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Short Communication

## An Exploration of Debriefing in Virtual Simulation

Margaret Verkuyl, MN, NP:PHC<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer L. Lapum, PhD, RN<sup>b</sup>,  
Oona St-Amant, RN, PhD<sup>c</sup>, Lorraine Betts, RN, MN, CHSE<sup>d</sup>,  
Michelle Hughes, MEd, RN<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Nursing Professor, School of Community and Health Studies, Centennial College, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M1C 5J9

<sup>b</sup>Associate Professor, Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3

<sup>c</sup>Assistant Professor, Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3

<sup>d</sup>Nursing Professor and Simulation Program Coordinator, Sally Eaton Horsfall School of Nursing, George Brown College, Toronto, Ontario M5A 0B6, Canada

### KEYWORDS

debriefing;  
virtual simulation;  
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**Abstract:** Debriefing is integral to simulation-based learning. There is an extensive body of literature that documents empirical work and established standards of best practices for debriefing in the in-person simulation context. And yet, few resources exist to effectively guide debriefing in virtual simulation. With the advent of virtual simulation, this is a major gap. In this paper, the concept of debriefing in the context of virtual simulation is examined followed by identification of future research initiatives. It is important for us as a simulation community to resist the simple transfer of in-person debriefing models and standards to virtual simulation. Instead, there needs to be a shift in thinking so that we can best capitalize on the unique attributes of virtual simulation. The simulation community and educators must investigate how to best facilitate virtual simulation debriefing so that learning is optimized. We call upon the community to engage in research that develops a body of literature so that virtual simulation debriefing standards of best practices are established.

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The debriefing phase in simulation-based learning is conceptualized as indispensable to learning (Decker et al., 2013; Dreifuerst, 2009; Hall & Tori, 2017; Levett-Jones & Lapkin, 2012). Facilitated by simulation experts, this phase provides learners with the opportunity to reflect on scenarios, examine their own decision-making processes, and consider alternative actions (Decker et al., 2013;

Dreifuerst, 2009). A concept analysis by AL Sabei and Lasater (2016) found that debriefing allowed learners to assume active roles in the learning process which promoted their clinical judgment and performance. The guided reflection and discussion that occurs during debriefing is pivotal for synthesizing insights and enhancing learners' performance in future simulations and clinical practice.

The nature of debriefing requires careful deliberation with the advent of virtual simulation (VS) in nursing and

\* Corresponding author: [mverkuyl@centennialcollege.ca](mailto:mverkuyl@centennialcollege.ca) (M. Verkuyl).

health professions education. VS involves computerized scenarios that resemble real-life (Duff, Miller, & Bruce, 2016) with capabilities of combining gaming features (Verkuyl, Atack, Mastrilli, & Romaniuk, 2016; Verkuyl et al., 2017). VS offers accessible, safe, and interactive environments that enhance

### Key Points

- Health care educators are incorporating virtual simulation to augment opportunities for clinical practice.
- Debriefing opportunities need to be studied to optimize learning through virtual simulations.
- Multiple research opportunities for exploring debriefing within virtual simulations are identified.

learners' performance at a reduced cost compared to in-person simulation. There has been a recent upsurge of educators collaborating with digital gaming experts to design, create and implement VS into curricula. Our interest of debriefing VS emerged during analysis of focus group data pertaining to a study on learners' experiences with virtual gaming simulation (Verkuyl et al., 2017). In addition to responding to the question posed, participants seemed to use the focus group as an opportunity to debrief

their experience (Verkuyl et al., 2017). The focus of this conceptual paper is to address some of the major gaps in the literature related to VS debriefing. Furthermore, we examine the significance and challenges of debriefing in the context of VS and propose future research initiatives.

## Significance and Challenges: Debriefing

The current definition of debriefing is an instructor-facilitated phase that triggers reflective thinking following simulation (Decker et al., 2013). This phase has been defined as a "structured reflective conversation" (Fey, Scrandis, Daniels, & Haut, 2014, p.e255) in which learners are central to the discussion. The instructor prompts learners to reflect upon and reexamine the simulation events, their thought processes, the emotions experienced, and the decisions made (Cockerham, 2015; Fey et al., 2014). Debriefing augments learning, self-awareness, clinical reasoning and self-efficacy (International Nursing Association for Clinical Simulation and Learning [INACSL] Standards Committee, 2016).

There are many models and guidelines of debriefing detailed in the literature (e.g., Decker et al., 2013; Dreifuerst, 2009; Simon, Raemer, & Rudolph, 2010) that incorporate similar key elements. Recently, standards of best practice for debriefing associated with in-person simulation have been established by the INACSL Standards Committee (2016). Best practices include: a person who is trained and competent in debriefing and can fully focus

on the simulation with the intention to facilitate the debrief; environments that promote learning; use of a debriefing framework; and alignment with simulation objectives and outcomes (INACSL Standards Committee, 2016). Despite these standards, it is unclear whether these best practices for debriefing can be applied to VS. In this budding field, we did not come across empirical literature that specifically examined debriefing in the context of VS. There are also no documented standards of best practices for debriefing that are specific to VS. This is a major gap in the literature considering that debriefing has been acclaimed as fundamental to simulation-based learning.

There are several insights to be drawn from the simulation literature related to debriefing. Using a mixed methods approach, Tilton, Tiffany, and Hognlund (2015) conducted a pilot study to examine students' experiences of VS (n = 79) and found in-person debriefing was essential. Peters and Vissers (2004) also highlighted the need to debrief following simulation games, but recognized that there was a need to better understand how to design and conduct these sessions. Crookall (2010) suggested that debriefing should be built throughout as well as at the end of a serious game so that learning can be extended. Educators need to creatively address this learning opportunity as technology advances in VS.

As the field of technology in simulation evolves, the simulation community will evolve as well. It is imperative for the simulation community to question as well as resist the simple transfer of in-person debriefing models and standards to VS. It is not sufficient to replicate the status quo of debriefing in VS. Instead, there needs to be a shift in paradigm to best capitalize on the unique attributes of VS. There is uncharted and vast potential for such features as individual reflection and analytics to inform the debriefing process in ways that in-person debrief cannot do given the capability of technological advances. To capitalize on the technology that is inherent in VS, several avenues for debriefing are possible. The individualized feedback provided to learners during and after VS can facilitate reflection on their performance. Extending beyond that, learners can share their feedback with others and educators can make comparisons concerning learner performance within small groups, large classes and globally. A bidirectional relationship between learners and educators can allow debriefing to be tailored to the group based on analytic data and identified knowledge gaps from the VS.

We need to fortify debriefing methods in VS by thinking in more imaginative ways and exploring less prescriptive methods that combine formal and informal debriefing approaches. For example, facilitated or non-facilitated chat rooms can be used for learners to dialogue and reflect on their experience. The chat room discussions have the potential to be used to inform a formal debrief. Furthermore, technology platforms have the capability to accommodate synchronous or asynchronous virtual debrief.

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