

Appreciative Inquiry as a Tool for Faculty and Organizational Development

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Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Robert Kennedy observed that “Progress is a nice word. But change is its motivator and change has its enemies.” The same can be said of professional and organizational development. Such initiatives are generally successful until it comes time to actually make a change. The idea of change assumes that there is some existing deficiency to improve, which suggests that current practices are deficient. This inherently triggers cognitive dissonance and resistance to change.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provides an alternative approach to change that rests on a different assumption. AI draws from existing strengths and uses these to build towards a better future. AI can be used as a process to facilitate conversations and commitments to foster the development of a learning-centered institution by creating buy in and positive energy for change. It can also be used as a non-directive approach to faculty development that supports effective teaching by building on existing, good teaching practices.

AI is a product of the positive psychology and organizational change movements and was originally developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s (Stetson and Miller, 2004). Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) describe AI as “a form of personal and organizational change based on questions and dialogues about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams. It focuses on the positive, not the negative.” Elsewhere, Whitney (1998) describes the AI as “the vehicle for change to emerge. As a high-involvement process, it leads simultaneously to the reconfiguration of organizational meaning and relationships. It shifts the network of who talks to whom about what. The careful selection of topics for the AI process alters the organization agenda and enables more positive patterns of thinking and performance to emerge.” The AI process initiates and fosters a conversation in an organization that in turn fosters change by altering the stories and narratives that define the organization. The Appreciative Inquiry Commons (<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/>) at Case Western provides an online collection of resources on the application of AI in a variety of organizational contexts.

Kerka (2003) provides a brief overview and a long bibliography of related resources about AI. Typically, the AI process follows what is known as the 4-D Cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. The Discovery phase aims to identify the “best of what is” by soliciting and capturing stories about positive aspects of the current situation. The Dream phase focuses on “what might be.” During the design phase, “Provocative Propositions” or design statements are articulated that capture the vision of the Dream phase. Finally, the Destiny phase yields action plans that define “what will be” to achieve the design statements. A case study describing each of these phases comes later in this paper.

AI in Higher Education

Despite the many potential applications of Appreciative Inquiry in higher education, the literature does not provide more than a handful of examples of the application of this tool in the higher education context. These examples can be divided into two areas: use of AI for institutional change and application of AI in teaching.

The application of AI as a tool for institutional change is identical to its organizational development application in commercial and non-profit organizations. The literature provides examples of the application of AI for planning, curriculum design, and other change processes at all levels of higher educational institutions. Stetson and Miller (2003) provide brief overviews of the use of AI in ten community colleges. Saunder (2003) offers a review of a project using AI to improve college retention. AI can be used as a tool for program assessment, as presented by Norum, Wells, Hoadley, and Geary (2002) who review a project using AI to evaluate an instructional technology program in a college of education. Haglund, Kushner, and Martin (2003) used AI as part of a curriculum design process for a mechanical engineering program. Norum (2001) includes a discussion of how appreciative design could be used for redesigning educational systems. These projects are just a suggestion of the potential application of AI in higher education. For example, an institution could use the AI process as the framework for its self-study or systems portfolio review as part of accreditation.

The AI philosophy of looking at positives rather than negatives can enlighten teaching philosophies and practices. Yballe and O'Conner (2000) discusses how to integrate philosophy of appreciative inquiry into classroom teaching. Perodeau (2004) talks about how to integrate the philosophy of AI into online teaching. Lander (2002) uses AI in a research methodologies course as a teaching tool. Norum (2001) includes a discussion of using Appreciative Design in an instruction design class and how appreciative design could be used for redesigning educational systems. AI as an approach to teaching and learning is still very early in its evolution, and faces an uphill battle in an educational system based on hundreds years of critical, deficit based thinking in the classroom.

AI for Faculty Development: A Case Study

Surprisingly, the application of Appreciative Inquiry as a tool for faculty professional development has not been addressed in the literature. The Developmental Education Appreciative Inquiry project at Baker College provides an example of how AI can be used in this context and also provides a case study of the AI process in general. This project is part of a larger program to improve student success in developmental education courses. Faculty development was identified as a critical component of the change program, and an initial faculty training plan was developed based on a review of the developmental education literature. Rather than using a top-down, highly directive approach to faculty development, AI was identified as a process that would recognize what instructors were doing well and give them opportunities to share best practices. The hope of the project planners was to engage faculty in a positive fashion that would engender buy-in and ownership for further professional development.

Baker College is the largest private college system in Michigan with nine traditional campuses in addition to an online campus, a corporate services division, and a graduate school. In fall of 2004, enrollment was almost 32,000 students system-wide. The individual campuses are united as part of a system that allows the campuses to share resources and infrastructure, including a shared curriculum.

In the fall of 2003, Jim Cummins, the president of the Baker College system, approached Dr. Barbara Honhart, system vice president for academics, about developing a quality improvement initiative for developmental education. Baker College is an open admissions institution, and 80% of the entering students placed in one or more developmental education courses. Taken together, the number of credit hours that fall quarter in developmental education courses was larger than 4 of the Baker College campuses. (By Fall 2005, the number of credits in developmental education was larger than 5 of the campuses.) Clearly, developmental education was a major issue for Baker College.

Existing data analysis also indicated that the developmental education program was not being very successful. The four developmental courses (ENG098B College Reading, ENG099 English Review, MTH099A Basic Math, and MTH099E Pre-Algebra) all had some of the lowest student completion and success rates of courses at the college. In addition, institutional research had indicated that students required by placement exam to take either ENG099 or MTH099A did not perform as well in subsequent English or Math courses as those students who placed directly into the 100-level courses.

Dr. Honhart convened her staff including the Directors of Assessment, Curriculum, Effective Teaching and Learning, Institutional Research, and Teacher Education. Each of these directors was assigned an area for reviewing the literature and developing an action plan. The Director of Effective Teaching and Learning, Dr. Chris Davis, was assigned the task of looking at faculty development.

The developmental education research literature provided a list of what faculty should know, but the decision was made by Dr. Honhart and Dr. Davis to not pursue a very directive approach to faculty development. Starting the previous year (2002), four of the campuses had contracted with a consultant to launch an initiative to improve student success in the MTH099A Basic Math course. After the first year of the project, faculty resistance to the project and the highly directive approach of the consultant was so great, that one of the campuses dropped out of the project. With this experience in mind, the concern was that a directive, top-down approach to changing faculty practices would likely lead to resistance rather than change.

Dr. Davis had become aware of Appreciative Inquiry as a process for organizational development. This approach fit the goals of the program by providing a structured opportunity for faculty to share best practices, to be engaged in the larger change program, and to take an active and direct role in determining future professional development. Working with the Deans, Dr. Davis developed a schedule for September

2004 to offer this session for faculty on each campus at least one. Since most of the faculty are part-time adjuncts, sessions were offered mornings, evenings, and Saturdays.

The AI Process

Ten sessions with a total of 100 participants were facilitated by Dr. Davis. Each session began with a brief introduction on the importance of developmental education and the Developmental Education Quality Improvement Project (DEQIP) that the AI process was part of. As part of the introduction, the four session goals were reviewed:

- Identify, share, and capture existing classroom best practices
- Develop a mutually supportive community of practice
- Foster the development of a shared vision for developmental education
- Allow faculty to plan future professional development activities

A very brief introduction and overview of AI was provided, and the Discovery process was launched. Participants were split into pairs (and the odd 3-some) and asked to interview each other using the following questions:

- Think back on your experience teaching a developmental or other class. Locate a time when an entire class or even an individual student was truly engaged in the class and motivated to learn. What circumstances caused this to occur?
- Describe an incident when a student took accountability for his or her learning in one of your classes. What were the circumstances that led to this happening? What were the consequences?
- Describe a moment when you observed a student have that “a ha” moment when she or he experienced deep learning and understanding. What made that possible?

No specific time limits were set, and instead the facilitator monitored each pair’s progress. The debriefing allowed each pair to share their findings, and a volunteer from the group served as recorder.

Typically a break was given between Discovery and Dream. The Dream phase was handled differently depending on the size of the group. For smaller groups (less than 6), this was facilitated as a whole group activity. For groups 6 or larger, the participants discussed their dreams in pairs or small groups before the general debriefing. The question to initiate discussion in the Dream phase was:

If you could transform the developmental education learning environment at Baker College any way you wish, what would it look like and what three things would you change first?

The initial (and naive) vision was to accomplish all four stages of the 4-D Model of AI in one three hour session. At the first session, it was clear that time was not available for the Design and Destiny phases. The vision was updated to implement the Design phase prior to Winter quarter 2005 and Destiny prior to Spring quarter 2005.

The results of the Discovery process were summarized in a document to be distributed to faculty teaching developmental education courses. The ideas generated and captured were used to construct a concept map showing the antecedents of student learning and success. During the actual sessions, participants shared many stories, which unfortunately were not captured in the note taking process except as abstracted concepts. This has been the biggest disappointment of the project, because it limited the impact of the sharing across sessions. However, within the individual sessions this was a powerful aspect of the process. The summary of both the Discovery and Dream phases are available online from the Baker College Effective Teaching and Learning web site (<http://www.baker.edu/etl/deqip.html>).

The results from the Dream phase were used to construct another concept map and served as inputs in the development of 28 design statements. These statements are being used to survey the faculty as to how important each statement is and how true the statement is today. This approach mirrors the process described by Ryan et. al. (1999) with an AI process being used with a high school. The design statements are:

General

1. Both faculty and administrators are open to change and continuous improvement based on data-driven decision making and assessment.

Students

2. Students in developmental education courses come to class prepared and on-time, stay for the entire class, and do the homework.

Placement

3. All students in developmental education courses need to be in that class.
4. All students in developmental education courses can benefit from the class.

Advising

5. Students take developmental education courses at the right point in their studies to support their learning and success.
6. All students take COL111A before or during their first quarter at Baker College.
7. Students taking a developmental education course participate in a mentoring program to support their success.

Curriculum

8. All developmental education courses have proper course outcomes to prepare students for college-level courses.
9. The course outcomes for each developmental education course can be met by students in a 10-week class.

Faculty Development

10. Faculty teaching developmental education courses have sufficient opportunities for professional development activities to support the development of their teaching.

11. Faculty teaching developmental education courses have sufficient opportunities to share ideas with each other as part of an on-going learning community.
12. Faculty teaching developmental education courses participate in peer mentoring to improve their teaching effectiveness and facilitate sharing of best practices.
13. Faculty teaching developmental education courses are trained and knowledgeable about how to work with students with special needs and learning disabilities in particular.

Teaching Delivery

14. Developmental education courses are scheduled to meet both student schedules and learning styles.
15. Team teaching is used to improve student-teacher ratios and promote learning in developmental education courses.
16. Developmental Education courses use cooperative learning to support peer teaching and learning.
17. Learning in developmental education courses is connected to the student's life, career plans, and program of study.
18. Grade inflation does not happen in developmental education courses.

Classroom Environment

19. The average class size is small enough to allow sufficient student-teacher interaction and assessment in developmental education courses.
20. The classroom physical environment for developmental education courses is decorated and equipped with furnishings conducive to student learning.
21. Students and faculty have access to computers for using learning development software such as Plato, word processing, and the Internet for developmental education courses.
22. Faculty teaching developmental education courses have access to resources such as copy centers, office space, and storage facilities for classroom materials.
23. Break times and break durations effectively meet student needs in developmental education courses.

Support Services

24. Students in developmental education courses utilize the Learning Support Services for assistance outside of class.
25. Paid student tutors are available in developmental education classrooms to assist students.
26. A supplemental instruction program is available to students in developmental education courses who need additional support outside of the classroom.

Assessment

27. Assessment tools allow teachers to identify where students are at the beginning of each class and what their learning needs are in developmental education courses.
28. Assessment instruments at the end of a developmental education course properly identify whether a student is prepared to move onto the next class in sequence.

The survey of the Design statements is being administered to the faculty in January 2005. The results of the survey process will be used as an input into the Destiny phase, which will take place in spring of 2005.

Conclusions

Despite being incomplete, the AI process has already met many of the initial goals. The Discovery and Dream sessions are amongst the highest rated of any sessions delivered by the Effective Teaching and Learning Department (90% of participants who recommend the session to another colleague). The sessions did provide a rare opportunity for faculty to share best practices and develop a mutually supportive community of practice. The energy that resulted from the sessions was so noticeable that one of the campus presidents called Dr. Davis to comment on the positive energy on her campus.

The sessions provided a starting point for an emerging shared vision for developmental education. The larger DEQIP process is currently focused on creating an outcomes-based assessment framework that will enable assessment of the impact of any system intervention or change. Planning of future professional development for this group of faculty is still on-going. During the Dream phase, faculty did not focus very much on change in teaching practices. This may be indicative of on-going resistance to changes in practice.

As a result of the success with the AI process, the Effective Teaching and Learning Department is planning on creating a similar professional development module relevant for all departments as well as creating a module on AI in teaching to facilitate the integration of AI philosophy in the classroom. Hopefully, these efforts will be joined by other efforts at other institutions of higher education to integrate AI into higher education.

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This paper was presented at the 2005 meeting of the Higher Learning Commission in Chicago, IL and was published in the conference proceedings with the following citation:

Davis, C. (2005). "Appreciative Inquiry as a Tool for Faculty and Organizational Development." **A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement, 2005, Volume 2: Becoming a Learning Focused Organization: The Learning Environment**. Chicago, IL: The Higher Learning Commission, pp. 40-44.