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Digital Dialogues: Enriched Discovery for a Leadership Development Cohort

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A statewide Leadership Development Series for All-Hazard Teams allowed the effectiveness of an appreciative inquiry augmented by online technologies to be tested. Vodcasts let potential interviewees observe a discovery inquiry and resulted in more relaxed conversations. Vodcast onlookers wanted to share stories and experiences. Polling let participants respond in real time to questions posed in vodcasts. Subsequent AI phases and leadership skills can be facilitated through Distance Appreciative Inquiry without sacrificing the integrity of the experience and desired outcome. Incorporating AI and DAI into the LDS course design added an element of novelty for a cohort that had attended many leadership courses.

Engaging the Whole
Municipalities could be on their own for upwards of 96 hours following a disaster. This would require exceptional leadership from local all-hazard teams. Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) maintain that leaders foster disaster-resilient communities by inquiring out loud, ensuring transparency and accelerating feedback. The ability for leaders to engage a broad range of stakeholders moves communities closer to fulfilling the Department of Homeland Security (DHS, 2008) preparedness mandate. A statewide Leadership Development Series (LDS) for All-Hazard Teams provided the venue to amplify the boundaries of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) through online technologies.

Having conducted research in the past regarding core values of volunteers and first responder partnerships, (Drabczyk, 2007, 2006, 2005) I welcomed the opportunity to test the hypothesis and implications of Distance Appreciative Inquiry (DAI). Would access and application of technology broaden inquiry into the whole without sacrificing the efficacy of face-to-face Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methods? Preskill and Tzavaras-Catsambas (2006) support the use of technological resources in evaluation of AI methods, noting that this enables engagement of the whole.

Course Design
In the LDS course design, each phase of AI was paired with leadership skill development activities. In session I, Discovery corresponded with Values-Driven Leadership; in session II, Dream aligned with Visionary Leadership; in session III, Design paired with Transformational Leadership; and in session IV, Destiny was coupled with Authentic Leadership. The sessions were four hours in length and held approximately every other month. The in-class format included lectures; individual, small and large group activities;
and a take-home assignment. Between sessions, LDS participants modeled leadership skills with essential emergency management partners in home communities, through application of AI methods and access to technology. I served as the LDS facilitator and guided the cohort through a co-constructive meaning-making analysis during the in-class sessions. For example, core value statements revealed through Session I directed the visioning process in Session II.

**Vodcast and Discovery Inquiries**

Under my guidance (I also developed the course protocol), two representatives from the LDS cohort taped a video-on-demand (vodcast) segment, which simulated the discovery paired interviews completed in-class during Session I. The 7 minute-long vodcast was archived on the Ohio State University (OSU) server site and participants could access the URL asynchronously at any time, as they interfaced with stakeholders. Course participants reported using the vodcast with volunteers, co-workers, staff and community leaders. The vodcast was accessed in person, by student and community partners viewing the vodcast together, or remotely and individually at a convenient place and time.

There were two tangible outcomes from the vodcasts: they allowed potential interviewees to observe the discovery inquiry. This demystified the process and diminished any hint of participant anxiety, resulting in more relaxed conversations. Vodcast availability also resulted in the expansion of the LDS AI cohort from 36 to 432 DAI participants. Each cohort member was instructed to conduct discovery inquiries with three community all-hazard partners, and the process sparked interest among additional collaborators. Through the Session II values meaning-making assignment, the LDS affiliate roster expanded exponentially as cohort participants elicited validation of value themes among key community leaders and volunteers. Involving group members in the shared experience of aligning values constructs higher-level consciousness for the team (Barnett, 2006) and contributes to internal cohesion and transformation.

Vodcast onlookers witnessed many ‘ah-ha’ moments and wanted to share stories and experiences of disaster management leadership in their communities. One example of such an enlightening moment developed during the discovery inquiry between two partners on extreme ends of the all-hazards continuum. The American Red Cross participant commented that they are on scene at the beginning of an incident to provide the basics to victims and responders. The mental health professional responded that they enter several weeks post-incident to provide counseling. There was a pause and then came the discovery, barely audible: 'Hey, we’re on the same team'! Capturing inquiries and conversations on vodcast appeared to cultivate connections. Northwest Ohio had experienced severe flooding in 2007; that shared experience sparked solidarity of effort among local all-hazard teams.

**Vodcast and Visioning**

The two cohort representatives who videotaped the initial discovery vodcast volunteered to help tape the second. The intent of the second vodcast, a recording of seven minutes, was to model a meaning-making process and code the value themes emerging from discovery interviews.
As the figure shows, the screen is split to allow a PowerPoint view as well as the live video stream. As the video progresses, the PowerPoint presentation recedes and the screen shows just the video. The advantage of having PowerPoint is that it allows an exact visual representation of questions related to process content, with additional benefit of process modeling by presenters in the video. The 'Emerging Trends' vodcast was shown during Session II and enriched in-class data analysis by demonstrating how to examine discovery interviews for value themes. Application of the vodcast enabled the cohort to focus conversations around alignment of leader and stakeholder values, which allowed greater scope for visioning initiatives. The thoughtful in-session work and take-home assignments enabled LDS cohort participants and municipal stakeholders to co-create action plans to grow and sustain all-hazard projects. McIntyre (2008) notes that stakeholder involvement 'provided evidence that their research was data driven, credible, accurate and trustworthy'. (p. 59)

Array of technology

Production of the vodcasts used in Session I and II of the LDS were created with the ease of videotaping (VBrick software, 2008) and linking the video through the OSU server. Stakeholders in the field simply had to use a personal computer and gain access through the URL. (Directions for accessing LDS Parts 1 and 2 are provided at the end of this article.)

One take-away message from this LDS experience of digital discovery inquiries and modeling of values meaning-making is to try the technology and learn as you go.

As the leadership cohort progressed, a polling feature of VBrick was enabled which allowed participants to respond in real time to questions posed on vodcast. Polling could be used to facilitate a virtual or cyber focus group, or to enhance the distance learning experience. With polling, the discovery interviews could occur remotely or in person, following an individual or paired viewing of the vodcast. This polling attribute also assisted with capturing AI discovery and dream/visioning data, which expedited data transfer into Nvivo (a qualitative analysis software application) for coding, concept mapping and reporting purposes.

The use of voiceover, created with VoiceThreads (2008), was employed during Sessions III and IV. Design-statement poster-boards, created by the in-class cohort and invited stakeholders, were photographed with a digital camera and VoiceThreads descriptions were added. Projecting a voiceover on a team’s design poster allowed stakeholders not present to
feel the excitement of the collaborative effort. The digital file also depicts the body of work accomplished by the LDS and will inspire the participants as the journey continues. Voiceovers will also have a marketing application for future classes. For example, a promotional postcard could announce class content and enrollment details directly from the OSU homepage.

Post series, use of Google Groups (2008) or GoToMeeting (2008) technology will enable members of a cohort to share success stories and progress through threaded discussions. Tracking conversations will likely build sustainability into the training and program evaluation experiences.

Outcomes and Next Steps
Use of technology can enhance delivery of a course and expand inquiry into the organizational whole. As a follow up to the LDS pilot, a Leadership Institute for the American Red Cross in Ohio is under development, and will certainly incorporate technological elements. Based on outcomes of the pilot, recommendations for future LDS courses for all-hazard teams throughout Ohio will likely adopt a blended approach. The initial meeting of the cohort will be face-to-face, serving to anchor the group. Subsequent AI phases and leadership skills could be facilitated through DAI, without sacrificing the integrity of the experience and desired outcome. Reuniting the cohort for AI sessions to summarize their achievements, recorded by employing creative technology, will afford opportunities to archive a tangible portrait of group accomplishment, which cohort members can then share through oral and photo stories. In addition to a recommended blended approach, a key lesson of this LDS experience is to not underestimate how openly individuals will embrace new technology. Incorporating AI and DAI into the LDS course design added an element of novelty for a cohort that had attended many leadership courses and moved the all-hazard leadership issue closer to an inquiry into the whole.

References


Download Directions
To view the archived vodcasts, go to The Ohio State University’s College of Public Health video repository at http://vod.cph.ohio-state.edu. System login is required to view the available content User Name: guest and Password: guest. You may be prompted to download the appropriate plug-in to play the video. Click Login button and: a) Choose the Video Library tab at the top of the page, b) Choose and click on the Leadership Development Series folder. c) Choose and click on the LDS Part 1 sub folder to watch the first segment. d) Choose and click on the LDS Part 2 sub folder to watch the second segment.