perfect* for meaningful reflection?

*Difficult topics become more difficult to explore as the group size grows.*

In twos, reviewing can take place with a coach, a supervisor, manager, partner, friend, relation ... or even with a stranger. Much of our day-to-day reflection, whether formal or informal, is either on our own or with just one other person. In fact, reviewing with one other person can seem like such a normal everyday occurrence that we may well think of it simply as a conversation rather than as a "review". The term "reviewing" (like "debriefing") tends to be associated with what happens in facilitated groups.

Moving a paired learning conversation into a group setting does not necessarily make it any more valuable, so let's look at what might be gained and lost when moving from a paired review to a group review ...

## 2. Potential benefits of reviewing in twos - compared to reviewing in groups

These benefits are not guaranteed: some pairs may just not "click" with each other or may simply wander away from the briefing they have been given. The "benefits" listed below might therefore be more accurately described as "opportunities afforded by reviewing in twos":

- **More 'me' time**  
In a group of 10 each person gets attention for 10% of the time available - if the time is shared equally. Whereas in a group of two people, equal time-sharing gives each person 50% of the time available.
- **More reflection time**  
It is easier to sustain reflection on individual experiences when talking with just one other person. In a group there are so many other interesting things to talk about that time for *reflecting* on experience can easily get squeezed out out by other kinds of discussion.
- **Safer to speak up**  
Confiding in one person feels safer than confiding in a whole group - whatever ground rules have been agreed in the group or however supportive the group might be.
- **Greater depth and honesty**  
In one-to-one conversations people tend to give a less selective and more honest account of what happened. It feels more OK to elaborate in a pair than in the whole group.
- **Accelerated engagement**  
In twos people can more quickly experience a sense of belonging, acceptance, empathy, mutual understanding, support, friendship, being valued and respected. It takes longer to experience such things at a group level - however effective your favourite energiser or group reviewing technique happens to be!
- **Higher quality learning**  
Higher quality learning results when individuals have time to reflect on their experiences. This can be achieved in a whole group setting if there is sufficient time and support, but this is generally easier to achieve when a significant part of the process happens in pairs.
- **Less editing**  
Some of these benefits of reviewing in twos can be seen in sharper relief if contrasted with the kinds of "editing" that take place in the larger group: in whole group reviews participants tend to be more *cautious* or don't want to appear *greedy* by taking up more than what they see as their "*fair share*" of time; or some people may simply feel that what they might say to one other person is just *not important enough* to say in a group.

Despite these potential benefits of reviewing in twos, things do not always work out as you may hope. Pairs may not get on well with each other – they might get into conflict or spend their time in silence rather than supporting each other's reflection. [For some solutions see Section 4: "Planning for Reviewing in Twos".]

Although the main focus of this article is "reviewing in twos", the relative benefits of reviewing in groups deserves a brief mention:

- In groups there can be a greater sense of occasion and importance
- Your learning is facilitated by a group facilitator rather than by a fellow participant
- In groups there are more perspectives available to enrich your learning
- In groups you have the chance to gain insights from what others are learning
- If developing teamwork or interpersonal skills perhaps such learning is more valuable when it takes place in a *group* setting?

### 3. Potential benefits of reviewing in twos - compared to reviewing alone

There are also situations where reviewing in twos is more beneficial than leaving participants to reflect on their own. Compared to reviewing alone, reviewing with a partner has these potential benefits:

- **Twos are more likely to stay on task**  
Because reviewing in twos is more sociable it does not usually require as much self-discipline to stay on task.
- **In twos you put thoughts into words and speak aloud**  
Turning thoughts into words and communicating them to another person puts thinking "on view" in a shared space. Even if the other person just listens, you might learn more from listening to yourself speaking than you would by listening to your partly formed thoughts.
- **Twos brings in an extra perspective**  
If the other person responds from their own perspective, this can help you to step outside your habitual thinking patterns and to see things differently.
- **People like to do a good job for others**  
When roles are to be reversed, there is a mutuality and shared responsibility which generally means that partners will try hard to make the process valuable for each other. The motivation to help others can be stronger than the motivation to do something to benefit oneself. Reviewing in twos taps into this altruistic instinct to do a good job for each other.
- **Twos creates a potential supporter and spokesperson**  
You are less alone: after reviewing in pairs you automatically have a potential ally who can speak up for you without you having to speak up for yourself all the time.
- **Reviewing partnerships tend to work well**  
You may be lucky and have a partner who excels as someone who can help you learn from experience. Yes you can be unlucky too, but a good set up by the facilitator improves everyone's chances of finding that their partner or "learning buddy" does their job well. [See section 4 below.]

*Reviewing in twos taps into this altruistic instinct to do a good job for each other.*

The comparison above shows how valuable paired reviewing can be. But it would be an oversight not to mention that reviewing alone can also be valuable:

- When alone, twice as much time (100% of the time) can be spent reflecting.
- There are no issues of trust or confidentiality to hold you back.

- You have greater freedom and choice (unless there is a very demanding task to do alone).
- You can think at your own pace without having to compromise.
- You have more choice about how you reflect – because you only have yourself to please.

Naturally there are also some drawbacks when reviewing alone (compared to reviewing in pairs). More self-discipline and commitment are needed for reviewing alone, and if your reviewing habits when alone are not very productive – then it will be important that any opportunity for reviewing alone is set up in a way that helps you to avoid bad habits and develop better ones.

#### 4. Planning for reviewing in twos

Here are some choices you cannot avoid when setting up reviewing in twos - so it is worth thinking them through rather than making these choices on automatic or by default:

##### **How will partners be chosen?**

If your purpose is to encourage lots of fairly brief conversations, each person simply pairs up with anyone from the shrinking pool of people they have yet to pair up with during the exercise. But if you are setting up something like a learning buddy system that is to last for some time (and even beyond the course) then it makes sense to ensure that pairs are well matched, are committed to supporting each other and know how to do so. It takes time to set this up well. By making the first paired review "a trial session" participants are less likely to get stuck in a pairing that isn't working well.

*If people stay in the same reviewing pairs all the time, there is a risk that some pairs will be stuck in a low functioning partnership.*

##### **How long will participants stay with the same reviewing partner?**

Unless your purpose is to establish a long-term learning partnership (as in the example above) the benefits of frequent changes usually outweigh the disadvantages. If people stay in the same reviewing pairs all the time, there is a risk that some pairs will be stuck in a low functioning partnership. It is in no-one's interest to sustain unproductive pairings – so ask participants to find a new partner each time you ask them to review in twos. This strategy is a kind of safety net that rescues people from unrewarding partnerships. Expressed more positively: regularly changing reviewing partners increases the chances that most of the time everyone has a good experience of reviewing in pairs.

##### **What is the source of the experience about which you are asking people to reflect?**

The experiences being reflected upon can come from many sources. These include:

- Reflecting on an **input** such as a presentation, performance or a film
- Reflecting on **group experiences** in which the pair have both been participants
- Reflecting on a **paired task** that the pair have just conducted together
- Reflecting on **one person's performance** in a group activity that was observed by the other
- Reflecting on **one person's experiences** – not necessarily witnessed by the other (For example, something that happened at work or in the community.)
- Reflecting on their **paired review**

Examples of paired reviewing methods suited to each of these situations follow in Section 5 below.

##### **What roles can the listening partner take?**

The risk of ending up with an 'unhelpful' listener can be reduced by providing clear briefings and by

providing an easy way for the 'speaker' to change the rules or opt out if they find the process is not working well. Here are some potentially helpful roles that the 'other person' can play when reviewing in pairs:

- LISTENER: just listens - giving the 'reflector' the opportunity to think aloud
- SOUNDING BOARD: listens and responds to any questions the reflector may ask
- SUMMARISER: repeats key phrases, summarises, asks for clarification
- BUDDY: notices, empathises, supports, and possibly advises
- COACH: agrees objectives, provides feedback, and asks questions that assist reflection
- INTERVIEWER (with a script): asks set questions or follows a certain review sequence
- CURIOUS CHILD: just keeps asking 'why?'. The reflector can stop the process at any point.
- DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: tests and challenges what the reflector says. This needs careful briefing to ensure that the challenges are provided and perceived as being part of a helpful process. The reflector should stop the process if they feel it is no longer of value.

### **What will you ask people to do when reviewing in twos?**

Participants are more likely to stay on task if there is something for them to do as part of the reviewing process (other than just talking). Participants can be asked to make, choose and use visual communication aids to help them reflect and communicate – such as diagrams, maps, pictures or movable objects. Or participants can be asked to tell the story of their learning journey as they walk between points representing stages of their journey. Or participants can walk and talk together as they follow a question trail, or as they walk to different parts of a model that is scaled up to fill the working space. A review that involves some degree of movement can help the facilitator to see at a glance if there are any pairs that seem to need extra support to engage in the process. You can find more detailed examples of these active methods in Sections 5 and 6 below.

*The more confidence you have as a facilitator in paired reviewing, the less need there is for a sharing session.*

### **Will you ask pairs to report back in any way?**

If reviewing in twos has been working well and producing significant learning there is a risk that any sharing at the group level is going to be relatively superficial and less interesting for speakers and listeners alike: sharing learning in a group can be an anti-climax. Sometimes such sharing is primarily for satisfying the facilitator's curiosity (or for providing a quality check) rather than for enhancing the learning of participants. The more confidence you have as a facilitator in paired reviewing, the less need there is for a sharing session. But if it is important to have a sharing session, consider giving a separate briefing for this *after* the paired reviews. This is because the quality of the initial paired review can suffer if pairs start thinking about how they will share their learning before they have had time to learn anything worth sharing. (But there are exceptions where 'preparing to share' can help to keep pairs on task.) It is usually wise to encourage brevity and creativity in the sharing method so that the sharing stimulates responses that add further value.

### **Will you give time for individual work after reviewing in twos?**

If reviewing in twos has worked well, then each individual may appreciate some time on their own to add their thoughts to their learning journal, their ideas and applications notebook, their action plan, their blog, etc. If you are working within a groupwork paradigm you may prefer that everything begins and ends in the group, but if you are hoping that individuals will transfer their

learning to other contexts then reflecting alone can sometimes be a more productive way to finish a review session. Time for individual recording after significant reviews will almost certainly assist with the transfer of learning. Suitably designed group sessions can also provide powerful ways of supporting learning transfer. When working in groups it should not always be assumed that the end of the process is in the whole group. Sometimes a paired reflection (without sharing) is a suitable way of *ending* a review session. And sometimes the best ending can be providing time for individual recording.

## **5. Matching reviewing methods to the sources of experience**

These paired reviewing methods are chosen to match different sources of experience – such as the vicarious experience of watching a film, or the shared experience of working together, or an experience occurring elsewhere about which the narrator is telling their partner.

**Reflecting on an input** - such as a presentation, performance or a film

### ***Walk and Talk:***

#### ***a paired learning conversation on the move***

After sitting and watching a presentation, performance or a film it is helpful if the review process is reasonably active. Participants may well have the dual needs of wanting to talk about the performance and wanting a bit of exercise. These two needs can be satisfied by walking and talking with a partner! To ensure the time is shared 50/50 you can ask people to swap roles at half time, or you can use a chat card process in which the pair work together through a series of questions with one person giving the first answer to the odd-numbered questions and the other person giving the first answer to the even-numbered questions. Another way of providing a structure for reflection is to create a question trail or designate certain parts of the route to specific topics. For example, each side of a field or square can be associated with a topic or question that guide conversations as pairs walk along each side together.

**Reflecting on group experiences** - in which the pair have both been participants

### ***Storyline:***

#### ***making a graph showing the ups and downs of feelings or progress***

This exercise can be done on paper, but the large scale version using a 5 metre rope on the floor has more impact for both the storyteller and the listener. The making of the graph can be valuable time for reflection and preparation. Walking along the graph tends to improve the quality of the storytelling. Optionally brief the listener to ask questions at key points eg "What helped you reach this high point?" or "How did you recover from this low point?" Such questions tend to prompt or reinforce learning.

### ***Picture Postcards:***

#### ***choosing five pictures to illustrate a story about facing a challenge***

This can be followed by an unstructured conversation with a partner. But it is more likely to be a *learning* conversation if there is a suitable set of questions that helps people to analyse their story. Some questions can focus on the story: "*Which is the most 'significant' picture and why?*" Some questions can bring out patterns: "*Would these pictures also illustrate your response to other challenges? If so, how?*" Some questions can make connections with the future: "*Imagine a future challenge that you respond to really well. Choose up to 5 pictures to illustrate your future 'inner world' story of this achievement.*"

**Reflecting on a paired task** - that the pair have just conducted together

***Empathy Test:***

***guessing how a partner has answered a scaled question***

Pairs ("A" and "B") stand back to back, half a metre apart. The facilitator asks a question that can be answered on a scale (eg "How difficult was it for you to ...?"). Person A answers by positioning one hand on an invisible vertical scale stretching from the floor to the highest they can comfortably reach. Without looking at shadows or reflections, person B guesses the height of their partner's hand by positioning their own hand at the height that they think their partner has chosen. Now ask everyone to turn to face their partner while keeping their hands in place long enough to register their relative positions. (Clarify that full stretch = 100% in case pairs with a height difference get confused when comparing scales.) Leave about 30 seconds for conversations before asking your next question which should be for B to answer by hand height (and for A to guess the height of B's hand). Continue alternating with fresh questions so that each person has from 3 to 5 guesses.

**Reflecting on one person's performance** - in a group activity that was observed by the other

***Goal Keepers:***

***receiving instant feedback from a partner during a group task***

Goal Keepers speeds up the process of learning from feedback. The first task is for each person to prepare 2 or 3 cards by writing (in big letters) a word or short phrase that they want to pay special attention to when it is their turn to join in the group task. The words state the areas on which the "performer" wants feedback. During a group task each performer's learning partner (or "Goal Keeper") is an observer who looks after their partner's cards (goals) and occasionally shows them to their partner with either a thumbs up (meaning "you are doing this well!") or with a thumbs down (meaning "remember what you wrote on this card!"). This instant feedback process is not a full review so allow time for reviewing in pairs whenever roles are swapped.

**Reflecting on one person's experiences** – not necessarily witnessed by the other

***Back to the Future:***

***an audit of existing assets that will help a partner achieve their goal***

One person in each pair chooses a picture that represents their goal. This person describes their goal to their partner and lays it on the floor. Both people move 5 metres away from the goal. (Laying down a rope connecting them to their goal is a nice optional extra.) The person who chose the picture now faces *away* from the picture/goal, and their partner asks "What strengths do you already have that will help you on this journey?" (Subsequently, a number of other words can be substituted for "strengths" such as "values", "support", "experience".) The person giving the answer moves backwards towards their goal – a small step for what seem to be "slightly useful" assets and a big step for assets that they expect to be really helpful. The backwards walking allows the walker to keep all their assets "in view". The process boosts confidence and helps to ensure that the "walker" includes these assets in their plan for achieving their goal. It makes sense to follow up this audit with a plan. It is not a substitute for a plan.

**Reflecting on their paired review**

***Rank ordering:***

***arranging a list of factors that have supported learning***

These factors can be in the form of a pre-made set of cards that the group have agreed to in

advance. Or the list can be created by the group in answer to your question "When you are reviewing in twos what do you expect from your partner in order to make it a valuable learning experience for you?" The list can be numbered and kept on view so that all pairs can readily refer to the list as they each place the items in rank order as a form of feedback for their partner.

## 6. Using paired work to encourage reflection in action

Ask two people to do a job that is normally done by one person, and they start thinking aloud, sharing ideas, pooling their knowledge, explaining the rationale behind their proposed course of action, reviewing their performance as they go ... *"How are we doing?" "Do you have any ideas?" "Great – let's try it out!" "What do you think?" "Why did/didn't it work?" "Shall we try it this way?"*

Working in pairs creates the perfect opportunity for voicing thoughts in these ways. Working alone, internal dialogues are less coherent and less open to scrutiny. Working in groups allows everyone to voice their ideas, but the bigger the group the fewer the opportunities for everyone to be thinking aloud. So "Reflection in Action" generally works best in pairs.

Is performance or learning enhanced when thinking aloud with others? Quiz teams probably think so – conferring improves their chances of finding the right answer. A more dramatic example comes from "pair programming" where software developers work together on a single computer. One is the 'driver' who keys in the code. The other is the 'navigator' who is the principal source of ideas. They switch roles every few minutes. It has proved to be a more creative and efficient way of working compared to having developers each working alone on their own computer.

*If you have any concerns that there are too many people for a group task, consider replacing the potential for redundancy with a learning buddy system.*

It is interesting to speculate about other job roles that might become more efficient if performed in pairs – co-facilitating, co-leading, co-working, co-operating or co-anything. Part of the increased efficiency happens because working-and-thinking together has such potential for accelerating learning. This principle can be readily applied in the training room. For example, if you have any concerns that there are too many people for a group task, consider replacing the potential for redundancy with a learning buddy system. You can adopt the driver-navigator system where one person is "hands-on" while the other is "hands-off". In a game of strategy where individuals are competing against each other (eg in a board game or in a simulation game) you can have people play in pairs – so that they are quietly and continuously reviewing their strategy and considering their next move. Or you can set up a group task as shift work. The key to this process is to change shifts frequently and to give sufficient reviewing time in pairs between each shift. Between work shifts, participants are on an "observer shift" so that the paired review in the changeover period can include a mix of perspectives from watchers and doers alike.

## 7. Finding a smart combination of reviewing in groups, in pairs and alone

A good facilitator can improve the climate for learning by using a smart combination of reviewing in twos, reviewing *alone* and reviewing at the *group* level.

Here are three examples of "smart combinations":

## **A reviewing sequence that begins and ends with the INDIVIDUAL**

*Sequence: 1 → All → 2 → All → 2 → 1*

- start with a few minutes for people to record their thoughts and questions
- ask participants to share (or display) questions in the whole group
- ask participants to find a partner whose question interests them
- let partners share their notes with each other (if they wish) and spend time with the question that brought them together
- back in the whole group, explore some of these questions using the horseshoe-shaped spectrum of opinion so that everyone can readily share their responses to the questions – initially by where they choose to stand on the spectrum
- the same partners meet up and share what new insights they have gained from the group process
- individuals have time to add to their notes

## **A reviewing sequence that begins and ends with the GROUP**

*Sequence: All → 2 → several paired interviews → 2 → All → All*

- an agenda for the review is created in the whole group
- pairs choose one item from the agenda and create one or two survey questions that will help them explore that item with others
- pairs separate and interview other group members one at a time. (Everyone is both a surveyor and a responder during this 'simultaneous survey'.)
- the original pairs meet up and combine their findings into a short report that condenses and summarises their findings
- these findings are presented to the whole group (or put on display)
- after seeing or hearing the survey results, the group decide whether they want to spend extra time with any of the survey topics

## **A reviewing sequence that begins and ends with PAIRS**

*Sequence: Pairs → Pairs perform to group → Group supports individuals → Pairs make plans for action and for supporting each other*

- pairs carry out the 'Back to the Future' exercise [see Section 5 above]
- each person is invited to present a brief summary version of the exercise in front of the group by asking their partner to re-ask the 4 questions that produced their biggest strides
- each person then can then ask the whole group for what they need from the group to help them achieve their goal. For example: "wish me luck", "give me encouragement", "how will you reward me if I succeed?" or "just wait until you hear the good news".
- to ensure that this confidence-building leads to action, pairs then meet up again and help each other produce action plans that capitalise on the most relevant assets that they have identified in Back to the Future
- pairs agree how they will support each other until both plans are achieved.

These examples have shown just some of the ways in which reviewing in twos can be used at the beginning, middle or end of a group review. How well people know each other is a significant factor affecting the quality of reviews – whether reviewing in a group or in pairs. If people do not yet know each other well, their limited knowledge of other participants limits how helpful they can be. People get to know each other much faster in a paired conversation than in a group setting. On the other hand, pairs may know each other so well that individuals may feel cramped, uneasy or

even intimidated in each other's presence. Being in the same pair can be more challenging than being in the same group.

In some situations paired work can help build a better learning group. When people have been able to experience deeper engagement in paired reviews they can feel more engaged in the group as a whole. If twos are changed frequently then a series of one-to-one connections can help to establish a stronger group because more people feel more understood by more reviewing partners. Reviewing in twos can result in people feeling more at home in the whole group even if they haven't yet spent much time together as a whole group.

Reviewing in twos can be a really useful and powerful part of the mix. The best strategy is to stay alert to the possibilities for reviewing in *groups*, in *pairs* and *alone*. If unsure ask the group for their views about finding the optimum balance. They might know best – for now – because the optimum balance is always changing.

## References

What roles can the listening partner take? (in section 4) is extracted from my article on '[Reviewing by Numbers: facilitating reflection in small and large groups](#)'.

Further details of the reviewing methods described in this article can be found online by searching <http://reviewing.co.uk> or by email by sending your request to [roger@reviewing.co.uk](mailto:roger@reviewing.co.uk)

## About the author

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