

The SimWars Experience: A Winner's Perspective

By Linda G. Taylor, DNP, RN, NPD-BC, CHSE, Nurse Educator at VA Palo Alto Health Care System



(Photo of Linda G. Taylor. Photography provided by Linda G. Taylor)

In fall 2021, I saw an advertisement for [the SimWars competition](#) that was being sponsored by the Association for Nursing Professional Development (ANPD). The contest required each participant to conduct simulation debriefings. The contestant with the most effective debriefing would be the winner. At the time it sounded like fun, so I applied and was a little surprised that I was accepted.

The first round of the competition consisted of watching a virtual simulation and then facilitating a live debriefing using a virtual platform. It was intimidating, but my goal was to maintain a safe learning environment. Being it was a competition, there was no feedback provided, so I hoped that I had done enough. As you may imagine, I was thrilled when I found out that I was a finalist and would be competing in person during the ANPD convention in the Spring of 2022.

There were five finalists at the live event. We each viewed the same simulation and had 20 minutes to debrief before a live audience. I was honored to win both the first prize from the judges, and the "People's Choice" award which was chosen by the audience.

Conducting a debriefing is challenging, especially when the facilitator and participants have no shared history or knowledge of one another. As an educator, I have seen firsthand the hesitancy of staff to engage in debriefing for fear of being judged or the subject of gossip.

Abulebda, Auerbach, & Limaiem (2021) note that while there is no gold standard for debriefing techniques, there are seven essential elements which should be present in all debriefing sessions:

1. Ensuring psychosocial safety.
2. Having a debriefing stance or “basic assumption.”
3. Establishing debriefing rules.
4. Establishing a shared mental model.
5. Addressing Key Learning Objectives.
6. Using open-ended questions.
7. Using silence.

Upon reflecting, I decided to focus on essentials, not technique. Reviewing the debriefing rules and establishing safety was my first priority. I have discovered that when expectations are clearly set and the facilitator is calm and reflective, learners are able to engage in reflective practice. I also found that stating events that occurred in the simulation and asking the learners about what they were thinking was very effective towards addressing the learning objectives and guiding towards a shared mental model. As a facilitator, it was a natural progression to make observations, ask open questions, and wait for answers. It was surprising to me how realistic the entire experience was. When I was debriefing, I had no awareness of the audience or even that I was in a competition. I felt completely immersed, just like I would with actual learners.

After the competition I asked several colleagues for their take-aways. Here are some of the important points they shared with me:

- Allow time for participants to reflect on their actions and to do the talking instead of the facilitator talking and pointing out mistakes.
- Have the facilitators review the simulation scenario with the learners and audience so that all are on the same page.
- Setting clear expectations and promoting a safe learning environment is important.
- Allow participants to process their thoughts, encourage them to voice their concerns, share their experiences, and learn from their own mistakes while the instructor listens intently to each of them.
- Restate comments from participants and connect them to the learning objectives.
- Facilitate reflections to recognize strengths and weaknesses of the team and draw recommendations from it (the good and what can be improved).
- Recommendations must be followed by actions – encouraging participants to take note of the recommendations for future use.
- Summarizing to seal the discussion.

While I am not a naturally competitive person, I am so glad that I participated in this competition. It affirmed the crucial role of educators as they facilitate learning to support staff performance and ultimately improve patient outcomes.

Reference:

Abulebda, K., Auerbach, M., & Limaiem, F. (2021). Debriefing Techniques Utilized in Medical Simulation. In *StatPearls*. StatPearls Publishing. Retrieved from [Debriefing Techniques Utilized in Medical Simulation - StatPearls - NCBI Bookshelf \(nih.gov\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK537022/)