**Reflective encounters for enabling educators: The role of debriefing in building psychological capital**

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**Abstract**

Pre-university enabling programs are a strategy to widen participation in higher education for people from under-represented backgrounds who would otherwise not meet general entry to university. They prepare students for a smooth transition to undergraduate studies. Typically, the enabling student cohort is diverse in regard to age and prior educational experiences; students are often first-in-family to attend university and/or from low socio-economic backgrounds. Many experience mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression. Meeting the needs of this cohort is complex and demanding (Crawford et al., 2015). Previous qualitative research conducted by members of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) Special Interest Group (SIG) on Mental Health explored the high emotional labour demands involved in teaching enabling cohorts and suggested that social support was integral to managing the stressors of the job (Crawford et al., 2018). One form of social support highlighted in the paper was debriefing. Debriefing, it was revealed, was utilised by enabling educators as a coping strategy that distributed the emotional labour load and reduced emotional distress (Crawford et al., 2018). Research, in fields such as defence and nursing, suggests that debriefing can aid in achieving emotional equilibrium after challenging events (Moldjord & Hybertsen, 2015) and, when implemented effectively, can also become a powerful developmental strategy for communities of practice (Cheng et al., 2017). The aim of this investigation was to explore the debriefing practice of three enabling educators located at two Australian universities, Murdoch University and the University of Tasmania, and to further understand not only what role debriefing performed when negotiating the demands of such high intensity learning environments, but also what conditions were conducive to effective debriefing. To gain an insider’s view (Mendez, 2013) of the debriefing process, a collaborative autoethnographic research method was undertaken. The autoethnographic reflections were then analysed thematically. Throughout the discussion, we demonstrate the positive impact of debriefing for enabling educators. We suggest that facilitating reflective encounters can build the psychological capital (Rabenu, Yaniv & Elizur, 2017) of enabling educators and, in turn, equip them to better respond to the diverse academic and non-academic needs of enabling students.

**Introduction**

University-based enabling programs upskill non-traditional students for entry into tertiary study and are growing in number in response to the Australian Government’s equity goals for widening participation (Hodges et al., 2013). Enabling students are typically from groups underrepresented at university, and/or have experienced disruption during their educational journeys (Hodges et al., 2013; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). This includes students who are first in family to attend university, and those from a low socioeconomic background. Enabling cohorts also include those who may have experienced large gaps between study or may have experienced a physical or mental health challenge in the past that has interrupted their learning goals. Research in the field suggests that these students tend to have diverse needs and challenges, and often require more pastoral care in the areas of mental health and academic support (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Jones, Lisciandro & Olds, 2016). This can result in a complex and challenging teaching and learning environment.

The emotional labour load of teaching enabling cohorts was previously qualitatively explored by members of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) Special Interest Group (SIG) on Mental Health and it was found that the emotional labour demands were considerable (Crawford et al., 2018). While the work can be associated with higher job satisfaction, it can also be associated with feeling overwhelmed and depleted. Teaching enabling cohorts was found to be “simultaneously joyful and exhausting”, a “tiring balancing act” and “more emotionally draining than other teaching” (Crawford et al., 2018, p. 28). This is notable as teaching can leave educators vulnerable to work-related stress and burnout due to the emotional labour intensity (Fiorilli et al., 2015; Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011; Klimecki & Singer, 2012), with Näring, Vlerick and Van de Ven (2012) also warning that contextual variables, such as working in an underprivileged area, are related to emotional exhaustion.

Debriefing was highlighted in the previous research as a coping strategy for educators working in the enabling context. It was not only seen as a proactive reflective tool, but an opportunity for “conversation and connection” (Crawford et al., 2018, p. 28) and a practice that distributed the emotional labour load and reduced emotional distress. In this research, we delve deeper into the ways that debriefing can buffer against burnout and explore the debriefing practices of three enabling educators at two enabling settings in Australia, Murdoch University and the University of Tasmania.

For the purposes of this paper, debriefing will be understood as a kind of ‘reflective encounter’, a holistic opportunity whereby the enabling educator can have an opportunity to share negative feelings and problem solve. It can be an interaction between a colleague, a group of colleagues, or through interaction with a superior. Most pertinent to this study, and in response to the labour demands on enabling educators, debriefing is understood as a way to build psychological and professional capital in a community of practice. Psychological capital, understood as the self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience of individuals, can increase well-being and performance at work (Rabenu, Yaniv & Elizur, 2017). According to Rehman, Qingren, Latif & Iqbal (2017) debriefing acts as an effective human resource intervention that can build psychological capital and offset burnout.

Throughout this exploration, we found that debriefing provided many benefits for enabling educators. A number of themes emerged, with debriefing notably occurring at its best within safe relationships and institutional structures that supported agency. We argue that teaching enabling cohorts requires considerable psychological and professional capital and debriefing provides enabling educators valuable opportunities to build such capacities. The nuances of debriefing practice uncovered in the reflective narratives also provide guidance for future reflective processes within enabling settings and beyond.

**Literature review**

Debriefing practices have been found to increase coping strategies in a range of contexts. For nurses, for example, Harris, Flowers & Noble (2011) and Kent, Anderson & Owens (2012) found that debriefing practices, both formal and informal, were coping strategies after stressful encounters. In social welfare and psychology professions, reflective supervision, a form of debriefing, is known to buffer the impact of work-related stress (Lindo et al., 2015). In the defence context, team members found that debriefing by sharing thoughts and feelings helped establish emotional equilibrium after missions (Moldjord & Hybertsen, 2015). For academic staff dealing with cases of plagiarism at a tertiary institution, Vehviläinen, Löfström and Nevgi (2018) found that debriefing distributed the burden and validated action taken by tutors.

Debriefing can be understood as a cognitive and affective process. Cognitively, it can facilitate purposeful discussion after experiences and allow for reflection on an experience that can guide future practice (Cho, 2015). Cognitive debriefing efforts are a way to control stressful situations and provide actions for coping with the long term demands of a job (Loriol, 2016), with the reflective nature of debriefing allowing educators to broaden competence and help them to deal with the difficult aspects of their work (Bell, Mladenovic & Segara, 2010; Luttenberg & Bergen, 2008). Debriefing also performs an emotional function as it allows for the processing of primarily negative emotions. According to Gross (2013), debriefing can decrease negative emotions and lower sympathetic nervous system responses, thus opening opportunity for the reappraisal of a situation. If holistic in nature, debriefing can explore the social emotional issues faced by groups, providing “restitution and reflection” (Moldjord & Hybertsen, 2015, p. 287). Harrison (2016) suggests that debriefing is a dyadic process; the “Release, Reframe, Refocus and Respond” model allows both a cognitive and affective process to occur. The model has four stages: i) provide a safe and validating space to release negative emotions; ii) encourage people to reframe a situation by considering alternative perspectives; iii) guide a refocus on the realistic possibilities of the situation; and iv) allow a person to respond in new ways in practice.

When applied both formally and informally in educational settings, debriefing can also become a form of social support, or collective coping (Loriol, 2016) as opposed to the alienation that can be experienced by tertiary educators (Bell et al., 2010). According to Ju, Lan, Li, Feng & You (2015), encouraging educators to communicate with colleagues and supervisors can reduce emotional exhaustion. Kinman et al. (2011) suggest that teachers who are given a supportive environment for the sharing of “true” feelings may develop more successful coping strategies and this in turn protects against burnout. Loriol (2016) suggests that collective coping performs powerful functions; it first normalises the difficulties of the work; then provides an avenue for sharing approaches; and finally enables a move to redefining the hardship. When performed effectively, debriefing can sponsor cohesion and trust (Moldjord & Hybertsen, 2015) and “a pooling of resources that enable coping processes” (Rabenu et al., 2017, p. 876).

**Method**

The aim of this study was to explore the debriefing practices undertaken in each of the enabling education settings, and to consider the benefits of debriefing and the conditions required for effective debriefing. Due to the research focusing on the experiences of enabling educators, a qualitative method was employed. Autoethnography identifies patterns and behaviours within a specific cultural group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and can provide an intimate, insider’s view (Méndez, 2013) of the debriefing process in enabling settings. Subjectivity is required as it allows the researchers to utilise personal experience in the field to explore a particular issue (Ellis, Adams & Bocher, 2011) and this richness cannot be captured with a quantitative approach (Holman, Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). Collaborative autoethnography allows for a simultaneously self-reflective process that can nurture conceptual expansion (Bell et al., 2010). The evocative nature of this research, whereby we “turned the interrogative tools on ourselves” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012), lays the foundation for future larger mixed methods research.

Three of the co-authors filled the roles of participant/observer/researcher (referred to as P1, P2 and P3, which are abbreviations for Participants 1, 2, 3), and had an average of six years working in the enabling field, performing a range of tasks such as coordinating, lecturing and tutoring in the two institutions. The fourth member of the collaboration is a psychologist whose expertise aided in the analysis of the psychological impact of the experiences.

The autoethnographic data was captured in a “story pot” (Bennett et al., 2016) that included first person, individual written reflections which were then combined, shared and analysed. The written reflections were guided by a set of reflective questions devised by the researchers and adapted from the “Describe, Interpret, Evaluate, Plan (DIEP)” strategy recommended by Boud, Keogh and Walker (2005) and by the Harrison (2016) “Release, Reframe, Refocus and Respond” model. Questions were designed to explore cognitive and affective dimensions of debriefing. They were as follows:

1. What does debriefing mean to you?
2. Describe a challenging situation you have encountered in the enabling teaching context.
3. How did the challenging situation make you feel emotionally and physically?
4. How did you interpret/make sense ofconceptualise the situation?
5. Did the situation impact your relationships within or outside of your community of practice? If so, how?
6. How did you deal with the stress of it? What strategies did you use? Where did you get support? Who did you/didn't you talk to? Why/Why not?
7. When evaluating the situation, what knowledge, resources and or skills would you have liked available to you? Can you identify any gaps in support?
8. Thinking ahead, what strategies would you use next time to cope with/manage the situation?

All researchers were involved in a systematic approach for qualitative data analysis as recommended by Chang et al. (2012). The written reflections were shared via email and were first reviewed by individual researchers. The individual researchers coded data by locating common recurring topics, words or short phrases in each reflection. A written record was compiled by each researcher capturing the keywords, phrasing and possible themes and this was then shared with the co-authors. Through collaborative dialogue, the coded findings were then regrouped into topical categories. Through further collaborative dialogue broader categories of “current practice” and “emerging themes” were created in order to make explicit the deeper meaning in the narratives (Chang et al., 2012).

**Current practice of debriefing in the enabling setting: A snapshot**

The collaborative autoethnographic reflections gave us insight into the debriefing practices occurring at both institutions and furthered an understanding of the benefits of the practice and the conditions required for effective debriefing. Evident in the reflections were four broad categories: debriefing descriptions; facing the elements; conducive conditions; and the benefits of debriefing.

## *Debriefing descriptions*

The participants’ descriptions of what debriefing means to them in the enabling education context were multi-layered in definition and purpose. On the surface level, it was described as ‘the act of talking out an experience’ (P1); “an opportunity for ‘a check-in’ and ‘a vent’ (P2); and “talking about, venting, sharing a teaching experience… an outlet” (P3). At a deeper level, this act of talking and being listened to facilitated the participants to: help understand a challenging situation, including the “physical, mental and emotional impacts” (P1); to “externalise a problem that can then be re-examined and reframed” (P2); “and problem solve, and share the load and responsibility” (P3). From the analysis of the reflections, it appears that debriefing was understood as simultaneously a cognitive exercise (Cho, 2015) and an opportunity for emotional processing (Gross, 2013).

## *Facing the elements*

The participants’ reflective narratives contained relatively extreme events, but elements of which would not be uncommon in the enabling education context. The students included in the three narratives all presented with significant mental health conditions that impacted on their behaviour both in and outside the classroom. The events described in the reflections were unplanned, involved erratic and unpredictable behaviour, interrupted the ‘normal’ classroom momentum and atmosphere, and included the participants feeling threatened and concerned for their personal safety. P3 described a student “laughing to himself, and sometimes laughing hysterically at me”. Adding further that it was a challenge to manage the “constant barging into my office”. P1 recounted one culminating event after weeks of managing an unpredictable student: “it finally came to a head when she was episodic in my office, and started throwing herself around the room, crying and pushing over furniture.” P2 wrote, “I am well known as having some of the strongest boundaries on the team. But that semester, this student seriously affected the equilibrium. His behaviour escalated over the first two weeks of semester. First he was contrary during discussions, raising his voice, then directly intimidating towards me, slamming books centimetres from my face, making inappropriate comments about me, and yelling at other students, particularly women. He was highly unpredictable”. The participants’ “normally reliable” classroom-management strategies were ineffective in these instances; thus, in their teaching roles, the participants felt a loss of agency normally experienced in their classroom and/or office environment.

## *Conducive conditions*

From the reflections, certain conditions for effective debriefing became apparent. The process required “a trusted colleague or mentor” (P2). The participants also reflected that someone with “emotional intelligence and understanding”, who could “get it” (P3) was necessary. Cheng et al. (2017) assert that debriefing requires psychologically safe spaces that are free of ridicule. Similarly, safety emerged as a key component in these reflections: “I think we tend to turn to those who are psychologically safe… it felt safe to discuss my fear and frustration with this person” (P2). Moldjord & Hybertsen (2015) emphasise that the social nature of debriefing renders individuals vulnerable and this needs to be conducted with empathy and awareness. It was noted in the reflections that not all colleagues were equipped with the skills to take on a debriefing role, which suggests the need for staff to be trained in debriefing practices. Prins et al. (2007) recommend training to help educational leaders to effectively facilitate a debriefing climate. Time and space is also required; therefore, opportunities (informal and formal) need to be organised for staff to partake in debriefing.

## *The benefits of debriefing*

Multiple benefits of debriefing emerged as a theme from the analysis of the participants’ reflections. An acknowledgement of the participants’ experiences from their colleagues provided confirmation “that they were handling the situation well” (P1) as well as validation. Sharing the experience lessened the feelings of isolation and distributed the burden; in externalising the experience, others in their team could assist, offering a different perspective and expertise (P2) . P3 acknowledged, “I guess I was spreading the load and the responsibility from my shoulders to two people’s shoulders and sharing it higher up the ladder too”.

Cheng et al. (2017) describe debriefing as rich developmental processes where peers can learn a range of skills from each other; this too was found in the reflections: “I’ve been able to debrief with great colleagues and build an arsenal of tricks in the process” (P2); “a member from the counselling team debriefed with me after a session with the student, and gave me some tools for creating boundaries, as well as detaching myself“(P1). Debriefing, it was found, helped create a shift when challenge was experienced, “I now have strong strategies around boundaries, referring students on early and knowing when to escalate challenging students to my line manager or seeking the counselling services for how to communicate with challenging students. I have been more confident in dealing with students and difficult tutors as a result of this experience”(P1). P3 noted that debriefing chats could be a catalyst for action, resulting in changes and/or interventions; P2 recognised that the process increased confidence for future interactions. It was also evident that debriefing led to a strengthening of relationships within the workplace, and to feelings of cohesion and trust (Moldjord & Hybertsen, 2015), which, in turn, developed a sense of community and belonging.

Collectively, what can be understood from this snapshot is that, in the right conditions, there are multiple benefits to be gained from debriefing. The process becomes a way of counteracting negative feelings and equips educators with additional resources when facing challenging demands.

**Emerging themes**

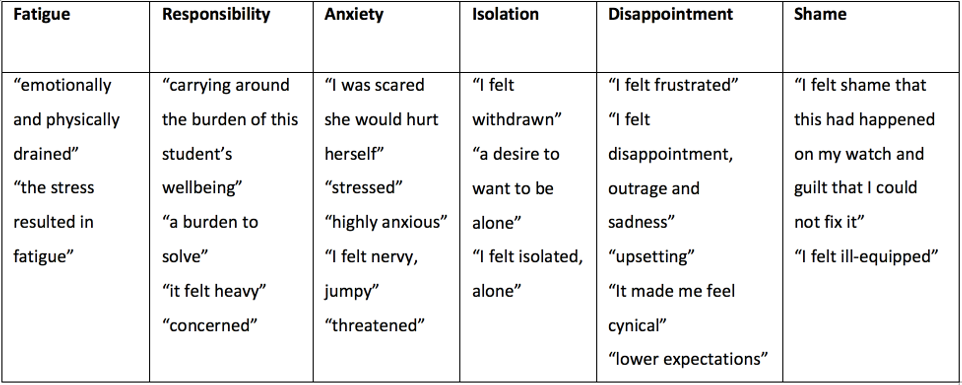
When analysing the four broad categories, two major themes became apparent; these were the connection between emotional labour and agency, and the impact of relationships on debriefing practices.

*Emotional labour and agency*

In reflecting on the extreme experiences, the participants revealed that they experienced feeling overwhelmed and working beyond their own personal resources. Chrisopoulos Dollard, Winefield & Dormann (2010) assert that when demands outweigh resources, strain results. The reflections demonstrated a range of internalising emotions, such as negative mood, anxiety, self-blame, guilt and helplessness, and the external emotions such as anger and frustration. This range of intense feelings can be divided into six categories as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

*Range of intense feelings*



To simultaneously carry these emotions *and* the role of educator is labour intensive. Näring and Brouwers (2006) explain that considerable emotional regulation is needed to negotiate these feelings and that this kind of emotional labour, when ongoing, is linked to emotional exhaustion (Taxer & Frenzel, 2015). Such feelings can cause a sense of immobility and powerlessness and it was at this point in the challenge, as described in the reflections, that support was sought. The seeking, it is being suggested, was an attempt to regain agency, to re-establish, “some influence over what they do” (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012, p. 296) and to protect the self.

We recognise that the symptoms of burnout such as exhaustion, detachment from the job, a sense of a lack of accomplishment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and cynicism (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter 2001) are intrinsically linked to an absence of agency. Agency is defined in this instance as “the capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation and action” (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). An individual is no longer considered to be an agent when they are powerless to exert influence or make a difference within their existing environment (Giddens, 1984). Giddens (1984, p. 9) notes that “agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently”. The burden of negative emotions as demonstrated in the reflections rendered the participants incapable of acting differently because “constraints” such as a lack of resources, processes and knowledge prohibited a real “choice” (p. 15) . This lack of choice demonstrates the lack of power and the resulting frustration and immobility that the participants felt. As Giddens suggests, agency is “influenced both by the scope of the knowledgeability that the actors have and the power they are able to mobilise” (1984, p. 11). While the participants did have some knowledge of mental health first aid and histories of successfully meeting the needs of challenging students, the limitations of the structures around them left them powerless to mobilise or enact this knowledge. According to Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö (2016), a lack of professional agency may increase the risk of teacher burnout.

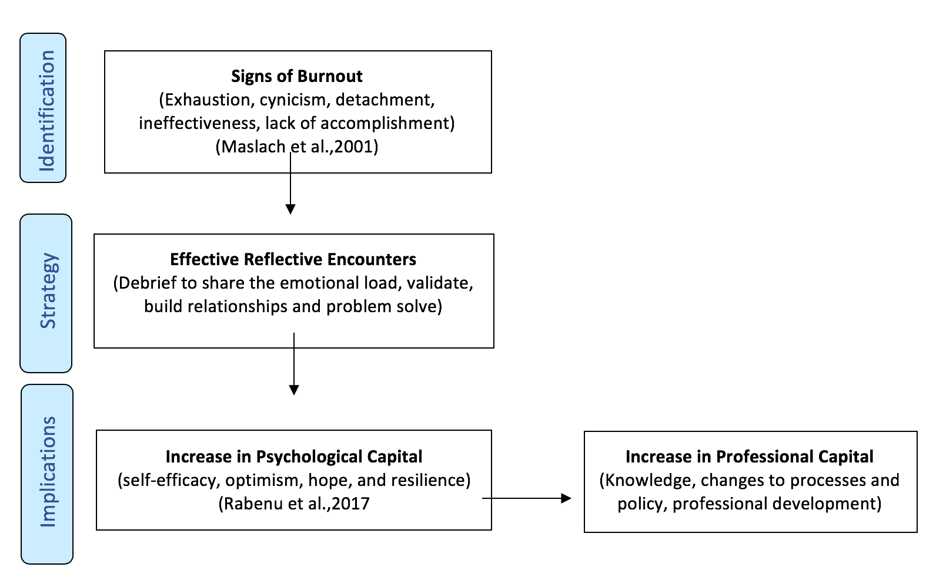
*Relationships through debriefing: developing agency and building psychological capital*

The importance of relationships between the individual and the institution, the individual and colleagues, and the individual and the self was a notable theme that emerged from the reflective narratives. It was when relationships were effective that agency could be regained. Giddens notes that “agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things, but to their capability of doing those things in the first place” (1984, p. 9). In this study, it was found that universities’ organisational structures can impact on the educators’ agency. Evident in the reflections were occasions where the educators felt let down by the institution because the resources required to meet the demands of their role were not adequately provided. However, the participants identified positive structural changes that were implemented in response to their experiences, such as: the introduction of professional development workshops; debriefing opportunities with line managers; and changes to processes. When elements of ‘care’ were provided by the institution, this gave the educator hope, agency and a reestablishment of power that bolstered their confidence to act in future challenging situations.

Arising from the reflections, was a belief in the importance of trusted collegial relationships. These relationships facilitated effective debriefing, providing the debriefer with another person to help “share the load” and an alternative knowledge set within the “safe” space of a collegial relationships where debriefing can be undertaken. The act of “venting and validation” shifts and lifts the burden of negative emotions and in turn, problem solving can be facilitated and personal resilience developed. The educator can then move from a place of struggle to a greater sense of agency. When the contextual variables (such as effective relationships with colleagues and support from university structures) allow, the psychological capital of an individual can be increased.

**Effective debriefing for building capital: Future implications**

Effective debriefing practices within educational spaces can result in greater psychological and professional capital for educators, as well as a movement towards an emotionally literate community with reduced burnout. The examples drawn from the reflective narratives demonstrate that while effective practices provide the relief from the symptoms of burnout they also build psychological capital in terms of self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience. These findings, the positive implications of effective reflective encounters, are illustrated in Figure 1.

*Figure 1.* Implications of effective reflective encounters

Debriefing is not a panacea for burnout, but it is one effective strategy that can be used to lessen the impact. Debriefing, as explored in this paper, needs to be distinguished from the psychological debriefing conducted by trained mental health practitioners after trauma (Cho, 2015). We acknowledge that some stressful situations may require formal one-on-one interactions with trained counsellors; indeed “counselling has been found to delay burnout and increase teachers’ longevity in challenging schools” (Maring & Koblinsky, 2013, p. 386). Consultation with a counsellor can provide support to an educator to directly facilitate a change in practice that can impact students (Clemens, 2007).Yet, for future enabling contexts, this paper recommends that leaders would be well advised to consider the potential benefits of effective reflective encounters. To help prevent burnout in enabling environments, building the psychological and professional capital of the educators involved is of great importance. Effective debriefing is both a reactive and proactive strategy which can be implemented readily in enabling education settings and other educational environments.

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